



NO ONE

INTERVIEW WITH SOPHIE LINSMAUX AND AURELIO MERGOLA

The audience of the Festival d'Avignon first discovered you with *Frozen*, in 2017. Today, you're coming back with *NO ONE*, which is also a wordless play. Are you moving towards a purely visual and choreographed work?

Sophie Linsmaux and Aurelio Mergola: Our work is a wordless theatre, but without going all the way into abstraction or suggestion. There are strong ties to reality, because we're interested in the concrete aspects of relationships. We begin our projects by writing a very detailed script, with a perfectly linear narrative, in a realistic, or even hyper-realistic, setting. We set the rules right from the start, by creating a setting, a situation, and a temporality which will slowly be distorted as a result of the characters' actions, but also thanks to our work on light and sound, and to the absence of words. The uncanny slowly comes to the fore.

The idea of theatre without words arose and started to make more and more sense as we worked on our projects. It first came as an intuitive choice in 2011, for our first creation, *Où les hommes mourraient encore* (*Where men still died*), which was about the relationship of the individual to death. We used words as a forever failed attempt to say something. It was a rare occurrence in that play, and always happened at a time when it shouldn't have and when, in a realistic context, it wouldn't have been tolerated. For our next creation, *Keep Going*, about the place of old age in our society, the absence of words was a choice tied to the personality of the characters and to their age, it made perfect sense in the narrative. Nowadays, this radical kind of writing is a truly meaningful approach for us. We've noticed how the absence of words creates a "lack" for the audience, it allows them to take up more space and forces them to change the way they look at our work. The gaze is the essential vector through which man claims ownership of his surroundings. It's through this vector that we address the audience. We don't think of looking as an innocent act. The audience has to dissect and own what is happening in front of their eyes. It's for us an attempt to give back its meaning to the function of looking, a response to the daily use we make of it in our society.

For *NO ONE*, five actors perform the most decisive actions, and a group of ten amateurs is like a mirror to the audience. The story builds sequence by sequence, towards a climax, a great silence. There's no temporal ellipsis. One hour in the lives of those characters unfolds in front of the audience, with group dynamics that appear and collapse. The fact that not a single word is said undercuts the realism. We go beyond words, the gaze of the audience shifts because things that start as ultra-figurative become dreamlike, even fantasy. It's a fanciful show. The audience is troubled by the lack of words, and has to watch more closely. It disrupts their habits and forces them to be more keenly aware even of their own bodies. It requires a truly physical attention paid to the story unfolding onstage. We like this palpable positive tension in an audience.

The central theme of *NO ONE* is the scapegoat. What's at stake onstage, even though nothing is said? Isn't it an admission of even greater violence, and thus of great powerlessness?

The story takes place in a petrol station that looks a little outdated, the symbol of an individualistic society where lonely people walk past but never see each other. It's almost the absence of a place. There's no place there for the intimate and personal. Then a group of lost tourists barge in. Their bus broke down, they don't have reception on their phones, they've been walking for hours to find help, they're exhausted. The inability to communicate with the outside world, to call on some external entity to save them, will lead to mistrust and to unexpected crowd reactions. We have a little fun exploring the mechanisms of scapegoating: the way the group turns into a finger-pointing crowd united against one individual. The story unfolds slowly, without any moment of acceleration or shortcut, which means that the smallest detail can be a source of tension: a raised eyebrow, an object that's been moved... We want to step away from a limited and specific story and move into the realm of symbolic representation. The scapegoat can be anyone and everyone at once. It's a faceless figure. The anonymity of the enemy is a source of fear, which makes the crowd's conviction seem even stronger. With no face and no words, transgression and violence become possible...

But we want to go beyond just observing and showing a phenomenon, by experimenting with the mechanics of scapegoating, both onstage and in the audience. You'll find in *NO ONE* all the themes we've obsessed about ever since our first projects: the infinite precariousness of existence and the fragility of the human condition. We depict a world where everything is going smashingly awful, where mankind is under threat and trying at all cost to find meaning and a reason to exist again.

If words disappear, the space becomes an even greater projection area. How did you work on the world through which your lost characters move?

It's true that the petrol station is at once a symbol and a very powerful pictorial world. We've learned to function within it as a community by obeying tacit rules of non-communication. The stage is divided into two separate parts. In the forestage is the petrol station shop; at the back of the stage is the outside of the station, with the petrol pumps. All the objects you'd expect to find in a motorway petrol station are there. A glass wall divides the two spaces. The audience, sitting on the side of the shop, is a direct witness to the lonely life of the station clerk. Swedish filmmaker Roy Andersson has long been one of our references, for his desire to control every detail and his pictorial approach to images. The choreography is very precise. Very few of the characters think for themselves, they tend to be motivated by chain reaction and group dynamics. They form one body. So that the audience can identify with our story, the tourists are all archetypes, heroes or bullies. It's always easier to be on the "right side," that of the majority, of the crowd, and not to think about what we're doing. The temptation to scapegoat resides in each and every one of us.

You quote Gustave Le Bon, who wrote in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* that, when part of a group, man "possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings."

Scapegoating is a temptation for a group of people who don't want to be held responsible. The scapegoat is an easy and efficient target to bring a community together. As in Ruben Östlund's cinema, another source of inspiration, the other isn't necessarily my friend in our society, there's always some mistrust and fear. We want to explore individual and collective behaviours and face our humanity in its most primitive reactions. René Girard is another author we turned to to think about how to depict "*the weakness of humanity as a whole against the temptation of the scapegoat*." And more precisely, to his reflection, born of one question: from where does violence arise in human societies? The show is called *NO ONE* as a reference to the potential loss of identity by the individual. It's at once "no one" and "not one." It can become "anyone," someone with no responsibility, who hides in a crowd. It's also a reminder that when the scapegoat is killed, he's no longer considered a human being, but subhuman. He's not "someone" anymore, but "*no one*." English can easily pack a lot of different meanings in a single concept, and possesses this universal dimension we want to call on with this show.

Would you say that you are pessimists?

When writing our plays, we work with Thomas Van Zuylen, who's a screenwriter. We were struck by Jérémie Pujau's *De la poule ou de l'œuf* (*The Chicken or the Egg*), in which he would sit in the middle of a town square behind a table on which he'd put fresh eggs. It's about how people drive each other to express their hatred as part of a group: soon many, if not all, are throwing eggs at him. You also have the story of young Valentin Vermeersch who, in the Liège Province in 2017, was kidnapped, lynched, and killed by a group of people his age. Those events aren't so much references as starting points to question group energies and the mechanisms of violence in a society. With *NO ONE*, we can go to pretty extreme lengths in terms of representation thanks to the convention of theatre: everyone knows at all times that things will end soon. We're not stuck in an endless spiral. The story is pessimistic, the characters violent, but we hope that there remains some tenderness in the writing. The audience has the opportunity to meet the characters and to identify with them. They're deeply human and funny, too. The situation becomes so grotesque at times that we can't help but laugh, perhaps grudgingly, but it's a salutary laughter. Ruben Östlund's films are an inspiration by their savage humour and implacable look at society.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant the 20th November 2019 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach