

Interview with

Anick La Bissonnière

My name is Anick la Bissonnière. I'm an architect and I've done mostly set design for the past few years – I create theatre spaces.

What indications do you need when you're asked to do a set design?

I think that the basis of the work remains the text, unless we're talking about a theatre based on something other than the text, but, generally, I read a lot, I read a great deal when I'm preparing a design. For instance, for my last show with Brigitte Haentjens, I read the author's biography, correspondence, diary, and about that period. There are no particular indications that I look for, but you have to establish a context for the director and that's what's important. The context can be historical, physical, or something else. To prepare for *Eden Cinéma*, we even travelled to Vietnam with Brigitte Haentjens. We went to visit certain specific places. What indications did that give us? I can't say exactly, but it nourished our work. Indications, for me, aren't something precise or continuous. They can vary from one director to another, from one hall to another, from one text to another, from one project to another. The more pieces of information you have the better, although sometimes we do shows where we receive almost no indications – and everyone still arrives at the finish line at the same time. I guess there's really no precise answer to this question.

What is the first thing you take into account when you begin a set design?

Geography. That's funny, isn't it? Maybe because I'm an architect, I need to have a location. An architect usually starts to create a project based on a pre-planned physical location. In my case, this location is the theatre and whether it's a theatre, a theatrical space, an Italian stage, or a studio, the space where the show will take place is the first thing I analyze. If, in this space, the relationship between the actor and the audience is ill-defined, if I haven't fully understood it, or if there's interference between certain actors, or if there's interference between the audience and the actors, the show won't work. It just won't cut it, as they say, and for me, this is fundamental. It's the first thing I do. For instance, if I'm faced with an Italian stage, which already exists, where the seats are bolted to the floor, the stage/spectator relationship is already established. I study it in depth. I go and sit in the hall; I walk around the stage to see what the actors see. For me, that's fundamental, that's really the first thing I study.

Is there one design you're particularly proud of?

That's a perfectly impossible question! It's like asking a mother to pick a favourite child. It's always the last one, obviously... It's always the one we've just finished, the one for which we've just explored all of the possibilities. Or maybe it's the next one I'll do. I can't answer this question...

I'm certainly passionate about what all the work I've done in recent years with Brigitte Haentjens; it nourishes me, interests me, makes me constantly delve deeper and deeper, so, obviously, my answer would be my last show, *La Cloche de verre*. But I can't say that I'd ever completely distance myself from any project I've ever done. You have to love what you do; they're all my children, in a sense. Let's just say that I love them all about the same, and they've all taught me something different. I've never done a project in a vacuum. I think it was Jean-Pierre Ronfard who said, "When you accept work, it has to fulfill two of these three conditions: you either have to learn something, enjoy what you're doing, or earn a lot of money." Since you don't make a lot of money in the theatre... Above all, I've had fun and have learned something from the projects I've done, I can certainly say that. So, it's not that a certain design has demanded a specific effort which makes me more proud of it than of any other. They all have their strengths and weaknesses. That's why I love them.

What advice would you give aspiring set designers?

I'd give them the same advice I'd give to anyone who's young and starting out in any field: go right to the very end of your passion, to the end of your desires, and stay especially open to opportunities that present themselves. Sometimes, it's not always those we think that will be the best. At times, we have to create our own luck, by provoking events, being aware of what's happening around us. You have to be proactive; you can't just wait for things to fall into your lap. Although, in my case, it's a pure coincidence that I became a set designer. I didn't seek it out, someone approached me.

So, you see, even my advice is somewhat faulty! But after I did that first design, in order for things to continue, I made sure I remained very attentive to everything going on around me. I went to see a lot of people; I put plenty of effort, at first, into getting work. I didn't always get immediate results. For example, I approached Pierre Bernard in 1994 in order to work at the Quat'Sous because I really liked that hall. Here we are in 2004 and I'm finally working for the first time at the Quat'Sous. You can't ever lose hope. My advice is to be patient and attentive.