



SOON IN THE WOODS

INTERVIEW WITH PIERRE-YVES CHAPALAIN

Between reality and fantasy, your world is based on an almost everyday language, and often doesn't bother with literary usage. Made of sensations, it is performed very directly by your actors, who maintain a strong link to the audience. How would you describe your style?

Pierre-Yves Chapalain: I try to make a world emerge by working on dramatic situations which lead the spectators to feel as if they are actors of the story being told onstage. A key element is the work of the actors to bridge the distance between the stage and the audience, by speaking in a real way, as if words allowed us to physically touch the other, as if the actors could reach out and touch those who watch them... I try to create this world between dream and reality: a reality influenced by fantasy in which the border between inside and outside fades away, a porous world in which cosmic influences also play a part. A world inspired by all sorts of things: the power of words, nature, the presence of the spectators, technology. A microcosm where the various elements at play can interact and influence one another. That's how my shows are built, how they live and evolve, like living organisms, not predetermined.

There are two possible endings to your show, one of which is covid-compatible. Can you tell us more?

When health regulations allow it, I'd like to invite inhabitants of every city the show plays to take part in a "choir." The idea would be to ask them to come work with the cast and crew for one rehearsal session, so that they can become part of the show and actors of this story. It would only be for a few passages, a few simple sentences that would add to the show a dimension close to that of public theatre. I want the show to be able to draw on this living source of strength to create a climate of conviviality that we've all missed lately, kept apart from one another by these troubled times.

This text confronts everyday situations to invisible forces which act on the characters in a fashion similar to ancient theatre. One of them, the Mayor, is also the Corypheus. Why did you choose to write this contemporary play about the return to nature like a Greek tragedy?

It's the first time I've used this form. To write this play, I drew inspiration from Bertolt Brecht's *Stücken*, which shift the focus from the action to the narration. Here like there, the corypheus, a woman, unveils the story, explains its context, explores the motivations of the characters, and shows the audience what they need to know to understand what's happening on stage. She is both narrator and character. She's an important figure in the town, she knows her citizens well, and the surroundings even more so... She is often accompanied by the choir, a group of friends and neighbours that echo her story. The choir comments and questions the actions of the husband and wife, it warns them against their neighbour's scheming, it worries about those wild parties and about their organizer with his emerald eyes. Thanks to those two figures, which carry the story, *At the Edge of the Woods* is more like an oratorio. Music plays an important part thanks to a DJ/stage musician who takes part in the action but who also creates the sounds of this wild party which gets under the skin of the villagers and which, as a faraway, secret place, forces us to imagine, extrapolate, or even worry. But it's a very contemporary play, inspired by the movements of return to nature that followed the lockdowns. By the renewed awareness that a better, healthier life is still possible once one decides to leave cities behind. But it's also a reminder that none of that is easy...

Indeed, it seems that the characters of the play don't always have the codes that would allow them to understand each other... Disconnection is a key theme of the show.

Starting with the villagers themselves, who try their hardest to find those underground parties but can't locate them because they don't have the codes needed to do so. They're disconnected from that particular culture, although they find it fascinating, like this couple of newcomers who have to learn again how to be autonomous. It's also about the instinct of social relations. The man who comes from the city because he just inherited a family house doesn't know how to get on the villagers' good side. Nor does his grandfather, who doesn't know how to tell him that he gambled his land away at the casino. The grandfather won't be able to transmit this knowledge, to play the role that should be his. It also shows that many are moving to the countryside when those who live there now face an uncertain future.

Is this loss of instinct a symptom of a loss of freedom?

I think so. Instinct is what feeds the living. To deny it is to deny our very life force. And that's what is imposed today by mercantile, neoliberal control, which prevents us from expressing and from staying connected to our inner needs, made of instincts and impulses. A system which forces us to hide, like the ravens at the heart of the forest.

Is another way possible? Would you describe this play as an invitation to renew our relationship to our peers and to the living world in general?

That way is embodied by a woman. She finds herself again in nature, she melds into it, all the better to listen to and experience this nocturnal life that fascinates her. And the more she listens and shares, the more humble she becomes. She has a wilder relationship, more understated and instinctive, so as not to frighten the things that surround her. It's most certainly about the intelligence we use to adapt and create habitable, sharable worlds. Adapting instinctually, like trees, to the lack of rain, to the brutal sun. Can we, as humans, continue to censor ourselves, to accept to be used so? Are our instincts fated to be ruled by algorithms? For now, fear is keeping us apart, divided, it's preventing us from establishing a dialogue and to deal with reality. It echoes the fear some have of migrants and refugees. It's this world, upcoming or here already, which I want to question, sometimes to the point of absurdity.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu