



Η ΜΙΚΡΗ ΜΕΣΑ ΣΤΟ ΣΚΟΤΕΙΝΟ ΔΑΣΟΣ THE LITTLE GIRL IN THE DARK FOREST

INTERVIEW WITH PANTELIS DENTAKIS

Why did you choose to adapt *The Little Girl in the Dark Forest* at this time?

Pantelis Dentakis: Philippe Minaya's *The Little Girl in the Dark Forest* is based on the story of sisters Procne and Philomela as told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. And its extremely direct and almost brutal style, its economy of writing, offers an immediateness which allows us to enter right away into the darkest aspects of the myth. It's a cruel story which rests mostly on the unexpected. We're subjected to a fate we cannot master. Our ambition to control our own lives and to master our place in the world can make us arrogant. There's a Greek proverb that says, "when mortals make plans, the gods laugh". That's what the play is about, and it echoes our lives right now. The story is a tragedy, and the world we've built is dark, with its radical aesthetics and the insertion of particularly "uncomfortable" video and sound segments... The characters of the tale are represented by small sculptures which, without being puppets, are manipulated by actors in front of the audience. It's an immersive situation that allows the audience to add to and complete what's happening onstage. I wanted to leave a space for the audience's interpretation and emotions. The narrative is tightly focused on the five main characters of the myth in order to explore the relationships between them and the cruelty at play.

You've called your work on this show multidisciplinary, or as we like to say at the Festival d'Avignon, "indisciplinary".

My main desire was to create a work of video art that would be in direct correlation with a work unfolding on the stage. I needed to experiment, but to do so with artists from different fields. I felt that I'd reached the end of an artistic cycle and my intuition was to look for a dramatic aesthetics that would shift my perspective. This play is therefore the beginning of a new collaboration, for me and for the whole team. Upon reading Phillipe Minyana's play, I wanted to create a microcosm onstage, a fantastic micro-world both in the present of the performance and in dialogue with a film. Visually, two actors frame the mini-stage on which move the micro-sculptures they're handling. The attention and posture of the actors, bent over those silhouettes, is reminiscent of the careful and precise movements of chess players. This is almost like a game of the mind, a game of manipulation. The actors frame the story, there's a permanent tension between them and the pieces-characters in their game, they're the masters of the tale unfolding before our eyes. The video, projected against the backdrop of the stage, duplicates on a giant screen what's happening on the miniature stage. There's a twisting of the story, the stakes unfold on several levels, and this duality allows us to move from one level of sensoriality, from one atmosphere, to another.

The minimalism at play here seems to allow you to confront the infinitely small to the infinitely large, and to guide the audience towards very meaningful discoveries.

The actors seem gigantic compared to the miniature dolls they're handling, and they serve as "masters of ceremony" and breathe life into the characters. They're like gods manipulating the destinies of mortals. A relationship of power between the infinitely small and the infinitely large starts to appear, between what we can control, what we think we control, and what remains impossible to control. It's the first image I wanted to show. And insidiously, as the play unfolds, there seems to be an inversion. Those tiny, inanimate creatures start to take more and more space and to influence the beings manipulating them. The relationship between those two dimensions evolves over time. The strangeness it leads to was so interesting I found myself trying to inject a monstrous aspect borrowed from the aesthetics of horror films. Music therefore plays an important part in the narrative. It was designed just as something to accompany or help the story, but it takes on the role of narrator, of a protagonist even. It adds to that atmosphere of suspense.

Horror aesthetics to serve the cruelty of the story.

It's true that it's one of the cruelest stories in mythology, with a rape, several amputations, cannibalism... When put that way, this accumulation of acts of barbarism seems a little surrealistic. My previous plays were often about political subjects, but I noticed I liked to work with subjects and texts whose meaning would sometimes remain metaphysical. Probably because the meaning of life remains unknowable, and this mystery often leaves us distraught. I'm not much of a pessimist, but it's still a reality that concerns me. One of the most difficult, even trying, things for us as human beings is our awareness of our own finiteness. We've found stratagems to circumvent this painful reality, and they're a source of some pride and of a feeling of superiority, like the temptation of absolute mastery to avoid terror. Artists are sometimes the most likely to explore this dark aspect of our existence, but the audience has a part to play in that work. There's a large space left to their imagination and interpretation. The end of the myth tells of the final transformation of the characters into birds, like a challenge to death and the possibility of a second life, or of a second chance, offered to the protagonists. That transformation seems to ask the question of what happens after death. That's when the gods grow serious and stop laughing at us, it shines a different light on the story and offers a new goal to our existence.

To experiment with new forms, you've created a new company.

Yes. Wanting to experiment in different ways, I surrounded myself with different artists. We work like a collective with three creative heads: Clio Gizeli, sculptor and plastic artist, Apostolis Koutsianikoulis, video artist, and myself as director. Our group was born just a year and a half ago, and we named it *Black Forest*, after the English title of Philippe Minyana's book. Our goal is to find "new methods" of communication onstage. Just like the playwright Treplev in Anton Chekhov's play *The Seagull*.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant in February 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach