



KINGDOM

INTERVIEW WITH ANNE-CÉCILE VANDALEM

How did you first encounter the work of Clément Cogitore, which served as inspiration for the last part of your trilogy?

Anne-Cécile Vandalem: After *Sadnesses* and *Arctic*, I wanted to work in *The Kingdom* on the absence of future as seen by children. I discovered Clément's work thanks to the catalogue of his exhibit at the BAL in Paris, then I saw his film *Braguino*. The themes he tackles, this "disappearing world," as he calls it, echoed the topics I wanted to work on. This convergence of interests led to my wanting to meet him to discuss a possible adaptation. There's such a strong artistic point of view in his work that I found it stifled my creative freedom. While working on the narrative framework, we agreed that I would draw from *Braguino*, but freely. If his film is the main source of inspiration for *The Kingdom*, it's not strictly speaking an adaptation. There are other inspirations, like Nastassja Martin's *Croire aux fauves*, or the writings of Camille de Toledo. Furthermore, I delve into what I think are the unexplored areas of the documentary, I wanted to fill them in with people. Starting from the concept of a psycho-genealogy of this family, I wanted to see how, when the future is uncertain, the past can become a way to reinvent it. I'm working on a biography of the characters separate from the narrative of *Braguino*. The fiction I created allows me to explore aspects that aren't in the film. It allows me to talk about something else than just the world of the living, to move towards a change in that world which carries within itself different answers for the future. Clément filmed a reality, though his outlook as an artist is already a form of interpretation, but he couldn't, in a documentary, go beyond what he was given to see. As for me, the theatre gives me the opportunity to extrapolate.

In both the film and your show, children carry the narrative. How did you use their potential onstage?

Bringing children and young adults onto a theatre stage to perform in a story far removed from realism and alongside professional actors creates a shock. I always try not to make the children perform but to take them as they are, I immerse them and make them exist within scenes. The actors have to work differently with them, the codes of performance change. I'm used to working with children who have never acted before. There's often something unique about them that I like. To allow them to find their place within our narrative, I first tried to establish a relationship between them and the adults—the four of them—and to create this family, in a way. In *The Kingdom*, I wanted the children to always be witnesses to what is happening. The characters tell their stories, and through their testimony, the story slowly catches up to them. Those children are like sponges, they hear everything of the adults' conflicts, they're always absorbing them. How do they inherit those, and what do they do with them? Their parents taught them that their neighbours—their cousins—are their enemies. There has always been a barrier between them. I wanted the audience to understand how the children perceive all that, but also what it leads to at night. The only way for them to sublimate and exorcise those fights through scenes halfway between dreams and reality. Just like in *Sadnesses* and *Arctic*, the final resolution, at once powerful and tragic, is enacted by the children, and above all by the young adults, who stand at the exact border between the two worlds. It's tragic because it's not a solution. And I absolutely don't want to say that the solution has to come from youth, that they have to solve the problems we created. I want to show that there might be in children a refusal to remain indifferent or paralysed, that they have the will to try to do something, even if the outcome remains uncertain.

Your trilogy features warring clans and shattered communities. In what way would you say this last part continues your research into the impossibility of living together?

This community, which isolates itself from the outside world, reproduces warlike conditions, when it's the opposite of what they seek. The impossibility of living in peace is here tied to fundamental historic oppositions, like the question of territory, the opposition between nature and nurture, the relationship to the living... Themes that harken back almost to mythology. It's a perpetual war. I always think in terms of trilogies, it's a way for me of creating a frame. I wanted to work on what I call humanity's great failures. There are more than three, of course... When, as a child, I understood the world I would live in, it was still possible to believe in the future. Today I can't tell my children that the future will be better. So I asked myself what failures led from the perspectives of my childhood to the current situation. In *Sadnesses* I wanted to tackle the impossibility of living together from the point of view of politics, then in *Arctic* the absolute failure of the promise of ecology and progress, and here the inability to build a future. I create dystopias, but I also try to ask questions that might lead us in another direction, not to just say that we're going straight into the wall. I explore the question of psycho-genealogy not as destiny, but to show that within what we carry of our roots, of our past, might hide new possibilities. I'm not entirely pessimistic, I also try, through my stories, to give people strength. I'm trying to give this story the opportunity to resonate with people. I try to imbue fiction with power, to give back to the story a strength that is supposed to last longer than just the time of the performance. And that, for me, is the true power of theatre, of cinema, that of sublimating a story. I'll never stop believing and fighting for that.

The return to nature, to a life in balance with resources, is a very current theme, both in people's daily lives and in fiction...

Rather than a return to life in the wild, both Clément Cogitore about *Braguino* and Nastassja Martin in *Les âmes sauvages* talk about a common sense relationship to nature. What opposes those two families is that one of them wants to live within nature long-term. To that end, they try to find a balance, in a common sense relationship. If we want nature to continue to provide for us, we can't take more than what we need, we can't destroy other living things. This isn't radical environmentalism, this is common sense. Of course, it stands in opposition to the consumerist relationship which takes everything nature provides as fast as possible, until there is nothing left. It's this clash I'm interested in, because it's part of my questions about the future. The forest could be a paradise, but it turns out to be a prison, notably with the arrival of the poachers flying in in their choppers and, with them, the violence of an ultra-capitalist world which turns everything into a commodity, destroys the taiga, and exploits all available resources for commerce. Then you have the forest fires caused by climate change. Their paradise keeps getting smaller and smaller. In *Braguino*, Clément never filmed the other family. I didn't want to show anything of those outside dangers, either. The enemy, be it bears, machines, poachers, or fire, is never seen, only heard of. We remain as close as possible to the family, without ever crossing the barrier. That's where the power of the narrative resides. Telling that story is a way to stop it from disappearing. It's the continuation of a world through the power of the story.

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