

Interview with Bart Baele and Yves Degryse of BERLIN

How did you come into contact with Nadia and Pétro?

Yves Degryse: Via the French journalist Cathy Blisson, who worked for a long time as a journalist and theatre critic for Télrama. When she stopped doing reviews, she went to Chernobyl, where she'd been before. A photographer friend had gone into the forbidden zone and driving through it he suddenly saw Pétro standing in the road. Cathy Blisson also met Pétro that way. On her return, she contacted us and told us the story of Nadia and Pétro. We decided to do something with it.

Did you know from the very start that you would use this story for your next theatre project?

Bart Baele: In the beginning, we just went there. We didn't know whether Nadia and Pétro would tell us anything. It took a long time to get closer to them.

How did you gain their trust?

YD: Mainly just by being there, I guess. It was also important to dare to lose time, and to wait. In those four years, we never filmed inside their home – that was the deal, so we usually stood outside their gate. They sometimes slept during the day, for example. We then had to wait until they came outside. I think our relaxed attitude about it ensured they also felt at ease. Their social reflexes were naturally completely different due to the isolation they lived in for 27 years. For instance, they didn't realise that we came there especially for them, that we had booked a flight especially for that purpose. Once it happened that we arrived, in the winter, and after ten minutes they told us we had to come back in the spring.

So they did not know in advance that you were coming?

BB: That's right, but in the beginning they always stood outside as soon as they heard our car coming. Given that hardly anyone ever came there, they would always wonder who it was, and whether we had any staples with us, such as bread or oil. If someone did come, it was usually someone from a checkpoint or the police.

Why did Pétro and Nadia actually choose to continue living in Zvizdal?

BB: They told that story in many layers. A first layer was: "We want to stay here because this is our land." They were both born there, and apart from a brief departure by Pétro for his military service, they have never left. Their entire lives have taken place in that village. Their family is buried there. Thus, a firm attachment to Zvizdal; that was certainly a determinant. Another story they told is that they didn't dare to go away following the evacuation because they knew that their possessions would be looted. In their hesitancy to leave, time passed and the apartment that they had been assigned by the State was already occupied by others.

YD: In recent years, their daughter often asked them whether they would come and live with her. They considered it, but at some point during the process of mulling it over, they definitively decided to remain in Zvizdal.

BB: Their theory is basically that everyone who left Zvizdal is dead. Then why leave? The longer they lived there, the less the radiation hazard or health considerations have played a role.

During those years, did you know what you would be doing with the material?

YD: We waited a long time to decide that. The story of Nadia and Pétro is fragile and intense. We had to find the right thread. We do not make reports or documentaries, but performances. What could we contribute with our performance? That was the quest.

BB: It also changes a lot over time. Apart from the story of loneliness and contamination, this is also a story of life on the land, of living with a cow, a horse, a cat, a dog, and a few chickens. A small difference meant much in the lives of Nadia and Pétro.

YD: From the start, the question was also: are they going to continue living here? They could just as well have moved away during the period of our filming.

BB: The winters there are so severe that every time we visited we held our breath wondering if they would still be alive.

YD: We saw many disturbances over the course of the years. An animal that died, that caused a tilt in their life. In the beginning, our conversations were still about why they stayed there. Over time we went deeper, we talked about death, for example, and the fear of it.

This material lends itself perfectly to a documentary. Where did your choice for theatre come from?

BB: We do want to make a documentary with this material in future. But in the first place, indeed, a performance. That is something else completely.

YD: With theatre, we can create scenes that take place while we were not there. We want to do this by means of, among other things, models of Nadia and Pétro's property. The death of an animal, for instance, was a turning point in their lives, but of course that didn't happen while we were filming. Theatre enables us to stage that moment.

BB: A theatre presentation also has a very different tempo than a documentary. You can pursue different things at the same time. It allows for multiple layers at once. Another important difference is that you have an appointment with an audience at a certain hour. Together with them, you can create a tension.

YD: In the theatre, you as an audience also relate to a space. Unlike watching a film, you can freely choose how you look and what you look at. For us, in any case, it would be an exercise in how to make a film with a single screen. Theatre is simply the medium that we know well.

What has grabbed you about this story?

YD: Each time we came back from Chernobyl, we needed a few days to be back *here*. It's such a different world. We had never before experienced something so intense. We also became emotionally involved in the lives of Nadia and Pétro. We always left them behind when we departed. As if we stepped into and out of their lives.

BB: Everything is extreme in that spot. The distance to the civilised world, the nature that engulfs everything. The relationship between Nadia and Pétro, as well. If you look on Google Earth, you can clearly identify their property because all the rest is overgrown. There is something extremely pure about it. Dying was a theme that often came up. And especially the practical side of dying. If one of them should die, the nearest person was 13 kilometres away. At their age (they were almost 90 years old), this is a very real question.

YD: We are talking literally about a zone you are not allowed to enter. Within it are two people with their story. You can connect dozens of threads from outside that zone to those two people who have decided to stay there. Loneliness, isolation, ... these were important themes.

BB: Dependence on each other. Care for each other, or not.

YD: The more time you spend with them, the more you see that their story is about us. You see mechanisms that you also see outside that zone. By zooming in on them for so long, for four years, the essential threads also come to the fore. If you were to stay there for a week, you would have at most a remarkable documentary. A number of important themes could only arise due to the long period of time spent. They only spoke about certain things after time had passed. Moreover, they were also always busy. This is something else very special; there were only two of them and they always had to get everything done on their own, such as harvesting potatoes. It all went very slowly. After a few days, we felt it was time to go away and leave them in peace.

How do you assemble such a long period of four years into one compact performance?

YD: The staging of the seasons helps us with this. Indeed, the succession of the seasons was for them one of the key elements in dealing with time.

BB: Also by not designating much, and just showing the initial impetus. Letting the purity exist.

YD: Also, on film you see the passing of time, in that they become older. In the images taken at the beginning of the period they look very different from in the images of four years later.

After these experiences, do you look at our way of life differently, and our perception of time?

YD: Absolutely.

BB: Yes, and not only because of the extreme story of Nadia and Pétro. The fact that you were there in Ukraine also meant that everything was completely different than it is here with us. The fear of war, for example, sometimes came too close. A member of Nadia and Pétro's extended family had died in the plane that was shot down in July 2015. All those elements had a lot of impact. Coming back to Belgium after having spent a couple of days there, was always intense. The fact that you are on a plane and can travel so quickly from that world to this world, was each time an absurd experience as well.

YD: Nadia and Pétro always broached great themes, unconsciously. Like when Pétro said, "A man must remain in his zone; if you put him in another place, he dies." That makes you think,

for instance, about the many tours that we do with BERLIN, the constant travelling, the being on the move, our feeling that we must see everything, ... Such a rule then rattles you. Also the fact that they had exclusively lived together as a couple for 27 years, and that for four years we were onlookers of that. There were many small things that could not be immediately grasped but that together certainly triggered a lot. Just as the performance is about many little things and cannot simply be summed up in a slogan. So it was, too, when we first arrived: obviously we wanted to immediately know and understand everything, but that does not work, of course. Everything only emerged gradually, in words, phrases, looks...

Karliën Meganck (deSingel)
Antwerp, February 2016