Barthes and the Theatre

3. The Brecht Years

If 1953 and 1954 can be described as Théâtre populaire’s TNP years, those years when the editorial line of the review was closest to the Vilar’s ethos or conception of the theatre, 1955 was their Brecht year and started with a special issue entirely devoted to him. That year also saw the publication of the first volume of Brecht’s Complete Works by L’Arche, where Barthes, having failed to have his contract with the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique renewed, was momentarily employed as literary editor. Under the leadership of Roland Barthes, Bernard Dort, who had recently joined the editorial team, and Robert Voisin, Théâtre populaire’s critical approach to theatre became in some respects a ‘systematization of Brecht successful formulae’,\(^1\) an increasingly radical stance that would gradually alienate the support of Barthes’s early co-editors and eventually lead to the departure of Morvan Lebesque, Jean Paris and Jean Duvignaud.\(^\text{ii}\) Henceforth, Brecht’s ‘epic’ theatre replaced Greek tragedy as the standard against which Barthes measured all theatre.

It must be remembered that, except for The Threepenny Opera (1928) whose success had made him into a household name before the Second World War, Bertold Brecht’s work was little known in France in the early 1950s. The Cold War was at its height and he was considered a dangerous East German Communist, the conservative press going as far as to describe Vilar’s brave decision to produce Mother Courage and her children at the TNP in 1951 as ‘subversive’ and ‘antipatriotic’. But Vilar’s production was nothing as compared to that of the Berliner Ensemble in June 1954. Although the Berliner Ensemble’s second appearance at the Paris International Theatre Festival the following year with The Caucasian Chalk Circle was reviewed enthusiastically by Barthes, ultimately it was their production to Mother Courage under direction of Brecht that represented for Barthes the perfect fusion of
text and performance, and the epitome of Brecht’s art. For years to come, whether he discussed stagecraft – acting, set, lighting, costume – or issues of structure and dramatic coherence in a play, Barthes would almost inevitably refer to Brecht and his production of *Mother Courage* as a model. Brecht’s untimely death from heart failure in 1956 meant that his production of the play, revived by the Berliner Ensemble in 1957 and captured by the photographer Roger Pic, would remain, in Barthes’s view, the definitive example of what popular theatre should and could be.

*Scenes from Mother Courage and her children performed in Paris in 1957 by the Berliner Ensemble, and photographed by Roger Pic.*

In 1954 and 1955 alone, Barthes published altogether over 20 pieces on the theatre in addition to his 24 contributions to *Théâtre populaire*; by 1956, however, this number had halved and 1957, the year when *Mythologies* was published, saw a further decline of his involvement with the popular theatre movement. By the time Vilar had left the TNP in 1963 and *Théâtre populaire* had stopped publication as a result of administrative and editorial difficulties in 1964, Barthes had long ceased to play an active part in the magazine. His last contribution was published in the autumn of 1960, and henceforth, he would only write occasionally about the theatre and, with few exceptions, mainly on topics that he had tackled before: Greek theatre, French classical theatre, Brecht, the avant-garde.

In his introduction to Barthes’s writings for the period 1942–1961, Eric Marty remarks on the astonishing verbal violence with which Barthes put forward the ethical and political views that defined his aesthetics. Anyone first acquainted with him through his later writings cannot but be surprised by the Micheletian tone of some of Barthes’s unrelenting attacks against ‘bourgeois theatre’, which induced in him a nausea reminiscent of the physical revulsion Michelet felt for kings and queens. In his preface to Barthes’s collected writings on the theatre, *Écrits sur le théâtre*, Jean-Loup Rivière explains that when he approached
Barthes in the late 1970s with the idea of this collected edition, the latter was at pains to understand Rivière’s youthful enthusiasm for this body of work and why the young generation might read it with interest. Although Barthes agreed to help his former student make a selection, he expressed a number of reservations – perhaps the same that led him to only include half-a-dozen of his articles on the theatre in his *Critical Essays* (1964). Barthes doubted that reviews discussing the work of long-forgotten stage directors could still be of interest to contemporary readers. The high-mindedness, ‘obsessive reference to the bourgeoisie’ and strident militancy that characterized Barthes’s stance and style in those pieces also made him feel uncomfortable: Jean-Loup Rivière quotes him as saying: ‘the Wealthy, Money (where did I get that from?)’. The proselytising zeal and infectious enthusiasm with which Barthes defended and promoted the théâtre populaire’s cause, sometimes at the risk of hammering the point home, resulted, however, in extremely accessible, punchy and witty pieces. This ‘combative’ stance, characteristic of the times, can only make Barthes’s writings on the theatre attractive to twenty-first century readers looking for ways of making art relevant to politics, as the rise of extremism in all forms and shades, and concerns over the future of the planet gave a new urgency to the political debate.

In view of Barthes’s growing interest in theatre as a display of signs, rather than as performance practice, as well as his eventual eschewing of militancy, some have questioned the depth of his political commitment in the 1950s. True, in 1955, when summoned to declare whether or not he was a Marxist, following a polemic with Albert Camus, Barthes refused to answer. To ask such a question was over-simplistic and smacked of MacCarthyism, he replied, adding that Marxism was ‘not a religion but a method of explanation and of action’ that demanded too much of its practitioners to be treated as just another label. True also, in September 1960, Barthes refused to join the 121 signatories, including his friends Nadeau and Dort, of ‘The Declaration of the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War’. However, in the mid-1950s, at the time when his involvement with theatre was at its most intense, there is no doubting Barthes commitment to the ideals, if not the practice, of a Marxist revolution: ‘art can and must intervene in history; […] the theatre must participate in history by revealing its movement; […] finally, there is no such thing as an ‘essence’ of eternal art, but […] each society must invent the art which will be responsible for its own deliverance’.

The Sartrian tone of this statement is unmistakable. Indeed, when Sartre’s satire against the anti-communist press, *Nekrassov*, came under ferocious attack in 1955, Barthes defended him vigorously in *Théâtre Populaire*. With hindsight, any discussion of Barthes’s political ideals in the post-war period should perhaps take into account the fact that while he shared them
with those, on the left, who had taken arms against Nazism and Fascism during the World War II, his personal experience might have been closer to that of their juniors. Like the younger generation, but by reason of his illness, Barthes had ‘missed’ the opportunity to fight, and he might have been somehow trying to make up for this by his heightened stance in support of Marxism.\textsuperscript{xii}

Barthes gradual and irrevocable move away from the theatre has puzzled not only his contemporaries but many of those who have more recently discovered Barthes’s early writings on the theatre. The various interpretations put forward to date are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Friends and critics often refer to Barthes’s ‘intellectual nomadism’, his ability throughout his writing career to apply his analytical skills to different kinds of aesthetic objects and cultural products, and to embrace whole-heartedly theoretical models which are subsequently discarded. What is uncharacteristic here, however, is that whereas Barthes never relinquished literary works or photography as objects of study when his approach evolved, there is no new discussion of Western theatre as live performance after 1960. More to the point, Bernard Dort suggested that Barthes’s desertion from the theatre might be related to the figure of the body, an interpretation developed more recently by Timothy Sheie: ‘The conundrum of the live performing body’s “presence” haunts Barthes, not only in his theatre reviews but throughout his early writings: in his euphoric moments, his discontents, and finally the abrupt and enigmatic end of his theatre criticism and the striking failure of his subsequent structuralist phase to accommodate live performance practice in its ambitious project.’\textsuperscript{xiii} Much is made, in this context, of Barthes’s 1954 article on Baudelaire’s projects for plays, later included in his \textit{Critical Essays}, which mentions the actor’s ‘disturbing corporeality’, that is the fascination and uneasiness felt at the sight of the actor’s exposed body.\textsuperscript{xiv}

Barthes’s own explanation was that the discrepancy between the theatre for which he yearned, an utopia only approached by Brecht, and the reality of French theatre from the mid-1950s onwards, was too great for him to find any kind of aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction as a theatre goer or critic.\textsuperscript{ xv} More generally, by the end of the 1950s, the socio-political landscape had changed and it was time for Barthes, a man more prone to boredom and averse to repetition that most, to move on. The popular theatre movement, whose origins dated back to the early part of the century, reflected very much the concerns and aspirations of post-war France and, over the years, the sense of political urgency that characterized that period had
gradually disappeared. The political turmoil caused by the Algerian war had strengthened, rather than weakened, the conservative right, and led to a weakening of Parliamentary democracy with the establishment of a presidential regime headed General De Gaulle in 1958. Moreover France was undergoing an extensive process of social transformation, that the Marxist and Brechtian models could not quite encompass and that Barthes had tried to address anew in his monthly ‘mythologies’: ‘Society today is particularly difficult to understand […]

Class problems have become unthinkable in the terms used fifty years ago. We are living in both a class society and a mass society. The big, immediate problems seem confused. Political culture itself seems to be at a standstill,’ he stated in 1962. ‘Imagine a mind like Brecht’s confronting life today; that mind would find itself paralyzed by the diversity of life.’xvi

Barthes’s theatre years, which have been examined here in their own right for the sake of clarity, can hardly be separated from the journalistic pieces published monthly in the mid-fifties and collected in Mythologies. Indeed the breadth and incisiveness of Barthes analyses of theatre performance are the very qualities that would make Mythologies a best-seller.

Barthes showed an active and acute interest in all genres and aspects of theatre and performance and wrote with equal gusto about Greek classical theatre, Shakespeare, seventeenth-century French classical theatre, opera, Chekov, the light comedies performed in the theatres of the Paris Boulevards and contemporary revolutionary or avant-garde theatre. And with few exceptions – those pieces that deal more specifically with the debates of the time such as the cultural policy of the French government – his reviews and in-depth articles raise issues that are fundamental to what is now call ‘performance practice’. By going from the particular to the general, he succeeded in articulating a penetrating and thought-provoking critique of conventional drama, and demonstrated how all aspects of production partake of meaning. Half a century later, he can still be praised by theatre specialists for his ‘synthetic approach to performance’, which ‘underlines the main structure of a performance while avoiding a fragmented perception of it’ and whose appeal stems from ‘its breadth of vision, its precision and the compromise it managed to find between meticulous observation and interpretation.’xvii

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NOTES


iv It must be stressed that Vilar’s withdrawal did not mark the end of the TNP as an institution, far from it. He was succeeded by Georges Wilson, who headed the company until 1972, when the TNP moved to Paris to Lyon and Roger Planchon, whose early productions Barthes had reviewed enthusiastically, took over.


vi Unfortunately the powerful sense of revulsion expressed in “vomir” (vomit, spew up) is somewhat lost in translation: ‘Michelet’s kings and queens thus form a veritable pharmacy of disgust. They are condemned, they are loathed [ils sont vomis]’ (Michelet, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 297; translated by Richard Howard, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 95); ‘The theatre that we loath [que nous vomissons] is the theatre of Money’ (‘Editorial’, *Théâtre populaire* (Jan–Feb 1954), *ibid.*, p. 382; my translation).

vii For further details about this editorial project see Jean-Louis Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography* (translated by Sarah Wykes, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) and Jean-Loup Rivière’s preface to Barthes’s *Écrits sur le théâtre* (Paris: Seuil) whose publication was postponed and then cancelled following Barthes’ accidental death in March 1980, and finally appeared in 2002.


ix See, for instance, Jacques Guicharnaud, then Assistant professor at Yale University, whose tone is not dissimilar: ‘Bourgeois writers and directors, if they are good and conscientious workmen, no more deserve praise or blame than the good manufacturer of “period” furniture’ (*Yale French Studies*, no. 14: ‘Today’s French theatre’, 1954, p. 10).


xii In his personal memoirs, Gérard Genette, a pupil of Barthes, detects a similar attitude in his own generation (see *Bardadrac*, Paris, Seuil, coll. ‘Fiction & Cie’, 2006, p. 359); to understand the appeal of Communism in the post-World War II France, it may be worth recalling here that the Communists had played an important role in the fight against Nazism and paid a heavy price for it, so that in France, in 1945, a majority of people thought that the Soviet Union, not the Allied forces, had played the decisive role in Hitler’s defeat (see Annie Lacroix-Riz, ‘L’Union soviétique belligérant décisif’, *Manière de voir* (*Le Monde diplomatique*), no. 82: ‘Pages d’histoire occultées’, Aug.–Sep. 1985, p. 16: ‘In 1945, 57% of the French considered the Soviet Union as the main winner of World War II, as against 20% in 2004’.)


