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## Performing Democracy

Mark Robson

### Abstract

The debate about the relationship between theatre and democracy rests on a presumption that both the artform and the political form share an intertwined history, based in their co-appearance in Greece. Equally well-known is the antagonism towards both theatre and democracy that emerges at the same moment, most clearly found in Plato. This essay revisits this history in order to set up an examination of two contemporary theatre performances that explicitly raise the relationship of democracy and theatre, the British company Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* and the Belgian company Ontroerend Goed's *Fight Night*. Both, in very different ways, approach democracy through a focus on audience experience. How, then, might these productions be read in terms of a democracy-to-come and a theatre-to-come?

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It is not enough merely to demand insights from the theatre, to look to it for instructive depictions of reality. Our theatre has to make people *desire* insight; it must illustrate the *pleasure* to be had in changing reality. Our spectators must not merely hear how the bound Prometheus is to be freed –

they must also be filled with the desire to free him. Our theatre must teach people to feel the desires and pleasures of inventors and explorers, and the liberator's sense of triumph. (Brecht 2016: 255)

### **1.**

Commenting on Jacques Derrida's formulation of a democracy-to-come, Samuel Weber traces the outline of what this rethought democracy might open onto:

A democracy to come, which resides not in the expectation of a more perfect system yet to be realized but rather in the recognition that democracy "per se" is structurally oriented to the future, toward a transformation through openness to what it is not. [...] Finally, a democracy to come, no longer based on the sovereignty of the self, whether individual or collective, could allow for a different organization of time and space, one no longer based on homogeneity, regularity, calculability, in which one day makes way for the next without seeking to impose itself as the first, last, and only one - and yet which remains, in parting, "once and for all." (Weber 2008b: 119)

For reasons that will become apparent, I cannot read this passage without being struck by its theatricality. Once and for all, unrepeatable, but without claim to be the unique, first or last instance; such is frequently the claim made for the ephemeral liveness of performance. An articulation of time and space without the imposition of homogeneity, regularity, calculability; this is one of the dreams of dramaturgy. In Derrida's texts on democracy, and

in Weber's reading of them, this calling into question of the sovereign self rests on the sense of an irreducible alterity at the core of democracy, one based on "time and space as media of proliferation, dissemination, alteration; and [...] language as medium of sharing and partitioning" (Weber 2008b: 115). Time, space and language become the structural supports within which sovereign power manifests its unity and unicity, and simultaneously the media which prevent that unity from ever closing upon itself. This is simultaneity as counter-time. The connection to theatre becomes more apparent when placed next to this passage from *Benjamin's -abilities*, in which Weber offers a reading of Benjamin that leads him to propose that: "The space of the theater, of the stage, of the theatrical scene, is defined not just by its physical perimeter but rather by the far less definable, heterogeneous others to which it appeals, and which through their responsiveness retroactively make places into theatrical stages." (2008: 235) To the extent that it depends for its constitution on the retroactive responses of others, and for its definition on far less definable others, the theatrical scene is always already internally divided. If the democracy to come overflows homogeneity, then, analogously, the heterogeneity of theatre is constitutive of its definition.

In *Theatricality as Medium*, Weber notes that: "Of all the 'arts,' theater most directly resembles politics insofar as traditionally it has been understood to involve the assemblage of people in a shared space." (2004: 31) He then goes on to list the ways in which the assemblage of people in a shared space in a theatre is markedly *unlike* the 'same' assemblage in political terms. Theatrical audiences exist for a limited duration; theatre embraces artifice; theatre tends to the extreme and exceptional rather than the shared and the common; theatre often prefers the emotional to

the rational; most significantly, “politics as generally practiced claims to be the most effective means of regulating or at least controlling conflict, whereas theater flourishes by exacerbating it.” (2004: 31) Yet, he says, politics has none the less felt the need to ‘come to terms’ with theatre.

## 2.

On one level, this sounds a little too obvious to be worth (re)stating, since it has become a truism that theatre and democracy stand in relation to each other. Or perhaps it would be better to say, democracy has been given a privileged place in the varied and competing claims regarding the relations of Western theatre and politics, particularly within European philosophy. The roots of this privilege are exposed in a familiar historical narrative that forges a connection between democracy as a governmental form and theatre as the artform that resonates with what might be called democratic culture, that is, with the forms of ‘life’ that are supposed to flourish under - and are even demanded by - democratic polities. There are, of course, many political structures that would call themselves democratic, and this is not a unified category (see Derrida 2003: 49; 2005: 27). Theatre has also been given a certain privilege, although of course the arguments about the relationship between democracy and the arts is much wider and more complex. As Caroline Levine suggests: “We are used to telling ourselves that the arts need the protection of a flourishing democracy in order to survive. But in fact, the opposite is at least equally true: *democracies require art* - challenging art - to ensure that they are acting as free societies.” (Levine 2007: x) Levine centres her argument on the ways in which art may help to guard

against the tyranny of the majority, in the suppression of minority views so as to deliver the 'will of the people,' where that people is granted a fictional unity that can become coercive. The treatment of minority groups has, rightly, become one of the key tests of a democracy's right to the name in contemporary political thought.

The potency of this articulation of political participation with the experience of 'art' may be remarked, as so often, in the strength of the resistance to it. So if the claim that democracy and theatre are in some sense tied one to the other is frequently made, this does not mean that recognition of this linkage has always been treated as a cause for celebration. The terms of a critique of theatre and theatricality can become the terms for a critique of democracy, and vice versa. Those suspicious of democracy have frequently cited its susceptibility to "theatrical" manifestations. In such discourses, the dubious ability of the orator-actor to sway a crowd by appealing to its basest desires is accompanied by a distrust of spectacle or illusion. Theatre's reliance on fiction and impersonation leads to a refusal of its seductive qualities as bearing no necessary relation to the true or the good. The analogy of theatre and life - its mimetic faculties - can, from one direction, be criticised for bringing elements of 'real' life on to the stage for the purposes of ridicule, and, from another, for an exemplary ability to enact onstage that which might be repeated offstage.

This interpenetration of theatre and 'life' is given a broad definition by, for example, Christoph Menke, who proposes in a discussion of Beckett's *Endgame* that: "Actions, verbal as well as nonverbal [*sprachliche wie nichtsprachliche* - so it may be better to say linguistic as nonlinguistic], in situations that place them and connect [*verknüpfen*] them, temporally as well as socially - this is the stuff from which societies are made. This social raw material

[*gesellschaftliche Grundstoff*] is simultaneously the raw material [*dramatische Grundmaterial*] of drama. In this respect, the games on stage repeat the games of society." (Menke 2005: 188; 2009: 154-155) "Raw" material is also the *Grund-*, that is, foundational, primary, elemental or grounding. Linguistic and nonlinguistic actions are knitted or knotted together in space and time, in the theatre as in the social sphere, and they share common ground. As such, these on- and offstage games can be taken very seriously.

Just as the historical narrative that suggests that drama and democracy both appear at the same 'moment' in Greece is rarely disputed as such, the beginnings of the anti-theatrical tendency in philosophy are well known. The shorthand name for this is Plato. In this myth of democracy's origins, theatre is given a formative political dimension – in its Western manifestation, at least – at its origin. This is also an effect, of course, of its contemporary theorization, most significantly in the implicit dialogue between Plato and Aristotle over the nature and status of mimesis. Aristotle's recuperation of theatre's mimetic faculty in the *Poetics* – especially as it is manifested in that text's privileged example, the tragedies of Sophocles – comes to characterize thinking about theatre and its import at least until the early modern period, but the shadow of Plato is never quite shaken off.

The resistance in Plato is in large part motivated by concern over the political stakes of theatre, and especially of tragedy. Central to the analysis of drama and of poetry more generally in Book 10 of the *Republic* is the status of imitation, such that the work of the poet is said to be at a third remove from truth (598-599). One of the key elements in the Platonic critique of theatre – and it is one that goes further than the assault on democracy per se – is named by the Athenian in the *Laws* as *theatrokratia* or

theatrocracy (701a). This suspicion of the pleasure of the spectators has already been suggested in the context of artistic competition (649b-c), and again centres on the knowledge of the one who judges. This is a matter of decision, then.

If I choose not to offer a full reading of Plato here, it is in part because such readings have become a 'scene' in work frequently aligned with or cited in the emergence of what is coming to be known as performance philosophy. Martin Puchner's *The Drama of Ideas* is a sustained instance of a move made by, among others, Freddie Rokem, Paul Kottman and Samuel Weber. Puchner makes clear the stakes of Plato's rejection of tragedy: "In attacking tragedy, Plato was seeking to change nothing less than the entire value system of Athenian culture, including Athenian democracy, with which tragedy had come to be closely associated." (Puchner 10-11) Tragedy becomes a placeholder for that which in framing it, makes it meaningful, and the effort to displace theatre is a substitute for unsettling that which gives theatre its place.

There is a curious re-emergence of this tactic from within theatre itself. Part of the movement towards notions of performance in recent decades has involved a displacement of the privilege given to theatre and especially drama. One of the spurs to a rejection of the 'play' in favour of the performance has been the perception that something of the democratic potential of theatre has been neutralised by the dramatic form. In the name of participation and the displacement of a 'passivity' of the audience, forms of performance have been sought that prompt an activity that has both aesthetic and political stakes. But is it quite that simple? Jacques Rancière's insistence in *The Emancipated Spectator* that there is a kind of disabling fiction at the heart of this move, a supposition of impotence that is the prerequisite for the



emancipation offered by thinkers from Brecht to Artaud, stems from his earlier work on pedagogy and his assumption of equality as a starting point rather than a goal to be achieved (Rancière 2008). As Nikolaus Müller-Schöll has pointed out, in this general model of emancipation, Rancière does not define the specific nature of the theatrical experience itself (Müller-Schöll 2016, but see Rancière 2014).

For the remainder of this essay I want to thread together the theoretical aspects of these questions with examples of different ways in which theatre practitioners have tried to rework the relation of theatre and democracy. I will take two instances that operate as indices of the problems at stake: Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* (2013) and Ontroerend Goed's *Fight Night* (2013).

### **3.**

Coming out of the tube station in Paddington, I cross the road, heading for a huge, anonymous-looking building. A queue is already winding its way out of the main entrance, but that doesn't bother me because I am looking for a different door. There are six of us who have made that choice and selected roughly the same entry time. The only thing we have in common is that we have all chosen to pay for a premium ticket. We are met by a 'hostess' who immediately makes a division: I and two others are given a drink when we enter the room, the others are not. Six become two threes. The most intriguing aspect is that we are all given a pass that will allow us to access a room that the majority of the audience don't know exists. But we aren't told where it is. There are no maps of Temple Studios, or so I think. But of course, that's what they want you to think. Sat around a table as if at a seance, with or

without a drink, for the six of us the performance begins in that relatively small, shadowy room. A brief apparition, a moment of illusion. The hostess leads us to the lift that will take us - and people who have come in through the main entrance - down into the main complex.

The lift stops. A couple of people get out and the doors swiftly close behind them before the rest of us can follow. Another splitting. The lift takes us deeper. The doors open again, and this time we all spill out into a cavernous series of connecting rooms, sprawling across four floors.<sup>1</sup> A constant soundscape, trees and a rough forest floor, areas of light but also deeper shadows. People in white masks like my own pick their way across the set. The expanse unfolds as you walk through it, and you become aware of zones of exterior and interior space. The forest, but also a desert, a trailer park, a 50s car. And then rooms 'inside' Temple Studios, offices, bedrooms, a bar, a cinema. Openings allow you to see into (or out into) another zone while you explore, piecing together clues and images into a narrative.

Scenes suddenly begin and just as rapidly dissolve, the performers moving slowly or at speed from one zone to another. Some audience members choose to follow a single 'character,' at least for a while, navigating stairwells and other spectators, often only to have the performer disappear through a door to which they have no admittance. Others favour location, loitering to see what - if anything - will happen in that space. Neither choice is the right one. Performers arrive to discover that their mark is occupied by a spectator, who must either be more or less gently moved aside, or

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<sup>1</sup> In a television interview, Maxine Doyle states that there were 133 rooms, spread over 200000 square feet.

else danced around. Different perspectives on the 'same' scene are not only always possible, they are almost constantly in your field of vision as you watch others watching and wandering. The provisionality of the position that you occupy is impossible to ignore. But there are also different relations to time, in the problems of sequencing those scenes to construct a narrative arc, in the fear of potentially 'missing' sections of the narrative. People move at different speeds, now running, now slowly edging open drawers, reading letters, pausing to decide where to go next.

#### 4.

In the preface to *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon makes the following general suggestion about adaptation:

different media and genres that stories are transcoded to and from in the adapting process are not just formal entities ... they also represent various ways of engaging audiences. They are, in different ways and to different degrees, all 'immersive', but some media and genres are used to *tell* stories (for example, novels, short stories); others *show* them (for instance, all performance media); and still others allow us to interact physically and kinesthetically with them (as in video games or theme park rides). These three different modes of engagement provide the structure of analysis for this attempt to theorize what might be called the *what, who, why, how, when, and where* of adaptation. (2013: xvi)

I turn here to Hutcheon because Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* presents itself as a version of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*.<sup>2</sup> Adapting Büchner's notoriously fragmentary text, Punchdrunk also adapted an enormous space (formerly a Post Office sorting office) opposite Paddington Station, London, to become 'Temple Studios,' a fictional film complex in which the spectators are invited to wander. The world in which the show takes place is a version of 1960s America, as the studio system began to fail and fade. There are other influences, including Nathaniel West's novel, *The Day of the Locust*, and a wide array of films, not least those of Hitchcock, but equally David Lynch. How might this performance be accounted for within Hutcheon's schematic distinction between telling, showing and interacting? This distinction is crucial to Hutcheon's project, and as such the figure of reader-spectator-audience is placed at the centre of her theory of adaptation. A further question arises: if all media and genres are "immersive," then where does that leave what has come to be called 'immersive theatre'? Does *The Drowned Man* "show" a story at all, whether Büchner's or another?

Punchdrunk's version of immersive theatre involves some distinctive elements that have become the company's signature: the transformation of a non-theatrical space into a playing space; an emphasis on choreography rather than text; a "cinematic level of detail" in set design; distinct sound zones for each area of the space; a bar area 'inside' the set; attention to the sensory,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*, directed by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, was a co-production with the National Theatre. It ran from July 2013 to July 2014 at "Temple Studios," 31 London Street, London W2. I saw the performance of 17 October 2013.

including smell and touch, as well as the usual concern for lighting and sound. Music is used not only to create atmosphere, but also to participate in the storytelling, often possessing a strange familiarity that unsettles as it sets the tone. What Punchdrunk reject most explicitly is the 'form' of theatre, its institution as a horizon of expectations, and its narrative closures. Their 'content' is avowedly within – or at least in dialogue with – the theatrical tradition. If *The Drowned Man* is a rethinking of *Woyzeck*, their international breakthrough show *Sleep No More* presents a fragmentation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. These ur-texts act as a frame, and however much the reworking attempts to distort and warp that frame, it nonetheless relies upon its solidity to act as a guardrail for the fractured, segmented performances that Punchdrunk's audiences experience. This effect of displacement of the familiar runs through both the scenic and sound design.

In *The Drowned Man*, the narrative is on a loop. There are 12 scenes, lasting in total an hour, but this hour's worth of material is reset at the end of the hour, and recommences. Repeated three times, the show then gives the audience approximately three hours to construct their own version of the sequence. There are some hooks for those aware of the piece's main source. The image of the red moon in Büchner becomes the Red Moon Motel, and so on.

Where, then, might this work sit within the framework of a consideration of the relations between theatre and democracy? The artistic director of Punchdrunk, Felix Barrett, has often commented on the 'democracy' of the Punchdrunk experience and of immersive

theatre more generally.<sup>3</sup> For Barrett, this democratic experience is a function of the active role of the audience members, whose relation to the performance is such that, he suggests, they no longer act like an audience at all. Each audience member chooses her or his path through the work, that is, through the space that the work occupies, and the democratic potential is thus located in this choice of paths. Movement models freedom. As Barrett puts it in an interview with Josephine Machon: "It's the empowerment of the audience in the sense that they're put at the centre of the action [...] It's the creation of parallel theatrical universes within which audiences forget that they're an audience, and thus their status within the work shifts." (Barrett 2013: 159) Action and passivity (as inaction) are opposed: movement becomes both a form of interpretation, since the audience members make their individual choices in part according to their reading of the scene in which they find themselves, and this movement also becomes something that is itself in need of interpretation. Audience members become part of the scenography, that is, they become something for both the others in the audience and the performers to read.

One of the most striking aspects of a Punchdrunk production is the insistence that – except in moments of calculated exception such as some one-to-one inset performances or, in the case of *The Drowned Man*, in the bar area – audience members wear masks throughout the performance. This is another element in what Barrett sees as the liberation of the audience: "They're empowered

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<sup>3</sup> While I draw primarily on the Machon interview here, there are many useful Youtube videos and texts available at the company's website, <[www.punchdrunk.org.uk](http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk)>. Accessed 30 June 2017.

because they have the ability to define and choose their evening without being judged for those decisions. They are also removed from the traditional role of the passive, hidden audience [...] The impact of the mask differs for each audience member.” This seems to be a conscious inversion of traditional uses of the mask, in which the mask ‘liberates’ the performer to find the character given by the mask; this function is still what the makes makes possible, but for Punchdrunk it is the audience member who is liberated to behave in ways that are not ‘in character,’ in other words, the spectator displaces the performer.

This emphasis on the activity of the audience means that the nature of the performance itself becomes difficult to describe in a way that is not simply impressionistic. More than usual, there is a risk that all one can do is present a partial account that amounts to little more than a stammering sense that this partiality is the experience. As Frances Babbage puts it in her attempt to account for Punchdrunk’s 2007-8 show *The Masque of the Red Death*:<sup>4</sup>

Performance experience is fragmented on many levels: you may catch a narrative when the scene is finishing, or, as I did, find yourself in rooms which seem palpably only recently abandoned. You may decide to leave a scene halfway through, itself just a fragment of a larger narrative the actors do not choose to share. There may be sequences you hear about yet never find, whilst others you stumble on repeatedly. One may be improvised uniquely for you alone. You can

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<sup>4</sup> *The Masque of the Red Death*, directed by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, presented by Punchdrunk and Battersea Arts Centre. Battersea Old Town Hall, September 2007-April 2008.

observe; you can interact, with characters and material things (there is an abundance of “things”). You can do almost anything, except remove the anonymous mask you receive on arrival – or, perhaps, depart before Punchdrunk want you to. (Babbage 2009: 11-12)

Abandonment, halfway through, a fragment, heard about but not found, stumbling on, the improvised one-to-one. Punchdrunk’s narrative techniques of fragmentation are designed to fragment the audience as much as the story. Babbage comments on *The Masque of the Red Death* that “in place of controlled narrative composition, the company substitute event composition – and for that event to be possible, narrative “wholeness” was sacrificed, perhaps gleefully abandoned” (Babbage 2009: 17). This is equally true of my sense of *The Drowned Man*, and it is apt, then, that this is a piece based on Büchner, whose work has provoked much debate precisely around the issue of the relation of the incomplete and fragmentary nature of his biography and work to a sense of wholeness (see Reddick 1994).

Some find that in fact because the narrative of a particular piece is secondary to the Punchdrunk ‘style’ or, better, ‘signature,’ wholeness is to be found in the signature of Punchdrunk itself. Babbage quotes a comment made by Dan Rebellato about *The Masque of Red Death* to the effect that while it was wonderful, having seen Punchdrunk’s 2006 *Faust*, it was “more of the wonderful same.” (Babbage 2009: 18).<sup>5</sup> This offers another brake

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<sup>5</sup> *Faust*, directed by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, in association with the National Theatre. 21 Wapping Lane, London, October 2006-March 2007.



on the idea that the experience of the show is primarily a matter of audience choice. To paraphrase Henry Ford, you can have any show you like, so long as it's Punchdrunk.

Barrett admits that much of the sense of choice given to the audience is itself illusory: "The basic way that we shape the response, whatever the work, is the choreography and manipulation of audience around a space. It relies on allowing them to think they're discovering things, whilst in reality we are gently flagging moments for them. If we *tell* the audience what to see, we break the spell. If they find it themselves and they think that they're the first person to come across it, that's where the power lies" (Barrett 2013: 161). The illusion of choice is exactly that, a spell that can be broken. But there is an interesting ambiguity in the use of the word power at the end of that statement. The power lies in the audience member's belief that he or she is finding something for her- or himself, Barrett says. But what kind of power, and whose is it? Does this refer to the "power" of the work (what we might think of as its aesthetic effect), to the power of the company (something like artistic skill and signature), or to the 'democratic' empowerment of the audience member?

Is democracy the right name for this vision of empowerment, however? There are aspects of it that makes it appear to be closer to a model of consumption. The illusion of choice is offered as a substitute not only for conventional theatrical illusionism, but also in place of any genuine control. As in a market economy, free choice is always circumscribed, and frequently in ways that are designed to forestall political change (see Salecl). And where this departs most decisively from any democratic decision is in the fact that the choices made by the audience members in a Punchdrunk show are not informed or, for the most part, critical. That they are active

choices does not mean that they are actions. Babbage's sense of not finding scenes, or else of stumbling on others repeatedly, does not suggest volition, however pleasurable the experience. It is perfectly possible, of course, to maintain a critical attitude towards the performance-event, but this is not what Barrett appears to value in the response of his audience. As Müller-Schöll notes: "Today such a new ideology can often be found where one encounters so-called immersive theater or theater practices dedicated to enabling a 'collective experience' or 'collaboration,' which in fact turn out to be another version of neoliberal structures, comparable with the so-called web society or social networks: the players enjoy a freedom that is given within the framework of more or less hidden orders, which, not least, include the obscuration of these orders." (2016: 64)

Equally, for all their emphasis on the individuated experience of the work, there remains a definite sense that Punchdrunk nonetheless want there to be traces of a shared and collective experience of *The Drowned Man*. The presence of the bar area, for example, encourages discussion of the experience, and is reminiscent of nothing so much as the interval in conventional theatre. The difference being that it is the audience member who decides when this interval takes place. The movement towards a collective experience is suddenly made concrete in a final sequence of the show. The audience are encouraged – very insistently – to make their way towards a particular area of the building: once there, they see what is presented as the shooting of the final scene of the work within the work, the film "The Drowned Man" within *The Drowned Man*, and then the 'wrap party,' a huge dance in which the whole cast appear. This last sequence reminded me of nothing so much as the closing dances in the early modern English theatre;

from discord and fragmentation, or the spectacle of suffering in tragedy, harmony is restored before the audience is sent on its way.

## 5.

A host appears in a check jacket and bow tie, and a microphone descends from the ceiling. The host begins:

Ladies & Gentlemen,  
Lend me your ears.

It has often been said that you  
can't have a show without an  
audience and tonight that is  
more true than ever.

Because tonight we will not only  
need your eyes and ears, because  
at the centre of everything will  
be your voice.

Ladies & Gentlemen,  
Welcome to "Fight Night."  
(Ontroerend Goed 2014: 465)

August 2013, The Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. On their way into the performance space – in this instance the underground T2 studio-space, with a capacity of approximately 100 – audience members are given keypads with numbers from 1 to 9. It will soon be explained that the purpose of the keypads is to allow the audience to 'vote.' The show begins with a set of four initial

questions that acts as a kind of demographic study of the audience itself: gender, marital status, age, and income. Two figures behind laptops sit at the back of the stage throughout, processing the responses to the questions 'live.' Results are relayed both by the on-stage compère and also on two screens above the stage. It is the information drawn from this initial 'research' that will apparently allow the performers to tailor their speeches according to the particular distribution of the audience for a given performance. In fact, large sections of the show are already scripted.<sup>6</sup>

This looks like the democracy of focus groups and opinion polls, the attempt to take the 'surprise' out of elections by testing how policies will 'play' long before anyone casts a vote; what we might call, the rule of the demographic over the democratic. While the show gives the appearance of working through a crude sense of direct democracy, in fact there is a 'system' that governs the structure of the performance. Rules are gradually revealed that more or less subtly shift the weight of certain votes and groups. Coalitions become possible, lending additional power to minorities and threatening candidates with significant votes with elimination. There are some twists in the structure, not least at the end of the show in which the issue of choice becomes far more complex. The issue of non-voting or non-response is explicitly thematized by taking up the issue of the tyranny of the majority. It is possible to participate in the democratic process and still to end up feeling dispossessed. Elections appear to offer participation, but the result

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<sup>6</sup> *Fight Night*, directed by Alexander Devriendt, and created by Devriendt and the cast, was first performed on 10 April 2013 at Vooruit, Ghent, Belgium. It was a collaboration with The Border Project, an Australian company.

always involves the reinscription of the border between those who hold power and those who are 'in opposition.' The central experience of the piece leads to reflection on the role of the majority in democratic societies, and mimics the senses of exclusion felt by even sizable minorities.

The show itself – while its title and publicity refer to the boxing ring, and this is echoed in some of the initial set-up – is closer to the format of a talent show. Five contestant-candidates take to the stage and they are gradually voted out through a series of 'rounds.' For the first round of voting, all that the audience members know of the candidates are their faces and rough body shapes, they wear boxers' robes that cover other features, and they have yet to speak. Nonetheless, we are asked to vote, and a winner and loser are declared. The performer who has 'won' gives a scripted speech which is the same for each performance, even if the performer chosen by the audience changes. So too does the loser. In part what they speak of is precisely the possible effect of hearing their voices: will this change our opinion and make us vote for someone else in the next round? What is it that we look for in our politicians?

In a note on the creation of the show in the printed script, two key events transform what had begun as a formal exercise focused on theatre and acting into a viable project (Ontroerend Goed 2014: 460). The first is the curious hiatus in Belgium in 2012 which led to a period of 541 days in which there was effectively no government, the other was the rise of separatist party in Flanders. The first situation undermined faith in the democratic process. The emergence of the N-VA party, which adopted many of the ideas espoused by the right-wing and overtly racist Vlaams Belang party but emphasised an economic separatism, thrived in the face of

democratic paralysis. Key to the success of the N-VA party was the appearance of the party's chairman on a TV quiz show. While he did not 'campaign', the chairman presented himself to viewers as "an intelligent, funny man of the people with a broad knowledge" (2014: 461). From this came the insight of the show, that a political candidate "could win votes merely by his presence as a private person." The show thus becomes about mediatisation rather than theatricality, and the actors present themselves as media-trained "personalities," without the context of a party structure or programme. The invocation of "Lend me your ears" from the outset should have given us a clue. This attempt to stage democracy is on the one hand something apparently new, and on the other a reworking, a setting to work again, of a mechanism that has always shadowed theatre and performance, namely, its relation to rhetoric, that point at which the performance meets the performative (in the sense understood by speech act theory). The address to an onstage audience is always also a doubling in its simultaneous address to the offstage audience. In *Julius Caesar*, the audience is divided and doubled so that there are on- and offstage consequences for the attempt at persuasion. The speech is always 'delivered' in the present, therefore, even in a history play (see Robson 2013).

*Fight Night* is relentlessly focused on the present moment. The artistic director of Ontroerend Goed, Alexander Devriendt, suggests that *Fight Night* is ultimately about being part of or not being part of a majority: but the point is not simply to say this, nor is it to provide a narrative form in which that political insight might

be allegorized.<sup>7</sup> The key element of the show for Devriendt becomes its metaphorical dimension: the fact that audience members are actively participating through their selections and votes means that 'life' is not suspended in the act of watching the theatre, but continues throughout the performance. It is this experiential dimension that is at the heart of Ontreerend Goed's practice. The company strive to respond both to the specificity of a space, and to the particular audience for a given performance.<sup>8</sup> Rather than making a point about the mechanics of power through an adaptation of *Hamlet* – the example is Devriendt's – *Fight Night* is an attempt to make the audience 'feel' what may be a familiar point differently. As he asks, there have always been plays about those in positions of power, so how can that be communicated to an audience in a new way? Devriendt seeks to move here from performance to the performative, his argument recognisably a

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<sup>7</sup> Interview for Traverse Theatre 'Travcast' with the Traverse's associate director, Hamish Pirie, August 2013. <[www.traverse.co.uk](http://www.traverse.co.uk)>. Accessed 9 November 2013.

<sup>8</sup> This responsiveness to audience or to location is apparent in other shows also shown in Edinburgh. 2014's *A Game of You* (Traverse Theatre) uses what is not normally a performance space, and enacts a one-to-one performance that literally pieces together a show that is not seen by the participant-spectator, but which is then given back to the spectator in a mediated, mediatized form, namely a DVD cut produced as the show unfolds, and presented to the spectator at the end. Alternately, the 2016 show, *World Without Us* (Summerhall), made specific reference to the performance space, asking the audience to imagine a possible future for the space once all human life had been extinguished.

species of thinking about theatre that sees the experience of the audience for traditional dramatic forms as passive. That passivity is then transferred from the aesthetic to the political.

Since the individual performer who delivers a given speech is not tied to any kind of context, the system of the performance is not fundamentally altered, whoever the audience votes for, that is, the votes can alter the relative positions of the available options, but there is no space for anything genuinely new to emerge, since even the decision not to vote is a negative one that is simply discounted, and literally not counted. The total is always presented as 100%, since it only considers votes cast. The replaceability of the participants consciously reduces the performers to acting as placeholders within a structure that is in fact untouched by the decisions made by the audience. The performers have thus become precisely what Plato warned against: the speech to be given by the winner is delivered by whoever happens to win, there is no sense in which the speech expresses the view of either the performer or the persona that performer performs. The performer becomes a machine to deliver the speech. What this most resembles perhaps, is the argument concerning teatrocracy to be found in Plato. As I suggested earlier, much of the anti-theatrical argument in Plato centres on the mimetic capacity of performance; there is no necessary link between a desire for the good and the true that Plato values and the performance of such a desire in the mouth of an actor who is playing the role – expressing the desire – of another, a character. In theatre as in democracy, we are faced with a question of reading and interpretation: how do we tell the difference between sincerity and a skilled performance? The precariousness of democracy is starkly revealed even within the artificiality of the manipulation.



*Fight Night* begins with an insistence on the divisibility of the audience, that is, it installs dissensus into the experience of the piece from the outset. There can be no sovereign position of the spectator, since the monarchical model of spectator is displaced immediately. This is not to say that sovereignty is therefore dispersed among the spectators. The key element of the piece, invisible on the stage and inserted into the published text, is the System. Each person in the audience is aware that there are others who did not respond to the performance in the same way, the choices made about who to vote for literalize differences. But the larger inequality remains that which persists between the members of the audience and the System. The manipulation of the rules and therefore the dramaturgy of *Fight Night* is consciously analogous to the ways in which the possibilities offered by democratic models are constrained by the model itself. But this analogy, as analogy, must work in both directions. While theatrical performance can give the impression that is 'open' to interpretation, and that the possible readings of it stretch towards the infinite, it is more appropriate to think in terms of what Nikolaus Müller-Schöll calls "infinitely numerous finite readings." (2016: 58) Without wishing to fall back into the assumption of passivity diagnosed by Rancière, which does not to me seem to be present in Ontroerend Goed's work, there is nonetheless a constitutive inequality at the structural level to which the company have given a name and a textual presence: the System. The manipulation of the audience by the System in *Fight Night* is similarly concerned to expose the zero-sum logic of a view of democracy that sees elections as a way to bring dissensus to an end, suspending the different mode of agonistic struggle on which democracy itself depends (see Mouffe 2000).

## 6.

I would like to go back to the comments on a democracy-to-come with which I began. In the sentences of Samuel Weber's essay that I replaced with an ellipsis, Weber contrasts the openness of a future-oriented democracy to "the agonistic temporality of professional sports, with its regular and recurrent calendar celebrating and punctuated by the logic of winner-take-all," a logic he sees exemplified in the American binary democratic process, as well as in many other aspects of America's "competitive" culture (Weber 2008b: 119). Weber identifies theatre's exacerbation of conflict and debate, and it is this that is contrasted with the simplifications and mystifications of versions of the democratic process that celebrate coercive expressions of the 'will of the people' that are forced to rely on a fictional unity and univocality.

The insistence that theatre and democracy are linked stems, of course, from the positing of origins that are inevitably distorted. But the recent turn against plays and drama in the name of performance and theatricality suggests that there is also a perceived vulnerability in the link between politics and theatre (see Lehmann 175-187 and Wood, for explorations of this turn in terms of the 'postdramatic'). That means, as well, that theatre is itself seen to be that which severs theatre from democracy. This is therefore a formal question, a question that poses itself as demanding an answer that is itself formal, and which might go under the name of the aesthetic, but only if we also recognise that it is the very notion of the aesthetic that is often seen to be the problem. Theatre is born with democracy, and vice versa, but, on the one hand, theatre is that which disrupts that filiation, and on the other, politics is that which seeks to free itself from any taint of

theatricality. What this might suggest is the trace of a theatre-to-come, a theatre that is more than simply diagnostic of its own perceived problems and that retains the possibility for critical engagement, but that at the same time recognises that the future towards which it is oriented may be the trace of a foundational dehiscence, of an opening already legible in the relation of theatre and democracy, read otherwise.

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