

## Dramatic Text in the Recent French Theater: A Hybrid Form?

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In the course of the past twenty years, radical new developments have changed the nature of text used in avant-garde French performances. Dissatisfied with the take-over by powerful directors, who claim the right of authorship over their own productions, writers for the stage have altered the nature of their creative work. Instead of writing plays, which directors can then come and interpret in their own way, many of the most innovative, who are often themselves actors or directors, claim to produce only "textual material." This "material" typically discards the traditional framework of narrative, character, site, instead mobilizing the voices and movements of actors, and the spaces in which they develop, in a way that recalls abstract art or certain schools of poetry claiming inspiration from Rimbaud and the Symbolist movement of a hundred years ago. Their works range from pure monologue to assemblages of many voices in chorus, often impersonal voices that cannot be attached to a particular speaker. In this way they hark back to the distant origins or drama in choral recitation, while at the same time developing an austere new form of writing that has been described as postdramatic.

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### Introduction

“In the same way that the mule is a combination of donkey and horse, so too dramatic text is a hybrid form” (Vinaver, “Le théâtre entre deux chaises” 23). In 1983, when Michel Vinaver applied the word “hybrid” to the double function of dramatic text (as something that could be performed *and* read), he was championing the role of text over the dominant power of directors. His campaign concluded with the 1987 publication of *Le Compte rendu d’Avignon*, which helped to bring about an increase in the number of plays published in France. But no sooner had the sale of theater

texts began to increase than the rules of engagement once again shifted. A more complex form of *métissage* replaced the hybridism of text (as represented by Vinaver): writers and theater practitioners began to argue that it was wrong to try to distinguish between dramatic texts and other texts, and that *any* text could legitimately be used as the basis for performance.

The artistic output of the 1970s had already begun to point in this direction: on the one hand, the director Antoine Vitez had asserted that it was necessary to be able to create theater from any text; on the other hand, the writer Marguerite Duras described *India Song* (which came out in 1973) as a “text theatre film.” The period known as “the reign of the director” bore witness to a large number of productions based on all sorts of texts, from scientific discourse to autobiography, often giving rise to impressively lavish spectacular productions. This expansion of the raw materials available for creating theater played a large part in the erasure of the historic boundaries separating one genre from another.

However, writers had no intention of allowing directors to be the only ones to create theater from any sort of text. Their own writing was now liberated from the constraints that defined traditional writing for theater. Dialogue was no longer seen as a necessary component of text intended for performance. Monologues became the dominant form in the 1990s: apart from pieces for a solo performer, many plays of the period were structured as a series of monologues. However, this “theater of the self” became more complex as authors such as Phillippe Minyana, Noëlle Renaude, Enzo Cormann and Valère Novarina began to question the double function of Vinaver’s model, and to reject the need for any intervention on the part of a director in the *mise en scène* of their work. These dramatists demanded the right to be seen as BOTH literary AND theatrical writers, creating complete artistic worlds that already incorporated spatial and physical components that were inseparable from their textual materiality.

In their desire to create an autonomous world based on the power and process of art, several of these writers turned towards the great modernist novelists of the early twentieth century, especially James Joyce. The dense texture of Joyce’s work was emblematic of the new theatrical dynamic that they were exploring. In his work they found a dazzling array of themes and characters, often expressed through monologues and streams of consciousness and they appreciated his ability to approach everyday situations through the filter of ancient mythology. But most importantly, they discovered a structural freedom, a rejection of the laws that governed literary genres and an environment that became more defined as the text progressed—

an environment that could be either an entire city or the thoughts and dreams of a single illiterate character.

They also found in Joyce a fascination for objects and for the things that separate man from his so-called dominance over the world around him—a dominance created through language. Words were often detached from character in a “shared voice” that originated in different voices or in the self-reflection of the writer meditating on poetic creation—and in this last case one can see the staging of (or rather the vocalization of) writing itself. Several writers have followed in the footsteps of those directors who sought to create work based on the provocation of other art forms. In the same way that Gilberte Tsai gave voice to the art of painting in *Tableaux Impossibles* (1991), so other writers turned to music as an abstract form of inspiration where words are liberated from character, situation or narrative.

### A Dissolving Dramaturgy?

As a result of this wave of experimentation, it became difficult at a certain point to differentiate between dramatic text and “text” per se: the general characteristics that defined traditional dramaturgy (whether Aristotelian or Brechtian) lost their potency and, to borrow a phrase coined by Patrice Pavis (concerning Jean-Luc Lagarce), “dramaturgy dissolved into textuality” (184). What he meant by this was that, for the most part, the construction in these texts did not follow classical criteria (story, action, character) but instead created a “textual material” that owed little to traditional and generic form. These conditions raised the issue of whether it was still possible to define a theatrical specificity. One of the few people who attempted to do this was Michel Azama, in his anthology of francophone writers from 1950 to 2000. In his research into this specificity, Azama found “two fundamental features in theatrical texts”:

The first could be called its “respiration,” that is to say its ability to enter the actor’s body and create “play.” This “vocal potential” is as essential to theatre as it is to poetry. [...] The other quality of theatrical writing is its “dramaturgy.” If a text’s respiration is represented in “vocal potential” then its dramaturgy is represented in “visual potential.” (*De Godot à Zucco* 20)

The ambiguity of this definition shows the level to which it is difficult to establish adequate criteria in the textual analysis of many contemporary writers. A sense of poetry is certainly an important criterion, but this does not help to differentiate the wide variety of plays ranging from the few writ-

ten in verse, to the majority that are almost like prose poems. This definition of poetry can only really be tested in performance on stage: ultimately, there is no other way of judging the quality of “respiration” or “visual potential” other than through performance.

These texts no longer recognized the dichotomy between performance and reading; like poetry, they incorporate the physical dimension of words together with the word as an expression of reflection or meditation. The majority of these texts are hard to approach, not readily fitting into the visual spectacle of performance. Moreover, writers vehemently rejected the notion that theater was principally a visual spectacle. The playwright (and director) Didier-Georges Gabily was particularly vocal in this new campaign. He denied Planchon’s claim (of the mid 1960s) that the theater director’s creative input to a production was equal to that of the writer, since he completed the author’s *écriture dramatique* with his *écriture scénique*. Gabily proclaimed that it was he, the author, who was responsible for *both* things, insisting that “there is no such thing as an *écrivain scénique*” (“Cadavres” 58). For him, the playwright’s work had a unique, if complex aim, and part of this was to counter spectacular, media-driven display:

*Violences (un diptyque)* is pure theatre, written only for the theatre; or rather for the stage; a place where it is still possible to express the body, to hear non-normalised (even abnormal) voices, and literally to make a show of the pressure of media imagery, its prescriptive constructions and its populated deserts... (“Désordre” 10).

In other words, these writers were privileging the physicality of actors and words on stage, and rejecting the idea of a director- or designer-led theater. Many other writers from this period showed a desire to write texts that required, by their very nature, a highly physical realization, but without any appeal to spectacular visual display.

Such assertions reinforce the endorsement of both body and text that we have already observed. New writing from the 1990s revealed a paradox reminiscent of the theater of Antonin Artaud: on the one hand, this writing is constructed in successive verbal layers creating a dense and poetic texture, in which language is put to the test and clichés and everyday speech are questioned or transformed; on the other hand, it aims to “shatter language in order to touch life,” that is to say to achieve the reality of physical presence as envisaged by young writers in the 1980s. A large part of new French dramatic writing is concerned with this undiscovered fusion of text and body.

Gabily's last two plays performed before his death in 1996 were the short *Chimère*, written to be performed immediately after Molière's *Don Juan*, and *Contention*, written to follow Marivaux's *La Dispute*. These plays confirmed Gabily's technique of dealing with the modern world by looking to the past. According to Fabrice Gzil, "Gabily is part of the generation defined by what it comes after, especially after the war (after Auschwitz, after the fall of the Berlin wall). He writes for the 'post' generation (post-industrial, post-modern, post-68...)" (26). Thus its condition is that it can only write with reference to that which came *before*. In his preface to *Violences*, entitled "Introductory Disorder," Gabily asserted:

Theatre is ravishment. It is exhumation. We don't know about the rest. We rummage through the bones and the scraps and, occasionally we still hear Yorick's laugh. It is the archaeology of antiquity but also of the modern. ("Désordre" 9)

In this preface, Gabily explains his claim that textual disorder is the only honest way to expose the cruelty and utter confusion of our world. His plays may be difficult to approach, but this is intentional, as Gzil commented: "if Gabily is one of our contemporaries, it is because he tries to speak about something that has apparently resisted language: otherness or contradiction" (27).

**"The post generation": Eugène Durif; Enzo Cormann; Michel Deutsch; Adel Hakim; Laurent Gaudé; Michel Azama.**

The condition of belonging to the "post generation" is shared by many dramatists of this period—Eugène Durif for example. Some of the concerns in Durif's plays echo those of Gabily, and moreover his plays are more accessible. As in Gabily's *Gibiers du Temps*, Durif's *Meurtres hors Champ* presents a juxtaposition of Ancient Greek mythology and contemporary mythology. It tells the story of Orestes's return to avenge his father by killing his mother; the two main characters are called Orestes and Pylades. Unlike Gabily, Durif structures his play as a fable, with distinct scenes or sequences, and a narrative that more or less follows the original myth. The only difference is that Durif eliminates the character of Electra so that Orestes and Pylades become the focus. It seems as though Durif's aim in this play is to create a sense of intertextual hell. In a long central monologue the chorus leader reflects on all those (including Homer, Hemingway and Shakespeare) who have tried to expose man's own cruelty against his fellow man: "a stream of millions of ghosts [...] these soldiers lost to all of those

futile wars. [...] A crowd of anonymous and interchangeable shadows. A Fool and his double. Lear on the moors” (58).

This monologue affirms man’s inability to express his own pain without employing the words and images that have been soiled by previous usage. Even poetry is useless as poets themselves are unable to avoid their own role: “LET POETS SING OF THEIR GRATEFUL HOMELAND IN BATTLE, the poetry of a mouth gagged by a handkerchief” (60). At every moment of the play, it seems as though the dramatist is warning the audience that they are trapped in an implacable web of cliché. Even when modern characters burst on stage in a car, they speak and act in a stereotypical way: the bare-breasted prostitute uses coarse language, before transforming into a Sphinx and then aging several decades in a single moment. At the end of the play, Pylades attacks a whole civilization that has turned all language rotten: “I discard you, old pomposity, kingdom of filth, homeland of graceless simpletons, politician-businessmen who have finally befouled language” (74-75). Even if language has lost its power, there is nothing in the play that absolves the “politician-businessmen” of their responsibility in this catastrophe. Nonetheless, the audience can assess the lack of distinction between the mythic world of archetypes and the modern world; in the same way that words have collapsed under the weight of over-usage, so archetypes have lost the mystic power that they once possessed.

The “post” genre, especially “post Auschwitz,” continued to be exploited in theater right up to the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Enzo Cormann provided an example of this in 1997 with his *Toujours l’orage*. However, Cormann insisted on theater’s need to avoid mixing the mythic with the modern, in creations that are only about the impossibility of creation:

After Lyotard, it was finally possible to define hypermodern art as a form where self-reflection, autobiographical fiction, even self-mockery have replaced any historical perspective. The cannibalistic hypermodernity of the avant-garde has turned into mere trend-setting, as fleeting as the present, adding up to nothing more than a carnival death mask. (“Sous le regard des anges”)

With some of his own plays, Cormann has shown that he can rise to the challenge of postmodernism and autobiographical fiction: *Takiya! Tokaya!*, for example, showed a certain maturity. This play recounts many different stories that intertwine to such an extent that the audience becomes lost, no longer knowing what is fiction and what isn’t. The influence of the masters

of modern autobiographical fiction, such as Joyce and Calvino, is keenly felt in this play.

The action of *Toujours l'orage* takes place in the present day (that is 1997) where Nathan Goldring, a young director, meets Theo Steiner, the seventy-six-year-old legendary former actor of the Vienna Burgtheater. Twenty-five years previously, at the height of his success, Steiner had fled Vienna without any explanation. Goldring wants to persuade Steiner to give one final performance in the title role of *King Lear*. Steiner initially refuses; during the course of a difficult confrontation between the two men, we gradually learn that Steiner has already performed in *King Lear*: he played Edgar in a production at Terezin in 1944 and, because his performance was noticed by one of the "Untersturmführers," he escaped being sent to Auschwitz where the rest of his family perished in the gas chambers. He is suffering from survivor's guilt and, far from being a consolation, theater is now intrinsically linked to his nightmares.

Where *Toujours l'orage* revisited the familiar yet painful territory of Jewish ghettos under Nazi occupation, leaving little room for hope, another of Cormann's recent plays adopted the Brechtian model. *Cairn* (1998) tells a somber story that underlines man's complete impotence in today's society. Cairn, the hero, has known only brutality and suspicion since secondary school. The play tells of his clash, as union representative, with the heads of the stove and pan factory where he works. However, class conflict is cut short by violence. Cairn kills the director's daughter but is himself killed by the security guards who have been hired to watch over the factory during the strikes. A romantic character, the rag-and-bone man, arrives with his cart at the end and takes Cairn's body away; he ends as a spokesman for the author, justifying his nostalgia for the old romantic dream of a revolutionary who fights against injustice and oppression.

Despite Cormann's desire to rediscover a theatrical form that could connect with contemporary history, these two plays, as dramaturgically skilful as they are, only affirm the impossibility of using ancient forms to articulate the political conflicts of the future. It was perhaps in the hope of finding another artistic solution that Cormann founded the "Grande Ritournelle" with the saxophonist Jean-Marc Padovani. This group created musicals such as *Diverses Blessures*, a pocket opera for three musicians, two actor-singers and a narrator; jazz, theater and opera combine in a dark tale where only music can provide hope.

Michel Deutsch began his theatrical career in the world of kitchen-sink drama and was the dramaturge for the group that Jean-Pierre Vincent col-

lected at his Théâtre National de Strasbourg. During the 1990s he went on to write plays that echoed Durif, and countless others, in their tragic and grotesque intertextuality. Both *Le Souffleur d'Hamlet* (1993) and *John Lear* (1996) present contemporary characters that seem to be consumed by the famous words of their Shakespearean counterparts, words that bear no relationship to the world in which they find themselves. Deutsch puts a short quotation from *King Lear* as the epigraph to *John Lear*: "My wits begin to turn," and indeed Deutsch's characters do seem to suffer from an immense confusion. As with *Histoires de France*, written in collaboration with Georges Lavaudant in 1997, the story is told through puppetry and superficial characters that speak in media sound bites. *John Lear* consists of a series of short playlets, the last of which, *Tamerlan*, shows two men dressed in black in their kitchen, who "repeat like every Saturday night: The World Conquest by Timour Lang, Timour the lame, or Tamerlan (1336-1405)" (73). At a certain point they open the fridge and sand regularly drops down from inside the machine at regular intervals. This near-surreal foray underlines the dreamlike, inexplicable quality of the men's absurdly repeated conflicts, but the play does not make any connection between modern history and Tamerlan's history, except for frantic and ubiquitous violence. As with so many other dramatists of this period, Deutsch appears to be lost in an intertextual labyrinth, without a central theme.

One constant element in the writing of this period is the evocation of violence, even if this violence is often "off stage" (a lesson learnt from the Greeks). French writers know that public imagination reacts more willingly to the account of violence than to the spectacle of simulated battles and torture. Using the urgent and intense qualities of the monologue form, several young writers have depicted the absurd and insane aspects of brutality. A successful example of this genre is *Exécuteur 14* by Adel Hakim, an actor, director and writer born in Cairo, but who has lived in France since 1972. Hakim was appointed director of the Théâtre des Quartiers d'Ivry in 1992, a year after the creation of *Exécuteur 14* at Saint-Denis. This monologue depicts the last man left alive in the ruins of a civil war. Hakim explains how tensions developed between two denominational clans and how the slow deterioration of the situation leads to violence, despite individual objections. He is looking for reasons for this descent into hell, but can blame only the inexorable increase in revenge and counter-revenge.

The lamentation of the "last man standing," surrounded by ruins and corpses, was a popular theme for many young writers. One of the most tal-

ented, Laurent Gaudé, depicted a town under siege and ready to fall into the hands of enemy forces in *Pluie de cendres* (1997). All of the other characters are killed during the play so that, by the last scene, Ajac finds himself alone: “And so I am the last man. They will come now. (*He cocks his gun*)” (75). The name Ajac, so close to Ajax, takes us back to the Trojan War, giving a mythic resonance to the town’s destruction. The weapons may be from the twentieth century, but the human reaction to violence and the characters’ discourse do not situate the action in a defined time or place. Despite the complete destruction at the end and the lack of explanation for this war, Gaudé seems to offer a glimmer of hope in the tenderness of the women. A female chorus tries to provide for the needs of their men, even if (as in scene 11) they are polishing and nailing pieces of wood to make coffins.

*Combats de Possédés* (1999), a somber series of confrontations between a boss, an assassin, bodyguards and gravediggers, also ends with a scene where the hint of tenderness between a woman (“the whore”) and one of the bodyguards seems to suggest some hope. But, for most of the time, the violent action of the play again emphasizes the persistence and absurdness of inhumanity. When the whore tries to dissuade the assassin from his murderous task, he tells her that it is not the right moment, to which she replies:

It’s never the right moment. I know that. It’s never the right moment. Life is like that. Long hollow periods where everything is fine. Where nothing happens. And then one day problems appear, and everything speeds up, you think you’re going to lose your mind through pain and rage, it’s as though you’re being drowned by life that is moving too quickly, but in this enormous flood of suffering there is also a man, a love, like a tree trunk swept away in the flood. (59)

The audience never understands the reason for the confrontations—for example, why the assassin must kill the boss; they are given only a vision of humanity where conflict is the one constant truth, and love, for the majority of the time, is unattainable. Gaudé owes much to Koltès: scene 5 of *Combats de Possédés* even has a brother who tries to sell his sister (“the whore”) to the boss, which closely echoes scene 11 of *Roberto Zucco*, in which the brother sells the young girl to the female boss of the Petit Chicago Hotel. A third Gaudé play, *Onysos le Furieux* (1997), seems to be inspired by another moment from *Roberto Zucco*, where Zucco spends the night in an underground station with an old man. *Onysos le Furieux* is set in a New York underground station and only has two characters: a wrinkled old man and an-

other man next to whom he sits. In a long monologue divided into six “odes,” this old man tells his neighbour of a life, many centuries ago, spent in Asia, Mesopotamia and Egypt, which concluded with the ransacking of Troy.

Gaudé’s talent, like that of the old man in the underground, is in storytelling and his accounts powerfully represent the feeling of being drowned by life that is moving too quickly. These dramatic stories summarize the human condition at the threshold of the twenty-first century as being subject to senseless and inescapable violence and conflict. The only respite that people can find from absurd brutality is in the tenderness that can develop between individuals. With powerful writing and meticulous observation learnt perhaps from Koltès, Gaudé manages to make us believe in the reality of the characters and worlds he creates. His writing seems freer, less confined by mythic models, than the writing of some of his contemporaries.

Another way of giving the impression of a world ruled by obscene and absurd violence is to present children on stage. This was the approach taken by Michel Azama in 1989 with *Croisades*, the first scene of which showed a young boy dying, victim of a booby-trapped toy that was filled with explosives, and also a young girl dying under a hail of machinegun bullets. The play then continues with fifteen sequences, each one showing the consequences of different atrocities. Violence is always present in *Zoo de Nuit* (1995). However, the violence is more ordinary—four youngsters in a squat, seen over the course of a single night. Again in this play, the level of violence shocks due to the selfishness and brutality with which one of the characters, Jo, treats a child. He seizes Sarah’s infant so that he can blackmail the mother. In the end Sarah agrees to sell her baby: the poverty-stricken world in which she lives eventually destroys all of her human emotions. Azama tries to give a generalized and eternal vision of violence but lacks the linguistic originality that brings the work of, say, Durringer to life.

### “Writing against theater”: Noëlle Renaude

Noëlle Renaude’s theatrical creativity is, above all, experimental: “what interests me is the merging of genres. Taking from novels or films the very elements that separate them from theater” (*Trois pièces* 140). Inspired to write by her own reading of Proust and Joyce, Renaude aimed to stage the subjective imagination that she found in modernist novels. She sought to do this through an avowed experimentalism, in which the audience is invited to participate, like a game, to see how far a certain technique will go.

Aspects of her experimental approach to dramaturgy can be seen in four of her plays from the 1990s: *Le Renard du nord*; *Ma Solange, comment t'écrire mon désastre*, Alex Roux; *Fiction d'hiver* and *Madame Ka*. The first of these, *Le Renard du nord*, was broadcast on France Culture and published by Théâtre Ouvert in 1989, before being republished by Editions Théâtrales in 1991 and finally staged by Robert Cantarella in 1993 at the Théâtre Ouvert. In this play Renaude questions the notion of character: what is a character? How do we recognize one? What is essential to a character so that we, as an audience, take it seriously? The play attempts the impossible (in naturalistic terms): to separate a character from its environment.

Renaude is fond of genealogy: her 1993 play, *Les Cendres et les lampions*, consists of 74 short stories that run through the history of a single family, from a first ancestor (about whom we learn only that he lived and died) right up to the present day. What could be more logical than a genealogical approach to contend with the issue of how to present two characters? In the first scene of *Le Renard du nord*, Adrienne takes her son Maxime through his genealogy. The audience feels the same frustration as Maxime: a contradictory mixture of knowing everything (now that parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, etc. have all been identified and named) and yet a feeling of confusion or ignorance, because all of this knowledge, in and of itself, reveals nothing about his character. Throughout the play, Adrienne can only speak to her son about their ancestors, and especially his father (the "northern fox") who ran away with the maid, which is seen by the son as an abandonment. At the beginning of the third act, the son hangs himself with the final words: "Goodbye, father. Wherever you are, I tell you this: I have missed you" (45).

Renaude contrasts the unfortunate and mismatched mother and son with M. and Mme Kühn, a couple who are clearly defined by their theatrical artifice. The Kühns come straight out of light comedy or the well-made play: each has adulterous lovers, each lies to the other and they are both aware of this. Paradoxically, this non-naturalistic couple seem to possess a reality that escapes Maxime: Renaude heightens this paradox by having Mme Kühn directly address the audience:

I am Mme Kühn. Wife to Monsieur Kühn. Paul Kühn to be precise. Otto has been a friend of my husband for a long time. I am Otto's mistress. I have been for an equally long time. Otto is being unfaithful to me. And I know exactly who with. Rita Bergère.  
(*Renard* 13)

As opposed to the mother and son couple and the bourgeois couple, the character of Angelo seems to exist out of context. He is the male predator, with a strong sexual drive, but without a defined “environment.” His role is simply to seduce Poupette, Maxime’s girlfriend. Renaude revels in creating an intrigue that pits these disparate characters against each other, experimenting with their possible interactions.

*Ma Solange, comment t’écrire mon désastre*, Alex Roux, like Olivier Py’s *La Servante* (1995), is an extremely long play—inordinate length being another way of rejecting the norms of an action played out over two hours and pushing the boundaries of what is possible. Renaude began writing this theatrical saga in 1994 at the request of Christophe Brault, the actor who had played Maxime in *Le Renard du nord*. It took four years to write the play, in collaboration with Brault, and Editions Théâtrales finally published it in three volumes. More than two thousand characters appear throughout the course of twenty hours of uninterrupted monologues. Stories and characters are depicted and seem to develop in one way, then change direction or change in importance, intertwining with other characters and stories before disappearing and occasionally reappearing later. In choosing to write monologues, Renaude forgoes any sense of counterpoint that develops in the language of, say, Vinaver. Phrases, particular idioms and snatches of meanings all echo, nullify or support each other so that the audience is left with a web of verbal musicality. This musicality is one of everyday life and consists of bits of expressions, moments where people are speaking seriously, others where they are telling jokes, encounters that appear to be ordinary but prove to be important, or the reverse. Renaude claimed that she wanted to “consign all the fictional stories to a later stage so that she could question words, phrases, verbs, their tenses and their moods” (“Ma Solange, une histoire” 7).

The title of the play reveals its profound subject matter: writing itself. This questioning of words is a way of trying out all of the different possible ways of writing about a disaster or other human ordeal. This means that the text has no theatricality in the classical sense of the word; it may have an oral form but it is a prose poem or reverie that demands to be read out loud, but has no tension, conflicting characters or situation. Words and phrases create a conflicting fluidity in which some ideas, people and words assert themselves whilst others fade away. But the experience does not, ultimately, hold the key to a new theatrical form able to expose the diversity of human lives, situations and experiences, as managed by, say, Vinaver.

Having decided to finish *Ma Solange* with the third volume, Renaude moved onto a new question: “what would happen if I separate fiction from the dramatic situation? This produced *Fiction d’hiver*” (*Trois pièces* 142). This play for four actors, very different from *Ma Solange*, is entirely written in fast dialogue with responses that are rarely longer than a single line. However, the verbal material is fairly similar to *Ma Solange* in that it consists of fragments of various discussions, arguments and comments, none of which lasts long enough for the audience to fully piece together the puzzle with which they are presented. In this case, the answer to “what would happen?” is clear: the resulting dialogues are deeply frustrating for an audience. This is because the dialogues are not themselves absurd; they are not the cliché-ridden grotesque dialogues found in Ionesco’s *La Cantatrice chauve*, for example. In fact, everything that is said seems to make sense, but due to the fact that conversations intermingle, and that the writer has decided not to give any of these dialogues a coherent situation, it all seems rather empty, as though the phrases are floating around, looking for a situation that would anchor them to some kind of meaning.

*Madame Ka* (1998) was written for Florence Giorgetti, who had played the role of Madame Kühn in *Le Renard du Nord*. Noëlle Renaude told an interviewer that this play was “about machines: the stage as a machine, theatre as a machine, and Madame Ka is battling with modern machines (the photo booth, the answering machine, the fax, a bird that is actually a talking machine). Her friends are machines, in fact everything is machinery except for Madame Ka who is a sort of resistant heroine.”<sup>1</sup> In this play, which again is very different from her preceding plays, Renaude creates a highly comical character: while never clowning around herself, Madame Ka is the kind of character that provokes extreme reactions from other people, especially when the modern mechanical world gets the upper hand. For example, when she needs some photos to renew her passport, Madame Ka finds herself in a conversation with the automated voice of the photo booth that incessantly repeats her first horrified reaction to her own reflection in the mirror: “I look like my mother.”<sup>2</sup> Her photos finally come out of the booth, but she cannot recognize herself in them at all. The majority of the sequences are very short, and necessitate a constant flow of new characters on stage—sixty of

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1. Interview with Noëlle Renaude, by Erwan Tanguy, 25 August 2000 <<http://erwan-tanguy.sprechgesang.net>>.
  2. Interview with Noëlle Renaude, by Erwan Tanguy, 25 August 2000 <<http://erwan-tanguy.sprechgesang.net>>.

them in all. Madame Ka is the only constant character. After having watched her in so many little adventures, the audience grows fond of Madame Ka and identifies with the feeling of being overwhelmed by the progress of technology. To a certain degree, this character encapsulates the humanity that emerges from all of Renaude's textual experiments.

**The Choral Voice: Olivier Py; Pascal Rambert; Claude Prin; Jean-Luc Lagarce; Patrick Kermann**

Renaude's experiences with form led her to isolate different elements such as character, situation and words. Other writers were led to different experiments, most notably with elements borrowed from music. Unsurprisingly, those writers who rejected story and character in favor of a concrete theatrical poetry rediscovered the ancient forms of public speech, such as chorus, cantata, oratorio and requiem. We have already seen how Gabilly and Gaudé used chorus. Other young writers (including Olivier Py, Jean-Luc Lagarce and Patrick Kermann) also managed to find fairly original methods to adapt these forms to express a collective voice. These authors were looking for artistic ways in which to portray the pain of oppression and solitude, and turned to forms that were, in a certain sense, pre-dramatic.

As Martin Mégevand observed, the choral form is rarely adapted to the representation of dramatic action. "On the other hand, it is very suitable when showing *processes* such as mourning, praise or lamentation, or when accompanying any sort of ceremonial theatre" (82). Olivier Py was looking for a way to show the horrors of the Bosnian war on stage, without resorting to media cliché, and, in 1999 created *Requiem pour Srebrenica*.<sup>3</sup> It was a collection of accounts from those who had suffered at Srebrenica, and was structured as a religious ritual, which allowed the intolerable events to be remembered without them becoming completely overwhelming. It also allowed for a celebration of the courage shown by ordinary people. As a Roman Catholic, Py believes in the possibility of the transcendence of evil and his "requiem" actually speaks of the hope of peace in the next world. In order to distance the shocking facts and, in a way, to make them sacred, they are mediated by a trio of female narrators.

Other secular dramatists have also adopted the choral form. Pascale Rambert found this form to be an appropriate solution to the difficult task of giving voice to the study of different types of racial oppression. *Race* (1997)

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3. *Requiem pour Srebrenica* was not published. It was performed in 1999 at the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers and was directed by Olivier Py.

carries a “warning” in which the author explains, “It is *a single voice* that is being heard. However, due to theatrical realities, it is *shared* [...] by three *voices*, three *mouths*: that of the African actor, that of the North African actor, and that of the Asian actress. Then through a chorus” (9). Thus, the words themselves, for example, take on a three-cornered form of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century business:

SPICES  
 PHOSPHATE  
 IRON  
 GAS  
 TAPIOCA  
 INDIGO  
 WHORE CIVILISATION  
 WOOD CIVILISATION  
 TOBACCO SUGAR CIVILISATION (51)

While Rambert’s poetic and choral voice recalls the German *Sprechchor* tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, other writers were inspired by the choral tradition found in Attic tragedy. Claude Prin, for example, had already incorporated a female Commune chorus in his 1971 *Cérémonie pour un combat*. In 1994, commissioned by the Maison du Geste et de l’Image, he created *Chant d’Exils*, a play for adolescents:

What voice could I give them? I decided on a dispersed chorus that would allow everyone’s voice to be heard—their own voice—within a group that was simultaneously self-contained yet open to the great sweeps of History. A maximum of individuality with a minimum of words: a minimalist poetic score for a mini-tragedy. (“A propos de” 78)

One of the most frequently mentioned examples of such poetic scores is Jean-Luc Lagarce’s *J’étais dans ma maison et j’attendais que la pluie vienne* (1994). This lamentation-play consists of a series of speeches shared between five women (“the eldest,” “the mother” and her three daughters) who have spent their lives waiting for the return of the young brother, who had been driven out of the family home by the father. He has now come back, but lies dying in his room. The audience never knows what he did whilst he was away or why he is dying (there has always been an assumption that the play is about Aids, given that the writer died in 1995, but the text itself never actually confirms this). The play feels like a classical tragedy that has been denied its main characters, leaving only the chorus.

The women's voices resemble each other and create a "chorus" in that each woman is in the same situation, tells the same story and uses the same phrases. Together they produce a lyrical voice through a verbal repetition that has echoes in musical construction. In attempting to define the nature of this text, Patrice Pavis appropriately turned to musical comparisons:

As with Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Ravel's *Bolero* or Philip Glass' repetitive melodies, the listener is not in the position to memorise every detail, but he is aware that everything advances, despite the citations and reprises. (191)

The voices are not identical—there are distinct differences in the three sisters' roles (reminiscent of Chekhov)—but these differences are not accentuated enough to create *characters* in the conventional sense of the word: they use the same turns of phrase and the same images, thereby remaining just short of true characterization.

Watching this play is like seeing, or rather hearing, a poetic language gradually being woven together in front of one. Each person who speaks displays the same verbal tick of repetition. With no action and only the gradual accumulation of this poetic voice, Lagarce's play bears a certain resemblance to Beckett's work. Beckett's *Footfalls* finishes with the mother's words: "will you never have done ... revolving it all?" and, similarly, Lagarce's female voices never finish repeating the same facts, albeit in slightly different ways each time. However, unlike Beckett's voices, they speak more about the present than they do the past, and their almost obsessive repetitions seem motivated by an unachievable need for precision; as though their only way of experiencing an emotion is to express the details of what they are experiencing, with increasing exactitude. This can be seen in the eldest sister's attempt to express the joy that she felt on the return of the long-awaited brother:

when he returns  
when, finally, he returns, I laughed at myself, at the importance  
accorded to details,  
the idiotic yet terrifying importance that I accord to details.  
when the young brother, when he, after all these years spent  
waiting,  
when the young brother, finally, when the young brother returns,  
the one thing that perhaps I have hoped for most in my life, all  
these years, when finally, the young brother returns,  
I laughed to myself. (236)

The way that the text is set out, in verse form, underlines its poetic status; the constantly renewed repetition of the beginning of the sentence, followed by variations using the same words, creates the feeling of being on the brink of an emotion that could vanish if the stream of words were to cease. The confusion of verbs in both the past and present tense continues throughout the text, as though reinforcing the impression, felt and commented on by the characters, that they are living (like Beckett's characters) an infinitely expanding present. But this present needs to be captured in words as words are the place where life exists: as long as the words continue, so does existence.

With no story, character or conflict, what is left as the object of these words? It is description that remains, the endless repetition of details as perceived by the person speaking, a description that the eldest sister is all too aware of in the extract quoted above. If her reaction to the "importance accorded to details" is ambiguous, it is because she is imprisoned by these details, as insignificant as they may be. But the very importance given to these details means that the words achieve an almost abstract poetry. This phenomenon is nicely summarized by Nöelle Renaude: "like a photograph taken from very, very close up. It is so real that it becomes abstract" ("Piéger" 73).

With *J'étais dans ma maison et j'attendais que la pluie vienne*, Lagarce seemed to be revisiting the frustrated waiting of Beckett's characters, suggesting that, even if he came, Godot's arrival would change nothing for them. The women have spent their lives waiting for the brother to return, and indeed he has returned; however they find themselves in the same situation in terms of their relationship to him and their "home": the brother's return has changed nothing. They continue to await death—both his and their own. Their world is their family, the small group where everyone has a defined role in a hierarchy that has been accepted and lived with for many years. There is no impulse to rebel, no evocation of the external world where familial interaction is different, nothing that could endanger the impression of choral harmony in which every "voice" has its place.

The French production, directed by Stanislav Nordey at the Théâtre Ouvert in 1997, displayed little physicality in its staging: the five actresses hardly moved, they spoke when the lighting picked them out from the shadows and rested when one of the others started to speak. Patrice Pavis considered Nordey's choices to be appropriate:

The reading of the text and the rhythmic staging of the voices are the main focus of this play. This is something that Stanislav Nordey has understood, and the scenic interpretation leans more towards oratorio and chorus with its collective gestures rather than

a spectacular visualisation. Lagarce's theatricality is therefore less visual and more sonorous and rhythmic. [...] Each reply is its own response, creating hesitations, explorations, anticipations or backwards movements in the phrases, its regrets, hopes, extrapolations and sudden resolutions. (196-97)

The intense emotion conveyed by the five women's words certainly has a hypnotic effect, but the audience is primarily moved by the experience of witnessing a poetic form being created. As Pavis explained, it is the "theatricalisation" of the words that creates the elegiac tone and casts such a powerful spell.

Patrick Kermann, a young writer from Strasbourg, is another dramatist who developed a form of choral voice. He committed suicide in 2000, leaving behind a dozen plays, some of which contain the voices of dead characters. As with many of his contemporaries, Kermann used structures from Attic tragedy or musical forms such as oratorio; *La Mastication des Morts* (1999) is even sub-titled "Oratorio in progress." Similar to Noëlle Renaude's play in which seventy-five members of the same family get up, one after the other, to speak of their "division," Kermann's "Oratorio" visits his town's cemetery, giving a voice to about a hundred of the dead, each introduced by the name and dates inscribed on their tombstones. Some of the interjections are very short, such as Marie-François Vinchon née Rouart (1932-1994) who only says "filthy rat" (74). Others go on for many pages. Their speech has none of Lagarce's shared choral voice; in fact, quite the opposite: the voices are extremely distinctive. Some of them tell jokes or remember an old quarrel; others throw themselves into a detailed examination of their emotional states; while others just recount facts. What unites them all is that they are each buried in the same cemetery and have all lived and died in the same village.

The extent to which Kermann was a part of the *zeitgeist* of 1990s French theater is shown by his use of quotations by Genet and Müller as epigraphs to his play. The quotation from Genet, taken from *L'Etrange Mot de...*, highlights the advantages of placing theaters near cemeteries: the only people who would come to the theater would be those who could brave a nocturnal walk through a cemetery to be confronted by a mystery. The one from Müller is taken from *Germania 3*: "The dead are light sleepers / They conspire in the foundations / And it is their dreams that stifle us" (5). Clearly, the possibility of dramatic action is severely limited by the fact that each character is in the grave and that they speak exclusively in monologues.

Theatricality is therefore found in a sonorous and rhythmic exploration, as with Lagarce, and also in the attempt to find a new rite or mystery. The power comes from the paradoxical combination of death and “verbalization” implied by “oratorio in progress.” This “new mystery” is only possible in the abandonment of traditional dramaturgical categories in favor of an almost abstract art of “dreams that stifle us.” In the choruses of Py, Lagarce and Kermann, the presence of these voices that take shape on stage are not comforting: its urgency is attributable to a voice, both elevated and passionate, that protests against the violence and suffering in our world.

### **A Fragmentary and Discontinuous Art: Philippe Minyana; Michel Vinaver; Armando Llamas; Xavier Durringer**

Since his 1984 debut play, *Fin d'été à Baccarat*, Philippe Minyana has continued to work towards a theater of orality and discontinuity. Like Noëlle Renaude, he was driven by an adventurous desire to experiment with form. In the 1980s, he began to create theater based on unforeseen movements in thought and spoken word, which often lacked reason but nonetheless flourished, developing meaning and a concrete and human reality. Like others, Minyana found inspiration in other art forms: Christian Boltanski's installations were fundamental in the development of *Inventaires* in 1987. Throughout the next decade, Minyana took his inspiration from music. According to Robert Cantarella, his preferred director, Minyana's texts should be seen as “librettos for actors”:

At every moment, the textual material, its arrangement, its “inking” all infer a musical vision. Not a need to tell a story. However, a scrupulous study of the written “score” is necessary. (9)

These words appeared in the preface to *Anne-Laure et les fantômes*, “a libretto for actors, singers and musicians” which opened at the Saint-Denis Théâtre Gérard Philipe in March 1998, directed by Cantarella. However, Cantarella was referring to all of Minyana's work when he described the “musical vision,” even those plays that have no music in the strictest sense of the word. What does he mean by this notion of “musical vision?” It is only in answering this question that one can hope to discover the originality of Minyana's plays, as well as that of other dramatists in the 1990s.

When speaking about *La Maison des morts* (1996), Minyana claimed that the six “movements,” including the prologue and epilogue, were constructed in the same way as a piece of music. “I feel more like a composer, architect or photographer—it's about a point of view. You only see what the

camera sees, not what surrounds it" ("Interview" 178). He has explained that he works from a specific theme (in the 1990s it was mainly on the theme of mourning) and that his texts should be seen as variations on this theme. In the case of *La Maison des morts*, Minyana orchestrates a variety of reactions to death, articulated by voices that, for the majority, have no real name: the voice, the female police officer, the woman with pigtails, the neighbour, the man with walking sticks, the sick man, the woman with a scathing look, the poor man, the man dressed as a woman etc. Their voices range from indignation in the very first line ("The voice: WHO KILLED ANNE-CHRISTELLE") to prayers, letters from doctors or tax inspectors, moments of rage, accusations, intolerable memories, banal lists of everyday objects etc. There is no resolution, just fragments of conversations taken from real life. In the words of Cantarella's preface to the play: "It is in furnished rooms that death carefully sets about its business and slashes every destiny" (7).

*Drames brefs* is also composed of short sequences between men and women, fathers and sons, and characters about whom we know nothing other than the words that they are speaking. These disconnected sequences of dialogues and monologues are like Polaroid pictures or vocal recordings of real life, with no explanation, introduction or conclusion. The audience accepts these random fragments, which are often very emotional, but can only react to them with a detached curiosity. Without any characters with whom to identify or narrative on which to cling, the experience remains rather abstract, despite the very concrete situations that are described in many of the sequences.

*Drames brefs*, like *La Maison des morts*, is divided by the dramatist into movements that can be compared to symphonic movements. Some of the movements are very short; others are composed of several simple sequences. The structural principal of these plays is the collection of as many possible variations on a theme, to continue the musical metaphor. Minyana's dramaturgy can be defined as this accumulation of different registers of voice around a central theme. According to Michel Corvin, the theme of *La Maison des Morts* is "the incessant violence imposed on people" (24) and the play takes shape through the relentless accumulation of testimonies to the violence of death, or the accounts of those that are already dead. Minyana's achievement, for Corvin, is to have created a perfect balance between the form of his plays, based on obsessive repetition, and their profound meaning, a catastrophic vision of human life. Despite their differences, Minyana does indeed resemble Beckett in the sense that his experi-

ments with dramatic form go beyond the normal distinctions between form and content. The fragmentation and discontinuity found in Minyana's plays are the result of both an aesthetic choice and the affirmation of a life experience.

Two plays written by Vinaver around the time of the new millennium directly confront similar experiences of discontinuity. *King* (1998) was a look at the extraordinary life of the inventor of the disposable razor, King Gillette; *11 Septembre 2001* (2001) was written in response to the destruction of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers in Manhattan. Since the 1960s, Vinaver's writing has been informed by music, and these two plays also show the close relationship he has to musical form. *11 Septembre 2001* was originally planned as a libretto to be scored by Georges Aperghis; according to Vinaver's introductory note, its form closely resembles the cantata or oratorio. *King*, written for three characters (young King, middle-aged King and old King) is like a cantata for three voices: it is structured around alternating solos (monologues spoken by one of the "Kings") and "trios" of interlacing voices.

In his *Ecrits sur le Théâtre*, Vinaver takes great pleasure in referring to the different stages of capitalism: the 1960s were, for him, a Homeric, heroic era, in which industrial societies set out to conquer the world market. This was followed, in the 1970s, by a period of retrenchment that recalls Hesiod's *Works and Days*. But, unlike the period described by Hesiod, this period was anything but peaceful: in Vinaver's *Les Travaux et les jours*, the Cosson staff are "simultaneously crushed by the system and in complete harmony with it" (*Ecrits* 1, 286). Other plays from the 1970s, especially *L'Ordinaire*, emphasized the disastrous, even cannibalistic, side of this industrial rise of the world markets. In *King*, Vinaver managed to display in a single man these three aspects of industrial evolution as seen at the beginning of the twentieth century: the heroic, the peaceful, and the disastrous.

Having spent a large part of his life working as an executive at Gillette, it is hardly surprising that Vinaver is so fascinated by this industrial American character. King Gillette was born in 1855 and died in 1932, shortly after the Wall Street crash. Vinaver was driven to write his play after discovering a book written by Gillette himself, *The Human Drift*, published in 1895. In this book, Gillette argues that all of the world's evils originate from competition. The book describes a utopian vision, in which all of humanity is gathered in a single city that has been built for everyone's well-being. Rivalry and commercial competition are eternally banned. A few years later,

King Gillette, then a sales representative, struck upon the idea of a razor with disposable blades. He had to fight to bring his invention into being:

A long series of tribulations and then dazzling success. The devastating conflict between Gillette and his major shareholder, who orchestrated his removal; however he had amassed a fortune and moved to California, where he grew grapefruit and threw himself into increasingly grander real estate ventures, then died penniless, three years after the 1929 crash, another victim of the Depression. (*Ecrits 2*, 229)

King Gillette's life has all of the ingredients for a gripping drama, full of conflicts and unexpected twists and turns, and the way in which Vinaver chooses to tell his story in the above quotation highlights these qualities. But he chose not to write a traditional biographical play; rather, Vinaver was interested in the tension between the historical reality of this hero of competitive commerce and Gillette's own imagined utopia.

The play consists of a series of monologues, interspersed with "trios"; the three King Gillette characters tell the story of what happened to them, their worries and hopes, and they also speak the words of those that surround them. There is no dialogue in these monologues and "trios": Vinaver does not create any imagined discussions between the different aspects of the same character. The three Kings share the same space but as though they are each alone on the stage. Rather than focusing on an opposition between the characters, Vinaver searches for the drama created in the opposition between two temporal dimensions: on the one hand, a necessarily ahistorical utopia; and on the other, the historical reality of the global market domination of the invention of the disposable blade. The play does not seek to resolve this opposition, which is presented by Vinaver as a profound enigma: once the play has finished, the audience realizes that this enigma encapsulates Vinaver's global vision of the Western world during the twentieth century. On the one hand, there is the dream (in itself rational yet unachievable) of a utopian paradise of material equality where people are free to spend their time as they see fit; on the other hand, the hellish reality of industrial competition that seems indifferent to human interest, and advances with an inexplicable (almost mechanical) momentum, discarding those that have no immediate use and crushing those that try to hinder its progress.

One of the most interesting qualities of King's character is his innocence. He is not an intellectual: his thoughts in *The Human Drift* are not de-

veloped through political or philosophical reading. King does not acknowledge the contradictions of his own thoughts, and devotes himself to one activity after another without understanding their incompatibility. As with Minyana's fragmentation, the discontinuous form of the juxtaposed monologues thus achieves a certain aesthetic inevitability. As the subject of the play is the exploration of an irreconcilable contradiction, the juxtaposition of different visions and motivations (each told with equal passion) proves to be the appropriate form. However, Vinaver's dramaturgy remains close to that of his previous plays, not using the layering technique found in Minyana's work. His primary tool is still dramatic irony. The audience understands the contradictions at play in the ideas and career of King Gillette, and can appreciate the irony of the utopian visionary who became a "king" of modern industry only to die ruined by the Depression.

*King* occupies a unique position in Vinaver's work in that it is solely composed of monologues. His talent for dialogue and the interweaving of voices, seen in all of his other plays, displays Vinaver's originality in relationship to most contemporary writing for theater. In *King*, the absence of this plurality of voice creates a certain monotony that is rare in his plays. However, *11 Septembre 2001* achieves, in only 30 pages, a remarkable compression of different voices, from workmen cleaning the World Trade Center windows to Bush and Bin Laden. To write this "oratorio," Vinaver returned to his proven method of verbal collage, using words taken from the daily press. The play is a polyphony of phrases provoked by the September 11, 2001 attacks, ranging from the voices of pilots and passengers on the hijacked planes, to the victims in the Twin Towers, and culminating in a confrontation between Bush and Bin Laden.

The image that emerges from this polyphony is one of a world fragmented to the extreme, where people's concerns are so disparate that they could be said to be living on completely different planets. For example, the account of Demczur, a New York window-cleaner who manages to get out of a broken-down lift by piercing the inner wall with the metal handle of his scraper, is juxtaposed with the account of one of the terrorists, Mohamed Atta, who forbids any women to come to his grave during his funeral. After such combinations of accounts that seem to have so little in common, it comes as a surprise to hear the climactic words of Bush and Bin Laden, who express similar sentiments using identical words. The text was published in two parallel forms, one in English, and the other in French (the original testimonies were all in English). The production premiered in a Catalan translation, at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (Barcelona) in 2002.

The experience of a fragmentary and discontinuous world informed a great variety of work at the end of the millennium. One of the most successful was Armando Llamas' *Meurtres de la princesse juive*. Originally published by Théâtre Ouvert in 1990, the play was chosen by Lucien and Micheline Attoun (Directors of Théâtre Ouvert) to launch their new "Enjeux" series in 2000. It developed the technique of juxtaposing fragments of unconnected lives in a traditional narrative structure, so as to depict intercultural social exchange in contemporary urban life. The thirteen scenes take place in airports, cafes, shops and apartments in different world cities: Budapest, Paris, London, Karachi, Chittagong and Hiroshima. Various languages are spoken, not only French, but English, Pakistani and Serbian. The same characters find themselves in different places and have to react according to the extremely different customs and prejudices that they encounter, giving rise to moments of humour and surprise. Llamas, who was born in Spain and grew up in Argentina, worked with Jorge Lavelli at the Colline where he wrote the French adaptations of two leading texts for the director: Lorca's *The Public* and Valle-Inclan's *Barbarian Comedies*. His own plays are both cosmopolitan and part of a postmodern world where it is possible to pass from one culture to another.

Xavier Durringer is another writer who knows how to exploit discontinuity to create an image of contemporary life, but he limits his palette to French youth culture. His *Chroniques des jours entiers des nuits entières* (1995) consists of short scenes, in which young people meet, argue, fall in love or drift apart. This genre of miniature fragmentation demonstrated Durringer's talent. However, when he writes longer plays, he relies on the clichés of violence and urban displacement. *Une envie de tuer sur le bout de la langue* (1991) tells of an evening in the lives of a small group of friends who hang around the entrance to a beach dance hall. The structure largely corresponds to naturalist drama: the environment determines the characters' choices and a form of social realism is portrayed on stage. The mythical figures, ghosts or other apparitions that haunt the plays of Gabilly or Minyana are absent. The characters are mostly outcasts but, as Patrice Pavis noted, "it is not the dregs, the downtrodden, the lowest depths of society or the ailing societal limbs that he shows us, but suburban normality with its tedium, dullness and self-satisfied alienation" (160).

Following a conventional naturalist structure, the action depicts the changing relationships between friends, their dismal hopes, small betrayals and deceptions. The threat of violence lingers over the action: one of the characters, Rou, tries his best to terrorize the others. At the end, the main

object of his intimidation, Poupon, takes out a gun and threatens to kill Rou, who manages to avoid getting killed before Poupon finally turns the gun on himself. The characters talk in familiar and vulgar language that energizes the text, but the violence that simmers throughout the play is not, as in Kassowitz's celebrated film *La Haine* (1995), attributable to social deprivation: it is presented as a "norm" within certain suburban youth cultures.

### Conclusion

How has the status of text changed as a result of the rapid evolution of theater since 1968? The most apparent change has been in dramaturgy. Before the twentieth century, every theatrical text contained in its structure an implicit performance model that conformed to the accepted conventions of its day. The onset of the director gradually affected a change. With the arrival of Chekhov and Stanislavski, the relationship between writers and directors entered into crisis because directors thought that texts were radically incomplete, needing their own input to complete them. Staging a play went beyond the simple realization of an implicit dramaturgy, necessitating a supplementary creativity. Meyerhold was the first, quickly followed by others, to understand how this creativity could not only help to realize the writer's ideas but also question them: the door to "reinterpretation" was now open, and this particularly applied to the classics, the glory of twentieth-century French theater.

With the director's omnipotence since 1968, and the claim that the director's work amounts to "scenic writing," whose creative importance is as great as that of the dramatists, playwrights have often been reduced to mere providers of "scripts." When Gabilly said that there was no such thing as an *écrivain scénique*, he was denying the director the right to reinterpret the writer's text, to give it a meaning that was not specifically intended by the writer. He also rejected Vinaver's more prudent approach, which advanced the theory that plays possess a double status: as material to be read, they are entirely attributable to the author; as a material to be performed, they are subject to the inevitable transformations caused by the arbitrary interpretations of those that are producing them.

Dramatists who shared Gabilly's sentiments therefore moved towards a form of text that refused to be reduced to a simple meaning, resisting the tendency of directors to remould what they are given. To do this, writers looked for a dramatic action that discarded the framework of narrative, character or situation. This was the sought-after grail. Their quest led them to the roots of theater and especially the theater of pre-literary culture; they found

in the oral tradition of ancient Greece, and in particular Attic tragedy, a model for poetic creation where the word *is* action, where the dramatist does not write with an eye to publication, but where their main tools are the voices and movements of the actors, the space in which they develop. They sought to rediscover a similar form of poetic creation that exploited chorality and liberated an almost prophetic voice.

The resulting work was intimately connected to theatrical practice: it respected the actor's task and reduced the director's hegemony. The search for a corporal dimension led dramatists to highlight physical qualities. Moreover, these writers were more than willing to let their texts be "roughed up" during the course of performance: Olivier Py's long poetic tirades, for example, are often colourfully enlivened by surprising on-stage play. The influence of companies such as Deschamps-Makeieff, Philippe Genty or Théâtre du Mouvement, continued to be felt in the field of writing.

No longer a distinct genre, discarding all the inherited rules of dramaturgy, theatrical text now had aspirations of poetic status close to abstract art: it can be taken or left as a "material" and only fully exists in the interaction between body and voice in a dedicated performance space. Transcendence is found in language itself and, even if this can lead to a certain self-centeredness, it can also create ambitious texts that rival classical tragedy and achieve a form of universality. However, despite a period of audacious experimentation, no young dramatist dominated contemporary theater in the way that Vinaver and Koltès dominated in the 1980s. The most interesting work continues to be the result of a close collaboration between a theater company and a writer, such as Philippe Minyana and Robert Cantarella's company, or Olivier Py and his own company. But it is difficult to identify original contributions in today's "dissolving dramaturgy" that could help to establish theater as an important element of contemporary civic life in France as it was in the immediate postwar decades.

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