



IPHIGENIA

INTERVIEW WITH ANNE THÉRON

Could you tell us about how you discovered Tiago Rodrigues's text, as translated by Thomas Resendes?

Anne Théron: I read this play for the first time in 2012. It moved me to tears. As a director, I need to hear the text, and Tiago Rodrigues's writing is beautiful. He has a very unique way of using a word, then coming back to it, circling it, dissecting it to question its meaning. It creates an exceptional prosody which makes you hear the very flesh of the words. It swept me away. There's also an undeniable metadramatic aspect to the play. We are watching actors trying to recreate the myth based on their memories of it. There's a constant back-and-forth on stage. Line by line, they delve into a shared memory. In a way, they're all trying to understand their role. They "re-remember," as Clytemnestra does in scene 6: *"I remember this place. I remember this moment. Being here. It feels like years ago. (...) I remember it as if I lived it. As if someone had told me a story in which all of this happened. But I don't remember what happens next."*

How would you summarise this interpretation of *Iphigénie*?

Agamemnon, Menelas, the Old Man, Ulysses, Achilles, Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, the Choir: the characters of the tragedy are all here. Agamemnon, Iphigenia's father, is wracked with the same doubts as in Euripides's or Racine's versions: what if he refused to sacrifice his daughter to win the Trojan War? What if he gave up on the war itself? Can he change the course of history, escape his past and its repetition? It's on that last part that Tiago Rodrigues's rewriting of the play hinges. If Agamemnon already had his doubts in Euripides's version, here the actors-characters try to find again the thread of the story while also trying to escape it. All except Iphigenia and her mother, Clytemnestra. Both of them say no right away, refusing to follow the path chosen for her by the men in charge of their destinies. The characters are all here, but they live in a different space-time because, unlike in ancient or classical tragedies, Tiago Rodrigues calls into question the idea of power. And he does so in tremendous fashion: by removing the gods from the dramatic equation! During his altercation with his brother Menelas, Agamemnon says that *"The gods are stories we tell the Greeks to justify what they would otherwise not understand."* Later, his wife Clytemnestra will say: *"The gods are a tale we're told so that we'll remember what really happened in a different way."* That means that men suddenly find themselves alone with their free will and that the figures of the tragedy, freed from the yoke of supreme powers, suddenly turn into characters struggling with their own being. They are but men faced with their own freedom of thought and action. They all rely on their memories to try to find themselves in a shared attempt to escape the fiction of tragedy. By challenging their own roles, they become others, dizzy from the possibility of their own emancipation. By calling on their own memory rather than to the collective memory of ages past, the characters of the play are suddenly able to see themselves as subjects.

Yet the story ends the same way, with the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Isn't that a paradox?

It's what Menelas says when he warns Agamemnon: "The end will not change regardless of what you do." It's true that at first glance the tragedy ends the same way, but in spite of this unescapable ending, it is fundamentally new because entirely determined by the sole will of the characters. Tiago Rodrigues's writing is a new language which breaks free from the beliefs that had so far trapped the protagonists in their roles as mythological figures. It's a language that frees the characters and allows them to express themselves in their name, to embody situations instead of being subjected to them. The play creates a different rhythm, one that would have been unthinkable in the time of Euripides or Racine: that of inner questioning.

From that point of view, would you say that the female roles are almost feminist roles, even though Clytemnestra and Iphigenia react in different ways?

In this version, even though they have been granted free will and can challenge history, the men end up bowing to the diktat of tragedy. Agamemnon knows full well how the play will end, and says so to Menelas: *"I remember the future."* He knows he and his daughter will die. *"It is inevitable,"* he eventually admits. In the name of the Greeks, his subjects, he cannot reject the war. Agamemnon does not believe in the gods, but he believes in power. All the men in the play believe in power, which they see as leading necessarily to war and to the death of innocence, as embodied by Iphigenia. Enslaved by this idea of power, the men don't have the strength to break free. But the women radically refuse to follow the path the myth chose for them. They are alive and ready to assert their choice: they want to start again, in a different relationship to the world. Clytemnestra is an extraordinary character. She asks the men to give up. In scene 13, she clearly threatens Agamemnon: *"If you kill Iphigenia, these hands will be your downfall."* She's an angry woman, determined to see Agamemnon answer for his crime before history. In that way, she also constructs another memory of the tragedy, for us watching today. It's dizzying!

Iphigenia doesn't want revenge, she categorically refuses to even be remembered. Who do you think she is?

Iphigenia's physical presence is very limited in the play. She doesn't talk much, in large part because she is rarely given the opportunity to do so. Unlike her mother, depicted as a woman of action fighting until the end, Iphigenia only says "no." But it's more powerful than any other form of expression. I think it's actually the only theatre character I could summarise with a "no." She doesn't reject the personal fate that awaits her, but she wants to escape the lie, be it that of gods or men. She refuses to perpetuate and collaborate with a system in which power leads to murder. She's the one who breaks in a radical fashion the thread that connected her to the tragedy and who gives everyone the opportunity to break free from the repetition of tragedy. She doesn't want to be mourned. She refuses to be used. She doesn't want to become a martyr. She takes herself out of the game. She wants to die as a free woman: *"Do not touch me. Not now, not after. This body is mine. Nothing, no one can touch me anymore. I am already dead. I have already been forgotten. Do not tell my story again, ever. Goodbye."* That breaks my heart.

Your directions are skilful alloys. You weave together text, recorded images, and sound. What sensations do you want to arouse with this tragedy?

The stage is like a secluded part of the huge beach where everyone is waiting for the wind to come. The sea ebbs and flows in the distance, beyond a dyke, on a screen on which are projected the ghostlike silhouettes of soldiers, crouching around a fire, standing and scanning the horizon, or walking along the sea. We glimpse them from the back, they're like tiny, blurry shapes moving in slow-motion. I wanted to film the act of waiting. The harrowing absence of wind which makes the upcoming war even more present. The sound tells the story of what we can't see, the noises of those naval armies invisible onscreen, the ships waiting, the distant lapping of a wave against the hull of a ship. When this sort of aural close-up ends, we hear the silence, as if we'd pulled away. A sound which seems to come from the dawn of ages, from before memory, which sculpts the silence. As for the actors, they stand on a living stage which slowly breaks apart. The ground falls away but the actors remain, they remember and refuse to let the text repeat itself. The Choir warns them that a tragedy can only end badly, but they struggle against destiny until the end. Against the ground evaporating under their feet. And then there's Iphigenia, standing ramrod straight, alive, filmed at the end of the show in close-up, her face radiant. Tiago Rodrigues's play makes me want to resist and to live, and I'd like the spectators to leave with the same vitality, the same mad need to live.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu