



# SOLITAIRE

## INTERVIEW WITH SOFIA ADRIAN JUPITHER

***Solitaire* is one of the last pieces written by Lars Norén's last play. It revolves around characters stuck in an unfamiliar environment, from which they can't seem to escape...**

**Sofia Adrian Jupither:** Ten people stand on stage, squeezed against one another in a rectangular space. They are ordinary people. We don't know where they are and have no way to recognise the space to which they are confined. They can't leave that space, yet they don't know what's stopping them. They're all in a state of stunned astonishment, and their early literal questions slowly turn into existential ones: "I was on my way to get groceries," one says, "I was just going to pick up my suitcase," explains another, "I was dropping my daughter off at her dance club," a father adds. Then, "Why are we here?" "What is this place?" It's very dark, so they don't know how many of them there are. That's the situation as created by Lars Norén, at once crystal clear and very hard to grasp. But since the place will remain unspecified, the spectators are invited to come up with their own interpretation. Are they in a container? On an ocean liner? Are they boat people? On a lorry? Crossing the Channel? Stuck in a tunnel? In our minds, the situation comes to echo well-known models of anxiety, displacement, and proximity, such as illegal immigration and migrant flows.

**Would you say the characters are ordinary people just like you and me?**

In this nameless place, they all react to the situation in their own way. Their social shell has been stripped away, the homemaker, the worker, the student no longer exist, they are alone with themselves. The only thing left in this exceptional situation is the purest self: alone and reacting to the group. Since the characters find themselves having to survive, one could imagine the narrative driving their experience to the brink of horror, but that's not how Lars Norén works. He was a writer who truly loved human beings. His acuity came from his hyperrealistic writing, his very precise portraits of his contemporaries. In the end, humour prevails over horror. And so there seems to be nothing there. But what's nothing, if not a projection of our desires and fears, both individual and collective? In this nothingness, one can always find a something, a somewhere... Especially since we're at the theatre. Which means we're in a space with its own references. It's dark, pitch black, we can barely see a thing. But how does one work on darkness at the theatre? I figured out quickly that to rely only on theatrical convention would not be enough, I wanted to recreate the atmosphere conveyed by the author with his efficient, realistic, and economical style. That's why I chose to be equally economical in my direction and to put my trust in the text and in the actors. Mine was therefore a process of reduction, of cutting. I started with three great walls and clear marks on the floor, but the whole thing was too present, too visible. We got rid of the wall to keep the large, dark, and empty space of the stage. Now the story is told through the lights and sounds, and through the text. Nothing more. Thanks to the sounds we worked with, the rain and rats are among us, we sense a presence we can't quite recognise, just like the characters do. That's what I was trying to achieve: to be as close as possible to the experience of the ten characters Lars Norén brought together without giving us any of the answers. The sound landscape puts the audience in the same space as the actors, it makes the stage and the place where the characters are squeezed together bigger. The result is a shared experience between the stage and the room. It's synesthetic work, it's a play that gets under your skin...

**Since we can easily identify with the characters, the spectators aren't put in the position to be voyeurs to the characters' anxiety.**

That's right, we're right there with them. Not outside the situation. Quite the contrary. Their experience echoes our own, both physically and existentially. When the characters wonder about why they are there, they first try to find the reasons behind their physical constraints, then they question their relationship to the world in a more existential way. And there's no obfuscation when it comes to those questions, they are very concrete and direct, asked with everyday words by people like you and me. Each character wonders how they should react in this situation they don't fully understand. "Why" stops being relevant after a while, and is replaced by "how." The goal is to survive this moment in their lives which seems pretty unreal. To not be overwhelmed by panic, to stay in control individually so

that they can quickly start thinking as a group. Which social and moral codes can a group of strangers call on in such a stressful situation when they have been stripped of all that make humans social beings? This dispossession can be seen in the writing itself, with the characters named after numbers. We get to know their personalities and stories only through their lines and the way they talk. We meet them as the play unfolds, just like the characters meet each other and rediscover each other intimately in all simplicity, without the usual finery of social life. They cannot hide anymore, neither from the others nor from themselves. Lars Norén's style isn't deprived of humour, the characters are funny and the promiscuous situation leads to moments of mutual aid and intimacy. He shows us a larger picture of what humanity is and of what we are capable. What is amazing in this play is the way the situation is flipped. The group here is made up of Europeans, when the situation obviously brings to mind that experienced by other nationalities, the fates of men and women who sometimes seem so far away from us, seen only through the prism of the TV news. That's why their questions find such a powerful echo in us.

**You've directed several of Lars Norén's plays throughout your career. What makes this one unique?**

I first started working on and directing plays by Lars Norén about fifteen years ago; we were pretty close, but he never interfered in my work. I've directed seven of his plays, six of which were being presented to audiences for the first time. I sometimes tried to ask him questions and to include him in the creative process, but he didn't like to get involved in that part of the work. Once he was done writing a play, it wasn't entirely his anymore. For this play in particular, since my direction revolves around a scenography of nothingness, the space had to be built mainly through our work on sound, on chiaroscuro, and on the text. The way the characters are gathered at the centre of the stage, squeezed against one another with almost no freedom of movement, led me to work on the rhythm, on silences, pauses, speeches stopping and starting again, like a conductor with a choir, since that's mostly what we encounter, voices and presences in the dark. The dark, and the fact that we can see in it, is one of the most important subjects in *Solitaire*. It was one of the great challenges when it came to directing the play. The play is co-produced by six different theatres in Sweden, Finland, and Norway, with actors and actresses of all three nationalities. Some of them are actors I know very well, others are newcomers with whom I had never worked before. When directing actors, I always focus on the text, and from the text arise the specificities of the characters. We truly come to discover the temperaments and the relationships described by the author throughout the rehearsal process, all together on the stage. Table readings alone aren't enough to see all the subtleties of the text.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant