



NIN IN THE MIRROR

INTERVIEW WITH ÉLISE VIGIER AND AGNÈS DESARTHE

Who is Anaïs Nin? What do you have in common? What would you say is the place of this play in your career?

Élise Vigier: During the lockdown, I started reading Anaïs Nin's short stories. It fitted perfectly with my need for something soft. I didn't know Anaïs Nin's work all that well. I discovered a writer who, especially in her early work as an artist, tried to write about desire. Those short stories caught my attention because they are always about love, about how it allows us to discover unexpected places within ourselves. Those stories are entirely composite and fantastical. Through them, one can also guess at the personality of this French-Cuban woman who writes in American English and loves flamenco... She has a unique way of describing reality, of being at once inside and outside of it. She's a multi-faceted and elusive writer, always studying her own avatars and writing about her own experiences. I also like her non-realistic aspect, because the realism of the world overwhelms her. She says, "*I'd rather focus on the little things, because the big ones are like so many gaping chasms to me.*" I also found in her a writer with a very strong attachment to what makes us human, which she looks at as through a microscope. She looks at what can change it, reveal it, in the magical sense of the word. This ability to believe that art can have a magical function doubtless is what we have most in common. She believes that literature can create dialogue between the living and the dead. She believes that the fantasy and wonder of literature can be as powerful as love, as life.

There are likely many sources for this show.

Élise Vigier: In June 2021, I was lucky enough to attend a writing residence at La Chartreuse-CNES in Villeneuve-lez-Avignon with writer Agnès Desarthe, who translated Anaïs Nin's *Waste of Timelessness and Other Early Stories*, and with the actors and actresses of the show. With Agnès, we worked on scenes based on the stories *The Song in the Garden*, *The Gypsy Feeling*, *The Russian Who Did Not Believe in Miracles and Why*, *Red Roses*, *A Slippery Floor*... All those stories are based on an encounter, an event that reveals that the protagonists are not who they thought they were, or leads them to leave what they are behind. We then combined other short stories which all focus on women whose lives change when they encounter art. Agnès had also written sequences from scratch that echoed those stories and which we saw as connective tissue. We had a lot of different things written for those specific actors and actresses. It was written for them. In the end, we set part of the action in a theatre. There, we meet actors talking about their work on the text, wondering if art can save or even act upon the world. In that collection, Anaïs Nin is sort of looking for her ideal world. Feminism, eroticism, rivalry between men and women, politics: she tackles so many things in those short stories! But above all you have love, time, and art. As for the characters, they're trying to escape social conventions and hypocrisy, and they manage to do so thanks to their encounter with art, which creates in them a desire for freedom. They all try to invent their lives anew, to live their love freely. We also added excerpts from Anaïs Nin's diaries to Agnès's writing. Words are at the heart of the short stories in that collection. Anaïs Nin was an avid reader, enthusiastic and fascinated by writers, psychoanalysis, astrology, love, sexuality...

To many, Anaïs Nin is a sulfurous writer who talks openly of sensuality. How did you approach this specific aspect?

Élise Vigier: I didn't try to show Anaïs Nin for the sexuality she describes, even if it's a real subject. Those passages are beautiful because they are simultaneously about the world, time, the sky, birds, words... Anaïs Nin doesn't talk about sex in a clinical way, nor as something to consume, but as an experiment that unites the self to the other. That's what some people find disturbing in her writing: she shifts the object of desire. She is the poet and the man her muse. She writes as a woman looking at men, she becomes a subject rather than an object.

Agnès Desarthe, you describe Élise Vigier as an investigator of the real. What do you mean by that?

Agnès Desarthe: When I work on a translation, I immerse myself fully. I don't interfere with the text. I try to be as transparent as possible. It leads to a certain intimacy with the author. I forget myself and become the other. For this play, I needed to understand what triggered this desire for theatre in Élise Vigier. Her answer was to go back and forth again and again between Anaïs Nin's writing and her own perception of the world. This dialogue between Anaïs Nin's writing and our time guided my work as a writer. I understood that Élise was fascinated by Anaïs Nin's ability to draw doors where there was just a wall. To offer a new and multi-faceted horizon. To reinvent the real so as not to be swallowed by a normalised, oppressive, and dystopian discourse.

You set the play in a theatre. On stage, we can still see the remnants of the set of an old play. It's a reminder that Anaïs Nin's own writing blends together fiction and reality, which you translate through your use of filmed images. How did you approach this world which oscillates between caricature and social critique and plays with the reader thanks to its many shifts, breaks, and tipping points?

Agnès Desarthe: Social critique is indeed everywhere, and it first appears through intimacy. Throughout her life, Anaïs Nin wrote daily about what was happening around her. She transgressed social mores and the established order, but didn't try to make that a cause or a goal. She was about the experience, with a passion for curiosity that could almost turn into a form of madness. I let my gut feeling guide me. Here, there's no grand narrative, but rather a number of magic tricks, of cabaret acts, of dance numbers. The only story may well be that of the ghost of Anaïs Nin, who haunts the stage and eventually disappears. The ship is a sort of home she calls her *caloge* as a reference to Maupassant. The film uses this leitmotiv of a boating trip which came back time and again in her life, each time with a different meaning. In the play, that's where she falls asleep to escape social pressure, going on a twenty-year journey during which she enters into a dialogue with events from her life.

Élise Vigier: In the film projected on stage, we aim, with director Nicolas Mesdom, to tell the journey of a little girl who becomes a teenager, then a young woman, before growing older and older. The black and white texture of the film will show something of the body as other: the skin, the eyes, the gaze. Those close-ups allow us to show what we can't say. They're a reminder that Anaïs Nin was obsessed with permanent movement and journeys. Driven by this constant need to confirm that she really did exist. Water is an important element. It's like a mirror. This play is also about reflection and memory. It's dizzying, because we're dealing with something unstable and alive.

Music also plays an essential part. Manusound and Marc Sens, composers for the show, wrote several songs based on *Delta of Venus*. A more sensual period followed her meeting with Henry Miller.

Élise Vigier: Songs are a connective agent. A sort of fluid. They say what cannot be said. It's a different space-time, like that of childhood, which Anaïs Nin carries with her all the time, like that unspeakable space-time of love that she tries to draw through writing.

Anaïs Nin in the mirror shows actors rehearsing a play by Anaïs Nin. It's a dialogue between Anaïs Nin's time and today. How did you write this text with all the actors during a residence at La Chartreuse-lez-Avignon?

Élise Vigier: The through line was already written, and so were the characters. Agnès Desarthe also wrote dialogues based on the actors' improvisations with Anaïs Nin's diaries. The actors chose excerpts that resonated with their own private questions. They chose to dig out one or more questions out of the material given to them, and Agnès wrote based on those. What matters to me is to highlight the diversity of bodies present on the stage. We tried to weave different levels of speech and narrative. That's why the figure of Anaïs Nin is played indifferently by three men and three women. All are moments of Anaïs Nin's life.

Agnès Desarthe: This dialogue between two time periods that is the basis for Élise's project guided my writing. It allowed me to give this show its own fantastical and poetic power. To animate it in a game of mirrors, to play with a temporal confusion. Élise brought a lot of material, a lot of very different things: texts, images, documentaries. Current and urban references, most of the time. I started writing scenes based on what she brought me. Nothing organised or fixed. We then put them in what Élise calls *le Vrac*, her loose bag. The actors then reached into it for improvisations that became the basis for the final text. It was a very unique experience for me, who usually work alone and only show something to the outside world once it's finished! I had to ask questions, listen, watch, and write. I didn't try to transcribe what was being done, but to build something based on it. It was fascinating!