

The Theater of Alain Badiou¹

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The essay that follows emerged from my long-standing interest in the relation between theater and philosophy. As someone who has spent a lot of time doing both, I have always been convinced that the mutual hostility between theater and philosophy, with philosophers attacking the theater as corrupting and false and thespians shunning abstract ideas as irrelevant, was only part of the story. In order to tell the fuller story, one in which theater and philosophy were shown to be deeply entangled with each other, I needed to start with Plato, who was often seen as the first philosopher hostile to the theater. It was in the course of looking for allies in this undertaking that I turned to Alain Badiou. Two things struck me about his

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thought: unlike most twentieth-century and twenty-first century philosophers, Badiou went back to Plato (rather than presenting himself as an anti-Platonist); and his interest in Plato was part of a fascination with theater. Putting the two things together, I began to consider Badiou a “dramatic Platonist,” as I put it in *The Drama of Ideas*, the book in which I tried to capture a double history of theater and philosophy.²

Around this time, I was lucky enough to end up on a podium with Badiou, at an event hosted by New York University. With some trepidation, I seized the opportunity to ask him during my response whether he agreed with my description of him as a “dramatic Platonist.” He paused, reflected, and burst out with his characteristic giggly laughter. To my relief, he finished the outburst with an enthusiastic “yes.”

What does this have to do with architecture? Badiou has not written much about architecture, and yet his thought has fascinating implications for architecture; this, no doubt, is the motivation behind the present publication. I had occasion to think about these implications a few years ago, when Ariane Lourie Harrison invited me to talk about Alain Badiou at the Yale School of Architecture. Talking about a philosopher at Yale is, of course, nothing out of the ordinary. The Yale School of Architecture has long been associated with a particularly intellectual approach to the trade, for example through which figures as Peter Eisenman, one of Ariane Harrison’s mentors. Ariane Harrison herself is deeply interested in the performing arts, since her atelier, co-founded with her husband Seth Harrison, has specialized in the relations between architecture and the performing arts. During the conversation with Ariane Harrison and her students, it became clear to all of us that Badiou’s understanding of theater was in fact an excellent way of approaching architecture.

The word theater comes from the Greek *theatron*, which describes not an art form, nor a genre or a type of entertainment. Rather, it describes a designed space, a piece of architecture: a ‘place of seeing’. A *theatron* is a space designed to allow one group of people to watch an event performed by another group of people. This designed space or building is the medium within which particular acts of theater are performed and watched.

When I teach theater history, I always begin with this architectural origin of theater in the large open-air theaters of Greece before moving on to the full-fledged theater buildings in the Renaissance and then to our own intimate theaters and theatrical activities taking place outside traditional theater spaces. For me, the most crucial part of this history is the raised stage, which begins in Rome and reaches its zenith in the nineteenth century: the raised

² Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

stage lifts theatrical events off the ground and allows dramatists, actors, and directors to manipulate space at will.³

In Badiou's understanding of theater, the physical arrangement of space does not receive much explicit attention, but it forms the basis for his understanding of theater. He begins by noting our current fascination with materiality, which he diagnoses as a belief system that posits bodies and languages as the only building blocks from which the world is composed. This is our materialist assumption in most things, but it is particularly strong in the theater. The theater, we are always told, is an art of the body. It is a doctrine that is presented with a considerable amount of enthusiasm: what's great about the theater is its physicality. This usually means first of all the physicality of actors, who stand there, in the flesh, on stage. But this fascination with materiality can be extended to the audience, which is assembled, also in the flesh, in the place of seeing. I might add that these two physical or material entities are made possible by a third, namely the physical space of the theater.

This is our current description of theater, and it is precisely this description that Badiou criticizes, or rather critically supplements, with an addition: yes, he admits, there are only bodies and languages; except that there are also truths. That addition changes everything, or almost everything. In the theater, this means that the actors' bodies are shot through with ideas. And not just the actors' bodies; the entire theater becomes nothing but a theater of ideas, in his memorable and provocative phrase.

I would argue that what Badiou says about bodies in the theater and the physical, material reality of the theater can be extended to architecture. Architecture, even more so than theater, is the most material art form (I know this first hand because my father was an architect and took me to many construction sites when I was growing up). With Badiou, one might say that this materiality should not lead us to think of architecture as yet another art form of the body. Rather, we should say that yes, in architecture there are only bodies and (architectural) languages; except there are also truths. This means that the material out of which architecture is made does not rest in its materiality; it is shot through with ideas. For Badiou, the conclusion would be clear: all architecture is an architecture of ideas.



Throughout its history, philosophy has used the theater in two ways. The dominant way is as

³ Martin Puchner, "The Problem of the Ground: Martin Heidegger Site-Specific Performance," in *Encounters in Performance Philosophy*, ed. Laura Cull and Alice Lagaay (London: Palgrave, 2014), 65-86.

a model of representation. Here the theater creates the distinction between appearance and truth. The origin of this model is, of course, Plato's parable of the cave in book VII of the *Republic*, which presents a puppet-master creating visual and auditory effects for the benefit of an imprisoned audience.⁴ This shadow theater must be abandoned in order for an upper realm of truth to be accessed, as happens when a prisoner escapes to the real world above. Theater, in other words, stands for illusion in contrast to philosophical truth: in order for philosophy to occur, we must leave the theater behind.

The cave paradigm has had a profound impact on the relation between philosophy and theater. Theater studies has tended to view this impact as negative; the theater, after all, is cast as the villain in this drama of illusion and truth, prison and escape. Jonas Barish has summed up this conventional wisdom by coining the term "anti-theatrical prejudice".⁵ In the meantime, however, dramatists returned to Plato's cave with a very different set of interests. Rather than holding it responsible for fostering a 'prejudice', they recognized it as what it really was: a moment when Plato's philosophy avails itself of the resources of the theater. The cave parable – with its gothic shadows and ominous sounds, and the suggestion of lifelong bondage in an underground dungeon – is itself the product of a dramatic and theatrical imagination of the highest order. Into this carefully elaborated scene is then dropped the plot of the freed prisoner, his dramatic experiences in the upper world, the painful process of getting used to the sun, and then, at the climax, the descent back into the cave, where he and his news of the upper world are greeted first with laughter and finally with violence.

Refusing to dismiss this tragic drama as prejudice, dramatists of various ilk have adapted this parable to the stage. The British composer Alexander Goehr, for example, composed a chamber opera called "Shadowplay" in which a tenor sings the text of the parable only to be joined by a prisoner who enacts, in front of our very eyes, the drama of escape and ascent.⁶ Another adaptation of the cave parable can be found in Howard Brenton's "Bloody Poetry", a play set among the Romantic writers Bysshe and Mary Shelley, Lord Byron and their entourage on Lake Geneva. In a central scene, the group decides to 'do' the cave parable and proceeds to enact this scene.⁷ Byron's pedantic biographer is forced to play the prisoner, the overbearing Lord Byron is demoted to playing the minor role of Glaucon, while Mary Shelley takes on the part of Socrates. The stage directions elaborate just how the cave and the shad-

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, books VI–X, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 119ff.

⁵ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

⁶ Alexander Goehr, *Shadowplay* (Mainz: Schott, 1970).

⁷ Howard Brenton, *Bloody Poetry* (London: French, 1985), 41.

ows are transposed to the space of the stage: a chandelier is placed at the front of the stage representing the source of light, the fire. The chandelier merely 'represents' the fire because the stage direction makes it clear that in truth it is the footlights that cast the characters' shadows on the back of the stage: the stage props are replaced by the real stage, and the parable by the theater. More recently, the cave has been appropriated by film, and in much the same manner. *The Truman Show*, for example, creates the shadow cave as a reality show in which a child, purchased by the television company, grows up in a carefully set up all-American town, only to discover slowly that everyone else is merely playing a role.⁸ In this case, when the prisoner finally ascends from his constructed world, he moves from his brightly lit cave to the darkness of the control room above; Plato's crucial difference between darkness and light is thus inverted. The conclusion to be drawn from these theatrical adaptations of the cave parable is that far from being merely the cause of a hostile relation between philosophy and theater, the parable constitutes a genuine encounter between philosophy and theater, a moment when philosophy needs the theater and uses it in a carefully elaborated manner. Small wonder, then, that the theater has responded in kind by adapting the parable's theatrical matrix to the stage.

Besides the cave paradigm, however, there exists a second model for the relation between philosophy and theater, one that is more difficult to capture: the use of drama as a paradigm for philosophy understood as act or action. In this second paradigm, there is nothing illusory or false about the theater; instead it becomes a model for philosophy as something that happens in the manner of an act or event. Interestingly enough, this second model can also be traced back to Plato, though not to a particular scene or terminology as is the case with the cave parable and its language of (theatrical) illusion and (philosophical) truth. Rather it is to be found in Plato's use of the dramatic form of the philosophical dialogue, which implies a conception of philosophy as an act executed by agents in a series of arguments. This is just a way of stating the obvious, perhaps, although the obvious in this case has not always been recognized: Plato invents characters, places them in scenes, and has them enact particular philosophically driven actions, or plots. Philosophy is not something that occurs in the privacy of your own mind, but something that is done, acted out in particular scenes and interactions. Borrowing a term from another theatrical philosopher, Kenneth Burke, I will call this second paradigm 'dramatism', since Burke used drama as a paradigm for a philosophical scheme centered on agents, actions, and the purpose of action.

⁸ Peter Weir, dir., *The Truman Show*, Paramount Pictures, 1998.

The dramatic form of the philosophical dialogue embodies the classical understanding of philosophy as intimately tied to conduct, habits and actions rather than to a set of doctrines or beliefs. If you believe that philosophy has to do with the actions of agents, you find yourself in the realm of drama. Only on occasion have modern philosophers continued this dramatic understanding of Plato's philosophy. A notable, and in some respects surprising, exception was Michel Foucault, not a philosopher generally recognized for his interest in drama and theater. This, however, changed notably in the lectures given at the Collège de France during the last years of his life.⁹ Devoted to the Greek term *parrhesia*, or truth-telling, Foucault elaborates the dramatic coordinates of this understanding of philosophy by differentiating his 'dramatic' analysis of philosophical truth from J.L. Austin's theory of 'performative' speech acts.¹⁰ Foucault's last lectures, which also contain fascinating discussions of Greek tragedy and the death of Socrates, have yet to be discovered by theater studies; once they are translated into English (they appeared in France only in 2008 and 2009 respectively) this will hopefully change.

While modern philosophers have rarely paid attention to this dramatic (or dramatistic) dimension of philosophy, there exists a long and remarkable tradition of playwrights who recognized Plato's dialogues as a dramatic form and decided to follow suit. I have so far found over a hundred plays, written since the Renaissance, centered on the philosopher Socrates and adapted, more or less directly, from Plato's dialogues. Often these playwrights combined the material from the most theatrically vivid dialogues, such as the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo*, or found other ways of portraying the remarkable actions of this quintessential philosopher and the characters with whom Plato had surrounded him. While not a major force in the history of drama, these Socrates plays, as I call them, pay homage to Plato as a dramatist.

Among the living philosophers, no one stands more clearly at the intersection of theater and philosophy than Alain Badiou, whose significance for the study of theater cannot be overestimated. In the context of this essay, his importance lies in the fact that he moves between the various traditions and models outlined above. In line with the dramatistic model, for example, Badiou writes, "for me, philosophical theatricality indicates that the essence of philosophy [...] is an act".¹¹ At the same time he holds on to the classical philosophical search for truth, precisely the term that organizes the cave parable in which theater is used as a locus

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres (1982-83)*, ed. Frédéric Gros et al. (Paris: Ehes, Seuil and Gallimard, 2008); Michael Foucault, *Le Courage de la Vérité: Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres II (1984)*, ed. Frédéric Gros et al. (Paris: Ehes, Seuil and Gallimard, 2009); Michael Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).

¹⁰ Foucault, *Le Gouvernement*, 59.

¹¹ Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, with a preface by François Wahl (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992), 103 n. 15.

of falsehood. Badiou's twin conceptions of philosophy as act and as truth are in the service of a new Platonism. His call for a return to Plato even includes the demand that "we can, we must write for our contemporaries, Republics and Symposiums."¹² Uniquely among contemporary philosophers, Badiou brings together the cave model and the dramatic model and traces both of them back to Plato.

What Badiou cares most about when he calls for a return to Plato is the continuation of philosophy as an independent discipline. It is this integrity of philosophy, he feels, that has been under threat throughout the last one-hundred-fifty years, during which time philosopher after philosopher has declared the end of metaphysics and therefore the end of philosophy as it had been instituted by Plato. Friedrich Nietzsche's attack on Platonism is the most famous example of this tradition of seeking to end philosophy, but Badiou also includes Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida.¹³ Declaring the end of (Platonist) metaphysics, Badiou argues, comes at too steep a price, and he measures this price in terms of Plato: it means ceding philosophy to its enemies, the sophists and other relativists; it means giving up that which has distinguished philosophy from sophistry, namely the category of truth.¹⁴ It is important to recognize that Badiou is not an idealist in the sense of asserting the existence of concrete universals. For him, reversing anti-Platonism is a way of staying true to the project of philosophy itself, "philosophy as it was instituted by Plato".¹⁵ And that project cannot do without the concept of truth. Once philosophy gives up truth, it reverts to sophistry, relativism, the description of an ever-changing world. Badiou identifies with Plato when he watches modern anti-Platonist philosophy tear down Plato's bulwark against relativism. Philosophical self-critique is all well and good, but modern anti-Platonism has thrown out the baby with the bathwater, ensuring the death of philosophy in the process.

The philosopher who represents, for Badiou, an intriguing version of this anti-Platonist tendency is Gilles Deleuze. Drawing on Nietzsche among others, Deleuze had positioned his own philosophy of the multiple against Plato, making anti-Platonism the center of his method. In many ways, Deleuze is the perfect example of what happens when you declare Platonist metaphysics to be over: all that is left to do is to celebrate contingency, immanence, heterogeneity and endless series of differences, reveling in the sheer groundlessness of all thinking: "Deleuze is the cheerful thinker of the confusion of the world," Badiou writes, who

¹² Ibid., 77.

¹³ Ibid., 307.

¹⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹⁵ Ibid., 77.

offers “an immense description, a collection of today’s diversity”.¹⁶ Deleuze is the thinker of bodies, of endlessly differing identities, of machines, of matter in its myriad forms, a Dionysian thinker of the multiple, the thinker who identified his own writing with the project of a ‘reversal of Platonism’. Deleuze, of course, was himself a philosopher deeply engaged with the theater, especially in his 1968 early work *Difference and Repetition*,¹⁷ which celebrates the theater as an art form prone to disrupt the principle of identity and difference on which idealist philosophy had staked so much.¹⁸ Indeed, Foucault gave Deleuze’s book a rave review, speaking about his conception of a theatrical philosophy as one immersed in bodies and screams. Theater here functions very much along the lines of the cave paradigm, only now it is the bodies, not the ideas, that are valued above all.¹⁹

Without discussing this theatrical dimension of the debate, Badiou proceeds to the second step in his argument, namely that in reversing Plato, Deleuze has left Platonism more or less intact. Yes, Badiou declares, Deleuze enjoys his bodies, multiplicities, minor languages and endless series of differences, but behind this immense mobilization of difference lurks the same old distinction between appearance and essence first made in Plato’s cave parable. The only difference is that Deleuze enjoys the multiple appearances of shadows on the wall and feels little desire to turn around and leave the cave. Deleuze does not dismantle the Platonist distinction between appearance and essence, but merely changes the values assigned to them, favoring the ever-changing world of appearance over the Platonic ascent to the realm of ideas. The same argument can be made with respect to other anti-Platonists, since it speaks to a danger almost invariably associated with reversal: reversing Platonism leaves the distinction between cave and upper world in place and only reverses the values associated with it. In a way, modern philosophy has never stopped paying homage to the cave, even if it has tended to do so by means of reversal.

The surprising twist in this interpretation of Deleuze occurs in a third argument: Deleuze starts out as Platonist in reverse, but he ends up being a Platonist in disguise. It turns out that behind Deleuze’s fascination with the multiple lurks, as a foil, a conception of the one. Badiou lists many passages in which Deleuze relates multiplicities to a transcendent notion of unity and oneness. There is a singularity to Deleuze’s notion of being, for example. Here Badiou argues that Deleuze’s philosophy is a ‘classical’ one, and this means that it is a “metaphysics

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: Le Clameur de l’être* (Paris: Hachette, 1997), 18, 26.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, “Theatrum Philosophicum,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 165–97.

¹⁹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

of Being and of foundation".²⁰ This is even more true of Deleuze's other central category, borrowed from Henri Bergson: time. Time is the foundation of Deleuze's philosophy, that which guarantees that the world of wild differences can nevertheless yield a conception of truth. Badiou's bravura reading of Deleuze, counterintuitive as it might seem at first, is not to be dismissed out of hand even if it also betrays Badiou's own Platonist philosophy, which here manifests itself as a reinterpretation of one of Plato's greatest foes of the late twentieth century.

If anti-Platonism is one target for Badiou's approach, the other is language philosophy. Badiou recognizes the focus on language as one of the dominant strains within twentieth-century philosophy and one of the chief opponents of any kind of Platonism, especially insofar as it presumes that all thinking is determined by the medium of language (whether conceived as speech or as writing). Earlier philosophies had understood language to be one of the fields of philosophical inquiry among others, but language philosophy claims that since philosophy is crucially determined by language, all philosophy must become a philosophy of language.

For Badiou, the main problem with language philosophy is that it replaces the question of truth with that of meaning. Posed against a (Deleuzian) philosophy of the body and a (Wittgensteinian) philosophy of language, Badiou summarizes the cornerstones of his philosophy in his *Logics of Worlds* with the following formula: "there are only bodies and languages".²¹ Even as he thus recognizes, with this assertion, the achievements of a philosophy of the body and of language, Badiou supplements that assertion with a crucial addition: "There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths."²² The body-language doctrine, Badiou argues, can be traced back to the Sophists and their (relativistic) declaration that 'Man is the measure of all things'. Badiou understands truth to work against such anthropomorphic relativism. Truth is what takes the philosopher outside the human realm, indeed it 'dislocates', as Badiou puts it with respect to truth in the Republic.²³ At another moment he says that "truths exist as exceptions to what there is," as an interruption of the continuity of bodies and languages.²⁴

So far, Badiou's resuscitation of Plato takes place within the frame of the first paradigm of the cave: modern philosophy is anti-Platonist in that it has abandoned truth and thus the pos-

²⁰ Badiou, *Deleuze*, 83.

²¹ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009 [2006]), 1; Martin Puchner, "Nothing but the Truths," *Bookforum*, April-May, 2009, 34.

²² Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 4.

²³ Badiou, *Conditions*, 318.

²⁴ Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 4.

sibility of the world above, contenting itself with the theater of shadows and words below. Only the most astute anti-Platonists, such as Deleuze, pay grudging homage to Plato by being not so much Platonists in reverse as Platonists in disguise. But it takes a reader such as Badiou to ferret out the Platonist overtones in the celebration of shadows, bodies and languages current in much twentieth-century philosophy.

Folded into this critique of anti-Platonism, however, we find Badiou availing himself of the second, dramatic paradigm, the understanding of philosophy as (dramatic) act. The key term here is 'event', which Badiou first developed in *Being and Event* and further elaborated in *Logics of Worlds* and several other texts.²⁵ For example, when, in the quote above, Badiou speaks of truth as an exception, he has in mind his definition of the event, which is always an exceptional occurrence. With the notion of the event, we arrive at the center of Badiou's ontology. Badiou offers us four routes towards the event: love, politics, mathematics and art. The second, politics, is perhaps the most intuitive, and also the one that reveals Badiou's political convictions: a history of true events is nothing other than the history of revolts and revolutions, beginning with Spartacus and ending with the Cultural Revolution in China. Here 'event' can be translated as 'revolutionary event'; periods of reaction, by contrast, are not events, but merely negative attempts to dilute the revolutionary effects of true events.

Among the four, mathematics is the most difficult, but also, for Badiou, the most crucial, philosophically speaking. Trained as a mathematician, Badiou has always sought to remind philosophy of its connection to mathematics. In this regard, too, Badiou follows Plato, who had identified mathematics as a stepping stone in the ascent from the cave to the realm of truth. Today's philosophy, for Badiou, has reversed Plato's preference for mathematics over poetry by installing poetry at the center of (Continental) language philosophy, most prominently so in the work of Heidegger (but also post-structuralism).²⁶ Badiou seeks to rectify this situation. From mathematics, Badiou takes his theory of multiples. Unlike Plato, with his insistence (at least in his middle period) on concrete universals, single ideas that are themselves sustained by the transcendent idea of the good, Badiou furnishes his worlds with multiples theorized with the help of Cantor's set theory. Here, the philosophical notion of the situation, which harbors multiples, finds its mathematical grounding, as does the argument why there are multiple worlds, not just one. Badiou's often technical use of mathematics has puzzled many readers (including this one), but for our purposes here suffice it to say that Badiou proposes an ontology of multiplicity that does without recourse to oneness and transcendence and remains instead on a plane of immanence.

²⁵ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1998]).

²⁶ Badiou, *Conditions*, 163.

Even though Badiou seeks to install mathematics at the center of philosophy and thus to reverse the dominance of poetry – and literature more generally – over philosophy, he does not want to give up on literature altogether. Indeed, the poem remains another path towards the event. It is surprising how closely Badiou follows Heidegger's reverence for poetry, his belief that through poetry the true language of being takes place above and beyond the degraded language of communication and everyday life. But where Heidegger finds in poetry the language of being, Badiou finds there the occurrence of an event. What he shares with Heidegger is the presumption that in poetry something happens, that the language of poetry is somehow truer – more revelatory – than non-poetic language, which also means that language manifests itself more fully in the poem than in other forms of speech. Avoiding the quasi-religious language of revelation, however, Badiou thinks of the poem as an event, as the moment when 'what there is' is being interrupted, when something new and strange enters a situation and radically alters it: an exceptional poem bears traces of an event.

The contrast with Heidegger is visible most clearly in Badiou's choice of master poet: instead of the late Romantic Friedrich Hölderlin, Badiou reveres the modernists Stéphane Mallarmé and Samuel Beckett. Badiou's admiration for Mallarmé stems in part from the poet's own regard for numbers and from his quasi-technical understanding of poetry as an 'operation'.²⁷ The most important poem, for Badiou, is the experimental "A Throw of Dice," in which Mallarmé arranges words on a page reminiscent of falling dice. By deviating from the regular poetic line, Mallarmé turns every word into an event just as the poem itself revolves around an event: a shipwreck. But even more central is the event that gives the poem its name, the throw of dice itself. A throw of dice creates an event; it distills what we might call an event to its essence. When we throw dice, we have defined the situation, a bet, into which an event will intrude by making a decision. After the throw, nothing will be the same; the event will have fundamentally altered the situation. Not only does Mallarmé produce an event with and through his poem, he also does so, according to Badiou, by crucially relying on absence, negation and the void. The shipwreck, in that sense, is only the ruse of an external event, not its essence, which resides in a peculiar quality of absence. In Badiou's parlance, an event takes place 'on the edge of the void' in close proximity with nothing (the title of his main book, *Being and Event*, echoes Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*). Badiou's ontology is not one of plenitude, but of a precarious relation to absence. Such absence is a recurring concern for Mallarmé, whose poems are fascinated by silence and, for the first time in modern poetry, by the blank space between the words. For Badiou, Mallarmé is thus the

²⁷ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 20.

poet of subtraction and isolation, the representative of a modernism that seeks to reduce mimesis and expression, the traditional domain of poetry, to a minimum.²⁸ The eccentric arrangement of words on the page in “A Throw of Dice” might indeed be seen as a poetic rendering of Badiou’s conception of multiples arranged on the edge of the void.

Situation, event, throw of dice – the terms of Badiou’s discussion of Mallarmé have one thing in common: they are at home in the theater. Even though Badiou, following Heidegger, discusses Mallarmé under the general rubric of the poem, the more important category is in fact drama. In *Being and Event* he emphasizes at the outset that “A Throw of Dice” is *dramatic* (his emphasis) and that Mallarmé more generally “is the thinker of the event-drama”.²⁹ In *A Handbook of Inaesthetics* he details more fully what kind of theater is at work in this extraordinary poet. Trying to specify what use Mallarmé makes of the theater, Badiou approaches a category that almost all philosophers interested in the theater encounter sooner or later: anti-theatricality. Mallarmé, the writer of the event-drama, as Badiou puts it, isn’t he really an enemy of the theater?

Badiou approaches this question via the rival category of dance as a metaphor for thought. Noting the frequent opposition between dance and theater, Badiou sees a clear anti-theatrical turn in the work of the later Nietzsche, who attacks Richard Wagner with an anti-theatrical polemic and praises instead, via the figure Zarathustra, the superiority of dance. Mallarmé, with his interest in dance, seems to go a similar route – but not quite. Mallarmé, for Badiou, parts company with Nietzsche in that he installs a peculiar, purified, idealized theater at the center of his dramatic poetry.

Badiou avoids a conception of theater as mimesis and reads Mallarmé’s monologue *The Afternoon of a Faun* as just such an anti-mimetic dramatization of the idea. This is another way of recognizing that Mallarmé has managed to install anti-theatricality at the center of his theater, creating an event drama in the manner of Plato, as I have detailed at greater length elsewhere.³⁰

Behind Badiou’s philosophy of the poem, we thus find a conception of Platonic theater. What are the contours of that conception? First of all, it asserts the centrality of the theater for thought. In *The Century*, Badiou observes that “the twentieth century is the century of the theatre as art,” the century that witnessed the emergence of the theater and of the *mise-en-scène* as high art. In particular, Badiou is interested in the figure of the director, who has

²⁸ Badiou, *Conditions*, 108.

²⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 191.

³⁰ Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-theatricality and Drama* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

emerged as “a thinker of representation as such, who carries out a very complex investigation into the relationships between text, acting, space, and public”.³¹

Badiou places the modern director at the center of theater because he wants to formulate an understanding of theater that emphasizes its connection to philosophy, or more precisely, to thought. The director, as he specifies in another short text on theater, assembles components, including text, acting, set design and music, but assembles them in a unique manner; this is why the theater can be called an event. The theatrical assemblage occurs only in the present, night after night, there, on the stage. Further, Badiou argues that due to this unique form of assemblage, the theater is capable of producing ideas. “This event – when it really is theater, the art of the theater – is an event of thought. This means that the assemblage of components directly produces ideas.”³² Since philosophical truth has the character of the event, it is the theater, the most eventful of the arts, that plays a central role in its formulation.

Badiou’s most important text on theater to date is *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, published in 1990. As editor of *Theatre Survey*, I commissioned a translation of this short book into English; it appeared in its entirety in the autumn 2008 issue of *Theatre Survey* and can be accessed via *Cambridge Journals Online*.³³ It is in this book that Badiou spells out the theatrical dimension of his thought, and sums up his understanding of theater in the thesis that “All theatre is theatre of ideas”.³⁴ Badiou here does not mean that theater fulfills merely a kind of pedagogical assumption, “distancing the Idea in the veil of representation”.³⁵ Rather, it means returning theater to a Platonist conception of the idea, albeit an idea understood as event and therefore as something that must be understood dramatically.

Badiou’s conception of theater as event also identifies the theater as the most political art form, the art form most closely tied to the state. This, of course, is especially true in France, with its tradition of national theater and generous state subsidies. Things could not be more different in the United States. But even if we allow for national difference, the essential relation between theater and the state posited by Badiou has a relevance for us as well, since it identifies the assembled public, the liveness of the theater event and the history of theater as crucial political categories. (Here and elsewhere Badiou contrasts the political nature of live theater with film, which cannot be political in the same way, and this preference for theater

³¹ Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 40.

³² Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 72.

³³ Alain Badiou, “Rhapsody for the Theatre,” trans. Bruno Bosteels, *Theatre Survey* 49.2 (November 2008): 187-238.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

over film might be seen as yet another contrast with Deleuze, whose earlier interest in theater had given way to an engagement with film.) In order to preserve this character of the live assembly, Badiou also demands that theaters keep the practice of intermission, the moment when the audience can see and experience itself as audience rather than disappear, as it does in film, in the anonymity of the dark.

We can now see the contours of Badiou's theatrical philosophy. The poem is for him an 'event-drama', and this emphasis on the event ultimately leads him to think of the theater as the art form – or assemblage of existing art forms – that is the most directly tied to ideas. Like many theatrical philosophers before him, including Plato, Marsilio Ficino, Denis Diderot, Voltaire, Søren Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Albert Camus and Sartre, Badiou also translated his dramatic philosophy into drama. Only recently have his plays begun appearing in English, despite having already acquired a (small) following in France. They are wide-ranging and witty, turning philosophical concepts into scenes and characters, including the figure of Ahmed, an Algerian immigrant around whom four of Badiou's plays revolve.³⁶ These plays also testify to the fact that Badiou's philosophy is not only dramatic, but actually veers towards drama itself. Badiou's work is an occasion for rethinking the relation between philosophy and theater; it is also itself an exemplar of this relation, a reminder of how fruitful the encounter between theater and philosophy can be.

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³⁶ See Alain Badiou, *Ahmed the Philosopher*, trans. Joseph Litvak (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

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