

A Theatre of Operations

A Discussion between Alain Badiou and Elie During

Elie During: Let's start with a major question. If one grants that a politics of theater exists, is it possible to speak of a politics of "theater without theater"? A lot has been said about avant-garde theater abolishing the stage or the separation it implies. In some cases an avant-garde abolished the stage by promoting it as a "physical concrete site," "a unique site without borders or barrier of any sort," in which the placement of bodies is more important than the text, and which forms "the theater of action itself" (Artaud). One can also speak of the abolishing of the auditorium rather than the stage. In any case, what this action marks is the emergence of a new spectator who is no longer a simple spectator but also an actor or actant participating in a kind of collective creation. It is clear that contemporary performance has been heavily influenced by this gesture in the various spaces it constructs whether inside galleries or on their thresholds. But what then remains of the "public" that is traditionally associated with the idea of theater? In your opinion, is the suppression of the stage or its transfiguration capable of opening a new space, a site for the emergence of a collective subject?

Alain Badiou: The relation between the stage and the public has always been a torturous problem for theater. Think of Molière's meditations on the duality of the public (the nobles and the bourgeois, the court and the town) or of Brecht's concept of the dialectical division of the audience, of Agit-prop theater in the Soviet Union, or Vilar's idea of a "popular" theater and the vogue of happenings about fifty years ago like the more contemporary fashion of "street theater." In Greece theater was already a political instrument, or to be exact a function of the State. Wealthy citizens were obliged to pay for theatrical performances through a kind of tax. This is the source of the persistent idea that theater has a political, democratic and even revolutionary function. In reality, as I have argued ever since my essay *Rhapsody for the Theater*, theater is bound to the State; it is a public mediation between the state and its exterior—the crowd, gathered together. And just as circulation occurs in both directions (from power towards the crowd

and from the crowd towards power), theater is entirely ambiguous. It is the point at which a certain audacity of the State encounters the intellectual resources of what is collective, gathered together and public. Louis XIV himself funded Molière's materialist adventures, and in France popular theater just like street theater is still funded by the State. I don't think abolishing the stage radically changes this situation. It is merely a formal transformation and the theater has seen many of those. Why would a crowd which does not revolt against flagrant injustice actually constitute itself as a collective subject through the grace of a theatrical summoning? The ambiguity of the situation of theater can only continue. Theater is an art and art will always be a site divided between subversion and institution, contemplative passivity and active rupture, the State and the crowd, creation and the market. An important work displaces these frontiers but it cannot abolish them.

E.D.: But then if the political virtue of theater resides in its position, the question arises of what remains of that position in performance art. If we define "theater without theater" as a form of pure theatricality, a modality of the presence of bodies freed from representation, performance comes down to the organization, according to an intention to create art, of an immediate experience of being-together. Consequently is there not a risk that performance will fall into a degraded form of "ethical" theater consecrated to revealing either the performativity at work in social exchange or — by staging suffering or mistreated bodies — increasing awareness of the vulnerability of beings and the relation between beings? In fact, just to focus a little, could we return to what constitutes for you the specificity of theater?

A.B.: I think that there is theater as soon as there is a public exhibition, with or without a stage, of a desired combination of bodies and languages. The exhibition of the body alone we will name "dance" and of language alone "reading," even if no written text pre-exists. Theater is the intersection of the two. Moreover it displays elements external to the languages / bodies duality

such as images, screens and activities (painting, sculpting or throwing objects, etc.), but these elements simply introduce new dimensions of the body (violence, nudity, sex, imaged deformations, etc.) or of language (soundscapes of all types, mixes of languages, music, etc.). In this framework an insistence on a particular aspect of theatricality, like the contemporary impact on theater of all the forms of dance or an emphatic use of violence on bodies, would in fact express ideological demands like those you mention: focusing on the fragile life of bodies, on threats to the entirety of what is conceived as "natural," hostility to any strict coding of individual life, dissipation of the frontier between public and intimate life, etc. The problem is that these demands simply reflect contemporary subjectivities rather than presenting a genuine movement for their transformation. What needs to be found — whilst accepting the formal transformations — is a more affirmative element, or rather, to take up Brecht's terms, a didactic element. The question of the relation between theatrical action, performance and politics cannot be reduced to the radicality of gestures. It supposes that all of this be integrated within a larger vision of the challenges of the contemporary epoch.

But before one even gets to that point, perhaps it is not so easy to "exit" theater or internally annul it. In fact, theater cannot be reduced to the stage and its perspective or to the interpretation of a pre-existing given (a text or a protocol for improvisations . . .). Theater is a complex ordering system whose material series is not set in stone: texts of course, but also bodies, costumes, the set, the site, music, light . . . This set is neither closed nor for that matter infinite. But it is in this set that the theater-Idea must pass; that is, what theater makes truth out of in the pure present of the material ordering itself. Suppose that someone does nothing more than imperceptibly emphasize everyday gestures to the point of being apparently indiscernible from the "audience" in which he is operating given that these gestures could just as easily be the "natural" gestures of an audience member. It would be a case of theater and not of the

absenting of theater. Why? Because the underlying idea—that every relation to the body can support a performance—can only be transmitted in the present of its material ordering; thus the terrestrial “passage” of the idea will be coextensive with its immediate activation. It is for exactly the same reason that Duchamp’s first readymades could not escape the status of the visual arts (painting, sculpture, etc.). In these arts, the passage of the idea is coextensive with the showing of a material form with a contour, however blurred the latter may be. As soon as the display of an indeterminate object can be perceived as the display of the latter’s contour, as a local staging of its materiality, the display has a “plastic” relation to the idea. However an indeterminate corporeal action, once it is grasped as deliberate or “working,” enters into the “scenic” arts; it enters dance, mime or theater. No doubt one could in the end reduce the ideal types of the visual arts (leaving out pure music for the moment) to a transcendental aesthetic. If the displaying gesture that indicates the idea organizes the primacy of space (or the contour) over time one has a case of “plasticity.” If the display organizes the evident primacy of time over space, one has “theater.” In both cases the subordinate term (time or space) is not suppressed but organized by the other term. I have always seen this in the use of videos as an intervention; whether they are theatrical (incorporated within a display in the present moment, in a slice of time) or “plastic” (abandoned to their repetitive destiny in a museum room and thus primarily placed in space). The intellectual effect is not the same because the idea that arises in the two cases (if an idea arises) is not presented in identical transcendental systems. So I would quite willingly posit that in principle the most indiscernible performance of everyday gesture remains theatrical in the sense in which Duchamp’s readymade remains plastic. When it is a question of determining the artistic register or the formal genre, the gesture and its placement are more important than the exceptional or indeterminate, invented or repeated nature of “what is” shown by the gesture in its site.

E.D.: To sum up, in what is paradoxically designated as “theater without theater,” the reference to theater is not merely residual: perhaps it is due to an essential dimension of all performance which is that of thinking in relation if not to a text to be interpreted at least to instructions or statements to be performed, that is, complemented or used as rules which can then be revised. Without such a relation what is it that is performed? What would distinguish performance from the execution of a task in somebody’s ordinary life even if that somebody be an artist? The theater-Idea passes via a material ordering which implies statements, even if they be invisible or inaudible. Only in the limit case of the happening with spontaneism is there an aim to emancipate performance from such rules. But it is not because room is made for chance and improvisation that something like an instruction is not implicitly at stake: “let the party begin!” is still a statement—the zero degree of the script. Between the idea and the act there is the statement. Hence George Brecht’s “events” and some of Allan Kaprow’s “activities” evoke a kind of restricted theater (in the sense of “restricted action”). Speech and the text are reduced to instructions or minimal declarations which are not necessarily performatives in the linguist’s sense. Could this be compared to Beckett’s theater and his singular montage of gestures and statements?

A.B.: This is an entirely different register, but one of considerable importance. It’s a question of knowing whether the theater of representation has been succeeded or not by a theater of operations. In more general terms it’s a question of whether the display of the theater-Idea ceded its place to the construction of that idea, such that the codes of that construction are themselves visible or shown? In my opinion, the question of the place of ritual, of improvisation, of chance, and that of a spatial relation which is either orientated or not between what is shown and the audience, all of this comes down to discussing—in reference to the most recent experimentation—the relationships between the visible and the invisible in theatrical (or non-theatrical) action. Here I call “invisible” the instructions

or statements which you rightly identify as being “between” the idea and the act. For a long time these instructions were half hidden—because they were only present during the rehearsals—or half visible—inasmuch as the Brechtian director wanted to reveal or explain them in the program. In order to complete the passage from a theater of display to a theater of construction (or process) there must definitely be a revision of the nature and place of instructions. The first form of that revision was for just over a century the increasing importance of the director. At the frontier of the visible and the invisible he was the man of instructions (or axioms of performance). Performance, along with the invasion of the stage by schemas drawn from dance or corporeal practices, clearly indicates the end of the century of the director. But that end should in no way be confused with the end of theater. This is like believing that the end of metaphysical construction in its limited classical schema—implying a theology—is the end of philosophy. The end of the idea of a director of the world is in no way the end of any idea of the world. Theater has existed for a long time without the separated figure of the director and it will continue without it. The entire question lies in knowing what will then localize the instructions however random the latter might be. My feeling is that they will become more and more abstract and not corporeal or collective. We are headed, and this is my prophecy, towards an austere theatrical mathematics.

E.D.: Let’s enter into the detail of this large scale history: the emergence of a theater of construction, then of a theater of process which would seem to find its logical development in the idea of a “theater without theater.” At the turn of the century a revolution occurred in theater which in a certain way prefigured the turn of visual arts towards performance. You often underline the importance of Meyerhold, and not only for the “new theater.” In what manner does Meyerhold form an event for you rather than, say, Stanislavsky? What exactly did he change in the idea of theater?

A.B.: Stanislavsky, whose work is nevertheless incredibly complex, was mainly interested in what I would call the constructive invariables of theater: at the center, the construction of the character. The temporal dynamic of the actor is fundamental. As always, the theater idea is submitted to time, but within a constructive and organized vision of the effects which bring about its manifestation. With Meyerhold it is the collective present which becomes decisive. It is not temporality which is constructive but the artificial display of the present as action. Theater must primarily indicate how it fuses an active conception of thought with material sequences that frame and exhibit the present as fiction. What's more, the evolution of this fiction has indicated its fragility and division since the active present can just as easily be that of the crucified body, of mystical dialectics (the sublime and the abject), as that of the didactic of choices, of the organized staging of conditions that surround the absolute present of a decision. Indeed, Artaud and Brecht indicate two different ways of being faithful to the Meyerhold event. But in both cases there is performance since no invariant of the type "character" can be separated from the artifice of a present such as that delivered immediately and collectively by theater. There is also performance in that all of the tenses of action count equally. We know that for Brecht every scene must be organized according to an energy which makes it comparable to the entire play. Nor can the mystique of cruelty, of the unbearable real, "expect" the systematic and referential construction to which Stanislavsky was attached. It's true that with Meyerhold the passage of ideas in theater no longer had to occur via representational mediation. The route was open for performative exercises.

E.D.: These exercises are often described today according to the paradigm of the game: from Wittgenstein's language games to notions of interactivity and participation tied to happenings and media art. It's as though what is expected of games or of play — and yet they have always formed one of the

fundamental dimensions of theater — is that they loosen theater up . . . But on the side of the game there is also ceremony and then ritual. Finally there is the feast. How can the theatrical apparatus integrate or evoke these different figures of performance.

A.B.: I believe that theater has always oscillated between two extremes. On the one hand there is the public taking sides, its commitment, a kind of tendency towards collective fusion whose more or less secret paradigm is the orgy. On the other hand there is the distance and contemplative passivity of a silent and captivated public who attend a ceremony whose paradigm is often celebration, of a religious character. To put it in your terms: the feast and the ritual, or the farce and the tragedy, Aristophanes and Aeschylus; or in the language of the romantic authors, the grotesque and the sublime. When Boileau tells us he does not recognize "the author of *The Misanthrope* in the ridiculous sack in which Scapin wraps himself," he is simply telling us that a genius like Molière circulates freely between the two extremes. Say that it is the sublime of ornamented, statuesque and rarefied bodies that dialectically corresponds to the living abjection of dancing sexed and provocative bodies. Do happenings and new technologies really affect this situation? I don't think so. They introduce new liberties, of course, tied to the contemporary ideology — which is materialistic and democratic. They serve a tendency which I would term vitalist, and which moreover refers in philosophy to Deleuze: performance as a pure immanent becoming opposed to representation or reflection. However, one can easily recognize in this figure the "orgiastic" tendency present since the very origin.

E.D.: This tendency that you have identified is inseparable from the promotion of the body or of certain dimensions of the body (which could be, if need be, that of the artist-performer, exhibited in its naked presence). Under what conditions can the body be the bearer of new forms and significations?

A.B.: I summed up what I believe to be the dominant ideology today, after the death of God and under the abstract sovereignty of the market, with the formula "there are only bodies and languages." The replacement of the space of the stage, which supposes a privileged axis of vision and thus a kind of transcendence, by the immediacy of the body and its nomadic delocalization is quite simply the artistic projection of that ideology. This projection is quite normal and its consequences must be explored. However it is highly questionable whether it can be seen itself as a subversion or a radical aesthetic because it is first of all, quite simply, an ideological contemporaneity. Here we have a possible milieu for the invention of forms and significations, just as the stage was able to form the possible milieu for the Brechtian rupture but one must not confuse the new sites of invention with the invention itself.

E.D.: Even so, the celebration of the immediacy of the body is not the only orientation in performance. But it is true that representatives of this tendency, Kaprow in the first line, primarily approach theater for the artificial nature of its apparatus. Of course one can always respond to this by pointing out that artifice is always present in one form or another up to and including the modes of presentation of the performing body. The heritage of pantomime, of the theater of marionettes, of the Balinese theater dear to Artaud, of the scenic discipline of Oskar Schlemmer or the biomechanical exercises of Meyerhold is still evident in certain contemporary compositions. With the intervention of prostheses and machines these compositions contradict the celebration of the presence of bodies traversed by Life. In your opinion what is at stake in this reevaluation of artifice as means for art?

A.B.: A crucial question has emerged here. Whatever its site, closed or open, scenic or nomadic, close to or distant from itself, theater is always a public meditation on the relation or non-relation between artifice and life. Every text in the theory of theater, from Aristotle to Brecht or Grotowski via Diderot or Meyerhold, deals with this question. The actor or performer is at the

center of this meditation because he or she is the focal point of the conjunction-separation of the two. The actor is the living being who sacrifices, or on the contrary, exhibits vital spontaneity at the service of a collective effect. The problem is always one of either dissimulating artifice under the norm of the natural, or displaying artifice such that the received forms of the natural can be criticized, or showing that any "nature" is an artificial construction, or even "naturalizing" artifice. I think this last tendency is the most frequently investigated today. The force of technology and its side effects is such that it is tempting to theatricalize it by showing both its prominence and its ultimate defeat via its absorption by life. A kind of monstrous equivalency has been established between vital organs and metallic chimera, thus proposing a new type of unstable equilibrium between artifice and life. Some of David Cronenberg's films explore the same domain in the cinema. In everyday life, piercing is already a kind of local metallization of flesh. This entire tendency causes a variation in the formula "there are only bodies and languages": there are only bodies and artifacts. Finally, the philosopher — who generally sees things within a very long temporal span and so distrusts incessant "novelty" — would say this is all a matter of *techné* and *phusis*, there's no way out of it. "Theater without theater" often tries to naturalize artifice by the use of new means under the conditions of technicized democracy. Again, this experimentation is necessary but it says nothing of what it affirms or contests with regard to collective becoming.

E.D.: Let's return for a moment to the politics of performance and to the question of its possible invention of a collective subject. By presenting performance as an act of collective creation Meyerhold broke with a traditional conception of theater and its capacities which was founded on the formal characteristics of representation. We know that he sometimes invited the public to express themselves directly: in *The Dawn* (1920) and also in the second version of *Mystery Bouffe*. But perhaps he didn't go so far as to introduce the participative relation into the core of

theatrical experience. The auditorium was not an appendix tacked on to the stage, however, it wasn't a question of simply fusing these two spaces in order to create an undifferentiated continuum. He defined the auditorium as "a workshop of psychophysical energy" . . .

A.B.: The collective dimension of theater is essential because the present of the Idea is experienced and investigated through the presence of the public. Theater is the exemplary artistic form of an immediate liaison between temporal form (the present) and spatial form (the presence of a crowd in a place). The idea of performance, anticipated as it was by Meyerhold and several others throughout the twentieth century (like Agit-prop theater and its link to revolutionary experiences), consisted in treating this liaison as a shared act, as an indistinction between the time of the idea and the space of the crowd. There must have been something of that kind in the medieval performances of the Passion. The difference lies less in the relationship between the collective and theatrical action than in the existence or not of a compulsory script and the casting of roles. We could perhaps say that performative experience lies at the intersection between the idea of participation, the construction of a new collective, and another requirement of contemporary art; that of the importance of improvisation and openness to chance. A performance is a Passion without a script.

E.D.: This notion of participation joins up with another insistent theme in the history of the *avant-gardes*: the idea of an art that would no longer present itself as an art but would maintain a relation of continuity with life whilst guarding a capacity for active intervention. Effacing the frontiers between the arts in order to more fundamentally efface the frontiers between art and life: this is what performance attempts to do when it places the physical presence of the performer and the process of performance itself at the heart of the artistic act — grasped as a prolongation of common experience rather than as a staged event or as the construction of an autonomous space. Allan Kaprow reproached Fluxus events precisely for perpetuating the artistic

"framing" of the performance in another form via their maintenance of a minimal script. For Kaprow, contriving a space for the event between the prescriptions of ritual and the chance of improvisation (in which a margin of liberty is opened up by the multiple performances, in varied circumstances, of the same instruction or script) was still giving too much of a role to theatricality. What Kaprow recommended for his part was a kind of "performance non-art," freed from any scenic effects, and which can be summarized as developing an attitude, a particular attention to the performative character of everyday tasks (greeting somebody, adjusting one's clothes, etc.).

A.B.: Yes, of course, "radical" performance is on the side of non-art, of life barely underlined, and without any insistence, as if in passing. This is the most recent form of a desire which goes back, I think, to German romanticism: that it be life itself which is art, that nothing separate the universe of forms from living affirmation, that there be a kind of poem of life. The most recent performative form eliminates even the dimension of poetic enchantment, it establishes itself amidst everyday gestures, in the anything whatsoever, a little like a certain philosophy declares itself the philosophy of 'ordinary language'. I certainly understand that this mythology can be stimulating but I do not share in the enthusiasm for its powers. This mythology already existed in the surrealist and then the situationist interpretation of Rimbaud's existential poetics. Poetry made "by everyone." If the "by everyone" means the promotion of the ordinariness of life to the status of art as non-art I would simply say: even if it is punctuated, the ordinary never delivers anything apart from its vacuity. On this point I hold to a maxim of Antoine Vitez: "elitist for everyone," which means: sharing the extraordinary. Whatever its formal destiny may be, art remains a heroic cut out of truth within the resistant material of sense.

E.D.: Chris Burden said "It seems that bad art is theater." But as you demonstrate it is not so easy to leave theater. Theater resists within even the most explicitly "non-theatrical"

forms of performance, which still concentrate whatever remains of “theatricality” when the text, the stage and even the actor have been subtracted from theater; in other words, when one has subtracted any form of separation between the director, the “performer” and the public. But this is precisely the question: what remains? A presence, and also an action or a chain of actions which take place and which are performed at a particular time and place. This execution is more important than the product, the result or end. But what happens in the actual process of performance other than the material inscription of the idea that any body (and any language) can support a performance? Is there something more at stake *between* this very general idea (that life can and should be performed) and its unique performance each and every time. To make things clearer, perhaps it would be useful to examine the status of the event in performance. People claim that performance renders tangible the *taking place* of the event. But taking place paradoxically signals a relation to time rather than to space. Space is rather the problem or condition of dance which you describe elsewhere as an art of imminence and restraint and secondarily as an art of the temporal development of movement. Dance is what does not possess a place: what has not yet taken place, or what has already taken place, too soon or too late. On the contrary, the problem of performance, and more particularly the body’s exposure in performance in its power of immediate affection, is rather that of wanting to give, if not a show or spectacle, at the very least the integral experience of an event. But is this even possible? Perhaps at this point one should distinguish certain performances which attempt to inscribe the trace of the event, or its irremediably ephemeral character, rather than directly housing its irruption. It would then be less a matter of incarnating the idea formulated by a statement or instruction than that of locally organizing, via a play of delays and gaps, the site in which this idea will be unfolded, or the truth that it encloses . . . Here the use of video and every kind of screen, mirror and projection seems to be a crucial resource. Dan Graham’s work, at the border between installation and performance, is exemplary. I’m thinking of the form of de-synchronization at work in the deferred video

recording of *Present Continuous Past(s)* and in the different versions of *Time Delay*, but equally in the more sober set up of *Past and Future Split Attention* in which an anticipated description and a remembered description, an advance and a delay, are articulated within the same space. I would just add that in this case the delay or deferral does not involve any rhetoric of absence, of the absencing or disappearance of gesture, although one can find in it a critique of the ideology of “live” or “real time” performance.

A.B.: I think you’re quite right there. Performance is the chimera (the “good” chimera, experimental and interesting) of a “giving to be seen” of the event. This is why performance is focused on the body; the body drawn out and centered upon its gestural and suffering powers, the body insofar as it is capable of simultaneously declaring the active dimension of the event, its violent surprise, mark or strike, and its passive reception, the effect of subjective transfiguration, the “pathos” that it can induce. This is also why there is no real contradiction between active violence and the simple discrete generation of traces. It is of the very essence of the event to be both what irrupts and what solely exists and organizes subjects in the form of traces which are immediately difficult to read. One could say that performance takes place precisely between the active force of what emerges and its enigmatic dissemination. Hence one often finds in contemporary performance sudden changes in pace or in the sequencing of, say, cruelty and unconscious tenderness as if they were the same thing. In terms of the event they are actually the same thing. The difference between dance and performance on this point is that dance is a mimetic exposition of the event, an abstraction, and performance on the other hand tries to be a pure indiscernible and tendential real of indeterminate becoming. This is where we find Duchamp again and his structural hesitation between an evident irony and an exemplary seriousness, between the pinnacle of indeterminacy and the pinnacle of sophistication; again as if it were the same thing.

E.D.: Speaking of seriousness and irony, you often insist on the necessity of defining a place for comedy in contemporary theater. I wonder whether in the domain of performance the burlesque would bear the same charge. Indeed burlesque implies the mastering of an ability that cannot claim any competence or which turns incompetence into a superior competence (Buster Keaton, Chaplin, Peter Sellers). Comedy shares this problem though in the case of burlesque it is generally a matter of a corporeal ability which only becomes linguistic, social or political by extension. It’s quite striking how performance art has for the most part cultivated farcical or sordid genres rather than the comic or the burlesque. The burlesque seems to be specific to cinema . . .

A.B.: There’s nothing to add to that excellent remark save that the reason why burlesque triumphed in cinema is that competence-incompetence found an incomparable medium for itself in the mechanization of movement and the optical illusions that cinema allowed. Méliès is the absolute origin here. In fact we’ve returned to the initial theme of our discussion: how can technique be integrated into the living peripetia of the body? The cinematographic burlesque was a glorious response to this problem. However, the problem of contemporary comedy is entirely different because it supposes another type of connection. On the one hand there is the incomplete presentation, in the form of a text or any other separable element, of a political idea in the grand sense: the social and intellectual virtuosity of the lower classes. On the other hand, there is the material combinatory and public element, which completes this idea in the pure present of theater, which realizes its eternity. In the end, comedy is nothing other than the incomparable present of equality, even, I would say, of communism. The classic combinatory was dominated by intrigue, in the double sense of the play’s intrigue and the intrigues of the poor, of the young, of women against fathers, the rich, and the old. In the register of farce and sordidness performance is the symptom of the following: how can comedy fulfill its political function (in the final analysis, the people against the State) if the form of

the intrigue is out of date? What is a comedy without intrigue? In this line of thought it is definitely Beckett who is still exemplary. Let's say that in the place of comedy with intrigue or plot he substitutes comic sequences, which, moreover, are more theatrical installations than performances. Voices, bodies, becomings, irruptions, are arranged without any plot and yet they indicate the critical power of the indeterminate existent. But language remains, and what language it is! Insofar as theater is neither dance nor reading, and however performative it might be, everything can disappear from it save language such as it traverses bodies and sites them beyond themselves.