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Translated by Joel Anderson

STAGING CALAMITY

Mise-en-scène and Performance at Avignon 2005

Even before the fifty-ninth Avignon Festival began, if one heeded the press or listened to the festival regulars, one thing seemed clear: There would be no more theater, either classical or contemporary. *Mise-en-scène* would give way to performance art, and all the productions would be struck with the same despair, blighted by all the calamities of the world. Calamity, in all its forms from destruction to catastrophe, offered the only theme common to the eight productions I saw at Avignon 2005. This tendency reveals an obsession and a profound discontent that we should take seriously: Civilization and its discontents, or culture and its calamities? Things have escalated since Freud, but we should be on guard against catastrophism, a fascination with unhappiness. So let us content ourselves with recounting the week and seeing how it might have taught us to face unhappiness and to work for the theater. On paper, and perhaps in the minds of the festival directors, Hortense Archambault and Vincent Baudrier, and of the guest artistic director, Jan Fabre, the festival was a golden opportunity to bring together “artists of the stage” who, “by way of their creations, question our human identity spiritually and as animals,” “examining our relationship with our bodies and with our fantasies, our relationship with beauty, but also with violence, things which sometimes coexist in us.”¹

We should check this proposition by analyzing eight productions seen in the festival’s first week. “Calamity” is a sufficiently general leitmotif to allow us to make comparisons. If catastrophe is a punctual and irreversible phenomenon, calamity is a more lasting, or even permanent, state: a scourge affecting crops, an ecological disaster hitting a region, a misfortune or collapse affecting a people. Whether it is a natural disaster or a man-made one, calamity brings about a long-lasting state of apathy for many artists. Their works, nonetheless, often show a will to overcome the dead end brought about by calamity and to seek a fictional and aesthetic way out of the crisis. As always, artists’ responses are individual, and it is thus more valuable to analyze their

Dieu et les esprits vivants, 2005. Photo: Fred Nauczyciel

achievements than their discourses—their commentaries or what we assume to be the intentions that accompany and sometimes even precede them.

Once the theme of calamity had been identified (and it would have been difficult to miss it!), it became necessary to ask how different productions treat and represent this theme. I have made a distinction between two kinds of representation, *mise-en-scène* and performance art: *mise-en-scène*, meaning theater as we have known it since the end of the nineteenth century; performance, as it has been practiced since the 1960s. If none of these eight productions can be called performance art in the strictest sense, each contains moments of performativity in which the present moment, risk, uncertainty, or chance prevent any fictional representation of an event. Despite this mixing of representational modes, the distinction endures. We must simply grasp their unflinching alliance. Everything hinges on the question of presence and representation of meaning. According to Alain Badiou, “the theater is the perception of the instant as an instant of thought.”² Is performance art not, then, the perception of theater as a thought of the instant?

The public obviously does not ask itself whether it is attending a *mise-en-scène* or participating in performance art. The spectator setting foot in Avignon suspects that things will not be easy, that simple mimetic representations of the world cannot be hoped for, and that we must “go with the flow.” Nothing surprises or shocks the audience: what is a naked body, or a snake hanging over a well-trained dog, compared with a kamikaze who kills scores of bystanders? The audience has become used to media representations of the worst calamities or feels protected by an imaginary bubble, not believing—if only in order to go on living—that bombs and catastrophes could one day befall them, like a calamity, a real calamity.

I.

“May our bodies weep / to prevent a catastrophe” is the claim of the Knight of Despair in *L'histoire des larmes*, Jan Fabre’s production, which opened the festival a few days before the reprise of *Je suis sang*.³ This leitmotif of the production also offers a key to most of the official festival shows.

Most of the Avignon productions required the free expression of a sympathetic, rather than heroic, body pushed to its extremes in order to save humanity from the calamity in which it finds itself. The body without language—dance more than dramatic art—appears, at first sight, capable of meeting this requirement. But to represent and show calamity, the responses vary from artist to artist. There are basically two solutions: *mise-en-scène* and performance art. *Mise-en-scène* requires dramatic fiction, representation; performance art presents a live, unrepeatable, real, not fictive, action. The examples I have chosen vacillate between these two theoretical poles, making any distinction problematic.

L'histoire des larmes is above all a choreographic piece, a production organized as movement in space. In the Cour d’Honneur of the Palais des Papes, Fabre brings

together percussionists, dancers, and actors. There are three actors, playing the Knight of Despair, the Dog (Diogenes the Cynical), and the Rock, and all have the power of speech. The Knight operates at center stage; the Dog runs from one side to the other; the Rock, “obscenam in mulierem,” speaks from a window in the facade, almost offstage—ob-scene, meaning in front of the Latin *scaena*, so on the edge of the playing space. They take the floor regularly for fairly long monologues, but the show does not hinge on this spoken dramaturgy.

The composition incorporates the vast expanses of the Cour d'Honneur and the facade, the trajectory of the groups and objects, and the temporal unfolding of the musical score (renaissance harp, percussion, and voice). With an admirable architectural and pictorial sense, Fabre gives us one scene after another each in a different style, from an individual routine to a ballet for six or eight dancers, to simultaneous and coordinated actions. As in a Hieronymus Bosch painting (think of his *Last Judgment* at the Alte Pinacothek in Munich), elements are juxtaposed with a certain autonomy, but the viewer is in a position to perceive a figure of the whole all the more easily, since the huge percussion instruments and the musical compositions of Eric Sleichim create an auditory continuum and make the spatiotemporal composition, the symmetry of the motifs, more noticeable. We fleetingly notice occasional references to Bosch's grotesque figures climbing immense cliff faces. They are monstrous forms, such as eiderdowns with feet crisscrossing the stage. At times an image surfaces in the production: for instance, glass blown on long sticks. The glass vessels the dancers lie on are both concrete and abstract—that is to say, allegorical—manifestations of human tears. The auditory, pictorial, and choreographic composition, the appearance and development of visual motifs all have their own logic;



L'histoire des larmes,
2005. Photo: Guy
Delahaye

L'histoire des larmes,
2005. Photo:
Fred Nauczyciel



they are not subject to the text. Indeed, the verbal utterances seem more like foreign bodies in the overall composition, especially those of the Knight, spoken with a slight accent and a certain distance, as if split from the image and the visual and auditory event. There is no fixed, frozen, or global image, as in a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but rather moments of explosion, flashes of light, fleeting references to medieval painting. Never does the closed system of *mise-en-scène*, coherent in relation to a dramaturgical conception or a philosophy, come into play. This production has nothing of the “histoire des larmes” seen by Roland Barthes: “In what societies, in what periods did one cry? Since when do men (and not women) no longer cry? . . . Perhaps ‘to cry’ is too wide; maybe we should not refer all tears to one same meaning.”²⁴ Fabre does not

consider tears in a cultural history of emotion. He sees them simply as a watery secretion, alongside sweat, urine, and, to a lesser extent, sperm, these “golden tears [which] compose love songs and symphonies of joy,” as the Knight so poetically puts it.⁵

But where does this Knight come from? From the wandering knights of our time, artists? And what philosophy is he advocating? He has some very fixed ideas about bodily fluids, particularly tears: “The crying body / can bring about / a magical transformation of the world,” he says.⁶ This magical thinking is impregnated with idealism—as he points out, “Thought is a heritage of the soul.”⁷ Often declamatory, explicit, and talkative, the Knight is concerned about the drying out of human beings, but his message remains obscure. Do the tears take us back to the tragic nature of existence or to the biological necessity of hydrating body and mind? Faced with such a dubious philosophy, and given the beauty and power of the images, one is tempted to disregard the words in favor of bathing in the sensuality of the visual and auditory. Far from being text-based theater, this heterogeneous production is made up of choreographic and musical fragments arising from improvisation and reworked by Fabre. Moments of performance art occur whenever an action is repeated or prolonged in an improvisation. Ironic counterpoints are always a possibility—for example, the stage rain at the end in the style of *Singin’ in the Rain*, right after a lament about things drying out.

II.

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In *Je suis sang*, we find the same principles of composition, in particular in the coordination of the stage actions and the very didactic final text. This production, which originally premiered in 2003, deals with blood (as its title would suggest), a subject of vital importance for medieval thought and desperately neglected in our times. The final litany, “Je suis sang, sanguis sum,” is taken up by a chorus of dancers, when a red liquid, more like wine than blood, is sprinkled, taking us back to a Dionysian ritual and to a vitality that the Renaissance and the evolution of civilization have supposedly repressed. This call for a society that no longer oppresses such instincts is strangely reminiscent of the birth of tragedy according to Nietzsche. *Je suis sang* finds a balance between the harmony of forms and the turbulent violence of blood. Here too, the Dionysian and Apollonian forces, “the two impulses of art[,] are obliged to unfold their forces in rigorously reciprocal proportions according to the law of eternal justice.”⁸ What threatens humanity with annihilation would therefore be the death of instinct, the

Je suis sang, 2005.
Photo: Guy Delahaye



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Je suis sang, 2005.
Photo:
Fred Nauczyciel



taming of the body, the anemia caused by the civilizing process of modern times. But is it a cause or a consequence? What the spectator perceives is just as much about violence, castration, and bloodshed. Calamity is preprogrammed (“the blue planet will become red”), parodied (“the tango of the butchers of the La Villette slaughterhouse”), aestheticized, and all of this along with the realistic representation of violence: stumps oozing blood, severed genitals, women dancing with their hands tied behind their backs, tortured bodies emptied of blood. Once again, the text shocks by way of its directness and naïveté: “I like my impotence,” “jouissance beyond jouissance,” “I am a wounded, disinterested man.” Fortunately, the stage event always takes the upper hand over such textual moments. The constant production of new images, visual shocks, the overflowing imagination of the images, and the virtuosity and energy of the dancers give new impetus to the production. There is nothing perverse or decadent in this picture of destruction and reconstruction, only an overflowing vital energy that refuses to be channeled into veins, into words, or into stage space and that flows abundantly while the blood inscribes itself onto the black of the stage and the white of the wedding gowns. Calamity, be it an absence of water or of blood, is never the final state of things, because everybody fights against it. When speech makes an appearance, as direct as it may be, it also becomes an impetus for reaction and the surpassing of self.

III.

Dieu et les esprits vivants, written and directed by Jan Decorte, is a disconcerting experience. The story is scarcely comprehensible, and the silent presence of Decorte, as a monk/soldier, is no more enlightening. Even if, as the program states, “this is writing, not biography,” and if “the way of writing has nothing to do with automatic writing, it’s more of a writing directed in all directions,” the reader instinctively searches for meaning, for a narrative direction. As Decorte further explains: “*Dieu et les esprits vivants* encompasses a great deal of subjects: good and evil, language, the world and so much more, but it is probably above all a text about murder. It’s a kind of anatomy, philology, or encyclopedia of murder. Something sends this man named Blood-Wolf-Devil into a mad rage, mad with rage to the point of killing.”

While calamity is anonymous, murder, on the other hand, is personal, provided we understand the motives; in this case we don’t even know if it has even been committed. This situation would not be hopeless if the stage action caught the attention in such a way as to transport the spectator into a dream world. Yet this spectator merely witnesses, for the first twenty minutes, the actor washing his entire body from head to toe. Throughout this unending introit, the spectator waits for a real beginning, the start of the fiction. But this washing has no other function but to test the patience of the audience, provoking anger or boredom. The only remaining option is to see this long episode as a provocation, a moment of performance art intended to make the spectators



Dieu et les esprits vivants, 2005. Photo: Patrice Pavis

reflect on their expectations, limits, and impatience. The only thing preventing us from definitively rejecting the piece is Arno's haunting music, providing an uncanny *basso continuo*. Likewise, the audience appreciates the dance solo by the great choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker, who appears, without dramaturgical justification, for a virtuosic impromptu number done in a 1980s style. The washing, music, and dance number are autonomous moments of performance art within a production that finds it hard to get off the ground or create an illusion of a possible world. In the same way, the tour de force of Sigrid Vinks, who speaks the text, finally earns our attention: the strangeness of her words, her slightly foreign accent, the relationship of entranced confidence she shares with the audience, her way of leaning forward, showing the palms of her hands—all of this creates an intimacy and a tension which owe nothing to textual fiction. It is a performance art effect, as unexpected in a murder story as it is in a traditional staging. This performance would surely seem lean compared with what has been left aside: the untapped beauty of the space; the inanity of the text; the provocation that wears itself (and us) out; the monotony of the hopping of the monk. It's a total disaster and makes one miss even Fabre's obsessions.

IV.

The question of calamity, as opposed to tragic catastrophe, has always been at the heart of the work of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio, the company run by Claudia and Romeo Castellucci and Chiara Guidi. Since 2002, they have produced eleven episodes of the *Tragedia Endogonia*, a tragedy destined to grow by fission, that has already given birth to a dozen offspring in various European cities. *B.#03 Berlin*, shown at Avignon's municipal theater, is, according to the program, "an Episode that tells the parable of the life and death of a woman who has known motherhood, crime and the confusion between the power of life and the power of death. Her anonymity is confused with that of the audience, while her lack of speech, her weakness before the law and her helpless pain constitute the essential conditions for this tragedy, which also includes the 'role' of the spectator by way of a metaphor of stalls inhabited by rabbits." Who could understand such a muddled text? The important thing is the production! Reading these commentaries or Castellucci's theoretical musings will only confuse the well-meaning spectator. This is even more the case since the Castelluccis define *tragedy* in terms that might better describe *calamity*: anonymity, the absence of speech, the confusion between life and death. It is obvious in any case that it is no longer a question of Greek tragedy, but of an "inhuman" tragedy yet to come, that is precisely the object of their theatrical research. "I feel," says Romeo, "that this will be a cold, transparent, clean and unnamed tragedy. I feel that nobody will realize they are faced with a tragedy and that will be the best proof of its effectiveness."⁹

If we use only the images shown onstage in *B.#03 Berlin*, we observe a series of tableaux in constant development, figures made foggy by the gauze (or plastic) curtain separating stage from auditorium. There is always, in the literal as well as figurative sense, a screen between us and the action. We never have access to clear perception of the objects and the bodies; they are represented by silhouettes, shadows, forms, or phantoms. Only a King Kong, whether the famous gorilla or the brown Berliner bear, comes to the foreground, in his traditional outfit, to move rabbit corpses around with a fork, an image we know well from the concentration camps. Behind the curtain, which becomes more or less translucent depending on the lighting, we can make out scenes of torture or of the intertwined bodies of lovers, and it is not easy to differentiate the two. Crime, vengeance, and the massacre of the innocents are clearly out there, but we are refused access. Reality escapes us, as if it were all a mirage. Here calamity is the impossibility of reaching the real, to see only its shadows, to not—or to not yet—perceive the tragic (as Castellucci rightly states), to no longer possess the instruments necessary for judging and accepting fate. We hope for the tragic, in order to at least know who we're dealing with, but we only run into calamity, a Medusa's head.

For the Castelluccis, to stage is to propose a series of anthropomorphic figures in constant transformation, without a final destination. To describe and interpret them,

one could draw on Panovsky's definition of the work as a formal object and bearer of conventional meaning and, finally, as symbol and symptom of the mental attitudes of a time. For example, we might look at an object resembling a pillar, a tomb, or perhaps the stone tablet of the Law of Moses. We first identify it as a form that could be toppled; next we think of the familiar form of the tablets of law that a furious Moses smashes before the Israelites; then we watch as a little girl appears, in a moment of calm, to put some order back into this place of calamity, replacing the tablet without thinking: Law is restored, and this image becomes a distillation of the conception of Judeo-Christian cosmology.

This iconographic interpretation allows us to understand how the figures, objects, and human beings transform themselves and escape from both their creators and their spectators without ever reaching a final conclusion. At every stage, we must work out exactly where in Castellucci's narrative we are and what human figures are emerging. The enigma is never solved; instead it drives the *mise-en-scène*, "a figure that arrives in a flash[;] no sooner has it appeared . . . than it disappears. It brings together something that simultaneously both obvious and enormously complex."¹⁰

The theater of images needs the iron fist of the director, who must stick to the action's throughline and who cannot allow the slightest dip in energy, lest the spectator awaken from the daydream. Castellucci and Guidi manage to do this well, provided that the spectator tolerates the slow changes, the lengthy blurring of figures, and the narrative uncertainty. They know at exactly which moments the image must coagulate into a possible meaning before going on its way. They know how to play on the progression of stage images: for example, after the long shaping of a blurry, uncertain, and dreamlike gray image, suddenly a rainbow descends from the flies, marking a contrast and altering the narrative rhythm. At other times, the directors contrast the blurred image with realistic sounds from the score. The sudden use of external elements is not necessarily without opportunism: The quotations in German ("show yourself," "cross the bridge," "come here," "closer," "eat my ashes," "eat my metal," "drink my water") are entirely without justification except as a reminder that the play, funded by the city of Berlin, makes reference to Germany (to its flag, the white Berliner bear, and, in inexhaustible allusions, the death camps). The *mise-en-scène* is not entirely faithful to its idea of keeping the enigma alive; it ends up telling a story and moreover ending on a note of innocence and hope. Within a chorus of celestial voices, the young girl appears, a sort of Alice in Wonderland, lifting up the tablet of laws, peering through a translucent curtain, looking for a way out, in short bringing a last-minute note of childlike innocence as the curtain drops to the sound of soothing music.

Unlike previous Castellucci productions such as the *Oresteia* and *Genesi*, the stage here does not contain any disruptive element: no animals, no wailing baby, no unpredictable element imported from the world of performance art to threaten visual and aesthetic harmony. Without putting the iconography, so tightly controlled by the *mise-en-scène*, in danger, the production—cold and calculated, and beautiful in a glacial way—

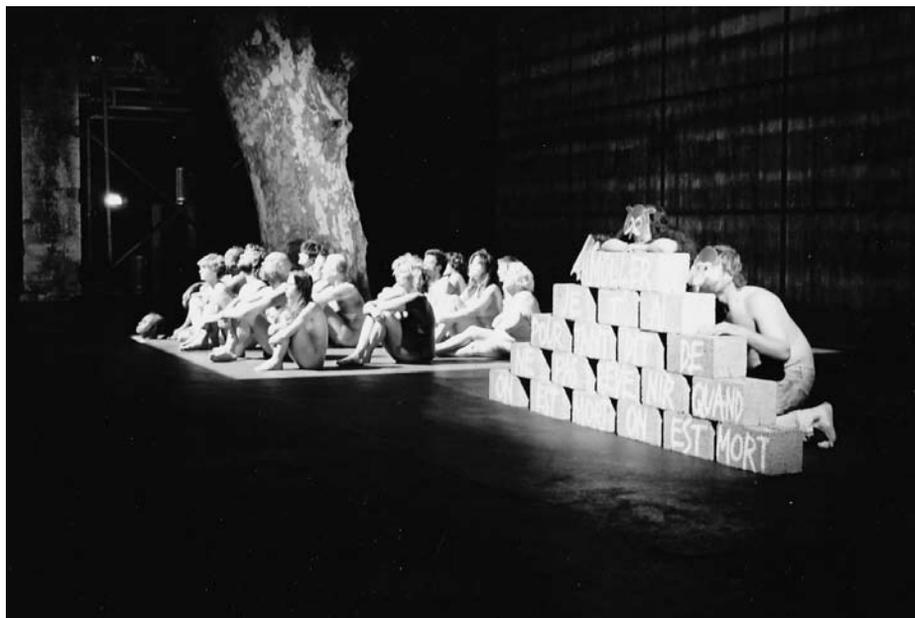
becomes irreproachable: Could one criticize a dream for being too vague, banal, or subjective? Would one reproach a director's vision for being too personal, indecipherable, or untranslatable? This theater of images is the culmination of the theater of art and Western *mise-en-scène*. Its score is as beautiful, but also as fragile, as a spider's web.

It remains to be seen whether this production corresponds to this "cold, transparent, clean and unnamed tragedy," to which we have given the name *calamity*, in contrast with Greek classical tragedy. Calamity is precisely the unnamed, as yet unimaginable and perhaps unnameable. The Castelluccis approach it through figures struggling with the material to attain a certain figurative and mimetic representation. When this happens, it either brings us to King Kong, the production's herald of calamity; or to the little girl and the return of innocence. We are left either frightened or surprised, like the rabbits in the stalls.

V.

With *Anathème*, the Jacques Delcuvellerie Groupov offers quite another way of addressing calamity. It is the anathema that the God of the Old Testament casts on the peoples that do not do his will: massacres, mass executions, floods, and plagues. Yet the anathema, in biblical Greek, is a cursed object as well as a curse. It is at once total condemnation (excommunication for Christians) and the person or people cursed by God.

This production is made up of readings by a group of six of extracts from the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, recounting the massacres, genocides, and collective executions following the divine anathema. For an hour and a half, the Avignon audience is faced with a classical painting depicting an idyllic landscape. Stage left, we hear the readers from their raised platform, numbering the destructions, while stage right three singers pick up on certain words as part of a musical composition by Garrett List and Jean-Pierre Urbano. The spectator, or rather the listener, sees only the painting, the light from the music stands, and so must concentrate on hearing the Bible in all its stylistic splendor and shameless cruelty. The diction is not consistent: It is very carefully and discreetly delivered by the women but is dramatic and bombastic when delivered by



Anathème, 2005.
Photo: Patrice Pavis



Anathème, 2005.
Photo:
Fred Nauczyciel

the men. The audience has trouble concentrating during this unending oratorio; many leave the theater, having run out of energy reached the end of their tethers.

The reading nonetheless continues for almost an additional hour while fifteen people appear onstage one by one. They come from the rear stage via a bridge. Surprised and defiant, each eyes the audience, then undresses and, as part of the same ritual, calmly removes jewels, personal items and clothing, before entering a square of light where all the arrivals remain, seated or standing, until the ceremony's end. We have the impression that these are "real" people, not professional actors, who have come in from the street or from the audience. They do not play any role or character but rather take their places and wait while studying the audience. However, this act of undressing is not gratuitous; it obtains meaning when linked with the litany of anathemas. We read it as the illustration of the massacre of the innocents, like the final gathering before the Shoah or the gas chambers. In this sense, the stage action of undressing, real or fictional, not only has a direct and gripping impact on the audience but also conveys a very strong message about the violence of religion, the killing frenzy of the supreme being, and the close link between monotheism and genocide. The protest juxtaposes a terrifying, (mostly) harmoniously spoken and sung narrative with a mute action, worthy of a happening or a sit-in. This juxtaposition, however, cannot last forever. The Bible reading, which we grow accustomed to (and tire of), ends up being little more than background noise—or a mechanical listing of violent acts—and has trouble competing with the presence of naked bodies onstage. These bodies are not aesthetically pleasing

nudes; they are the bodies of people of all ages, of all body types, with various looks. This public display cannot be easy, even if unease is the artists' desired effect. It also has the effect of performance art, as the performers, in the eyes of the majority of the spectators, are not in the elsewhere and before of a fiction, but in the here and now of a real action. Within the theatrical structure (the institution, the stage, the narrative), there are always a few authentic events. Here, nakedness, hearing the Bible, the symbolic violence, and the allusions to extreme situations, as in Bruno Bettelheim's definition, are all traces of real performances addressed to spectators as individuals.

Unfortunately, the remarkably radical "reality" borrowed from performance art is not backed up by the *mise-en-scène*. The space, the *cloître des carmes*, is poorly used; there is a total absence of dramaturgy; the repeated actions are tiresome; the only new action, the construction of a wall, is artificial and superfluous. A Heiner Müller quotation—"I told you before not to come back, when you're dead, you're dead"—is borrowed from *Bildbeschreibung (Description of a Landscape)*, where it refers to a dead woman brought back from hell but not back to life. Out of context, the line now refers to God, who is also asked not to come back, corresponding to the idea of a return of the religious following the predicted death of God. However, the construction of the small wall seems somewhat childish, particularly because of the animal masks. Thus as soon as radical performance art makes the slightest concession to theater, the results are unconvincing.

Of these eight festival productions, this piece treats calamity in the most radical way. The question is whether performance art can make do without a single illustration via *mise-en-scène* and ignore an audience's capabilities and needs to such a great extent.

VI.

With *Puur*, a choreographed piece by Wim Vandekeybus at the Boulbon Quarry, calamity is visible in a film showing violent and bloody action. Onstage the dancers do not show this violence mimetically but stylize and aestheticize it. With such explicit film images of violence, it would be easy to become distracted by the themes, but it is better to analyze the physical actions of the dancers, their sequences of gestures and interactions. These danced actions do not produce a clearly decipherable story or message. Vandekeybus sees dance as "emotions of the flesh onstage" and claims we need a "state for dance since the state is more important than the content." We can seek such things as calamity and violence in these emotions and states. Vandekeybus's aesthetic is not unlike Raymond Williams's notion of the "structure of feeling": the "continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, until its recognition as a general form, and the relationship of this general form to a given era." Calamity, in this sense, serves as both a formal and an ideological structure. Calamity is not merely the direct expression of violence and of a story, but a metaphor for a general state of the world.



Puur, 2005.
Photo: Wolfgang
Kirchner

In *Puur* this state, this “structure of feeling,” evolves throughout, stretching from birth to death. The film has the task of locating the story, alluding to events that will then be enacted, performed, in the playing area. It shows the birth of a child and the painful paradox this brings his mother: “Now that I have you I can only lose you.” Birth is a severing: “He had to be freed, millimeter by millimeter, from my flesh, made from my flesh. . . . He had to be hacked free, chipped millimeter by millimeter, sundered from me.”¹¹ This image of block-by-block separation is appropriate in a place of digging, the quarry where the live audience has gathered and onto which the film is projected; here the dancer must now cut a few blocks of dance, finding in a duet the heart-tearing creation of the other. Here, at the end of the show, we hear the sound of a rock fall, as if the artistic creation has definitively detached itself from inert matter and each spectator will be leaving with a piece.

The relationship between the stage and film is neither a mirror image nor a dialogue between the recorded and the live. The gap widens between film and the concentrated abstraction of “contact dance.” The two modes stand in total opposition: By digging in the quarry, by closing itself up in representation of the massacre, the film calls on blood, water, violence, and hysteria. By removing the stones thrown at the beginning of the play from the theatrical stage, by pushing them to the edge of the playing area making a border, a wall to guard from the barbarian wilderness, the dance creates an aesthetic universe, a smooth and shiny surface suited to choreographic movement. Thus even cruel actions (hitting oneself, impaling another person on a stake, quartering them, tying them down with rope) are stylized, refined representations of violence. This piece must be enjoyed “puur,” like a glass of whiskey, without ice or water diluting its strength. For example, when the dancers throw sticks from one side of the stage to the other while in motion, it requires a great deal of skill, but unlike the bricks

from the first Vandekeybus show, which were thrown and caught in the air, these sticks have protective rubber on both ends. The risk here is no greater than with other dance companies. Is it a question of our having developed a tolerance, as with dangerous performance art? We become accustomed to the danger such moves represent. The blows delivered to oneself or others are fake, the trajectories perfectly drawn.

Resisting the temptation to give verbal explanation (the way that Jan Fabre does), the choreography never slips into performance art. Rather than offering a necessarily disappointing representation of a calamity, or a powerful but tiring description of plagues, *Puur* finds a pure form, which holds up and builds upon the addition of very beautiful poems by P. F. Thomèse and Never-illustrative music of David Eugene Edwards and Fausto Romitelli. I cannot stress enough the importance and quality of the musical compositions used in these productions.

VII.

In the long odyssey through the calamities of Avignon, *Mue*, performed at the Château de Saumane, in deepest Provence, offers a quiet moment, the perfect counterexample to the prevailing obsession with despair. *Mue* presents a founding myth to understand not so much the nature of man as man's place in the universe.

Mue.Première Mélopée is billed as a “sonar and poetic Wara for nine voices, one electronic voice, and a percussionist, and a sound installation” in the program's strange wording. Jean Lambert-Wild, the director, and Jean-Luc Therminarias, the composer, following a stay with the Xavantes on the Rio das Mortes Indian reserve, in the Brazilian Mato Grosso, called on five Xavantes to reconstruct, with four French actors, a Wara or open space where the men of the council of elders gather every day in a circle at daybreak and sunset. The four members of the cooperative and the five Xavantes stand in a circle on the central mound, their backs to the audience, each in front of a microphone. The spectators sit around this mound on seats placed directly on the sandy ground and listen to the words spoken by the chorus and narrator, who walks around the exterior circle. What they hear has been described as “a speech by Serebura, a dream by Waëhipo junior and myths from the Xavante community of Etenhiritipa.” It would be futile to attempt to differentiate what comes from Serebura, Waëhipo, or from Lambert-Wild's own re-creation, since everything becomes deliberately mixed: word and dream, myth and poetry. The origin of the words and the dreams, and the source of the sounds, remains undetermined. There is much tact, much restraint, much elegance, and much integrity in this thoughtful and sensitive intercultural collaboration, which avoids being voyeuristic or patronizing.

The resulting ceremony (can it really be called a “show,” or should we not rather call it a “cultural performance?”) avoids the trap of “exotic” ritual, artificially transported to this park under Provence skies for an enlightened audience open to the world's many cultures. The spatial, musical, and discursive structure renders obsolete any theoretical notions of authenticity, cultural identity, universality, or cultural essentialism. We witness, instead, a quiet questioning of the intercultural theater of the 1980s

and 1990s—that of Brook, Mnouchkine, and Barba. We do not get a transference of cultural bits and pieces or a reconstitution of the culture of the other; nor do we get an apology for cultural universalities or a postmodern relativity of all cultures, much less the whiny discourse banning the quoting of any culture that does not belong to us and which is protected by communitarian laws disguised as political correctness.

Far from seeking to reconstitute the authentic speech of the Indians, to display scraps of dance or ritual, *Mue's* mise-en-scène unapologetically employs the latest sound technology and uses Therminarias's remarkable talents as composer. The voices, each one different in texture and emotion, are brought to the fore, in the sometimes centered and sometimes peripheral space created by the speakers. These voices disorient the audience. We are no longer able to distinguish original and primary speech; instead, we must treat voice and music as speech in motion, constantly changing its origin. The Wara becomes a decentered center, giving impetus to poetic reflection. Everybody's voices break, as if they were adolescents. We become something else while remaining ourselves. We change our voice and our voice changes us. Our voice breaking also signals a change in our mental and political attitude toward other cultures, abandoning our concepts and words:

here's what the A'Uwé Uptabi taught me,
 these men of truth from Etênhiritipa,
 to slip into all the contained faraway places of my dreams
 to find the form to share them
 to free myself from my words
 and to say,
 the dawn of the change
 which will no longer belong to me.

These words are penned by Lambert-Wild, but they are everyone's dream. This dawn of change has nothing of the "grand soir," the evening before the revolution, when universal humanist values will make a discreet comeback. Such a return after abandonment corresponds to the phase Philippe Descola describes in contemporary ethnology. In his studies of the Jivaros Amazonian Indians, Descola insists both on learning about cultural diversity and on critiquing extreme culturalist positions that

end up saying that everything is a product of social life and cultural constraints. . . . Anthropology, for a very long time, had as its object of study the understanding of human nature in all its diversity. The accumulation of ethnographic data meant that we lost sight that our fundamental objective is indeed the understanding of a single human nature, bringing solutions to some of our problems. Our world places great emphasis on the discontinuity between human and nonhuman (in a sense a moral discontinuity) and on material continuity. In societies like that in which the Jivaros live, the emphasis is—on the other hand—placed on moral continuity and material discontinuity.¹²



Without denying obvious cultural differences, Lambert-Wild insists on a similar vision of a single human nature. He brings together different voices, people, texts, and styles, but the staging, endless translations, and changes of identity counterbalance this cultivated diversity with deliberately blurred boundaries: who is speaking, and to whom? Toward the end of the evening, the external commentator, the “electronic voice,” declares his intentions: “I’m going to tell you how the world was made. Here I am, as our forbearers told.” He concludes the Xavante narrative like an anthropologist well versed in Lèvi-Strauss: “This is the way myth speaks. . . . The myth I’m speaking of maintains a living tradition. . . . You are similar to us. . . . you also come from our forbearers. . . . I ask you to respect us. . . . I don’t want you to treat us like animals any more. . . . You may leave. Forget we ever existed.” The calamity already happened five centuries ago: The only thing that matters today is to limit the damage and learn to live together.

It is surprising to hear a white narrator speak this way, even when rechristened as an electronic voice: The representative of an invisible chorus or of the European audi-

Mue, 2005.

Photo: Group 326

ence speaks for the Indians, giving European humanist discourse and using concepts from Western anthropology. But if one looks more closely, this discourse actually tries to transcend the usual divisions. In sociological terms, one might well be tempted to point out the huge economic difference between the Xavantes and the citizens of Belfort, between the international coproduction (about which the program contains fifteen lines of text!) and the fragile community of the Indians. Lambert-Wild builds upon poetry and dream to justify this convergence, and his work tests these principles. Institutional support must have been vital for this expensive enterprise; certainly the production's politics remain at a declarative stage (with a neoliberal dead end that leaves open inevitable questions around ownership and the division of labor). But no other performance at the Avignon festival in this week so renews the art of directing or asks burning questions with such energy.

VIII.

The Biography Remix, the final production I saw that week, is a retrospective of the life and performances of Marina Abramovic, directed by Abramovic's colleague and old friend Michael Laub. There is no ambiguity in the event: It is not for the general public but, rather, is a very clear and well-devised presentation of a genre little known at Avignon, making use of historical examples and performance works from the performer's past.

This remixed biography, which is a sort of work in progress for Abramovic as it recaps her already-long career, is probably a key to understanding the other productions, to evaluate without prejudice the changing relationship between *mise-en-scène* and performance art. This remix too offers an occasion to contemplate the notion of



The Biography Remix,
2005. Photo: Alain
Girault/Redaction



The Biography Remix,
2005. Photo: Patrice
Pavis

calamity, as opposed to the risk or danger courted by the performer. In a way, this performer (often female) plays the role of a calamity, in the second meaning of the word: not the natural plague, but the person who causes constant problems in addition to being the victim of these self-inflicted problems, a “Calamity Jane.” Is the performer not a calamity for herself, someone who endlessly creates problems and troubles? If she excels at creating her own unhappiness, she can also undo it with brilliance, sometimes with humor, and can triumph despite the trials and tribulations. She has nothing of the natural calamity, which, by definition, remains in place for as long as possible and leaves humans little chance to avoid or neutralize it.

We sense that this production has found its balance and its positive pedagogical strength. Laub designs it as a chronology by displaying two lines of scrolling text (in French and English) with key dates in Abramovic’s life as well as dates of her main works. Laub’s exterior eye is not critical—that is not his job—but he likes to give humorous points of reference. He opts for a double presentation: Video extracts play on a screen covering the stage opening and live events start the minute the screen is raised, giving the impression that stage reality comes out of the screen. Thus he sets up simultaneous actions and serial repetitions, conveying a real aesthetic quality. When performed by five groups, the famous slapping duel becomes a beautiful rhythmic moment, losing its original violence in the ensemble effect: It sounds like several ping-pong games taking place in the same immense hall.

In the first sequence Abramovic, hanging from the wall, welcomes the audience, holding two snakes in her hands, while two huge placid hounds come onstage and gnaw on a bone, just underneath the snakes. Disturbing growls come from the loudspeakers; an Italian prima donna talks into a microphone, then a megaphone. Fear is soon replaced with admiration for the composition, humor, and visual beauty.

The entire production shares this quality of a smoothly running *mise-en-scène* that, without excluding performance art, nonetheless keeps its risks at a distance, putting them in perspective, offering us a sample conceptual version perfect for a master's thesis. Laub's remix eliminates the risk—or at least minimizes it and reduces its impact. Protected by distance, the spectators slowly get to know Abramovic, grow to like her, learn of her painful path, leave aside their prejudices about the smoke and mirrors of art, the frivolity of the theater, and discover presence and silence. When Abramovic finally sits down before them wearing a formal gray suit, looking them in the eye, and enjoying a span of silence and stillness, there is a moment of universal relief; it is a mutual state of *anagnorisis*, deep empathy, a meeting. Then, suddenly, there is a ripple of applause, like a warm fire nobody expected anymore, in this rather somber festival lineup.

IX.

Tragic catastrophe, which is sudden and punctual, has been supplanted by the foreseeable and enduring calamity. Many productions, and spectators, today seem afflicted with a deep and long-lasting depression, with a black vision of history. Calamity, in these Avignon productions, is more a metaphor or allegory than a tangible reality, a plague sent by God or the forces of evil. It is present as an endemic evil, a situation offering no way out, a social or religious disaster that will linger on and against which we are defenseless. We have seen how the productions make numerous references to religious fundamentalism (*Dieu et les esprits vivants*, *Anathème*, *Puur*), to hatred of women and bodies, to the Holocaust, to genocide (*Mue*), and to the inquisition (*Je suis sang*). All of this, of course, invokes either historical realities or current events. In these renderings of the world as a gray and calamitous landscape, there is no trace of the grotesque comic, of Homeric laughter, or of a rejoicing body. But there is nothing explicitly tragic either, since, despite the anathema, condemnation, and imprecation, we find no God to blaspheme against, nor any transcendence to rage against, or destiny to oppose.

With no new comedy and no renewal of the tragic, the situation is clearly desperate—almost like a drama! A spectator's catharsis is no longer possible, since there is no functional identification with a hero or acceptance of transcendence. Catharsis is based on fear and pity; calamity on angst and disinterest ("compassion fatigue," or apathy in the face of the suffering of others, with implications for performance that Guillermo Gómez-Peña has written about). Calamity is a drama of irreversible degradation inflicted by a God more blinded than hidden. Unlike catastrophe (which affects particular individuals by consciously making them disappear, laying its cards on the table), calamity affects the anonymous masses, without apparent or absurd reason, refusing to show any cards at all. Unnameable calamity thrives in the spiritual void, as bodies disappear and body and mind split. Although linked with all civilizations since



time immemorial, calamity today feeds on the death of ideologies, on the absence of any political analysis that might lead directly to action, on the renunciation of critical thinking. Calamitous thinking—of the end of history, of postmodern relativism, of the well-fed and right-thinking—displaces the natural plague onto social life, placing us in the axis of evil, threatening us with divine punishment just at the moment when faith has been lost.

Calamity—a weapon of mass destruction, universal depression, indescribable panic—lets the audience believe that everything around them is rotten, destroyed, condemned. This dehistoricized way of thinking is found with nuances and variations in these Avignon productions. It is, in general, more defeatist than nihilistic, more provocative than subversive. Violence, the most frequent and obvious sign of calamity, is ubiquitous, but as Denis Guénoun has written, “the idea that violence should in itself have the value of revolt or provocation appears to be one of the founding presuppositions of contemporary representational ideology. . . . violence no longer has any critical value and from now it is violence itself that must be the subject of criticism.”¹³

But violence is certainly not the subject of criticism in all eight of these works. Each shows it in an extremely different way; to see that this is so, one need only observe calamity’s effect on the bodies of the actors, dancers, and performers. For Jan Fabre, the performers’ bodies are naturally valiant and naked and in no way anemic, despite

Life of Galileo, 2005.
Photo: Alain Girault/
Redaction

his concerns. It is a dancing, rejoicing, tortured body, subject to despair (the Knight), to wandering (Diogenes), to tears (the Rock), but still ready for new conquests. Calamity is, perhaps paradoxically, what the process of civilization (according to Norbert Elias) does to the vital instincts. But should we not fear new calamity with the arrival of a superman given over to warlike instincts and thirst for blood? Jan Decorte's insipid character Sangloupdiable (Blood-Wolf-Devil) becomes "mad with rage to the point of killing," as the program says, but we only ever see him naked or dressed as a monk, sword in hand, a body at times untied and at times tied to his partner with a thick rope, suitable for hanging oneself.

The bodies of *B.#03 Berlin* are vague outlines, silent and malleable figures, phantoms and fantasies in constant evolution. They are the blurry images that we today make of the tragic body: tortured, though it is impossible to grasp the victims. But precisely who are they? We remember only King Kong and the anonymous rabbits he unloads with a fork. Apart from this struggle between two figures, the body eludes us, fainting undecided between *coup de théâtre* and calamity.

The naked bodies of *Anathème* are both present and insistent, something rarely achieved on stage. Beyond evoking those who have been sacrificed, they refer only to themselves, as in performance art. This ambiguity transforms a boring but disturbing show into an unending sit-in. In *Puur*, the battered bodies in the film, and later the gassed and disinfected bodies from the ballet, engage in almost acrobatic contact. Their lifting, throwing, balancing, and dueling are active and decisive responses to violence, not an acceptance.

In the Wara in Provence, we particularly notice the participants' voices, as if an entire struggle for survival had taken refuge in ancestral speech and in a close-sounding voice amplified with the aid of a microphone. Therefore the survivor's fragile body forms an alliance with people of goodwill, using sound technology to collect and preserve words. Elsewhere still, Marina Abramovic's body faces all dangers—snakes, slaps, exhausting journeys, and all kinds of trials and tribulations—but avoids catastrophe, refuses enslavement, and ends up facing the audience, calmly sitting before it, all suffering forgotten, turning its back on all the calamities of the world. Jean Lambert-Wild received visitors in his bed at the edge of the castle; Marina Abramovic takes her leave of the audience in a moment of universal calm. Have we moved from calamity to calm?

Overwhelmed by so many universal misfortunes, exhausted by recurring calamities, I tried, in my room at Saint-Joseph, in good company and well looked after by the CEMEA, to get to sleep. But under my window, I heard Jean-François Sivadier's actors performing *Danton's Death*. "What?" I asked myself, "more of the awful fatalism of history?" More of this "revolution that devours its own children?" Later that night they performed Brecht's *Life of Galileo*. Galileo too was defeated by the Church's obscurantism, but for the time being, in this scene at the beginning of the play, I see

him explaining the workings of the world to his pupil. It is illuminating, light, and inspiring. Then it turns—it is that simple! With a few boards, a backdrop, and clear gestures fitted to the actions, a miracle occurs: the world is reborn, and with it the theater. We need only to follow the trajectory of the stars and the actors' gestures, to put simple words into orbit onstage, to rely on the audience's lively imagination—captive but alert—to see and construct a world both based on our own and transforming it. Could hope triumph over calamity? Before falling into a doubtful sleep, a warning from Raymond Williams comes to me: "It is in making hope practical, rather than despair convincing, that the ways to peace can be entered."¹⁴

NOTES

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1. *Festival Program*, 1.
2. Alain Badiou, *Rhapsodie pour le théâtre* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1990): 115.
3. Jan Fabre, *L'histoire des larmes* (Paris: L'Arche, 2005).
4. Roland Barthes, "Fragments d'un discours amoureux" (1977), *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 3:627.
5. Fabre, *L'histoire des larmes*, 35–36.
6. *Ibid.*, 32.
7. *Ibid.*, 39.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *La naissance de la tragédie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 142.
9. Working materials, read at Avignon, July 13, 2005.
10. Claudia Castellucci, 3.
11. P. F. Thomèse poems.
12. Philippe Descola, "Les Jivaros d'Amazonie et nous," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, July 14–20, 2005, 71. See also Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).
13. Denis Guénoun, "Dispositions critiques," *Alternatives théâtrales* 85–86 (2005): 107.
14. Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983), 240.