



20 NOVEMBER

INTERVIEW WITH SOFIA JUPITHER

What is it that interests you in Lars Norén's writing?

Sofia Jupither: I find the way he writes about the modern world and about human beings very moving; his grasp of our times and of our society shows his extreme sensibility, and applies not only to Sweden but to the whole world. I think that he truly loves people, he describes them with empathy and tenderness, without judgment, even in their meanest and cruelest actions. In 2006, when Lars Norén wrote this play, not long after Sebastian Bosse went on a shooting spree in the small German town of Emsdetten, I don't think the Swedes felt really affected by this kind of phenomenon. It's different today, since two similar attacks have happened in Finland over the past few years, and in Sweden in 2015. People are starting to discuss how and why those events happen.

You recently directed another one of Lars Norén's plays, *Fragments*, which features 30 characters. If *20 November* is a monologue, it does use many registers and voices. Would you call this play fragmentary or polyphonic as well?

20 November guides us through the mind and thoughts of a clearly defined young man. But through that personal portrait, it confronts us to all the young men and women who struggle to find their place in life and in society. The questions that haunt Sebastian and the feelings that he experiences are ones we can all easily recognise and relate to. In that sense, it seems to me that the play is indeed much more than just a monologue, or the portrait of one man.

How did Lars Norén, how did you, approach the figure of this murderous teenager?

The way Lars Norén dives into the psyche of his character is typical of Nordic drama. It's one of his favourite subjects. He conducted very detailed documentary research for this play; as it happens, Sebastian Bosse published a host of documents on the internet before going on his shooting spree, including his diary. Trying to understand the reasons that led him to do what he did causes a very troubling feeling. Any teenager could indeed say the things he said. He built an entire political theory to justify his actions, revolving around the pressure to fit in in society. Part of it is political rationality, but it's mostly deep emotional distress that motivates him, caused by all the violence and humiliations he was subjected to. There are successive stages in the play. He starts playing ever more violent games. His language becomes ever coarser. Yet what he says remains in many ways typical of teenagers: he speaks of his dog, of playing video games, etc. What's actually frightening is that every single one of us can understand what he describes, the way he feels. Millions of teenagers feel the same way. Why him and not someone else? There's no true explanation. His feeling of inferiority, the way he feels, all that is terribly widespread.

It can be a very hard play to sit through. How did you deal with its violence?

The text can indeed be hard to bear and violent. One of the tools of the theatre is identification; in a play like *Tigern*, even if we're shocked by the way the characters behave, we can see ourselves in them. It's much harder when faced with a murderer. My goal is precisely to re-humanise him, not to treat him like a monster. We're talking about a 19-year-old boy. And that's how I want the audience to see him. The violence of the text has to do with our knowledge of the events that will follow his monologue. If we didn't know about that, we might see him as a fragile boy, touching in spite of his violence, whom you might want to hold to try to comfort him. If you watch the film he made an hour before shooting up his school, you can see how his whole body expresses his unease.

How did you tackle the monologue with your actor, David Fukamachi Regnfors?

I've wanted to work on this play for years, but it's only after meeting David Fukamachi Regnfors that I decided to launch this project. It's a little like how you have to meet the actor you know will make a good Hamlet before you can even think of directing Shakespeare's play. I discovered David in a play in which he played the part of an autistic 12-year-old boy. I knew right away that I wanted to work with him, and after casting him in *Tigern*, I decided to start working with him on *20 November*. There's a beautiful vulnerability and interiority to him, as well

as a perfect technical rigour, and a great intelligence. It's a rare combination, which seemed necessary to play this monologue. If you focus only on the hypersensitive and fragile side of the character, it becomes a melodrama. You have to be very solid, technically speaking, while being able to bare yourself to the audience at the same time.

In what environment do you place the character of *20 November*?

The audience faces Sebastian in his own home. We enter his privacy, and can thus share his doubts and thoughts, but also watch as he gets ready. He invites us into his home and forces us to follow his emotional evolution. That's exactly what he did when he recorded himself, in his home, an hour before shooting up his school.

The violence of this teenage boy may be seen as an echo of another type of violence, that of terrorist attacks. Did that influence your work at all?

I didn't draw a parallel between the two, but I think similar mechanisms are at play. Loners who shoot up their schools and young jihadists have one thing in common, they're outsiders.

I may be naïve, but I think that if young people feel like they fit in better, the probabilities that some of them will go on to commit those massacres are going to plummet. It's marginality and exclusion that make those things possible. I think it's a key aspect of the play.

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

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. Lars Norén loves the people he makes his subjects; he sees the chasms in them, tries to understand the reasons that make them do what they do; and by doing so, in a way, he forgives them.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina

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