



GRETEL, HANSEL AND THE OTHERS

INTERVIEW WITH IGOR MENDJISKY

***Hansel and Gretel* might be the most famous of the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales, a story told countless times throughout Europe for centuries. What is your relationship to it? What made you want to adapt it for the stage?**

Igor Mendjisky: What instinctively struck me with this tale is the link between the two main characters. It's very personal to me. Firstly because I have a twin sister, so my childhood was always spent alongside another child. I'm also thinking about my 8-year-old daughter, who sees the world in a fascinating way. 8 is a unique age, they're out of early childhood and for the first time start questioning the things they are told, but at the same time they haven't entered preadolescence yet. I think I was also responding to the call of the wild. I had to write about this path, this journey through nature before those two characters could reach the gingerbread house. It felt to me like *Hansel and Gretel* followed the ideal "recipe" of the fairy tale: a forest, two children, a witch, a trail to follow. I saw those as the tools, the ingredients of a story. As I wrote, I read many essays and critical texts about the original tale. I was sometimes surprised to discover some very deep analyses of the story; I wondered, "Are we sure the Brothers Grimm wanted to say all that?" The themes most often mentioned when reading this tale—poverty, the place of an evil, threatening woman—weren't what I was most interested in. I used that recipe as inspiration, and I'm trying to tell the story of what within it moved me.

You named your show *Gretel, Hansel, and the others*. Who are those "others?"

Adults! When I started telling the story to my daughter, I asked her about some of my ideas, and she thought it absolutely necessary to have her daily life reflected in the fairy tale: parents, teachers, the other children in the playground, people worried—or not—about this disappearance. There's more to the world than witches! In my version, Gretel and her little brother Hansel decide to go into the forest one night instead of going home from school. No one abandons them. At least not literally, but metaphorically. Their father works a lot, their mother lives a little too much in her own head. Nowadays, we abandon children because of our jobs, our daily lives. I wanted to talk about that form of abandonment, which is invisible. Gretel feels abandoned, a little disgusted by what she sees of the adult world. She has no desire to join this grey reality, where things have no flavour anymore, where there's no sugar or salt. The concerns of the adults don't seem to fit within her life. So she decides to leave, and she takes her little brother who, being much younger, still sees things with the eyes of a child. She figures that he will help her rediscover the world. As for Hansel, he's happy to follow his big sister on this adventure.

You talked earlier about the way the shape, the "recipe" of the fairy tale was the first thing that inspired your writing. Can you tell us how it translates onto the stage?

The first word that came to my mind was "model." I wanted to play. On the stage, in an ordinary, messy child's bedroom, models are strewn across the floor to carry us away, to take us to a different landscape, a different time: the playground or the police station, for instance. A whole miniature machinery unfolds in that room: cameras film live images that are then projected onto a sheet, pens become marionettes, a Foley artist is present onstage to create those different places. The wonder is also that of the audience, witness to a show unfolding before their eyes. To that end, I tried to remember everything that moved me as a child when I first discovered the world of the theatre, and I brought all those things together on a stage. The story is played the same way two children would play in their room, turning the desk chair into a tree they absolutely must not touch, for instance. Children are almost ideal spectators in that way: they believe everything, they imagine what you're telling them. It's an amazing sensation to observe. Children think globally, in a very organic way, without any filter. And I wanted the adults who'll be there to feel the same sensation of wonder, and to think that "there's something magical in listening to this story," to wonder whether this or that line isn't meant specifically for them. I'm convinced all of us, children and adults alike, can happily dive into a story. What's on the stage is the imagination and the power of the audience, first and foremost.

It's your first time writing a text for children. How did it change the way you work?

I thought it would be much simpler! You mustn't be too verbose with children, you can't say even one extra word, or explain the story beforehand to change the way it is received. I try to imagine what they'll think, while knowing full well I can't ever really be in their place, and that this work also has its share of fantasies and projections: my own childhood memories, what I see of my children, what I observe in the children I know... There's a desire to find the right word, to create wonder. The way adults can forget and lose this sensation of wonder is something that frightens me. This fear drives my writing, like a desire to find this emotion again. When the text throws up questions, the stage also provides answers. I work with many performers, with artists from many disciplines: video, drawing, Foley, etc. Together, we try to experience this story we'll have to tell.

Interview conducted by Lucie Madelaine