



THE RESPONSE OF MEN

INTERVIEW WITH TIPHAINE RAFFIER

Your new work is based on the works of mercy. Did you decide to explore all fourteen of them?

Tiphaine Raffier: While researching things like reciprocal exchange, debt, and sacrifice, I started wondering about kindness and compassion, then got into Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog*, a cycle of ten TV movies inspired by the decalogue of the Ten Commandments. There were therefore two sources at the same time: one having to do with morals and the other with mercy, which led to two somewhat different questions. *What does it mean to do good? What does it mean to act justly?* For Christians, the works of mercy are a series of concrete actions that each and every one of us can undertake in all aspects of life to help our fellow humans. I took the teachings of those works, which are really more orders, as writing prompts. After my first three shows, I needed to experiment with a new way of building and tackling a non-linear structure. I found a form of freedom in the use of a fragmented dramaturgy to talk about substantial subjects, without feeling constrained to systematically connect the different narrative moments one to the next. Each part presents a simple temporality. Accumulation creates depth. I don't see the idea of a stylistic exercise as derogatory. Quite the contrary. The concepts of exercise, of attempt, is particularly relevant in our field, in which the question of the work, as work of art—which isn't exactly the same as the work of a craftsman—remains a gamble you make every time. While a craftsman repeats the same gestures based on a model, the artist never quite knows how to end what he or she is doing. I also wondered why the works of mercy are called *oeuvres* and not *ouvrages* [translator's note: *oeuvre* also means work of art, while *ouvrage* refers to a craftsman's work], and the question of the relationship between the act of charity and the work of art quickly came to the fore. Each new story is about "the work of charity," seen from a specific point of view; the various characters bring a large range of emotions, and we can feel the fluctuation between coherence and incoherence so dear to Krzysztof Kieślowski. I also based my work on the theories of philosopher Ruwen Ogien, a thinker of minimalist ethics, who writes of the moral incoherence of our actions compared to the coherence of a narrative, and of the vertigo one might feel when faced with the absolute indeterminism of our actions. Moreover, the use of classical music, played live, also allows me to explore that idea: from the order of harmony to the anxiety of disharmony.

Can you tell us more about your creative process, which seems to be coupled to a research at once spiritual and concrete?

Each of the stories we tell takes place in our time, the characters seem to be people we know, they are our contemporaries. To cast the show, I chose a sample of humanity: a number of very different people of various ages, with a very generous approach to the work. The texts I first brought to rehearsals slowly changed based on the work we did with the actors. The stage is a magnifying glass which amplifies parts of the text, and those quickly enter a dialogue with the space of the stage and the performance of the actor. It's a permanent process of research, and you must always keep in mind that you're allowed to make mistakes and start over. The notion of progress is an illusion when it comes to the work of a director. I think rather that what we try to do is to untangle things to get as close as possible to an intuition, to a reasoning. My shows are often expansive in terms of content, a lot is said and showed so as to leave the spectator with the freedom to interpret what they're seeing. For *The response of Men*, I tried to find a balance between different logics: the logic of the dramaturgy and that of the scenography, the logical sequence from one story to the next, the articulation between the textual and visual aspects of the show. The works of mercy are divided into two chapters: the corporal works and the spiritual works. There's an inherent path from one to the next, which we decided to respect without following it exactly. The beginning of the show is crucial to create a shared vocabulary with the audience, especially since points of view become more and more numerous as the dramaturgy unfolds. There's a protagonist per work; each of the story asks a question. Two of the corporal works are "to feed the hungry" and "to shelter the homeless"; those of course led to questions about what welcoming means and what a stranger is, but I tried not to tackle them through the exclusive prism of our current situation.

You mentioned the articulation between dramaturgy and scenography. How do you make the fragmented nature of the stories visible on stage?

The space shared by all those stories is a *palimpsest location*. We chose as our reference a holy place, the Pio Monte della Misericordia church in Naples, which used to be a hospice and which houses Caravaggio's *Seven Works of Mercy*. It's a place that has gone through several lives, known several stories, and has been transformed. It started as a holy place and was then secularised, like a palace or a museum in which you can see the traces of the past as well as those of a recent renovation. You then have to work with a legacy that was partly painted over and hidden. We don't have all the codes to decrypt the place we find ourselves in on stage, but it seems that it was adapted to the values of the different times it's lived through. The enclosed space we face is riddled with exits, doors and windows, all of the more or less accessible save one, which has been walled off. I'm interested in the idea of the museum here, because the audience is faced with a number of works and I want everyone to feel like they're walking from one to the next, like in an exhibition. The gaze of the audience is at times doubled by that of the camera, which allows us to see the other side of a space or situation, or to experience a character's subjectivity. The titles of the works are projected onto the stage. Every single verb or noun is interesting to me, as well as every word whose definition is unstable. The goal of all that is to reveal multiple perspectives. We zoom in and zoom out to work on focal distance, allowing us to be alternatively inside the body of a toddler or a soldier, then to discover their environment. It's a way to shift the subject, to counter the sacred, just like Caravaggio would place biblical figures right next to ordinary people (a prostitute, a beggar...). The characters we encounter, such as the young army recruit or the mother who doesn't want her child, are characters you rarely see in art. I also worked with choreographer Pep Garrigues to put more emphasis on movement. The works of mercy are about perceptible things, things you can feel in your gut, which have more to do with the body than with the mind. Like compassion, which moves through the body and is translated into action, I wanted to experiment with a sensual gesture on stage, to return to the physical aspect of the language of the Bible.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant the 10th February 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach