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ENTREVISTA AMB GUY CASSIERS *DE WELWILLENDEN (Les Benignes)*

What was it about *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell that made you choose to turn the novel into a play?

Since I became director of Toneelhuis in Antwerpen in 2006 I concentrated in my work on questions of power, politics and history. From *Mefisto forever* (about an actor in a fascist society) and *Atropa* (on the Trojan war) over Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to *Caligula* by Camus. In that sense *The Kindly Ones* is a logical choice. It is for me the culmination point of ten years of theatrical research into the relation between language, politics and power. The Holocaust is the moment in European history where this relationship reaches its most destructive and inhuman expression possible. Adapting *The Kindly Ones* I concentrated on the military story and left out the story about the incestuous love of Max Aue for his sister and about his possible involvement in the killing of his parents. It was the political story that interested me most.

What stood out for you in the creation process? What was it like working with Littell on the staging?

The novel has a very unusual and particular perspective. Stories about the Holocaust are mostly told from the perspective of the victims. Littell tells the story from the perspective of the perpetrators. His main character, Max Aue, is a highly ranked nazi officer and an active witness of the Holocaust. He is a cultivated and intelligent man who tries to understand what is happening. At the same time he is a monster. But he could not be a monster if he was not a human being. A animal can not be monstrous. Only human beings can be monsters. The monstrosity of a man shows in a paradoxical and negative way his being human. The word 'monster' is often used to exclude someone who did something terrible from the human race. It is a normal reaction of self protection: this person can not be a human being. But we can only try to understand something of this monstrosity if we accept it as a possibility of every human being. Literature and theatre gives us the means to explore this without harming ourselves or the others.

What was the collaboration between Tooneelgroep Amsterdam and Toneelhuis like?

For several seasons already Toneelhuis and Tooneelgroep Amsterdam are working together on one production a year, directed by either Ivo van Hove or by me. It makes sense because we are the two biggest theater companies in the Netherlands. It gives us the possibility to make productions with a large ensemble. We are going to continue this collaboration in the future. For me it is an opportunity to work with some of the finest actors on the dutchspeaking stage.

Political violence is a recurring theme in his work. Why is it necessary to bring the theme in *De Welwillenden* to the stage?

First let me make something clear. We are not reliving the thirties and forties at this moment. That is not what I want to tell with staging *The Kindly Ones*. The political, social and economical circumstances are very different now. But there is a lot to worry about these days. What I notice at this moment is a hardening of the discourse in Europa, especially the discourse on the refugees, but also on second and third generation migrants and on Muslims in general. Social media and political populism are changing our perception of reality because of their radical and extremist discourses. Things are said now about 'foreigners' that were impossible and not

accepted only a few years ago. A few weeks ago a young Belgian boy of Moroccan origin had a car accident in Morocco and died. On the social media some people in Belgium expressed their joy: one less! That is a terrible evolution. Luckily there was also a strong reaction against these racist remarks. But this is happening very frequently. Look at the recent discussion about the burqini. That is extremely worrying. Our humanity is at stake. On that level I do see historical parallels. The extermination of the Jews did not start overnight. It was prepared by years of verbal attacks and poisoning propaganda. If you keep on hearing again and again that someone else is a cockroach, you start believing it in the long run. That is the force of language. And that is why I think theatre still has a role to play: it exposes these linguistic mechanism of exclusion and violence.

I am worried about the growing lack of historical consciousness, especially among young people. There is so much information about everything, but we are more and more incapable of interpreting all this information. Because people feel overloaded by data, they reach out for simple stories to deal with a complex reality. If we built a wall than the migration problem will stop. If we get out of the eurozone than our economic problems are solved. If we become independent then we can take care of ourselves. And so on. I still hope that theatre can play a role in deconstructing these simple tales and offer a more mature vision of reality

What staging and language do you use in the staging to convey the story?

I concentrated a lot on modernist novels, novels written in the first half of the twentieth century. I made a cycle of performances based on *In search of time lost* by Proust and *The man without qualities* by Musil. I adapted also *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad), *Orlando* (Woolf) and *Under the Vulcano* (Lowry). All these novels raise the same question: what does it mean to say 'I' and to say 'world' or 'reality'? What do these words we so often use stand for? The modernist writers made clear that these words don't refer to fixed entities. They stand for somethings that is changing and transforming, multilayered and dynamic. In my performances I try to translate these layers into the confrontation between word and image, narrative and technology, live presence and projected images. I try to stimulate the senses of the spectators by not showing what is said and by saying what is not shown. The senses should be addressed by different kinds of information. It is up to every individual spectator to put the information together. I give them the colours, they have to make the painting. *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell deals in an extreme way with the falling apart of the idea of the individual, the world and the reality. After Auschwitz the meaning of these words has changed fundamentally. The whole discussion about the representation of the Holocaust is based on this. Are words or images strong enough to deal with it or not? A very difficult question. .