



# LA FAMILLE SCHROFFENSTEIN

## INTERVIEW WITH GIORGIO BARBERIO CORSETTI

**With the students of the ERAC, École Régionale d'Acteurs de Cannes (Regional School for Actors of Cannes), you are presenting a work that concludes the three years they spent at the school. It's also the result of a long work you did with them.**

Giorgio Barberio Corsetti: I worked with the same group during all three years they were at the school. We worked on Calderón's *Life is a Dream*, then on Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Calderón*. The following year we worked on *Genannt Gospodin* (Name: *Gospodin*), by the young German writer Philipp Löhle, and we'll conclude this year with Heinrich von Kleist's *The Schroffenstein Family*, which we'll present at the Festival d'Avignon. It's been a fascinating journey, as I've watched those actors and actresses grow. It's always possible to go a little bit further with them, to push them in different directions, and to finish this cycle with a work at once important and risky.

**This play, *The Schroffenstein Family*, is the first by Heinrich von Kleist, while *The Prince of Homburg* is his last.**

It's a play he wrote as a young man, which is why I chose it for those young students, who are just starting out. It's a very rich text that borrows from different genres, from tragedy to comic and ironic drama. In it you can already find everything that will make Kleist's poetic universe, and the growing paranoia between the two families at the heart of the play only adds to the comedy. For those young actors, it's an opportunity to play extreme characters and to work on a very large range of genres, from tragedy to farce. There's something terrible about the art of slander, and something funny about the misunderstandings that pepper the play. And, just like in *The Prince of Homburg*, someone faints! There's a little of Shakespeare, too, albeit in a different tonality.

**Did you feel an evolution in the writing between those two plays?**

There's a difference in the structure of the plays, in the way they're put together, in the way we move from one scene to the next, mostly because there is in the first one a Shakespearean influence that is absent from the other. Kleist's style is of course already present in *The Schroffenstein Family*, even though that play makes heavy use of a dark humour related to the stupidity of some of its characters. I've even heard that Kleist would laugh a lot when he read this play in public, although you would have to double check that. The key difference might reside in the role the audience plays. In *The Schroffenstein Family*, the audience watches as this terrible story unfolds, while in *The Prince of Homburg*, they are encouraged to experience the play with the characters, to be with the Prince, to be the Prince.

**The overall story is close to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.**

Yes, it's the story of two teenagers who fall in love when they shouldn't, because their families only think about killing each other. Which ends up happening... But behind this synopsis hide Kleist's secret impulses, which explode in different directions. The characters are finely drawn, they seem alive, but they escape their own reality. The freedom Kleist felt as he wrote can be felt in the freedom of the characters, who seem sometimes to escape his control. Kleist's writing seems tortured, the kind you do at night, on a corner of table lit by a single candle.

**There are in this play two generations who live together: the parents and the children. The students of the ERAC belong to the generation of the children. How do you think you're going to work on the generation of the parents?**

We'll have to come up with something on the stage, because it's hard to play "age." They'll have to play things a little differently, to give their performances a little more weight. Parents and children don't look at events the same way. That being said, being old in 1802 often meant only being on the wrong side of thirty-five... Since the students will play several different roles, as we'll have two different casts, they will all work on both "young" and "old" characters. This will necessarily create a sort of polyphony. Of course, we should keep in mind that there are more male characters than female ones in the play, as is so often the case... Girls will therefore have to play male roles. This will allow me to touch on some of the unresolved questions in the play and in Kleist's oeuvre as a whole. For instance, a girl will play the role of the bastard brother but without dressing up as a boy, and she will therefore be in love with another woman. There seems to be things left unsaid on this question of homosexuality, of gender, in Kleist's plays.

**Do you draw a link between your work on *The Schroffenstein Family* and on *The Prince of Homburg*?**



When Olivier Py asked me to direct *The Prince of Homburg*, we hadn't yet talked about the ERAC coming to Avignon. But when that came up, I of course had to choose another play by Kleist. I like to delve into an author's body of work, even if I'm just directing a tiny portion of it. Kleist is a writer for whom this concept of a *body* of work seems particularly

relevant; it's a body whose parts, even though they are very different from one another, are connected by hidden streams and canals. That's the case for his plays and his tales, but also for his letters, which as just as much a part of his writing as Kafka's are a part of his. For those two authors, writing of any kind is a way to try to decipher oneself and the world. I wanted the play to be a tool of learning for the students. Of course, the stakes aren't the same as for the play we'll perform in the Cour d'honneur. Here, the cast has already been chosen. Since our work has been divided into different stages, we have, since November, gone through the entirety of the text two or three times already, either playing or improvising. We needed to fix the text in our memories, to have a solid basis for future work. That way, when we start rehearsing, we'll be able to build on that basis. I want to keep this a workshop, to protect this freedom. I'm here at the service of those students and, to sum it up, I would say this is a show made by students for themselves, to allow them to work and to discover the energy and the joy one feels when going through an entire play through a character. That's also why we have a double casting: it allows us to perform the play twice with the same actors in different roles. It's twice as much work, but it's a great and beautiful journey for us.

### **Do you think it is important for you to pass on your skills and knowledge?**

I'm a nomad. I have a company in Italy, Fattore K, with whom I work regularly, but I also like to travel and discover things in other places. I like to work with the same actors whenever I can, but I don't have one theatre, one fixed location. Up until now the only workshops I'd headed only lasted for a short while, the goal being usually to pick young actors for my shows. This has been the first time I've been able to work regularly for three years with a group of students. It's been fascinating to watch them evolve. They're very young, they are eager for everything. You see them change and become more and more aware of what they can do. With them, I keep learning. I always accept those presents actors give me.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.

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