

WYCINKA HOLZFÄLLEN

Taking place in the cultural and artistic circle of 1980s Austria, *Woodcutters* is a quasi-autobiographical tale, by turns ironic, funny, and violent. Through the power of Thomas Bernhard's writing, it becomes a sort of novelistic fiction that betrays the irritation of its author, both witness and player of the games people who belong to the same world play. By choosing to adapt and direct it, Krystian Lupa creates a wonderful reflection on art and artistic creation that goes beyond the anecdotal description of the squabbles inherent to the oversized egos of the people gathered for a dinner in remembrance of a dead actress. Faithful to Thomas Bernhard's "frantic" style, which exposes his wounds and contradictions, Krystian Lupa once again develops a dramatic aesthetics based on a slowing down of time, alternating with an acceleration in moments of crisis, supported here by thirteen actors whose work aims to uncover the essence "of people and of things." This artistic process, bright and clear, which goes beyond the simple psychological incarnation of the characters and is unique in European theatre, is presented for the first time at the Festival d'Avignon.

Show premiered on 23 October, 2014, at the Jerzy Grzegorzewski Stage at Teatr Polski, Wrocław (Poland).

KRYSTIAN LUPA

After studying as a painter, then as a graphic artist, at the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts, Krystian Lupa enrolls into the National Film School in Łódź, then into the Ludwik Solski Academy for the Dramatic Arts in Kraków. He directs his first play in 1976, and soon comes to be associated with the Teatr Norwida de Jelenia Góra (1977-1985), where he adapts primarily the work of Polish authors such as Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz or Witold Gombrowicz. He then works at the Stary Teatr, in Kraków until 2013. There, he adapts the works of Russian, German, and Austrian authors: Robert Musil, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Rainer Maria Rilke, Mikhail Bulgakov, Anton Chekhov, Werner Schwab, and particularly Thomas Bernhard, playing his dramatic texts as well as his literary works, which he adapts for the stage himself. Krystian Lupa does his own scenography and designs the lighting for his shows. He has written several theoretical texts about his work, in which he says he thrives to explore the spiritual situation of individuals living at times of "great cultural upheaval."

THOMAS BERNHARD

In 1984, a then-53-year-old Thomas Bernhard publishes *Woodcutters*. Already celebrated throughout Europe as a poet, novelist, and dramatic writer, he is known as a master of provocation, as "the man who says no." Clear-headed and inflexible, filled with a fierce and turbulent joy, he made his life and his love-hate relationship with the history of his country, Austria, the raw material of his fiction. He died in 1989, leaving behind an essential body of work made up of eighteen plays, about twenty texts in prose, five poetry collections, and about a hundred essays, all testament to a lifelong quest to "find the measure of truth within every lie."

Des arbres à abattre (Woodcutters) by Thomas Bernhard, Bernard Kreiss's French translation, is published by éditions Gallimard, collection Folio.

INTERVIEW WITH KRYSTIAN LUPA

You have worked on many texts by Thomas Bernhard, both plays and novels. What makes him so endlessly interesting?

Krystian Lupa: It comes in waves. Bernhard haunts me obstinately, relentlessly, pushes me in mysterious ways. Whenever I tell myself “okay, that’s enough” and start working on something else, his influence remains; his vision, that unmask and bares men and their relationships, influences the way I react to other literary works, and when I end up going back to Bernhard, I always discover new things. What is also interesting is to realise that while at first I was his fervent disciple, now I argue with him. Our argument is playful and passionate.

Thomas Bernhard once said: “You can’t write about this stuff in complete calm, as you do in conventional prose; instead, you sit down and straightway you’re excited by the very *idea* itself, and when you actually start *writing*, you’re still excited by the style. The book is written in an excited style.” Were you in a similar state of excitement when you started working on your adaptation, then on your direction?

It isn’t until you dive deep into the story to the point of feeling the demands of men and causes that you understand the “hunger” of those emerging characters. They lead you through the randomness of their own rules, their own mysteries. It isn’t until you start struggling with them that your imagination begins to bring up personal patterns, as happens in intimate and oppressive situations. That is when the product of your imagination becomes new and illuminating, that your creative path reaches a truth: the truth of a stormy adventure. This feeling of excitement, which is often like an irritation, isn’t always fascinating and joyful. Often, it has more to do with an ache that would be caused by your own imagination, similar to the one you feel when you are in a state of pathological jealousy, or suffering out of love. It’s generally comparable to sentimental pain. *Woodcutters* was, according to Thomas Bernhard, a perfect example of that. It is the extreme example of such a state of “excitement.” It’s important to remember that even though Thomas Bernhard had broken free from those who had once introduced him to art, he was still stuck in a conflict of ideas and artistic values. This state of excitement was his principal reason for existing, and it is at once this excitement and this irritation that drove me back to Thomas Bernhard: given the political context in my country right now, what is happening in the world of culture painfully resonates with his text.

***Woodcutters* is a violent attack on Austrian cultural circles, which led to a famous trial. What did you think was the most important thing to focus on, thirty years after its publication?**

What feels most relevant in that text is its biting denunciation of the traps of the relationships between artistic and political circles, and the mechanisms of mass consumption. It’s also the process of degradation it shows, the decline of artists caught in those relationships, which leads to the ruthless ascent of self-betrayal, to the loss of artistic ideals, and most of all to intransigence as the basis for the condition of the artist. *Woodcutters* is a struggle, with ourselves, against that process. It’s a furious attack against our recent

forebears, those who fraternised with the artistic community, became part of it, and were the victims of that betrayal. That seems to me much more relevant today than thirty years ago.

There is a lot of humour, of irony, of self-deprecation. Should this aspect of the writing make it to the stage and influence the actors?

The point is not to tell funny stories, to say caustic lines. Bernhard's humour is the consequence of his acerbic and mischievous outlook. It's a tool to help you reach knowledge, the blade that cuts through the human mysteries that are hidden, hard to bring down. It's a tool to get closer to the human being in a state of powerlessness before the absurdity of those situations, or before his own unconscious absurdity. It is both the means and the process through which one can become aware of the absurdity that hides within human relationships. Laughter, in Bernhard's work, when it surprises us as if red-handed, is like a feeling. It plays a part in the *catharsis*.

Did you give your actors the text of your adaptation when you began rehearsing? Have all the roles been assigned already?

All adaptations come together during rehearsal, slowly. I believe that working on an adaptation alone at home is a mistake: all you are doing is turning one form of literature into another. It is the characters as they emerge that play the essential role of creation: their needs, their wants, their "hunger," as I call it. During our improvisation sessions, those characters in the making emerge, they travel through the landscapes drawn by the author of the novel. We work with a copy of the novel in hand. We record those improvisations, which only serve to add dialogue that wasn't written by the author.

Thomas Bernhard's style has often been described as a succession of long sentences that take the characters from an immediate observation to an older memory, before ending with a meditation. He is also famous for his love of repetition. Is your adaptation faithful to that style?

Bernhard's style can't be reduced to his way of thinking. It's much more than that: it's the unveiling of the inner monologue, hidden from others, which is incomparably more pointless and repetitive than we show outwardly. Bernhard's style serves to expose what is inside men. I try to be faithful to that idea, even in those "apocryphal" passages we have added. The long monologues of his novels are also a product of the fact that he doesn't isolate sentences and lines, but absorbs them within his monologue, and often dissolves them within it as well. I'm trying to keep the same ratio between eruptions of monologue and dialogues, as in his dramatic works.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier / Translation Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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Exhibition Tadeusz Kantor

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FICTIONS FRANCE CULTURE

Goethe se mheurt (Goethe Dighs) by Thomas Bernhard

11 July at 08:00 pm, Musée Calvet, free admittance

#KRYSTIANLUPA #THOMASBERNHARD

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