

Theatre as team sport

A conversation with Catherine Bourgeois

What exactly is collaborative writing? What was the creative process behind the score of *Dis merci*?

Collaborative writing is like a game of ping pong. I begin by finding a topic that intrigues me, and I do some research. Then I bring together actors and actresses who might have something to say on the subject. In the case of *Dis merci*, each member of the cast has experience with issues of mobility, displacement, migration. Then, I prepare a rough outline of the structure based on suggestions for improvisation, a questionnaire or an image. The performers respond, we film, we discuss, then the playwright I'm working with gives us her input. The designers join the team, and their views come into play. The process continues, right up to the point of contact with the audience at one or two workshops where audience feedback is collected to fine-tune the script. We continue alternating between writing and rehearsal hall, until at last we have a script, choreography and a structure ... we're ready for opening night!

You enjoy working with actors from all backgrounds, often with performers who live with a disability. What motivates you in this process?

I believe that the ideas and words that reach a certain level of public awareness are often very uniform, because they come from people who are not very diversified. The discourse lacks contrast, opposition, texture. I believe that many artists are sidelined because they don't fit into a certain mold called normality (whazzat?), despite the fact that they're super talented and have a lot to say and to offer.

***Dis merci* reflects a sophisticated aesthetic research: the beautiful tableau “Se fondre dans le décor” (“Blending into the background”), and the ballet for electric wheelchair. What were your sources of inspiration for the visual aspect of the show?**

I frequent galleries and contemporary art spaces. Because of my background in stage design, I believe that my way into theatre is not through the acting or the text, but rather through the images and tableaux that I can imagine. The wheelchair ballet is the first scene that came to me, before I had even assembled the team. I see the electric wheelchair as a metaphor for our comfort and our indifference to the suffering of others. Same thing for “Se fondre dans le décor”. For months, I tried to convey my vision of this scene to the actors, but without the sets and props, it was hard for them to grasp. People suggested several times that we cut this passage. Not me! What a relief when all the pieces came together and we heard the audience's laughter!

Interviewed by Amélie Dumoulin