

In Bergman's bottomless pit

Theatre directors are inevitably attracted to the way the Swedish film director plays with the border between fiction and reality and between actors and characters. The Belgian collectives tg STAN and de Roovers (...) took the plunge.

After the Claude Debussy spring comes the Ingmar Bergman autumn. Abundant homage is being paid to the Swedish playwright and film director on the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth. However, enthusiasts will not find these homages on download platforms, which are almost completely devoid of his work, but at the cinema – where some ten films have been revived – and above all at the theatre. Presenting on stage what was shot on film sets is nothing new, but in Bergman's case it takes on a special meaning because his work ponders the sense and the nature of performance. How do you set about tackling an author with such an entangled oeuvre? "With Bergman it is simple: you dive into a bottomless pit". So let's dive.

As part of the Festival d'automne, the Flemish collective tg STAN is staging two works by the man from Fårö, *Après la répétition* (After the Rehearsal) and *Infidèle* (Faithless). The latter, written by Bergman as a scenario in 1997, was then filmed by one of his actresses and former companions, Liv Ullmann. Bergman doesn't appear in it himself, but his name is associated with the character of a playwright looking to define a heroine. That is what the spectator sees on the stage at the Théâtre de la Bastille at the start of *Infidèles* – for tg STAN and its collaborating company de Roovers have given the title an 's'. Amidst unobtrusive pieces of furniture (bed, sofa, desk) which will serve to furnish some scenes, the actors start constructing a character, that of Marianne (played by Ruth Becquart). What sort of person is she? Where does she come from? They then construct a context. A husband. A friend. Then a desire. For the friend. Incest. Then, carried by the characters of these protagonists who didn't exist until a moment ago, they start their vertiginous fall until they reach a point that would discourage anyone from tying themselves down. It is called divorce, a break-up, a radical breakdown of feelings whose pieces Bergman picks over with a scalpel. "He really does have the talent to understand and penetrate human nature and to translate that knowledge into dialogues", says Frank Verduyssen (the lover) with a smile.

"Cruel"

Bergman says the same thing in his autobiography *Laterna Magica*: "I have a gift for representing most situations in life, I turn on my imagination and the right feelings come flooding in and take on colour and depth." With him the quest for carefree happiness never lasts very long, unlike the wounds inflicted by that quest. "The way Bergman combines lightness, cruelty and self-mockery never fails to impress me. He deals with cruel subjects. We *are* cruel. And at the same time we have a good laugh", says Verduyssen, who compares the author to Büchner or Chekhov. Back in 2013 he staged *Scènes uit een huwelijk* (Scenes from a Marriage) with tg STAN.

Bergman also handles extremes in real life. He comes across as a likeable sort of guy - "In all the theatres I worked in for any length of time, I had a toilet installed for my exclusive use. They are probably my lasting contribution to the history of theatre." But also provocative: "The beautiful and brilliant actress lost her memory and her teeth and died in a mental institution at the age of fifty. That's what she got for leading a riotous life." He displays his aversions but also his weaknesses with powerful analytical skills which he also uses in his films. A life of frenzied emotions, punctuated with anxiety attacks, insomnia and chronic health problems. "Bergman is fascinating because his personality is contradictory and complex, but also candid", the Flemish actor explains. The author is obsessed by infidelity: as soon as he takes up with someone new, he abandons wife and children and runs off with his mistress, who he drops a little later only to do the same thing again with another woman. He could remain a bachelor and double the conquests, but he invariably (five times) succumbs to the prospect of sharing his life in a marriage which he knows from experience will end in failure. He seems to be blinded by the carefree moments at the beginning of the affair.

The same applies to his characters, whose trail of infidelity at the Théâtre de la Bastille was modelled on Bergman's own life – the adulterous elopement to Paris in 1951 with Gun, a journalist who he later married. "That's the difficulty: if you want to know the truth, don't ask Bergman! I read that somewhere. His autobiography is perhaps even more fictitious than his scenarios", Frank Vercruyssen continues. The actors and directors who tackle his plays never really know which world they are venturing into. Is Marianne, the heroine of *Infidèles*, an original character, a metamorphosis of Paula from *Scenes from a Marriage* (whose heroine is called Marianne) or a fictitious version of Gun – and if so, to what extent? Did the terrible scene between the deceived husband (Robby Cleiren) and his daughter (Jolente De Keersmaeker) ever really happen? And why does the lover force Marianne to explain to him in detail a crucial event, while in his autobiography Bergman claims to know nothing about it? To approach Bergman is also to be confronted by a hyper-textual forest which leads to a maze of under-ground corridors with no way out. Meandering between his biography and his plays proves to be as pleasant as it is frustrating.

"As actors Bergman provides for us well because his works are complex and because each character can be interpreted in numerous different ways", Vercruyssen continues. During rehearsals the members of the collective sit round a table discussing the author's intentions, which includes comparing different translations. Jolente De Keersmaeker: "That process can easily be derailed! If we are not careful, we can lose the spectator or the play can revert to being a very simple story. We have to be vigilant because we are dealing with fine-spun registers of emotion." On the stage the collective does this extremely well, mainly because of the subtle way they practise their skill: often one doesn't know if they are speaking to the audience, to the other actors, to the characters played by the actors or to everyone at the same time. This 'cross speak' makes tg STAN natural Bergmanians.

(...)

Guillaume Tion