



# DIRE CE QU'ON NE PENSE PAS DANS DES LANGUES QU'ON NE PARLE PAS INTERVIEW WITH ANTÔNIO ARAÚJO

**You've been an actor, then a director. Can you tell us more about that evolution, and about the creation of the Teatro da Vertigem company?**

**Antônio Araújo:** I've always loved the theatre, so I began my career as an actor. But very soon I found myself working on projects related to dramaturgy. While in college, in drama school, I chose to study theory, then directing. That's when I decided I would be a director. I directed a few institutional plays but I soon realised I didn't find working as a director-for-hire particularly interesting. This kind of individual practice was common in Brazil in the 1980s. The military dictatorship had destroyed the collective network of independent theatres, which they considered hotbeds of communist troublemakers. That's why, with a group of friends from college, we decided to create not a company but a group for the theoretical and practical study of theatre, in order to devise theatrical experiments. After working for a year, we decided that we had something we could show people and we created a first show called *Paraíso Perdido* (*Paradise Lost*), based on improvisations as well as texts and images we chose. We then had to pick a name for our group. We referred to ourselves as "group for the study of classical physics as applied to the actor's performance", but we couldn't quite use that professionally. Based on a scene in *Paraíso Perdido* in which a man is struck with vertigo, we chose that name of "vertigem". The group has since then been made up of a permanent core of six people and of guests that work with us on each show.

**There is often a three- or four-year wait between each of your productions. Is that by choice or by necessity?**

It's a choice as regards the conditions of the creative process. We rehearse our shows for a very long time. The way we work on our projects means that we need to rehearse between a year and a year and a half, five days a week, six or seven hours a day. We also want to play for as long as possible. We played *O Livro de Jó* (*The Book of Job*) six times a week for two years in São Paulo.

**You seem to prefer not to play in traditional theatre houses. Why?**

We've played in a church, in a hospital, in a prison, on a boat in the middle of the river that flows through São Paulo, etc. With our very first show, it was already very clear that our creations, by their very nature, would not make sense if played in traditional settings. For instance, for *Paraíso Perdido*, we wanted to talk about the separation between the divine and the human, but we also wanted to change our relationship with the audience and get them closer to a place with links to the sacred. We looked for a venue for a long time, in Buddhist temples, in mosques, in churches... Nobody wanted us, until the bishop of São Paulo, who is close to liberation theology and thus to the left wing of the Catholic church, and who'd studied in France and had once seen a show in a church in Paris, allowed us to use his church. Every night we played in that space that was used during the day as a place of worship. There were demonstrations organised by fundamentalist Catholics, death threats against the actors and the audience. In the end, it sparked conversations, made people curious about our work, and reinforced our will to use other spaces, to leave the black boxes of the theatre houses behind, to lead our audience to unusual locations. When we played *BR-3* in 2006, we decided to do it on a boat in the middle of the Tietê River, which flows through São Paulo. Unlike the Seine and the Thames, this river isn't exactly the pride of the inhabitants of São Paulo. It's seen more as an open-air sewer. To make people come to a boat floating in the middle of this "sewer" forced them to look at their own city differently. We've also played in hospitals and prisons. In Poland, for instance, we worked with convicts, and we insisted that the prisoners be allowed to come take a bow with us, even though the last scene took place outside the walls of the prison. We were once again lucky: the warden was a theatre-lover and, at the end of our long discussions, he gave us a beautiful gift, a book about Tadeusz Kantor.

**The convicts worked as actors, then. Do you often work with amateur actors?**

We did it for *BR-3* because we'd worked in a favela for months, organising workshops, acting classes, and meetings with the inhabitants. At the end of that period, we asked some people to work with us on our final project, either as actors or as technicians. But it isn't something we do systematically.

**For *Say what you don't mean*, in a language you don't speak, you worked with a writer. Was that the first time?**

No. Usually, the writer is there during rehearsal, and builds a sort of textual dramaturgy tied to the actors' improvisation. But it is true that for *Say what you don't mean* we adopted a new approach. We could only rehearse for



two months, so we had to change the way we work. We therefore decided to work with Bernardo Carvalho, one of Brazil's greatest contemporary novelists. We'd worked together before on *BR-3*, and he was also interested in working with us again. This time, he wanted to write the text of the play before rehearsals began, while knowing that it might change during the creative process.

### **Was this project born in Brussels?**

Originally, it was a creation for the European project *Villes en Scène/Cities on Stage* that was imagined by Olivier Py and Agnès Trolly, when they were still at the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe. Then, in 2012, we were invited by an architecture firm, VRAC/L'Escaut in Brussels, to participate to the Europalia Festival. They knew our strong relationship to urban structures. We went there with Bernardo Carvalho, and we ended up deciding to put up the show in Brussels with the National Theatre, which is also part of the *Villes en Scène/Cities on Stage* project, based on our experience there.

### **Did Bernardo Carvalho write a play or a theatrical novel?**

It's a play with a great narrative power. It also plays with the language of cinema a little. Bernardo Carvalho produced a first draft, on which we worked together, cutting some things, changing others. This allowed us to make it more concise, better suited to the theatre. In the end, we went from a five-hour play to a two-hour one.

### **His work as a novelist is often referred to as "documentary fiction." Can the same be said of this play?**

Its reality is that of European cities. Not only Brussels, because Bernardo Carvalho has also lived in Paris and Berlin, and knows Europe well. But it may seem arrogant to talk about cities we've never lived in. There will therefore be multiple outlooks: our outlook on Brussels and other European cities, the outlook of the Belgian actors on their own city, Bernardo Carvalho's outlook on his own stays in Europe, and our outlook on São Paulo, our city.

### **At the heart of this text is an old man who comes back to Europe today after having lived there in exile from the military dictatorship between 1964 and 1985. Is that theme of exile important in the play?**

It is more like a trigger for the story, it isn't a central theme. We didn't want to force ourselves to talk about political exile. It appears when the old man's daughter is wandering through the city, looking for her father who has gone missing. The father, though, is lost. He has to face the ideological confusion between the values of the right and of the left, the rise of fascist extremisms, the people who seem disconnected from the world around them and live in a sort of ghost state. All those things upset him and make him wonder.

### **Europe is facing very strong nationalistic temptations at the moment. What about Brazil?**

No, but we have other problems, especially on the economic and social fronts. Our project arose from a desire to talk about the current crisis, an economic crisis but also a crisis of ethics. By choosing to play in a location that's also a symbol of the economic crisis, we open up the play to more interpretations, since human relationships nowadays are very often economic relationships as well. During our stay in Brussels we learned that the building that used to house the Brussels Stock Exchange was empty. It seemed like the perfect venue. In Avignon, we'll play in the Hôtel des Monnaies.

### **Will the show include both Brazilian and Belgian actors?**

Yes, two of the actors are Brazilian, five are Belgian, and one is French. They'll all speak French during the play. While working on the play in Brussels, I chose actors of different ages so as not to have to take nationality and language into account when casting the different roles. This is a brand new experience for us. It's a beautiful challenge.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.

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