

LUDWIG, A KING ON THE MOON

A mad and legendary king, a king who never really wanted to be king, Ludwig II of Bavaria is as admired today as he was despised and misunderstood during his reign. The man who wrote “I wish to remain an eternal enigma to myself and to others” succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. It is this mysterious and explosive character that Madeleine Louarn and her handicapped actors, with whom she has been working for over 20 years, have decided to put at the centre of their next show. With their faithful companions, writer Frédéric Vossier, composer Rodolphe Burger, and choreographers Loïc Touzé and Agnieszka Ryszkiewicz, they explore the fantasies and dreams of this most romantic of kings. A multi-faceted king, Ludwig II questioned the border between “normal” and “abnormal” and sought to live to the end the excessive lyricism of romanticism as a critique of modern life. The actors of the Catalyse workshop follow the slow disintegration of the monarch, his progressive withdrawal from real life and into a world of fiction. From this downfall, they create a journey into the mind of Ludwig II, and build a landscape-play in which nature, arts, and excess all lead to the fantastic.

MADELEINE LOUARN

It is as a special needs educator that Madeleine Louarn discovered theatre in a centre for the mentally handicapped in Morlaix. There, she created the Catalyse workshop, dedicated to amateur performance, before deciding to dedicate herself fully to her job as a director and to found in 1994 her professional company, the Théâtre de l'Entresort. Since then, she has been alternating creations with those two structures, sometimes bringing them together for specific projects. She's directed texts by authors as different as Lewis Carroll and Christophe Pellet, Shakespeare and Beckett, Daniil Harms and Frédéric Vossier, Armand Robin and Pushkin, Aristophanes and Horvath. For Madeleine Louarn, this atypical double path that has marked her surprising career is but self-evident. With the actors of the workshop, exemplary and unique, she puts herself in danger in order to question “the uncertainties and codes of representation” by choosing texts that always revolve around the performance of the actor, around his or her truth and presence. For the past few years now she has been working with musician and composer Rodolphe Bureger and, more recently, with choreographers Loïc Touzé and Agnieszka Ryszkiewicz, which has allowed her to offer her actors different possible ways of expression. Always avoiding the risk of condescension, she challenges her actors to lead them towards the greatest possible form of artistic expression.

FRÉDÉRIC VOSSIER

In 2012, Frédéric Vossier worked for the first time with the company L'Entresort, adapting Aristophanes' *The Birds* for the actors of Catalyse. The holder of a doctorate degree in political philosophy and the author of books about Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Karl Marx, Frédéric Vossier is also interested in contemporary art, and has written for the theatre since 2004 (his texts are published by Théâtre Ouvert, Espaces 34, Quartett, and Les Solitaires Intempestifs). He has also written *Lotissement (Housing Estate)*, directed by Tommy Milliot, which played at the 2016 edition of the Festival Impatience. In September 2015, he joined the Théâtre national de Strasbourg as artistic advisor, where he serves as director of the magazine *Parages*.

INTERVIEW WITH MADELEINE LOUARN

How did you come up with the idea of creating a show based on Ludwig II of Bavaria?

Madeleine Louarn: The idea was the playwright's, Frédéric Vossier, whom I've known for a long time. I'd already commissioned *Lotissement (Housing Estate)* from him, and later he adapted for us Aristophanes' *The Birds*, which we created in 2012. Watching the actors work on that adaptation made him want to continue, to write for each of them. The project really took form in 2014, after *En Chemin (On the Way)*, a choreographic and musical performance we did with Bernardo Montet and Rodolphe Burger. The encounter between Bernardo's choreographic work and Rodolphe's live music created something very powerful in the actors. It carried them, opened up a space of imagination and pleasure we'd never seen before. After that, it seemed obvious that *Ludwig* would have to mix theatre, dance, and music. Rodolphe Burger will be on the stage with pianist Julien Perraudeau, and Loïc Touzé and Agnieszka Ryszkiewicz will serve as choreographers for parts of the show.

Ludwig II is known mostly for his relationship with Richard Wagner and his architectural projects, and for the movies that have been made about him. He isn't as well-known for his letters and diaries, though. Did you look into that?

Ludwig's letters and diaries are two very different things. His letters are written very elegantly, sometimes with a certain pomposity or exaggeration, but nothing that should come as surprising from a king. His diary, however, written in secret, is terse and fragmentary. In it, he recorded memorable events, places he liked, vexations he suffered; he talked to himself as well, urging himself to stop kissing other men, to stop touching himself, comparing himself to Louis XIV... Everything in it is like encrypted, full of symbols and acronyms. It's fascinating to compare those two texts. They make clear one of the tragic energies that Ludwig embodies: the radical separation between public persona and private person.

It must have given you a lot to work with to build this character?

The text by Frédéric Vossier is indeed largely based on Ludwig's diary. The obsessions and delusions you'll find in it open the doors of fantasy and allowed us to approach differently one aspect of Ludwig's legend: his quest for ecstasy, for the sublime. Ludwig is famous for his obsession with art, but also for the eccentric life he led: he would spend entire nights in snowy forests, organise huge parties in the mountains with his valets, dine alone but ask for the table to be set for Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette... Ludwig's diary lets you experience the pain hidden behind every one of those gestures, the complete rejection of a society in which nothing he saw as giving life value was possible. Ludwig is a profoundly romantic character; for that aspect of the character, the text finds inspiration not only in his biography, but also in German Romanticism in general. It calls on nature, and on the dream of a nature in which man could disappear, the nostalgia for a purity and a straightforwardness to life that would have been lost...

Ludwig has remained famous for his eccentricity or his "romantic" behaviour, but also for his madness.

Yes, and this diary that we found so interesting was also used by his doctors to diagnose him. Back then, he was seen as paranoid, whereas nowadays we think he was more psychotic. A psychosis that didn't come all at once... He was a man tormented by his homosexuality, by periods of ecstasy and trance that cut him off from the real world. He lived in a fantasy world and progressively abandoned his royal functions, whose imperatives he rejected. It all happened progressively, and also has a lot to do with the historical context. Bavaria was defeated by Prussia very early in his reign. He had to watch, powerless, as the German Empire was proclaimed, as a militaristic and industrial project he hated but couldn't oppose was established... His headlong dive into fiction, just like his quest for the sublime, are reactions to the political world that surrounds him. Reactions that, in time, grew stronger and stronger, took ridiculous proportions: he got into terrible debt to build his castles, towards the end of his life refused to see his ministers, lived alone, abused his servants, ordered them never to look at him... His very deposition is part of his mythology: certified insane and deposed, he is found dead the very next day at the same time as his psychiatrist, with whom he was supposed to take a walk by the lake. There's something of the cathartic in Ludwig. If we were to look for a modern equivalent to this king, we'd have to look towards pop stars—we mentioned Michael Jackson a lot, for instance.

How will you try to figure this “madness?” Should we think that there will be several Ludwigs on the stage?

There will be two Ludwigs, to represent the fact that there were apparently two different Ludwig II. Chronologically-speaking, there was the flamboyant young king, the prince charming who served as inspiration for Walt Disney, then the aged king, ruined by illness, deformed, the one who couldn't bear the defeat at Sadowa and the victory of Prussia, the one who lived at night and in his fantasies. And from a psychological point of view, there had always been two Ludwigs: the one he was, and whom he sometimes hated so deeply, and the one he would have wanted to be, sublime and desirable. The show could be a journey through his brain.

What are the other characters that surround Ludwig?

His brother Otto, who was also committed to an asylum a few years before Ludwig; his cousin the Empress of Austria, Elisabeth, or Sissi; Richard Wagner; Bernhard von Gudden, the psychiatrist; Hornig, his equerry and lover; and anonymous choruses of ministers and servants. We're not trying to create a historical play, though. The show is built like a biography, but what we're interested in first and foremost is Ludwig's relationship to the world, and how he evolved and ended up behaving in excessive ways, which led to his being called “mad.”

You say of this show that it is an important step in your work. Why is that?

Because it is the first time it will bring together theatre, choreography, and music, at least to such a large extent. The work we've done with Loïc Touzé and Agnieszka Ryszkiewicz will for instance be the basis for our entire research. There will be solos, duos, or group numbers, but they will also work more generally on the physical presence of the actors. “What would a romantic body be? What would a lyrical body be? How can the dramatisation of a movement approach the sublime? And conversely, how can the sublime become ridiculous or grotesque?” A number of questions guide our research, and will influence the entirety of the show. As for Rodolphe Burger and Julien Perraudau, they will be on the stage, with the actors. The music, played live, will re-use Wagnerian themes. We've already worked with musicians and choreographers during workshops, but after an amazing encounter with Rodolphe Burger, we realised that live music opened an entirely new space of inspiration for the actors. Probably because of our subject, there will be an immediate and stronger presence of dance and music on the stage. To put Ludwig II of Bavaria at the centre of the stage also means putting Richard Wagner there, of course. The composer, Rodolphe Burger, and the pianist, Julien Perraudau, will be present on the stage as well. The music, played live, will be based both on Wagnerian themes and on pop influences. Michael Jackson is never far. It's an inner music, the background noise of Ludwig's experience of the world, which will accompany his moments of ecstasy and joy, but also his gradual breakdown.

The show is also special because of its scenography. Will this be your first time working in a bi-frontal space?

Actually, it won't. The space of *En chemin* was also bi-frontal, and the proximity it created between the actors of Catalyse and the audience is very important. It highlights their presence. Moreover, such a space allows us to definitively place Ludwig's story in the space of representation, where one cannot hope to escape the other's gaze.

You spoke of the unique presence of the mentally-handicapped actors of Catalyse. What does their handicap mean to you? What convinced you to work with them?

First and foremost because they represent an otherness we very rarely confront. They're usually excluded from the media. Yet we share a lot of their confusion when faced with the world. They're condensed versions of our own enigmas. They also question a lot of our expectations when it comes to the theatre. Handicapped actors operate a shift when it comes to the question of fiction, unravel the concept of performance to provoke a sensitive, direct, and powerful encounter with the audience—something that's got a lot to do with performance. Mostly, I believe that if it is interesting to work with the actors of Catalyse, it is because the way theatre works, the acting, the reference to fiction, allow us to disrupt and challenge the difference between “normal” and “abnormal.” The space of communication open between actors and spectators, the feelings and images they exchange help make porous a border that is still pretty much airtight, from a social point of view. In a social context of generalised casualisation, in which the impossibility to excel in a specific field condemns you to social relegation or marginality, it is essential to challenge our definition of mankind—to challenge that border between the “normal” and the “abnormal” is for us a way to open that space.

AND...

WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Dialogue artists-audience with Madeleine Louarn and the team of *Ludwig, a King on the Moon*, July 11 at 17:30, Louis Pasteur site of the Université d'Avignon

Why write for the theatre today?, with in particular Frédéric Vossier, July 9 at 15:00, Louis Pasteur site of the Université d'Avignon

IMPATIENCE

Housing Estate, Tommy Milliot / Compagnie Man Haast, the winner of 2016 Impatience award, festival of emerging theatre, July 22 at 18:00 and July 23 and 24 at 15:00, gymnase du lycée Saint-Joseph

THE LESSONS OF THE UNIVERSITY

With Madeleine Louarn, hosted by Laure Adler, July 12 at 11:00, Sainte-Marthe site of the Université d'Avignon

Ludwig, un roi sur la lune by Frédéric Vossier is published by éditions Les Solitaires Intempestifs.

TOUR DATES OF LUDWIG, A KING ON THE MOON AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- December 3 to 12, 2016 at Théâtre Gérard Philipe de Saint-Denis as part of the programme of the MC93 Maison de la Culture de la Seine-Saint-Denis
- February 9, 2017 at Archipel Pôle d'action culturelle in Fouesnant-Les Glénan
- March 2 to 4 at the Centre dramatique national Orléans Loiret Centre
- April 4 to 6 at Centre dramatique national de Besançon Franche-Comté
- April 9 and 10 at Théâtre du Pays de Morlaix as part of the twentieth edition of the Festival Panoramas
- May 3 to 5 at MC2: Grenoble Scène nationale

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