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a cura di

Roberto Ciancarelli, Fabiola Camuti, Aldo Roma

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SRUTI BALA

Theatre and the Risk of Fire

The contribution to this special issue on *Theatre as Enriched Environment* is written in a period of intense ecological, social and political turmoil and crises on a planetary scale, so overbearing that one must wonder how the tiny drop of water that the field of the arts represent, might possibly extinguish the fierce fires raging across the world. The urgency of the question of how performance might meaningfully respond to societal challenges is thus without doubt. Yet it is a question that has been posited so often in the history of theatre and answered in so many astonishingly different ways that it might be regarded as the paradigmatic question that triggers and sustains the theatrical imagination. In an unfortunately unfinished 1962 essay *On Brecht and Marx*, French philosopher Louis Althusser remarks that while both philosophy and theatre may be heavily determined by politics, what characterises them is that they do everything possible to «efface this determination, to negate it, to appear as if they escaped politics»¹. What Althusser possibly meant is that in order to find an adequate response to politics, it is the task of theatre to search for the political in the terms and means of the theatre, *i.e.* in theatrical practice itself. «One cannot see the place of politics in the theatre with a naked eye»², he continues, because political theatre at its best carries out a series of shifts or displacements,

¹ L. Althusser, *On Brecht and Marx* [1962], in W. Montag (ed.), *Louis Althusser*, Palgrave Macmillan, London-New York 2003, pp. 136-149: 140.

² *Ibidem*, p. 143.

distancing the viewer from cherished understandings of the political towards other modes of recognition and insight. In the final section of the essay, from which the current article borrows its title *Theatre and the risk of fire*³, Althusser sketches an imaginary scene that takes place in the theatre, in order to bring home an intriguing counter-intuitive argument about theatre as an enriched environment:

In the theatre the spectators are given the pleasure of seeing fire played with, only to be reassured that there is no fire, or that the fire is not in their house but in somebody else's house, anyway not in theirs. [...] If we want to know why the theatre entertains, we must take into account this particular type of pleasure – playing with fire without danger – with its double stipulation: 1. It is a fire without danger because it is on the stage, and because the play always extinguishes the fire; and 2. When there is a fire, it is always at a neighbour's house. [...] The audience is, indeed, composed of neighbours⁴.

For Althusser, the theatre of Bertolt Brecht and others he admired, including Italian playwrights such as Carlo Bertolazzi, and the productions of Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi, were pleasurable not because they mystified the high status of the arts as a site uncontaminated by politics, but because, in his view, they displaced the political within the practice of the theatre itself, they found a means to politically confront the viewers without fooling or intoxicating them, *i.e.* by presenting them with a risk⁵. The risk of playing with fire is pleasurable to the extent that it is controlled by the conventions of the art form, it can be indulged in with the assurance that it will be extinguished. The significant point is that the fire is interpreted by Althusser as a displacement, as a material and figura-

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 146-148.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

⁵ See L. Althusser, *The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht*, in Id., *For Marx*, Verso, London-New York 1969, pp. 129-151.

tive relocation and rearrangement of the political within theatrical praxis. «In order to put philosophy (and the theatre) in their (true) place» he asserts, «one has to carry out a displacement (*spostamento*) within philosophy and within the theatre»⁶. To answer the question of theatre's political responsibility is thus, following Althusser's scene of the fire in the theatre, to displace the risks of political action and thought onto the material conditions of the theatre.

A fuller elaboration of the underlying conception of the political would require situating Althusser's reading of theatre within his materialist philosophy and theory of ideology, which would exceed the scope of this contribution. In the following, I will analyse a recent lecture-performance, which serves as a case in point to think through Althusser's idea of theatre's pleasurable play with fire, and its implications for our current understanding of theatre as an enriched environment. The context is the annual national Dutch Theatre Festival, which is traditionally inaugurated by a lecture by a different speaker each year, titled *The State of the Theatre* in the auditorium of the Amsterdam Municipal Theater. The 2018 lecture was delivered by Belgian scholar-artist Chokri Ben Chikha, and concluded with a controversial performance intervention. Ben Chikha is a Belgian theatre maker, teacher and researcher. He is co-founder of the theatre companies *Union Suspecte* and *Action Zoo Humain*, with numerous performances that have been known for their provocative and controversial approach to public debates. He also conducted an artistic research doctoral study, wherein he examined the importance of stereotypes in performance.

⁶ On the term "displacement" (*décalage* in French original), Althusser references the Italian *spostamento* in brackets – possibly in allusion to the Italian context of theatre makers he addresses, as the translator remarks, but also possibly in nuancing the term *straniamento*, which is the usual Italian translation of the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdung*. Not estrangement, but an effect of displacement is what theatre can achieve, a recognition of something because of how it is relocated to a different place. See L. Althusser, *On Brecht and Marx*, cit., p. 141.

«Does anyone have a lighter?»

Towards the end of his lecture, Chokri Ben Chikha announced to a full hall in the majestic Municipal Theatre of the City of Amsterdam that he would set himself on fire. His lecture addressed the urgency for theatre makers to stop merely commenting and reflecting on the problems of the world, while safely remaining within the bubble of the theatre industry, and called upon them to start intervening in the world. When he announced towards the end of his lecture that he would immolate himself as a first possible step in that radical direction, the rumble in the audience was palpable. Ben Chikha then picked up a jerry can, which he had ostentatiously placed next to the lectern at the start of the lecture, walked to the front of the stage and doused himself with the liquid in the jerry can. During the seconds while all this was playing out in front of an increasingly disconcerted audience, one spectator, who happened to be a well-known senior theatre personality himself, got up from his seat and shouted «stop!», then marched up to the podium, exclaiming «this is not nice, not even as a joke!» and then intervened on stage, physically urging Ben Chikha to leave the stage, which, incidentally, he was doing on his own anyway. Ben Chikha's last lines as he exited were: «does anyone have a lighter?». The lecture performance by Ben Chikha, the intervention of the audience member, and all that played out after it ended, were the subject of much discussion in the Dutch and Flemish theatre circuits for the next weeks. Was it actually petrol that he doused himself with? One online commentator said he was so outraged that if it would “really” have been petrol, he would file a police case against Ben Chikha for incitement to violence or disturbance of public peace. Another replied that if it was “only” water, then it would be an equally cheap prank and he deserved to be reprimanded for raising false alarms and insulting the audience. Why play with the emotions of the audience, so the argument went, in order to merely make a stale point about theatre's (lack of) political impact, a lament as old as theatre history itself? Theatre ought not to be reduced to a site for political stunts. For some, the interruption of a lecture-performance by a staged or real

threat of self-immolation was a frivolous tactic. For others, including myself, it was a gesture of purposeful interruption, a clever use of “tactical frivolity” to urge us to be both circumspect and hopeful about the political potentials of theatre and performance.

It was not difficult to recognise the numerous markers of a theatrical frame that were part of Ben Chikha's lecture-performance. All along, a volunteer was seated in the wings of the stage with a fire extinguisher close to hand, a scenographic conjuring of the imminent possibility of fire, but also an instance of law and order, authorised to interrupt the performance at any moment if the public health and safety is endangered. Retrospectively, the volunteer's high-visibility yellow-orange vest could be interpreted as an uncanny foreboding of the *gilets jaunes* movement in France, that emerged two months after the performance, beginning November 2018. Anyone might have wondered why she needed to be positioned in a manner so glaringly visible to all, if it was simply about adhering to fire and safety regulations. Before Ben Chikha picked up the jerry can and poured the liquid on himself, he curiously proceeded to take off his white designer shoes, as if at least these precious consumer objects of desire should be spared the sacrifice. As for the jerry can, this shrill yellow plastic object stood out as an odd accessory right from the moment he entered the stage, unbecoming to the occasion of such a prestigious and formal event as the annual *State of the Theatre* lecture. Even more obviously staged was his closing line, asking the audience for a lighter, ironically placing the onus on others to start the fire, and thus turning his threat to another's responsibility. In the end, instead of setting himself on fire, Ben Chikha had in fact drenched himself with water, without even wetting his shoes. Yet, although there were enough signs to recognise that this was “just a performance”, the speech act of declaring he would set himself on fire, along with the other acts that followed, no matter how symbolic and self-referential, had an illocutionary and perlocutionary force that left the audience fairly perplexed. It was not a coincidence that he left the stage and did not return for the usual round of applause, another breach of theatrical convention that further confounded the straightforward framing of the situation as a performance in a con-

ventional theatre space. My own sense of bafflement grew with what happened right after the lecture-performance was over. The moderator of the evening appeared on stage, proclaiming the next item on the programme, *i.e.* the announcement of a BNG Bank sponsored theatre award. As if nothing had just happened, as if this was just a change of television channel, as if the radical call underlying the annual *State of the Theatre* lecture was a minor interruption to what was determined to adhere to festival conventions and remain an undisturbed festive opening. Upon hearing the groans of dismay from the audience, the moderator then changed his mind, invited the public to take a few minutes to share with each other their responses to what had just taken place. Meanwhile, stage hands mopped and dried the stage, which was already set for another performance later that evening. An official from the awards committee awkwardly mumbled into the mic, supposedly as a joke, asking if the wooden floor might have been damaged with the liquid being poured on it. The evening then proceeded as scheduled: the awards were announced; the theatre festival was declared open. The absurdity of the situation couldn't have been more painfully apparent. Ben Chikha's plea to the theatre world to "step out of its cage", was directly proceeded by the guardians of the theatre sector rushing to make sure the cage was, in fact, intact, without any cosmetic damages. For all his passionate critique of the all-pervasive neoliberal rationality of the art world, what followed his lecture-performance was evidence of the very same business-as-usual approach he was reproaching.

Leaving the theatre in search of the theatre

The reference to theatre as a cage was not a passing metaphor in Ben Chikha's lecture-performance⁷. It formed a recurring theme of

⁷ By using the idea of the cage in the performance, Ben Chikha indirectly references the history of Performance Studies since the 1960s, wherein artists appear in cages, or purposely place themselves or others in incarcerated situations. The performance art work *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*

the entire lecture, which touched on a wide range of issues, from the phenomenon of fake news and facts-free politics to the Arab revolution, to the history of human exhibition in Europe, a subject he has also extensively dealt with in the past in the framework of his doctoral research and developed artistically in the work by his company, *Action Zoo Humain*⁸. The cage is a particular kind of stage, a stage of display and control, with its own biopolitics of the spectacularisation of difference. If the human zoo was a perverse but commercially successful strategy of using a cage as a means to draw invisible borders between the normal and the abnormal, which resulted in a lasting racialised regime of ordering, stratifying and differentiating between humans, then the same strategy – Ben Chikha termed this "zooism", a neologism derived from the Dutch word *zooïsme* – can be found in today's world, whereby entire populations are locked in material or metaphorical cages and dehumanised to being objects of spectacle. «The world has silently devoured the theatre and now serves it back to us every day as a human zoo»⁹. The lecture broadened the understanding of "zooism" from the 19th century phenomenon of human exhibits to the numerous manifestations of racialised capitalism in the contemporary world, ranging from deportation and detention policies, to the prison-industrial-military complex, to Palestine, to xenophobia in his country of residence, Belgium, and the growing technologies of securitisation and surveillance. These and other instances exemplify how the preservation of the privileges of a few depended on the restriction of other sections

(1992-1993) by Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Coco Fusco is one prominent example. Earlier spectacular works such as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) or Joseph Beuys' *I Love America and America Loves Me* (1974), wherein Beuys locked himself in a room with a coyote also come to mind.

⁸ See C. Ben Chikha, *Wat Is de Kritische Waarde van Het Gebruik van Stereotypen Als Theatertekens? De Zoo Humain Als (Onder)Zock(s)Instrument* [What Is the Critical Value of Using Stereotypes as Theatrical Signs? The Human Zoo as (Re)Search Instrument], PhD diss., Ghent University, 2013.

⁹ Id., *Staat van Het Theater 2018* [The State of the Theatre 2018], opening lecture, Dutch Theatre Festival, Amsterdam 2018.

of the population. In Ben Chikha's elaboration, the cage metaphor thus shifted terrain: from the critique of the "cage as a stage" to the "world as a cage", and finally, to the "stage as a cage". For if features of the artistic domain such as fiction, affect, distraction and artifice have become absorbed and appropriated into the cynical business of politics, he argued, then does that not make it urgent for artists to revise and reclaim the task of theatre and performance, to transgress the limitations and borders of artistic domains and extend the theatre podium to sites external to the conventional theatre?

He called upon his fellow theatre makers to «Reclaim the truth. It's we who have, after all, got what it takes. We know how to arouse emotions. With our artistic truth we can unmask, bewilder and imagine»¹⁰. The idea of an artistic truth is central to Ben Chikha's point, a truth that belongs to a different register than juridical or philosophical or empirical truth, which neither mimics nor rejects these orders of truth, but rather offers other possibilities to unmask and reconfigure and transform the existing conditions of the world. To pursue this artistic truth, he proceeded, involves discovering and following the example of the role models that theatre provides. «Troublemakers, provocateurs, truth-tellers, fools, oracles: all age-old role models for those concerned with justice»¹¹. At first glance, Ben Chikha's notion of artistic truth seemed to be an assertion of what might be read as an anti-theatrical position, a call for a shift from constative to performative acts¹². Following this line of argument, the performance stage as a site of mimetic, secondary representation, «parasitic» in J.L. Austin's terms, could be interpreted as a restrictive and limiting space of pursuing artistic truth, a cage, as it were, that needed to be broken out of in order for the fools and truth-tellers and oracles to make performative interventions in the

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² See A. Parker, E. Kosofsky Sedgwick (eds.), *Performativity and Performance: Essays from the English Institute*, Routledge, New York 1995.

world¹³. Why should the creative interventions of the world be left to amateurs such as Greenpeace and Pussy Riot, he asked sarcastically. Aren't we, the professionals of the theatre and performance sector, far more qualified to be creative and imaginative?¹⁴

Yet while Ben Chikha proclaimed theatre must step out of its limitations of representation, he simultaneously also called for theatre and performance to take inspiration from historical figures such as Mohamad Bouazizi, the 26-year old Tunisian fruit-vendor, whose public self-immolation is regarded as the trigger for the surge of popular uprisings in Tunisia in 2010, or Jan Palach, Czech dissident whose self-immolation marked a turning point in the Prague Spring in 1968. These figures were inspirational, Ben Chikha claimed, because they understood that the spark of revolution could only be set ablaze by turning themselves into a site of spectacle, a self-sacrificing human zoo, as it were¹⁵. Besides being another tongue-in-cheek pointer to the closing act of the lecture-performance, the reference to these two figures as performers raises different questions: In what sense were they performers? How do their "performances" pursue or enunciate an artistic truth? If it seems cruel and disingenuous to render their tragic acts of self-immolation as "performance", it seems equally inappropriate to ask artists to mimic them and do as they do in the theatre. At the same time, it could be argued, particularly with reference to Mohamad Bouazizi, that his act of self-immolation was not a political act, to the extent that it was a spontaneous act of despair and outrage at the corruption of the government, it was not pre-meditated or in the service of a political cause. Its status as a deeply political act is derived not from existing repertoires and recognised conventions of political action, but from its symbolic power, and from its having taken place in full public view in front of the

¹³ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words. William James Lectures*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1962.

¹⁴ See C. Ben Chikha, *The State of the Theatre*, cit., p. 7.

¹⁵ See *ibidem*, p. 8.

government office, hence from its performative force, as it were¹⁶. The reference to Bouazizi's death as a model for theatre's political potential points to its status as a performative moment, in the way it interrupted and brought to crisis the existing order of the political, inviting us, as Banu Bargu suggests, «to question the link between the agency of the individual and the movement of history»¹⁷. The questioning of this link opens out the possibility of extending the realm of the political to theatre and performance, and its relations between the agency of the individual performer or artist and the collective movement of theatre and performance as political, social, cultural, historical institutions, practices, and sites.

Ben Chikha's "artistic truth" thus assumes a paradoxical quality, it is to be found by leaving the theatre in search of the theatre, as it were¹⁸. The paradox is most palpable in the moment of interruption, when the lecture-performance condenses into a *tableau vivant*. The performer who has just doused himself with a liquid and declared (threatened, some would say) he will set himself on fire, creates an interruption in the conditions that guarantee the suspension of disbelief, the smooth mechanism of theatrical activity. It is an interruption to the extent that it portends to no longer remain a staged, scripted scene. At the same time, that interruption is in turn interrupted by an audience member, who is compelled to intervene and prevent what they fear may turn into an act of self-destruction in the guise of radical performance. Yet as the performer leaves the stage, leaving the audience with the burden of the question «does anyone have a lighter?», the conventions of the theatre world are laid bare, made visible and observable, as the floor is mopped and

¹⁶ See B. Bargu, *Why Did Bouazizi Burn Himself? The Politics of Fate and Fatal Politics*, in «Constellations», vol. 23, n. 1, 2016, p. 28.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

¹⁸ Baz Kershaw pursues a similar line of argumentation in his conception of the "paradoxology of performance", whereby the analysis of performance is akin to the Buddhist proverb of «riding an ox in search of the ox»; see B. Kershaw, *Performance Studies and Po-Chang's Ox: Steps to a Paradoxology of Performance*, in «New Theatre Quarterly», vol. 22, n. 1, 2006, pp. 30-53.

the moderator announces the next item of the programme. The idea that it may after all "only" be a staged and scripted scene now becomes equally uncomfortable, all the more so in its juxtaposition to what follows. For even if it is merely water and not petrol, and even if the scene is staged and scripted and Ben Chikha does not actually set himself on fire, the gesture is nonetheless consequential, it bears a performative force, derived from its paradoxical closeness to and distance from actual acts of self-immolation. It gives the audience a glimpse, however tentative and stylised, of what it might be like to witness such an act, which, for most, is only accessible through mediated news reports. And it simultaneously stretches the boundaries of the theatre, it brings into relief the frameworks at its edges, the infrastructures that enable its workings and keep its imaginary mechanisms intact. The question «does anyone have a lighter?» thus becomes a form of interpellation, in the way Althusser famously formulated it in his *mise-en-scène* of subjectivation, the exemplary situation where a policeman calls out «Hey, you there!», hailing a certain subject position into being by calling it out in an accusatory mode¹⁹. Hailing in the mode of hurling, as it were. To respond to Ben Chikha's call is to bear some form of responsibility, even guilt, which cannot be shed just because the performance has technically come to an end. The audience is thus bound to the scene in a volatile impasse, it is made co-responsible for abetting the act of self-immolation, which amounts to harming a person and committing an act of arson, albeit for a supposedly greater cause. Conversely when the moderator proceeds to move to the next item on the programme, the audience is interpellated as being co-responsible for viewing the scene with nonchalance and distance, as if it wouldn't matter, as if it were insensitive and irresponsive to the turmoil of the world, as if theatre were mere entertainment. The impasse is however uniquely generative, in that the closing gesture leaves an act unfinished, stalled, placing upon the audience the task

¹⁹ L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Verso, London-New York 2014.

of imaginative completion and leaving contingent the possibility of a different ending in the future.

Fire in the neighbour's house

The audience, not unlike the audience in Althusser's hypothetical scene of the risk of fire in the theatre, is thus faced with a situation of both intense identification and simultaneous dis-identification. Ben Chikha's gesture of dousing himself with a liquid brings the scene of the opening lecture to an indefinite halt, simultaneously ending and dislocating the scene at a disconcerting moment. The theatre becomes the exemplary or privileged site for an operation of power to become perceptible, but the full manifestation of the operation of power is paradoxically displaced elsewhere, outside the conventional institutions and platforms of the theatre, in its back-stages and its rehearsal spaces, on the streets, in public squares, in parliament, in the workplace, in all the sites which form the interface of performance and politics. It is further arrested by an audience member before it might become dangerous to the performer and the audience. Ben Chikha's risky play with (self)-immolation may have ended with a reassurance to the audience that there is, after all, no fire on the stage, and indeed the visible placement of a volunteer with a fire extinguisher offstage literalised this reassurance. Yet it also simultaneously left the audience with an eerie recognition that the neighbour's house is in fact the place where the audience is; and that perhaps it is not the play that will extinguish that fire, after all. In her recent study on temporality and its relationship to history, Maurya Wickstrom recognises how fire in relation to performance is often deployed – usually metaphorically but sometimes also actually – to «signal the interruption of history as processionism», *i.e.* as a history of linear progression²⁰. Fire, even the signalling of the possibil-

²⁰ M. Wickstrom, *Fiery Temporalities in Theatre and Performance: The Initiation of History*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London 2018, p. 9.

ity of fire, allows for an interruption of the experience of time, such that it is not simply a temporality of getting from one moment to another, but also about the imminent and mythical possibility of riot, unrest, and uncontrolled outcomes, a weapon of the disenchanted that threatens to raze the ideological apparatus of the theatre. The fire in Ben Chikha's lecture performance is staged as literal, but it is simultaneously interrupted and thus deliteralised. The threat that the fire represents can be interpreted in many ways: the self-inflicted destabilisation and decentring of the theatre in terms of its place and relevance in the world, a kind of institutional self-critique; the devastating self-recognition of the audience in being interpellated as critical but nonetheless bourgeois-liberal art enthusiasts and thus as paralyzed political subjects. Through this risky and pleasurable play with fire, the theatre becomes an enriched environment for a moment of collective introspection.