AUTOPHAGIES (STORIES OF BANANAS, RICE, TOMATOES, PEANUTS, PALM TREES. AND FRUITS, SUGAR, CHOCOLATE)

INTERVIEW WITH EVA DOUMBIA

Bertolt Brecht, Edward Bond, Salim Jay, but also Dieudonné Niangouna, Aristide Tarnagda, Marie-Louise Mumbu, Maryse Condé, or Jamaica Kincaid are authors whose texts you've directed, in addition to your own. What's the place of *Autophagies* in your career? What is this play about, with its long subtitle (*Stories of bananas, rice, tomatoes, peanuts, palm trees. And fruits, sugar, chocolate*)?

Eva Doumbia: I don't draw any distinction in my work between the texts I've directed. I'd rather say that there are two main through lines in my work. The first is narrative in nature, the other closer to collage theatre. For the past four years, I've only directed my own productions. In a way, *Autophagies* is a follow-up to *Moi et mon cheveu* (*Me and my hair*), a cabaret show about the history of kinky hair and its treatment, a history of alienation and colonisation. It was about showing that beauty is also a political question. This new text is more autobiographical. In the 1980s, my father, Amadou Doumbia, opened the first African restaurant in Le Havre. He offered mafé on the menu. We rarely ate mafé at home, where my mother, a teacher from Normandy, did most of the cooking. African meals were served when we had Ivorian friends over. They were often sailors. I still remember large plates sitting in the middle of the table, everyone using their hands as utensils. Except for us, the French kids, who would use spoons. I long thought this festive dish, made with chicken and peanut paste, was a traditional dish from West Africa. But it's actually not. It reminds me of the story of the *tiep bou dien*, made with fish rice. I discovered that this Senegalese dish only dates back to the 18th century, probably to the arrival of the European settlers. I started wondering about where all the foodstuffs we eat today in Africa come from: bananas, rice, chocolate, pineapples, mangoes… I realised none of them grew south of the Sahara. Those aren't endogenous crops. I wanted to dig deeper. Tastes, the pleasures of the mouth, hide stories of travelling, conquests, dispossession, deportation, and enslavement. Our kitchens are full of history. To eat all that food, in a word to feed yourself, is to eat yourself. The point is not to make people feel guilty but to become aware of our passive role in a chain that began long before Antiquity, with the creation of the first empires. *Autophagies* goes further than my previous projects, because it draws a link between the memory of colonisation and current mechanisms of exploitation. The show is a reminder that to eat today is, symbolically speaking, to eat other beings. When I eat a tomato, for instance, I also absorb the work of people who were exploited so that the tomato could end up on my plate. In a way, it makes me complicit in slavery. Those mechanisms began a long time ago, with the cultivation of sugar in particular. In Paul Ariès's writings, for instance his *Histoire politique de l'alimentation – Du paléolithique à nos jours* (*A Political History of Food – From the Palaeolithic Era to Today*), he shows how food is closely tied to the environment, to identity, to life and death. It's much more complex and deeper than our daily needs. Eating changes our landscape and transforms the world.

Texts, films, dance, music, singing, but also a chef-actor cooking and performing in front of the audience… How did you bring together the many sources and materials of *Autophagies*?

It's a long project which arose from my reading of texts that brought together literature and cooking. It started in 2015, at the Plumes d'Afrique festival. I spent a lot of time travelling after that: Mali, Ivory Coast, New Orleans… Every time I went to people's homes to try new food. I also did a lot of research into how we transform and transport foodstuffs. My most explicit question about those contradictions could be: why and how did rice become the most used cereal in Africa, when it doesn't grow there? At first, it was only me and musician Lionel Élian, but I didn't feel I was the right person to say my texts, so I asked another actress, Angelica-Kiyomi Tisseyre, who's a real chameleon who can draw the audience into a world that isn't quite Africa or Europe. Music clearly plays an important part in this journey, too. The show is punctuated by songs inspired by traditional, popular, or jazz songs, sometimes based on or interwoven with sounds I recorded. The words of the songs all have a dramaturgic meaning. They serve to express a form of *saudade*, of human pain. I tasked Ivorian choreographer Massidi Adiatou, with whom I work regularly, with writing for the bodies. His work is very expressive, sometimes to the point of brutality, and is inspired by the bustling streets of Abidjan. The audience will also be shown a series of images depicting a unique gesture —the gesture people make when growing and picking up fruits and vegetables—taken from various cultures in different countries. There are also texts, such as the ones by Gauz, who gave a personality to foodstuffs like tomatoes, cocoa, or palm tree fruits. He wrote them monologues, in a way. The personal stories of those plants are told by the actress and by our chef-actor Alexandre Bella Ola, who's also cooking a dish we share with and among the audience at the end of the show. It's important to make sure that not one of those disciplines is seen as subservient to the others. The show shouldn't deal in hierarchies. The audience can look at whatever they want, build their own show with the different materials they are given and which enter into a dialogue.

There's an important ritual dimension, you even call your show a "documentary Eucharist." The first action performed is the eating of food, followed by this surprising sentence: "*Forgive us for eating you*." Aren't you also talking about the sacrificial and sacred dimension of your play?

At the beginning of the show, the kitchen, with its hotplates, its worktop, its knives, pans, oils, spices, condiments, and tomatoes, bananas, rice, onions, chocolate… cohabits with musical instruments, keyboards and microphones. But the stage slowly changes shape over the course of the show, according to my movements, to the stories, the songs and dances. The space unfolds to reveal an altar, candles. It slowly turns into a sacred place. That's where we eat as well. Disparate elements (foodstuffs, photographs, portraits) I brought back from my travels allow me to position myself as a mistress of ceremony. I like this figure, because it helps give my words a weight and allows me to pass them on. It serves to create a link. The songs punctuating the show can also take on a liturgical dimension and play with the audience and their perception. I always say that I don't believe in anything, but that I'm keenly aware of life. My relationship to the world, to life, to others, and to faith would be closer to animism than to monotheistic religion. In that sense, *Autophagies* is also about the place of man in his environment, his relationship to the trees, to nature, to the cosmos. Veganism, for instance, has articulated new moral and ethical issues about the question of animal sacrifice. I see the ritualistic dimension of the play as a reminder that life is a much more complex and sensitive whole than described so far by a monotheistic and individualistic West. It's a perspective I'm still building, little by little, and which in the end is only made up of a series of questions without answers about the way we understand the world.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu the 23rd January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach