AND...

NAVE OF IMAGES (screenings)
Norden based on Louis-Ferdinand Céline, by Frank Castorf (excerpt) (2007),
July 10 at 14:30, Église des Célestins

Le Roman de Monsieur de Molière *by Mikhail Bulgakov, translated by Michel Pétris, is published by Éditions Gallimard.*
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#FDA17

#DIEKABALE
#FRANKCASTORF
#MOLIERE

DIE KABALE DER SCHEINHEILIGEN. DAS LEBEN DES HERRN DE MOLIÈRE

In order to shine a light on and playfully question the relationship between the artist and political power, Frank Castorf calls on two figures. Two? Four? Many more than that. First: Mikhail Bulgakov, writer whose books weren't published, director whose plays weren't performed. Then: Molière, author, actor, and company director recognised and pampered by the court, until his downfall. Then their judges: Stalin for the former, Louis XIV for the latter. Multifaceted figures, they are also actual people that Molière and Bulgakov know personally. The Frenchman responds to a commission from the king with *The Impromptu* at Versailles. The Russian uses it as a reference to create, three hundred years later, *The Cabal of Hypocrites* and *The Life of Monsieur de Molière*. But the famous German director wouldn't content himself with Bulgakov's texts alone. He opens *Die Kabale der Scheinheiligen* to other greats, from Racine to Fassbinder, and enriches it with dialogues created during rehearsals... A way for him to comment on his own relationship to a German power that recently removed him as director of the Volksbühne, the "People's Theatre". Now that everything seems to be allowed, what remains of censorship? Who does the artist have to entertain, to get the credit he deserves?

FRANK CASTORF

Frank Castorf was born in East Berlin in 1951. After writing a thesis on Eugène Ionesco, he became a dramatist, then a director, in various theatres, the subversive character of his shows bringing him notoriety. He founded his own company in Anklam in 1981, adapting and directing texts by Heiner Müller, Antonin Artaud, William Shakespeare, and Bertolt Brecht, incurring the wrath of censors. Frank Castorf kept his independence when the fall of the Berlin Wall allowed him to create shows in West Germany and throughout Europe, where he was recognised for his unique approach to novelistic, philosophical, and dramatic texts, which he brought together with panache and a sharpness of tone. Named director of the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin in 1992, he remained the bad boy of the most prestigious theatres and opera houses in Europe, using texts by the greatest authors (Sophocles, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Strindberg, Beckett, Kleist...) to loudly question the order of the world. After his visits to the Festival d'Avignon in 2004 with Pitigrilli's *Cocaine* and in 2007 with Céline's *North*, Frank Castorf reunites with Mikhail Bulgakov, the Russian genius whose *Master and Margarita* he directed in 2002.

MIKHAIL BULGAKOV

Born in Kiev in 1891, Mikhail Bulgakov first worked as a doctor, and wrote his first novels while serving in the White Army. Starting in 1920, he decided to dedicate himself to writing and to theatre. Condemned as pessimistic and reactionary by the regime, his first play led to many of his books and shows being denied publication or production. As an assistant director at the Moscow Art Theatre, he wrote *The Cabal of Hypocrites* (1930) and *The Life of Monsieur de Molière* (1932), in which he began his reflection about the relationship between art and power. He continued it in a satirical autobiography, *A Dead Man's Memoir: A Theatrical Novel* (1936), and expanded it fully in his masterpiece, *The Master and Margarita*, which he began writing in 1929, continuing to work on it until his death in 1940.

INTERVIEW WITH FRANK CASTORF

You bring together on the stage a story written by a Frenchman and the point of view of a Russian. Is that the balance you needed to express yourself as a German?

Frank Castorf: No. As a director, I don't see myself as a diplomat trying to impose my point of view as a mediator. Not between texts, writings, and languages, and not between the actors and the audience. In art, there's no diplomacy, no balance. It's anarchy I care about, not compensatory arrangements. Or, as Heiner Müller would say: I believe in conflict.

To what extent did you adapt the texts by Molière and Bulgakov? Did you keep the original texts for your show, or did you rewrite them completely?

Of course, the show includes original texts, completed by other texts: some by Bulgakov, dialogues from Racine's *Phaedra*, the screenplay to Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Beware of a Holy Whore*, and a lot of other dialogues that arose during rehearsals, often by chance, in situations of surprise. That's often when the best things emerge, because they weren't conceived in advance. Like all good sports, theatre thrives on surprise. Brecht demanded "more sport!" That's how I see theatre: as a combat sport.

How do you build the framework of your shows? Do you work first on your own, before rehearsals start, to write their structure? How was this show in particular built?

At first, you have the words, the play I decide to direct. Before rehearsals begin, we agree on a number of plays and texts that will serve as references; those can be novels, short stories, letters, screenplays, or other kinds of texts. Then, during rehearsals, we see which ones we can use and which ones we can't. I wouldn't call it a basic structure, or a basic idea. To the contrary, eclecticism is one of my core principles. To risk being physically overworked, to risk overexposure to stimulants, as it often happens in the reality of our daily lives in western Europe. When you read the news, this situation that looks like a worldwide civil war—and in France, it's probably even clearer than in Germany—is a huge influence on our work during rehearsals. The theatre isn't a closed and protected place where you create art for niches—to the contrary: we see ourselves as a politically active tool. And confrontation with the past, with historical processes and societal states of emergency as they were discussed in exceptional literary works, helps us to understand the constraints of our present to be able to use art as a lever—through the use of entertainment.

By introducing a double relationship—that of Molière and Louis XIV, and of Bulgakov and Stalin—you seem to be suggesting a third one. Under whose dominion do you see yourself?

Molière is commissioned by Louis XIV to write a new play, rehearse it, and play it, in front of that same king, and with a very short deadline. It gives birth to a play about performance, about the relationship between the artist and the State. Three hundred years later, novelist and playwright Mikhail Bulgakov tries his hand at being an actor with Molière's plays. A few years later, he transposes his own biography, following Molière's example: two existences then meet, their precariousness the very consequence of a certain power structure. For us at the Volksbühne, this material was the perfect opportunity—at the very moment politicians decided to hand over that theatre, with all it represents thanks to its original inclinations and our conception of art, to a new direction.

You seem to be lamenting the haziness created by "this society where everything is allowed." Do you think we're missing an intransigent guiding authority for art to find its edge again?

Art should be sole responsible for its own existence, its own edge. That's the task of the artist. When he complains about inappropriate circumstances, it reveals that there's something wrong with the artist, with his relationship to the world, to the real, to the concrete. The conditions offered by our society are always a source of complaint. That's what the utopias for which art works oppose. Art is a counter-proposition that shows that life and reality are unbearable. That fact, the revelation of the impossibility to come to terms with reality, is the very function of the artist.

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Interview conducted by Marion Canelas and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach