

AND...

THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Site Louis Pasteur de l'Université d'Avignon

The shattering of gender in theatre avec notamment Phia Ménard, *Alternatives théâtrales* and *L'Écho des planches*, July 19 at 14:30
Fighting the fight: discussion with Phia Ménard and Emmanuel Gat, Fondation BNP Paribas, July 22 at 14:30

CINEMATIC TERRITORIES

Bambi, by Sébastien Lifshitz, encounter with Phia Ménard and Bambi, July 20 at 14:00, cinéma Utopia-Manutention

SACD ENCOUNTER

Interview with Phia Ménard, July 18 at 14:30, Conservatoire du Grand Avignon

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- November 29, 2018, Bonlieu Scène nationale d'Annecy
- January 10 to 13, 2019, MC93, Maison de la Culture de Seine-Saint-Denis, Bobigny
- January 17 and 18, Le Théâtre Scène nationale d'Orléans
- February 5, Tandem Scène nationale de Douai
- February 13 and 14, La Comédie de Valence Centre dramatique national Drôme-Ardèche, Valence
- February 28 to March 2, La Criée Théâtre national de Marseille
- March 7, Théâtre des Quatre Saisons Scène conventionnée musique(s), Gradignan
- March 13 and 14, Le Grand T théâtre de Loire-Atlantique, Nantes
- March 20 to 29, Théâtre national de Bretagne, Rennes
- May 4, La Filature Scène nationale de Mulhouse

DRY SEASON

The stage is an architectural structure: a box, a confined space, a zone of imprisonment. It is painted a sterile white. There, seven women struggle. Watching, we perceive tiny openings in the walls, and in the ceiling, a mechanism that reacts to any inappropriate gesture. A living structure that serves as a constant call to order... But that's not taking into account the fact that bodies are bodies, and thus they can't help but shiver, hop up and down, or twist. Little by little, something happens, a ritual takes form. Borrowing from dance, visual arts, theatre, and anthropological cinema to create a protean artistic world, Phia Ménard leads the audience through a telluric experience which drops them at the heart of the struggles against norms and the fights to freely choose our identities. Here it is about defying patriarchal power and escaping the constraints of gender, by creating new gestures and new poetic rituals to feed our imagination.

PHIA MÉNARD

Born in 1971 in a man's body, the future Phia Ménard began by studying juggling, acting, and modern dance, before founding in 1998 the company Non Nova. After becoming a woman in 2008, her search for what she calls the "Complementary Unjugglability of Elements" led her to explore ice, water, air, and their influence on human behaviour. *Dry Season* is the continuation of this organic cycle, following shows like *P.P.P.* (2008), *Vortex* (2011), *Belle d'Hier* (2015), *Les Os Noirs* (2017), or *Et In Arcadia Ego*, which she directed last winter at the Opéra Comique.

72th
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JULY 17 18 | 20 21 22 23 24
L'AUTRE SCÈNE DU GRAND AVIGNON - VEDÈNE

INTERVIEW WITH PHIA MÉNARD

Dry Season begins where Belle d’Hier ended. How did the transition happen within your “cycle of Water and Steam”?

Phia Ménard: When I wrote *Belle d’Hier*, I asked five women to “organise humanity” and the attributes of patriarchal power, which made everything possible when it came to redistributing roles. *Dry Season* came very soon after. Once you’ve done away with prince charming, you realise that doesn’t mean the castle has fallen. So you have to wonder about how the whole thing is built. At the beginning of the show, the performers are surrounded by walls with high windows, a little like arrowslits, that allow a watcher to stand in one place and see the prisoners without being seen. As soon as the captives quiet down and are no longer seen as hysterical, the ceiling goes up, but if one of them has an inappropriate gesture, the ceiling comes down again. This cage, made real by the shrinking of the space, symbolises patriarchal power, the patriarchal house. In a second time, that of the fairy tale, those prisoners, seven women, will try to destroy the structure. The preys become predators in a battle to win back their freedom. They transform, put on their war paints, and enter a trance. Calling on the elements through a ritual dance, they will be able to deceive the enemy who, fascinated, will forget to maintain the walls. Moss creeps in, and things will start to seep out of those sterile walls, whose whiteness symbolises virginity and peace: images of spirits, chthonic energies, memories. The house, eaten away by saltpetre, will fall. After ice, wind, water, and steam, it’s earth that inspired me here, the evocation of earthquakes, fissures, and mudslides that carry everything away. This metaphor refers to the idea that it’s only the intelligence of women, their coming together and their sensitivity, that will be able to change the social reality of domination.

Who are those performers of a new kind, at once disturbing and fascinating, and how did you go about creating this ritual?

The performance calls on not spirits but avatars, on *drag kings*, so to speak, transgender beings who then start moving. At first, the performers wear one-size-fit-all costumes that don’t actually fit any of them. Then comes the time of transformation. They’re no longer women, but warriors who paint their bodies before the fight. They throw us off balance because taking the structure by surprise is the only way to topple it. For *Dry Season*, the common thread is the question of violence, which is the visible form of the patriarchy. All those women I meet and with whom I enter a dialogue tell me of their experience of violence. There’s a sort of obvious sorority that develops between us. I chose seven women among those who came to me, through a process of cooptation. We talk a lot, then I let them think about what we said for a while. In shows like this one, in which the body is put to the test, where they have to bare themselves, it’s important for the performers to know why they are exposing themselves, and to fix limits. I have to draw the boundaries of my work, and very precisely define my intentions. The performers also need to create a certain distance. They have to be able to tell the difference between who they are onstage and in real life.

That distance allows them to express the idea that the theatre is a place where all fictions become possible, where we can question the limits of what makes us human. Onstage, they are in the performance. All my shows are messages, but they are first and foremost metaphors. I want to let the audience find the border between performance and reality.

What about the relationship with the audience?

The seven women in *Dry Season* could be Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai*. Having an odd number means that balance can only be restored through the eyes of the audience. What’s most difficult is to manage to make the eighth warrior both male and female, so that everyone in the audience, men and women, can be touched. How do we project ourselves into the other, if the other is difference itself? Can we project ourselves into a different body, a different gender? And what are the forms necessary to accomplish that projection? Those questions are essential to the work. To make it work, I call on personal experiences each member of the audience has had when faced with the elements, in order to bring him or her into the world of the show. I create empathy. The scenography must be fascinating, so that the audience can be, right from the start, ready to go through an immersive experience. I anaesthetise their resistance to prevent judgment. Then I present them with a physical, sensory trial. When I create, there’s a relationship to hair, to flesh, something hypersensitive. I invent metamorphoses through *mise-en-scène*. Neither theatre nor the elements are fixed, they live, transform, evolve. They’re the best partners to express the situation in an epidemic way, to show that we are all beings in transition, in mutation. I was heavily influenced by Jean Rouch’s *The Mad Masters*. At the heart of this ethnographic documentary is the question of monstrosity, which moves us at the same time as it repels us. My shows are always on the edge between attraction and aversion, to create a reaction in the audience. What’s our limit regarding the other, when it comes to our capability not to judge but just to accept and be ourselves?

Your shows are very intense. Do you see creation as a form of engagement?

My group shows are political acts. The basis of my work is the body as a political object in society. In every show I write, the body isn’t an individual with a personal story, but a political sign: they’re female bodies in a patriarchal society. Having had this journey of the body, having experienced power in society first in the body of a man and now in the body of a woman, it’s shown me that, in my new condition, I have lost power. While I lived in a man’s body, I felt a lot of empathy for the possibilities of feminism out of solidarity, but it was a political hobby. Today, I’m in the permanence of the body, I’ve become a feminist warrior. Faced with desperate and catastrophic situations in our societies, we as creators have a duty to create worthy and meaningful artistic acts. It might be utopian, but I can’t help but dream that *Dry Season* could help topple the patriarchy! That’s the mission I’ve given myself, I’m working on it.

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach