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CHAPTER

28 Interruption and Interpellation: Leaving the Theater in Search of the Theater

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Abstract

This chapter reflects on the significance of interruption in performance. Under which conditions might interruption be deemed political? And what precisely accords such interruptive gestures an interpellative quality, the capacity to usher a sense of political subjecthood into being? The chapter dwells on three scenes of interruption: in Walter Benjamin's writings on Bertolt Brecht, in Louis Althusser's ideology theory, and a scene from a 2018 public lecture–performance in Amsterdam by the scholar–artist Chokri Ben Chikha. In the artist's gesture toward self-immolation, the protocols of theatrical performance are interrupted in order to reflect on the political efficacy of performance. By way of a complementary reading of Benjamin's elaboration of the Brechtian 'gestus' and Louis Althusser's conception of ideological interpellation, the chapter suggests that performance and politics are related by the ways in which they interrupt and interpellate each other.

Keywords: [interruption](#), [interpellation](#), [Louis Althusser](#), [Walter Benjamin](#), [Chokri Ben Chikha](#)

Subject: [Political Behaviour](#), [Politics](#)

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Tableau

IN a well-known essay, Walter Benjamin ([1966] 1973, 4–5) argues that Brechtian epic theater is not so much about mimetically depicting or reproducing situations but rather about revealing the conditions underlying a situation using various means and techniques of interruption, such as stage design, music, heightened punctuation, and the actor's *Gestus*. Far from ruining its enjoyment, Benjamin points out, the interruption of a scene counterintuitively brings about a keen awareness of a specific situation, a sense of rapture in the spectator. Just as the sports enthusiast can remain engrossed in a game and simultaneously be cheering, hooting, and commenting on the players' moves, or a radio listener can switch on and off, move in and out of the radio show with ease, so Benjamin imagined the audiences of Brecht's epic theater as participants engrossed in the scene while being simultaneously keenly aware of the circumstances of the scene. They find a "pleasurable recognition" of the conditions of a situation not despite but in the very moments of its interruption and foregrounding of its framing (13). He introduces a curious example to elaborate how such an interruption could bring an ongoing scene to a standstill, enrapture it, and simultaneously dynamize it:

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This uncovering (making strange, or alienating) of conditions is brought about by processes being interrupted. Take the crudest example: a family row. Suddenly a stranger comes into the room. The wife is just about to pick up a bronze statuette and throw it at the daughter, the father is opening the window to call a policeman. At this moment the stranger appears at the door. "Tableau," as they used to say around 1900. That is to say, the stranger is confronted with a certain set of conditions: troubled faces, open window, a devastated interior. There exists another point of view from which the more usual scenes of bourgeois life do not look so very different from this.

(18–19)

The stranger's unannounced appearance at the scene interrupts a sequence of actions that would presumably have continued in the absence of the stranger. For Benjamin, the interruption is intriguing in the way it leaves not only the stranger but all the figures in the scene wondering what might happen next, what happened earlier, what led to this moment, what is the larger condition it evokes. The stranger is confronted with a scene that apparently grinds to a halt, calling upon everyone concerned to piece together the puzzle of a given moment. The distance to the event makes the details of the event become vividly perceptible. Benjamin's stranger is left astounded (*erstaunt*), not knowing how to interpret what is going on and how to respond. Yet so are all the others in the scene, including ourselves as readers and implied spectators. This state of astonishment or enrapture permits a deep recognition of the historicity and larger purport of a scene (Butler 2015).

Benjamin's scene implicates us as theater audiences to the extent that we too might take the place of the strangers who appear as interruptions at the door and seek to make sense of what plays out in front of us. We might, however, feel closer to the position of the daughter, who is about to face an object being hurled at her by her mother. We might step into the shoes of the father, seeking refuge in the law to resolve a domestic crisis. We might participate in the rage of the mother, who, for some unknown reason, throws a bronze statuette at her daughter. We might, besides all this, become alert to the gendered dimensions and connotations of what purports to be a scene of domestic violence and conflict.

Yet Benjamin's interpretation of such participation is bound in a paradox: it is a participation that is possible not through involvement but through marked distance. The distance of the stranger from the scene is not only physical but also marked on the lines of kinship; he or she is not a relative or friend, but someone unfamiliar, a neighbor perhaps. It creates an interruption and simultaneously affords a possibility of witnessing. The moment of interruption generates observations and insights about the event and its larger

implications. For the stranger who appears at the door of the family row, Benjamin ([1966] 1973, 5) comments, “the more far-reaching the devastations of our social order (the more these devastations undermine ourselves and our capacity to remain aware of them), the more marked must be the distance between the stranger and the events portrayed.” The scene becomes perceptible to us as a scene of devastation only when we are able to step aside from it, which is of course not the same as turning away from it. The scene, as Benjamin describes it, does not necessarily occur on a theater stage but is an imagined domestic scene, a hypothetical event that serves as metonym for bourgeois society at large in Benjamin’s reading of Brecht, a society wherein familial relations are inseparable from status, wealth, and property. It becomes theatrical because of the appearance of a stranger, who, by virtue of assuming the position of a spectator, makes of the occurrence “a scene” and thus shifts it from the quotidian realm to the register of the theatrical. Yet it is equally the constitution of the family row as a theatrical scene that allows for an examination, an exposure of the bourgeois family as an institution, thus shifting it from the imaginary to the register of the political. The scene of interruption thus reveals some of the co-constitutive entanglements between theater, performance, and politics.

p. 457 Benjamin’s curious case of the family row was intended as a scene that crystallized the principles of Brechtian epic theater. It has often been referenced as a reflection on the potential of theater to enable an artful interruption of ordinary time (Kear 2004). However, in this contribution I use it as a point of departure to reflect more generally on the significance of moments of interruption in theater and performance. Under which conditions might they be deemed political? And what precisely accords such interruptive gestures the quality of performance when they occur in the political realm? I begin by outlining forms of interruption that are deemed objectionable, from the more innocuous sounds and movements that disturb the conventions of performance to the uninvited hurling of objects or abuses at the stage. These moments of interruption, sometimes quotidian and well-intended, at other times creating headlines and uproars, compel us to reconsider assumptions about participation as being somehow inherently benign and harmonizing. I then turn to a 2018 lecture-performance by the Belgian scholar-artist Chokri Ben Chikha, in which the gesture of interrupting the protocols of theatrical performance raises questions about what makes performance political. In the course of researching the phenomenon of interruption in performance, I was drawn to the political philosophy of Louis Althusser, whose conception of ideological interpellation ties the discursive and material act of interruption to processes of subject formation. Reading Althusser’s scene of interpellation, in which the interruption of a quotidian situation by an act of hailing heralds the formation of a subject, I suggest that the political in performance is to be found not in the definition of politics but in its staging. Performance and politics are thus related by the ways in which they interrupt and interpellate each other.

As a scholar trained in the disciplines of theater and performance studies, I am specifically interested in the visceral, vivid, material details of how interruption happens and what ensues as a result of such interruption. I am wary of romanticizing and elevating the concept, and hope to demonstrate that it is not in itself benign or emancipatory. Its analysis can be meaningfully pursued in terms of its gestures, an approach I have recently developed in a book-length study of participatory art (Bala 2018). The present contribution reads interruption and interpellation in conjuncture with broader political concerns around the intersections of the performative and the political.¹

Scenes of Interruption in the Theater

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Theater stages are accustomed to receiving material and verbal tokens of disapproval from their discontent audiences. In some cultures, these interventions are no cause for alarm, as they form part of accepted conventions, serving as barometers of audience responses. Performers are expected to be prepared to respond to them gracefully and try to do a better job as entertainers and artists. A poor performance may receive vocal expressions of dissatisfaction, such as audiences behaving boisterously or boos and hoots. In some popular performance traditions, it is not uncommon for artists, especially those performing solo numbers, to face audience disapproval in the form of rotten tomatoes, eggs, slippers, paper planes, and other objects or invectives.² This might be regarded as the negative counterpart to being showered with cash or flowers and generous applause and shouts of praise for a skilled performance, which are positively connoted and therefore not considered to be interruptive.

Where the interruption is unexpected and not an accepted convention, it presents a more complicated situation. The immediate response to the pelting of objects on stage or other unsolicited interventions in a proscenium stage performance is usually a foregrounding of security arguments: unruly audience members are ushered out of the hall, reprimanded or fined for disturbing the show. Reviewers click tongues at those who couldn't care less for the sacred conventions of the art space. Yet once the wider debates are initiated, once people care to ask what purpose the interruption served and if the protestors' demands ought to be taken seriously, or whether they pose a threat to artistic freedom, such disruptive gestures, or indeed the artists to whom they are addressed, may even become hallmark moments or figures of theater history.

The phenomenon of the interruption of a stage performance can be motivated by a wide range of political or ideological positions. The act of throwing objects on stage as a marker of disapproval seems to cut across traditional political divides. It is to be found on both left and right sides of the spectrum, as it were, and is targeted at both politically so-called progressive as well as conservative theater forms. There are numerous examples of performances by renowned theater-makers subject to attacks by groups who raise objections to the performance's message, content, or dramaturgical choices on political, religious, or ideological grounds. There are equally numerous instances of activist attacks targeted at the theater as a form of institutional critique and creative, tactical disruption or in order to draw public attention to a specific cause.³ Tomatoes or eggs become the recognizable signs of a disapproval that cannot be expressed without an audience, but as signs they need to be read with attention to the specificity of their contexts. Perhaps it is not that useful to distinguish between or judge these differently motivated interruptions of performance solely according to their political or ideological views. This is not to claim that these distinctions do not matter; in fact quite the contrary. It does obviously matter if the interruption is a form of *parrhesia*, of speaking truth to power or not, of "punching up" rather than "punching down," as the conventions around appropriate targets of humor in comedy prescribe. Yet besides the questions of who is being offended or interrupted, and for what reason, and whether or not we feel it is justified, it is relevant to ask what such scenes of interruption might reveal about the porous and co-constitutive relationship of performance and politics.

“Does Anyone Have a Lighter?”

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At the end of the 2018 performance lecture “The State of the Theatre,” an event that traditionally inaugurates the annual Dutch Theatre Festival, the Belgian scholar–artist 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 theater-makers to stop merely commenting and reflecting on the problems of the world while remaining safely within the bubble of the theater industry, and called upon them to start intervening in the world. When he announced toward 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. 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 theater 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 physically urged 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 theater 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 report against Ben Chikha for incitement to violence or disturbance of the public peace. Another replied that if it was *only* water, then it would be an equally cheap prank and Ben Chikha 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 theater’s (lack of) political impact, a lament as old as theater history itself? Theater 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 theater and performance.

It was not difficult to recognize 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 at hand, a scenographic conjuring of the imminent possibility of fire but also an instance of law and order, authorized to interrupt the performance at any moment if public health and safety are 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, in November 2018. Anyone might have wondered why she needed to be positioned 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 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 into another’s responsibility. This was no doubt a trigger for the audience member who interrupted the lecture in an undeniably sincere attempt to prevent an act of self-immolation.

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 recognize that this was “just a performance,” the speech act of declaring that he would set himself on fire, along with the 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 conventional theater space. My own 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 program, the announcement of a BNG Bank-sponsored theater 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 and 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 in preparation 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 be damaged from the liquid that was poured on it. The evening then proceeded as scheduled: the awards were announced; the theater festival was declared open. The absurdity of the situation couldn’t have been more painfully apparent. Ben Chikha’s plea to the theater world to “step out of its cage” was immediately followed by the guardians of the theater sector rushing to make sure the cage was, in fact, intact, without any cosmetic damages. For all his passionate critique of the insensitivity of the art world, what followed his lecture-performance was evidence of the very same business-as-usual approach he was reproaching.

Leaving the Theater in Search of the Theater

The reference to theater as a cage was not a passing metaphor in Ben Chikha’s lecture-performance. It formed a recurring theme of the entire lecture, which touched on a wide range of issues, including the phenomenon of fake news and fact-free politics, the Arab revolution, and the history of human exhibition in Europe, a subject he extensively dealt with in his doctoral research (Ben Chikha 2013) and developed artistically in the work by his company, Action Zoo Humain. The cage is a particular kind of stage, a stage of display and control, with its own biopolitics of the spectacularization 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 racialized 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 dehumanized as objects of spectacle. “The world has silently devoured the theatre and now serves it back to us every day as a human zoo” (Ben Chikha 2018, 4).

The lecture broadened the meaning of *zooism* from the nineteenth-century phenomenon of human exhibits to instances in the contemporary world: deportation and detention policies, the prison-industrial-military complex, the occupation of Palestine, xenophobia in his country of residence, and the growing technologies of securitization and surveillance. These and other instances exemplify how the preservation of the privileges of a few depend on the restriction of other sections 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, does that not make it urgent for artists to revise and reclaim the task of theater and performance, to transgress the limitations and borders of artistic domains and extend the theater podium to sites external to the conventional theater?

He called upon his fellow theater-makers: “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” (Ben

Chikha 2018, 7). 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 theater provides: "troublemakers, provocateurs, truth-tellers, fools, oracles: all age-old role models for those concerned with justice" (7). At first glance, Ben Chikha's notion of artistic truth seemed to be an assertion of an antitheatrical position, a call for a shift from constative to performative acts (Parker and Sedgwick 1995). Following this line of argument, the performance stage as a site of mimetic, secondary representation, "parasitic" in J. L. Austin's (1962) 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 world. 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 theater and performance sector, far more qualified to be creative and imaginative? (Ben Chikha 2018, 7).

Yet while Ben Chikha proclaimed that theater must step out of its limitations of representation, he simultaneously called for theater and performance to take inspiration from historical figures such as Mohamad Bouazizi, the twenty-six-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, the Czech dissident whose self-immolation marked a turning point in the Prague Spring in 1968. These figures were inspirational, Ben Chikha (2018, 8) claimed, because they understood that the revolution could be set ablaze only by turning themselves into a site of spectacle, a self-sacrificing human zoo, as it were. 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 theater.

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 premeditated or in the service of a political cause. Its status as a deeply political act is derived not from existing repertoires and recognized conventions of political action but from its symbolic power and from its having taken place in full public view in front of the government office, hence from its performative force, as it were (Bargu 2016, 28). The reference to Bouazizi's death as a model for theater'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" (29). The questioning of this link opens out the possibility of extending the realm of the political to theater and performance and its relations between the agency of the individual performer or artist and the collective movement of theater 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 theater in search of the theater, as it were.⁴ 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) that 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 no longer remaining a staged, scripted scene. No wonder, then, that an audience member is compelled to also interrupt the scene 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 theater

world are laid bare, made visible and observable, as the floor is mopped and the moderator announces the next item on the program. The idea that it may be *only* a staged and scripted scene after all 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 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 stylized, of what it might be like to witness such an act, which, for most, is accessible only through mediatized news reports. And it simultaneously stretches the boundaries of the theater, bringing 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 (2014) famously formulated it in his *mise-en-scène* of subjectivation, the exemplary situation wherein a policeman calls out “Hey, you there!,” hailing a certain subject position into being by calling it out in an accusatory mode. 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, 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 program, 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 theater 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 of imaginative completion and leaving contingent the possibility of a different ending in the future.

p. 463 The audience, not unlike the stranger in Benjamin’s domestic scene, is thus faced with a situation of both intense identification and simultaneous disidentification. This is precisely ↪ what the Brechtian *Gestus* refers to in Benjamin’s interpretation of the domestic scene: not simply the outward expression or bearing of an inner feeling or attitude, as the common English usage of the term *gesture* suggests, but an interruption of the conflation between inner and outer worlds. In Samuel Weber’s (2008, 98) reading of Benjamin, *Gestus* is not “the fulfilment or realization of an intention or of an expectation but rather its disruption and suspension. It entails not so much expression as interruption. And it is this that makes it eminently theatrical.” *Gestus* calls situations into being, brings their smooth movement to a halt, as it were, making a situation perceptible in its details and its contradictions by interrupting any assumed direct link between inner feeling and outer expression. In Brecht’s thinking of epic theater, the generativity of *Gestus* on stage was an essential means of achieving the *Verfremdungseffekt*, the effect of disidentification or defamiliarization, which he regarded as necessary for the cultivation of a critical and politicized audience. *Gestus* is the purposive arresting of movement, and thus the arresting of any possible identification with meanings and associations attached to movement, a technique that seeks to lay bare inconsistencies and make a scene perceptible in its vivid details.

In Judith Butler’s (2015, 41) reading of Benjamin’s scene of the family row, with the bronze statuette about to be thrown by a mother at her daughter, the gesture functions “as the partial decomposition of the performative that arrests action before it can prove lethal.” The gesture, as sketched by Benjamin, brings the scene to an indefinite halt, just as Ben Chikha’s gesture of dousing himself with a liquid simultaneously ends and dislocates the scene at a disconcerting moment. In this gestural contingency, the theater is 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 theater, in its backstages and its rehearsal spaces, on the streets, in public squares, in Parliament, in the workplace, in all the sites that form the interface of performance and politics.

Scenes of Interpellation

At stake in this contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance* is the significance of an interruptive mode of participation both in terms of theater and performance theory as well as in the theorization of politics. Benjamin's scene of the family row interrupted by the arrival of a stranger serves as a case in point to elicit an anecdotal conception of the gestural in Brecht's epic theater. Ben Chikha's lecture-performance presents a scene of interruption on a different register, where the seemingly stable boundary between the theater as institution or site of political practice and the world of political action is destabilized. Both these "scenes" trouble the relation between performance and the political, revealing that these are not watertight compartments, that theater is not merely a metaphor for describing the political, or that the political is not simply a theme that is depicted on stage, but that they are intertwined in their modalities in complex ways.

p. 464 To think through the implications of this co-constitutive entanglement at a broader level, I turn now to a third scene of interruption, namely to Althusser's famous scene of interpellation, which I referred to in passing earlier. Althusser's insights on ideology and subject formation and his privileging of the theater as a site for thinking the political are pertinent to the current discussion in many ways. In recent appraisals of Althusser's political philosophy, scholars have been attentive to his references to theater in his writings on ideology as well as on the materialism of the encounter.⁵ This includes his interest in Brecht, in the plays of Carlo Bertolazzi, and in the Piccolo Teatro of Milan, particularly the productions of Giorgio Strehler and Paulo Grassi (Althusser [1962] 2003, 1969). However, the case that best concretizes Althusser's (2014, 191) use of a "theoretical theatre" is the scene of a policeman's hailing in his well-known essay on ideology. Here theater serves as an analytical *dispositif*, as Etienne Balibar (2015, 2) points out; it allows certain philosophical problems to be identified from singular situations and moments and for general principles and observations to be extrapolated, made perceptible. The scene of hailing is, however, not a scene from a conventional theatrical performance but, akin to Benjamin's family row, a quotidian situation in all its singularity, presented or staged, as it were, in terms of a scenic structure, enabling a distanced observation and recognition of underlying mechanisms at work. It is in some senses a displacement of the theatrical register onto a hypothetical day-to-day situation. The tableau vivant in this scene is the moment of a policeman calling out to someone on the street and the person who responds to this call turning around:

Hailing as an everyday practice governed by a precise ritual takes spectacular form in the police practice of hailing: "Hey, you there!" (It functions in very similar forms in interpellating or summoning at school.) Police hailing, however, unlike other kinds of hailing, is repressive: "Your papers!" ... Identity, concentrated in first and last names, and so on, makes it possible to identify the subject (presumed in police hailing to be more or less suspect; initially presumed, that is, to be a "bad sort"), thus to identify him without confusing him with another subject, and either "let him go" ("It's all right") or "take him in" ("Follow me!") ... the whole terribly material ritual that ensues when a policeman recognizes a "bad sort [*mauvais sujet*]."

(Althusser 2014, 190–1n24)

What exactly does "interpellating" mean and imply here? The term as deployed in French is derived from the Latin *interpellāre* (to interrupt by speaking) and refers in one of its meanings to a person being intercepted in public by an instance of authority, stopped in their tracks and singled out from a crowd, as it were, and being required to identify themselves. Given that Althusser wrote this around the time of the student revolts of the late 1960s in France, it is not unlikely that the then widespread police practice in public squares of screening individuals deemed suspect in the eyes of the law informed his specific deployment of the term. To be required to identify oneself with papers is not only to declare to the authority who one is and what one's name or address is but moreover what one was intending to do, where one was

heading as the act of interpellation occurred; it is to be intercepted in the act one was engrossed in by way of the police hailing, calling out to one with the words “Hey, you there!”⁶ To be more precise, interpellation is thus not simply synonymous with hailing; it is the staging of the hailing as an act of interruption by the law (or by other repressive or ideological state apparatuses), accompanied by the turning of the head, an acknowledgment of being the one hailed. Butler (1997, 106–7) formulates the performative aspect of this cogently when she remarks that interpellation is “not an event, but a certain way of *staging the call*, where the call, as staged, becomes deliteralized in the course of its exposition or *Darstellung*.”

p. 465 For Althusser, this is a typical scene of subject constitution: when the individual hailed as being a “bad subject” in the eyes of the law (Was it me the policeman was summoning? Did I do something wrong?) is subsequently “let go” when the law enforcers are reassured that the individual is not a “bad subject” after all. In this scene of encounter, the individual gives account of themselves to the law, and in doing so recognizes themselves as a subject. Subjection and subjectivation thus condense into one scene, no doubt oversimplified and reductive but nevertheless useful and dynamic in the possibilities of interpretation it offers.⁷ The scene is conjured by Althusser in order to concretize the functioning of ideology and to demonstrate that the state and its subjects share not only a legal or territorial but also a psychic relationship, marked by ideology. A state “recruits” its subjects not only through law-enforcement institutions and agents like the police and the courts but, equally, and in a far more heterogeneous and decentralized manner, through so-called ideological state apparatuses such as schools, religious bodies, the social institution of the family, and the media, and art institutions such as the theater. These ensure that individuals as subjects are compliant with and subjugate themselves to the terms of the state by willingly believing that their position within the state and its structures is a natural one. Althusser argued that through these ideological state apparatuses, subjects are hailed into being; individuals come to recognize themselves as subjects through being interpellated.

Although the scene of interpellation presents a chronological sequence, Althusser’s (2014, 191) significant point is that there is no order of succession or vantage point of being outside of ideology, for, as he points out, “the existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.” This implies that ideology is not first an idea in abstraction that is subsequently inserted into or translated into certain material practices and actions, but that ideology comes to existence through material practices and not outside of them. Ideology is the unity of idea and action, “at once ideas *and* actions, ideas *in* actions,” he argues ([1962] 2003, 146), following from the work of Antonio Gramsci. In fortifying this argument, Althusser (2014, 186) cites Blaise Pascal’s aphorism “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, *and you will believe*,” implying that it is not necessarily the belief that comes first, taking on the form of religious rituals and acts, but equally the act of kneeling down in church, moving one’s lips in prayer through which one becomes interpellated as a believer, as a subject of the ideological apparatus of religion. Althusser’s scene of police summoning thus alerts us to what he terms the material—and what theater and performance scholars might term the embodied or performed—manifestation of ideology. In this light, it is not surprising that Althusser was greatly invested in the revolutionary potentials of Brechtian theater. In his essays on amateur theater, Brecht remarks, “Crying is caused by sadness, but sadness is also caused by crying” (cited in Esslin 1986, 30), implying that certain psychological states and forms of self-identification are not independent of the gestures, rituals, or acts in which they are embedded. In Althusser’s ([1962] 2003, 141) opinion, Brecht’s theater, like Marx’s philosophy, developed such a unity of idea and action not merely as technique or formal device but as a political practice that pervaded all aspects of his theater. Although Althusser is careful in not making any general proclamations about theater’s political potential at large, and cautions against the reduction of political theater to the mere imitation of Brechtian techniques, he does indeed maintain that theater as a phenomenon has the capacity to sustain a relation to revolutionary politics and philosophy. “One cannot see the place of politics in the theatre with a naked eye,” he maintains in what seems like a counterintuitive turn of argumentation (142–3).

While insisting that ideas and actions are simultaneous in appearance, he nevertheless claims that the unique potential of theater lies in the way this simultaneity is allowed to be ↪ displaced and interrupted. The recognition of the self as subject that is central to the working of ideology thus becomes a highly risky enterprise in the theater. Unlike the subject on the street who (albeit in nine out of ten cases, Althusser notes) immediately turns around when hailed by the police, the theater's ideological mode of recognizing the self is staged in the risky play of recognition not being immediate or guaranteed. It might happen that audiences leave entertained, disappointed, or reassured by what they have seen. They have then recognized themselves in ideological terms as connoisseurs of the theater, as art lovers, as critical subjects. It might, however, occur that there is a moment of being disconcerted and interrupted in one's self-image by theater's interpellation. As an indication of this risk, the last section of Althusser's ([1962] 2003, 147) unfortunately unfinished text "On Brecht and Marx," intriguingly titled "Theatre and the Risk of Fire," hints at this scene of estrangement from cherished ideas of oneself and of the theater:

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 neighbours.

I quote this at length, for it affords a serendipitous rejoinder to the lecture-performance by Ben Chikha in drawing this contribution to a conclusion. 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 literalized this reassurance. Yet it also simultaneously left the audience with an eerie recognition that the neighbor'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 study on temporality and its relationship to history, Maurya Wickstrom (2018, 9) recognizes 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 progression. Fire, even the signaling of the possibility 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 theater. The fire in Ben Chikha's lecture-performance is staged as literal, but it is simultaneously interrupted and thus deliteralized. The threat that the fire represents can obviously be interpreted in many ways: the self-inflicted destabilization and decentering of the theater 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.

I have tried to grapple with how and under which circumstances interruption in performance might be a generative form of participation and serve as a case in point for examining the interfaces of politics and performance. I do not claim that interruption is, in itself, radical or counterhegemonic; it very often isn't. Nor do I advocate a conceptualization of it as a technique that can be implemented as a political tool regardless of context. I argue that in taking interruption seriously and accounting for it politically, specifically in conversation ↪ with concepts of political theory, it becomes important to pay attention to the material details of a scene of interruption, to scale down the action to gestures, images, tableaux vivants, and scenographic particularities. In the process of examining a number of scenes of interruption, moving in and outside the domain of theatrical performance—imaginary, theatrical, and theoretical—the practices and acts of interruption drew me toward the political concepts of ideology and interpellation.

Intriguingly, these concepts are elaborated by political theorists as theatrical scenes. The political dimensions of the scenes are not distinct from but are embedded in their materiality. The political is thus not to be found in the definition of politics but in its staging. This might seem counterintuitive to the project of outlining the political in theater and performance, but only if one imagines the political as an item to be searched, identified, and spotted in the otherwise un/a/nonpolitical realm of performance, or if the political is deemed the realm of ideas and debates and opposed to performance as the realm of action. This chapter, like the rest of the Handbook, suggests that it is time to put aside that tired binary and engage more rigorously with methodologies and approaches in distinct disciplines, such as theater and performance studies and political philosophy, to develop concrete practices and areas of study and research.

Notes

1. The approach I am suggesting resonates with Emily Apter's (2018) conception of "unexceptional politics," referring to those "micropolitical phenomena for which classical political theory and political science have no precise names" and elude conceptual grasp along the lines of exceptionalism. It also takes a cue from Rai and Reinelt's (2014) proposal to work out a grammar of politics and performance.
2. The origins of such customs, especially the throwing of rotten food on stage, is unclear, though often estimated as dating to the Middle Ages. One of the earliest documented uses of rotten tomatoes to signal disapproval and shaming of an actor is a *New York Times* article from 1883, reporting a trapeze artist, John Ritchie, leaving the stage demoralized upon being pelted with tomatoes by an angry audience (N.N. 1883). In folk entertainment forms in India, it is not uncommon for audiences to occasionally throw footwear as a marker of insult. This practice is also adopted in cinema theaters, where slippers are hurled in disapproval at figures on the screen.
3. A well-known example of this is the series of so-called "Tomato Incidents" in the Netherlands, which began with a group of protestors disrupting a performance in the Municipal Theatre in Amsterdam by pelting the performers with tomatoes (van Maanen 2009).
4. Baz Kershaw (2006) 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."
5. Butler's (1997) early engagement with Althusser's theory of subjectivation strongly informs her conception of gender performativity. In more recent writing, such as the essay "Theatrical Machines," Butler (2015) reads Althusser's work in connection with notions of disidentification and disobedience, referring to numerous instances from theater and performance. Etienne Balibar's (2015) essay most prominently engages Althusser's use of the theater, elaborating on the Althusserian conception of ideology in terms of a dramaturgy, forming a continuum between the politics in theater and the theatrical in politics. The same journal issue includes relevant responses to Balibar by scholars such as Banu Bargu, Judith Butler, Warren Montag, and Adi Ophir, all of which emphasize the place of theater in Althusser's conception of ideology and the subject.
6. For an extensive discussion of the genealogy of the concept, see Montag (2013).
7. The critique of Althusser's scene as reductive is worked out in Butler 1997.

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