

SADNESSES

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Just as she's about to be named Prime Minister, Martha Heiger, the leader of the Popular Awakening Party, has to return to her native island, Tristesses, to bury her mother, found dead in puzzling circumstances. She finds her village ruined after the collapse of the Muspelheim abattoirs, and decides to use the situation to lay the foundations of a propaganda project. Meanwhile, far from the limelight, two teenage girls decide to take up arms... Inspired by the violent rise of various brands of nationalism in Europe, Anne-Cécile Vandalem's latest creation dissects with humour what she sees as one of the most formidable "weapons" of modern politics, the "saddening of peoples." How? By inextricably weaving together sadness and social comedy, politics and moral investigations, emotion and her own acts of resistance. Turning this fable into a Nordic thriller, animist and supernatural, the director brings together fiction and reality, the theatre and the cinema, the living and the dead. A thriller in which the past and the present collide, in which characters are caught in situations at once funny and cruel, in which the insidious power of the media reigns supreme. "One of the states of sadness."

ANNE-CÉCILE VANDALEM

After graduating from drama school, Anne-Cécile Vandalem began her career as an actress in various productions. From 2003 to 2007, she wrote and directed *Zai Zai Zai Zai* and *Hansel and Gretel* (with actor Jean-Benoît Ugeux). It was then that the young director, who lives and works in Brussels, laid the foundations of her research: fiction as a way to help people come out of their isolation, both literally and figuratively. Isolation is indeed a concept she likes to play with, redefining it thanks to technical scenic worlds that play with space and always add something of the supernatural to it, often inspired by cinema. From 2009 to 2014, heading her own projects within Das Fräuslein (Kompanie), she created her *Trilogy of Parentheses: (Self) Service, Habit(u)ation, and After the Walls (UTOPIA)*, as well as the play Michel Dupont. Since then, Anne-Cécile Vandalem has carried out more of her aesthetic, physical, visual, and textual investigations that play with reality: *What can I do for you?, Looking for Dystopia, and Still too sad to tell you.*

INTERVIEW WITH ANNE-CÉCILE VANDALEM

Without spoiling the plot, can you tell us a little about *Sadnesses*, which you decided to build like a thriller?

Anne-Cécile Vandalem: The story isn't based on actual events, but it was inspired by reality, with a story that looks a lot like a news item: two teenagers decide to kill the president of a populist party. How do they get hold of the weapons they use? Who helps them in their project? Was it the mother of that political leader who orchestrated the murder? From those questions, we built a plot. I chose to have the play begin with the discovery of the body of the mother just as the politician, who belongs to a far right party, is about to be named Prime Minister of Denmark. And so she has to come back to her native island, both for the funeral, but also to solve problems that have to do with the bankruptcy of the abattoirs her father owned. Years earlier, her father embezzled money from his company—which was once the economic heart of the region—to finance the party she inherited. The third reason for her return is that she's thinking of building a propaganda film studio on the island. The company's former accountant, who lived through all those events and is also a pastor, watches as the politician returns... All those characters are bound together by the same tragic knot: the economic and social collapse of the island, which lost most of its inhabitants after the abattoirs closed down. The father's embezzlement led to many lives being broken, it's the story of a sacrifice, a fertile ground for a state of civil war. It's one of the states of sadness.

Sadness, our relationship to power and to manipulation, and the “saddening of peoples” are topics that aren't often debated, except maybe by philosophy. What made you want to talk about them? What meaning do you give them?

One day, I asked myself: why wouldn't someone who knows he's going to die just grab a weapon and kill someone else before dying? I wondered how we can react when faced with a violent situation that's got us cornered. I'd read what Gilles Deleuze wrote about lines of sadness and lines of joy. For him, sadness is a result of the pressure of a body on another that finds that pressure unacceptable. It can be about a person, but also about a situation. Deleuze tells us that some sadnesses cannot be avoided, while others are caused. Sadnesses that hurt but which we continue to seek. It's a little like stubbornly diving into the sea over and over again when you don't know how to swim... Not being able to swim is alright, but if you're in a swimming pool, it becomes a problem... Even if it's possible to escape a situation of sadness, I chose to focus on characters who can't. Sadness is omnipresent here: in the relationships between people, in the relationship between those people and the power that sacrificed them for its own personal gain... Relationships become cruel and monstrous, people are caught in situations where they are powerless. Taken to the extreme, I think there's a sort of ultimate sadness: a sadness that subdues imagination, that colonises it.

Death and oblivion are also two key themes of this show, which is nonetheless very funny.

I see the world like an animist would. I believe in irrationality, in things you can't explain, or that you can only explain differently, by opening certain perspectives. Sadness arises from ultra-rationality, from the impossibility to give meaning to what is beyond the visible: a certain relationship to the past, to archaism. That's what the philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman talks about in *Survivance des Lucioles* (*Survival of the Fireflies*). We are also what goes through us, that can't be formalised, like the past, or desire. Here, I show it by trying to make things come back, to reactivate their symbolic dimension. We forget too easily, especially when it comes to History. Yet without History, we can't find our place in anything bigger than just what's going on right now. There's a sort of amnesia that immerses us in a form of sadness. But the play is funny because it is cruel, because it puts its characters in extreme situations. It's the engine behind the comedy in *Sadnesses*.

As its author and director, and an as actress, you play a key role in the conception of this show. How do you write? How do you work with your actors?

I like to play a part in every step of the construction of a show, including its production, but I don't work alone. I like every single stage, because they're all tied together. When I start working, I want to know what the backdrop of the action will be. When I write, it's with a certain idea of the rhythm of the show, because I need to take the music into account. Piece by piece, I imagine an object that will later be put to the test of reality to see how it works, how it resists. At the beginning of *Sadnesses*, I had a foundation, a scenario. To test it, to check if its structure was sound, I organised a first workshop in July 2014 with thirty actors. I split up our work into five chapters of two hours each, during which we improvised. I gave them new information about the story every time. Then I wrote the main events and twists of the plot, and I started coming up with more defined characters. One year later, in July 2015, for two weeks, I led another workshop with the actors who would work on the project, some of whom had also taken part in the previous workshop. And since there will be musicians on the stage during the show, it was important that they, too, work on the creation of the show during the rehearsals, just like the actors. That allowed me to further explore the relationship between music and the film image, which isn't the same as the relationship between music and the theatre. Then I started writing the dialogue. To be in the show is to me a question of pleasure, but also a way to direct it. I find it easier to convey a rhythm, a method, a relationship to performance if I'm onstage with the actors. Besides, even though it's more technical, I like to have the actors perform in the presence of children. It creates a very direct and concrete relationship to performance. You can't lie with children. They know why they're performing, and they give it their all. Their presence, their naïve and sometimes dangerous power, also tell us of a form of openness to the world.

Houses play a big part in this play. Can you tell us more about your love for scenography, for architecture?

I always come back to the house, the presence of an inside and an outside, and to food, too. Those are symbols of what brings people together and divides them that systematically appear in my plays. For *Sadnesses*, I wanted a village. In July 2014, my idea was simple: to figure this village through markings on the floor. But it didn't work, it was pretty limited, from a dramatic point of view. In July 2015, I tried working with structures, to create spaces, sometimes hidden ones, that could be filmed. It's as if the markings on the floor unfolded in 3D to allow for a certain permeability of those spaces. But that wasn't satisfactory, either, because it also lost all theatricality: the gaze of the spectator threatened to focus only on the screens and not on the stage. In the end, we created a village, a square with a church and three houses that remain closed, that we only get to visit thanks to the cameras. There are two spaces, one theatrical and the other cinematic, and movements from one to the other.

The actors are therefore the performers at once of a play and of a movie, edited and screened live on the stage. Where does this attraction towards cinema come from?

It's the first time I've formalised this relationship between theatre and cinema in a play, even though it's always been there. In the theatre, I like that things sometimes resist what you're asking of them. You have to find concrete means of directing. But I've always wanted to work in cinema, to be a film director. Little by little, I've given myself means to get there. In *Sadnesses*, our work with the actors is clearly organised according to camera axes, the idea being to edit live. The theatre allows us to show a place, to define the space of performance, and I then get to use all the possibilities of cinema to show what we're talking about on the stage.

AND...

WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Research and creation by the French National Research Agency with in particular Anne-Cécile Vandalem, July 8 at 9:30, cloître Saint-Louis

Writing and creation by women with in particular Anne-Cécile Vandalem

Organised by Alternatives théâtrales, July 11 at 15:00, Louis Pasteur campus of the University l'Université

TOUR DATES OF SADNESSES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- October 7 and 8, 2016 at l'Onde in Vélizy-Villacoublay
- October 13 and 14 at the Festival VIE in Modena (Italy)
- October 26 to 29 at the Theatre de Namur (Belgium)
- November 8 and 9 at the Volcan Scène nationale du Havre
- March 15 to 17, 2017 at the MC2: Grenoble Scène nationale
- March 21 to 22 at Bonlieu Scène nationale d'Annecy
- November 7 and 8 at the Maison de la Culture d'Amiens

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