

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2025)

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PS

PERFORMANCE & SPACE

PROCEEDINGS OF THE
PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

Edited by

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University of the Peloponnese

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

2025

The Politics of Space in *Ça ira* (1) fin de Louis by Joël Pommerat

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doi: [10.12681/ps2023.7991](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.7991)

The Politics of Space in *Ça ira (1) fin de Louis* by Joël Pommerat: Staging the People. The Gap Between Presence and Representation

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Abstract

Joël Pommerat's *Ça ira (1) fin de Louis*¹ evokes the history of the French Revolution while exploring contemporary trends of depoliticisation. The linear dramatic structure of the performance follows the events from the King's convocation of the Assembly of the Three Classes in 1789 to the adoption of France's first Constitution and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in September 1791. However, the prospective dramaturgy -pointing towards the future and following "presentism"- neither moves from crisis to crisis towards a climax and a final resolution nor aims at a historically accurate narrative. Instead, the crisis is permanent and lasts beyond the performance, extending towards contemporary political crises and blending fact and fiction, past and present. In its five-hour duration, the theatre becomes a "parliament" where the spectator is positioned in the gap between presence and representation. The paper explores the ways the performance exposes this gap using strategies of staging the people (Rancière, 2011). After exploring the sound and vocal elements of the performance as a spatial "distribution of the sensible" which contributes to a heightened sense of presence and their spatio-temporal relation to history, we will examine how the aesthetic practice of staging the people is manifested in two scenes of the performance.

Keywords: Presence, representation, staging the people, politics of aesthetics, distribution of the sensible, aesthetic regimes, regimes of historicity.

¹The performance was presented in Greece at central stage of the Onassis Cultural Centre, 4-8 October 2017. The title could be translated in English as *It'll be fine (1) the end of Louis*.

Spatial Distribution of the Sensible in *Ça ira*: Sonorous Elements, Lighting Design and Presence

The politics of space in *Ça ira* are addressed using as framework Jacques Rancière's term "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2004) or "division of the perceptible" (Rancière, 2004, 2011), a concept grounded in the dialectic of a politics of aesthetics. For Rancière art is not political because of the way it represents social structures, conflicts, or identities. It is political precisely because of the distance it maintains about these functions to the extent that it arranges, shapes, produces, frames a particular spatio-temporal sensibility, modes of being together or being apart, of being inside or being outside, in front or in the middle, modes of arranging and dividing the visible and the invisible, modes of distinguishing speech from noise.

Politics consists in reconfiguring the division of the sensible, in bringing new objects and subjects onto the stage, in making visible what was not visible, in making audible as speaking beings those who were only audible as noisy animals. To the extent that it sets up such scenes of discord, politics can be called an "aesthetic activity" in a way that has nothing to do with that ornament of power that Benjamin called the 'aestheticisation of politics' (Rancière, 2004, p.13).

Joël Pommerat, as an *auteur en scene* (or *écrivain de plateau*), writes "from the stage, on stage and for the stage" (Phelopoulou, 2019, pp.163,161) in collaboration with actors of Compagnie Louis Brouillard. As his emphasis is on reality rather than verisimilitude or a reconstruction of the past through a realist scenography, the props of *Ça ira* are minimal and the stage is almost stripped down, with sparse, removable furniture. The main spaces are created by contrasts between light and darkness (by set and lighting designer Éric Soyer), rendering the scenic and sonic design allusive, blurring spacio-temporal boundaries, and prioritizing the actors' haunting presence. The lighting design, coming from above or from the left and right (rarely from the front) of the stage –as is usually the case in dance performances– produces radiant bodies.

The way sound and light create space and bring the actors' presence into the fore is redolent of Peter Brooks tenets about presence and the empty space. Presence, for Brook is not related to subjective action. It rather figures as an objective quality related to space:

For me, the way of the theater leads (...) to a perception that is heightened because it is shared. A strong presence of actors and a strong presence of spectators can produce a circle of unique intensity in which barriers can be broken and the invisible become real. Then public truth and private truth become inseparable parts of the same essential experience (Brook, 1987, p.41).

Presence –central to Brook’s philosophy and Pommerat’s performance– attains its full resonance only in relation to the concept of empty space which is not conceived as a geographical or physical entity but as everything that does not yet have form, as a virtual and yet-to-be born reality that is as yet undefined (Sucher,1995). For Brook, an actor has to be capable of expressing more than an objective horizontally motivated by desires and actions. Rather, the actor is a vertically integrated presence capable of accessing and transmitting both corporeal and incorporeal realities. The vertical dramaturgy of *Ça ira* brings into relief the equality of the interacting scenic elements. The ‘shock of presence²’ (Brook, 1997), presupposing the actors’ interdependence to the audience and the other performative elements, encapsulates Peter Brook’s influence on Pommerat’s work.

Figure 1

Scenes From Ça ira (1) fin de Louis, source: <https://www.artpress.com/2016/10/01/joel-pommerat-ca-ira-1-fin-de-louis/>



The sound design (by Francois Leymarie) contributes to this complex interrelation of actors’ bodies and space as a performative agent, creating images and multiple spatial perspectives. These perspectives make up what the dramaturge of the performance Marion Boudier calls “prospective dramaturgy”, which consists in the collaborative construction of the performance text through theatrical improvisations based on research topics or text

² Pommerat has been influenced by Peter Brook’s work as he and his company were guests at the Bouffes du Nord, Peter Brook’s theatre in Paris, in the early 2010s.

fragments. It is noteworthy that, while the term “prospective” is generally applied to visual perception (it “looks forward” [prospectare³]), in *Ça ira*’s dramaturgical context it takes on a sonar dimension alluding to our hearing perception. This is indicative of the privileged status attributed by Pommerat and his company to aurality -the dialectic counterpart and complement of visuality- and the dramatic and semiotic value of soundscape and noise.⁴

Sound is privileged as a dramaturgical strategy for its referential ambiguity and polyvalence and its potential as a signifying agent, extending beyond the directorial arrangement of language via actors’ speech and defying ocular-centric theatre semiosis. Voice amplification and strategic speaker implementation create sonorous spaces invisible on stage, representing an exterior to what we witness, generating fictional soundscapes close to the spectator’s ear. A wide range of sound effects are used narratively or extra-narratively creating atmospheres or transitions suggestive of what is happening on stage or backstage (e.g. different frequency bombardments signal the approach of the army to the building of the National Assembly or voices off-stage indicate the siege by the crowd).

Figure 2

Snapshot from the recorded performance of Ça ira (1) fin de Louis accessed via the Onassis Cultural Centre



³“Prospective dramaturgy (...) contemplates future needs, anticipates, or encourages the directions the writing takes by gathering and sharing potentially interesting material, the potentials of which are explored collectively during rehearsal. It “is a process of inquiry and research” which “develops during rehearsals, closely to the stage, and in connection with the actors” and involves -amongst others- “contributing to thinking about the writing currently undertaken, the point of view used, form, and relationship with the audience” (Boudier, 2021, p. 752, 753).

⁴“Theatre noise is a new term which captures a contemporary, agitational acoustic aesthetic. It expresses the innate theatricality of sound design (...), articulates the reach of auditory spaces, the art of vocality, the complexity of acts of audience, the political in produced noises (...). Noise (...) is to be understood as a plural, as a composite of different noises, as layers or waves of noises” (Kendrick & Roesner, 2011, p. xv).

Presence through Embodied Speech

Pommerat asks the actors “to be *in* the speech, not to recite or reproduce a text.” Thus, he tries to “break the mechanism of (...) the theatrical attitude” and “the lack of naturalness” (2007, pp. 9-10). The actors’ de-dramatised voice and their direct address to the audience breaking the fourth wall, signals a departure from the text and emancipation from the supremacy of an authorial mould, targeting colloquial language’s dynamism. While written texts and archival documents play an important role at the beginning of the creative process, with actors appropriating historical sources, in the later stages this process involves a detachment from them, prioritizing “ideas over style and character study” (Pommerat, 2016b, p. 10). The written text “disappears”⁵ on stage due to the actors’ phenomenological physicality, while performative, active verbs (e.g. give the floor, threaten, warn, reject, validate, deprive, legitimise) permeate the performance exemplifying an understanding of speech as “embodied logos”.⁶ This spatial distribution of the sensible through the actor’s voice aims at a “balance between revelation and concealment, between the desire to see and that which prevents it” (Pommerat, 2007, p. 32) and both at distantiation and an intimate relationship between spectators and actors.

The performance’s distance from myths, legends, symbols and stereotypical constructions about the French Revolution dominating collective imaginary, collective memory and public history and the de-monumentalising attitude towards history, -a deliberate venture to “cleanse” it “of all its folkloric rubbish and monumental sediments” (Norrito, 2015) is reflected in the avoidance of recognizable, well-known quotations from famous figures of the revolution and in the change of the names of its protagonists. Similarly, the reiteration of the phrase “Ça Ira”⁷ by Louis as a leitmotif does not function as an allusion to the famous symbol of the revolution but inscribes the written language of the archives and past symbols to a living, colloquial, contemporary mode of speaking and to contemporary modes of depoliticisation. “Getting rid of the rhetoric and the appearance of the revolutionaries seemed necessary in order to really hear those speeches again and rediscover a certain innocence of the gaze” (Pommerat, 2016, p. 10).

⁵The demands of Pommerat’s stage writing explain why the written word plays a minor role in *Ça ira*. According to the dramaturg of the performance Marion Boudier, Joël Pommerat was reluctant to publish his texts and it took the insistence of an editor to finally accept (Boudier, 2015, p.23).

⁶This term is inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s theoretical understanding of *logos as flesh* that allows the perception of logos as an embodied and inter-subjective experience (Stenstad, 1993, pp. 52-61)

⁷Reference to the “Ça ira” of the title (meaning “It’ll be fine”) but also to the famous revolutionary song of the same name which, by 1795, has become a patriotic song or national dance.

Figure 3

Scene from *Ça Ira* (1) Fin de Louis

Source: <https://www.thaetre.com/2017/03/24/entretien-avec-eric-feldman/>

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The microphonic amplification of actors' voice (through high frequency microphones [HF] and headset microphones) and the play with the range of voice levels, tones and tensions, preserve its everyday, natural and "intimate signature" and the "grain of voice" (Barthes, 1978⁸), avoiding "vocal projection" (Triaux, 2013, p. 60). The aesthetic prioritizing of voice is politically inflected as the physiological manifestation of the phonetic properties of language is always socially coded to place subjects within the social and political order. As Rancière observes, the distribution of the sensible is a "delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise that simultaneously determines the places and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (Rancière, 2004, p.13). Therefore, the microphone on the podium does more than enhance the actors' presence and the polyphony of the performance bringing them closer to the spectator, allowing the space between them to become denser and bridging the individual and the collective, the scene and the

⁸For Barthes, the "grain" primarily refers to the phenomenological perception of the materiality of language and speech in voice with no reference to how the body's materiality might be mediated by discourse and by various technologies. However, Pommerat does not promote an understanding of the human voice that ignores the body as an effect of power relations and regulatory norms and the fact that embodiment is "shaped in each historical context by specific cultural, aesthetic, and scientific models, and paradigms" (Zarrilli et al., 2013, p. viii).

auditorium. It also exposes the gap between presence and representation by highlighting the construction of identities and subjectivities predicated on claiming and possessing language. It acts as a “weapon” (“I fight with words, not with weapons” (4: 20: 55⁹), says a member of parliament), as a “modern way of exercising power on people” which the actors have to seize and “appropriate with different skill”, states the sound designer of the performance, François Leymarie (Sinard, 2016). What is more, the emphasis on actors’ voice does not imply a logocentric “metaphysics of presence”¹⁰ but rather points towards a constantly fleeting present and stresses the paradox of the actor’s absence-presence, simultaneously inhabiting the past and the present. As Peggy Phelan argues, a value and an ontological aspect of performance is presence’s disappearing character. The fact that the body and the voice are always media or surplus of meaning, always becoming themselves through disappearance (Phelan, 1993, p. 146), never establishing themselves on stage as present in the here-and-now, never coinciding with themselves, requiring taking a stand and a certain point of view, reveals their political potential¹¹ and subversive status.

Staging the People: The Gap Between Presence and Representation

The interrelated questions of how the people are represented and how the spectator is included in the performance will be addressed using Jacques Rancière’s conceptualisation of “staging the people” (Rancière, 2011). The “people” is more absent than present, as they actually gain visibility and claim their voice after the fourth hour of the performance. Does this mean that the people are misrepresented in the performance?

In *Ça ira* the audience acts as members of the French National Assembly since the actors are addressing them and mingle with them in the auditorium. Some reactions (boos or cheers) seem to come spontaneously from the spectators, but, in fact, there are fifteen extras, dispersed in the rows of the auditorium among the audience, divided into two political groups (left and right wing), called “Forces vives” by François Leymarie (Sinard, 2016), who applaud their leaders or boo their opponents. Although this is not a participatory performance, some spectators react along with the “Forces vives”. The voices of actors and audience and sound diffusion through speakers are used to create the atmosphere of an

⁹References to the text of the performance are taken from the Greek subtitling of the performance by Louisa Mitsakou as shown in the recording (indicated by the time marker) and from Joël Pommerat’s published text (Abbreviated: ÇI) (Pommerat, 2016a).

¹⁰In *The Voice that Keeps Silence* Derrida states that “voice is the being which is present to itself in the form of universality, as consciousness; the voice is consciousness” (Derrida, 2012, p.498).

¹¹“Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. (...); it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (Rancière, 1999, p. 29-30)

assembly hall and to immerse the spectators in a specific space-time dimension that blurs the boundaries between stage and auditorium (see figure 4).

Figure 4

“Forces Vives”

Source: <https://www.parislete.fr/en/home/ca-ira-1-fin-de-louis>

© Élisabeth Carecchio



The way the spectator and the people are included or separated from the action constitutes a distribution of the sensible. Distance and proximity established through sound strategies render the people present and absent at once or represented suggestively. This distribution of the sensible transforms the space between stage and auditorium into a “parliament”, echoing the slogan outside the Théâtre de L’Odéon in Paris in May 1968: “When the parliament becomes a bourgeois theatre, then the bourgeois theatre becomes a parliament”. The audience is positioned in the intermediate space between the people who are deprived of speech and visibility and their representatives who monopolise the scene, between the new constitutional organisation imagined by the deputies and the real needs of people. Thus, the spectator is hovering in the gap between the people and their representatives, between presence and representation, sharing their contested terrain.

At the heart of Rancière’s conception of the politics of aesthetics lies the demonstration of this gap and tension between presence and representation as a political but primarily a theatrical question, as “the inter-play between them determines who is there and how they are seen” (Rancière, 1999, pp. 87-88). The aesthetic practice of staging the people and its capacity to frame, codify and remediate the presence of people is central to imaging their

political figure and their “claim” in representative democracy (Rancière, 1999, pp. 87-88). However, once the people¹² are theatricalised or staged as a material presence “they are emptied out”, “they become an image (...), as if always already a representation” (Didi-Hubermann 2016, p. 68). The people are missing from representative democracy because they never existed as a unified totality, but “only in the condition of minority” (Deleuze, 2013, pp. 215- 217). “ ‘The people’ are (...) the locus of the unbridgeable gap between presence and representation that constitute politics’ primary (...) site” (Rancière, 1999, pp. 22, 87). As long as representative democracy, the post-democratic apparatus and populist rhetoric attempts to close this gap, the practice of staging the people remains the recurrent ground of political and aesthetic tension (Kear, 2021).

Ça ira reproduces¹³ and simultaneously undermines contemporary depoliticised tendencies exposing them as a “post-democratic show” or “populist theatrical spectacle” unveiling the people’s “missingness” from the aesthetic-political regime and re-opening the gap between presence and representation as a contested terrain without final resolution (Kear, 2021, pp. 2, 3).

Scene 5

In the 5th scene of the performance, a Spanish anchorwoman deliriously comments on the opening ceremony of the General Classes from behind the official forum. Once the Prime Minister takes the floor, the Spanish reporter rushes to the hidden right side of the stage, to interview an MP who expresses the divisions of the General Classes, concealed in the image of the live broadcast. In a dialectic juxtaposition, the stage is divided into two, with the left side -where the officials and the Prime Minister stand- silent and illuminated, and the right side -where the MPs stand- speaking and dark (see figure 5). The members of parliament are duplicated and are no longer opposite the stage (as the audience) but within it, into the spectacle of history but also absent because invisible and hidden by a black wall. Their presence is only implied by the voices of the deputy and the anchorwoman. A new re-configuration of the classical stage-spectator division -a new distribution of the sensible- is

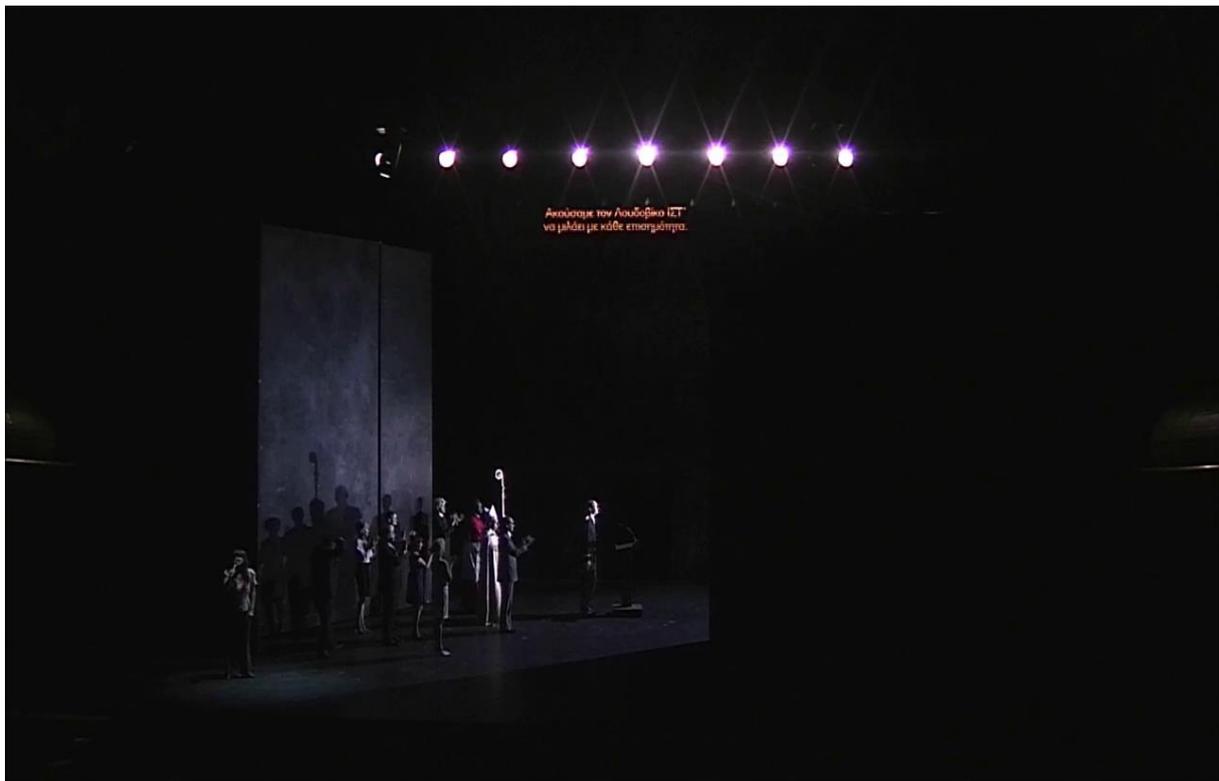
¹²“A ‘people’ (...) is not an assemblage of social groups and identities. It is the polemical form of subjectification that is drawn along particular lines of fracture, where the distribution of leaders and led, learned and ignorant, possessors and dispossessed, is decided” (Rancière, 2011, p.15).

¹³Olivier Neveux criticises Pommerat for reproducing depoliticised discourses, for presenting political discourse as an already constituted, rhetorical and spectacular whole and for bringing out the various forms of discourse according to a purely thematic logic (Neveux, 2007). The director's neutrality certainly does not reveal a militant political position. However, he exposes the depoliticisation of politics through a politics of aesthetics. Conversely, the issue of the disappearance of the art forms of dialectical conflict (dissensus) is addressed differently by Rancière. Both political debate and a sense of the strange disappear at the very moment when artworks address contemporary social or political issues directly. In every such attempt there is an automated effect of “delegitimation” and self-referentiality (Rancière, 2004, p. 14). However, contemporary politicised aesthetic regimes promote and augment political action by their very ambiguity.

created. The theatricalisation and dissociation of sound and image allows the spectator to reflect on the mediated nature of the historical event as a sensational post-democratic show or a populist theatrical spectacle, unmasking the mechanisms of both theater and history as constructed. The gap between the immediacy of the live event and its media coverage is exposed, challenging the hegemony of the image, while at the same time taking full advantage of it. This self-referential comment points suggestively towards the consensual¹⁴ and universal discourses and class-based rationales that govern the institutional framework of the performance. It also reveals how aesthetic regimes or regimes of spectatorship can produce and frame regimes of historicity (Hartog, 2003) and exposes the gap between presence and representation questioning representative democracy. History is revealed as a spectacle that separates the viewer from the object of viewing.

Figure 5

Snapshot from the recorded performance accessed via the Onassis Cultural Centre archive



The Spanish TV commentator operates as a kind of meta-dramatic, epic bridge between stage and audience. As such she embodies a contemporary depoliticised perception of politics and a parody of the power of media. Her attitude also reflects the aesthetic question

¹⁴Consensus implies the suspension of hierarchies in traditional dualisms and oppositions and therefore the abolition of dialectical conflicts. “The shift from dialectics to symbolism is obviously linked to the contemporary shift in what I called the aesthetics of politics, meaning the way politics frames a common stage. This shift has a name. Its name is consensus” (Rancière, 2009, p.48).

of the performance: to escape the *déjà vu* surrounding the Revolution and to immerse the spectator in the unpredictable (Mazeau, Boudier, 2015), but also to distance her/him through the effect of liveness rendered from the journalist's burlesque perspective. "An important event for France, of course, but we may say without exaggeration, for the whole European continent" (ÇI, p. 25). Unable to construct a grand narrative of the French Revolution in her confused excitement and lack of objectivity, the journalist reinforces the irony about an optimism or faith in progress which is challenged along with the spectator's horizons of expectation. The performance asks us to evaluate our participation as spectators, destabilizing our privileged position as such, through the fact that history is played out "live". Electronic media tend to relativise– if not to abolish– the "Euclidean" experience of space-time and the opposition between presence and absence as well as that of proximity and distance in the situating of bodies (Weber, 2004, p. 99). "Televised 'bodies' mediate between the body and its presence, between the experience of the body and its stage existence" (Weber, 1996, p. 117). One of the strongest scenes of the performance is, in fact, the one that is less "live" as – in exposing mediation– the truth status of the visual system is questioned in contrast to the voice off-stage that brings from the background the historical conflicts that are silenced by the "televised" image.

Scene 26

The last scene of *Ça Ira* leaves the "end of Louis" (*fin de Louis*) suspended along with all the questions about the aftermath of the Revolution. The scene, structured between two games of billiards, invites the viewer to read the conflicts in the light of the symbolic meaning of a game. The ambiguity of this game -played by the queen and the king's sister and then by two bailiffs and the militiamen- no longer being the exclusive privilege of aristocracy, is underlined by the dialogue between the two women ["Perhaps we should avoid arguing in public...", "Where is the audience, my lady?" (ÇI, p.129)].

Here again the gap between presence and representation is unveiled pointing towards the audience by making the theatrical space a site of dynamic and dialectical conflict between the political and the aesthetic. As a metaphorical expression of a class demand and an allusion to the *sans-culottes* people of the Revolution or the military coup, this game is emblematic of Pommerat's staging of history in the present tense, showing history and politics as a game played by many class agents, a game of conflict, surprises and carom. History is presented not as a predetermined but as a productive and potential moment, as a field of struggle. The performers' and the audience's presence inextricably and dialectically relate the historical past with the "here and now". "The spectator is in a state of discovery of events, as if he himself is contemporary with what is happening before his eyes" (Pommerat,

2016b, p. 11). The performance does not aim at reproducing a pre-existing past reality as a referent to itself and outside itself. Instead, it aims at producing history as a system of fluid and multivalent cultural signs by haunting the performance space and the movement of the actors, by dissipating the sense of pure presence and by generating potentially alternative presents. Dramaturgy aiming in that direction involves a form of performative writing inscribed in the body and by the body, a scenic writing that reflects the various mechanisms of memory and referentiality and pushes against a teleological conception of history, pointing towards “not an essence but a positioning” (Hall, 1990, 226).

Figure 6

Snapshot from the recorded performance accessed from the Onassis Cultural Centre archive, “Where Is the Audience my Lady?”



“In my performances I am looking for the relationship we have with characters in a novel” (Pommerat, 2007, p.32). An epic dimension is manifest in Pommerat’s work, aiming at distancing while simultaneously immersing the audience. Although his stage writing bears traces of ‘historicizing¹⁵’ in a dialectic, Brechtian manner, the blurring of past and present temporalities brings him closer to what Hartog defined as “presentism¹⁶”. The audience is

¹⁵ “To historicise is to show an event or a person in a light that is social, historical, relevant and changeable” which renders it “the exact opposite of archaeological reconstruction” (Plassard & Prost, 2006, p. 80).

¹⁶The regime of historicity, which Francois Hartog defined as “presentism”, emerged after the collapse of the visions of modernity to replace the modern regime of historicity that had begun with the French Revolution. “Presentism” signals “a predominant attachment to the present, where the future is no longer predictable, where the relationship with the past becomes blurred, localised, variable according to interests, situations or business plans. Defenders of modernism have called this transformation of the 1980s a crisis of ideologies and the end of unifying ‘grand narratives’”. This change, according to

invited to read the conflicts in the light of the symbolic significance of a “live” television broadcast and a game of pool which function as a metaphor for politics and aesthetics as a site of conflict. The rearrangement and division of space does not appear as an external condition which precedes the performance. Instead, it forms part of it, creating a new relationship between audience and stage. If the performance offers a form of collectivity, it is in the absence of the ideal of a coherent, fully transparent, unified community. As a shared and yet divided space, it is a space we can join precisely because of its pointing towards a gap between presence and representation, because of its dividedness. “Our separateness (...) is the unity of our condition” (Cavell, 1976, p. 339).

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Didier Plassard, marks the end of Brechtian historicisation in theatre directing. “The past that takes shape on the theatrical stage is no longer presented in its historical coherence nor in its transient and ephemeral dimension, but as an enigmatic space where *res factae* and *res fictae* freely intertwine, a space that is at once historical or mnemonic and poetic, testifying to the fact that history has lost its legibility” (Plassard, & Prost, 2006, pp. 80-83).

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