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Review 2

Olivier Neveux, *Politiques du Spectateur. Les enjeux du théâtre politique aujourd'hui* ["The Politics of the Spectator. Issues in Political Theater Today"], Paris, La Découverte, "Cahiers libres," 2013 (280 p.).

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Translator: Saskia Brown

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Review 2

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- 1 Associating theater with politics —although not as in the old days of far-Left radicalism — is clearly well-received in the state-aided theater sector. Today, an increasing number of theatrical discourses claim to be "subversive, a form of resistance, contestatory." At a time when the state-aided theater has difficulty justifying its role in society, this book criticizes "the impoverishment of meaning and the generalization of empty gestures" in this domain, and asks theaters which claim to be political how they would describe their practice and its effects, and consequently, what sort of relations they establish with the audience, since the meaning of political "is, at the very least, here, inseparable from the notion of emancipation and the transformation of reality."
- 2 Olivier Neveux is interested in recent trends in theater policy and practice. The increasing number of theater festivals generates, in his view, an excessive number of productions, encouraging shopping-around and programming strategies in which eclecticism "replaces a coherent theatrical identity." Developing Jean Jourdheuil's analysis, Neveux shows how commercial theater, the bugbear of Jean Vilar, has today got the upper hand. He invites the reader to reconsider the ambiguities, which are symptomatic of our times, of the Théâtre du Rond-Point's "victory by knock-out in its programming logic." There is nothing particularly wrong with the productions scheduled, but they are so disparate that they cast doubt on the theater's political commitments, since all spectators are sure to find a subversive subject they can

applaud with “the laughter of resistance,” as long as they choose the right “Personal Awards Evening.”

- 3 Compared to this tendency in the state-aided theater sector, and its equivalent in the established private theaters, namely the imperative to amuse, post-dramatic theater, as illustrated by Romeo Castellucci’s work, seems to represent a model of esthetic, ethical and even political rigor on the contemporary European scene: “It is a form of refusal, in its own language, of the free-market order, of what happens to bodies and lives under it.” Olivier Neveux provides a salutary critique of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s book *Postdramatic Theater* and of Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. He evokes the “democratic illusion” created by the theater, which had already been criticized by Michel Surya, arguing that post-dramatic transgressions, far from scandalizing a public of regular theater-goers, rather bolster their short-sighted conviction that they are supporting the freedom of expression and hence democracy. The brutality of the imagery, the spectacle of suffering bodies and the overall cynicism are of course meant to give an uncomfortable shock to spectators conceived by directors as “passive, spineless and compliant” (and Olivier Neveux attempts to protect Artaud from this new type of instrumentalization of his work). But, argues Neveux, even if this emotional provocation is legitimate, it cannot be an end in itself. The question remains of what spectators can possibly do with the immense impotence aroused in them by the violence they are subjected to from the stage, when they return once again to the impotence which characterizes their daily life.
- 4 The book’s second part explores militant theater practice, harkening back to the 1920s tradition of political theater, a theater “on condition of politics” which, “to paraphrase Brecht, names the oppressors and the oppression.” Although it seemed to have its swan song in 1968, it was rediscovered at the beginning of the 1990s, with the return of the “social question.” Theaters devoured Pierre Bourdieu’s edited volume, *La Misère du monde* (1993) [*The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*] and began drawing on the experience of workers, illegal immigrants and the socially excluded to stage exemplary life-fragments. *The Weight of the World* deserves a special mention for covering the theater productions and testimonies of those artists, for example around the Cartoucherie, who were committed to showing the daily life of the most oppressed. It recalls some powerful moments, such as the hunger strike at the Avignon Festival in 1995 in response to the Serbian forces’ capture of Srebrenica, and the positions adopted by Ariane Mnouchkine, Olivier Py, François Tanguy and Bruno Tackels, which sought to be representative but retrospectively appear to be very personal.
- 5 Theater can obviously testify to its epoch—but what then? Olivier Neveux never allows the reader to beat a nostalgic retreat to the “hallowed time of the TNP [National Popular Theater]”. After arguing that the state-aided theater sector has unashamedly swapped its commitment to a “popular theater” for the curious formula of an “exclusive theater for all,” Neveux dismantles the idea of a “citizen’s theater,” which he interprets as an awareness-raising forum which goes no further than registering the facts. It has caught on, Neveux maintains, because it privileges Republican consensus over class struggle. Neveux’s tone is often harsh, but he also makes some exceptions, notably for popular education, with the caveat that those involved would do well to reconsider the naivety of their political claims, especially since their activity comes under a Ministry whose responsibilities are supposed to be much more socially involved than those of the Ministry of Culture. Popular education is vital for countering

what has really undermined public theater, namely the undeniable failure of cultural democratization.

- 6 While a Professor of Theater History and Esthetics at Lyon 2 University-Lumière, Olivier Neveux is first and foremost a very assiduous theater-goer. Neither a moralist, nor over-polemical, he is always on the lookout for encouraging signs, and is enthusiastic about the re-inventions of documentary theater, and the re-emergence of agit-prop, particularly in this connection *Rwanda 94* (1999), which importantly pays homage to the militant forms which preceded it. In contrast to the present fashion for deploring failings, this book is a real tonic, showing through close analysis of theater practice —Stanislas Nordey's experience at the Théâtre Gérard-Philipe of Saint-Denis, Alain Badiou's theater, Benoît Lambert's productions, and more— how the author coherently supports his vision of a theater which really seeks to take on political responsibilities.
- 7 We are unable for reasons of space to pay a fitting tribute to the intelligence with which Neveux handles a whole range of references, both artists and thinkers, for example, Gilles Deleuze, Stathis Kouvelakis, Annie Le Brun, Jean-François Lyotard, and Herbert Marcuse. Let us simply signal the admirable footnote on Jacques Rancière, at the bottom of page 9: "I use his work, I appropriate what in his words and thoughts open up new avenues for me and renew questions. I try to do it with rigor, and not to conceal my debt to him." Neveux is also inspired by intellectuals such as Émile Copfermann and Bernard Dort, who broke new ground, often neglected thereafter, in theater studies, by advocating an uncompromising political solidarity with the artists. This book has the same lucid, compassionate and demanding vision of society, art and theater in particular as did its dedicatee the militant philosopher Daniel Bensaïd, before his untimely death. It seeks to "affirm that everyone's emancipation can take place, here and now, that we can all enter the circle of emancipation, in which the theater has its part to play."