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*Playful Thinking: Theater and Philosophy*  
(*du jeu dans la pensée*)

*Prologue*

In *The homecoming*, Pinter portrays the philosophy professor Teddy grappling with the »spontaneous philosophy« of Ruth, a prostitute and his wife, of Joey, the boxer, and Lenny, a pimp. Teddy is convinced that he is the only one able to see or understand (»I'm the one who can see.«) And yet Lenny and Ruth explore philosophical issues:

»Lenny: But you're a philosopher. Come on, be frank. What do you make of all this business of being and not being?

Teddy: What do you make of it?

Lenny: Well, for instance, take a table. Philosophically speaking. What is it?

Teddy: A table.

Lenny: Ah. You mean it's nothing else but a table. Well, some people would envy your certainty, wouldn't they, Joey? For instance, I've got a couple of friends of mine, we often sit round the Ritz Bar having a few liqueurs, and they're always saying things like: take a table, take it. All right, I say, *take* it, *take* a table, but once you've taken it, what you going to do with it? Once you've got hold of it, where you going to take it?

Max: You'd probably sell it.

Lenny: You wouldn't get much for it.

Joey: Chop it up for firewood.«

When staged by the theater, the failure of philosophy is patent: Teddy leaves his family to return to his American university. Ruth, who chooses Joey over Teddy, has the last word and directs her comments as much to her husband as to Philosophy:

»Ruth: Eddie, don't become a stranger.«

The occasional severity of theater with regard to philosophy is merely an echo of a long and lasting relationship. To this corresponds philosophy's malevolent fascination with theater: beginning with the third book of the *Republic*, has not theater been the haunting specter of the philosopher, to the point of excluding the tragedians from the polis? It is not simply a

question of attacking the state of theater, but more radically of discerning the harmfulness of its very essence: »The West as a whole, in its explicitly philosophical and truth-based plan, was founded on this hate.«<sup>1</sup> The credibility of the philosopher's remarks suffers when, in this same polis of the theater, a make-believe world creates illusions as indirect means of arriving at the truth. The same holds true when the spectator requires the philosopher to »play« within structures of emotional identification and seduction. When exposed to the risks of theater, all of philosophy's projects are challenged in its metaphysical concerns as well as in its educational, moral and political aims. With full knowledge of the facts and lamenting the powers of theater, philosophy can only master, control, or tolerate them. The staging of theater and philosophy together will necessarily take place in the mode of rivalry. In this essay, while acknowledging the lasting character of this relationship based on a power struggle, my aim here will be to expose its weaknesses and to illustrate how other options might be sketched out.

### *Love and Hate*

It should be recognized from the start that rivalry only makes sense in a context of close proximity. It is because theater and philosophy seek in part the same effect that a power struggle has any meaning; that is, because philosophy, like theater, seeks to have an effect, by making sense, and transforming those whom it addresses by the unveiled truth or path opened up by that meaning. An action is directed: therein lies the power which is at stake and demonstrates to what extent the interlocutor (spectator or reader) is the target of this arrangement. Whether dramatic or philosophical, these exchanges are directed at an individual and leave room for this interlocutor, sometimes enough for his existence and his reactions to materialize: it is not a coincidence that dialogue is so often a simple paradigm of the philosophical or theatrical relationship. Such a formal analogy generates periodically re-emergent attempts to philosophize on the dialogue mode<sup>2</sup> and to introduce into the theater philosophical dialogues or thought put into motion.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, in *L'art du théâtre*, Spring 1986, n°4, Arles, Actes Sud/Chaillot, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for example, also Jean-François Lyotard, in *Que peindre? Adami Arakawa Buren*, Paris, ed. La Différence, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Platon/G...*, from *Le Banquet* and *Le Mépris*, Michèle Foucher, Théâtre de Gennevilliers, April 1997; cf. also *La légende des anges*, by Michel Serres, Dijon, May 1998.

These exchanges founded on proximity and which circulate thoughts and thinking in the well-suited arena of the polis are rooted in a long and complex history. These beginnings would result as much in the annexation of the theater by philosophy or the government (pedagogical theater, theater of enlightenment, didactic or political theater) as in the appropriation of philosophical texts by the theater. For the contemporary period, I would cite the efforts of Grüber, who worked on fragments of Heraclitus in Milan in 1988, or the staging of »literary« texts by Jean Jourdheuil (*Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Montaigne: *Le rocher, la lande, la librairie*, Spinoza: *Vermeer et Spinoza*, Lucretius: *La nature des choses*<sup>4</sup>). Much is at stake in these exchanges and acknowledging proximity is far from implying the use of a common practice, an effective collaboration or even the creation of a mixed genre: theatrical philosophy or philosophical theater. Each foray from one domain into the other represents a risk and a chance for renewal, and at the same time an occasion for further plays for power. Against this backdrop of potential rivalry arise the accusations of annexation or appropriation, in other words, of denaturation.

Nevertheless, all of these exchanges reveal a truth: they question the exclusively solitary practice of philosophy as well as the systematically pusillanimous and entertaining character of theater. Each displacement gives birth to thought by incarnating it and restoring its »agoretic«<sup>5</sup> dimension: thought in theater rediscovers its strength of address and the theater, by fulfilling its connection to thought, regains its function as an agora. Theater and philosophy therefore maintain a relationship based on proximity that encourages movement and exchange as much through the practice of thought as through the public, dialogic or collective aspects of this practice in the polis. However, radical proposals deriving from the acknowledgement of the agoretic role in the arts and philosophy have not, to this date, taken shape. For example, the producer Jean Jourdheuil was not given the means to create his »Theater-Painting-Philosophy« project on Robespierre. It was an ambitious project that was to include a painting exhibit exploring the theme »Robespierre«, a symposium for philosophers on this same theme and the staging of Gilles Aillaud's *Le masque de Robespierre*. The novelty of this project was found in the idea of a contradictory »art space« that, in this case, Jourdheuil imagined as being »tumultuous.«<sup>6</sup> The problem presented by the hypothesis of an association which would create the conditions for both

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<sup>4</sup> 1978, 1982, 1984, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Guénoun uses the term »agoretique« for »assembly function« of the theater, in *Lettre au directeur du théâtre*, Le Restev-les-Eaux, Les Cahiers de l'Egaré, 1996, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Théâtre/Public*, no. 140, p. 47.



proximity and rivalry, was that of practical specificities versus common themes and objectives. With annexation or appropriation, specificity was transgressed or transposed. In a space allowing for the juxtaposition of genres, the specifics maintained highlight a certain proximity without giving rise to a power play: the effect being the creation of mutual recognition.

The problem posed by specificity in theatrical and philosophical practices still leaves room for many questions. We might begin by considering the following: it is the institutional practices most greatly influenced by the academy, be it in the realm of theater or philosophy, which develop and exacerbate their secular characteristics and satisfy the expectations and aims of the genre. Consequently, philosophers consider the theater as entertainment (or at best, culture), and theater people consider philosophy as an esoteric exercise accessible only to a minority. The two practices are thus divided using a system of oppositions: fundamental/futile, serious/recreational, arid/attractive, etc. In fact, theater and philosophy have often developed their autonomy by accentuating the rivalry between them and by cultivating differences. The thought that circulates between the two and is obviously present as much in theater as in philosophy does not possess the same characteristics. For the one, thought is systematic and conceptual and for the other, it is not distinguished from the words used to express it and the forms that implement it; here, thought is not coerced to subject itself to any demonstrations, nor does it prove its legitimacy. As Pierre Macherey demonstrates, with literature, there is an anonymous thought which presents itself and reintroduces some freeplay into its presentation. The fact remains that it is this supposed specificity which excludes what appears as deviant and exacerbates rivalry. In this type of configuration, each discipline exposes the limits of the other, thereby implicitly criticizing it. Any change of form or challenging of genres is out of the question, as a reform of practices, whatever they may be, implies a reexamination of their traditional characteristics and a sort of contamination. But before considering the possibility of more intimate links between theater and philosophy, it should be noted that the practices of the majority still cultivate, at the same time, specificity and rivalry, and that this behavior encourages distorted perceptions, false images and hypocrisy.

If philosophers were to casually turn their attention to the theater, or if by chance, dramatic authors were to philosophize, the result would be nothing less than reciprocal carping and misunderstanding. Philosophy knows, ungratefully, to not overestimate the texts from which it nevertheless derives its models and subjects: it stigmatizes their inadequacies or attempts to set forth their truths out of which it will create the theory. If the philosopher

cannot deny that dramatic literature frequently expresses truths, in particular those most often not revealed, and thus exercises an »eye-opening« function, he balks at admitting that subversion and transgression are two constant elements in theater. He merely illustrates and supports his remarks with quick references to those works which secretly inspired him. He hesitates even less to borrow thoughts after lifting them from context and altering their mode of enunciation. In this way, all that remains is a theoretical content that the philosopher can falsely claim credit for. This ingratitude by philosophers finds its parallel in the disparagement of current philosophical research by those who write for the theater: from Aristophanus to Brecht or Müller, philosophy is returned to its history and context. But critical freedom and attempts at comprehension do not always meet up. Freud's case, though it deals with psychoanalysis rather than philosophy, can serve as an example to illustrate the two aspects of this phenomenon. Imbued with theater, Freud transforms what he has gleaned from it, but the theater gets even with him through the way it anticipates psychoanalysis and portrays it.

Even the concrete alliances between philosophers and theater people, either true contemporaneous collaboration or intellectual alliances across time, have rarely proved to be without difficulty. Did Jaspers do justice to Strindberg? Nothing is less sure.<sup>7</sup> The same question might apply to Shakespeare scholars, analysts, or philosophers. Did the many philosophers grouped around Brecht have a decisive influence on his work? Though we may be drawn to study certain episodes in the tumultuous relationship between Brecht and Benjamin, Bloch or Lukács, we soon conclude that they are pervaded by rivalry. This fact detracts from our analysis, offers no theoretical insight into the relationships and leaves us with no more than value judgments. Misunderstanding is the norm, be it for Hölderlin or Artaud. One of the most persistent (and surprisingly heuristic!) of these ideas is that which permitted philosophers to invent a strong philosophical figure in Greek tragedy, very different from the one known to historians. A recent work by Jacques Taminiaux<sup>8</sup> reveals the extent to which philosophers transform this art form »whose birth, rise and decline mirrored that of Athenian democracy« into an ontological document. Examining the roots of tragedy, he refers to Plato and, after separating and bringing out Hölderlin's singular stance concludes: »The Platonic source contradicts the German current in that Platonic tragedy possesses none of the dignity inherent in an ontological document attributed to it by German philosophers.«<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Karl Jaspers, *Strindberg und Van Gogh*, Bern, 1922.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Taminiaux, *Le théâtre des philosophes*, Grenoble, ed. Millon, 1995, p. 5.



Be it carping or misunderstanding, our interest lies less in the negative side of this statement than in the inevitable consequences of the withdrawal of these disciplines into their respective protectionist autonomies and academic traditions. Repression accumulates at the margins of institutions and seeks outlying spaces with no predetermined purpose to express itself: thus, a critical philosopher at odds with this academic or university abusive practice, may, by rediscovering dialogues or poetry, find asylum in the theater. Inversely, the more adventuresome undertakings of theater which reject the constraints of entertainment, find an answer in philosophical dialogues. Distancing themselves from sterile convention and conventional expectations, theater and philosophy seek salvation and renewal by exchanging their stages and language.

Do the necessary conditions for dialogue, exchange and collaboration truly exist and is the present situation a new one? There is no lack today of enthusiastic scholarship by philosophers specializing in theater, well received by theater people interested in philosophy and competent in this domain. We cannot, however, ignore the great tradition of scholars which begins with Aristotle and Diderot and brings us, in France, to Henri Gouhier, Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze, as well as Jacques Derrida, Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. This indulgence for personal tastes or for the clever handling of reciprocal misunderstanding has often been dismissed as being suspiciously and conveniently self-serving. Lacoue-Labarthe seems convinced of this in suggesting that the love displayed by the philosopher differs from hate only in a simple inversion of values: »Hate or love (...) are, in this case, the same thing. What it amounts to, at any rate, is an *arraignment* of the theater or its theorization.«<sup>9</sup> Any alliance created merely represents a power play by philosophy, desirous of controlling the theater in order to subject it to its own designs. Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis may be suggestive and valid, but it does not consider the will of each party to come out of confinement or to attempt an objective alliance against their shared long-standing sclerosis.<sup>10</sup> Besides the theater portrayed as victim is perhaps excessive: does the theater not tolerate with polite indifference much talk of legitimization, the effects being no more threatening than those of the compromises made at every stage of production?

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<sup>9</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact Lacoue-Labarthe assisted the producer Jean-Louis Martinelli when he staged *Oedipus-Tyran* by Hölderlin (Avignon, July 1998).

### *Playful Thought*

We could endlessly ponder the conditions necessary for genuine collaboration between dramatic authors, producers and philosophers. We may come closer to finding an answer by examining the ideas of philosophers who defend the concept of »aesthetic rationality«. <sup>11</sup> They abandon exaggerated appreciation of artistic creation, dismissed as »speculative art theory« and, influenced by Habermas, work from an angle based on a critical rereading of Adorno. They proceed by exposing the principles on which the perception and interpretation of works of art are based. An aesthetic associated with German philosophy that abandons a central role in philosophical thought in order to contribute to »the general debate on aesthetic categories, the state of Art, and rules for defining and interpreting works of art,« would reestablish the bond uniting aesthetics and poetics. Could such an aesthetic unite artists and philosophers around one object? To not stray too far from the theater, I would say that nothing is less sure, and this for several reasons.

The first reason is that philosophy's or aesthetics' interest in theater shifts the focus from the performative to the theoretical realm. As much as dramatic writing or staging is derived from implicit or explicit theorization, so theoretical reflection, when uprooted from its performative context, is of little concern to artists. When the writer or director creates a speculative work and occasionally theorizes about its practical representation, he is nonetheless a creator of art, participating in a process which has more to do with action than knowledge. The logic of action and commitment obeys its own inherent requirements. Mikel Dufrenne agrees that, »thought and action are in perpetual discord. (...) Human choices, no matter how justified, are never satisfactory, insofar as they express man's unjustifiable being.« <sup>12</sup> Though the dramatist and the philosopher may agree about thought and thinking, they diverge when it comes to the fabrication of Art. On this point, the dramatist is misunderstood by the philosopher unless, as Alain Badiou suggests, he transforms himself into an »anti-philosopher« striving to confront concept with reality and defending truth, »that is the subjective dimension of the act« and as such, »implies an encounter.« <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rainer Rochlitz, »Religion de l'art et théorie esthétique en Allemagne«, in *Histoire et théories de l'art de Winckelmann à Panofsky*, Revue germanique internationale, Paris, PUF 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, *Jalons*, La Haye, Nijhoff, 1966, »Les aventures de la dialectique«, p. 173.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Badiou, »Paul, le saint«, in *Art Press*, no. 235, May 1998, p. 54.



The second reason is at least as decisive. It concerns one of the greatest acts of violence philosophy has committed against the theater: that of reducing theater to its literature. Philosophy has undeniably played a central role in the overemphasis placed on theatrical authors and texts, thus detracting from their representation in the technical and theatrical sense of the term. There is no need to review the Aristotelian condemnation of »opsis«: even if it requires careful handling, it stigmatizes a preference that would exile theatrical representation from philosophical reflections and considerations on the theater. Philosophy, in this case, becomes the faithful ally of Literature in the subjugation of the theatrical production by the tyranny of text. Today, it is in this area that further investigation must take place if we hope to establish a dialogue between theatrical art and philosophy and between director and philosopher. It is not a question of separating author and director, but of uniting the specificity of dramatic writing to its production on stage, with all of the problems that staging presents. Herein lies the art of the theater: as an ephemeral encounter between actors and audience, this event, which organizes itself around bodies and inextricably binds thoughts and emotions, represents without a doubt philosophy's repression. This event also finds its place at the margins of society: the building or site assigned for a performance functions exceptionally, according to its own set of rules. To employ terms used by Michel Foucault, this site acquires a heterotopic function in the etymological sense of the term: the theatrical space is a singular space and an exception, and as such, is authorized to question that which takes place outside of its walls and, in particular, in »the negative structure of society.«<sup>14</sup>

Looking at this from a different angle, but one that builds on this line of reasoning, Gilles Deleuze contrasts two forms of theater or two staging operations. In the first, a traditional operation, everything is extrapolated »on élève au 'majeur:' a thought becomes a doctrine, a way of life becomes a culture, an event becomes a History. In this way, we claim to recognize and admire when, in fact, we 'normalize'.«<sup>15</sup> The other operation allows us to discover an »active minority force« in, for example, Shakespeare as staged by Carmelo Bene. Theater (its staging) finds, therefore, an »anti-representative function in outlining, constituting in some way a figure of minority consciousness as the potential of each of us.« A definition takes

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, »Des espaces autres«, 1967 and »La folie et la société«, 1970, in *Dits et écrits*, Paris, Gallimard, t. 4, p. 756 and t. 3, p. 478.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Superpositions*, Paris, Minuit, 1979, p. 97.



shape: »Theater will emerge as that which represents nothing but which presents and constitutes a minority conscience, as a universal becoming.«<sup>16</sup>

Extending Foucault's line of reasoning, I would invoke the power of theater in terms of opposition and transgression and perceived as »the act that involves limits.«<sup>17</sup> »Opposition is not the result of thought which denies existence or values, but rather the act which takes each thought to its limit or, perhaps, to the realm in which ontological decision is made: to oppose is to reach an empty core where a being reaches his limit and where this limit defines a being. At that transgressed limit can be heard the resounding 'yes' of opposition which has the 'hee-haw' of the Nietzschean ass ring empty.«<sup>18</sup> Conceived in this manner, the theater is no longer philosophy's foil but takes up philosophy's most urgent questions and creates a forum for playing things out. The limit and the acts that violate it thus exist simultaneously. The stage mirrors our categories and their fragility; it questions us about our being and about the existence of the systems we establish (without identification or compassion). It is as though, as an effect of the stage and the theater, the philosopher confronts the conditions of incarnation and experiences the ability to think and to represent. This happens amidst the tension of an unassignable reality that the theater, in its best moments, has us feel.

A dialogue is established when the philosopher exposes thought to the risks of reality and when the dramatist opens up the stage to receive ideas that are not exclusively entertainment. This dialogue unites the protagonists who, without championing the same ideas, inspire one another to satisfy the same conditions. These encounters, as real and as frequent as they may be today, are unfortunately neither indispensable nor do they take place in real time; their occurrence depends solely on chance or affinity. In fact, their only site is moved within the spectator who, at the time the event unfolds, is able to realize the encounter between theater and philosophy.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125 and 130.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, »Préface à la transgression«, 1963, *op. cit.* t. 1, p. 236.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

