

**Review of « Red Beard, Red Beard » by Odile Quirot, journalist at the french weekly magazine « le Nouvel Observateur », as posted on her culture blog « Théâtre et compagnies » on the Nouvel Obs website**

**04.04.2008**

**Discovering an unquiet American**

A blog is sometimes made, even if it displeases some, for live reactions. Thus I couldn't possibly wait to share an interest in a production signed by a stranger, in France at least. Because **John Malpede's** name will not ring a bell, most likely. Neither will the **Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD)**, which he founded in 1995 [*sic*]; a theater "without walls, committed, multidisciplinary" and which counts homeless people among his actors. **John Malpede** also worked with Bill **Viola** and Peter **Sellars**. This American who allies social commitment and artistic boldness can be discovered at the Theater of **Gennevilliers**, where he is Pascal **Rambert's** guest.

The performance is entitled "Red Beard, Red Beard", a title borrowed from Akira **Kurosawa's** "Red Beard" which inspires it: a magnificence in black and white, a story woven of the destinies of those who wind up at a free clinic for poor people headed by the doctor Red Beard, great healer of bodies and souls. A young ambitious doctor will learn there how to look at death in the eyes, and how to discover the goodness of the connection with another.

**John Malpede** gathered 40 actors, four from LAPD, the others being amateurs from Ivry-sur-Seine and Gennevilliers. Many make their first steps on a stage. The rehearsals lasted a month. The result is striking for its rigor, accuracy of tone, overall control. When we come back from here, we understand well why Marie-José **Mondzain** entitled her philosophic meeting: "Against discouragement" (guest Antonia Birnbaum, on April 5th, 17:00 at the theater).

Against discouragement, yes: here artistic research and social commitment go hand in hand. Here we do not ask young (or less young) people from suburbs to tell about their life, to play simple walk-ons, or to dance hip-hop. It is much more subtle, deeper, more universal also, due in particular to the way the **Kurosawa** movie is ever-present but never used as an image, or as a beautiful icon.

Like a choir, seated in a line and dressed in black, 40 actors say the lines from "Red Beard" in echo to the movie displayed on four small television screens. They sit on both sides of the TV, but they do not exactly enact what's playing, not always, and often portray a moment only with a simple movement of the head, or a look. Sometimes, for a more intense, brief scene, two or three actors get up, embody a character. The voices of the four groups of actors - the stage is a quadrangle around which four groups of spectators are distributed - reach the audience simultaneously, but slightly shifted, thus creating an enthralling impression of a perpetual murmur of oratorio, which amplifies even more the universal compassion of the **Kurosawa** movie. A beautiful mix of cinema and theater, of life and acting, "**Red Beard, Red Beard**" is an artistic experience and a profound human adventure; as when on an actor's face, we fleetingly perceive the echo of **Kurosawa's** story (until April

20th). This production, beyond **Japan** and beyond **Gennevilliers**, lasts as long as "Red Beard", the movie: 1h 52min.