



STRAIGHT TO THE HEART

INTERVIEW WITH THIERRY THIEÛ NIANG

The performers of your new creation, *Straight to the Heart*, are children and teenagers. Was childhood what inspired you for this show?

Thierry Thieû Niang: Childhood has always been at the heart of my work; childhood in art, childhood in the world. Here, I wanted to give a chance to speak to those children and teenagers.

Because we've seen in the news those images of children's bodies lying on the ground, images of rest and quiet, but also images of terror. Images of a child isolated from the others, of a child falling, of a child lying face-down on a beach.

What feelings do those visions stir in us?

But there are also children right here and now, children who come here, who walk, who stand up straight, here in this town, in those countries. All those situations inspired us for this project aimed at everyone, children and adults alike. I'm also interested in the joy children express when they play, alone or in groups, running, falling, playing dead, or pretending to be reborn. I worked as a teacher, then as a psychomotor therapist, I worked in health camps with Doctors Without Borders. Childhood to me is a place of art, of beginnings, of research, of all kinds of learning. It's a place of possibilities. There are children around me who are my friends, and I'm friends with them in return. I see them as people, there's an actual exchange that goes both ways. I work with children the same way I work with adults.

Who are the young performers of *Straight to the Heart*?

The idea for this group was born during workshops I did at the Charterhouse of Villeneuve lez Avignon with secondary school students. I'd also worked with a group of children, younger and of mixed origins, from the city and the surrounding area, some of them I'd met through associations, others through the workshops of the Collection Lambert. I thought it was important for the children of Avignon to be able to enjoy the Festival, to take an active part in it. The children I'm working with are from different social and cultural backgrounds. Some of them will be on a stage for the first time, while others already have a familiar relationship with the Festival d'Avignon, like Anna, who took part in Odile Duboc's *Petit projet de la matière* (*Little project of matter*) and Jérôme Bel's *Cour d'honneur*.

How do you work with them?

Through exercises and situations, I try to get the members of the group to look at each other, to dance together, to discover a shared sense of belonging, secret, mysterious, and invisible. I want them to evolve, to access danced tools that have to do with space and time but also presence, and I want them to experience sensations and matters like weight, falling, or taking flight, allowing them to move from abstraction to incarnation and back. We explore different propositions in different spaces, since *Straight to the Heart* will be presented in three distinct locations. We challenge ourselves with music, texts, and images, alongside artists like Linda Lê, who is writing for the children, or like the singer Camille, or the visual artist Claude Lévêque. All of that feeds our process and allows something to happen, to blossom, both within the group and within every one of them. I write the show based on what arises from this shared experience. The way I work with them is also a summary of the project: What are we giving this community that embodies the future, to allow them to build something sensible, to build a present?

What I've seen of the rehearsals is beautiful, but sometimes serious and melancholy.

Within every child, there is grief and loss. Tragedy, in some of them. There's no such thing as a child that doesn't need to be comforted, I think. My work is to highlight this living thing, this particular being, this shared thought, whether with the artists I work with or with the children. Moreover, the immobility or the silence of a child isn't always synonymous with gravity. A falling child isn't necessarily hurt, ill, or dead. It can also be a child who's playing, who then gets up. A child who learns.

Music plays an important part in *Straight to the Heart*.

On the stage, we have a young musician, Robin Pharo, in charge of the music. He comes from baroque music, plays the viola, and sings. I thought it would be interesting to bring together those young children and teenagers and an ancient, almost distant music. I also asked Camille, with whom I'm acquainted, to help the children work on two or three a capella songs.

The show also uses text and visual arts...

I wanted to collaborate with other artists thanks to the partnerships with the Charterhouse of Villeneuve lez Avignon, which focuses on writing for the performing arts, and the Collection Lambert, which works in the field of contemporary art. I've always liked the effect a text can have on bodies, on space, and on thought. I asked the writer Linda Lê to join us. She's also a child of immigrants, originally from Vietnam like myself, and she speaks very eloquently of our relationship to that lost childhood, to our inner exile. I also called on Calude Lévêque and his words written in neon lights, those sentences that will play the role of titles, slogans, and poems. I'm very happy with the unusual, surprising, and diverse team we form.



What place does this kind of project with amateurs occupy in your work?

I've always wanted to look for other bodies in order to feed and question my dance anew. To invite them and dance with them.

I first found them in theatre actors and musicians, but also in amateurs, children, elderly people, inmates. Those encounters are like a sensible matter that is indispensable to my practice of dance, to my work as an artist and as a man. What I experience and discover with those women and those men, adults and children alike, I owe it to them to welcome it in everything I do and share. It's at the very heart of who am I and am still becoming!

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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