



A CEREMONY

INTERVIEW WITH RAOUL COLLECTIF

A few years ago, you all attended the Drama school of the Royal Conservatoire of Liège. Why did you want to work together?

Raoul Collectif: The first show the five of us created together, *Le Signal du promeneur*, was the result of a school exercise. We quickly realised we shared an interest for the same “material,” and at first we followed our intuition. We were interested in a certain relationship with social and economic performance, in light of a relationship to nature and to a need for authenticity. In the end, all those questions motivated us to actually move into action. We already had a strong taste for adventure, which includes being masters of our time and of our means of production. Ever since our first play, we’ve been trying to write stories about personal and collective destinies. In *Le Signal du promeneur*, we explored the struggle of the individual within his social, professional, and family background, sometimes to the breaking point. *Rumeurs et petits jours* was about asking a group to position themselves within a brutal economic context, between resistance and acceptance. In *A Ceremony*, we’re taking the road less travelled to follow people we might call “idealists.”

Can you tell us more about the reality of your work, your relationship to the collective writing and creation of your shows?

We don’t have “one” method, and with every new creation we try to find a way of working that suits everyone. We keep going back and forth between our writing desks and the stage. Our research is often a game of trials and errors. Sometimes, the stage provides us with answers, and we just have to agree on what most seems to make sense. We mix together our intuitions with historical resources and documents. We find inspiration in outside material and in material from within the group. It’s this accumulation of information that ends up revealing the story we want to tell. We come from a school—the Royal Conservatoire of Liège—whose methods are largely influenced by *Le Groupov*, a collective of artists who often used the phrase “you have to ride the tiger.” We identify with that image. Riding the tiger means to dare to follow intuitions that might lead nowhere. But it’s also funnelling collective energy so that it can be in the service of a critical intelligence, of a dramaturgy. We don’t have a director, so we have to take a step to the side and come together around what we want to say. What interests us is to progressively find our place around a common story. We give birth to a story, and put ourselves at its service. We often continue working on the writing of a show after the first performance. We could say that it’s a living organism, always reorganising.

About those intuitions and permanent reorganisations around a common intention, it seems that a trip to Benin may have been the starting point, or at least a trigger for your show *A Ceremony*.

We’ve followed a dramaturgic process ever since we first set foot on a stage. In a way, the starting point of *A Ceremony* already existed back when we worked on *Le Signal du promeneur*. For instance, we were fascinated by the story of a man who hunted for extinct species in Mexico. While working on our second show, we went to meet him and ended up discovering a pre-Colombian culture whose rituals persist to this day. That’s one example of the path we follow. The story of the pterodactyl hunter is but one of the many steps which allow us to reach something new. In this *Ceremony*, we’ve let our relationship to music come through, our passion for jazz, and the fact that this genre is descended from African music. In Benin, you have this concept of spiritual ceremonies in which spirits are embodied in fetishes. Similarly, in *Rumeurs et petits jours*, we asked ourselves what our myths are, and worked on neoliberalism. This question is back here: fetishes, the stress between the realism of a society, the irrationality of some, and the so-called truth within the realism of that society. One can’t deny that there exists a system of oppression that surrounds us. It would be impossible for us to talk about idealists without talking about the constraints they live in. Although this ceremony remains a mystery, forever searching for its own codes, there is in it the story of a defeat, of a joy. We wanted to show the idea of people wanting to organise a ceremony, of how important it is to them today, even though they don’t know where to start, what to wear, who to call on.

Within your *Ceremony* is a character no one expected: Don Quixote. What made you think of this symbolic wanderer?

First of all, we find Don Quixote really funny. Secondly, we see him as the embodiment of a form of resistance: he ventures onto paths that lead nowhere, at his own pace. At a time where urgency, performance, and efficiency are everything, his attitude seems to us exemplary. We're constantly defending the idea that to create takes time, the right "not to know" exactly where we're going. Those are fragile fortresses we're trying to protect. The world seems to us to be an aberration when we're supposed at once to obey norms of profitability while still finding the freedom and time to create. What we like with Don Quixote as well is his desire to go on adventures armed with antiquated weapons. Our weapon, which most people might find outdated, is theatre, it's imagination. Theatre is one of the codes of this ceremony: why is it always so fascinating to talk about theatre, to make theatre? We wanted it to be an homage to theatre.

Next to this homage to theatre, the show is also a love letter to music.

Music's been there for a long time. It's part of our rituals, before we begin working. In our previous shows, we'd created a brass band and a tuba quintet, for instance. For this show, it's tied to Benin, to our love for jazz. It comes from the Kingdom of Dahomey, where it accompanied the griots who told of kings and of the powerful. Then, to sum it up, there's a long thread that connects those rhythms and chants to jazz, through the Atlantic slave trade. The journey of History through music is something we're interested in, it becomes a challenge: to try to interpret it on stage even though we're not musicians.

Do you feel nostalgic for the future?

We are nostalgic of an ideal. Tarkovsky once said "*I defend art as it contains nostalgia for an ideal, as it expresses its quest.*" It's also our position. In a society busy destroying itself, the only way not to collapse with it is to oppose it with an ideal. Our imagination has to be equal to the task. "*The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters,*" Antonio Gramsci said. Those monsters call to us, we try to explore them on stage, to represent them like fetishes. This moment between two worlds was already present in our previous show, with the use of *TINA**. *TINA* is a monster-idea. To say that there is no alternative is a monstrous idea. Because we live in a time where social rights are being dismantled, we have to use the power of imagination to be able to respond with dignity, right here and now. We're much more motivated by the present than by a fantasised image of the future. We look at history to find weapons for the present. To learn from the past in order to face the present with integrity is already a precious goal to strive for.

* *There Is No Alternative* = political slogan used by United Kingdom Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher

Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux the 22nd January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach