

**Interview with Clara Simpson, Université
Lyon 2, March 2021¹,**

Christine Kiehl: Thank you for joining us Clara. Could you tell us what you do now, a year after *Dunsinane*'s first French production²?

Clara Simpson: What I don't do at the moment... I'm an actress, I have been an actress for a long time, all my life. I'm Irish, I trained in Dublin, both my parents worked in the National Theatre over there. And then I came to train in Paris when I was 19. I don't know why. I had very romantic ideas about the theatre in France and theatre training in Paris. I was a huge fan, when I was a young thing, of Beckett.

Christine Kiehl: And you met him.

Clara Simpson: I was supposed to meet him, but I was too shy to turn up.

Christine Kiehl: But your parents met him?

Clara Simpson: Yes. My father was a director and directed the first Irish *Godot* in the 1950s. So, I came to Paris with all these ideas, and I don't regret it, that's the reason why I'm still here. I've worked in theatre in both countries. I go back quite a lot, and work in Dublin or with Irish companies regularly. There's one company I've worked most with over the last 4 or 5 years, who are called Dead Centre, who tour in Europe and internationally. They're often inspired by the classics, but try and work on new forms of theatre that speak to audiences today, which in a way is what *Dunsinane* does. *Dunsinane* is David Greig's response to *Macbeth*. It's not just an adaptation or a

contemporary sequel. It's a reply. Of course he imagines what's going to happen where Shakespeare's play ended, but it's also a reaction to the received ideas in Shakespeare's play. All the received information we have inherited about its characters, about the role of women, incarnated by its legendary female character, Lady Macbeth.

Baptiste Guiton is interested in contemporary writers, and very interested in contemporary forms of theatre that reply to, or that investigate the big myths, the Greek myths, the big issues but in a contemporary way.

Christine Kiehl: So that is what spurred his interest in David Greig's *Dunsinane*?

Clara Simpson: Yes, let us come back to David Greig. David Greig went to see a production of *Macbeth* in Scotland, some time in the early 2000s. It struck him that, as he listened to the story unfolding, all the place names in the play were places he lived beside. He has grown up in Africa, but these were places he now knew and was familiar with as a Scotsman. He said that he found it odd, how this play was placed in an eleventh century Scotland emerging from the Middle Ages, but that it's a very English play and it has got a very English take on politics. Shakespeare often wrote for the monarch in power at the time, and would have written it to please that particular monarch, and this was James I.

Michèle Vignaux: And he worked on English sources as well, the English historian Holinshed, not the Scottish historians.

Clara Simpson: Yes. What they call the chronicles. The story that had been passed down through the centuries was very subjective and partial, English-sided politically, pro-English. So, slowly but surely, the

Scottish characters in the play became the demons, the bad guys, the primitive animal blood-thirsty peasants. Of course, Lady Macbeth, because she was the only woman around, and with any intelligence, obviously couldn't have been a woman, she was a witch, a blood-thirsty devil, a diabolical individual. Also, Lady Macbeth in the Shakespeare play is a very hard role to play because she doesn't get a lot of time to develop.

So, David Greig is sitting in this auditorium, watching this play unfold and he thought "it's my country, it's my land". He said that the end of that play is such an extraordinary bad end to a play, a most complicated ending to a play, quite hard to make sense of. There's a lot of information at the end of *Macbeth* about what might happen next. And David Greig said "it's like a series, a big series, and we want to know what happens next. He also thought, politically at the time, about Iraq and the war raging there, and he related this to the question of "the tyrant" and "the dictator" embodied by Macbeth. So David Greig raised the following question: What happens when an army, like the English, a foreign power like the British, comes to topple a dictator, the so-called bad guy – and is that for them to judge? You think that's absolutely shocking and you can't let that happen so we go into Iraq, or Afghanistan, take away the dictator, kill all the baddies or put them into prison, leave our army there, and then go home. And then, you let them try and sort it out. And that's what the English did in *Dunsinane*. The English weren't doing it because they were concerned about human rights in Scotland. They did it because they thought Scotland was a military threat. David Greig pops in a Malcolm who has been brought up in England, educated in England, pro-English, who likes the English way of life, the comforts, the quality food, the beer and the ham. The English then expect to go home and leave him to govern. But it's a disaster.

Christine Kiehl: As you said, David Greig wanted to question what happens after, when Malcolm comes in, when Siward comes in with

his good intentions: re-establishing a properly governed country in Scotland. And what happens is that David Greig resuscitates, brings back to life a different Lady Macbeth. It's not Lady Macbeth, it's someone else, and that's why she's called Gruach. What has happened between Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth and Gruach?

Clara Simpson: The difference is that in Shakespeare's play, she kills herself, she dies, whereas historically, factually, that did not happen. She did not kill herself. She lived on, not for a terribly long time, but she lived on and she governed. And she had a son, Lulach. She reigned, which was not that unusual at the time. There existed what were called "warrior monarchs" in the Celtic worlds and elsewhere. And some of them were women. They were rare, but they existed, these women existed. There were Irish queens who ran and led armies, fierce individuals, and very capable obviously. It was a male-dominated world, but there were women out there who knew how to govern, even when they also had to manage producing heirs to the throne, vital for their stability.

Gruach was a warrior and she survived all of them. David Greig went back into the chronicles which are very sketchy, but he did find enough factual traces of Gruach's existence. His story sparked from that. It's a very plausible story. What's amazing about it and about her, is that she's defending her country. Scotland was not an imperial power, like the Japanese or like the English, or other kingdoms, they didn't go out and declare war to another country to expand. The Scots had their own country, they were quite happy, living where they were, like the Irish, fighting amongst themselves, but not seeking to dominate any other country or people. But if you threatened them, if you crossed Hadrian's wall, they would fight, they would sacrifice anything to defend their country. A little like the image we would have of a Japanese warrior, Gruach is someone who is from that lineage, who would do anything to defend her country, anything. "It's a question of honour, she says at the very end of the play, the difference is that I'm not

doing it for some political ideal, it's in my blood, it's honour. I will die for my country. I'm not here just to survive, or just to gain power by putting my son on the throne, it's for the Scottish people. And I would sacrifice my son for my country."

Christine Kiehl: Gruach embodies the fight for power, for justice, and you're mentioning honour here, is it revenge? Talking about mythology, can Gruach be compared to something like the *Erinyes* in Aeschylus' play, who seek revenge and justice at the same time?

Clara Simpson: There is a big difference between Gruach and Shakespeare's character; what we retain from Lady Macbeth is that she is above all looking for power, she's blood-thirsty, and would do anything to achieve power. Gruach isn't looking for power. She likes being queen, she says that, she enjoys being queen, but she will go to any end to save her country. Yes, she does want justice.

Christine Kiehl: Coming back to the *Erinyes*, they are represented with torches and ropes, and their faces are often surrounded by snakes, which is also one of Gruach's emblems.

Clara Simpson: Yes, when Siward actually looks at her – It's funny, just another digression, but today, I was directing a young actor who's preparing to get into one of the national British schools at the moment. For his audition he chose a scene from *Dunsinane*. We were just running through it and working on it. It's the scene where Siward storms in, and where a boy, one of the soldiers has been killed. He comes into Gruach's quarters shouting "Dehors! Out!" But she seduces him. In a way, it's exactly like in Euripides' play. My note to the young actor is that "whatever you do, don't look her in the eye!" Because, with the snake heads, once you look them in the eye, you'll be under her spell.

Michèle Vignaux: That would be Medusa, the gorgon. It seems to me that the Erinyes are transcendental beings. They are divine beings in a way. They stand for retribution, rather than revenge.

Clara Simpson: If it's a question of revenge, it is at a higher level.

Michèle Vignaux: Yes, revenge is a very human thing. Retribution is from above.

Clara Simpson: And *reparations*. It really does remind me of the Irish, who will fight for their nation, but not nation as we understand it, nation as in their language, their spirit. The language is hugely important because it's a tool. They speak Gaelic, they do not speak English. The play is written in English, but when it is performed in English, the Scottish parts are spoken in Gaelic, which is a very different language. It's a very complex and advanced language. And at the time of this play in eleventh-century England and Scotland, English was a new language, a mixture of four languages I think. Saxon, Latin, Norse... am I missing one...?! Which is why Gruach says to Siward "your language is a carpenter's tool", in French *la langue d'un menuisier*. She's actually saying to Siward that his language is rudimentary, not as sophisticated as the Gaelic.

Christine Kiehl: She also says to him "our language is the forest".

Clara Simpson: "Our language is the forest. You don't understand the forest". Their language is full of mysteries, poetry. The invader comes in, with a new language, born from commerce and military. It's the political and functional language at the time. A lot of different nationalities use it to trade.

Michèle Vignaux: “To seduce a man in English is like dancing with wooden shoes”. There is also a confrontation between Malcolm and Siward, in which Malcom complains of Siward’s “insistent literalness”. It’s very clear that Scottish is much more subtle, nuanced.

Clara Simpson: Full of metaphors. They say, and I believe it, that languages resemble their country, literally, physically. Scottish, the language, is a reflection of the actual land, the highlands and the lowlands. It’s a very varied and extreme country.

Christine Kiehl: She talks in images but she is less lyrical than Lady Macbeth. Does she have something of the witch in her?

Clara Simpson: I think the wonderful thing is that in the twenty-first century world, David Greig isn’t actually asking us to believe she is a witch. He’s clever, it’s very subtle. He knows that the image, the old conceived idea, is that this woman is so gifted that she must be a witch. To command such power. Which is an idea that ran through society at the time, and through to very recent times. She’s aware that the English suspect she might have witches’ powers, and that Scotland is full of dark magic. So, she plays on that, and she plays on them. And Greig leaves it open and hanging at the end of the play, maybe she actually *was* a witch. We all know that obviously fairies don’t exist. But there’s always that frisson of “but maybe, just maybe they do...”. I think he plays on the idea that the tourist board of Scotland would sell as being Scottish, the myths and the highlands, the fog and the purple mountains, Loch Ness and so on. So, it’s like a *clin d’oeil*, but at the same time, when you’re over there, when you actually go to these places and you look around you, and you feel the atmosphere, you could believe. It could be true”. I love how he plays on that mystery.

Gruach plays with the young soldier boy, she has fun in that scene, and during the play she gets really close to this young man. That's another theme in the play, the absent sons: her son is missing, Siward's son is missing. And then, the young soldier boy, who is far from home, is placed between this man and woman, like a surrogate child. But she plays on the young soldier boy, his fear and skepticism, and he ends up believing in her magic. And it's a bit like any magic, if you believe, it works.

Christine Kiehl: so Lady Macbeth would be related to this myth of the witch thirsting for power. In French, power can either mean *pouvoir* or *puissance*, which are two very different things. You can have power (*le pouvoir*) and not be powerful. But Gruach seems to want power in both senses, (*pouvoir et puissance*), which brings a more modern, a more feministic dimension to the figure of the witch. In the Middle Ages, relating women to witches was a way to deny the power of women, considered subversive and dangerous for a male-governed society, whereas today, the witch has become a very popular emblem of rebellion as Mona Chollet wrote³.

Clara Simpson: I think the connection between *Les sorcières* de Mona Chollet, the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the witch in *Dunsinane*, and the witch figure in today's society, is the fear that women might have superpowers. They can give birth, they're kind of crazy, and if you leave them on their own too much, independent of men, they're very much to be feared.

Christine Kiehl: You mean, when they are not under someone's control?

Clara Simpson: Yes. I think David Greig asks what is power for a woman? Baptiste Guiton, our director, really reinforced the idea that

the power of this woman is that she doesn't use seduction in the classical sense. She does indeed seduce Siward, and possibly allows herself to dream a little, but she doesn't allow her heart to rule, which, for an audience, and even for an actor at the beginning, is quite hard to accept. You think "oh no no! She's got to fall in love! They've got to be in love! That last scene in act IV, they're definitely in love!" As an actor, you always want your character to be noble. You always want them to be the heroes. You want her to be a heroin. And she is a heroin. But she does not lose sight of what she wants. If she sleeps with Siward, it's because she wants something of him, which is hard, even for an actress, to accept. She doesn't use the accoutrements of seduction. She doesn't curl her hair, she doesn't put on lipstick. Or if she does, it's because she enjoys it for herself. Her symbol of witchery is that like any good war chief, she plays on the enemies' nerves, she plays on their fear. It's like the German army during the Second World War, one of their genius strokes was to create this extraordinary siren, The Sirens of Death, that their planes invading England would let off. This high-pitched noise that would scare the living daylights out of the London people, and that was as effective a war tool, as the bombs themselves. Of course, they did use a lot of bombs too!

But it's the fear, the strategy of fear that is Gruach's witchery. Her intelligence is witchery. She doesn't have a crystal ball, she's just clever, very very clever. She's in touch and very connected to nature, which is something that the rational mind, the rational English man doesn't like either. Because anything that isn't rational scares the hell out of him. It's also back to the idea that women are to be feared when they are too connected and associated with the happenings of the other world, to the spirits, trees, and the elements, which Shakespeare uses a lot.

Student: You talk about Gruach as a witch and how she uses that power, how she uses the illusion of her power, how do you act this on stage?

Clara Simpson: Great question. The big challenge in playing a queen and a really powerful woman, was to question the idea of what power is, and not to fall into any clichés. If we sit back and think about what embodied power is, as women and men, it is when people stop having to try. They don't have to seduce. So, the big challenge for me, as an actress, was to not, in any way, seduce the actor opposite when playing the role, or the director, or the audience. An important decision. I struggled with it at the beginning, I had all these guys around me, all these actors in leather jackets, with loads of armour and weapons. And I just had this little nightdress, I had nothing to turn me into Superwoman or Catwoman or Cleopatra. I had nothing. So I started slowly but surely going "well, Jesus, I have nothing in this show, so what can I do? Well, do nothing." So, I started to do less and less and go back to the text asking: "what is it, what's scary?" It's written there, I wasn't inventing it. What's written in the play is that she just tells the truth. She looks someone in the eye and she's direct. And that's very powerful. The English man is very unnerved by that. He never knows when she's telling the truth or not. I don't think it makes her cold, I think it just makes her frank. That's her power, her frankness. She was still a queen but she didn't have, as we say, royal manners. But she could fight.

Student: In *Macbeth* and in *Dunsinane*, Lady Macbeth is presented as "the wife of", "the queen of". In *Dunsinane*, Gruach is also presented as "the queen of", "the mother of". How do you perceive her as a woman without a link to someone?

Clara Simpson: In her own right. She's a mother and she has been a wife. I think the most important thing to remember about her is that she's lucid. She knows what she's doing. If she has to marry this man to further the future of her country, she'll marry this man. She's absolutely lucid, which is quite shocking in a way. And Gruach is in a man's society, a military society. She's the only woman apart from the other young kamikaze, *la jeune fille qui s'occupe des poules*, who's one of

her soldiers and blows herself up. The equivalent of today's DAESH's military extremism is quite pertinent in this whole landscape. It is a form of terrorism. The Scots are very good at being terrorists. It's not a direct war, they hide in the hills, and stage ambushes. Then run for the hills. They know how to do that, they know the land.

Michèle Vignaux: It's their country, like the Afghans, like the Vietnamese... they always have an advantage.

Clara Simpson: They don't have the military power to reply in any other way. They don't have the numbers, they don't have the weapons. At the time, the English army had been armed by the Normans and they were incredibly sophisticated. They were *en retard*, the Scottish.

Michèle Vignaux: But they had the knowledge of the terrain, which, as Machiavelli insists, is terribly important as well. It shouldn't be neglected.

Clara Simpson: Yes, the play is about the land. War usually is. Again, just because of the context, I think of Scotland today and Ireland today. We think there was a religious war in Northern Ireland. It wasn't a war waged to defend the Protestant or Catholic religions, it's about land and people's history with the land, how they're attached to and feel represented by the land. It's as far away from urban society as you could get. Scotland is so far north, it's nearly in Norway. You can see the northern lights up there. It's an extraordinary country. The land itself is very, very dramatic and very powerful. This lady comes from the Moray family, which are from a long line of people in the highlands. So, you cannot get more extreme surroundings. Next stop north is the Orkney Islands, and then you're in Norway. You're nearly in Scandinavia. The elements are incredibly harsh. Their connection to that land is so strong. They have become Christians, but it's Celtic

Christianity. They're practically pantheist, which means that God is in everything, in all the elements. They believe in that, in the water, in the wind, in the rain. The water is incredibly important. There's a lot of it! There's rain, snow, marshes, rivers, the sea... They're very harsh conditions. The English are at a huge disadvantage.

In any country where the elements are very severe, what becomes important? Oral tradition becomes very important. Language becomes very important, very developed.

Michèle Vignaux: To come back to the staging, there's no attempt at any realistic scenery. Quite like Shakespeare's theatre, everything is in the language, in the poetry, how to suggest nature through the words. In this, Greig is very Shakespearean. The stage was a fairly neutral stage, which could suggest the castle. There was no attempt at...

Clara Simpson: Representation, illustration.

Christine Kiehl: It's very stylised. A lot of metal suggesting a fortress.

Clara Simpson: David Greig's play leaves it very open, as does Shakespeare. Shakespeare sometimes changes location, country even, from one scene to the next. So, it cannot be represented in a realistic way. Baptiste Guiton's choice, in this production, was to suggest the castle with a metal structure. Everything is about the castle. The play is called *Dunsinane*. All the other action, like in Greek tragedy, happens off stage. The armies don't meet on stage. The entire play takes place in the castle.

Christine Kiehl: An important element of staging is light. What can you say about light and darkness in this play?

Clara Simpson: The lighting designer was inspired by a number of things. One was the paintings of Edward Hopper, in a sort of modernist America, where colour, a bit like the fauvist paintings, would represent emotion. The lack of colour is also commenting on something. There are a lot of lateral lights that would come and, like in Renaissance paintings, pick out the silhouettes and create mystery and tension in the dark background. There were contemporary visual suggestions, neon lights, in pinks, greens. There was some upbeat stuff. At no time was it trying to reflect the eleventh century. And a lot of people are confused because they think that the action in *Macbeth*, because it was written by Shakespeare, actually took place in Elizabethan times. Of course, it didn't. It took place in the eleventh century, in 1040 or something like that, in the Middle Ages. In our production, it was a mixture of some very beautiful contemporary lighting, and mainly a dark stage. Hard to imagine living in those times, living in a world with no electricity. It'd be so scary, like what's behind that door? Night-time was very dangerous for these people. It was very easy to believe in magic.

Student: What about the sounds like the thunder?

Clara Simpson: Thunder and lightning. No. We use music as a metaphor. There was music on stage. One of the actors plays an extraordinary instrument, like a flat guitar, like Jimi Hendrix on stage.

Christine Kiehl: a zither?

Clara Simpson: A present day version of a zither. We had a musician and a sound engineer who created a lot of music for the production. There was sound effect, atmospheric sound but never illustrative. It wasn't like a soundtrack in a film, which makes you start feeling scared before you actually see what's going to happen. What the musician

who created the music for this production steered everybody away from, was any kind of sentimental, picturesque, sound reference to Scotland, the kind of tourist take we might have on that. It was quite physical. I think the whole take tried to remain resolutely contemporary with references.

Student: What is Siward's relationship to duty?

Clara Simpson: Siward's political aspiration is to do the right thing. To me, he was like Tony Blair when he sent the boys into Iraq, it was his moral ground. As Gruach says at the end of the play: "it's such a shame you're a good man". Good men are very dangerous with their ideas.

Clara Simpson: It's interesting that in Justin Kurzel's film version of *Macbeth* (2015) the three witches are in the presence of a child, which is really disturbing in that film. Children can be very disturbing, children and women, it's funny, isn't it? Why? Because we feel as if they're connected to something that we've lost touch with.

Christine Kiehl: that *men* have lost touch with.

Clara Simpson: Men, and even us in our evolved society. When the connection to nature in a way is cut in urban societies. I remember, I was an au pair girl for this very proper family in place de Clichy, in the XVIIe in Paris, when I was studying in the Cours Florent. This is a little digression. There were three kids. There was a boy who was older, there was a little girl who was about three. She was the devil incarnate. She was the scariest. It was like *The Shining*. She freaked me out. They were lovely people. The mother played the classical harp, and the father just kind of looked confused. There was a baby and an older boy, they used to go to rallies. I was an Irish woman thinking "what is

going on?” I just arrived in France. And this little girl, she obviously knew that there was a little way to get in with me. She’d come up and go “I had a dream last night. Mmm. I dreamt the devil came to see me. He makes me want to do things.” There was something about the fact that a small child, when they say that, they might have a connection that we don’t, because they’re closer to that world. Like the author Beckett, who was very connected, who did a big *psychanalyse* and connected to young and the dreams and all of that. He explored and remembered the time he spent in his mother’s tummy. He talked about it. As did my children, they told me about what went on. That connection with children is the non-rational world. Scotland is the non-rational world for the English. Clearly. Every time these imperial powers go and try to dominate the world and the lands that they don’t know, they often lose.

Michèle Vignaux: on English representations of the Scots, there was a famous book by Thomas Harriot on the New Found Land of Virginia, which established some sort of parallel between the natives of America and the Picts in old Scotland who were similarly tattooed...

Clara Simpson: I heard yesterday that in the paintings in caves, the signature was a hand. The conceptual sculptor Jane McAdam Freud (who is the daughter of Lucian Freud, and the great great granddaughter of Sigmund Freud) discovered that, that they used to put their hands in paint, like children do, and put it on the wall. That was their signature. A lot of those signatures have been discovered to be women’s, which means that a lot of the art was done by women, which is very recent.

Michèle Vignaux: ... here is a Pict soldier and then we have a woman Pict, a young daughter of the Picts. They’re tattooed all over.

Clara Simpson: This is an English drawing of what they imagined the Picts to be.

Clara Simpson: It is beautiful, when you see this prehistoric use of stones, like the old Pict crosses, and their language, quite like the Irish old Celtic stuff, full of symbols, snakes, circles. The old themes run through...

Christine Kiehl: And there is the figure of the moon.

Clara Simpson: The moon is huge. Just imagine being a Pict, the moon and the sun were just huge. They were very connected to that. There were obviously a lot of snakes around as well.

Student: I have a question on language: How do you do it on stage when Gruach is speaking Gaelic?

Clara Simpson: I speak Gaelic. That's a good answer. I speak Irish Gaelic, it's practically the same thing.

Student: How is the audience supposed to understand what you're saying in Gaelic?

Clara Simpson: It depends I suppose. The story is being told, on many levels, through the eyes of an Englishman. It's Siward's narrative. He's the one who tells. There's very often a character in a play who assumes the responsibility of telling the story. In a play there's often also the voice of the author, which can be the intimate voice of the author, sometimes distributed through a couple of characters, but which also often comes through one character, something more intimate. I don't

think it's Gruach. I think the young soldier tells the story but assumes as well the political responsibility of what Greig is trying to say through his version of *Macbeth*, his sequel. But to get back to the Gaelic and not understanding it, the character I'm speaking to is not supposed to understand it. So, it makes perfect sense that an Englishman, in front of this Scottish witch who speaks a very strange language, or dialect as they like to think, speaks in a foreign language, which is what they did in the original Greig production. It was a coproduction between the National Theatre of Scotland and the Royal Shakespeare Company in England. The hen girl speaks in Gaelic like it's a code language as well. It used to drive the English crazy that people wouldn't be speaking in their language. It was banned 800 years. They banned Irish in Ireland. They actually made it illegal to speak. It's horrific.

Christine Kiehl: And that has happened in so many wars with the invaders trying to impose their language.

Michèle Vignaux: But the English find language an obstacle in Scotland. Gruach points out towards the end "Nearly a year here and you haven't yet learned our language". Language is a powerful weapon as well, an obstacle.

Clara Simpson: Language, religion and music, entertainment, all of which were banned in Ireland. But they gave up on the Scots. The English brought the Scots into England, educated them and put them back. They dominated them, they offered them land, money, education and slowly but surely, they anglicized the Scots.

Michèle Vignaux: When they suppressed the Scottish parliament in order to create the parliament of Great Britain, they incorporated them into the English parliament. That was the end of it.

Clara Simpson: That's what's interesting about somebody like Macbeth and Gruach, the Scots were tribal. They weren't centralized. That's what made it so difficult for them to resist the English. They didn't always have a common cause. The common cause was freedom. You'll never keep a Scotsman down. It's freedom. Like *Braveheart*, it's quite a good film actually, that film with Mel Gibson who plays Wallace. They found it so difficult to unite, because they would fight amongst themselves, as did the Irish. It was a tribal faction. Basically, unlike the English and the French, royalty was not sanguine, it was not hereditary. You had to be part of the royal family, but it was quite an extended family. It was basically "let the best man win", whoever was the strongest and proved it, which is why she says at the beginning of the play "my king, my guy, was the strongest, he ruled for fifteen years". Which is true, historically, and it's a long time for someone! They just kept on killing each other. It was *coup d'état après coup d'état*. Macbeth is called "the tyrant" because he was a very strong leader, fearsome, but you kind of had to be at the time.

Michèle Vignaux: Julius Caesar said the same about the various tribes in Gaul, in *the Gallic Wars*. But he managed to play them one against the other, which is not the case here.

Clara Simpson: The Romans never made it to Ireland.

Michèle Vignaux: nor beyond Hadrian's wall.

Clara Simpson: They just built that wall, because they said "look, let them! Leave them! They're too complicated!"

Student: In the English text, there seems to be a lot of mistakes, like grammar mistakes, and they're not really reproduced in the French version. Was it done on purpose by Greig?

Clara Simpson: some of the language is quite colloquial, as in local colour, you know it's a Scots person talking. It's idiosyncratic, it's not normative language. It has a local colour, which as a translator, is impossible to reproduce. So, Pascale Drouet, who translated *Dunsinane* into French, tried to tell it as clearly as possible without making it too complicated for our ears, which I think is the best choice that she made. There are a lot of colloquialisms in Greig's play that don't travel through to the French. Some of the language is not normal normative English. There's a lot of very familiar contemporary language, which has been straightened out in the French.

Christine Kiehl: Can you tell us about the structure of the play in four parts, one for each season?

Clara Simpson: Beautiful. When Gruach says "you've been here a year and you still don't speak the language", it's one complete cycle, which is connected to nature, to the natural cycle, the female cycle. That's why I think, the pantheist, that side of being connected to the elements, is really really strong. But at no time does David Greig make it *pittoresque*. The minute you start talking about these beautiful places, like la Bretagne, we all get a little bit romantic. David Greig is unsentimental, but he's poetic, there's obviously a huge difference. One very interesting thing about him as a writer is that he did not grow up in Scotland. There's a distance. He said that very beautiful thing that he treats language always as though he's translating it, as a foreign language. He's not trying to be really natural. It's not always naturalistic. The words, the language flow very easily, but there are odd formulations... it's not just bad grammar. [...] He has an extraordinary sense of rhythm, Greig. It's incredibly musical. It's wonderful to play. It's naturalistic and very credible to portray, but there's always that extra attention to rhythm and language.

Christine Kiehl: Which means that the translation is very good, because you're talking about playing it. You've played it in French, but you've never played it in English.

Clara Simpson: Not yet.

Christine Kiehl: Pascale Drouet's job was not easy.

Clara Simpson: She did very well. The difficulty is to translate familiar language. It's always really complicated. There's a lot of swearing, bad language in this. Bad language with a Scottish accent is just what I would call "colourful language". It sounds great. It's got a lot of humour in it. The Scottish people are so funny. There's a wonderful Scottish comedian called Billy Connolly, and I defy you to listen to him and to try and understand what he's saying. It's wonderful. A lot of Ken Loach's films as well. In *The Angels' Share* (2012), for instance, they're Scottish and it's delicious. And they use bad language all the time, but it doesn't seem vulgar. That's a real challenge in French. For the translation of *Dunsinane*, there was a big debate about the word that we'd use for "boy", "the soldiers", because in the English language, you talk about "the boys", which is the army like *les gars*, *les soldats*. But *les gars* in French immediately has a working class connotation. *C'est un peu populaire "les petits gars"*. Whereas "The boys", not only means "soldiers", but also the idea of sacrificing the children. When Siward turns up in that scene saying "a boy is dead", we think of a child, which is true. They were young, like kids, as is often the case today of the soldiers, they're kids. That whole idea of these young boys being sent to fight, slaughtered, being sacrificed, is interesting. There always are *des faux amis* between French and English. But I think you have to take license when you translate. It is your version. There's a man who talks well about that, who does a lot of translation and whose writing is amazing, who is called Frédéric Boyer. He organized the translation in 2002 of the Bible, and in his préface he explains

what he does with translation and the reasons why he chooses to translate, it is so beautiful. He translated Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, it's an extraordinary translation. It's really physical and muscular, and in the rhythm, it's very contemporary without at all losing any power. He talks about that, he has given loads of interviews on France Culture about translation. He translated Virgil's *Géorgiques* and *les Confessions de saint Augustin* ... his prefaces, his introductions are amazing.

The actor Laurent Terzieff, a beautiful old French actor who is dead now, said that translation was the distance you measure that the author travelled away from normative language. As a translator, if you're reading a piece of writing in its original language, you have to measure and analyze how far away from normative language the original author is. How can I say it in another way? When the author is writing, he decides to write in either incredibly simple normative language, or he might choose, as a writing style, to slowly move away from what we consider normal classical language. And it's the distance he moves away from it, that is something that you, as a translator, have to measure to produce the equivalent in the language you are translating into. It has to be as exotic or non-exotic, depending, as that original departure. It's in his little book, his little autobiography. It's a really interesting question, because in a way, if the original author would like to do this crazy, extraordinary departure from normative language, and you have to translate it, first of all... somebody else said and I can't remember who, that translation dates very quickly. It dates much quicker than the original writing. The original writing came from an organic place, whereas the translation is referring, it's getting all the rules right. Therefore, there's always something artificial about it, and that doesn't come from that organic place. So, it will date much quicker, which is why we constantly need new translations of works that can speak to our contemporary ears. I have an example where I produced a play that was written in English, by an Irish author, John Millington Synge. He wrote plays in English, but English which was very influenced by the Irish language, because it was written in the

1900s where the Irish was still spoken a lot in Ireland. His English was very exotic, extraordinarily different to the normative English language at the time, very poetical, beautiful. When a French woman came along, Françoise Morvan, to translate this language, she's from Brittany and she has got the whole "we're cousins" with Ireland, she tried to produce the same crazy language in French. She's a wonderful woman, but in French, sorry Françoise, it's just too much. It's too difficult. It's *truculent*, but it's too much. It might be *fidèle* in a way, it reproduces the same *mécanique*, but it doesn't work. So, I asked a contemporary poet, Jean-Pierre Siméon, to write it again. You have traces of all of that, but you can still understand what's going on. It's not to make everything flat or contemporary, but translation needs to be looked at, updated. Some of them are beautiful, but they're very personal, subjective.

Student: I'd like to go back quickly on the visual aspects of the play, if you don't mind. You mentioned Edward Hopper as an inspiration. Is there any chance the play was inspired by other artists as well? Because I would like to work on visual representations of *Macbeth* and *Dunsinane*, so I would like to know if there are any other sources.

Clara Simpson: I don't think so... I know there were other influences for the lighting designer and his colourscape, his palette, which I immediately recognized. He was influenced by the whole *Scandi noir*, all that new Scandinavian television, *les polars*, which has become very of the moment. Everything's green, it's always washed-out greens and greys, it's kind of a washed-out palette. There's a lot of green in it. Sometimes, there was beautiful kind of pale green light. So *Scandi noir*. Definitely American modernism, that he's a big fan of. There was one image in the play, it was like Caravaggio's *Pieta*, where Siward was holding the boy that had been killed. That was Baptiste's idea with all the beautiful Renaissance lighting behind it. In a way, the author paints it, he paints it, as we said very clearly, with words. There are the four seasons. Summer is full of blood, and then autumn gets very

wet. That's not very visual for you. The end, the first thing I saw, and I'm sure you feel the same, in that snowscape of act IV, was those sorts of Japanese influences of a little island with snow. The author gave us all of that already. Weirdly enough, the English production, which I think you can see photos of online, and there might be the trailer... or the teaser. That's why I made the connection. They go back, in the English/British production of *Dunsinane*, to the Elizabethan take on the play. It's the Royal Shakespeare Company, they're doing *Dunsinane* in Shakespearean clothes, nearly, bad Shakespearean clothes actually. It's a bit *ringard* if you ask me. But their set was quite similar to ours, a multifunctional piece of Lego that could adapt to quite a sparse set.

Christine Kiehl: the scenography defies clear historical location by incorporating the contemporary, beyond anachronisms.

Clara Simpson: It's not just out of time, we even get half a Roman toga with a tracksuit top. And it's great! These are references just for the imagination. But it has become in itself quite conventional. If you see a photo of Gruach in the Royal Shakespeare Company version, it's really old-fashioned. a bit *Moyen-Âge*. It's never contemporary. And everyone has got long beautiful hair, and they have got a lot of make-up.

Michèle Vignaux: It's interesting what you said with word 'painting'. I worked a long time ago on Renaissance music and that was one of the techniques, note painting, which was supposed to suggest through music, in the same way as words can suggest a whole atmosphere.

Clara Simpson: Shakespeare uses the iambic pentameter in very different ways, depending on what he wants to do, as does Victor Hugo. When you get the perfect *alexandrin*, it's usually in the mouth of the royalty, of harmony but a lot of the servants for example, don't get to

use verse. They don't get rhymes, they use prose. It's a more vulgar language. The more refined, the more perfect the language is, it's either a very important moment, but it's usually in the mouth of royalty.

Michèle Vignaux: In *Macbeth*, there is also the play on the iambic pentameter and the trochaic tetrameters for the witches.

Clara Simpson: Very powerful rhythmically. There's a suspicion, like you're not allowed to use those words out loud in the theatre, on the other side of the *Manche*.

¹ This interview was conducted in front of a class of 4th year students during the Covid crisis.

² Janvier 2020, TNP Villeurbanne.

³ Mona Cholet, *Sorcières, la puissance invaincue des femmes*. Éditions la Découverte, 2018.