



TERRITORIES TRILOGY

INTERVIEW WITH BAPTISTE AMANN

What place does the *Des Territoires* (Territories) trilogy have in your career as a playwright and director?

Baptiste Amann: My career in the theatre has been built around encounters, the most important of which was with my fellow students at the École régionale d'acteurs de Cannes-Marseille (Éracm). It is to those actors and actresses, some of whom still work with me to this day, that I owe my move towards writing: they allowed me to be an author. Yet the first few shows we did together weren't really focused on writing—quite the contrary. After graduating in 2007, we founded the Irmarr (Institut de recherches menant à rien, or “Pointless Research Institute”), with which we developed over the next seven years a process of experimentation throughout several shows with a very plastic, almost performative approach. But our research with the actor took place on such a level of non-fiction that it was difficult for there to remain a place for writing, which led to some frustration on my part. At the end of this long period, I wasn't satisfied: I wanted to talk about bigger things, and above all I needed to return to narrative forms. We'd done away with narratives almost entirely, yet I thought our work showed a giant contradiction: the more we tried to do away with fiction on the theatre stage, the more it resisted and exposed our approach as a sham. At that point, I wanted to build a grand epic, and I put forward to the same group of actors an idea that would directly contradict our previous approach. The *Des Territoires* trilogy was born of this movement: a first moment of performative research, then a desire to bring stories back into our dramatic space. I think I would never have allowed myself such a fictional, almost romantic, approach if we hadn't first spent so much time trying to explode fiction.

***Des Territoires* showcases a fiction made of endless layers, with several levels of reality superimposed on each other. How did this form come about?**

I wanted to start from something almost autobiographical, which touched me personally. I grew up in the Pont-des-deux-eaux, a residential neighbourhood in Avignon caught between two fantasies: the suburbs and the city centre. It's from this hyper-neutral territory that I was able to discover those two worlds and realise how little they met, how little connection they had. This personal realisation was also connected to a chronology of events over the past twenty years which seemed to augur the worst, shining a light on ever growing dissensions in society. Hence my desire to set the first part of the trilogy in a suburban house, like an observatory of disintegration. After their parents die, the brothers and sisters of the play have to choose between leaving or staying in that space which is at once their childhood neighbourhood and the cradle of their frustrations and wounds, a place which is falling apart and which they struggle more and more to understand. But I also wanted to give a larger dimension to that story. Ancient tragedy provides a fascinating model, with those spaces within spaces, like in the *Oresteia*, in which coexist the worlds of the palace, of the city of Argos and, lastly, of the gods who intervene in the actions of men—a mix of heavenly and political dimensions which I see as a sort of historic time. Just like the Greeks called on the gods, I decided to call on great figures of French History. The idea was to build a modern tragedy in a suburban living room, where family history and French History come to question this generation I belong to—this so-called disenchanting generation who, as the heir to a legacy without prestige, asks the question: can we still write History? Do we even want to? And if so, what exactly can we do? The tragedy of this trilogy resides precisely in the clash of so many timeframes. We can never focus on the tragedy striking this family, namely, the death of the parents: there are always interferences from the outside world and from history. But how can we live in a time of information overload and constant attention diffraction as we do now?

How do you tell those stories on the stage?

My approach of theatre comes first and foremost from my experience as an actor, and that's how I build the entire direction. Why want to tell a story? With the actors, we used the anti-fictional period that came before *Des Territoires* as a foundation. We are as much faced with a family trying to deal with issues of inheritance as with four actors dealing with a seven-hour show written over the course of seven years. It begins with the actors coming onstage; they look around, then start recreating what was happening when the story begins, which requires them to be in an almost instant relationship to fiction, but also to be able to step back from it just as easily. Which leads to an aesthetics of performance and a theatrical language unique to this trilogy: just like extras reconstructing a crime scene, we turn the stage into a space of reconstitution where we go through events again to try to make sense of them. This direction decision can be seen even in the scenography, which we completely redesigned for this version in which we'll be performing all three parts of the trilogy one after the other for the first time. We wanted that space to come together play after play, room after room, just like when you're trying to put a dream or a memory back together, starting with what looks at first like a suburban home under construction, forcing you to imagine the missing rooms, to end up with the hospital where the last part is set.

To be a revolutionary: why did you choose to tackle the question of political commitment in those terms, and through those specific characters?

The family circle contains within itself all the elements needed for a civil war. But I also wanted to explore those expiatory phenomena that are revolutions, this need to go through a period of head-chopping to create a curtain of blood we can never cross back. How would I react if I had to make that choice here and now? I went looking for historical figures who had firsthand experience of those events, with three iconic revolutions of the past three centuries: the French Revolution with Condorcet, the Paris Commune with Louise Michel, and the Algerian Revolution with Djamila Bouhired. It wasn't necessarily about choosing the most radical of revolutionaries: Condorcet rejected execution as expiatory sacrifice and chose moderation as a subversive action. But I had to find a counterpoint, as part of me thinks I'd be ready to take up arms if need be. Enter the Paris Commune. I let Louise Michel and Condorcet talk to each other in my head, to see what this confrontation would lead to. As for the last part of the trilogy, it seemed to me extremely important to have the Algerian Revolution as a French Revolution. With its principles of emancipation of peoples, of human rights, the end of colonisation seems to me the natural extension of 1789 and represents the most active revolution France has experienced in the 20th century. Through the figure of Djamila Bouhired, one of the Algiers bombers, we ask the question of the necessity of violence, echoing Danton's words: "Let us be terrible, so that the people will not have to be". FLN fighters, communards, 18th-century Montagnards: they're all connected. What revolution will the 21st century call for? That question was of course there when I started writing the trilogy; but this long process shook my certainties and in the end, nothing is so clear-cut for me. What fascinates me is the contradictions within us, how our ideological convictions can be shaken by a sudden tragedy. Yet there's one thing that cannot be destroyed—our capacity to imagine new worlds. Through this adventure, we were able to see the full power of fiction, its capacity to make us think about reality and to spur us to action. And maybe that's what being a revolutionary means today: to keep telling the stories we need to tell, to prevent our imagination from ever shrinking.

Interview conducted by Marie Lobrichon in January 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach