



VITRIOLI

INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIER PY

How did you end up directing a contemporary Greek play in Athens?

Olivier Py: This project was the product of the relationship between a director and a poet. I'd directed *The Blind Spot*, the first of Yannis Mavritsakis's plays to be translated into French, for France Culture. I found it interesting and asked the author to send me his latest play: that was *Vitrioli*, a work that convinced me even more of Mavritsakis's talent, and that I wanted to direct. The National Theatre of Greece then asked me if I wanted to do it in Greece, a proposition I gladly accepted.

Did your love for Greek tragedy play a part in that? Isn't the character of the boy in *Vitrioli* a sort of tragic hero?

The contemporary Greek writers I know, Dimitris Dimitriadis and Yannis Mavritsakis, are conscious of what they owe to the tragedy. That's also the case with actors; they know how to approach this repertoire because they've all played tragedies before, even the youngest of them. It's very interesting to work with actors who have all been strongly influenced by tragedy, because they aren't afraid of the extreme, they aren't afraid to show excess in their performance. There is a sort of tragic pattern in *Vitrioli*, in its radicalism and pessimism, but what also interested me was this opportunity to talk about the situation in Greece by talking about people, instead of economic or political concepts. The play shows the explosion of a symbolic crisis within people, which is in and of itself tragic enough already. The world in which the characters of *Vitrioli* live is a world that is crumbling down, that has lost all meaning, a dead world. The play is also close to tragedy, from a formal point of view, in the sense that it is fast—we immediately find ourselves faced with paroxysmal situations—and that it has a distinctive relationship to language. The disaster that the characters go through ends up having an impact on their relationship to language, they end up not being able to say anything about what's going on. There's in *Vitrioli* something of Orestes—with an absent father, although it also brings to mind *Medea*—because it has a mother plotting to murder her son. Oedipus isn't far, either, because it's a story of incest, which ends in blinding. All the great family myths are there.

The play's hero is like a cipher, he reveals other characters' desires, but is also an expiatory victim.

That's true. Everyone projects something onto him. At the beginning, when he stands in the hallway of a slaughterhouse, no one answers his questions: "Why is nothing possible anymore, why am I doomed?" He doesn't really fight back, but he doesn't really feel sorry for himself, either. He's a tragic hero. However, reality then starts unraveling, and we enter a psychotic dimension, which requires no comments; it's a lesson in darkness. That's the key difference between *Vitrioli* and *The Blind Spot*, which was a neurotic play. If the boy puts up with everything that's happening to him, it's because he knows there's nothing he can do about it. He is a metaphor for the situation in Greece: there's something hovering above us, called the economy, the crisis, Europe even, and there are people who know they have absolutely no room for maneuver, or even for revolt. I'm talking here about Mavritsakis's vision. As unable to revolt as Iphigenia, the boy becomes like possessed; he begins hearing voices telling him to get ready. And when he is ready, he will go to the slaughterhouse to be sacrificed. He's a symbol for this sacrificed generation. He will have been unable ever to say no to the desires others projected onto him. He will have found in the character of the hermaphrodite like a double of himself... who asks him to kill him. The strength of this play is that it is devoid of incidents. We know what is going to happen, and it does, inexorably; everything's preordained, foretold. There's no suspense. There's nothing but the acknowledgment of a world in which nothing is possible anymore. Not even salvation through art, or through words. In that sense *Vitrioli* is darker than some tragedies, in which the tragic hero has an apologist who justifies his presence on earth. Here there's nothing, right from the start, and nothing to take its place. Neither doctors nor priests (two roles played by the same actor) are able to find an answer to the state of madness in which the boy lies, which isn't so much personal as the general state of Greece, of a hopeless generation that represents, through this story, the anxiety of an entire youth faced with a world entirely devoid of spirituality.

Can't we see a form of critique by Yannis Mavritsakis of that youth, when he shows how the traditional models that are family and work literally slide on the boy without finding any purchase?

Maybe, but there's no meanness here, no irony. In his acknowledgment of the disaster, Mavritsakis even appears angelic, to an extent. He sees with compassionate eyes that man has no destiny anymore, without resorting to sentimentality or trying to make the audience feel guilty. He describes the situation in Greece, but not only, otherwise it wouldn't be of much interest to the rest of us (in that sense, it's similar to what happens when Thomas Bernhard speaks of Austria). I think it is first and foremost the absence of Art that is unbearable in the play. An early scene with a pope shows us that there can be no salvation from above, another with a psychoanalyst that there can be no salvation from within. There's no collective action, either. The only character that would come close to a figure of the artist would be the hermaphrodite, who gives, at some point, the faint hope of experiencing something different; but in the end, this hermaphroditic artist—a sort of alter ego of the boy—has no desire but death. Death by ecstasy. The boy accepts this



deal, but can't enjoy it. He is convinced he is rotten inside, because he is aware of his own madness, of the madness of the world.

The way in which what is intimate and what is public join together is characteristic of Yannis Mavritsakis's theatre.

Yes. He writes stories about families set against a background of crisis, of war. But there's no cynicism in his writing, no aggressiveness, no moralising posturing. Mavritsakis isn't some pontificator, his pessimism is the same as lucidity. His role as a poet is to hold a mirror to the situation in front of him, to allow us to see how, from one play to the next, the situation in Greece has worsened; we've moved from a neurotic situation, with a general feeling of malaise, to the explosion of disaster, the slaughter of an entire generation.

The show's stage design follows this idea of the play as a mirror.

It follows a bifrontal principle, which allows us to use the idea of the tragic chorus, which is absent from the play. The audience sees itself watching the disaster unfold. The stage design had to be cheap. The idea was to bring in soil—actually dyed and sterilised clay—to be able to work with a black, sticky matter, that would dirty everything and make the actors' performances physically tougher. In this mud, actors stomp, their postures are weirder, more frightening. The naked body, when it comes in contact with this mud, becomes more and more immersed in this disaster, starts secreting other substances. This progressive immersion is similar to the way tragedy works. Our attempts at avoiding it are exactly what end up causing it; by trying to get rid of the mud, we only end up getting even more covered in it. It is like a subconscious image of this psychotic state that is that of the characters. It's a very simple image. So is the stage design; a piano, a small table, plastic curtains, a shower...

How does it feel to work in a language that isn't yours?

I don't speak Greek at all. Yannis Mavritsakis was often there to mitigate this fact, but as you develop an aesthetics of the performance, you end up being able to understand the actors and be understood by them. Not everything has to be expressed through the direction of actors, there's another language, a meta-language, if you will, that of the *mise en scène*; it's the true language of theatre. It is through *mise en scène* that one really directs actors. Since I'm an actor myself, I can show them what I want, I think it saves a lot of time. And it's a pleasure to show things to actors who aren't afraid of *playing*, who take such pleasure in *physical* performance.

Interview conducted by Laurent Muhleisen.

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