

# David Geselson

## *Stating the commonplace*

Interview by Maïa Bouteillet

David Geselson trained as an actor at the École du Théâtre national de Chaillot and the Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique in Paris, where he graduated in 2003. David Geselson performed in the theatre under the direction of Brigitte Jaques, Christophe Rauck, Jean-Pierre Vincent, Jean-Paul Wenzel and others, as well as for film and television, before directing a first noteworthy theatre production in 2014. In a very singular way *En route-Kaddish* (On your Way-Kaddish) mingles intimacy with documentary, to track down the itinerary of his grandfather Yehouda Ben Porat, who left Lithuania for Palestine in 1934, with the project of establishing socialism.

As a soldier within the Jewish Brigade of the British Army during the Second World War, he participated in Israel's War of Independence, before deserting, moving to the United States in the Sixties, and returning to France to direct the Research institute of Jewish history from 1971 onwards. David Geselson has written about the eventful life of his ancestor, who died in 2009, based on archives and family history, even if some episodes may need reinvention, but also based on notes taken during trips to Israel and documentary research. The performance is captivating, funny, tender and fascinating. With a mix of reality and fiction in order to approach the truth of the present-day better, the foundations of the company Lieux-dits intend to explore *"the tension with which politics intervene in the intimacy of individuals and transform them, thus transforming history."* David Geselson claims *"a necessity to construct strong dialectics between a writer and a group of actors, in order to write and produce a theatre in correlation with the political, philosophical and poetical questions raised by the world of today."* Followed by the very beautiful Doreen in 2016, which recounts, in a kind of counterpoint to *Lettre à D.* (Letter to D.) by André Gorz, the pedestal of infinite love which leads two people to decide to die together, after 58 years of shared life. Very different in appearance from the first show, Doreen develops the same lines of emphasis, from intimacy to history, from fiction to documentary.

Once more we meet with a mix of humour and seriousness. The encounter with the Portuguese artist Tiago Rodrigues, under whose direction he performed in *Bovary* and with whom he participated in the Bastille Occupation event in 2017, has deeply influenced David Geselson as far as his theatre career is concerned. As a great fan of jazz and African American history since he was a teenager, he is now preparing *Le Silence et la peur* (Silence and Fear), an ambitious project based on the figure of Nina Simone and the history of African Americans, written after more than two years of research, working between France and the United States. Besides Elios Noël and Laure Mathis, two leading actors of the company Lieux-dits, David Geselson brings together for this production an international team, amongst whom the American actors Paul Bryce and Dee Besnaël. A production is scheduled for January 2020 at the CDN de Lorient. David Geselson is currently associate artist at the Théâtre de l'Aquarium.

UBU: The interaction of documentary / fiction is part of the fundamentals of your company. Concerning the Nina Simone project, you say "we will only be a pale shadow of reality." Does this mean reality is stronger than fiction?  
David Geselson: Reality is stronger than fiction, but it



depends from which angle we look at reality. If we put it on stage as it is — for example in shows where people are cast for what they really are — it seems always a bit weak to me, when there is no fictional or aesthetic transformation. When Tiago Rodrigues tackles reality, it is situated in a fictional context, very much written, after a long reflection... It's this crest which is interesting, and we have to find a way up. That is what I enjoy doing, figuring out how we can employ the fountainhead of reality to make fiction, create dramatic tension.

The matter which is raised every time, as it seems to me, is the context of the narrative. In *En route-Kaddish*, the narrator, David, who is part of the story, sets up the context. In the beginning, his intervention is almost like a lecture. In the case of *En route-Kaddish*, *Doreen* or *Le Silence et la peur*, real history allows me to create a substance. Reality is thus envisaged in a historical, political and social context. The story of my grandfather isn't interesting in itself, unless it is placed to resonate within some historical dimension, which takes it further. To share it with people, enables me in one go to expose someone's intimacy and my thoughts about our history. That gives us two commonplaces, the place of intimacy and the place of history.

In *En route-Kaddish*, we share a history of heritage, but also the relationship between Western Europe and the Middle-East, Israel and Palestine, the history of wars of the twentieth century. With *Le Silence et la peur* it's the same, recounting how European forces strike to conquer the Americas. Today we are still subjected to the consequences and that seems as interesting to me as talking about Nina Simone. The two dimensions are linked. In *En route-Kaddish* for instance, 90% of what my mother had told me couldn't be used. I proceeded date by date, examining what could match with my grandfather's biography and the historical events.

The question of doubt is always brought up, the connection with the truth. In *En route-Kaddish* the character of the grandfather, Yehouda, is almost mythological, like a condensed version of the great pioneers.

It's rather childlike to make yourself believe something is true; even if it might be a little bit the case. With *En route-Kaddish*, it's particular because it concerns my own grandfather. The stories about him were sometimes so incredible... even before writing them down, they were just too much. Perhaps this is why I had to make it into a story. It wasn't political, he was a real fairy-tale character.

Probably my aptitude for telling stories and theatre originates in this. It also comes from the pleasure one experiences, when telling a story exaggeratedly. What is true or not, within the global truth, when one builds a narrative, is very fascinating. What also raises questions for me about reality and history, is that I experienced it concretely. As a child, they took me to Jerusalem to visit my family. At the time, I didn't know I was in a country that provoked a massive exodus of Palestinians in 1948. My memories were mostly linked to what I was going to eat with my grandmother... and gradually we realise that we are immersed in a highly political society of which the historical and moral impact can't be ignored. Yet I'm not religious, I'm strongly opposed to the Israeli governments of the past 25 years, so I had the experience of being in a highly political context without realising it. My mother said about my grandfather that he looked like a clown with a gun.

Yehouda is incarnated in the show, Doreen and André Gorz as well in *Doreen*. How about Nina Simone?

She will also be incarnated, but won't be called Nina Simone. I play around with that ambiguity. To play Nina Simone is very complicated of course. If one intends to play Nina Simone, the show is ruined right from the start. We seriously considered this problem. The woman who will perform is called Eunice, which is Nina Simone's real name, who was called Eunice Kathleen Waymon. In the text, she is called Little Simone for the moment, Nina Simone wanted to be called Little Simone; 'niña' like little girl in Spanish and Simone like Simone Signoret. Dee Beasnael will play the character. We will play around with a certain identity disorder. In a letter addressed to her brother, Nina Simone writes: "Did you know the voice is the only pure instrument? That it can bring forth notes like no other instrument? As in between the keys of a piano. The notes are there, you can sing them, but you can't find them on any other instrument. It's like me. I live there. In between those two worlds of black and white. I am Nina Simone, the star, and I'm not there. I'm a woman. The one I secretly am, is hidden between those two worlds." She also says in interviews: "Here I am Nina Simone, but Eunice Waymon asks me to come back." She constantly moves back and forth between the public figure she is, and the intimate figure, and then is regularly taken up by other stories too. She often states she has been around for 900 years. The link with the past is present all the time. We might as well say we are going to play what we incarnate. When we tackle existing characters, they need to be incarnated at some stage, but it's never simple. For Yehouda, there was the age matter and the emotional proximity to this man. Elios just dived into the story, we wrote the show together, so intensely that he really became my grandfather. In Elios eyes, I saw my grandfather. We were in Israel together. With Nina Simone it's more complicated. We are facing someone who is part of the collective conscience, we all have our own image of her. With Doreen, we had to invent everything from scratch because there was so little material; with Nina Simone the contrary is true, I almost have to stop watching her, otherwise I can't write.

With Doreen, it's as if we are behind the scenes of *Lettre à D.* Almost like a counterpoint. With Nina Simone, we go to 1492, taking us far back.

What interests me in Nina Simone's case, is exactly the same as with my grandfather, there is a direct filiation between *En route-Kaddish* and *Le Silence et la peur*. Nina Simone, born in 1933, is history incarnate: her great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee Indian who survived the slaughter of the American Indians and who married a liberated black slave. They had a daughter who was raped by an Irish planter; from this rape a girl was born, Nina Simone's grandmother... For me it was impossible to tell Nina Simone's story without mentioning where she comes from. At this point we get to the questions I'm obsessed with: how does one deal with one's origins? Up to what point does one endure them? Which are the transgenerational traumas we carry around with us? How does the past live on in the present? All this is of great interest to me.

Concerning Nina Simone, we often think of civil rights' movements, but they only represent ten years of her life, one cannot tackle this without talking of the past. To represent civil rights on stage is very complicated. To understand the matter of civil rights one has to understand why Black Americans weren't granted any. If we don't recount where things stem from, they remain fixed in the past, like images, folklore... Nina Simone progressively evolved towards political engagement, but once she got involved, it became a major part of her life, and then she moved away. Her private life toppled over, she divorced her husband, the Black Panthers were wiped out. Much later she became an icon. In the Eighties people completely forgot about her. When she died in 2003, it was only briefly mentioned in the newspapers. I will mostly concentrate on the period before the Sixties and after the Seventies: the rise and downfall.

How did the writing process take place? Was there any prior research?

It's the same principle as with former pieces. I read everything about African American history, all the biographies of Nina Simone, I set up a genuine study programme and after that I select the sequences I take an interest in and confront them with the people involved on stage. With the American team, it's more complicated because it's on the move, a part of the original team has left the project underway — they don't have the same financial imperatives as we do. I write in a flow, come with proposals, and we discuss them on stage. It's a long process. We did a first session a year and a half ago at Théâtre Ouvert where we said to ourselves: it's great to deal with African American history, but where are the African Americans? Then we spent a fortnight in New York, at Harlem Stage, where we met with 35 actors and actresses, with whom we improvised and had all kinds of debates about, for instance, our legitimacy to deal with history, the cultural appropriation it implies (or not), and if cultural appropriation is the same in the United States as in France? This nourished our ideas, I proposed a framework for performing which was adopted by the actors. It invalidated things I couldn't keep. Studies are one thing, reality is another. You may know a lot,

but when you're a white Frenchman living in Paris, you remain a white Frenchman living in Paris. My understanding of the situation of Black Americans has its limits. One of the reasons I made *En route-Kaddish* is that I was fed up with people voicing my opinions, I also had things to say about the situation in Israel and Palestine and so I said things nobody but me could have said. As far as African American history is concerned, I immediately wanted to get involved. I had written some stuff I quite liked, with Nina Simone describing a torture carried out by American slavers. But one of the actors, Paul Pryce, bumped into me and said: "You define me as an African American, like a victim, but I'm not a victim, if you need to define me like that today, perhaps it's because you, as an heir, feel guilty about this history..." That kind of feedback is extremely precious for me in order to make progress. Concerning the casting, since I regretted there was no French black actor in the cast, the Americans said it wasn't the history of the French black people anyway. We had never-ending discussions. Whether there is a link with one's own history, isn't necessarily a good question, but what does seem important is that everything gets laid out on the table to envisage what can become of it...

**An actor is an actor, it doesn't need to be his own story to perform a role, does it?**

Of course, but let's be careful not to forget the position you're in when you express yourself, which is that of a dominant French white European, allowing us to claim freedom of speech. It's better to consider the empty place. The matter of performing comes next, must one experience something first in order to be able to act it out? That's a different matter altogether. We evolve in realities which are not alike. The African American actors were surprised there wasn't a theatre for black people in Paris, like the National Black Theatre in Harlem. Yet in France that would be considered as communalism. I have written a text about Jim Crow laws, which determined segregation. This text seemed rather corny to Paul Pryce, who pointed out to me this subject was tackled in the Seventies in the States; it's old-fashioned there, and here in France it's almost unknown.

In the process of writing, there is no improvisation normally. But according to the subject and my knowledge of it, the contribution of the American actors enhanced it a lot. There are many things I wouldn't have been able to write about without them, for example what they call "wokeness", meaning political awareness, an extremely important notion in the Seventies. When I started reading about Nina Simone, I wasn't at all "woke". By plunging into history, we discover a bit aghast, our lack of knowledge on this subject.

The notion of fear also overwhelmed me. This woman permanently teamed up with fear, it was like an authentic life companion for her. This intimately affects me, the feeling of insecurity in the world. How do we free ourselves from fear and why does fear make us want to live hidden, or on the contrary, surpass ourselves by speaking up in spite of fear. What is really fascinating about the African American cul-

ture is not what it silences, but what it expresses: how an oppressed population, ignored for centuries, liberates itself through culture, and produces sublime art. This is what the performance will be about: warding off fear, warding off silence, how to make culture into an act of resistance. *Le Silence et la peur*, we're still discussing the title.

Every time again, a strong relationship with the audience gets established in your shows. In *Doreen* the audience is invited to the protagonists' home, they have a drink and a meal in the sitting-room, then imperceptibly the theatre settles in. With *En route-Kaddish*, there is a tipping point, very beautiful because imperceptible, between the opening conference and fiction, with a simple gesture, the narrator hands a phone to the character and Yehouda comes alive.

How do we open the door to fiction? For me it's never obvious, it always raises questions. It's not given from the outset. I like the idea we agree on the story we want to tell, attempting to state commonplace. We have to embrace something of our community, to gauge it and observe. It's important to greet each other. But it shouldn't be systematic, because then we don't say what we have to say, but just create a reproduction. For the next show, I will come back to a frontal stage position, yet I will be looking for new ways of doing so.

**You mentioned Tiago Rodrigues before, you performed in his show *Bovary*, did you feel acquainted with his approach?**

I admire him enormously. I feel very much in tune with what he does on any level; his writing, his theatre and also the way he directs the playhouse he is responsible for. It's remarkable and very inspiring. We'll continue touring with *Bovary* next season, and it's a great pleasure. I went on a writing residency in Lisbon, since the Teatro nacional Dona Maria is coproducing *Le Silence et la peur*, it was great to be there. I feel very much acquainted with his work. The way he steals from reality inspires me. In his plays, Tiago has a strong link with literature, for me it has more to do with history. What we have in common is that we are both actors who write and direct; this establishes a particular relationship with the actors and the stage. We are aware of the organic necessities a text can produce. In this respect, the Nina Simone project creates new challenges: for the first time I don't perform in a show, directing it with an outer view, which for the moment I find very difficult. I consider myself to be an actor in the first place. So I'm asking myself how I will cope with it all. There is also the language matter: for 90% the text is translated and performed in English. I called upon two translators, with two different points of view. This changes the way the written form takes shape, making it into a more complicated and riskier project. ■

*Le Silence et la peur* by David Geselson: to be premiered at the Théâtre de Lorient in January 2020, followed by a tour; at the Théâtre de la Bastille (Paris) from 20 to 29 April 2020.