

THE TIGRESS

A taxi driver, a group of tourists, three birds and a few others are called to testify. They've all met Mihaela, a strange creature seemingly unaware of the local customs, and they all hesitate as to his, her, or its identity... And for good reason, given that Mihaela is a tigress who escaped her zoo to see the city, and the world. With this whimsical fable narrated like a documentary film, Gianina Cărbunariu and Sofia Jupither offer us a funny and powerful satire of our relationship to the other. Their outlook is kind but uncompromising: The Tigress is the story of beings that are vulnerable but who all have strong ties to the urban system—from the homeless man to the banker—and who respond with confusion, pettiness, or even violence when faced with otherness. If the shadow of Ceaușescu seems to loom over this (real? fake?) panicked town, it is rather the demons of today's Europe that are the greater threat. Sofia Jupither eschews costumes and figurative settings, choosing to draw an abstract space in which subjective tales turn into media noise. Her five actors play archetypes rather than fully-fledged characters, holding up a mirror to the audience that may unsettle them but doesn't distort the truth.

SOFIA JUPITHER

Sofia Jupither isn't afraid to seem naive: the goal of her theatre is to understand people and what motivates their actions, even the strangest and cruelest of them, without judgment. Since 2001 in Sweden and 2005 in Norway, she has met with great acclaim, especially when directing Scandinavian playwrights, be they classic – Ibsen and Strindberg – or modern – Jon Fosse and Lars Norén, a fellow Swede. In Norén's work, she particularly enjoys the empathy that transpires in his attempt to clinically describe the modern world. As part of the project *Villes en scène/Cities on stage*, his text *Fragmente* was directed by Sofia Jupither in Gothenburg in 2012. It is through that project that she met Romanian playwright Gianina Cărbunariu. With *The Tigress*, she has chosen to venture into a new dramatic genre: a composite form of theatre, characterised by its distance and its direct address to the audience. A new experience that shares with her previous creations the desire to show that everything in man is human.

GIANINA CĂRBUNARIU

Gianina Cărbunariu's theatre is tough and uncompromising, always oscillating between revolt and disillusionment. . Shown in theatres all around the world, her plays offer an alternative look at modern Romania while also forcing us to think about western representations of progress and success. Her work as a playwright and a director is symbolic of a new wave of political theatre in Europe, originating from the East, which faces head-on the issues of the European model of community integration, identitarian closure, and collective action. At the Festival d'Avignon, she directed *Solitaritate* in 2014, as part of the European project *Villes en scène/Cities on Stage*. *The Tigress*, a mockumentary, was made into a radio play for France Culture and was adapted for a public reading for the Rencontres d'été in the Chartreuse of Villeneuve lez Avignon in 2014.

INTERVIEW WITH SOFIA JUPITHER AND GIANINA CĂRBUNARIU

The play by Gianina Cărbunariu you're directing, *Tigern*, has little in common with the Nordic theatre you're used to.

Sofia Jupither: It's the first time I've directed a play like *Tigern*. I'm from a Swedish tradition of theatre that focuses on psychological drama, in line with Ibsen and Strindberg. Jon Fosse and Lars Norén, whose plays I regularly direct, are the heirs to that tradition. When I read Gianina's play, I immediately thought it was excellent. I really wanted to direct it, challenge myself with a register I'm not used to at all.

What is the story of this play, *Tigern*?

Gianina Cărbunariu: The project started with a real story that happened five years ago, the escape of a tiger from its zoo in a small Romanian town. I was travelling throughout Europe then and was struck by the simultaneous rise of populist and far-right speech in Europe. It was 2010; what's now become commonplace and probably more radical was just starting to spread. It came from all levels of society. The town in *Tigern* is in Romania, but I see it as symbolic of a European climate. The subject of the play isn't so much the escape of the tiger as it is us. The tiger is described from the point of view of the citizens. What I wanted to talk about was the fear of the other, the fear of ourselves when faced with the other. I focused in particular on the most vulnerable people: the play features characters that are poor, marginalised, who don't fit in. It's taken on a new dimension today, with the refugee crisis.

How did you two meet?

Sofia Jupither: We met thanks to the European project Cities on the Stage; we were each presenting a play. In Sweden, Romanian theatre isn't exactly well-known. We enjoyed talking to each other very much, then I read Gianina's play. I knew that *Tigern* was set in a Romanian town, but I immediately recognised Sweden and the Swedes in the situations Gianina describes. The question of the fear of the other, of the foreigner, is very important in Sweden. This isn't a play about foreigners, but about our reaction to them; that's what attracted me to it. When we first started performing the play in Sweden, audiences were convinced we'd adapted the text. Yet we hadn't changed a word. That's the power of the Cities on the Stage project: it's made us realise that, whatever the country and context in Europe, we're facing similar phenomena. We're convinced that we're very different from one another, that we have very different problems, but they are actually very close, like here, in small towns in Sweden and Romania. I thought it was very important to show Swedish audiences that we're all the same.

Gianina Cărbunariu, your theatre could be described as documentary. Would you say that's also the case for *Tigern*?

Gianina Cărbunariu: I conducted interviews with people from the town where the tiger escaped. But truth be told, I was much more interested in those people's life stories than in the specific story of the escape of the tiger. I spent ten days there. I settled on the style of the show while doing research. This is kind of a unique text in my production. It's a fake documentary. I usually work in a more realistic and direct manner. I wanted there to be a distance, an ironic look at the documentary method itself.

In regards to the performances, you seem to favour distance over incarnation. How did you work with the actors?

Sofia Jupither: For this play—as is the case for most of the plays I direct—we work mostly from the situations in which the characters find themselves. It's a very concrete approach. Acts and actions are what allow us to find the right distance, the truest way to play.

How did you treat the animal characters in the play?

Sofia Jupither: Having animals allows us to talk about us humans. It's something you'll find in particular in fables. Things that would seem trivial become absurd when said by or to an animal. But the reality is that their absurdity, their nonsensicality reside in what's being said rather than in who's saying or hearing it. At some point, we tried to use costumes to give a more realistic representation of those animals, but it didn't really make sense, because we're actually talking about human beings here.

The characters address the audience in a very direct way; is that type of relationship to the audience something you're used to?

Sofia Jupither: I'm not very used to having such a frontal relationship with the audience, but this kind of direct dialogue is something I've become more and more interested in. I first experienced it, before *Tigern*, with a text by Roland Schimmelpenninck, *Das fliegende Kind (The Flying Child)*. I enjoyed it a lot. But in the end, it doesn't change things that much: I direct people who find themselves in specific situations, and their actions are "read" and interpreted by the audience.

How did audiences react when the play was performed in Sweden?

Sofia Jupither: We played in Sweden, Finland, and Norway. The play triggered many different reactions, some of which we could call "polite," others very strong. What I find interesting is that the debates that ensue are always very different, depending on whether you're in Stockholm or Malmö, a city that has welcomed a lot of refugees. Reactions evolve a lot with time as well; society is changing extremely fast these days, with every new "twist" in the refugee crisis, every new political change. In any case, while the play may seem rooted in a typically Romanian reality, audiences almost always see themselves in it; it has a universal reach. It is my personal conviction that from one end of Europe to the other, people are much more similar than they are different. Political structures and economic development may vary, but societies all face the same issues.

Do the two plays you're presenting at the Festival d'Avignon, 20 November and *Tigern*, have anything in common?

Sofia Jupither: I think those two plays are about a choice we all have to make today: either we see our neighbours and fellow citizens as violent and senseless people, and we don't try to understand them, or we try to be empathetic, even when faced with the most irrational and reprehensible of behaviours. I consider that the theatre allows me to share this desire for understanding, this demand in my relationship to the other. We live in a time that can easily fall into civil war. One way to avoid it, or so I think, is to look into origins and causalities.

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AND...

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20 November by Sofia Jupither, from July 14 to 17 at 15:00, Théâtre Benoît-XII

La Tigresse by Gianina Cărbunariu, translation Alexandra Lazarescou is published by éditions Actes Sud-Papiers.

Books of Gianina Cărbunariu are available at the Festival bookshop at the église des Célestins and at the Chartreuse bookshop in Villeneuve lez Avignon

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