



# I AM

## INTERVIEW WITH LEMI PONIFASIO

**Your creation for the Festival d'Avignon fits into the framework of First World War commemorations.**

**What does this choice mean?**

Lemi Ponifasio: The First World War is not exactly the theme of this creation; it is more its stimulus. The 100 years commemoration of the WW1 disaster is a key moment for the human species to reflect on its journey as a life force sharing space with all sentient beings. What does it mean to be human in 2014? We'll probably still be talking about this war a hundred years from now. *I AM* is not a documentary of the war but something like a deafening scream to the sky on the occasion of remembering this war. Many lives were destroyed even for those who live faraway such as people from tiny islands of the Pacific Ocean, Kanaky and Australian Aborigines. They fought and died for countries that they weren't even citizens of. War is not only the catastrophic failure of democracy and politics, it is also the failure of our humanity. One hundred years on, War has become TV entertainment and easy foreign policy. We are numb to violence and we never have enough money and possessions. There is an intensely deep dissatisfaction, disillusionment and disappointment that we are nowhere near the promised land. We are overwhelmed with this despair and this has disabled us from fully recognizing that we are immeasurably powerful.

**Is the idea, in *I AM*, to honour these unknown, forgotten dead of the Great War?**

We're their heirs. That's why I'm using the text by Antonin Artaud, who cries out against the system and power. What would a dead soldier say if you could hear him? What could he say to us and God other than: "You have betrayed me. You broke your promise, hallelujah". The performance is like an attempt to destroy the Temple. How can we rebuild it? That's why I like the idea of playing in Avignon in a venue marked by a religious history like the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des Papes. The Church is undoubtedly the place that is most emblematic of power; nowadays there is non stop conflict based on what brand of God you believe. The image of God represents blood, pain and death.

**The title of your play, *I AM*, rings out like a declaration. What do you want to assert by this?**

For me, this project is like a life report and the condensation of my own life. The image of *I AM* is of the journey of a community to cities of empires, calling on the silent and the faceless to show themselves and confront the empire. We have created a system that teaches us to be obedient, to function like robots, everything is designed to homogenize minds. To say who you are - I AM ...is the most revolutionary thing you can say right now. It is to say I no longer find fulfillment in the standard, cookie-cutter life options. To free oneself from the icy grips of despair or to let it tighten its grip depends on how one finishes this sentence - I AM...

**Is the theatre the place for questioning for you?**

The theatre is the space where you are trying to listen to your soul reminding you of your higher state. The moment is real. To make performance is to protest the current condition of life. It is a prayer, a cry, a ceremony for new life, the quest to be reborn again. It is to be open to a new beginning. To be with silence, with the truth. It is the place where you can look deeply into the eyes of your brother and ask: "What does it really truly mean, for me, to be your brother?" The theatre is a moment of liberation in which you can listen to your own voice, your own morality rather than that of the market, government, the bank, the Church or God. So the audience must come prepared to the theatre as if they are going on a pilgrimage to meet the divine. It is a time in silence. The quiet before one embarks on a new departure.

**"I AM" is also a recurring phrase in the work of Colin McCahon, which you use in your play.**

**What more can you tell us about this artist?**

Colin McCahon is the most well known painter in New Zealand. His work is obsessed with the search for redemption, truth, a light, God. His human life struggle fascinates me. He spent his entire life trying to present and represent his relationship with God. He painted many works on which he wrote "I AM." Perhaps *I AM* was his cry for recognition of his existence in front of God. His intense vision similar to artists like Heiner Müller and Antonin Artaud. I think of all three of them as friends, as guides for me; they make up the genealogy of my search. Antonin Artaud and Heiner Müller are sacred orators. It seems to me that both of them approach the theatre like a battle for life, a life gasping for the breath of existence. Theatre as a guide towards immensity and space. I was also interested in these different spirits, one French, the other German, in the framework of this project relating to the First World War. Their texts are intensely human. They talk about flesh, shit, blood, desire, God.

**For this play, as for many others, you decided to include non-professionals from Avignon. What motivated**



### **this approach?**

I think the word non-professional is misleading. Everyone has a special skill or gift and spirit. That is what I look for in everyone and that is what I want from the performers on stage. I wanted to invite Avignon residents for this project. It's great to be part of this community even for a short time. This is the process of *I AM*. Art can be such a social weapon of control and can be a very violent act if it excludes people and reinforces the separation of power. By inviting the community, especially the silent ones, we are declaring that art must not only be the image of those who control us. I think art can and must have a greater ambition than simply serving the powerful or art itself. Having the community performing together with us at the Cour d'honneur is a special symbol - access for everyone.

### **You lay claim to the notion of community to describe the group you work with. What do you mean? How is this different from a company?**

Like I said before, everyone has a brilliant light, a brilliant skill, a beauty of his or her own. Working in this way is about intimately getting to know someone and that is not always easy. But you must view the people you work with as partners for life. It is living beyond your own individual self. Community is not a utopian dream, it is not an easy proposition. It's quite a challenge. But without this community challenge, life would be very lonely and art would have no necessity. So you can say that my artistic approach is based less on conventional arts professional methods and more on human journeys. The people I work with bring life experiences found in the struggle to simply live. I am not making what they call political theatre or social theatre or community theatre. I like a creative life with people which includes everyone, your grandmother, your village, friends... So I work with anyone, not just professionals or only people from the Pacific region, but with people from everywhere in the world.

### **How do you apprehend the space of the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des Papes, which is relatively singular because of its size and the fact that it is outdoors?**

I regularly create performances for outdoors and unusual locations. In 2012, I staged the opera *Prometheus* inside a former power station at the Ruhrtriennale – a space that was almost 200 meters deep. *I AM* staging will vary greatly from place to place. For example, *I AM* will be premiered outdoor in Avignon, then performed next in the Playhouse at the Edinburgh International Festival and then inside a former steel factory at the Ruhrtriennale. Coming to the Palais des Papes is not simply coming to a theatre stage. The Cour d'honneur is not a neutral space. It is a place with a powerful history and its memory will always make its presence known in the performance. Its architectural and religious tension is a dramatic act of its own. One will always make a response to a given place even if it is unconsciously. This is also true with the audience. This perpetual questioning about activating the space is a condition for something to happen, to spring forth.

### **What is this thing that will be made to happen?**

Oh beauty, truth. I believe that theatre does not correspond to a subjective approach to expression. The expression of oneself is always the beginning of a lie. I prepare the performers to serve the space, to serve the ceremony, as if they were sheep about to be sacrificed because you want to try to establish a communication with the divine. The divine within you. I want the theatre to permit access to other perceptions. I am sure the beginning of dance started when the human being wanted to acknowledge the mystical link with the cosmos. Ritual and ceremony has this orientation. It's a pity we took the gods and everything else out of the theatre. I think we are spending too much time making theatre about only the human or a place of projection or representation of what we call reality. Theatre as a mirror doesn't interest me; it's more useful to shatter the mirror enabling us to create countless reflections. If the world comes to an end tomorrow, what questions should we ask ourselves today? What do we talk about? This moment of the last conversation is the moment of the theatre.

Interview by Renan Benyamina.

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