



# WHERE I THOUGHT I WAS THERE WAS NOBODY

## INTERVIEW WITH ANAÏS MULLER AND BERTRAND PONCET

**Where I thought I was there was nobody** is the second part of your *Treatises of Perdition*. What is the dramaturgic project behind this new show?

**Bertrand Poncet:** After *Un jour j'ai rêvé d'être toi* (*Once I dreamed I was you*), which was a critique of narcissism, we asked ourselves if we'd said everything we wanted to say about this idea. In that first part, we'd also explored the fantasy of "being someone else," without really going into how far it could take you.

But as we continued talking about all those things, the character of Marguerite Duras quickly came up, precisely because of her narcissism and by the way this great writer constructed her own character. She talked about herself in the third person.

**Anaïs Muller:** She always spoke her mind. In an interview once, she said about school and its institutions that "it all should be destroyed." That sentence stuck with us and was the starting point of this new show. Working on Duras as both a woman and a writer, we looked into her relationship to writing and into how she was forever reassessing her own work. Her narrative project was intrinsically linked to the mystery of writing. It's a question we ask ourselves in the same way with each of our shows: why do we do theatre? What makes us authors? What is the meaning of our desire to create? Marguerite Duras had the unique characteristic of giving her opinion in lots of different domains. For good or bad. It's fascinating to get closer, to learn more, even to become familiar with someone who had this ability to impose her words. There's a form of fascination with her freedom and her desire to write pretty much for everyone and about everything.

**B. P.:** Marguerite Duras didn't self-censor, which is also what we try to do when we write. We rewrite a lot, cross things out, but it's actually to keep as close as possible to that freedom of expression, of tone. Our first show was about theatrical performance. Here, we dissect the mechanisms of writing. What goes through the mind of a writer? What cogs need to come together for the story to happen? In this new part, our characters, Ange and Bert, try to write a story inspired by another story. A pastiche of a masterpiece on stage.

**You have Marguerite Duras on the one hand, but also Robert Musil and his masterpiece *The Man Without Qualities*, which becomes intertwined with this project...**

**A. M.:** Musil wrote *The Man Without Qualities* in the 1930s. Duras discovered it in the 80s, and this painful read gave her the subject of her play *Agatha*: the story of two siblings who fall in love with each other. In the strict continuity of this literary imitation, Ange and Bert, facing writer's block and after attempting to read *The Man Without Qualities* on stage, begin in turn to write the story of a woman who falls in love with her brother. This repetition of the plot triggers in the characters a sort of identity crisis where it becomes harder and harder for them to tell what's real from what's not. Are they still Ange and Bert? Have they become writers in turn?

**B. P.:** This literary resurgence happens thanks to a book that appears out of thin air. With *Agatha*, Marguerite Duras becomes at once a source of inspiration and an invocation. It's because this writing appears in front of them that Ange and Bert are able to find the thread of writing again, as well as that of the show.

**A. M.:** Those things which "appear out of thin air" in the show are also a way of talking about inspiration: what falls into our laps when we are not necessarily aware of being ready for them. Intuitions and happenstance punctuate this process of "live writing" and lead to the tipping point for both characters.

**B. P.:** Which leads to the central question of this second part: that of taboo and of desire. How far will Ange—who has become the sister, but also maybe Marguerite Duras—go in her quest for transgression?

**A. M.:** All those layers of writing confuse the characters but reveal those interdicts. The sister who confesses her love for her brother realises in doing so that this feeling was just an illusion. To say something doesn't necessarily mean to wish for it to happen. Here, to say her love makes it disappear. All that's left is a sense of vertigo.

**How would you describe Ange and Bert, those characters who, from one show to the next, continue to explore the question of perdition?**

**A. M.:** I'd say they can be monstrous or touching, even sometimes fantasised. There's a part of us in them, and they allow us to use self-deprecation and to play with the audience. Within our "Treatises of Perdition", the through line is a flaw: what can't be resolved within the human. And in this second part, it's about the question of imitation. Are our feelings and choices the result of our inspirations? People construct their identities convinced of their authenticity, when they are actually the product of myriad references. Those characters then allow us to talk about narcissism, greed, or the quest for glory, while playing with the gap between form and substance.

**B. P.:** They exist in a sort of timelessness that is important to us. I sometimes imagine them transported from a different time to 2020, looking at the world around them with a sort of nostalgia. This gap Anaïs was talking about, we also experience it as actors, because sometimes we feel like we're not quite where we belong. It gives us the freedom to play too fast or too slowly, "flat" or "corny," without every losing sight of the work of sincerity, of "playing true." That's what makes the performance alive. Because we play as close to ourselves as possible, sometimes what is comic one day becomes tragic the next.

**Are the scenography and filmed sequences also part of that timelessness?**

**A. M.:** Ange and Bert are in a living room, which becomes in turn a ballroom (a reference to a scene in Marguerite Duras's *Lol V. Stein*), a TV studio, a writer's office, etc. The set doesn't change, but we move through it and transform the space.

**B. P.:** In a way, the set is also fixed in this form of nostalgia. A time period we can't really pinpoint and which we didn't actually experience but to which we still add references, like the arrival of a mobile phone.

**A. M.:** In this show in particular, we're talking about Marguerite Duras's world, but also about what goes on in our heads which we try to transfigure. At the end of the show, Ange and Bert go to the seaside to celebrate the "idea" of literary success. They're convinced they've written a great novel. Those images talk about what goes on outside the theatre, but also about those endless fantasies of success and fame. It's a preview of what will be the object of the third part of our series, namely, the search for recognition through the character of Marcel Proust.

**B. P.:** Contrary to appearances, we didn't intend to do filmed theatre from the start. Yet over time, we've found ourselves with more and more video recordings which are so many poeticised images that punctuate our shows. They also allow us to solve the problem of what can't be shown on stage. Every time we start working on a new show, we ask ourselves the same question: "Are we writing a play or a film this time?" Our writing is very influenced by cinema, that of the French New Wave in particular. It's a deconstruction of narrative devices. But paradoxically, that question allows us to always come back to theatre.

Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux