



## FREUD

# INTERVIEW WITH IVO VAN HOVE

**You have already directed several film adaptations. Why this fascination for cinema, and why did you choose to tackle Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Freud Scenario*, a text up until now never adapted in its entirety, neither for the screen nor for the stage?**

**Ivo van Hove:** I started adapting films on stage as early as the 1990s. I was one of the first to do it, in particular from the point of view of structure. I needed to widen a repertoire made up of texts both classic and modern written specifically for the theatre. I realised that many themes and characters created in films only existed in cinema, not in theatre. At the time, I already had a lot of experience directing plays. Directing a screenplay for the stage seemed new and different. A screenplay isn't made for the stage, cinema and theatre are organised according to very different rules. For each adaptation, I therefore have to gather my crew and come up with a new theatrical world, which is a huge challenge, artistically speaking. I bought Jean-Paul Sartre's *Freud Scenario* in Paris, and later I got the version published in the United States. I liked the idea of adapting it. It's a situation I'd never seen on a stage, characters who experience scientific breakthroughs and change the history of medicine. Depicting researchers, not when they've been successful but when they're just venturing into new territories, seemed an unusual idea. Nowadays we're steeped in the theories Sigmund Freud revealed, they are part of our experience, but back then, it was a revolution. The book depicts a world of innovators and precursors, and that's what I wanted to show. It's a theme I'd already worked on with *The Fountainhead*, about modernist and innovative architects, which played at the Festival d'Avignon in 2014. What most interested me then was to dive into the minds and souls of those great inventors. And it's also what drew my interest in *Freud*.

**In his screenplay, Sartre shows the young Freud as troubled and human. It's a more positive and empathetic vision than in his previous critiques.**

It is indeed this so-called young Freud, between the ages of 29 and 36, before fame, whom Sartre depicts and whom interested me. The major theme of the screenplay is the relationship between the young doctor and his various father figures. First his actual father, a weak man with whom he had a bad relationship. Then a "father-teacher" with professor Meynert, an authoritarian and narrow-minded doctor who doesn't believe in the unconscious. Finally, the "father-friend," Wilhelm Fliess, a Berlin doctor very interested in what Freud is then just glimpsing. He's an "inspiring" father. He is open-minded, takes Freud out of the small world of his family, and is a great influence on him. I think a father is someone who protects you, who shows you where to go. At the same time, it's never easy to follow, and every son has to go through a feeling of rebellion to stand on his own and find his own way in life. Sigmund Freud is too innovative to accept it when Meynert tells him that hypnosis is but a magic trick and not medicine, which is why he turns to professor Charcot. He will eventually grow apart from Wilhelm Fliess as well. It's through those experiences and those substitute fathers that Freud learns to reconcile with his biological father, even if he does so a little too late, on his father's grave... In the play, we watch Sigmund Freud at work, impatient in his research, but we also see him at home. Like his own father, he is often absent, not particularly attentive, and doesn't really care for the children. Although he loves his wife, his real passion is his work. Those are the themes I worked on, trying to make sure that everything is historically accurate without turning it into a biography, a form I'm not attracted to. The main subject, of course, is research. We see him explore and try out methods which, in the last part of the play, lead to the discovery of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud also shows that, in the therapeutic process, the doctor doesn't need to be in a dominant position relative to the patient to cure them, and that doctors need to accept to use the same process to cure themselves;

**The stage shows simultaneously the private apartments of the Freud family and his surgery. There is a great sterile white space in which can be seen a darker rectangle on the floor, sometimes defined by walls, like a little dark box in a great light one... is this interlocking a way to give tangible form to the different degrees of conscience of the human mind?**

Yes, the central idea here is to create a space in which we can watch the slow and yet intense development of Sigmund Freud's thought. It's as if, on stage, we were inside his brain. Outside of his personal and professional life, we mostly wanted to show that his own introspection was fundamental. Early on in the screenplay, Sigmund Freud says "*I want to know myself.*" Towards the end, he also says "*no one can bear to know the truth about oneself.*" I think those two notions are very important. Everyone has secret desires, and to suppress them makes us ill. If we want to heal and be able to find balance in life, we have to face our demons. That's why I made sure to show treatment sessions, which are physically and emotionally very intense. In addition to his great discoveries, I also wanted to show the social drama at play. One of the challenges was to depict Vienna at the turn of the century, with antisemitism on the rise. The Freud family is Jewish, and one of Sigmund's childhood traumas is a story told by his father about how a man once insulted and humiliated him in the middle of the street without him being able to say anything in return. That's why Sigmund Freud thought his father was weak, even though he better understood his attitude later. Antisemitism in Vienna becomes a drive for him. The need to stand out of the crowd and to be the best in his field will be his revenge. Showing that on stage was also very interesting, because we're surrounded by xenophobia today. There's a lot of hate, a lot of tension in the world! Let's hope that Freud, at his level, can show us how to turn a negative force into positive energy.

**How did you divide the work with Flemish company FC Bergman, who adapted Jean-Paul Sartre's huge screenplay?**

FC Bergman and playwright Koen Tachelet based their adaptation on Sartre's whole screenplay. We wanted to be faithful to the screenplay, which is very different from your usual cinema screenplay, because the scenes are very long and include a lot of case studies. We had to cut some of them so as not to make it too repetitive, while trying to remain respectful of the text. Everything you'll see on stage is in the screenplay, ours is just a more condensed version. The actors of FC Bergman had long wanted to work with me. The idea is also for FC Bergman to direct my company in a few years. If they adapted the text for the stage, the dramatic vision comes from scenographer Jan Versweyveld and myself. Three FC Bergman actors are part of the cast, Matteo Simoni, Marie Vinck, and Stef Aerts, who plays the role of Sigmund Freud. This is exceptional, as he usually never appears on stage, preferring to direct and produce his company's creations. I have a lot of respect for their productions, which are daring and very creative, and for their actors, all very talented. It's a beautiful, warm collaboration, because we've all known one another for a long time and have become friends.

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz the 5<sup>th</sup> February 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach