



# A NEST OF ASHES

UNABRIDGED

## INTERVIEW WITH SIMON FALGUIÈRES

**You're only 33 and are directing for the Festival d'Avignon an epic you also wrote. Can you tell us about your career so far and how it has led to the unique circumstances surrounding this creation?**

**Simon Falguières:** I was born in a theatre in Normandy. My father, Jacques Falguières, was one of the main figures of decentralisation. For a long time, he was director of the theatre of Évreux-Louviers. When I was 18, I went to Paris to study drama at university and at a conservatoire. I quickly realised I thrived in so-called alternative places. For eight years, I worked in non-mainstream structures. I earned my stripes at the Théâtre de Verre and the Jardin d'Alice in Montreuil, then with the Curry Vavart collective... I also founded literary magazines, shot films, directed many plays with the K collective, which has since become my company. I started writing plays very early, but I directed Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* to work with my peers. In the end, I discovered and learned about the theatre by building my own.

When I was 25, as Le K moved to Normandy, I joined the classe libre of the cours Florent, where I met amazing young actors with whom I shared an idea of what the theatre is and could be. I decided to write for them what I'd always dreamed of: a colossal show, a world-shaped work. I wrote the first draft of *Nid de Cendres* (*A Nest of Ashes*), which I then directed. That was seven years ago. But most of the actors I worked with went on to join national schools, in Paris, Lille, or Toulouse... But as they were studying, I made sure to keep the play alive. I asked the troupe if they'd like to work together over the summer. One of the actors, Pia Lagrange, welcomed us into her backyard, where we built a wooden stage. We met there over the next two summers, to create, rehearse, and perform a play that lasted twelve hours. Back then, no one was interested in that long a show. I had to cut it down to a six-hour version. The Théâtre du Nord produced this first step in our creation. We'd designed the show to be performed outside. So I asked Emmanuel Clolus (scenographer for Wajdi Mouawad, Stanislas Nordey, and Éric Lacascade) to help me transform it for a venue based on my drawings and on how I imagined the scenic space. Every step of the way, I had to adapt to many constraints. Then the Festival d'Avignon contacted me and gave me the opportunity to create the show I'd dreamed of.

**You wrote several versions of *A Nest of Ashes* before finally getting the opportunity to show the audience this final version. How did you recreate this epic, this fantastic and oneiric tale, for the Festival d'Avignon?**

I didn't want to be boxed in by the set. I wanted to keep a great freedom and not be stuck on an idea. We had to be clever, because there are so many different locations in the play: an apartment, a forest, a fairy tale castle, a cliff's edge, a raft lost at sea, a desert of ashes, limbo, an ice floe, etc. Talking to Emmanuel Clolus, we soon came up with the term of "boîte à jouer" ("playing box"). A naked stage with a few movable and reversible modules, chairs, a few servants for the forest, and something to figure the ashes and rubble. It's first and foremost a playground for the actors; fantasy will then arise metonymically. Which is incredibly theatrical and poetic. I've never thought of myself as a playwright, but rather as a poet-actor who writes for other actors. In other words, I'd say that my work as a writer is intrinsically connected to my work as a troupe director. I write like an actor, aloud, and I think writing is always motivated by necessity. You have to find within yourself this deep need to tell a story. For the Festival d'Avignon, I had to go through a complex process of rewriting. The show used to be made up of four dramaturgically autonomous parts. But now, *A Nest of Ashes* is made up of seven plays of varying length, written as one long epic.

**The story is simple: two worlds which don't know about each other, the world of dreams and our contemporary world, both in peril. One hero from each world trying to venture into the other to help save it. Can you describe more precisely the seven plays that make up this opus?**

This show is a love letter to the theatre, a theatrical feast starting with the writing. It is at once a thriller, a melodrama, a farce, and a symbolist drama. It's a fable and an epic, with many comedic scenes I refer to as "breathing scenes." *A Nest of Ashes* is about a world divided in two. On the one hand, the self-destructing West where Gabriel is born and abandoned, before being rescued by a troupe of travelling actors. On the other, a fairy tale land where Princess Anne is born. Those two births are the start of a dramatic gesture made up of a thousand stories. On either side, those heroes embark on odysseys, and cross paths with the wandering shadows of Shakespeare, Homer, and Sophocles. The first play, *L'Abandonné (The Abandoned)* begins with the birth of our two heroes, Princess Anne and Gabriel. The audience discovers the original tragedy and gets to know the characters. Then, *L'Endormie (The Sleeper)* takes place in the world of dreams, of fairy tales, stories, and omens. The queen of this realm falls ill. Wracked with sadness, the king sends first his sons, then his daughter, to look for the man he saw saving his wife in a dream. In *L'Appel (The Call)*, years have passed. Gabriel has grown up. Melancholy, he wanders through the ashes of his world, performing mimodramas for the survivors. All of a sudden, he feels something akin to the call of the sea: that of a young woman embarking on a voyage to find him. Instinctively, he feels that she will be his salvation. In *Et vogue le navire (Setting Sail)*, Anne and her crew kill a sea monster at the doors of the horizon. After many adventures, including a visit to the underworld which sees her falling from one circle to the next, she finally gets to the other end of the world, and finds herself atop a tower, where she meets Sophie. The fifth play, *Le Véritable Abandonné (The True Abandoned)*, is a family drama. Argan, the troupe director, is dead. Brock, his natural son, is cast aside so that Gabriel can succeed Argan, but he leaves in search of a tower where he will meet a princess. In *Le Réveil de la reine (The Queen's Awakening)*, Anne has lost her memory. She has nightmares every night. Sophie tries to help her by performing those dreams again, and Anne starts writing those stories on the walls of the tower. Gabriel, who comes across the princess's work, decides to build a theatre and invites all the characters of the play to attend his latest creation. The last play, *Le Rêve d'Auguste (Auguste's Dream)*, takes place ten years after the queen's awakening. The city of ashes has been rebuilt around Gabriel's theatre. Brock now leads the city. Gabriel leaves the theatre with Princess Anne on a quest for eternity...

### **Oneiric and contemporary...**

That's the power and the magic of fairy tales. My goal is for the audience to perceive in this tale the echo of our own present mixed with the ancient stories of fairy tales. Those stories remind us of our humanity. It's all a question of resonance, and theatre allows us to communicate with the humanity of the past, present, and future. Once again, without being aware of it... You just have to see how moved the audience is by the archaic gesture of the actor. This one gesture contains all the gestures of all actors past. It's an exhilarating mystery. There's a reason Shakespeare always had Apuleius's *Golden Ass* handy... The very first fairy tale in history, the first time someone wrote: "*Once upon a time, in a city, there lived a king and a queen...*"

**You'll be performing this show at La FabricA, in the first half of the Festival d'Avignon. How do you feel about it?**

It's very moving for me, because it's where I come from. My father, who is now 83 years old, is from Avignon. He first discovered the theatre thanks to Jean Vilar. He even played a halberdier in Vilar's direction of *Lorenzaccio*! With him, I've been following the adventure of the Festival d'Avignon since I was 6. All those big emotions for the theatre come from there. To end the adventure of *A Nest of Ashes* at the Festival d'Avignon is a mind-blowing twist of fate!

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu