



# NATURE MORTE

## INTERVIEW WITH MICHEL RASKINE

**You are working here with the students of a drama school, La Comédie de Saint-Étienne. How do you feel about passing on your knowledge and skills?**

Michel Raskine: For years I resisted the temptation to work with drama schools. Maybe it was modesty, maybe it was anxiety at the idea of being a teacher; I didn't feel ready, even though some school directors encouraged me to do it, and my actor friends all told me it was a fascinating exercise. I sometimes take some time to try new things, begin new adventures, but once I do, I don't regret it. I began "teaching" towards the end of the 1990s. I loved my first experience, at the ENSATT, in 1998. It was the first time I was responding to a commission: I chose the text (Roland Dubillard's *House of Bones*), but had no say when it came to the cast and crew. This constraint, only natural given the context, didn't bother me. I actually thought it had a lot of advantages. Curiously, it didn't really feel as if I were passing on anything: it was just another show, except everyone was much younger than me, I could have been their father! I liked working with people from a same age group, and I met people with whom I've remained very close—my scenographer Stéphanie Mathieu, for instance. I realised that if there were things I could teach them, there were also a lot of things I could learn from them. I then developed a close relationship with La Comédie de Saint-Étienne where, for the first time, I was able to work with one class for three years, from 2010 to 2012. Our first work together, on two plays by Marieluise Fleisser, went so well that we agreed that I would come back the next two years. We then worked on Ödön von Horváth's *Don Juan Comes Back From the War* (which became their end-of-year show), and Lautréamont's *The Songs of Maldoror*, a monster of a work I would never have attempted had I not developed such a close relationship with them. Working for a while with the same people is another great pleasure of working with a school, and it soon became self-evident that I should keep working with La Comédie. There's one aspect of Arnaud Meunier's project that I particularly like: every member of the admission jury must work at least once with the new class. This year I'm working with the third years of "promotion 25" on Thomas Bernhard, and with the second years of "promotion 26". Our goal is to take a text by a living Greek writer and to present it at the Festival d'Avignon. My work as a teacher isn't of course limited to working on shows. It means remaining in close contact with a school, meeting and talking with students, etc. This is particularly fascinating when working with the ENSATT, since they teach absolutely all the professions of theatre. Those discussions are always related to my work as a director, to the shows I'm directing outside of the school. I can't imagine only being a teacher, just like I can't imagine only being a director anymore: those two jobs complete each other. I think it's important for students that the people they work with be artists or professionals who are currently in activity.

**Your work with students here is based on a text by a living—and Greek—author. Is that new?**

As a teacher, it's a good thing not to cut oneself off from the creation of new texts. That's partly why I like this project. I also like it because I am very unfamiliar with contemporary Greek dramatic writing—and with Greece itself as well, at least on a geographical level. That being said, like everyone, I feel somewhat close to Greece, I find that country fascinating, because I strongly believe that on some level it's where we're all from, that we're all strongly connected to that civilisation, that we know what we owe to its history, especially when it comes to culture. Today, four months before the show's premiere, I'm not ruling out the idea of "integrating" to it two great Greek artists who lived thousands of years apart. I consider them to be two of the greatest poets in the world, they're a real source of inspiration, maybe even of influence, at the very least of pleasure: Aeschylus and Theo Angelopoulos. I directed *Prometheus Bound* in 1995, which was one of the hardest and most enlightening experiences I've ever known as a director. As for Angelopoulos, I admire his inspiration, his relationship to time and to contemporary history, to our world. I'm leading a group of nine young student-actors, five boys and four girls, into a discovery, as much for them as for me and for the audience of the Festival d'Avignon. I know little of Manolis Tsipos, but that's fine by me. I just directed two classic plays, by Marivaux and Thomas Bernhard, and working with so many unknowns is an ideal way to stimulate my imagination. We won't get the text until fairly late in the creative process because it is still being translated 1, and we won't have much time between our discovery of it and the first rehearsals. But I think this is the kind of text—and of author—that is perfectly suited to working with such tight deadlines. Manolis Tsipos is a writer who is close to the art of performance; what the translator showed me of his play makes me think that it's an extremely open material, very well suited to this kind of workshop. The students of "promotion 26", who will be working on *Still Life*, are merry, lively, and homogenous. The show will be about a group of youths from *today*, because the contemporary nature of the play is very clear, but they will also remind us—how could they not?—of the Greek chorus of tragedy, something that is already apparent in what I've seen of Tsipos's play. That being said, I don't want the group to remain anonymous; I want to direct characters, to make sure that within the group everyone gets a solo, so to speak, even if for a very short period of time. And I'm sure that if Tsipos speaks of the Greece of today and of its turmoil, he necessarily



speaks of the France of today and of its turmoil, of us. I put my trust in the text. Furthermore, because we've seen a lot of images of what has been going on in Greece for the past two years—demonstrations, the violence of police repression, the rise of poverty and of the far right—I trust the actors' and the audience's memory, and I don't want those images to superimpose themselves on what Tsipos is saying—even if his text seems to bring them to mind. I think this is my responsibility as a director, when working with a new text. My job is not only to play with the text, with the words, although that is a part of it. My job is to let a text be heard. I won't speak on Tsipos's behalf, or on behalf of Greece, though; there will be no investigation, no immersion, it won't be documentary theatre. Coming back to the text, it's important to recognise the work translators do. I never tire of saying it: throughout the world, translators don't just translate, they help pass on culture. We all know that without the initiative of some translators, without their work and commitment, we would never get to know some contemporary texts.

**Manolis Tsipos usually works on performance as well. From what we can tell about the play already, the link between writing, form, social context and this “direct” relationship to the stage seems very strong. Will that influence your work with the students?**

With this kind of textual proposition, I see two ways to work which are pretty much opposites, although it might be interesting to consider them both. The first is not to see the text as material, but just as a play, to completely disregard the creative process behind it. In which case you have to let your imagination take over while working exclusively with the text as a work of literature. Or, and I think my work with the student-actors will oscillate between those two extremes—just like it will oscillate between ancient Greece and the Greece of today, between the situation in Greece and the one in France—you can consider that, since the text was created at least partly through experimentation on a stage, you can also use this method as a director and borrow from other texts to incorporate them to this one, and not completely follow the “Tsipos material.” This balancing act will likely be a very interesting exercise both for the student-actors and for me.

**The play seems to express a great violence, both social and personal, closely linked to the recent events you mentioned. How do you plan on taking on this question, even just formally, with young French student-actors?**

Our work here is that of a workshop. I don't want to think about the question of how we're going to do things until I absolutely have to. It goes contrary to the way I usually work: I tend to do a lot of work beforehand, probably as a way to assuage some of my fears. I would like to wait until we're as close as possible to the first rehearsal—on May 26—to start thinking, with the group as a whole, about this. *Still Life's* original form and the short time between the moment where we'll get the French version of the text and the beginning of our work on it will probably help; this workshop will be a field of research not only for the students, but also for me as a director/teacher. Maybe their political and historical representations won't be as rich as those of their elders. Although we recently watched Theo Angelopoulos's *The Travelling Players*, and I saw how the way a great artist turned history and politics into his subject spoke to them. That was a *de facto* introduction to our future work. In any case, in order to tell about this great political and internal violence, I intend not to use pleonasm, but instead everything theatre puts at our disposition.

1. Myrto Gondicas is translating *Still Life*. I'm happy to work with her again after almost twenty years, since it was her who, with Pierre Judet de La Combe, translated *Prometheus Bound* for me.

Interview conducted by Laurent Muhleisen.

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