



# HAMLET IN THE IMPERATIVE !

## INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIER PY

**With *Hamlet*, conceived for the dramatic series in the garden of the bibliothèque Ceccano, and *Othello* with the inmates of the Avignon-Le Pontet prison, you're continuing your journey through William Shakespeare's plays...**

**Olivier Py:** It's almost a diptych this year. Both plays are adapted from the same author and bring amateurs onstage after a lot of workshopping. We worked all year on *Othello* with the inmates, and over a shorter period on *Hamlet*, with citizens from Avignon and elsewhere. I think it has a lot to do with my desire to explore unique avenues of work. It can be a challenge, too, as the open air series for the Festival d'Avignon is turning out to be particularly time consuming! The project everyone now refers to as Ceccano was first born of Alain Badiou's proposal in 2015. He'd mentioned the idea of a continuous presence by amateur actors, and of having it be free. The success of the series proved him right and convinced me to keep it going with every new edition. Alain Badiou had this beautiful phrase, saying that the decision to make it free gave it value. And it's true that, beyond the solely financial aspect, we're also making things easier for people from a logistical standpoint. You just have to come! After the amazing series we've created over the past few years, I wanted to take part in it. I think it's important for me to experience the atypical adventures I offer other artists. There was the travelling show with Aeschylus in 2016, and today the series with Shakespeare. It's a long philosophical daydream about *Hamlet*, which takes the form of a 10-hour series.

**You're editing a book based on your work on Shakespeare, entitled *Hamlet in the imperative*. Why *Hamlet*?**

It's the quintessential play! The most famous play by the most famous playwright with the most famous line: "*To be or not to be, that is the question.*" The series is based on the book's structure, but bigger, wider. All in all, it represents ten hours of theatre. While working on *Hamlet*, I was sucked into a black hole and I ended up realising that *Hamlet* also offered one thousand and one definitions of theatre! The series therefore incorporates my translation of *Hamlet* as well as others, but also analyses and comments on the play. If there's no way for it to be comprehensive, this approach allows us to create a wide profile of Western thought. I paid particular attention to deconstructing the episodes, focusing on themes rather than on chronology. And the themes are many: revolution, ontology ("*To be or not to be*"), the relationship to words (this other famous line, "*Words, words, words*"), madness, theatricality, death, etc. Talking about a theme, or focusing on one of the characters, reveals each time a new facet of the play, which the series allows us to rephrase again and again...

**Did this approach allow you to create a new scenic object?**

Can *Hamlet* be called an object? I've spent the past year falling into it again and again. And truth be told, I think I'm the object here. *Hamlet* asks two Kantian questions: "*What must I do?*" and "*What can I hope for?*" Those are the questions of theatre. "*What must I do?*" is the question of commitment, which theatre asks of us. "*What can I hope for?*" is a double question. Hope from theatre? Hope from life? This articulation is key. Can theatre do anything? If it can do *nothing*, is that reason to despair? This *nothing* it can do, it's still not nothing; it's already something! In *Hamlet*, the question of commitment is asked in a very wide acceptance. It's the question of duty, of the moral imperative. The word *morals* isn't very popular nowadays. But it is the right word. The question of the moral imperative is one theatre asks in its own way, without equivocation.

### **With its very first line, *Hamlet* opens a series of abysses...**

*Hamlet's* first line is indeed "Who's there?" This question opens this amazing text. Who's there? Who's listening? Who are you? What are you asking of me? Even: who am I, standing in front of you? That line is incredible. It's real meta-theatre: an actor goes on stage and asks the audience "who's there?" He questions the composition of the audience, their expectations. What do they want? What justifies their presence? It's endless, a series of reflexive questions about the mirror that is theatre... And let's not forget this other important detail: we have three *Hamlet*: F, Q1, and Q2...

### **What?**

F: First Folio. Q1: First Quarto. Q2: Second Quarto. Three texts. Q1 is most likely the oldest. It was discovered very late, in 1836. It's much shorter than the others. In all likelihood, it was the first one, maybe a pirate version of a performance we know nothing about. The Folio, of course, is from 1627; it was published seven years after William Shakespeare's death. Q2 is the version that's most often performed, even though it's shorter than the Folio by three hundred lines and diverges from it in many ways. To give you a great example, in the First Quarto, "To be or not to be" isn't followed by "That is the question" but by "Aye that's the point." It's an earth-shattering change!

### **I'd like to ask you to react to two aphorisms taken from your book, published in 2013. The first: "Theatre is a multi-faceted exaltation."**

To bring together professional and amateur actors and an audience in the unique setting of the garden is a meta-theatrical gesture. This exaltation is multi-faceted thanks to the forms that break the hierarchic relationship between those who know, those who listen, and those who speak. It's integral to the idea of this series in a public garden: to break down the barriers between the audience and those who speak. For one thing because part of the audience is actually onstage, represented by the amateur actors, and for another because this unique setting creates true conviviality. Who is this audience? They're here to have that question asked of them, just like they come to ask this of themselves: who am I? Not only as individuals, either. But also as an integral part of this society: do I have a place? Did I give myself the right to have a place? The show being free encourages that relationship. It allows us to foil it. Street theatre is the same. But this isn't street theatre, it's theatre on the street. There you have it, yet another definition!

### **And here's the second aphorism: "Theatre is alterity becoming pleasure."**

It's catharsis... I'm very happy to be creating this series, in the middle of the day, in a non-frontal relationship, with amateurs, professionals, and former inmates I'm working with again for the occasion, in a fragmentary way. One hour at a time! That's what the aphorism means: there is no pleasure but alterity. True alterity can be recognised by the pleasure it creates. Here, it manifests itself through theatre. Let's just say it's deeply different from other pleasures, like of course the pleasures of consumer society, which provides us with everything to avoid the pleasure of this alterity. Except there do exist cathartic phenomena in consumer society, but they don't lead to pleasure, but to lack... To talk about theatre in the garden of the bibliothèque Ceccano thanks to *Hamlet* is to create an ontology of theatre, before asking about its political place. Theatre, these past few years, seems to me to have been transformed into a "container." Brecht's parable in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* is still relevant: a man buys an orchestra, not for the music, but for the brass of the instruments. I've sometimes had this feeling with recent theatre: it speaks to citizens, not to mortals. That happens when theatre becomes but a container for political content. It forgets about itself. It's possible to think of theatre as serving no purpose, paralysed like the actors are in *Hamlet*. Even when theatre is at the service of something that is very legitimate and highly moral, it loses itself. It can but be at the service of man.

Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet the 21<sup>st</sup> January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach