



MOVING THE LINES

STORIES OF MAPS

INTERVIEW WITH BÉRANGÈRE VANTUSSO AND LÉONOR BAUDOIN

***Moving the Lines* is performed by actors from the Compagnie de l'Oiseau-Mouche. How did you meet them?**

Bérangère Vantusso: I first met the company and worked with some of its actors when Michel Schweizer asked me to create a puppet for his play *Les Diables* (*The Devils*). I had heard of l'Oiseau-Mouche and had seen a few of their creations. One year into her tenure as director of the company, Léonor Baudouin asked me if I wanted to work with her troupe again. I immediately accepted this great invitation. I think there's a right time in an artist's creative career to work with l'Oiseau-Mouche, a moment where you have to accept to shift the way you do things, and it's not something we're always ready to do. To work with this company, you have to want this shift for yourself, to want to create and do things differently. I think I've come to see my creations as experiments to live through. I've accepted not to know too much before I start working. It seems to me to be a good way to start things off, all the more so for a project like this one: to leave a large space for the actors' own imagination, without trying to force too many predetermined choices upon them. I also really wanted to meet them, because the question of norms and of the authority of the gaze plays a central part in my projects.

Léonor Baudouin, can you tell us a little more about the compagnie de l'Oiseau-Mouche and about its relationship with the artists it works with?

Léonor Baudouin: For over forty years, the company has been an atypical project, the only one of its kind in France. The company is made up of twenty permanent actors, all mentally or psychically handicapped. Some of them have been there for thirty years. Different artists are commissioned to helm our creations. It's a real strength that allows us to explore diverse aesthetics and disciplines, and leads to mutual growth through various encounters, including with different audiences. It's also a space of work and sharing, with its own programme, residencies, and workshops. We have a very rich repertoire. L'Oiseau-Mouche is a long-term project, it's rejoicing and exciting because it tells us that a utopia is possible. This creation with Bérangère Vantusso will be the company's first to be presented at the Festival d'Avignon. It's a very powerful moment for us, an incredible event.

The title of the play could refer both to the field of cartography and to the goal of L'Oiseau-Mouche. How did working with the company "move" your approach?

Bérangère Vantusso: It's brought me a lot of wonder, of surprise, because when I come up with an idea, what the actors propose in response is often something I would never have imagined. The unexpected plays a large part, which is always a good thing when talking about theatre. We're also driven by the same force: joy. The actors are very curious and open-minded, always willing to meet you halfway. Those great qualities nurtured within the company—as much as part of their training as actors as because they don't work with a single director—make this an incredibly pleasant experience. You have to adapt, rethink, reword, which forces you to step out of your comfort zone, to be more precise, or to find a different path to make yourself better understood. The show started from this semantic field. The company gave me carte blanche, which to me meant starting with a workshop with the actors. The first thing I wanted to do was to speak to younger audiences. The second was to find a theme which could take on even more meaning when working with those actors. I wanted to find a theme which, with those actors, would take on a real thickness, a singularity. The title can indeed be understood in two different ways, it moved things both on my side and on theirs.

As much political as it is poetic, the map can be an object of knowledge, the physical representation of an imagination, or a tool of manipulation. Which aspects did you choose to explore?

Bérangère Vantusso: We had to make choices, to find a balance between the maps dreamt up by Paul Cox and actual historical maps, between road maps and wind maps... All maps are narratives that tell themselves, and we decided to focus on some of those stories. We thought in terms of themes, like that of the borders, to explore the questions of commerce and war. What also really interested us was to see how map-making techniques led to their evolution. How, as soon as mankind started to take to the sky, with hot air balloons, dirigibles, or planes, and with the invention of aerial photography, we were able to see the world as Icarus did. Another important theme, related to the question of commerce, was the privatisation of the public space which appeared with satellites and GPS devices. Instantaneous geolocation has led some big brands to buy commercial spaces to appear on Google's maps. Whatever the technological evolutions, maps remain first and foremost an object of power, a tool of authority. Technical means may evolve, but the will behind them remains more or less the same: to master and control. Nowadays, we map everything, from French cheeses to the pandemic. It's become a way to objectivise and simplify. I'm both suspicious of and fascinated by maps; it's wonderful to be able to have a global vision in one image, to be able to encapsulate a concept, but it can be dangerous, because it's very easy to manipulate maps.

The show is also directed at younger audiences. What do you want to tell them?

Bérangère Vantusso: Maps are ambivalent, complex, and fascinating objects. Once you start looking into maps, the world is no longer the same. It's changed my relationship to landmarks, the way I picture space. One of the things I wanted with this creation, aimed at all audiences from the age of 9, was to lead young spectators through that experience. They're at an age when they still have a foot in childhood while also becoming aware of society and of the world as it is organised. What I'd like is for them to come out of the show looking at people and spaces differently, for them to look at and understand the world in a different way, with the idea that knowledge has to be the basis for criticism. I'd like young spectators to understand that this organisation of space isn't at all innocuous. It is often imposed, and it's always better to realise that, it makes you freer. I also like the idea of the actors of L'Oiseau-Mouche being the ones to bring this knowledge, it's also a way of moving the lines.

In your shows, you don't hesitate to use texts in conjunction with sound and visual creations. What was your idea for the show's narrative structure and scenography?

Bérangère Vantusso: The idea of using cartography came during the workshop. We'd worked on texts by Nicolas Doutey, with whom I'd chosen to collaborate for this project. I wanted there to be text in the show, because the theme of cartography required some ideas to be put into words. I'd already worked on other projects with Nicolas—whose writing I like a lot, with its Beckett influence—and this time I wanted him to work directly with us. He took part in rehearsals, as did Paul Cox. It's a real work of triangulation between language, images, and direction, with the actors at the centre of that triangle. I'd asked him to write fragments of scenes which would at first serve as improvisation prompts for the actors. It allowed us to develop the situations we wanted to try out based on the history and issues related to cartography. The idea was to find ways to turn that into theatre, through very simple and concrete situations. Working with Paul led to my taking another look at the question of illustration. We worked in close collaboration to make sure the images didn't just repeat what the text and the situation said, and vice versa. Paul is a plastic artist, but he has also worked as a scenographer; the space of the stage is something that's important for him. We started with a flat surface which can shift between horizontality and verticality, and which can open up, rise, move, and gain new depth or perspective, like a pop-up book. We had a lot of fun interpreting a number of cartography concepts literally to then embody them onstage. The vocabulary of cartography includes many polysemous words, and Paul Cox, with his playful spirit, never fails to remind us of it at the most opportune moment.

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz in January 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach

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