



# FRATERNITY, A FANTASTIC TALE

## INTERVIEW WITH CAROLINE GUIELA NGUYEN

**After the success of SAIGON, you're coming back both to the stage and to the screen with a cycle of creations entitled FRATERNITY. The first part is a short film made with the inmates of the Arles prison. Why? And what is its relationship with the second part, a show you're presenting at La Fabrica?**

**Caroline Guiela Nguyen:** I wanted to be able to fully explore the topic of fraternity with different teams, to work on it in several European countries. The first part of the cycle, *Les Engloutis (The Drowned)*, is a film I shot in 2020 in the Arles prison, where I have worked for almost 8 years with people serving long sentences. I've always wanted to bring a camera into that closed, almost forbidden place, hidden from sight. With them, I wanted to create a fantastic tale. The idea for the film came from something an inmate told me after seeing his daughter whom he'd left as a child and met again, four years later, as a young woman. He confessed he hadn't been able to recognise her completely. His brain resisted that recognition because he couldn't deal with this vision of a time from which he had been excluded. What we can talk about with these men is the question of time. It's their area of expertise, in a way. I wanted them to be able to tell us about this very specific time they're going through, and how they experience it. The story of the film is a simple one: a number of people who had disappeared for four years return home. They are given messages left for them by their loved ones while they were away and they find themselves faced with an archive of their lives from which they were excised and excluded. *FRATERNITY, a fantastic tale*, the show we're presenting at the Festival d'Avignon, asks the question of time from the point of view of those who wait, and no longer from that of those who come back. The characters of the show are the survivors of a catastrophe that took their loved ones away. We watch how over the following years and decades they gather together in a "centre for healing and consolation," trying to fill the void now at the heart of their lives.

**Can you tell us about your sources of inspiration, about your unique team, but also about the idea of place, which is very important in your work? How did all those elements combine to create the fantastic in your show?**

To come up with *FRATERNITY, a fantastic tale*, I gave my team a text without any dialogue, in which I talked about the show from a literary and aesthetic point of view. We then worked on this original story with the actors, the scenographer, and the costume and sound designers through moments of improvisation and research. It's through those exchanges that we were able to write the play. Originally, we only had the basic narrative architecture: the show's duration, the period and, above all, the place where it is set. In truth, it is this place, this centre for healing and consolation, which gave the project its structure, which guided its construction and casting. It's inspired by the social centres we visited, the way they function, their goals and missions, the concrete activities that take place there, and the men and women who gather there because they need to find answers to the things they are going through. It also allows me to show the people working there, who wonder how to help and heal men and women who don't share a common referential and cognitive system. Finding tools for healing without imposing a dominant framework first and foremost means being able to confirm someone else's reality. The other fundamental aspect was to find the right faces to carry the story onstage. Right from the start, I wanted the main character of *FRATERNITY, a fantastic tale* to be the group, which is why we spent two years bringing together this team of professional and non-professional actors from very different backgrounds and aged 21 to 82, and who speak different languages during the show. We met them while travelling and they all bring to the stage their own unique way of embodying the story. The characters of the play are as diverse as the people I met in terms of age, language, and culture. What's fantastic is how we were able to gather all those bodies on a stage for a fiction that is itself fantastic! While an actor, through his or her body but also through the role he or she has been assigned, is often consigned to a certain reality, here I wanted the fiction to fully inhabit those bodies, both individually and collectively. It has to do with the fact that, for us, imagining the future isn't synonymous with a dystopia. Quite the contrary. We want to show the idea of the future as a space and time in which healing, mending, and the acceptance of the other in all his or her otherness have become possible, and allow us to keep a deeply wounded, amputated, and changed society alive.

**After several months immersed in your work, how would you define fraternity today?**

I see fraternity as a way to look from the present towards both the past *and* the future. It means recognising the other as a brother, without hesitation, and acting with him, for him, because we're part of the same human community. In the play, it's expressed through the story of characters who are trying to build a shared future with the invisible people they carry within themselves. They embody the whole range of the meaning, both symbolic and concrete, of the word fraternity. But fraternity also manifests itself in life, which is what I learned from the people I met during my various periods of immersion before I started writing: from Cristina Cattaneo, an Italian medical examiner who has been fighting to identify the bodies of the migrants who have drowned while crossing the Mediterranean, to the staff of the Red Cross' Restoring Family Links programme, who help those who have lost a loved one to find them, in the name of the right of every human being to be close to those he or she loves. It's the same right that allows inmates to receive visits from their families, for instance. The emotional bond is a central and necessary element in any human life. I'm reminded of those two sisters who were separated during World War II. Sixty years later, when they were both over 80, they got a call from the Restoring Family Links programme. Throughout the decades, their file had never been closed, just suspended in the hope that new information would come. Fraternity can always arise, even after a hundred years... That's why today, Cristina Cattaneo is as intent on figuring out the identity of a man who just washed ashore as that of someone who died in the 18<sup>th</sup> century... Time doesn't heal wounds, but it makes it so we can one day mend them. I think that's what fraternity means to me, this urge that drives us to mend wounds for both yesterday and tomorrow.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu in January 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach