

Entomological Notes on Avignon Theatre Festival

Natalia ISAEVA

Two years ago a new team came to operate and lead the Avignon theatre festival. Before there was a single director (most recently Bernard Faivre d'Arcier) who determined the policy, the artists invited, as well as the artistic goals pursued. Now everything has changed: there are two young and ambitious directors: Vincent Baudriller and Hortense Archambaud. But apart from them, every season an associate artist is invited, a theatre personality who is called on to stamp the festival with their own presence, with their own vision of the things to come. Instead of the brilliant parade of theatre achievements, instead of the preview of well-publicized (and well-received) theatre shows, we are dealing now with a much more dangerous and insecure phenomenon. Of course, the Avignon festival was always known for its pedagogical and educational striving (something that lingers on since the times of Jean Vilar), but gradually it has seemed to have lost its experimental spirit, has stopped to astonish, and has stopped to torture its public with questions and doubts. Someone of a mischievous bent would say: the festival has become primarily a publicity show, a viewing stage for future European tours. A serious scholar like Georges Banu would bitterly note: it's the risk button that got so rusty with time that at some point it stuck completely ...

Anyway, we are now dealing with a new team (one is tempted to say a new troupe, since the directors participate fully in that artistic effort, artistic striving, as if our young directors themselves practice some newly found 'art of composition', a kind of 'meta-theatre-directing', a staging of a concept). In accordance with the three-year contract with the Ministry of Culture the directors got that necessary freedom to try out something different, to turn the whole heavy mechanism of the festival towards some new direction – and at the same time to bring back the audience (mind you, the audience of a totally different kind – not the kindly-minded bourgeois spectators who prefer to frequent the paths well-beaten by public opinion and press, but rather the students, the lefties, the young and insolent artists – the only milieu capable of nurturing creation). It's difficult for me to say whether it was a conscious calculation on their part to change so drastically the relations with the mass media; however, it's a fact that now instead of the usual high-brow reviews in intellectual magazines the information about the festival is inevitably imparted in that electrically charged field of the perpetual scandal, of anticipating and relishing the sensation – that is, it has a character of real 'news'.

The very idea of an associate artist ... Someone who assumes and shares the risk of piloting the programme of the festival, someone who is called for to leave the trace of their own personality, their own subjective tastes on the whole pattern of the festival season. Now we would no longer be lost in doubts: when exactly, in what season did we have this or that in Avignon? We can recall easily: that was in the 'German' year, or in the 'Dance' year. The 58th season was conceived under the

sign of German-speaking culture – the associate artist was the director of the Berlin ‘Shaubühne’, Thomas Ostermeier, and in July of 2004 the heart of France was given over to his brutal and socially-oriented theatre (as an associate artist he presented four of his own shows), to the sentimental and awkwardly musical Marthaler and to the tangibly ethereal dancer Sacha Waltz. However, all those artists enjoy a well-established reputation; the *fronde* of that season consisted in trying out in all sincerity the foreign taste of world culture. During the season of 2005 the change of orientation seems to be much more radical.

In July of 2005, the 59th Avignon season, the associate artist is a Belgian, Jan Fabre. And one should note – not a Belgian from Brussels, yet another leaf on a francophone branch of European culture. A brusque, bearish Flandrian from Antwerp who brought with him a whole team of young compatriots, formed mainly in the sphere of visual arts, dance and plastic performance. A group that finds its roots in the creative effort of the writer and actor Jan Decorte who composed numerous baroque and avant-garde texts, who worked on rock and theatre performances, as well as in the theatre of movement. Just a little digression – I am not really sure, but I think everyone of us had this book in their childhood: a huge volume with quasi-scientific, detailed pictures of insects by a respected French entomologist Fabre (I might be mistaken, but I think he was even born in Avignon), and the book is entitled *Le monde merveilleux des insectes* – something like that – dealing with all their strange habits, with all their mating rites and military patterns. Adult insects, with their dried-up, moving members – the antennae, the claws, the hollow spines of grass, the flustering bony joints, and, simultaneously, the moist larvae, that wet secret jealously guarded under earth – one takes the eighth turning to the left, the sixth tunnel down where the queen reigns, where the loins bear fruit, where all the honey is squeezed – the humid quarters of the progeny. Born as something wet and defenceless – until they, in their turn, would cover themselves up by that amour of spikes, until they would dry up from within and crawl out to the surface to be revealed in all their dried, glassy glory – those strong and magnificent tiny monsters, ready for any battle.

And Jan Fabre, who is not yet 50, through his mother is a direct descendant, a great-grandson of that Jean-Henri Fabre who elaborated exquisite glass boxes and traps, who caught grasshoppers and beetles, who observed their habits and movements – and took notes, took notes ... Jan Fabre for Europe is essentially a scandalous figure, even though he prefers to insist on a quasi-scientific interest that prompts him to go on with his experiments, pushing at the limits, going for the extreme. And as for insects – they were well presented during Fabre’s exhibition ‘Le for intérieur’ (‘The interior space’) that was held in the space of Jean Vilar – the main exhibition hall of the festival. Hundreds and hundreds of beetles (mostly Egyptian scarab beetles) in their shiny black and green carapaces, organized in armies, prepared to fight on the wax plates representing the hills and the valleys. A precise military scheme of the Waterloo battle – but instead of tin soldiers we are dealing with armies of beetles organized in military order, attacking each other with the same relentless discipline, with the same automatism of any given war machinery. Baroque Archimboldo (salutations to Hortense Archimbaud – I start to have serious doubts – it might have been her distant Italian ancestor!) who composed human portraits of luxurious fruits and vegetables, partly in order to

emphasize the incredible forms and colours, the ingenuity of the Creator, but partly, too, to make us feel that moist slackness, that perishing, transient character of any flesh, its readiness to rot through under the merciless sun. Here, with Fabre, we find portraits and objects (frightening ones, like the scull munching a bird, a squirrel, a tiny living creature) composed of shiny little insects: the surface of the image falling apart into a multitude of precious stones. And self-portraits of the artist, his wax effigies: Fabre, sitting at the desk, Fabre, already hanging from a noose; the shapes are hyper-real – and at the same time completely covered with tiny golden disks like cabaret costumes, even though each and every little scale is attached to the body with a needle – the whole surface resembles a bizarre metallic fur on the body (a paraphrase of some Voodoo rite with lots of needles stuck into a wax doll, or rather, Saint Sebastian pierced by the multitude of arrows, a butterfly pinned down to the entomologist's plate). And a little to the side we find video installations: a short film on Lancelot, where Fabre himself, sweating and exhausted in his heavy mediaeval armour, slashes the air with his sword – there is no dragon, no Saracen warrior, no Grail, just that supreme effort, futile, mechanical, rhyming with itself, translating that ultimate Oriental martial form, melting down and being smudged from innumerable repetitions.

Everything was already opened and announced here, during the exhibition which was presented to the public a month before the festival. A visual, highly expressive picture with a bridge linking the effects to the frightening tactility of the three-dimensional form (Fabre was educated primarily as a painter and sculptor – he graduated from the Royal Academy of fine arts of Antwerp); a studied military discipline of a dance, of a martial arts exercise that provides islands of structure inside total spontaneity and flowing liberty of actions (Fabre is first and foremost a well-known choreographer, a director of moving gestures and forms); rigid metal constructions, brilliant coldness of polished glass – and life that flows inside those set constructions, life that is recognizable primarily owing to its capacity to fluidly seep and melt away (Fabre – philosopher and writer – for a quarter of the century is toying with his own favourite idea, opposing liquid, moist living essence to a dry, dead structure). Already in the spring of 2005 a Parisian *Théâtre de la Ville* invited Fabre to show one of the parts of his last trilogy, entitled 'The Crying Body', more or less as an avant-premiere of his Avignon shows. Everything finished with a huge scandal. The dancers from Fabre's company 'Troubleyn' performed their exquisite tricks, free, acrobatic, and fully professional; but the same dancers actually masturbated around the strip-tease poles – and actually pissed on the stage. Now quite a lot of Fabre's critics remember that risky image of 'women-sources', 'women-fountains'. Newspapers have virtually torn him apart; the scandal rebounded in the Belgian parliament, with the outcry of the right-wing parties.

And now – 'Histoire des larmes' ('History of tears') as the main cultural event of Avignon, as the visiting card of the Festival itself, as the last show of the famous trilogy already known to the European spectator. Tears as a secret liquid produced by our body – literally, a part of that secret whose laws remain unrevealed, whose functioning is not totally controllable. On the one hand, we have that body of ours as a solid, secure shell which is polished by years of fitness exercises, cosmetic potions, esthetic surgery; we have that body that is ever urged to stay young and healthy, the body which is dressed in its chitin cover of conventions, social habits

and business obligations. It is hard and almost unbreakable; in its ideal it is ever perfect, even more than that – it can be irresistibly attractive or dangerous. Meanwhile – and everyone knows that, so to speak, from the inside – deep down in that cover or vessel the real element of life is secretly harboured, that liquid, palpitating substance, that moisture, that gentleness and weakness hidden from the jealous eye. And that body of ours is initially constructed in such an embarrassing way that its tiny channels and pores, all the cracks on its shiny surface from time to time start to squeeze out, start to spurt little fountains of liquid. As soon as the control slackens, in the moments of extreme passion or utmost weakness, our poor body starts to melt away, pouring out its ‘blood, sweat, and tears’, as well as its urine and sperm.

In the spacious inner yard of Palais des Papes, in the Avignon’s Cour d’honneur, among huge glass vessels and contraptions of an alchemist’s laboratory, we are watching the story of that crying human body, sobbing in convulsions. The show starts with the cries of newly born babies: the actors are lying on big white pillows; they throw their legs into air, they scream, complain, and demand attention. Cries are only hushed when they are in turn taken off of the pillows (adult body in the arms of another adult body, nursed and swayed in the air); however, as soon as they are brought back, the howling starts again. Apart from the dancers we have three drama actors on stage: ‘The Knight of Despair’, prepared to defend his favourite idea with a sword, ‘Diogenes the Dog’, a cynical philosopher still searching for a man, and, finally, ‘The Rock’ (Niobe, crying buckets of tears for her killed children, turned into a rock, but ever presenting the eternal vision of feminine compassion). Frankly speaking, the text of the drama, mainly delivered by the Knight, is the least convincing part of all that performance (‘Life is comic for someone who reflects, and tragic for someone who experiences it.’ ‘We are all knights of despair since we are alive.’). But all those romantic and rather childish passages are left as dried up cakes of solid matter inside the wet element of the apparent chaos of actions. The narrative is reduced to the minimum; neither it nor a purely visual image determines the show – rather, it completely depends on the physical and energetic presence of the dancers. Spread all over the stage, they create rhythmically organized moving patterns; they all go through similar experiences – but someone is the first to start, and now, as if electrically connected, they all seem to take turns and undergo similar actions. A cry, a sudden spasm, an awkward collision of bodies – sideways or from the back. The babies are finally squashed by the same pillows (and the monstrous scene is repeated over and over again in different parts of the space), the sweat and the sperm are carefully gathered in glass vessels, but the ultimate storm of tears comes only at the end, beyond human story itself, beyond human existence. From above, suddenly bursting and pouring down in torrents, the real shower comes: that rain that the characters had been praying for, the ultimate tears of transcendence and compassion, the waterfall of eternity that is pre-sensed, pre-minted in our own pitiful crying.

In a day after the ‘History of tears’ the Cour d’honneur was prepared to receive yet another production of Fabre (a show that ended with a flop in 2001, but was courageously repeated again, this time greeted with applause, shouts of admiration or sudden derisive laughter). Fabre defined the genre of his show ‘Je suis sang’ as a ‘mediaeval fairy tale’; as for the title, it can be approximately translated as ‘I am

blood', or 'I sweat blood', or else (taking into account the meaning of the French word 'sangsue') as 'I am sucking blood'. The Flemish text was translated into French for the previous premiere, but the show includes the fragments in mediaeval Latin, taken from the stories of Hildegard von Bingen.

Again we see about two dozens dancers arranged into a curious pattern on the stage; mass scenes following the images of Bosch or Breughel the Elder, mass action as a paraphrase or geometrical scheme of the human condition. Fabre's set design accentuates knight armours and huge double-handed swords, as well as grey steel tables moved in space as some indispensable butcher's or surgical equipment. Virginal brides in their long white gowns joyfully whisk up their skirts to boast of bloodstained panties. Men that are repeatedly castrated during copulation demonstrate to us the cut and torn pieces of flesh. Androgynous, skinny figures in hooded coats violently masturbate, touching and pressing various parts of their bodies, falling into frightening mechanic ecstasy from the sight of blood rivers flowing everywhere. And the final image – unforgettable – when the immobile human bodies in bloody clothes are laying everywhere as huge insects pinned down by the swords. The metal constructions are finally turned on the side, the table tops create the single grey barrier that diagonally cuts the space, while naked men and women jump from them, or slide down, or flow down onto the floor, as if their very bones – the last bastion of rigid structure in our being – are liquified. Only the steel remains rigid – every other form of existence has already turned back into its initial wet mass.

Fabre presented several smaller shows, and the works of other artists, invited to the Festival, were mostly related to his own vision of art. Michael Laub presented an anthology of a celebrated master of living performance, Marina Abramovic's 'Biography Remix'; and one can remember that somewhat earlier, before the Festival, Fabre and Abramovic staged a performance 'Warrior/Virgin – Virgin/Warrior' in Paris, at the Palais de Tokyo (two enormous insects – a male and a female – two mediaeval knights in iron armour engaged in endless fights/courtships behind the glass cover). From the Flemish team one would mostly remember Wim Vandekeybus with his show 'Puur' ('Pure'). Vandekeybus was among the most gifted dancers in the 'Troubleyn' group, it was for him that several years ago Fabre created a one-man show 'My body, my gentle body, tell me...' (At that time, in 1997, Fabre introduced a video screen with a condensed version of the movements performed by the dancer, so that the whole action was developing as the series of reflections and counterpoints of the same gestures.) Vandekeybus uses a similar trick for his own show at Avignon: in one of the most prestigious spaces of the Festival, at Carrière de Boulbon (the place of the legendary 'Mahabharata' of Peter Brook – deserted stone mines where natural landscape produces fantastic new visions) he projects his video right onto the surface of the rock. Again, it's all about memory – memory that exists deep down, recorded in our irrational sensibilities (presenting a paradoxical rhyme to one of his previous works 'What the body doesn't remember' (1987), wholly based on spontaneous, instinct urges and unmotivated strivings of the body). As Vandekeybus likes to specify, our life resembles a patchwork cover sawn from the bits and pieces of pain and subdued memories: we would not be able to exist without pushing those memories back into the dusty closet of our subconscious mind. There are ways and

means to bring back those memories but they no longer belong to the verbal, rational wisdom. 'Puur' as a spiritual, almost sacral purity, as a cutting-away of all the superficial contacts and stimuli, but also as the sterile purity of a surgical ward or a gas chamber, the purity of specially chosen souvenirs. The group of dancers 'Ultima Vez' recreates the Biblical story of the slaying of the Innocents: in some isolated society, trying to save itself from the imminent catastrophe, first all the children are killed, then, eventually, all other citizens. The execution that was performed by the people themselves is presented by the video image, while the stage is filled with those creatures – they already perished a long time ago but cannot realize that; they know something horrible has happened, but what exactly no one seems to remember. As if circling the Limbos, the souls and dead bodies are wandering along the banks of the Leta river. Suddenly – a gesture, a glance towards the images from the past – a sign that forces them to remember. And the rhythm of movements changes, it becomes more torn and chaotic, we are physically aware of that cold horror in the belly, that bodily panic they had experienced before. The bodies start to collide with each other, jump on each other, suddenly, without preparation, sideways, frightening interruptions of the previous monotonous rituals of sightless meetings. The murderers and the murdered – those chickens still running on with severed heads – are trying to remember, to keep count, if it's ever possible – to forgive. But all is in vain: in that blinding light of eternity one has got no real memory left – apart from some convulsive gestures, slivers of former dreams and images, apart from futile attempts to recognize one's own face in the mirror. What strikes is not just the sheer professionalism of dancers, rather, one is shaken by their courage, their readiness to write the story with their own bodies, to expose that body so absolutely – up to the last spasm of fear, up to the ultimate border of shame. From that point of view Vandekeybus echoes Fabre and Marina Abramovic, insisting that a living action (even though he prefers to talk about the 'process' rather than about the 'risk') becomes meaningful for the witnesses only if it is capable of taking even its performer unawares.

That totally different concept of the process drastically separates the new theatre from the shows that were mostly predominant in France for the last dozen of years. Olivier Py, undoubtedly the most prominent representative of a 'university', or 'verbal' theatre came to this edition of the Festival with his trilogy 'The Conquerors' ('Les Vainqueurs'); all in all the performance takes eight hours but Py has got his own faithful following of fans, some of whom came to see the integral version for the second or the third time. That kind of literary theatre activity, mostly gathered around the Parisian 'Théâtre Ouvert', for quite a long time remained a favourite toy for the university intellectuals who operated mainly on a DIY basis – writing innumerable plays, staging them, playing in them, providing set design and afterwards writing critical reviews for the national press. All those quasi-poetical texts are absolutely undistinguishable, a sort of a pointless 'Glassperlen Spiel', an intellectual exercise on the themes of human loneliness, estrangement, solitude of an artist; they are ever reshuffling characters and images, adding erudite allusions and exotic references. All of them exist more or less as texts to be recited, the texts meant to be accompanied with more or less imaginative illustrations, a sort of a highbrow slideshow. There is an illusion of many fabular turns, however, in truth, nothing ever happens, nothing ever changes, since the characters continue to tell each other endless stories, anecdotes or legends from their past lives. For me

that kind of 'inspired declamation' always seemed a blind alley, a clear dead end for French theatre, something essentially provincial and pathetic in spite of all the intellectual effort involved.

And yet another name well known in Avignon: Romeo Castellucci, who, together with his sister Claudia and his wife Chiara Guidi, directs the group 'Societas Raffaello Sanzio' based in the small Italian town of Cesena. For several years they have been engaged in an ambitious project called 'Tragedia Endogonia' ('The Tragedy of Parthenogenesis', that is, the tragedy of virgin matter giving birth without any involvement of a Creator). The project involved eleven shows (or 'stopovers') in ten different European cities. It was started and came to an end in Cesena and passed through several capitals and cultural centres, each time being inspired by the 'genius loci' – that spirit of intensive inner life which responds to touches and sounds, to historical memories; according to the initial idea, 'idioma, clima, crono' ('language, climate, time') are brought into collision with those theatre newcomers, each time producing some unpredictable spark of meaning. The first performance in Avignon (A #2 in 2002) was created specially for that place, but this time Castellucci suggested a kind of paraphrase on the themes of two following numbers: B #3 (Berlin) and BR #4 (Brussels). The work of Castellucci presented in an Italian box, that is, on a traditional stage, is something difficult to envisage; normally he constructs his pavilions especially for his shows, since for him spatial dimensions are extremely important for the general impression. But even here – as soon as you enter into the theatre hall, your heart misses a beat; there is already someone sitting in every seat – a huge black rabbit, and their ears are sticking out everywhere. At first you regard it rather like a game, but later, when the guardians begin to take them away to make room for the spectators and the rabbits' helpless bodies are piled up and carted away, the perception changes. After all, Eimuntas Necrosius in his *Cherry Orchard* presented all the characters – including Lopakhin and Petya – as poor little rabbits targeted by some strange hunter. You immediately recognize Berlin, that sick and infected city, the city which is still obsessed with its past and where it's so good to make art.

Since, according to Castellucci, the real penetration into the meaning is anyway impossible, he usually introduces some kind of obstacle between the spectator and the action on the stage (in Strasburg it was tinted glass, in Rome – plexiglas, in Marseilles – Venetian blinds). Here we are watching the show through several layers of tulle; whenever the actors come closer, the curtain seems to become almost transparent, and as soon as they move away, everything drifts into a fog – a fog of indistinct memory? Shame? Criminal past? Behind the curtain we can see a white bed looming in the centre of the room. A story of a mother and a murdered child; then – yet another murder, and now it's the woman herself who is dragging the corpse of her lover (or her rapist) by the feet. The fascist salutes, fascist marches ... the death of the woman, subdued, timid as ever ... Hebrew inscriptions that slowly develop on the surface of the tulle curtain – together with stains of blood. And finally, in the last scene, somewhere at the cemetery, a group of huge white bears lively discussing something among the tombstones. Actually, it's not for the first time that Castellucci turns to the theme of fascism: in 2000 he had already staged a show dealing with Auschwitz as the second part of his 'Genesi'. We do not see any signs of a concentration camp – just a quiet room where some very quiet children

are playing out 'Alice in Wonderland', playing the tale and quietly waiting for the coming of the guardians, quietly waiting to be tortured and killed. And above it all – the voice reading out the text of Antonin Artaud: 'I have gone mad, I am delirious? No, I am not delirious...' One might remember the words from the latest book of Castellucci Pilgrims of matter: 'Day after day – Artaud, my Artaud ('my' not because he belongs to me, but my Artaud since I cannot write otherwise) skins himself alive in order to get to the same phrase: theatre is a continuous generation of a creative act.'

And with it we approach at last that key name which means a lot for the whole of the 59th Festival. Coming back to Artaud – a new return, a new attempt, a new beginning. An ultimate realization that drama action cannot be presented as a beautiful recitation accompanied by spectacular images. The function of the text changes – along with the use of bodily, sensual energy. To put it crudely, what becomes essential on the stage is the presence of some bodily and spiritual substance which is in the state of utmost tension, inner burning, extreme experience. For me that is the only explanation why the shows now include elements and gestures that would have been unimaginable before (after all, Latin 'ob-scaeno' – 'indecent', 'obscene' – literally means something that cannot be presented on the stage and should be left beyond it), otherwise all elaborate reflections on 'taking risks' or 'ultimate transgression' are bound to stay practically meaningless, at most, a plausible covering a bit of well-calculated and already commercialized *épatage*.

However, to my mind, we cannot regard it as yet another step forward for the avant-garde, whose main function is to conquer new grounds, be it indecent vocabulary, extreme violence or obscene gestures, thus finding new material for art, taming and processing those new spheres with instruments of culture. Artaud's 'théâtre de cruauté', – oh yes, but not because the artists have now dared to introduce those new, 'cruel' themes. After all, a real artist is first and foremost cruel and pitiless to himself – according to Artaud, it means that he is prepared to really live through the extreme degree of passion right in front of the spectators. I find it rather simplistic and naive to assume that someone like Fabre uses violence in homoeopathic doses in order to treat it, in order to alleviate psychological tensions in real life. That would only mean that theatre assumes the functions of a psychoanalyst and psychiatry, not only offering distraction, but acting as a teacher, a pedagogue, as well as the handy means of personal hygiene. All these elaborate critical discussions about the Greek term 'pharmakon' that could mean both poison and medicine (cf. Hans-Thies Lehman, *Le Théâtre postdramatique*, Paris, 2002) seem to be rather missing the point. After all, if one ever takes a knife, surely, it is to cut – not just to draw a little blood but to accomplish a profound opening in the very tissue of being – something that Heidegger would have called a 'Riß', a 'tear' through which the light of transcendence can shine. And what is there, inside? What is hiding behind the layers of vulnerable flesh or fragile emotions? Well, according to Castellucci – a kind of 'emptiness', at par with the Buddhist 'shunya', even though in traditional philosophical systems one would be tempted to talk of the special place where the pure spirit reigns. Castellucci did not hesitate to use the image of Christ in his performances; however, for him religion is essentially dead, possibly being replaced by art (and that seems to be the main function of his theatre experience that still goes on in the austere, quasi-monastery surroundings of

Cesena). Jan Fabre pretty much shares the same view, even though personally he seems to be more receptive to Christian images and notions; in general, one would say that Western people are frightened and disturbed by the mere idea of a subversive Christian concept clandestinely crawling into their ideological constructions. What is not entirely realized is something quite simple, indeed: the profound difference between Christianity and other religions does not consist in its level of abstraction or spirituality. The most wonderful, the most splendid difference between them is Christianity's deeply ingrained interest in matter, primarily – its interest in the human body with all its secret suffering. After all, even in eternity we are not supposed to be transformed into pure unmitigated light, into pure unblemished spirit. Oh no; it is this body, dirty and shameful, which is to rise, this very living matter that continues to flow, continues to seep liquid in an amorous union, in all its awkward natural functions, finally – inside that earth, putrefying and melting away in its last abode. The suffering body is as dear to the Saviour as our soul, cherished and pitied as a sick puppy, as a lame fledgling, as a moist little fish – after all, it is this body that is supposed to be resuscitated in the final effort of immortality, since the Saviour himself had once been laid down in the same black hole which means the end of the road for us all.

When I look at Avignon shows, when I discern again and again the same interest taken in the torturing of the body, in its naked and shameful existence in full view of spectators or witnesses, it becomes increasingly evident to me that we are dealing here with a curious travesty of the sacred Passions. What looms behind all that is not just suffering or humiliation, but, primarily, the true passion as the supreme effort of our body and our psychical life, presented in their utmost striving to become a facet, an aspect of spiritual entity ultimately fit for eternity. And that for me is a profoundly Christian notion, not yet articulated, not even properly understood or reflected – existing more like a strangely tangible, almost visceral image. The image that stays. One can talk about the 'clash of civilizations', but in order to be able to engage at least in a proper 'dialogue' one should first and foremost become aware of one's own arguments. Avignon – as a place of trial and error, as an experimental stage for something not yet entirely clear to Western mentality. Avignon – as a point of reference for living arts, and, simultaneously, a point of return to intrinsic values, that are grounded in us so deeply as to become almost obscure and unreadable. Whenever anything comes back, it returns first as a striking, cutting image, to become a thought, a notion and an ideology much later.

This year in July the associate artist for Avignon will be Josef Nagy, who says: 'After twenty years of artistic creation... I close down books. My main concern now is to practically grasp a different side of matter; to my mind, it should be akin to the play of Jazz musicians who approach matter on a higher level – when we, as creators are already engrossed in it but before it opens up to the glance from the outside...' Nagy has already invited Eric Lacascade and Peter Brook, Bartabas and Anatoli Vassiliev; the main theme is mastership and crossing drama forms with other arts – chants, visual images, martial arts, sacred mysteries, poetry. Yet another turning on the same road, yet another hope and possibility.