

AND...

PRESS CONFERENCE with Clément Bondu,
July 6 at 11:00, cour du Cloître Saint-Louis

SHOW

Oresteia, Jean-Pierre Vincent with the students of the
École supérieure d'art dramatique du Théâtre national de Strasbourg,
July 12 to 16, Gymnase du lycée Saint-Joseph

DEVOTION LAST OFFERING TO THE DEAD GODS

If the audience thinks at first glance that they are watching a hotel room in which those who have been exiled from the world gather without knowing where to go, they quickly understand that writer and director Clément Bondu isn't working towards a new realism. Quite the contrary... Bondu has spent the past two years questioning the possibility of a contemporary dramatic ritual with fourteen actors from the École supérieure d'art dramatique of Paris who constantly switch masks here and play with references to literature and cinema. This new generation invites us to follow a tale made of several stories, a deeply poetic story. With its three acts dedicated successively to the personal, the political, and the celebration of the sacred, *Devotion, last offering to the dead gods* summons the ghosts of Europe to turn theatre into the place where words can be heard without any didacticism. A veritable human menagerie, where the figure of the poet is that of Evil, where Dostoevsky's *Idiot* makes a comeback, where Ophelia retells her death. A room which isn't actually a room but a world which will allow the audience to discover new faces and new existences buried under the ashes of our time.

CLÉMENT BONDU

Born in 1988, **Clément Bondu** is a poet, writer, and director for theatre and cinema. His company Année Zéro aims to occupy the stage through directions and performances. He was recently writer-in-residence at the Plateaux sauvages, took part in the Totem(s) project for new operatic writing with La Chartreuse-CNES in Villeneuve lez Avignon, and performed in 2019 the second part of his musical show *Nous qui avons perdu le monde (Les Adieux)* [*We Who Had Lost the World (Goodbyes)*] at the Théâtre de la Cité internationale in Paris.

ÉCOLE SUPÉRIEURE D'ART DRAMATIQUE DE PARIS

The concept of "actor/creator" is at the heart of the **École supérieure d'art dramatique de la ville de Paris**, which sees every young actor as a potential artist and offers them, over their three years of training, both the opportunity to work with seasoned veterans and to learn the basics of the craft.

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INTERVIEW WITH CLÉMENT BONDU

Is your play an expression of your desire to question theatre as it exists today?

Clément Bondu : Long before I started working on the direction, I wrote this play out of a clear and conscious desire to question the ritual of theatre. After numerous versions and changes prompted by many political and aesthetic interrogations, I finally made it through. Now I can say that, yes, this play questions the act of performance. What can theatre do today? I focused on three dimensions, echoing the Greek heritage. First, the political, especially through the role of the Chorus, which stands in front of a society itself constantly in the process of performing. Then the personal and the dramatic. Finally, the ritual, in its sacred aspects and its relationship to poetry and music. With these questions in mind: Is it still possible to believe in gods, in heroes? Can catharsis still happen nowadays? What of the actor, of masks, of characters?

Without defining itself as such, *Devotion* presents itself as its own world. Devoid of any particular story, it brings together many characters and archetypes. What vision of theatre leads you to make the space of the stage a place where the Word predominates?

I'm interested in theatre more as a location than as a discipline. The play is indeed a world in and of itself: in *Devotion*, it is the world we call to the stage. All those questions about the act of theatre are necessary. Theatre has drifted away from the field of literature; it's become specialised. My goal, then, is to bring back figures, symbols, to put some literature back in theatre, to talk about the world through the act of speaking on a stage. From there we can dig, dig ceaselessly into this complexity, above all the complexity of language. The question of the narrative becomes secondary. There are several stories, which might come together as one, or might be a thousand different stories. But you can't enter this process without treating it as an act of belief, of devotion.

You explore all the different aspects of desire, of power, of the social order...

I needed to call on the dead to perform an exercise in resurrection, in order to believe in the living. It was a sort of paradigm shift. To believe, I had to be stuck in this halfway state, I couldn't let go of the fictional, of this belief in the narrative and the story, and at the same time, I couldn't write that: political and social concerns kept coming up; they kept messing everything up. My own times would brutally reappear, with everything that makes them so terrifying, this "return of the repressed," the wars of the 20th century, etc. I could see fascistic behaviours coming back, summoning political ghosts to my mind, and mingling with other, more abstract ghosts, closer to specific references. How could I take responsibility for this mountain of ash that still follows us today? What kind of alterity is possible when faced with the guilty, the villain, the enemy, or with the exiled, the refugee, with him who doesn't speak your language, or who doesn't speak it properly, the exiled in his own language, him who doesn't know the codes?

This is the play of a generation, struggling with different legacies. How did you come to work with actors from the *École supérieure d'art dramatique*?

It all started with an offer by Serge Tranvoyez, director of the *École supérieure d'art dramatique* of Paris. I spent two years working with fourteen fascinating actors. They researched the European dictatorships of the 20th century; they improvised, they gathered video archives. They spent a lot of time reading and talking to each other. The idea had always been to work on fiction with a documentary approach, or vice versa. I don't quite belong to their generation. There's a small gap there. I grew up after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but before the collapse of the World Trade Center. This difference of about ten years led to an interesting dialectics. We're not trying to come up with a manifesto, but we wanted to make an inventory, to draw the picture of a generation, to call on a few ghosts. Not in a polite or formulaic manner, but rather from a position of critical explosion.

***Devotion* was also conceived with a particular scenography in mind...**

With scenographer Anne-Sophie Grac, we wanted realistic depictions which would allow for a literal understanding of what was going on. The room of the Idiot, which is also the room of the failed Writer, who narrates the story, and the shabby hotel room where the exiled of the world gather, that room, we had to bring it into existence, just like H.'s room as a teenager, which is a room where all dreams and fictions are possible. But we didn't want the space to be fixed and limited to those places. We created plastic, shifting, and luminous spaces, in which the bodies of the actors and actresses can move from one place to the next in only a couple of steps. To sum it up, we wanted everything to feel fake and ephemeral.

At the heart of the play is a poet who rejects society and is fascinated by violence. Can the poet be a figure of evil?

I think there needs to be some disagreement in the dramatic process. You can't do without it. The power of literature resides in its ability to show that writing is an act of contradiction. Just think of Pier Paolo Pasolini or Thomas Bernhard. We are now stuck between the impossibility of believing in art and the impossibility not to. You have to keep missing somewhere, as Samuel Beckett suggested. Otherwise, it's a great nothing. That's what *Devotion* is like. Though we know it's all in vain, we create wonder anew by presenting the figure of the poet, Animal-Baal, as a figure of evil.

With its many references, would you say that your theatre is haunted by the "ghosts of Europe?"

It's a deeply European play. We're living through a time where the very idea of Europe is once again crumbling before our eyes. *Devotion* calls on the great clichés of European grandeur. When zombies appear onstage, under the guise of homeless people or refugees, I know it leads to capitalism and colonisation. We've spent the past two centuries forging ahead like that. We keep piling up the dead, reliving the same aporias over and over again, the same tragedies, and now we can't even see that our economic model is destroying the very possibility of existence. To put it in theatrical terms, we have to wonder how long we can keep staring at the sun.

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Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach