



I HAVE VERY FEW MEMORIES ANYWAY

INTERVIEW WITH ÉRIC LOUIS

From 1987 to 1989, you were one of the thirty-nine students of the very last class of the École de Chaillot, founded and directed by Antoine Vitez. What made you want to create a show based on this experience?

Éric Louis: Teaching was very important to Antoine Vitez. When he was named director of the Théâtre national de Chaillot, he very soon decided to put it at the heart of his project, with what would become the École de Chaillot, a precursor to the école nationale. A few years ago, the Association des amis d'Antoine Vitez contacted me and the other former students, to encourage us to produce performing arts shows that would keep the memory of his work alive. That's when I had the idea of interviewing my former schoolmates about their experience: how they'd first discovered the school, what they'd gone through there, their impressions, the encounters they'd made, Vitez himself... and today what they've kept of it, their memories. I quickly found myself with a formidable amount of often beautiful testimonies, a very rich material, and which above all provided a different point of view on Antoine Vitez's work. He is well-known for his theoretical thought, but here it was about a lived experience, something personal, intimate, which said a lot about the work of the actor and about theatre as a whole. I then had the idea of giving voice to those testimonies, by asking young people around the same age we were back then and going through the exact same situation we did. We started working with student-actors of the École régionale des acteurs de Cannes et Marseille (ERACM), approaching each interview like a dramatic text. It was immediately fruitful. Firstly because those young actors are completely able to identify with those words, as they're facing, thirty years later, the same issues we did; but also because through those voices, they can grasp Antoine Vitez's work and its relevance in a much more organic way. I then asked students from the École nationale supérieure des techniques du théâtre (Ensatt) to join us, with the idea of producing a show.

How did Antoine Vitez's teaching impact your career and that of the other students of his school?

The idea behind the show is to give about thirty different answers to that question! It's fascinating to see how we've all been impacted in very different ways. Sometimes our memories are similar, sometimes they're drastically different. For some, what struck them the most was Antoine Vitez's relationship to the text; for others, his perspective on actors; for yet others, what remains stuck in their memory is his physical presence. And all of that was what made the school. It's this wealth of sometimes contradictory memories that is the strength of this project. We'd be hard-pressed to define exactly the experience we shared, but thirty years later, we're all in agreement to say that nothing will ever equal what we lived at Chaillot. In his *Douze propositions pour une école (Twelve proposals for a school)*, Vitez writes "they will at the very least have met there." And indeed, if only for that, our experience at Chaillot was decisive for many of us, who continue working together to this day, still developing this idea of a collective. But we weren't aware of that back then. It was only much later, when we got to know the world of theatre that we realised we'd met in Antoine Vitez a real figure, a master who by his practice, his thought, his political and artistic commitment, dwarfed most of the others. We were all impacted by his personality, by the way he approached theatre, other people, the group, the world, politics. He also played a key role in helping us understand our relationship to our work as actors. Because to be an actor means experiencing moments of great happiness, but also of great difficulty; and to have experienced Vitez's challenging teaching and his idealism has helped us withstand moments of doubt and given us the strength to keep going. This very human dimension can be found in all of the interviews, it's an essential part of the show.

The project is largely based on the idea of recollection. How does the very material of the testimony shape the show, including in its form?

All the writing we've done is based on memory. And remembering is also telling stories about oneself; if this show says a lot of things about Antoine Vitez, it also has a lot to say about those who provided their recollections. Because the strength of that school resided in the personalities of its students—in their unique characters. Taken as a whole, their testimonies create a very rich, kaleidoscopic, and sometimes even contradictory portrait of Antoine Vitez. It's all those different voices I wanted people to hear through those of the young actors of the project, with as much respect as possible. I therefore tried to reproduce as much as I could the original way they'd been told to me, so that the audience could hear not only the meaning of the words, but also something akin to a sensation or emotion. We started with read-throughs. I asked the students to read the interviews without trying to act them out, while staying faithful not only to the content but also to the form itself: moments of hesitation, mistakes, backtracking, stuttering... I decided to keep this very specific form of the interview, with all its meandering, because that's where you can see thought as it is being built. So there was at first a lot of distance, and little by little, through the rhythm of the words, of the breaths, the young actors were able to let themselves embody those voices and own them. I thought it very important that people should be able to grow attached to those characters, not only because of what they say but also because of their personalities. I weaved the testimonies together so they don't just follow each other, to create a sort of circulation of meaning from one to the next depending on what's happening onstage at any given moment. All of that created a show which uses the real as its material, but which isn't a work of documentary: some people might be recognisable through their voices—you can play the game of trying to figure out who's who—but I also reweave some texts together, sometimes giving one character the words of several different people. My goal is sincerity, not reality.

2020 was the 30th anniversary of Antoine Vitez's death. Why do you think it's important to pass on this vision of theatre to young actors and to the audience of the Festival d'Avignon today?

It was important to work on this project with drama schools to show young people how Antoine Vitez worked. Not as an homage or reconstitution, but by showing how relevant, alive, and pertinent his thinking still is, about the place of art in society, the relationship between theatre and politics, the work of the actor... Some of the things he said or did changed the landscape of theatre, both on stages and in schools; some of his criticism remains as sharp as ever and should be reclaimed, in particular about the role of school in an actor's training, the necessity for it to be free and separate from the world to give the artistic gesture time to find its place. I'd like to help people discover Antoine Vitez in a different way, through the people who knew him and the impact he had on them. But this show isn't only about him. It's also about what a drama school is, what it feels like to be a young adult and to want to do art... that's where today's young actors can identify with what we're saying. Through the figure of Vitez we speak of theatre, of training, of building one's own character, of the passage of time, of what a group is; it's also about the other side of the job of the actor, the one you can't see, which is the source of so many fantasies. And we tackle all those questions as they are relevant today. In the end, what I'm most interested in is for this project to be about theatre: how can it draw young people in, change lives or careers—it's something that can be very beautiful, very moving. Because that school at Chaillot changed the lives of many people, mine included. And that's why I think it's both amazing and necessary that we be able to make people hear the power of this particular point of view at the Festival d'Avignon, the place of theatre *par excellence*.

Interview conducted by Marie Lobrichon in January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach