



THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS JOLLY

How did you come across this text by Georg Kaiser, which isn't well known, and very rarely performed?

Thomas Jolly: I first came across it as a student at the École du Théâtre national of Brittany, back in 2003. I've dreamt of directing it for thirteen years. One of the difficulties was that the roles have to be played by young actors. That obstacle disappeared when Stanislas Nordey asked me if I wanted to work with the third-year students of the École du Théâtre national of Strasbourg and direct their first professional show; I immediately thought that the time had come to start working on this project. There are twelve characters—six girls and six boys—and there are six girls and six boys in the class. Well, there's also a thirteenth character... but let's not say too much.

Although it was written between 1940 and 1943, and is based on a true story (the sinking by a German U-boat of an English liner transporting children to Canada), do you feel like the text takes on a different meaning now?

Absolutely. We're talking first and foremost about people fleeing war... Here children fleeing a war waged by adults. They end up on a lifeboat and will commit an unforgivable crime in the name of their interpretation of a religious text, a Christian text here. If Georg Kaiser chose to have thirteen characters, it was to remind us of the fateful number of the Last Supper, with Jesus surrounded by his twelve apostles. There are thirteen of them, which is one too many... Because for thirteen people, some think, there will be no salvation... The themes of religion and indoctrination could be relatively ambiguous, but Georg Kaiser's position in this tragic debate is clear. Man can use his beliefs to justify the worst and feel like he did the right thing. It's monstrous in that it is the rules themselves that lead to tragedy. In the name of my personal beliefs, I can justify all my actions, even those others would find barbarous, even though we belong to the same religion. What's troubling is that what we have here isn't a debate that opposes experts in religious texts, but children. They're only repeating what they've been taught. Only Allan will remain faithful to his own conscience. Furthermore, there's the idea of children as victims, victims of the adults, the Nazis. They're children who have fled England to escape the bombings. At first they complain and see themselves as victims, which of course they are, since they are orphans. But quickly, in a way similar to what William Golding will later describe in *Lord of the Flies*, they find the bestiality and violence that exist within each and every one of us, more obvious in the adults but still there, in a latent state, in children. That's what Georg Kaiser says, with surprising power. Barbarism can arise anywhere and at any time. But if he asks the question of that latent barbarism, he doesn't give a very clear answer, which fortunately allows for any and all interpretation. There's a great subtlety in that permanent ambiguity. With war and religion, we have two axes that question our world in a fairly brutal and direct manner.

Do you think the title is a reference to the painting by Géricault?

There are many references in the play, all intentional. There's a reference to the true story of the raft that the passenger of the ship "The Medusa," wrecked and destroyed in 1816 off the coast of Mauritius, built to survive. We're talking about the same "micro-world" in which people live, kill each other, devour each other... But there's also a reference to the Medusa of ancient Greece... The one you can't look at without turning to stone. Like Allan in the play, who has trouble looking at Ann. There's an ambivalence there. For those two characters, another theme appears, and the play can be interpreted almost as a dream, as if it were a dark fairy tale. As for the love that binds Allan and Ann together, it's a children's love. They picture their love to be like the love they imagine adults share. It's sometimes very cruel. Children play at being adults, and of course they end up behaving like them, which will lead them to murder. There's a comparison to be made between George Kaiser's stage directions, according to which the play ends in a red sea, the same as the one in which the Medusa of antiquity dies after having been beheaded, that same blood red that gives birth to coral.

Speaking of which, the stage directions are very long, and there are a lot of them. Do you intend to respect all of them?

I just started working with the students in scenography, and we've been thinking about the organisation of the stage. There are elements that we take into account, that can't be avoided. The stage directions give an impression of quasi-cinematographic realism. Take, for instance, the fog that constantly surrounds the raft... Because the other distinctive feature of the text is that it all takes place in one location, in the middle of the ocean. A closed space in the heart of the infinite. The question is to distinguish between the dream part and the realistic part of the play. But I want the ideas we'll explore for the scenography to come from their own sensibilities as student-scenographers confronted with very different spaces of representation, since after Avignon, we'll play at the Théâtre national of Strasbourg, then at the Théâtre national de l'Odéon. In that class, there are sections working on sound, lights, dramaturgy, scenography, direction, costume design, and it is important that all of them make the work theirs... For this project, I feel more like I'm here to guarantee cohesiveness, like the foreman of the liner they're building together. This type of show, at the end of a three-year cycle, is often called "an exist show," but I like to think we're building "an entrance show." Which is why I think this play was a good choice, as they'll play roles close to them in age, with all the questions relating to their professional specialisation.

There are seven sequences in the play, each of them corresponding to a day spent at sea...

Yes, they spend seven days on the ocean... seven steps that lead to a murderous outcome and a truly tragic question. Who's right, who's wrong?... After our Shakespearean adventures, I'm glad to come back to a more compact play that's just as violent. It's pure brutality and savagery. It can't but bring to mind those reversals of fortune, especially following revolutions, that turn victims into torturers. It's a very pessimistic vision, especially since we're talking about children.

Although the characters are all children, the language used isn't what you would expect from children...

The text is indeed disturbing from that point of view, because it plays with the naivety of children, but also with the essential way in which they can get straight to the point. It gives the text a beautiful radicalism. Of course, there's another obvious source of discomfort that I like a lot, that is, the fact of seeing young adults playing children and, to be more precise, I'd say they'll be playing children playing at being adults... That being said, and having already worked with them, their youth makes the friction between adolescence and adulthood work very well. We'll work on this in-between state, without turning it into a pastiche of childhood.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach



JULY 6 TO 24, 2016

All the Festival on festival-avignon.com



#FDA16

