



PENTHÉSILÉ•E•S AMAZONOMACHIE

INTERVIEW WITH LAËTITIA GUÉDON

***Penthésilé•e•s* is a text you commissioned from Marie Dilasser. Can you tell us a little about your intent with this work and how it came about?**

Laëtitia Guédon: In 2018, for “Intrépides,” an event organised by the SACD, I tried my hand at adapting texts by contemporary female writers for the stage, and I discovered the harshness and subtlety of Marie Dilasser’s poetic writing. Then, after working with author Kevin Keiss on *Troyennes – Les morts se moquent des beaux enterrements* (*The Trojan Women – The dead don’t care about beautiful funerals*), based on Euripides, I felt the desire to return to ancient tragedy. I naturally thought about Marie. We started thinking about a first stylistic constraint: to write in a way at once poetic and ungendered. We were inspired in part by Monique Wittig’s work on *Les Guérillères*... We also worked on reinventing a language, without knowing at first how the Amazons would talk, since as a people they’d banned everything masculine from their society. It was also important to break away from the theme of Heinrich von Kleist’s *Penthesilea*: the fall of the feminine because of love. His heroine’s dilemma seemed to me to be an outdated idea which played down her feminine power and her capability to find a place for herself. What I find interesting in the warrior figure of Penthesilea is that she’s one of few female characters to play an important part in the Trojan War, even though historically there remain so few traces of her that we’re not sure she even existed. Did she even take part in that war? If so, who was she? The mystery gave us great freedom when it came to writing and directing the show.

There isn’t one Penthesilea on your stage, but three. Why this choice?

I wanted to explore the relationship between women and power and strength. Penthesilea isn’t one woman but several. Because she can access different levels of herself, she transforms, her body changes. But they are but facets of a single prism. Her relationship to violence—the Amazons were a tribe of warriors—can be seen in her relationship to the world, which often encounters obstacles: violence against herself, violence as a way to impose her will, violence she is subjected to... So, when actress Marie-Pascale Dubé comes onstage, she is that first Penthesilea who faces Achilles. The idea isn’t to pit man against woman, but to bring face to face two dissident figures of the Trojan War. It’s a meeting between two free spirits, but also two soul mates, who fight only with their voices. It’s a fight of sounds, which replaces the unspeakable, the lack of understanding between those two beings. I wanted to give the stage over to two vocal powers, which transcend all words. The fight ends with Penthesilea’s death. We don’t know whether Achilles prevails or if she gives up, kills herself because she “can’t take it anymore.” The figure portrayed by Lorry Hardel seems to be Penthesilea as we imagine her. She gives a reinterpretation of the myth, confesses who she truly is when faced with Achilles. By revealing herself in the mysterious space of the hammam, she is able to transcend herself to slowly become “another herself.” Finally, since I also wanted to have a hybrid figure made up of the animality and masculinity of Penthesilea, I went to Seydou Boro, a Burkinabé dancer who’s long studied the physicality of horses. With him, the body changes, we reach a different level of consciousness, and Penthesilea becomes this form that’s at once female, male, and animal. This incarnation reminds me of the physical transformation of certain female politicians who, upon reaching power, slowly become more masculine. As if their bodies had to pay the price of this autonomy. With those three possible expressions of Penthesilea, I give a less direct interpretation of the character. She’s not an eternal, unmoving figure.

Is the stage a place of metamorphosis as well?

Symbolically speaking, yes. I wanted to create a show whose different parts, like doors or airlocks, invite different understandings. The audience can, symbolically, move from the battlefield to the hammam, which is a place of feminine secret and revelation, to a ruined city. A chorus of Amazons, made up of classical singers, leads Penthesilea away from this world and towards the hereafter. There will also be a series of portraits of young women and men I met in the land of creation and whom I see as modern Penthesileas. A last space of conscience, free from all past failures. Talking about the Trojan War in 2020 also means talking about the spirit of one-upmanship in our society. Implicitly, it's also about the eternal conflict between East and West, the separation and death of representations. All those possible interpretations are woven together to make the story.

Can you explain what you mean by “modern Amazons?”

All women are Amazons by definition! The problem in our society is that a successful woman is both many and unique. She can reconcile many aspects of her life and assert herself. She's not fragile, she knows how to take care of herself. The question of independence is very important to the Amazons: they create their own laws, their own military code, but also their violence. That may be why they're so often ignored in history. They are women who own their autonomy. In the West Indies, some women are called *potomitan*, a word used to describe a totem-woman, a woman as axis of the world, the centre of the home around which everything is organised and leans on. She is revered, but also feared. She becomes a monster for men. The question of independence is a central one, because it brings up the concept of sacrifice. In whose name is it still legitimate to sacrifice one's life, to put one's life in parentheses, when the field of what we have to accomplish is so wide? It seems to me to be a very heavy legacy that women are now trying to overcome. I try my best to believe in propositions for the future, and that's what our re-imagining of Penthesilea calls on. This woman pays the price of her independence, of her power, she transforms physically, she owns her radicalism and her desires. There's a complexity to this feminine wholeness. I don't want the audience to feel empathetic towards her all the time. It's part of this woman's identity. There's something about her that can be revolting, and that's good. With Marie Dilasser, we tried to write a manifesto as oratorio, and to ask the question of a possible reconciliation.

Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux in December 2019 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach