



# BETWEEN DUSK AND DAWN

## INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIANE JATAHY

**The film *Dogville*, released in 2003, inspired your show *Between dusk and dawn*. In it, Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier tells the story of a fugitive finding refuge in a small American town in the 1930s. He “flattens” cinema to the extreme: houses are outlined on the ground, and the set becomes like a theatre stage. Do you feel that your interest for *Dogville* comes from a thematic kinship?**

**Christiane Jatahy:** While Lars von Trier’s artistic practice does resemble mine in some ways, our respective approaches are opposite. In *Dogville*, Lars von Trier does indeed move cinema towards a theatrical language, whereas in my work as a director, theatre comes first, then cinema follows. In formal terms, my work is about the ambiguous relationship between cinema, which looks towards the past, and theatre, always anchored in the present. While it is impossible to change a film, a dramatic performance can be subjected to any and all changes, accidents, and other unforeseen events. Theatre is an art of the present. *Between dusk and dawn* also follows the story of a woman on the run, but in another geopolitical context, and also asks the question Lars von Trier explored in *Dogville*: what does it mean to accept the other? But this time, the characters onstage know the film, they exploit the arrival of a Brazilian exile, Graça, and they try to manipulate the research previously conducted by Lars von Trier, while hoping to change the narrative.

**How would you describe this narrative and formal experiment?**

In *Between dusk and dawn*, the experimentation comes in large part from the conflict between a theatrical space in which the spectator is an active participant, and the space of cinema where the spectator is “dropped in front of the screen.” I’m working on how to share this three-dimensionality. A screen at the back of the stage shows the record of the experiment the actors/participants are filming; and progressively, it turns out to be an open window onto their thoughts and unconscious. If we start from the assumption that the film is behind us, and is known to the actors of *Before dusk and dawn*, we understand that they’re trying, through theatre, to change *Dogville*. Theatre in this show reinvents cinema to achieve this change. This desire become action is one of the central aspects of the show’s dramaturgy. Although it begins with a narrator presenting the scenic space and each character, they all speak *here and now*. The set starts to shift and change, just like this community. The relationships between the characters create a space that is no longer compartmentalised but collective. It leads, progressively, to a deconstruction of the film.

**Your show, just like the film that inspired it, is a chemical process: you take a community in which you drop a foreigner, and you then observe the ensuing reaction...**

I’m interested in the question of exile, of the foreigner. It was already so in the last show I presented at the Festival d’Avignon, *The Overflowing Present*, two years ago. It was about a foreigner who can’t enter a country but can’t go home, either, and finds himself stuck in a no man’s land. This reflection about the foreigner is the trigger in my work for both the concept of direction and of dramaturgy. In *Between dusk and dawn*, a woman decides to flee the far-right government in her country not as a political exile, but because the situation there has become untenable. While looking for another way to live, she meets a group of people who evoke what we’re experiencing as we watch the show, since they live in a theatre. But the key thing is first and foremost that the actors are presented as characters who come from the memory of *Dogville*. It’s a succession of *mise en abyme*. The place this woman ends up in might be Switzerland, where we rehearsed, or France, where we’re currently performing.

**This arrival raises the question of the difficulty of accepting the foreigner. As if fascism wasn't just a faraway regime, but our own worst urges, and as such a threat for any democratic State...**

Without saying too much, those characters begin indeed to reproduce the story they were trying to avoid... When the foreigner appears, like a response to their desire of experimentation, the audience has already heard the narrator talk about acceptance to all the characters. And actors and spectators alike are aware of it when Graça's arrival drags them back into the real. They struggle to do more than just observe the exploitation of the other, and they're in the perfect place to reflect on their actions as they unfold.

**This reflection about a fascism that would be without borders is influenced by your life in Brazil...**

While I found Lars von Trier's film very impressive when it came out, I do feel somewhat conflicted about it, in particular about its treatment of characters more as archetypes. What matters to me is to show how such a situation, the arrival of a foreigner who has been abused, raped, and dehumanised, with the excesses capitalism is capable of, is close to us. If my identity as a Brazilian does influence my work now more than ever, I think fascism can awaken anywhere. The character of Graça (Grace in *Dogville*) doesn't realise she might come across the same dangers outside of her country. But in *Between dusk and dawn*, I wanted her to be able to react, to resist... The rise of the far-right, the slide of a regime into fascism, isn't something that's exclusive to Brazil. It's interesting to think that although we're performing here in France, the play will then be presented in another country. And that it can become the story of a European woman coming to Brazil to flee an authoritarian regime, for instance...

**Lars von Trier's film ends with a series of famous photographs showing the poverty and exploitation of workers in the United States, from the 1930s to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The community in *Dogville* is a victim of its own poverty and exploits Grace. What do you make of the current state of your country, since your show plays with temporalities and geographical confrontations?**

Let's take the example of the pandemic: the current government did nothing to prevent it; on the contrary, it has seemed at times to want to spread it, to foster chaos in the country or accelerate the extermination of groups of people, like indigenous communities, who stand against the regime's destructive policies. The concept of "protection"—which comes back time and again in the show—is particularly revealing: on the one hand, the protection of each and every one of us depends on the collectivity, on society, on our capacity for accepting the other and accepting help; on the other hand, it also includes ecology—the protection of the forest, the fight against inequalities. In Brazil, we find ourselves in a situation where we often don't know anymore if fascism is a threat or if it's already there, in our institutions, but also in the minds and words of the people, sometimes even our loved ones, our colleagues, our parents. This slide from a democratic state to a totalitarian regime is at the heart of *Between dusk and dawn*. Hence the need to distinguish between actors and characters, and to give the audience the opportunity to watch them conduct their experiment to the end. As always, affect can interfere. It's the same with any experience of alterity within a community: everyone is tempted to exploit the other. With this deep conviction that if I give something of me to the other, they owe me a debt, and have to repay it... otherwise the debt grows. This relationship, capitalistic by nature, eventually turns the other into an *object* if we let it. With their desire to welcome Graça among them, the characters are convinced they're free from any form of fascism. When cinema invites us to look from a distance, theatre can create the experience of a situation of acceptance, submit a question to the audience, with a very current "vibration."

**Do you, in your work as an artist, try to abolish those borders we were talking about?**

It's true that in my work, I try to question borders, to make them porous. Geographic borders, borders between theatre and cinema, between characters and actors. At the same time, theatre is the space of the agora. The fourth wall is long gone! It's a space of dialogue whose essential characteristic for me is this very absence of border between the actors and the audience, between what's happening onstage and in the room. But if the actors can change the audience, the audience can also change the actors.

Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet in March 2021  
and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach

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