



THE PRESENT EYE

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHE RAYNAUD DE LAGE

You've been the official photographer of the Festival d'Avignon since 2005, never missing an edition. What is the specificity of your work in its relationship with the performing arts and with the artists?

Christophe Raynaud de Lage: My work consists in accompanying the director's vision. I never try to replace the show, but rather to recreate it rather faithfully. I follow the meaning the artist decided to give to their work. In a way, I think I bring a spectator's point of view to the shows. But a multifaceted point of view, as I like to change vantage points. Photographing the performing arts is a fragile alchemy. It's an encounter between a moment and a situation. Nothing is ever the same twice. Thus you can feel the emotion within the photograph, and experience it as a spectator. It doesn't replace the objectivity of a recording of a show. Nor does it make it any less necessary to attend a show. Each of my images is a reflection of what was. An instant fixed in time among many others.

How do you go around photographing the Festival d'Avignon?

Avignon is a unique festival. The main constraint is the sheer density of artistic proposals. To photograph theatre to me is first and foremost a relationship to meaning, but also to space. Venues, like the architecture of a show, are very important at the Festival. Memory and this relationship to space have been present in my work ever since I started as a photographer. That's why I immediately looked at the Festival as "a place." Places are crucial, because they are where shows and spectators meet. The Festival d'Avignon is a collection of unique locations. They are a source of inspiration for all, for me as much as for the artists. They carry a memory of the performing arts, but more than that. They are places that bring us together, and it's those places that guide the spectators throughout the exhibit. When I'm shooting, I can go backstage, stand as close to the show as possible, take pictures from various angles and heights. In that regard, Avignon is incredible: the Festival gives me the opportunity to sneak into towers, into cloister terraces, to take pictures from the side, from behind, from under the shows... I feel free. Theatre photography is also a relationship to light and shadows. On a stage, the various elements are lit by spotlights, but often I like to find my own way. I enjoy looking for clues hidden in the shadows instead of standing above the visible part of a show. There, I find emotions that are part of the working process, even if they can't be seen in the final product. I also like those moments of concentration, when the actors stand on the edge of the stage. It allows me to talk about the very strong relationship between the Festival and its audience. A theatre venue, in that sense, exists for those encounters. It's in this relationship to the audience that some of the most beautiful moments of theatre happen. I'm thinking for instance about the spectators covered in a large sheet in the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes for *Inferno*, or of the actors playing among the audience... The photographs showing the many interactions between the stage and the audience are often striking in their intensity.

How do your images carry the memory of the Festival, which has become, to a certain extent, your responsibility?

My photographs are like an incisive fragment of the giant living fresco that is the Festival throughout its editions. They are reminiscences of what we experience as spectators within a moment of collective emotion. Usually, that memory is spread around. For the first time ever, this immersive exhibition brings together and reconstructs this memory I've been gathering since 2005. But for this exhibition, I didn't want to work in a conventional way, to focus on a chronological restitution of memory. I wanted a photographic installation, a *mise en scène* of the images themselves as well as of the spectator's route. As a performing arts photographer, there is an undeniable subjectivity to my work, which expresses itself notably through the many points of view and temporalities I work with. I use the same tricks as those that existed before I captured those images: lighting, scenography, sets, voice, sound environment, props... I use the tools of dramaturgy. This installation is a sort of *mise en abyme*.

Would it be accurate to speak of sensory wandering?

Yes, that's the choice we made. It's first and foremost a sensory progression: it's an exhibition of live memory, a pretext for discovery, an encouragement to reminisce, but more importantly, it provides us with the opportunity to share our impressions. With curator Laurent Gachet, we wanted the spectators to enter the images and to be able to feel them. We tried to make those moments reappear. This exhibition was conceived based on a succession of acts that punctuate the experience of the spectator, guiding them from room to room. The first one is about wandering shows and about all those unusual venues: gardens, gymnasiums, cloisters, churches... Another is about audiences. There are for instance projected images that show how different directors take the audience into account... Then we get to the Cour d'honneur, which has a unique place in our exhibition, and La FabricA. The exhibition ends with backstage images, with stories of what goes on behind the scenes. It's a sort of second playground, a great opportunity to capture different moments of theatre, sometimes as intense as those produced on stage. One of the challenges was to make this exhibition truly immersive, notably by creating symbolic reminders with the use of sets, sounds, words, props, or costumes opposite the photographs that suggest or show them. It fits my way of working. When I'm shooting, I use all my senses.

How did you choose the images among your vast archive? Do some shows resist you while others call to you?

Every edition counts more than sixty shows and thousands of images... This exhibition, it's also seventeen years of constant renewal, new challenges, new emotions... I tried to find this exhilaration again throughout. There were many very real technical difficulties, but it's all part of the game! The shows that are the most difficult to shoot are those that touch me the most, because they force me to challenge myself.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu

An additional interview is available in the catalogue of the exhibition.