

FROM THE EDITOR

The image on the cover is from the recent production, by the Target Margin Theater under the direction of David Herskovits, of *The Dinner Party*, adapted from Plato's *Symposium*. This scene presents an encounter between philosophy and theatre—in the theatre. It can serve as a point of departure for an alternative history of theatre, one that is based on Plato and driven by its relation to philosophy. We have all been taught, of course, that drama (*dran*) means action, not idea, and that theatre therefore should occupy itself with the depiction of action, leaving ideas to the philosophers. But fortunately there is also *thea*, which conveniently points to the intersection of theatre and theory in the common Greek root for *theatron* and *theoria*. How can we do justice to this intersection, to this shared origin, of theatre and theory?

The three contributions take different routes to this intersection, although they all acknowledge, directly or indirectly, that Plato plays a central role. Freddie Rokem goes directly to Plato's *Symposium*. He reads it as the representation of an encounter, one between the philosopher Socrates and two playwrights, Agathon and Aristophanes. This encounter functions as a kind of showdown, an opposition between the philosopher and the two playwrights. At the same time, however, this showdown is itself presented in a kind of drama, a form of scenic writing that is deeply engaged with Greek theatre and must be understood in relation to such plays as *King Oedipus*. Once the *Symposium*—and with it, Plato's drama more generally—is recovered for theatre history, it comes as no surprise that Plato has in fact entered theatre history with frequency, with David Herskovits's production being only the most recent example. Here, theatre history has to catch up with contemporary theatre practice and restore Plato to his rightful place.

The final contribution to the issue, by Jefferson Gatrall, approaches the intersection of theatre and philosophy in the dramatic oeuvre and thought of Leo Tolstoy. At first sight, we are in a very different terrain, that of infanticide and the travails of peasants. However, in *What Is Art?*, Tolstoy adopts an attitude toward art that is mostly critical, notoriously dismissing most European art from Shakespeare through Goethe to Wagner as elitist and decadent. With this sweeping gesture, he explicitly harks back to Plato. More generally, Gatrall embeds Tolstoy and the fascinating performance history of *The Power of Darkness* in a discussion that ranges from Enlightenment thought to the ruminations of the Russian intelligentsia and the development of a peasant philosophy.

The encounter between theatre and philosophy staged in this special issue culminates in the longest piece, a translation of Alain Badiou's short book *Rhapsodie pour le théâtre*, which appears here for the first time in English. Recognized as one of the leading French philosophers since the eighties, Badiou has emerged as a major thinker in the English-speaking world only in the past

couple of years, with new translations of major works still coming out every year. With a few notable exceptions (Janelle Reinelt among them), theatre studies has yet to recognize Badiou's significance. In publishing this piece—and I am particularly grateful for Alain Badiou for letting us publish his *Rhapsody* in its entirety—we hope to rectify this situation.

Why is the work of Alain Badiou so central to theatre studies? First, Alain Badiou is a playwright as well as a philosopher, and his *Rhapsody* contains short sections of dialogue; one may think here not only of Plato but also of Diderot, Craig, and Brecht. This formal or generic intersection of theatre and philosophy points to a more wide-ranging, underlying affinity between the two in Badiou's thought. The central term of Badiou's philosophy is that of the "event," elaborated in one of his most important books, *Being and Event*, originally published in 1988 but translated into English only in 2005. The event, for Badiou, is a happening that changes everything around it, a transformative occurrence that carries overtones of revolution. But an event is not only a revolutionary change in politics; it also extends to the other three domains central to Badiou—love, mathematics, and art. To emphasize the philosophical significance of the event in those four domains, Badiou speaks in each case of a truth, or a truth procedure, taking place. Truth, in other words, is not reserved for the domain of logic (or mathematics or science) but can be found in each of the four domains if and when a true event has taken place. For us, who approach Badiou from the side of theatre, the significance of the event cannot be underestimated, since it installs a performative category at the center of his philosophy. An event takes place; it is enacted by agents; it is a singular, unrepeatable occurrence of a kind we recognize as the ephemeral nature of a theatrical performance.

Given this dimension of Badiou's thought, it does not come as a surprise that the theatre should be one of his privileged art forms. Badiou has written about some of the most important dramatists and theatre practitioners, including Beckett and Brecht. And yet, what is so fascinating about this dramatist-philosopher is that his approach to and use of theatre is quite different from the current trends in theatre studies. One sign of this difference is the fact that in addition to Brecht and Beckett there is a third dramatist who serves as a guiding figure for Badiou, one who is perhaps even more central than the other two but who has all but dropped out of our current conception of theatre history: Stéphane Mallarmé. Mallarmé appears everywhere in Badiou's writings, including *Being and Event*, as the creator of event-dramas that are located at the intersection of text, book, and theatre. Mallarmé is also one of the central figures in *Rhapsody*, where the relation between theatre and text is central for Badiou's understanding of theatre. Badiou also echoes Mallarmé in the style of his writing, with his complex sentences and noun-driven constructions, which made the task of the translator, the Badiou expert Bruno Bosteels, all the more difficult; it also requires from the reader some extra effort—which, I promise, will be richly rewarded.

Badiou's conception of theatre is important because it goes against the grain of theatre studies in other ways as well. Indeed, I like to think of *Rhapsody* as a corrective, an alternative, a proposal to rethink our most fundamental assumptions about theatre. Three such assumptions can be singled out.

1. *The relation between theatre and politics.* Contrary to our infatuation with the theatre's supposedly subversive effects, Badiou approaches the political significance of theatre by way of its relation—an essential relation, in his view—to the state. Here, as elsewhere, we are faced with an undoubtedly French conception of theatre, based on a long tradition of court theatres, a national theatre, and generous public subsidies. Things couldn't be more different in the United States, of course, a difference best registered in the ironic name of one of New York's newer Off-Off Broadway theatre groups, which wittily named itself (and was able to name itself!) The National Theater of the United States of America (NTUSA). But even if we allow for national differences, the essential relation between theatre (as opposed to cinema) and the state posited by Badiou has a relevance for us as well, since it identifies the assembled public, the liveness of the theatre event, and the history of theatre as crucial political categories.

2. *The relation between theatre and text.* In a move that will surprise our current antitextualist tendencies, Badiou insists on the essential relation between theatre and text, excluding from the domain of theatre more vaguely defined performances as well as dance. This does not mean that Badiou somehow underestimates the live, performative dimension of theatre; this dimension is crucial for his philosophy more generally (registered in the concept of the event). But Badiou does not see, as we tend to, this performative dimension in opposition to theatre's relation to text and literature. (It is, therefore, in accordance with Badiou's view of theatre when I note that the active exclusion of the text from the pages of *Theatre Survey*, which I bemoaned in my editorial a year ago, has now come to an end; the executive committee has kindly agreed to striking the "offending" sentence from the journal's self-description.)

3. The most provocative thesis of *Rhapsody* is perhaps that "all theatre is theatre of ideas." By this statement, Badiou does not envision a theatre that explains ideas, or philosophies, in a didactic manner, but rather one that maintains an intrinsic relation to thought, to philosophy, to the conception of truth. To appreciate this dimension of Badiou's thought properly, it is important to recognize another figure hovering in the background of *Rhapsody*, one who returns us to the cover image: Plato. Unlike many philosophers since Nietzsche who have made it their business to declare an end to Plato's inheritance, Badiou has proposed a return to Plato's practice of philosophy. Indeed, when Badiou defines all theatre as theatre of ideas, he is thinking especially of Plato and his conception of the idea (or form).

This (Platonic) conception of theatre is, it seems to me, a salutary corrective to our well-nigh exclusive focus on the body, on corporeality, on matter and materiality. Badiou does not propose a new idealism, a metaphysical realm of ideas (even the late Plato had moved away from the classical theory of ideas), but a conception of theatre—and also of philosophy—that acknowledges the poverty of a thinking that has no place for ideas, for truths. What would theatre studies look like if we installed Plato, and especially Badiou's Plato, at its center?