



MAI, JUIN, JUILLET

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN SCHIARETTI

At the origin of *May, June, July* is a project on Jean-Louis Barrault. What is so interesting about this somewhat controversial actor of the history of French theatre?

Christian Schiaretti: It all began with a commission to Denis Guénoun for Jean-Louis Barrault's hundredth anniversary, for which I was part of the honour committee. It was more precisely the occupation of the Théâtre de l'Odéon which I found interesting, and the slogans that were written on the walls of its neighbourhood, like "No more Claudel." It's a slogan that particularly touched me because at the time I was president of the association for the creation of a cultural centre in Brangues and because I have directed several plays by Paul Claudel. The occupation of the Odéon seemed to me to be the sign of a very interesting split between a revolutionary movement on the one hand, and the blacklisting, on the other, of a poetry that, regardless of what one thinks of its politics, gave birth to some great works and to important dramatic theories. Jean-Louis Barrault's attitude under those circumstances is itself fascinating. In spite of his anxiety, he welcomed the occupiers and couldn't help but feel a certain sympathy for them. The same way he welcomed, in his den on the quai des Grands-Augustins, the surrealists, Antonin Artaud, Mouloudji, etc. Barrault lived in a sort of intellectual and poetic phalanstery. His perception of the youth of 1968 was coloured by this experience. But they saw him as a servant of the Gaullist State. This disagreement asks the question of the possible articulation of theatre and politics, of revolution and poetry. More generally, the place Barrault's been given in the pantheon of French theatre isn't always fair; it's probably a punishment for his eclecticism, and maybe for his independence. Vilar is the father of the Festival d'Avignon, Jouvett is a mythic figure, Vitez is an authority on theory and poetry; Barrault is none of those things.

How did this project then extend to the Villeurbanne meeting, and to the Festival d'Avignon, which took place in June and July of that same year?

In order to give the play a structure, Denis Guénoun first imagined an exchange of letters between Barrault and Vilar. He exaggerates the tension between the two men who become incarnations, for the former, of a theatre that would be the expression of a right-wing ideology, and for the latter, of a festival that would be the expression of a left-wing ideology. During the writing process, it soon became clear that the Villeurbanne meeting was a decisive moment. The actors of cultural decentralisation, the directors of *maisons de la culture* ("houses of culture") and of dramatic centres, met in Villeurbanne in June 1968, at the Théâtre de la Cité, directed by Roger Planchon. The question that brought them together is that of the occupation of the theatres, a fundamental issue: for some, theatres are like forums, places of dialogue that accompany a movement that may or may not end up being revolutionary. For others, they are but instruments that should be protected, the same way one would protect a cello. Those two positions are voiced respectively by Francis Jeanson, who thinks the tools of theatre should be made available to the revolutionaries, in order to produce a socially conscious theatre, and by Roger Planchon, who thinks they should remain exclusively in the hands of those who make theatre. I found this intrusion of the Villeurbanne meeting particularly interesting because, having succeeded Roger Planchon at the TNP, I'm a part—physically—of this history. This meeting is rich in meaning. It gives us everything we need to understand what is happening and what isn't happening in the field of French theatre today. Finally, July appeared like the obvious resolution of this cycle. Vilar writes to Barrault from his clinic, after the Festival, after a sort of symbolic death. That gave us everything we needed to build a play around those three months as well as a very nice title. Going beyond the initial commission, Denis Guénoun built a narrative arc that, for him and for me, isn't about dwelling on the past, about nostalgia for a heroic time, but the opportunity to teach something to the youth of today. I think that, on some level, he wrote that text for his daughter, and I directed it for my children. We both worked to clarify or enunciate the contradictory information we have about that eventful period. We've each brought our own answers. Denis sees the lack of a feminine presence as a crucial issue; my analysis of the situation revolves more around the question of the relationship between generations.

The question of the relationship between theatre as an institution and youth is central in *May, June, July*. How do you see those youths, ready to sacrifice this theatre you defend on the altar of revolution?

There's no judgment here, just an observation. And a real question as regards drama as an art form today. The deeply revolutionary and rebellious part of poetry is poetry itself, not necessarily its meaning. By only paying attention to meaning, you end up celebrating a mediocre poetry that does nothing but encourage mediocrity. I think it is greatness that is revolutionary. And greatness can only be conquered, by understanding first that thinking is an effort to make and not a source of fatigue, that language can be acquired and that it is a place of education, that the process of passing on one's knowledge is a slow one. That's revolutionary; the rest is nothing but demagoguery. The main creative principle of French theatre today is the idea of rupture, of a permanent renewal. Spontaneity is valued much

more highly than transmission. But I consider myself an apologist for transmission. It is based on a respect for youth, but also a respect for age. I think it's important to understand that when it comes to theatre, we don't grow old, we mature. In my shows, I try to always be in this kind of back-and-forth, to never give up on my responsibilities as a teacher. When you work with Laurent Terzieff or Serge Merlin, the problem isn't to know where you come from, but where you're going. Actors like them have years and years of experience... For *May, June, July*, this reflection on transmission was as important an issue as the play's central theme.

This desire to bring young actors and seasoned veterans together is a recurring theme of your plays. Would you say it's a method, or is it an answer to a necessity?

For this play, it was obvious that youth had to have a large presence on the stage. I talked with a lot of young people, most of them under the age of twenty-five, for whom our work together was an opportunity to think about drama as art and about the history of theatre as an institution. The cast features about fifty actors. Fifty people, that's how many you need to make the audience understand what the occupation of a building feels like. Standing in the middle of it are the play's heroes: Jean-Louis Barrault, played by Marcel Bozonnet, and Jean Vilar, by Robin Renucci, as well as their political counterparts, Charles de Gaulle and André Malraux, who introduce a reflection on a national scale. This is a process that has long structured my work, although it took me a long time to truly understand it. I taught for several years at the ENSATT; that's why I quickly hired young actors who'd just graduated from the school to create a troupe. The advantage of having a troupe of fifteen to twenty young people is that they're all so full of hope. I feel incredibly lucky to be working with people like Wladimir Yordanoff, Roland Bertin, Nada Strancar, or Hélène Vincent. There's no room here for the kind of ambition that can lead to bitterness, which means we're all very happy to be working together. I try to constantly bring young blood in, in the same spirit. We also worked with a number of part-time actors from the Rhône-Alpes region who work together year-round, which lets them develop their own identity as a group. My plays are therefore generally made up of three circles: the permanent troupe, the regular collaborators, and the illustrious guests, like Marcel Bozonnet and Robin Renucci. This is also my answer to the idea of emergence.

How did the transition from the text to the stage go?

We put the play together very quickly, in seven or eight days. We did a public reading for France Culture during the Festival d'Avignon in 2011. A few shows at the TNP followed. The reactions were very strong. We realised that we'd created a great political show. It felt like I was presenting a sequel to Michel Vinaver's *Overboard*, which I'd directed in 2008, a play about the changes the world of business went through after 1968. *May, June, July* is about the changes in the beliefs about theatre during the same period. Both are about France, the Republic, and Theatre.

This play is therefore an opportunity for you to share your vision of theatre, against a number of trends you decry?

There's no bitterness in the show, I'm not trying to settle scores, but to look at what's happened and what's happening. In Michel Vinaver's *Overboard*, we see a society in mutation, and the advent of advertisement. Advertising professionals take a poetic inspiration and make use of it. The concept of brainstorming reminds us of other poetic practices. Poetry and advertising are closer than we like to think, the latter is like a corrupted version of the former. It leads to this world we know all too well. A similar corruption threatens the world of theatre if we decide that a work's relevance is only tied to its meaning, if we disregard its poetic dimension. If you do that, of course, Paul Claudel becomes one of your first targets. But Paul Claudel's excess is more rebellious, more difficult to control than any specific meaning. The question of the public, of our legacy, is also at the heart of the play, of its reflection. The revolutionaries of 1968 considered that decentralisation had only led to a gentrification of the audience in the postwar years. The culture they were handed down encouraged them to accept consumerism, to turn away from insurrection. In order to reactivate the revolutionary potential of the theatre, they therefore tried to discard everything that could be considered a legacy. This idea has made its way to us. For instance, we've reached a level of suspicion for and ignorance of the repertoire that is almost without precedent. Language is no longer the basis of what we teach young actors, but just another subject. This new process could very well lead not to the advent of popular theatre, but to an aristocratic theatre and a new form of State sponsorship.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina.