



THE LAST NIGHT OF THE WORLD

INTERVIEW WITH FABRICE MURGIA

Night has been the subject of many cinematic, literary, or plastic works. How did this collaboration with Laurent Gaudé come about, and what intentions did you share?

Fabrice Murgia: I usually work with a storyboard before creating the show on the stage with the actors, but it's the first time an author's given me a text. Our exchanges with Laurent Gaudé were very diverse in nature, which was made easier by the fact that we'd already worked together on an opera. There are a lot of mysterious questions within the concept of night. It's often a place of powerful intrigue, a great public plaza where people run into or past one another... In a word, it has a Venetian nature it shares with the stage! Something happens; but not everyone can see or know what... There's a sense of secrecy, like a mask, which is eminently theatrical. And of course, night is also the place of dreams. Because it is the source of many stories and myths, it has dizzying depths. We didn't intend to tackle all of it, but rather to explore what strikes us as artists.

With its narrative conceit—the invention of a pill that prevents sleep, leading to a “suppression” of night— isn't *The Last Night of the World* first and foremost a political play?

With Laurent Gaudé, we started with Jonathan Crary's essay *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*. For us poets, the night is a cherished space, but it's also more generally a place of resistance against the steamroller of capitalism as we know it. How frustrating it must be that the night can't produce and consume! What a shame not to be able to earn more profit from it! And while an aspect of neoliberalism wishes for this massive exploitation, don't we all sometimes think we would enjoy this extra third of our life if we could just stop sleeping? To stop resting to do more and meet more audiences: what a stimulating perspective... Jonathan Crary writes about the night as a natural cycle that has yet to be exploited. We sell love, friendship, hunger, thirst. But the night and sleep keep resisting...

Laurent Gaudé's play tackles this idea of the night turned into a source of profit. It becomes no more than a continuation of the day, which seems perfectly plausible in the near future...

We worked on a form of dystopia, a world where exists the possibility not to sleep, not to rest anymore. We use that as a springboard to talk about today's world, trying not to lose ourselves in an exclusively futuristic vision. We wanted to explore a space of freedom which turns into a space of danger as soon as mankind tries to make it disappear. To attack the night is to attack freedom. This reflection allows us to draw a parallel with the current state of our planet. We've entered the Anthropocene era, a world in which the actions of mankind have effects on the natural cycle of the planet, on Nature itself. The removal of sleep then becomes the starting point of this story, which is part flashback, part investigation.

You first devised a different working method with Laurent Gaudé, but were thwarted by another form of upheaval: the pandemic. Can you tell us how you wanted to work and how your thinking about the night was enriched and changed by this unprecedented state of the world?

At first, the writing process was supposed to mix documentary and writing. The idea was to confront ourselves to other cultures and to create a game with Laurent Gaudé: I'd start with an idea he'd come up with and would go meet people of all ages all over the world. Upon coming back, I would have given him my idea for how to structure the scenario. Then I would have left again for those same countries to shoot with local actors. Paradoxically, the pandemic became a global event, a “health” event, like our show—because taking away the night also has consequences for public health, and for the private lives of people. We had to change our writing process, to add more fiction, to contact people remotely...

***The Last Night of the World* follows several characters who all have specific reactions to the global decision to remove the night, to “privatise” it. There’s almost a logic to the rise of the irrational...**

Without wanting to say too much, we worked like scenario mechanics! It was very brutal, with a thinking process along the lines of, “No, this character needs to have a goal; No, this one needs to have something in his way!” We’d opened the hood of the car and were tinkering with the engine! I wanted a story... and I wanted to be in it! The pandemic made me want to see people, to meet the audience more, to spend time working with schools... There’s a strong tale dimension to the story, with fantastic and strange elements appearing in the final version. The man I play, Gabor, is an architect of this sleepless night, and he’s lost his wife Lou. But is she really gone? A child-oracle appears as he tries to get over his grief. We glued post-it notes to a wall to come up with characters, actions, locations, and to assemble and test them. We let go of a lot of things along the way, so that the audience wouldn’t be subjected to a show that would be half-theatre and half-film. That’s where our desire to create an original sound environment came from, this podcast aspect of theatre! This night is a story, as emotional as it is political; it is also an experience that calls on everything the stage has to offer.

The show is built a little like a series, with its many sequences, its narrative twists, and its many flashbacks...

Flashbacks and flashforwards allow us to play with the codes of the narrative. For the first part, we focused on the two weeks leading to that highly-anticipated last night, with the launch of the pill. The second part takes place over a timeless night. Then we have two parts of equal length, until the present of the stage catches up with the story in the last part. To sum it up: this back-and-forth with temporality is a way to heighten Gabor’s confusion, and ours as well. The narrative follows the temporality of an investigation, like that of a profiler! But it’s very serious, we’re gathering the pieces of a puzzle to fix a confused memory. The audience follows the investigation along with the main character, through a long narrated part which leads to an original sin: should I have left my wife in the hospital? What would have happened if I hadn’t left? Here lies the sin, sociologically-speaking: should I have invented this pill about to turn the world upside-down?

Your work as a director makes use of the many possibilities the stage provides, for instance with the use of video or of sound installations. To what did you pay particularly close attention?

To the quality of the here and now. Though I’m playing with different media, I try to put the emphasis on what’s happening live. I couldn’t imagine playing a video clip during the show and asking the actors to be quiet because the story’s continuing on the screen, especially since it means coming back to the stage afterwards! I pay very close attention to the connection with the audience, because of the many video and sound interruptions. When you have voices speaking a foreign language, it’s always dubbed by the actress onstage. A medium can’t ever be enough in and of itself. The medium’s not alive! The salvation of theatre resides in the preservation of a space that can come to an end at any moment. It’s essential in this show. The magic of theatre is to put the audience in front of a monologue, to have five hundred people hanging to the words of one. Those breaks in the rhythm between the systems of television and cinema on the one hand and theatre on the other are extremely exciting. Sound and image alike offer possibilities of immersion and create sensorial spaces. I’d like the many sensations offered by our work onstage to leave the spectator as tired as the main character, and wondering: is the character dreaming, or mad? Is he dying, or falling asleep? And there not to be an answer...

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