



## Daniel Jeanneteau The Blind

Premiered on January 23 by Daniel Jeanneteau at the Studio-Théâtre de Vitry-sur-Seine, which he directs, *Les Aveugles* (*The Blind*), after Maurice Maeterlinck, is a tale and a parable. It takes from Brueghel the mixture of terrible, comic slapstick and the tragedy of the human condition. Here, Jeanneteau discusses the theme with philosopher Clément Rosset.

Daniel Jeanneteau is a key figure in French theater, even if his presence on the scene is rather discreet, and to some even hidden. In the 1990s he undertook a number of memorable collaborations with Claude Régy in which he created his unique "visions" of space. For Jeanneteau a staging is a *cosa mentale*, a way of offering the gaze an absorbing and enigmatic space that is extremely open and wide-ranging. Inspired by the conceptual, economical bareness of certain aspects of Japanese culture, Jeanneteau applies these principles in his own stagings. For the last ten or so years he has been putting on surprising, mysterious productions in collaboration with Marie-Christine Soma, offering surprising takes on classics that are free of superficial "contemporariness," or presenting new work, of which he is one of the great prospectors. When working on Maeterlinck's "proto-Beckettian" play *The Blind*, Jeanneteau also studied the essay on the invisible by Clément Rosset, with whom he talks about the play and the philosopher's interpretation of Brueghel's painting of the blind as a comment on the inaccessibility of reality and the nature of the human condition.

**Georges Banu**

**Daniel Jeanneteau** The starting point of our conversation, regarding the Maurice Maeterlinck play *The Blind*, could be the paradoxical question of the representation of the invisible. Maeterlinck's aim in this work and in all the short pieces of his early days (conceived for puppets rather than flesh-and-blood actors) was to conceive a kind of

theater that embodied purely interior actions for the spectator, invisible entities with no appearance (in *The Blind* what we have is essentially "the gradual overwhelming of consciousness by the feeling of death" [1]). In your book *L'Invisible*, what you say about a print by Goya (*Que viene el Coco*) strikes me as having a rather direct link to the play and, above all, its end, that is to say, the coming of something one fears, something one expects, something imaginary, which nevertheless ends up happening. The very image of insistent, elusive obsession. *The Blind* think they can hear steps coming closer and these steps frighten them although there is no clear explanation for that. We make out a skeletal silhouette, covered with a shroud, possibly with a scythe. In Maeterlinck, then, we find this deep proximity to tales and legends, to popular imagery, at the same time as an astonishing play on the banality of exchanges, between anonymous, ordinarily human figures. The play is a reading of Brueghel's *The Parable of the Blind*, a terrible yet comical painting of six blind men following each other into a pond. A kind of slapstick *danse macabre*.

### GUIDED BY A DEAD MAN

**Clément Rosset** That is the heart of the play. We are guided by a dead man. We cling on to what will lose us, as in the Brueghel painting. What characterizes all illustrations and premonitions of death is the theme of the sudden fall, of the sudden and unexpected cessation of a process, and that abruptness makes us laugh. As Kant observed, laughter often occurs when expectations are suddenly disappointed.(2) There is something about Maeterlinck that makes us laugh the way Samuel Beckett does, so this play is a little bit premonitory. In the Brueghel painting there is a procession of six blind men clinging on to each other, but it looks as if the person guiding them, the one who has already fallen, is not blind. I personally prefer to think he isn't. You can see the fear on the faces of the five blind men, who are holding on to the person in front them, or to their stick—the fear of losing the intermediary, the guide to reality. And crash! It's the seeing person who gets distracted, slips in a puddle and falls, making all the others fall after him. An absurd version of the *danse macabre*. The play is interesting, not because its style is different from that of Maeterlinck's later, better-known plays, but more because of its theme: a representation, among other things, of the journey to death, an acute, at once tragic and absurd variant of the medieval *danse macabre*. The blind are anxious that they have lost their only guide on a walk from which they will never

return, waiting for the return of a guide who himself will never come back, because he has died in their midst.

**D.J.** He is absent because dead...

**C.R.** As Jacques Lacan would say, he is missing from his place. And yet he is there, someone is about to stumble over him. This anxiety about what turns out to be a premonition of death, of disappearance in the night of blindness and in the cold, strikes me as being related to another parallel, less tragic anguish, the rather incomprehensible one we feel when we lose the only word that can designate and in some sense embody what we are trying to express. Because we have lost both the word and its inseparable content. There is something dreadful about this memory block, and it is also a foretaste of death, as Pascal Quignard says in *Le Nom sur le bout de la langue*.(3) I think it is because we are always worried that the word will never come back. And why is it that the loss of memory makes us so uncomfortable, to the point of provoking angst? When we get totally lost in looking for a name or a word, it is because there is a connection missing. We generally find the word because we refer to something that puts us on the right track. But total angst is like the night of the blind, when there is nothing to cling to. Nothing, no path, no clue, no symptom, no sound, to direct you towards the word. Or it can be worse, when a sound, a word, what Freud calls a screen-memory, obstructs our reunion with the lost word.

In the Maeterlinck play this loss of intermediary is obvious, in fact it's the theme. The intermediary is dead, and he was the only one. The intermediary is the sighted person, in this instance, the priest who died without giving any warning, without a word, as they say in the play. That makes a double death: not only did he die, but he died for no one, no one saw him die: death twice over. The connection with reality has been cut by the one link leading to it. A knife has forever separated the blind from everything that is not their reality, which in fact comes down to seeing nothing. This absence of intermediaries between reality and themselves makes them beings that are already unreal, if not to say dead. And this fate of the dead, which is to have been reduced to that primordial blindness (which is ultimately death) is obviously tragic by definition: they are the living dead, which, as we know, is one of the great horror themes.

### CAUSING VISIONS

**D.J.** *The Blind* raises the question of staging a play in which nothing happens, where there is nothing to see, in which the protagonists and ourselves as spectators are surrounded by the invisible.