

Holding a Mirror Up to Theatre

Milo Rau's *La Reprise: Histoire(s) du théâtre (I)*

Carol Martin



Figure 1. Suzy Cocco's interview. Cocco performs Ihsane Jarfi's mother in La Reprise: Histoire(s) du théâtre (I). Théâtre National, Brussels, May 2018. (Photo by Hubert Amiel)

Swiss director Milo Rau's theatre and film production company, the International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM), founded in 2007, has been rattling the space between the lit stage and the dark house for more than a decade. IIPM produces political art that Rau calls "Real Theatre." Rau does this by wedding theatrical constructions to political and social realities in the context of upending the conventions of theatre's relationship to acting, violence, ghosts, stage space, and the notion of rehearsal while *at the same time* using these theatrical devices to

Carol Martin is Professor of Drama at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. Her books include Theatre of the Real (2012) and Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage (2010), among others. Her essays and interviews appear in anthologies and academic journals and have been translated into Turkish, French, Polish, Chinese, Romanian, and Japanese. She is the General Editor of In Performance, a book series devoted to plays and performance texts published by Seagull Books and distributed by the University of Chicago Press.

tell a story. His formidable intellectual training—German and Roman studies and sociology in Paris, Zurich, and Berlin under Tzvetan Todorov and Pierre Bourdieu, among others—and his uniquely constructed and thought-provoking theatre productions make him among Europe’s most sought-after directors.

Rau’s *La Reprise: Histoire(s) du théâtre (I)* undoes the conventions of tragedy—rising tensions, climax, catharsis, and resolution—as it developed in the premodern period. Gone are the offstage violence and heroic protagonists with fated outcomes typical of Greek tragedy. Unlike Aristotle’s estimation of the tragic hero as having a noble character, Rau’s tragic protagonists are common men and women enmeshed without redemption in a tragic mythos. Imagine how it would be if Oedipus were unable to find out who he is, the cause of the plague remained unknown, Thebes continued to suffer, and people cried out without anyone to save them.

Rau holds a mirror up to theatre in ways that reveal how the world we live in is created. The tragedy is a real one, and so is the violence it depicts. Rau’s cruelty (in Antonin Artaud’s sense) and the voyeurism it excites keeps actors and spectators in a visible exchange focused on the stage action. He aligns what happened in the past with what is happening onstage in the present in ways that defy the linear conventions of narrative. *La Reprise* takes place in the porous membrane between the actor and the character, the real and the represented, fiction and reality. The theatrical means are low-rent: a mobile video camera, a central video screen, some tables and chairs, and a car rolled onto the stage (Meyrick 2019). Rau’s visual landscape is anchored by the partition of the stage action into discrete areas, including the central screen on which both live-feed and prerecorded scenes are projected, in both close-up and mid-distance shots. The two tables on either side of the stage sign that this is a seriously researched and carefully constructed place for learning about tragedy in the real world and that the investigation is ongoing (see Martin 2014). The spatial and temporal leaps are obedient only to the laws of aesthetic imagination that enable the mind to grasp what is happening as it happens. Rau’s actors retain their own names even while they play others. There is no suspension of disbelief.

Acting

In the prologue to *La Reprise*, Johan Leysen, one of the three professional actors in the production, walks onstage and states that he has just performed the most difficult moment in acting: entering the stage.

JOHAN: What did I just do?

I entered.

I think entering is the most difficult part. Once you’re on stage, in the situation, everything is clear. You just react.

But the question is: When do you become the character? At what moment does the tragedy begin? Some actors begin in their dressing rooms. Or they identify. To “get into character.” I can’t do that. I don’t think they’re playing characters, they’re playing being actors. Just like directors who shout—they’re not directing, they’re “being” directors. Acting is like delivering pizza: It’s not about the delivery man. It’s about the pizza. The best actors communicate something, deliver something. And the less they stand in the way of that something, the more that something can exist.

I’ve been an actor since my 20s, nearly half a century. I’ve played everything, even dead people.

Once, I played the ghost of Hamlet’s father.

Mist, please...¹ (41)

1. All quotes are from the performance text by Milo Rau in this issue of TDR. Parenthetical numbers following each quote refer to the pages in TDR.—Ed.



Figure 2. Tom Adjibi's interview: "I get offered 'the Arab' or 'the mixed-race man' or 'the multi-cultural youth,' but never 'the bad guy' or 'the good guy' or 'the madman,' whatever." *La Reprise: Histoire(s) du théâtre (I)*, 18 January 2019 in Ghent, Belgium. (Photo by Michiel Devijver)

Johan's reprise of his performance of Hamlet's father's ghost augurs *La Reprise's* reenactment of the 22 April 2012 murder of Ihsane Jarfi, a gay Muslim man living in Liège, Belgium. As mist fills the stage, Johan faces stage right and delivers the opening speech of Hamlet's father's ghost. "That's theatre!" he says when he is finished. "A dead person speaking, a ghost. But in real life of course the dead don't speak, they don't even hear, they're just dead" (42). After his soliloquy, Johan tells a strange story of a lonely musician who, when walking through a cemetery, descends into a crypt, exhumes a body, and brings it home. Soon, the musician adds the body of a woman and then the body of a child to his macabre family. When the police ask him why he wants to speak to the dead when they don't talk back, he responds, "Maybe, but they can hear us" (42). The soliloquy and the fable alert us to Rau's recursive and layered storytelling: its acting, auditions, coincidence, tragedy, incantations, and interventions.

Auditions

La Reprise includes three professional and three nonprofessional actors. The nonprofessional actors tell portions of their own personal stories in the context of what is staged as their audition interviews. In Rau's dramaturgy, the convergence of the autobiographical details of the nonprofessional actors with the lives of the real-life protagonists links the actors with the characters they play in ways that make us understand that this is an "everyman's" tragedy. Responding to the casting call at Théâtre de Liège, Suzy Cocco, who will play Jarfi's mother, is auditioned by Johan.

JOHAN: Have you ever done anything extreme?

SUZY: In the last play [an amateur production of Molière's *The Doctor in Spite of Himself*] I played an old lady who had been abandoned. It was a reference to abandoned dogs. I had to crawl around on all fours.

JOHAN: Show us!

(She takes a few steps on all fours.)

SUZY: Like this... A dog.

JOHAN: You can sit down again.

Have you ever done any nude scenes?

SUZY: I'm 67—it might be a bit late.

JOHAN: Would you do it with me?

SUZY: I don't know.

JOHAN: Thank you Suzy. (43–44)

Johan's questions presage the scene in which he and Suzy will play Jarfi's parents. Suzy is a divorced mother of two boys; she is a sympathetic woman who takes in a Libyan refugee. She walks dogs to add to her retirement salary, and does not believe in God. Her husband left her for a "fake blonde" (43). Suzy's sense of loss and loneliness, and her compassion for humans and animals, creates empathy for Suzy the person, for Suzy the actor, and for Jarfi's mother, the character she plays. But the difference between Johan and Suzy as professional and amateur actors collapses when they sit naked center stage before a live-feed camera worrying about where their son was on the night he was murdered.

Suzy's, Fabian Leenders's, and Tom Adjibi's auditions (the three performers presented as nonprofessional actors) uncover a host of theatre conventions. Can you cry on demand? Have you ever been naked onstage? Why theatre? Have you ever done anything extreme on stage? Can you hit me? When Fabian responds to this last question with a gentle tap, the professional actor Sara shows him the technique of a convincing fake slap. The answers to "Why theatre?" are equally revealing. "There's a certain freedom in theatre...you can do things that you can't do in real life," says Fabian, who works as a forklift driver and spends his spare time making electronic music by sampling (44). Tom Adjibi, who plays Jarfi, shares that having a French mother and a father from Benin has made him adept at exploiting racial stereotypes even though he hates them. "I get offered 'the Arab' or 'the mixed-race man' or 'the multicultural youth,' but never 'the bad guy' or 'the good guy' or 'the madman,' whatever. If you're black you either get to play a black person, or you do political theatre where you criticize that you only play black people. Or you do dance" (46). When asked what he considers the most radical stage action, Tom responds that in a book by Wajdi Mouawad there is a character who tells the audience that he will attempt suicide. The character says he is going to stand on a center-stage chair and put the noose that is hanging above it around his neck, kick the chair away, and hold onto the rope to avoid being strangled.

TOM: The character climbs on the chair, puts the noose around his neck and he kicks the chair away. Either someone will save him and he survives. Or, the audience doesn't move and the character dies. The actor dies. (46)

Tom's story underscores how Rau's dramaturgy interrogates theatricality by showing how stage reality can be dangerously close to daily life. While Johan asks, "At what moment does the tragedy begin," Tom asks, "How do you know it's over?" (53). The question signals that tragedy reaches both beyond the social moment in which it occurred and the confines of the stage. After the auditions, the actors assume their roles and the story begins.

Coincidence

But Rau asks: “How do you give a story a sense of the tragic when it is total coincidence? These people are drunk, they meet Jarfi, they go too far and they kill him, but it was never their intention. They didn’t plan to take him, they were searching for a girl. The question of the play is, ‘How can you give meaning to this complete coincidence?’” (in Fisher 2019). Suzy is from the same place as Jarfi’s actual killers. After visiting Jeremy Wintgens in jail, Fabian (who plays Wintgens) says his face is probably the reason he only plays bad guys. The distance between the actor and the character, the real event and the staged event, learning to act and learning to murder, take on disquieting implications. Rau amplifies the doubleness of the actors as both themselves and as the characters, underscoring an uncanny confluence. Sébastien, who along with Fabian and Sara plays one of the killers, comments that on the night of the murder as one of the murderers was celebrating his birthday, Jarfi was celebrating a colleague’s birthday, and the next day was Jarfi’s mother’s birthday. The coincidence literally means nothing but it proposes a strange fate. Similarly, Sébastien recounts that during the trial Jarfi’s ex-boyfriend (he has no name in the play) struggled to answer questions that could not be answered. “Why did Ihsane leave the Open Bar just then? Why did he get into the gray Polo? Why did he have to suffer?” (48).

As a realist working in an enchanted medium, Rau says he wants “to show things as they are.” Jarfi’s ex-boyfriend confesses to wanting a sign, something mystical or transcendent, to help him deal with his pain. He has his doubts when a clairvoyant tells him that he will come across “a key ring, a rabbit’s foot...something soft, with fur, something you can stroke... In two or three weeks, a rabbit’s foot, you’ll come across it” (51). Two weeks later, on a trip to Italy, he experiences an amazing light and is overcome with grief. The next day, he notices a soft, fur keyring. Later, in desperation, he screams, “When am I going to be able to get on with my life? When is this going to stop? When will I stop moping around? And that every moment—believe it or not—a rabbit crossed the road” (52). In Rau’s theatre, just as tragedy invokes and sidesteps fate, coincidence summons and dismisses mysticism.

Tragedy

Tragedy presents a moving story with an awful underlying driving force: plague, war, murder, betrayal, vengeance, infanticide, matricide, patricide, regicide. The propelling set of circumstances might be divinely created or human-made. Ethical voices struggle to be heard. Innocents are sacrificed. The dead speak, ghosts appear. The ghosts are real, or symbolic, or metaphorical, or all three: a dead person returned, an assemblage of memories, a haunting by the past. Tragedy is typically the story of a protagonist who is fatefully compelled to act. But in *La Reprise*, the fatal choices do not have cosmic implications. The characters do not learn from the tragic events. Imperfection is without nobility. There is no reversal, recognition, or redemption. Noting that there are ethical issues about turning someone’s tragedy into a night at the theatre, critic Mark Fisher wrote in *The Guardian* that Rau got approval from Jarfi’s ex-boyfriend and father to make the work. “It depended a lot on the tolerance of these people,” Rau says. “But I told them: ‘This is not a historical or journalistic work, it’s a play. Somehow the case of your son will be changed so it can become a metaphor for what can happen to everybody’” (in Fisher 2019).

Well-versed in European history with its ideological shifts, Rau entitled the third “chapter” of his six-act production “The Banality of Evil.” Philosopher and historian Hannah Arendt used the phrase as part of the subtitle of her 1963 *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Arendt’s book grew out of her reports published in the *New Yorker* on Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem. Rau’s reference to Arendt is in relation to one of Jarfi’s murderers, Jeremy Wintgens. “I should have stayed at home. I should have stayed with my girlfriend, not gone into town. I should have stayed home,” Wintgens says when interviewed about his crime (49). Unlike

noble tragic protagonists, Wintgens learns nothing from his wrongdoing. His lament is for his banal, ordinary decision, not his evil, extraordinary crime—revealing the lack of moral compass of the bored and banal murderers. They have no ethical equilibrium to recover; no god, no leadership. Alcohol, pervasive unemployment, hatred of Muslim immigrants, and absence of community create the conditions for Jarfi’s murder, which the actors brutally reenact onstage. On a rainy night on a lonely road, Jarfi is dragged out of the trunk of a car that has been rolled onstage, stripped naked, and brutally beaten to death in the car’s headlights. One of the killers urinates on him. A live-feed of the murder plays out on the center-stage screen.

Unlike Greek tragedy, where violence happens offstage and is later narrated by a messenger, Rau stages the murder in real terms, before our eyes, as a repetition of social actuality.

Arendt writes that justice “demands seclusion, it requires sorrow rather than anger, and it prescribes the most careful abstention from all the nice pleasures of putting oneself in the limelight” (1963:4). Trials are typically public affairs of the police-guarded legal system, but the negotiations of justice take place in deliberative isolation, quarantined from infection by public opinion. Theatre is all about contagion in the public forum—a contagion that can sometimes confirm and sometimes upend the status quo. *La Reprise* states the conditions of violence, stages a murder, and performs a metaphorical resurrection of the dead with the sighting of a rabbit by Jarfi’s boyfriend. By the end of the performance, Jarfi is metaphorically resurrected, even as he remains dead, just like the family the musician brought home from the cemetery in the tale told at the beginning of *La Reprise*. Johan’s metatheatrical reflection on acting and illusion at the beginning of the performance has alerted us to the possibilities of storytelling. The story of the auditions, of the actors’ relationship to theatre, of theatre’s conventions, and the night of the murder all take place within two overarching narratives with different timeframes—what happens on the stage now, and what happened beyond the stage then. Together, the two timeframes position the ritualized public space of theatre to expose and transform political realities. Reenactments or repetitions, as the title *La Reprise* indicates, happen in the present but speak to the future despite being about the past (Rau 2015:283–84).

In his book, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, Timothy Snyder, a historian of Eastern Europe and the Holocaust, writes about *incantation* as a “fascist style [of oration that] depends upon ‘endless repetition,’ designed to make the fictional plausible and the criminal desirable” (2017:67). But *La Reprise* questions repetition both magically *and* rationally in ways that expose the mimetic terms that underscore its seeming inevitability. Rather, Rau suggests that there are shades of gray between the actual event and the staged event, and between learning to act and learning to murder. The audition scenes tutor spectators in the conventions of theatrical violence; violence that is both graphically enacted and shown as faked. Just



Figure 3. Ihsane Jarfi is taken out of the trunk of the car and beaten to death on the outskirts of town. *La Reprise* Histoire(s) du théâtre (I). Théâtre National, Brussels, May 2018. (Photo by Hubert Amiel)

Ghent Manifesto

1. It is not just about portraying the world anymore. It's about changing it. The aim is not to depict the real, but to make the representation itself real.
2. Theatre is not a product, it is a production process. Research, castings, rehearsals, and related debates must be publicly accessible.
3. The authorship is entirely up to those involved in the rehearsals and the performance, whatever their function may be—and to no one else.
4. The literal adaptation of classics on stage is forbidden. If a source text—whether book, film, or play—is used at the outset of the project, it may only represent up to 20 percent of the final performance time.
5. At least a quarter of the rehearsal time must take place outside a theatre. A theatre space is any space in which a play has been rehearsed or performed.
6. At least two different languages must be spoken on stage in each production.
7. At least two of the actors on stage must not be professional actors. Animals don't count, but they are welcome.
8. The total volume of the stage set must not exceed 20 cubic meters, i.e. it must be able to be contained in a van that can be driven with a normal driving license.
9. At least one production per season must be rehearsed or performed in a conflict or war zone, without any cultural infrastructure.
10. Each production must be shown in at least ten locations in at least three countries. No production can be removed from the NTGent repertoire before this number has been reached. (Rau 2018)

as Snyder cautions against incantations creating reality, Rau, in his Ghent Manifesto, cautions against suspension of disbelief enabling fiction.

Snyder cautions that incantation produces its own reality by undoing recognized experience and threatening democratic ideals that are built upon a commitment to and the certainty of facts and truth. But theatre always produces its own reality in terms that are akin to magical incantation. Worlds appear, dead people come back, actors pretend to be other than who they are. In the 21st century theatre's suspension of disbelief can be a dangerous endeavor that can teach us too well to ignore facts and truth in order to submit to fictional and criminal illusions.

The Sixth Act

At the end of *La Reprise*, Sara says tragedy's most important act is the sixth act. She recites Wisława Szymborska's famed poem, "Theatre Impressions." After waiting patiently in the wings, the performers come out and take their place in the limen between the stage and the real world, but with "the irrepressible urge to do it all again tomorrow." Rau leaves out the final stanza of Szymborska's poem, which states:

But the curtain's fall is the most uplifting part,
the things you see before it hits the floor:
here one hand quickly reaches for a flower,
there another hand picks up a fallen sword.
Only then one last, unseen, hand
does its duty
and grabs me by the throat. (Szymborska [1972] 1995:68)

Instead, *La Reprise* ends with Adjibi enacting the scene in Mouawad's book that he recounted during his audition. Wearing the blood-stained shirt of Jarfi, the murder victim, Adjibi climbs onto a center-stage chair and puts his neck in a noose. "Either someone will save him and he survives. Or, the audience doesn't move and the character dies. The actor dies" (53). As metaphor, the image of Adjibi with his neck in a noose, like the unseen hand in Szyborska's poem, is a jolt that injects theatre into the imagination where it remains long after the curtain falls. The afterthoughts, the imagery, the surrender to a dream world that is not a dream at all. Theatre's incantations can be in the service of insight as well as the service of perilous illusions.

For Rau, theatre necessitates neither suspension of disbelief nor catharsis. Rau's theatre asks spectators to avoid confusing the fictional with the real and ending up with their neck in a noose.

References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1963. "Eichmann in Jerusalem." *The New Yorker*, 9 February. Accessed 17 September 2020. www.newyorker.com/magazine/1963/02/16/eichmann-in-jerusalem-i.
- Fisher, Mark. 2019. "Making a Murder: True-Crime Stage Show Recreates a Shocking Killing." *The Guardian*, 9 July. Accessed 18 October 2019. www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/jul/09/milo-rau-true-crime-murder-edinburgh.
- Martin, Carol. 2014. "Table on Stage: The Rise of the Messenger." In *Performance Studies in Motion: International Perspectives and Practices in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Atay Citron, Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, and David Zerbib, 61–74. London: Bloomsbury.
- Meyrick, Julian. 2019. "La Reprise: Startling Theatre and a Call to the Dead to Speak." *The Conversation*, 6 March. Accessed 15 October 2019. <http://theconversation.com/la-reprise-startling-theatre-and-a-call-to-the-dead-to-speak-113032>.
- Rau, Milo. 2015. "Pussy Riot's Moscow Trials: Restaging Political Protest and Juridical Metaperformance." In *Anthropology, Theatre, and Development: The Transformative Potential of Performance*, ed. Alex Flynn and Jonas Tinius, 279–85. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rau, Milo. 2018. "Ghent Manifesto." 1 May. Accessed 10 July 2020. www.ntgent.be/en/manifest.
- Rau, Milo. 2021. *La Reprise: Histoire(s) du théâtre (I)*. *TDR* 65, 1 (T249):40–53.
- Snyder, Timothy. 2017. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. New York: Tim Duggan Books.
- Szyborska, Wisława. (1972) 1995. "Theatre Impressions." In *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, trans. Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, 67–68. New York: Harcourt Brace.

TDReading

- Rau, Milo, and Nina Wolters. 2014. "What Is to Be Done?" *TDR* 58, 1 (T221):2–3. https://doi-org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00620.
- Levine, Debra. 2017. "Not Just Adult Entertainment: Milo Rau and CAMPO's Collaborative *Five Easy Pieces*." *TDR* 61, 4 (T236):147–155. https://doi-org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00699.