
Interview with
Claude Poissant
...on casting a play.

Hello, my name is Claude Poissant. I'm a director, playwright, actor, and have been the artistic director of Théâtre PàP (Petit à Petit) for 25 years.

What is the first consideration when casting a play?

The first thing you need to do is determine exactly what you've read into the text, what came to mind as you read it. You ask yourself if what you saw was interesting. If there's something brewing in your imagination, you then slowly, but subtly, transgress into reality and see if there's anything palpable around you. What actors have you seen around you, in a vague sort of way, without really noticing them? Who are they? That's the first question I'll ask myself. This is quickly followed by: who is the play's central character, around whom I'll base my direction of the play? This can vary for other directors, although it's often the same for everyone, since some plays have a signature part. Then, you take that part and think of different people who could play it, asking yourself why you're choosing them. You wonder what reasons are influencing you most, who do you most want to explore. That's more or less my starting point.

Do the actors, the availability of an actor or actress, influence your choices?

I'd love to say no, but, sadly, the answer is yes. Sometimes, you have to pass on a play when the actor you want is unavailable and choose a different play. Otherwise, you're going against your ideal. Actors will also influence your choice of play because there are people you feel like working with and that leads you to think of them more often. And you suddenly realize that you automatically associated them with a specific text without being completely aware of it. All this to say that actors are the basis of everything: once you have a text, and even sometimes when you don't, and there are actors on a stage, that's the essential part for me. I need actors in order to survive.

How does the choice of actors impact on the direction?

Even when directors use actors as puppets, they'll have an almost irrational influence on the work, because they're human beings who'll live day to day, at their own rhythm... You can't predict everything they'll do. You may have a strong direction in mind, but it's what the actors are experiencing within themselves, in their personal and social lives, that will influence everything that happens on stage despite what you bring to the process, despite the text. Casting is very powerful and that's why sometimes you can make mistakes, in the sense that you have expectations about someone in terms of their character and you have pre-conceived ideas. You think too far ahead and then realize that's not it at all. That's not what this actor needs to deliver at this moment in their life. So, you have to adapt – and if you can't adapt, you're in

trouble. But if you can manage to adapt, understand, and compensate – and if the other person manages to budge a bit – then everything starts to move and the possibilities are infinite. I actually love to do casting but I'm very slow at it because I like to start with one person, then add a second, then add another to those two, and build up a cast, one person at a time. This way, the vision is constructed as I go along, even before we enter into the performance space.

What is the most difficult thing to do when you're choosing a cast?

When you're choosing a cast, the hardest thing is when you're somewhat advanced in the process and an actor or actress drops out, for whatever reason, and your carefully built house-of-cards starts to crumble. You have to go right back to the beginning, with the remaining cast that is now missing a player. But that's okay, it's not the end of the world; it's just hard to swallow and a bit depressing for a while. Then, all of a sudden, someone approaches things differently and instead of taking path #14, you switch to path #23, which just might take you even further. But when it first happens, it does feel like a disaster.

What is the most enjoyable part about casting?

The most enjoyable part is when you offer an actor or actress the role and you can hear over the telephone or see in their face that mixture of great happiness and fear. That is extraordinary.