



INTÉRIEUR

INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDE RÉGY

This is the first time you come back to a play you've directed before. Why did you accept to work with Japanese actors?

Claude Régy: It is indeed the first time, since I usually prefer to experiment with new texts. For *Interior*, things are a little different, since I was asked by Satoshi Miyagi, director of the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center in Japan, to direct it again with Japanese actors. I knew that Satoshi Miyagi's method was very different from mine. I also knew he'd seen several of my directions in France. I assumed it was that difference in our methods that interested him. However, even though I like experiments and adventures, I demanded to choose the actors myself, after a long casting based on the text of the play.

You say that Maurice Maeterlinck and Peter Handke, in the middle of the 1980s, were revelations for you. Did those encounters change the way you work?

Peter Handke defines his play *Walk About the Villages* as a "theatrical poem." I thought it was a glorious phrase. When I read *Interior*, around the same time, I thought it was a great example of theatrical poetry. Maurice Maeterlinck is a unique author, whom we lumped a little too easily together with the Symbolist movement when his approach to theatre was very personal and revolutionary. He's a pioneer who, before Antonin Artaud and Edward Gordon Craig, was the first to wage war against a demonstrative theatre dominated by "giant" actors, who were in contradiction with the particular demands of different authors.

You don't like labels, do you?

Not really... Labels are made to be taken off! We should look at the different paths of all those who find themselves, voluntarily or not, grouped together in a school of thought, in a movement. If we look for instance at the French "Nouveau Roman", we realise they have a lot in common with Maeterlinck's theatre—a rejection of the idea of character, of linear stories, of psychology. There's an interplay between movements and between writers that, even years apart, can lead to revolutions.

Why choose this play, in this context?

First of all because I'd already directed it in 1985, which was long enough ago to allow me to do something entirely different with it. It's a text that particularly moves me because of its theme, the death of a child, but also because of the opportunities it presents to dig deeper into my own work, my own research on the separation between voice and image, to satisfy my desire to reveal what is invisible, hiding between the words. It's a research that's existed in Japan at least since the 17th century as well, in *bunraku*, since you have reciters standing by the stage while puppeteers create images in the middle of it. I thought it would be interesting to bring together Maeterlinck, who called *Interior* a "puppet play," and Japanese actors, and try to make the latter act in a way that wouldn't be too "human," by which I mean not too lively, not too sentimental, not realistic in the slightest, not really active. I wanted their performances to rely on passivity in order to discover what appears through transparencies. If we also consider that another form of traditional Japanese theatre, *nô*, makes no clear distinction between the living and the dead—they even used to say that the actors entering the stage came from the realm of the dead—I had some very good reasons indeed to work on *Interior*.

The death of a little girl is at the heart of the play.

Yes, but what really matters is that part of the people on the stage know that she is dead, whereas her family, who is also there, doesn't know it yet. There is therefore a simultaneous presence of the conscious and the unconscious, a simultaneity which seems to me to be one of the bases of the work and thought of Sigmund Freud. What I was most interested in was the confrontation between a group of actors who talk, who discuss and tell what they see, and another group who live and move in total silence.

Maeterlinck says that what interests him most in this confrontation is the "premonition" of the accident, what we know without knowing it, a premonition that could exist in the closed world of the family. Something like a secret warning.

In the play's stage directions, Maeterlinck says that the family is inside a house and that we can see them through a window. Is that the setting you chose?

No. In this version of the show, the separation between the inside and the outside is only suggested by light. I thought that, since the text isn't realistic, we could push Maeterlinck's revolution a bit further by making the image unrealistic as well. A director should adapt a text according to his or her feeling for it, guided by his or her intuition. The text is always primordial for me.

How would you describe Maeterlinck's writing, this writing of silence?

His is a very musical writing, which makes the scores that have been imagined to accompany some of his texts often pleonastic. He isn't afraid to mix rhythms, sometimes using alexandrines, other times Shakespearean iambic pentameters. Mallarmé noted that in Maeterlinck's writing things aren't said, they're suggested. Some of the sentences are very mysterious, such as when a character says of the young girls standing next to him:

"You would say they were praying without knowing what they did.

You would say that they were listening to their souls."

Those are sentences that can be interpreted in many different ways, that can lead us to the world of dreams. Silence plays a central part in Maeterlinck's work. He says that two lovers don't know each other until they've been silent together. The poet Henri Meschonnic, who produced a new translation of the Bible, wrote that silence isn't "a pause" in language, it is "a category" of language.

Nathalie Sarraute said: "The purpose of words is to free a silent matter that is much bigger than words."

All that seems obvious to me.

We work on what is beyond words.

By working on rhythms, sounds, and silence, we hope to touch the audience in the same way music does.

Silence allows us to touch what is at the core of our being.

In this world of fury and incessant sounds, I believe it is now subversive to work on slowness and silence.

Aren't some of the actions very realistic, though?

Yes, but Maeterlinck makes sure that they don't conform to realist expectations. For instance, although we see the procession carrying the body of the young girl, we never see her body... It's a way to encourage the audience to use their imagination. There's no one true representation, the text only suggests, creates images that should allow the show to be built thanks to and within the imagination of the audience.

Maeterlinck came up with a phrase to describe his theatre: "the Tragic in daily life."

That's what fascinated Chekov when he read Maeterlinck. That means that, in order for there to be drama on the stage, there need not be swords or poison. Watching a quiet night during which nothing seems to be happening is enough. In *Interior*, Maeterlinck, talking about the members of the family who don't know yet that their daughter is dead, writes: "Whenever one of them rises, walks, or makes a gesture, his movements seem to be grave, slow, rare, and, as it were, spiritualised by the distance, the light, and the vague veil of the windows." The performances of the actors are defined exactly by the author. There's nothing to add. One just needs to make sure his instructions are followed. When Maeterlinck writes: "And if we are sometimes surprised, we should remember that our soul is often to our own eyes an incommensurable power and that there is in man places that are much more fertile, much deeper, and much more interesting than those of reason or intelligence," I couldn't agree more. It's what I've been defending in my work for years. It's why I was very taken by what Antonin Artaud wrote, he who was a great admirer of the "word" of Maeterlinck: "If we do theatre, it isn't to put up plays, but to make it so all that is dark in the mind, all that is buried and hidden, manifests itself in a sort of material and real projection."

The parallel between those two quotes is striking.

Two of the characters are called Martha and Mary, the names of Lazarus's sisters—Lazarus who, in the New Testament, is brought back to life by Jesus. Another is called The Stranger. Is that a coincidence?

Of course not. Maeterlinck wrote another text that revolves around Lazarus, and how this man who's brought back to life has to adapt back to everyday life. The first thing he asks for is a bowl of soup... But Maeterlinck also says that sometimes Lazarus will say something no one else understands.

It's as if Lazarus was experiencing two times at once: the present, and the time he spent wandering the realm of the dead.

As for the stranger, I'll go as far as to say that he's a stranger to everything. He belongs to our world, but perhaps also to another. He holds a knowledge to which we don't have access. He has a link to some secret universe.

It's him, the stranger, who found the body, who brought the drowned girl back on shore. He seems to have a sort of living relationship with death.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.

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