



# OTHELLO, VARIATION POUR TROIS ACTEURS

## INTERVIEW WITH NATHALIE GARRAUD AND OLIVIER SACCOMANO

**You are presenting an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Othello*. Can you describe how your company works, and talk about the cycle you're working on?**

Olivier Saccomano: This cycle is called "Spectres de l'Europe" ("Spectres of Europe"), and is about the concept of the foreigner in today's Europe. It contains two study plays: we worked on the first one, *The Benefits of Spring*, which revolves around the clichés about the East and the West, in the FabricA in Avignon, and the second is this *Othello, Variation for three actors*. We always work on creative cycles that last for two or three years, made up of study plays, that lead to the creation of an original show at the conclusion of the cycle. It's a sort of permanent and open work laboratory, which exists in constant relationship with the public.

Nathalie Garraud: We work with a troupe made up of fourteen people, including eight actors. The idea of collective creation is very important to us: for instance, for the study plays, actors work in pairs to create roles that will be played by only one of them each night. The question of the "ownership" of a role makes therefore no sense, and each actor works to bring out different aspects of the character. Similarly, during the first rehearsals, the text isn't entirely fixed yet, it arises from a dialogue between the stage, the direction, and the performance.

**Do you work the same way on study plays and on the play that concludes each cycle?**

O.S.: For the study plays, we don't have much time for rehearsals. A first draft of the text is ready by the time we start rehearsing, and it evolves during rehearsals. We work longer on the shows that conclude those cycles. I come in with a synopsis, bits and pieces of scenes. It's much more open.

N.G.: This dialogue between the writing and the stage is very important in our work, precisely because we think the stage has its own logic, just like writing does. We don't confuse them for each other, we try to use both, to make them dialogue, to pit them against each other, in their own contradictions.

**Do you create links between those different cycles? Between the previous cycle, "Notre jeunesse" ("Our Youth"), and this one, "Spectres of Europe"?**

N.G.: Every cycle brings up a question that becomes the centre of the next cycle. When we worked on tragedy, we ran into the question of the chorus, both in a political and dramatic sense, and to the concept of representation of the "people" today. That's how the cycle on youth came about, because we felt that young people, who don't necessarily have created a social mask for themselves yet, who haven't adopted a precise place in society, could shed some light on this question, on our time.

O.S.: In the final play of that cycle, there was a "foreigner," a character named Aziz, an old Arab immigrant, who served as a prophet of sorts. He was both part of the story and outside of it, his role was to reveal things. That character inspired us to make the figure of the foreigner the centre of our next cycle. With *Othello*, the focus was clear! This is a fascinating play because it is very abstract, and because of its political content, often obliterated by the focus put on the individual drama of the Desdemona-Othello-Iago triangle.

**Did you translate the text again before adapting it?**

O.S.: I started by simply copying the English text. That helped me to immerse myself in the text, to penetrate as best I could its structure. You can't always do that just by reading something. Then, I translated the passages I felt would be at the heart of our work, and we started building a structure...

N.G.: ... on which we worked during rehearsals. Which gave us the freedom, before we put everything down on paper, to validate or modify our hypotheses for this adaptation.

O.S.: I think what we did was write a new play based on the material offered by another writer (something that Shakespeare himself often did). I didn't feel restricted at all, I allowed myself to steer away from the structure of the Shakespearean sentence if I thought we could render the same image in a different way. For instance, the word "Arab" often replaced the word "Moor." We also had to keep the constraints we imposed on ourselves in mind, in particular the necessity to write for three actors.

**The Venice of your play is clearly a centre of economic and imperialistic power.**

O.S.: Yes, and at the heart of this economic system, we wanted to highlight the concept of "credit." Both in the economic sense of the word, and within social relationships between people. Iago is a debtor first, before he begins to manipulate everyone by telling them to follow their own interests. He takes this system of relationships of trust inherent to the capitalist system to its breaking point, this system of betrayals, of faking and cheating that is so common in Venice. Iago is a metaphor for the Venetian system which we believe goes beyond the simple figure of a Machiavellian plotter.

By the end of the play, he's also become a figure of the foreigner, as he's no longer a director but an actor in the trap he's set. I don't think he has a rational plan, all he does is react to what is going on around him, almost as it happens.

**How do you see the character of Othello, about whose life before he became the general of the Venetian armies we know nothing?**

N.G.: The only one who knows about his life before he came to Venice is Brabantio, Desdemona's father. But what Othello told him only seems to be a response to Brabantio's fantasy about Othello. The character rests partly on this mystery: he is what people say he is... If we could know who Othello really is, the play wouldn't work. Othello is an object of fantasy for all the other characters. He changes as they tell the story they imagine for him. There's a great theatricality to the character. He, too, lends credence to what people say about him.

**How do you explain that all it takes is one sentence by Iago for this man who has everything to be plagued by this terrifying existential confusion?**

N.G.: Iago misleads Othello by telling him that, given her rank, Desdemona "should" love one whose hair is the same colour as hers, who received the same education, who enjoys the same position in the Venetian system... He creates doubt by putting words in the protagonists' heads. The main character of the play is language, it is it that upsets everything, that reveals, that gives life through the telling.

O.S.: We should always remember Iago's declaration: "I am not what I am." It applies to almost every character in the play.

N.G.: The characters are defined by what others say about them: at the beginning, the Doge speaks of Othello as a brave man who goes where Venetians don't dare to, a man who gave himself to the Republic, who converted to Christianity. Before he dies, Othello says, "And say besides that in Aleppo once [there was] a malignant and a turbaned Turk [...], a circumcised dog." He ends up defining himself as a barbarian, exactly how he thinks the Venetians see him. Language has done its job...

O.S.: His suicide only serves to identify him to the image people have of him.

**In this work on *Othello*, the idea of Europe plays a large part. We even see its flag, hear its hymn. What link do you establish between those two worlds?**

O.S.: At the time in which *Othello* is set, Venice was the epicentre of Europe, waging a war against the Ottoman Empire to keep Cyprus, a trading post from which it established its economic relationships with the East.

N.G.: This play is interesting precisely because it allows us to work on a problematic that is usually looked at from the point of view of sociology or identity, but which we wanted to study from a political point of view: the question of what Europe has done to Othello, the way it uses his military skills, his aura, to win a victory that has major economic consequences.

**You've worked very closely with a Lebanese company, Zoukak, with which you collaborated for this *Othello*. Did this influence this creation?**

N.G.: We've been working together with this company, founded notably by Omar Abi Azar, for ten years. It was with Omar that we conceived our first study play around *Othello* at the FabricA, *The Benefits of Spring*.



O.S.: We talked a lot with them about, for instance, the spike in interest for what they do during the "Arab Spring"... They know just how precarious their situation is compared to Europe, which ascribes to them the virtues of poverty when their virtues have nothing to do with their being poor, when they would love nothing more than to have more resources.

N.G.: Working with this company is something that's very important to us. It's a political and cultural alliance: we question our respective practices when it comes to writing and creation, but also to production and organisation. For instance, regarding the public, the forms we imagine demand not only that we work on them daily, but also that we go looking for a public that would be made up of several different publics (people who are used to coming to the theatre and people who aren't).

O.S.: What sometimes seems for others to be an obligation to work on the social aspect of theatre imposed by third parties is for us at the heart of our artistic project.

N.G.: For *Othello*, we knew we would play in La Chartreuse, in a prison, in villages, both inside and outside. Every show will be followed by a discussion with the public, and we'll try to make sure political questions play a part in it.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.

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