



FALSTAFE DE VALÈRE NOVARINA

INTERVIEW WITH LAZARE HERSON-MACAREL

You are presenting an adaptation of Valère Novarina's *Falstafe* at this year's Festival d'Avignon. How did the idea of directing this text come to you?

Lazare Herson-Macarel: Originally, *Falstafe* was supposed to premiere in August at the Nouveau Théâtre Populaire (NTP), a Festival I co-founded in 2009 with a company of about twenty young actors, in the village of Fontaine-Guérin, near Beaufort, between Angers and Saumur. We've built an outdoors stage where we play great texts—over twenty shows over the past five years. The admission fee is only five euros, so that we can play in front of an audience as big and diverse as possible. Thanks to the support of local authorities, we are on the verge of turning it into a real place of residence and creation. The adventure that is the Nouveau Théâtre Populaire is actually why we chose this text. There's an extreme coherence between the existence of that place and the idea of adapting *Falstafe*: it's the work of a great living poet, the story of an initiation journey, and a show for a younger audience. Our future, the legacy that is bestowed upon us, the transformations we have to bring to it, how we take charge of it in a new way, all those themes are present in Valère Novarina's text.

Why, having so far only directed classic, did you choose a text by a living writer? Do you think his work should already be part of the repertoire?

I chose *Falstafe* because it is a unique collaboration between a "great dead" writer and a "great living" one, since it is a rewriting of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* by Valère Novarina. My choice was motivated by the relationship this play has with the past. Although we don't make it a particular project, we end up playing Shakespeare almost every year—maybe because there's a lineage between him and the Globe and our own stage, both right under the stars... Much like Jean Vilar, we want to help audiences discover contemporary poets, because we don't think there's a difference between the great works of the past, those of today... and those of tomorrow.

Here we have an adaptation within an adaptation: you're adapting Novarina's text, which was itself an adaptation of Shakespeare. Why?

Last year, we added a new form of theatre to the NTP, by creating an itinerant play. We decided that the next one would be aimed at a young audience. Which explains why the set-up is lighter—five actors instead of fifteen, a play that lasts only an hour—as well as the choice of this text, which allows us to dream of the time where companies were, both by definition and by necessity, itinerant. The original play describes a slice of history that begins with the death of Richard II and ends with the crowning of Henry V; we could not hope to show all of it. Like Novarina—and Verdi before him, and Orson Welles—we decided to focus on the character of Falstafe, and on the prince's initiation journey. Directing such a short version is fascinating because, even though the final text is indeed shorter, we end up coming back to the various touches and layers that helped make the play. Step by step, we find the continuity that exists between the historical characters, those that appear in Shakespeare's play, then in Novarina's. And since our presence at the Festival and our work in general imply a strong reflection about filiation and transmission, this project is like the embodiment of a lot of questions that underlie our work. We need this legacy from the past. It's no coincidence that we are putting on both *Falstafe* and *Hamlet* this year; we deem it important to assume this legacy to then be able to face existence.

Why did you choose to aim this show at a younger audience?

Because it is a terrible example for children! Falstafe doesn't care one bit about the future. He is determined to remain inconsequential, and hopes to lead the young prince into adopting his behaviour. I've adapted and directed some of Charles Perrault's fairy tales before, which let you explore some important themes but always end with a moral. I've chosen to present *Falstafe* to a young audience specifically because there's no lesson here. This play is an allegory for Rimbaud's "lovely youth"—after which my company is named—for childhood and for its love of life; it's an opportunity for a theatre that wouldn't need to justify its existence at all. The goal is to allow children to discover theatre itself, not to use it as a tool to say something about life. This is why this show is just as much for children as it was inspired by them. *Falstafe* allows you to cut to the heart of the matter, which is the relationship we have to incarnation. What I'm aiming for is the absolute seriousness of children's games, which shields them from any external preoccupation as they're playing. This is what this story is about: it's about dedicating yourself entirely to what you're doing without thinking about the future, without thinking about the usefulness or the worth of what you're doing. I like to borrow Novarina's idea about the pointlessness of theatre. In youth—which isn't a question of age, as *Falstafe* shows—we find what Novarina describes as being "lower" than intellectual understanding, a sort of deeper thought, a sense of wonder, an intuitive exploration of what it means to be "talking animals." I believe that is something that speaks to all of us, adults and children alike.



You call invention a “freeing fancy,” recognise its “exhilarating power.” Is this “baseless joy” at the source of your show?

This is a joyous play, because death is everywhere in it! Falstafe, thanks to his determination to resist it, always draws our attention to it. He keeps saying he is young when he is old, fat, and bald. That's what's touching about him, the fact that he lives a fiction. He thinks that if you see death coming, you can run away from it. His naïveté makes him indispensable. He is determined to remain a part of this youth that he doesn't belong to anymore, which reminds me of this other characteristic of childhood that is performative speech: saying “I am young” is enough for it to be true. Falstafe speaks to us of our world in the way he creates movement to escape the very idea of death. Like all clowns, he is obsessed by his own intolerable mortality. His solution is never to stop himself from doing what he wants. His lust for life, his total absence of scruples, his appetite, and his refusal to remain silent are all examples of that.

You make yours this quote by Louis Jouvet: “This is who we are. It is the superficial that moves us.” Does this hedonistic race hide something deeper?

This play is at the heart of all the political and symbolic questionings of our generation: it's the story of a free man in a miserable world. This hedonistic race is therefore a deep critique—consciously so, I should add—of our modern societies. Falstafe's existence serves no purpose. But should a man serve a purpose? Or shouldn't things be useful to men? It's a legitimate question, one to which we give no answer. The play shows two trajectories, that of Falstafe and that of the prince, who are going in two different directions. Of course, in my adaptation, I chose to highlight the first part of the story, with its rejection of a serious future, its hope for immortality. Those characters are typical of Novarina's work: they're figures/symbols of what might be.

On the battlefield, Falstafe manages to escape death by playing dead. What about you? What are you exorcising, when standing on a stage?

I have the feeling that theatre is a form of consolation, as much for the actors as for the audience. When theatre happens, it can't be taken away from us. Paradoxically, this feeling of being alive, of having lived, is granted to us by the most ephemeral and free of art forms. You sometimes hear that reality is the enemy of theatre. Yet not only are we never as alive as when on a stage, but we can only tell the truth by using other people's words.

Propos recueillis par Marion Canelas.

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