



# TO GO TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

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## INTERVIEW WITH MAGUY MARIN

### **What was the impact of the health crisis on this creation and on your teams?**

**Maguy Marin:** Just like for everyone else, it was a difficult moment to go through. The company had to cancel our tours and rethink our work schedule. I'd already decided not to have more than four performers onstage, but at one point I thought I might have to change their interactions and imagine different relationships between them. The way things evolved then allowed us to work almost as if under normal circumstances.

### **The throughline of this play is *The Peloponnesian War*. In this absolute classic of ancient literature, Thucydides tells the story of the bloody conflict between Sparta and Athens in the 5th century BCE. What is your creation about?**

One play after the other, although the form changes dramatically, I'm always working on the same questions: How to live together? How to find new possible ways of life, different of the ones we've known for so long? With this creation, I'm trying to connect ancient and contemporary History. The sieges Thucydides tells us about aren't so different from those of Madrid (1936-1939) or Sarajevo (1992-1996). His is a complex narrative. We don't understand right away what's at play between the States, the struggles for power and domination, the alliances and betrayals, the massacres, the thirst for victory... I want to explore the question of the might one can use against those who are weaker. I looked mostly into the Affair of Epidamnos, which takes place in Book I but has ramifications throughout the narrative, in particular in Books III and IV, but I also worked on part of Book VIII. The Peloponnesian War led to a dictatorship. To survive, the vanquished had to forget. It reminded me of Argentina where, long after the military dictatorship, people still marched in the streets against laws that allowed officers guilty of human rights violations to be pardoned. People didn't want their memory to be erased once more. I think that forgetting leads to the failure of any attempt to understand the mechanisms that lead to wars and create violence. Thucydides was a contemporary of the history he wrote about. Yet he also looks at it from a distance, as an exile driven away for his failure to defend his city. He says himself that there are thousands of ways to tell the story of war. In my opinion, he talks about the essential quality of the fight, the violence inherent in humanity. Of this brutal desire for victories for victory's sake. What I want to do here is not to offer a representation of that war, but to share its memory. As a writer, an artist, I often ask myself how to evoke the breath of the vanquished. They're left us many stories of the events that changed the world over past centuries until today. If war, with its massacres and devastation, sadly was often the one thing they had in common, resistance as a concrete struggle by men and women against all forms of oppression provides some hope. I don't mean to say that we are powerless in the face of History. Quite the contrary. The play is also about reconciliation and reparation. My responsibility is to make sure that the audience cannot look away from the topic at hand, cannot ignore what we are capable of in extreme moments of urgency, when survival is at stake. And I applied this reasoning first and foremost to myself, trying to tackle this topic in its entirety by multiplying points of view and *delving into it to take as close a look as possible...*

**The play doesn't follow a strict chronology and seems to want nothing less than to be an epic. Why did you decide to tackle this huge question with such a small group of actors?**

The description of events in Thucydides's text is so lively that it's almost impossible not to remember that denunciation and betrayal were engines for survival throughout the history of the 20th century. When talking about war, civil wars, violence, and events that led to the death of millions of people throughout ancient or contemporary History, it seems just as laughable to try to do it with twelve actors or four. My choice was then to turn to a deliberately smaller group to explore the subject in a different way. Our idea was to reveal what within us as humans creates war, to touch those catastrophes we build ourselves. We didn't try to express this violence through the body. It's impossible. We observed it, we stepped away from it, we tried to measure its impact on its victims. To that end, we also looked into poetic works about civil wars, like *L'Amertume et la Pierre (Bitterness and Stone)*, an anthology of poems written between 1947 and 1951 in concentration camps in Greece, which reminds us of the camps that exist today. Those places where people are thrown together, exiles or migrants, because we don't know what to do about them. The play is built through a system of montage which juxtaposes words and images or moments, without any logical continuity. It proceeds through mental association, jumps and rebounds, starts and stops. I tell the story in such a way that spectators have to create their own connections, have to solve the question on their own, just like the actors try to, caught in a space similar to a workshop, in which the elements of the show, be they sets, costumes, objects, or projection surfaces are always visible. They move across a stage which is a sort of palimpsest made up of different media all related to war, to geography. A fragmented space where every one of us tries to find or recreate connections to understand history and to be able to imagine a different future. I wanted to show a slow process of elucidation, with its missteps, its fits and starts, its attempts at justification or accusation, and the way it can go forward or backward depending on the danger, of the conditions of its own survival. I tried to give the show a rhythm by using short breaths as the basic unit. The actors tell a story, they don't act. We tried to pull away from words because the French text isn't as easy to understand as the original ancient Greek. The show speaks several languages, with several voices. There's the serious, precise, and poetic voice of Jacqueline de Romilly, but also those of the actors who speaks Greek and Arabic, and those of other people. When I start working on a show with actors, I don't have much in terms of elements or decisions. A lot of things are possible, and sometimes they destroy each other, or they combine and strengthen each other. In this particular case, it was my reading of Thucydides's book which laid the foundation of the question at the heart of the play. This isn't a dance show. It's something else. With the scenographer, the costume designer, the musicians, the video artist, the performers, we tried to make that specific story more directly accessible and understandable by all.

**In this back-and-forth between past and present, reality and fiction, image, video, and models play a very important part. How did you build this show, which is akin to a miniature diorama?**

It all comes from this team, from our shared reflection about how to approach this war, the number of soldiers who fought in it, the colossal naval forces arrayed against each other, with hundreds of ships. As we read the play, I wanted to shoot a short film to make it easier to catch the words we said, the story we told. I called on David Mambouch. It's a montage of images either shot, created, or collected, without any actor. It follows Thucydides's narrative and lets the audience grasp a lot of small details. It allows us to reduce war to a more manageable scale. Very quickly, we also started working with models, with tiny objects and artefacts of theatre. We tried to show very large things through those very small objects. There was something playful about the way we worked on the show, as it depicted a bunch of children playing at war. It reminds us that we often behave like children when faced with History. We've developed methods to turn the world into a fiction, to prevent us from having to think about our own death, our own end, to the point that we've lost all sense of the catastrophe unfolding in front of us. Here, this playful and childlike approach is a way to force us to face reality by having it touch us directly.

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