

The Theater of Modern Philosophy

A Review of Alain Badiou, *Rhapsody for the Theatre*,
trans. Bruno Bosteels. New York and London: Verso, 2013.

Arthur Rose

As the English translations of Alain Badiou's work consolidate themselves in the lists of Verso and Bloomsbury, it becomes increasingly important to orient engagements with the work in quasi-political terms that, sadly, have little to do with the truth-seeking aims of philosophy. When even the discreetly experimental interests of an admittedly coterie journal become the target of hoaxes, one may well say that a thinker has 'arrived' in the unfortunate, sensationalist sense. And with this arrival comes the need to mount political, rather than philosophical, defenses. The extraordinary "Rhapsody for the Theatre" mounts, as part of its philosophical defense of the theater, a politically aware defense of its own philosophical contingency. In order for the philosophical 'I' to maintain its fragile defense of a Theater (which "summons

Journal of Badiou Studies 5 :: 2017

ISSN 2049-9027



the spectator at the impasse of a form of thought"¹) against 'theater' (whose public "are marked with an identitarian sign"²), it frames the narrative as, in part, a dialogue with an Empiricist, who demands substantial, 'concrete' examples of the Theatre ("My lists, my lists!"³). The text maintains, in the philosophical form of the dialogue, an awareness that such erstwhile Platonism is bound to get one into trouble in the theater of academic philosophy. But if its 2008 translation for *Theatre Survey* could anticipate this problem through a nuanced integration of forms (it draws on, amongst others, the fragment, the treatise and the dialogue), its republication, by Verso, in 2013 demands a political defense to be mounted on its behalf.⁴ Notably, the decision to append five minor texts to the "Rhapsody" seems motivated more by the demands of philosophical publishing than for the needs of any particular audience. Nor does it contribute a more comprehensive philosophical defense than that of the Rhapsody itself. These texts, which from the 'Art and Philosophy' thesis of *Handbook of Inaesthetics* ("Theatre and Philosophy") through the historical reflections on theater in the second half of the 20th Century to the considerations of Badiou's own work for the theater, seem rather more to defuse, than enrich, the philosophical potential of the original Rhapsody.

This said, the increased circulation of the Rhapsody is only to be encouraged, particularly when it comes to thinking about the proper place of 'place' in Badiou's oeuvre. Badiou begins *Theory of the Subject*, perhaps the first of his masterworks, by returning to Hegel, and the question of alienation, which resolves the separation of an identity from itself with synthesis, and scission, which doesn't. He brings these terms together by considering how both are treatments of placedness. Assuming that something is, it is always both in itself (A) and in its placement (A_p). "What is the meaning of the something-in-itself and the something-for-the-other? Pure identity and placed identity; the letter and the space in which it is marked; theory and practice."⁵ Placement, situation, world: Badiou's language is spatially marked. But the space is always circumscribed by its use, in the performance of a Subject, responding to an Event, relating to a State. If the terminology of the three 'great' works (*Theory of the Subject*, *Being and Event*, *Logics of Worlds*) is not always consistent with that of the Theatre, readers of Badiou's *Rhapsody for Theatre* will recognize that the elements he designates for the latter have their corollaries in the former:

¹ Alain Badiou, *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (New York London: Verso, 2013), xxii.

² Idem.

³ Badiou, *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, xxvii.

⁴ Alain Badiou, "Rhapsody for the theatre: A short philosophical treatise," trans. Bruno Bosteels, *Theatre Survey* 49.2 (2008): 187-238.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 6.

Three things form a knot: the masses who all of a sudden are gathered in an unexpected consistency (events); the points of view incarnated in organic and enumerable actors (subject-effects); a reference in thought that authorizes the elaboration of discourse based upon the mode in which the specific actors are held together, even at a distance, by the popular consistency to which chance summons them.⁶

Thus, we have as Theatre's elements, a public, actors and a textual referent. These will serve to put into practice the three 'majestic instances' of the theater; that it is an Affair of the State, which is morally suspicious, and requires a Spectator. Each of these instances will be built on difference. Theater divides from Cinema, since the Cinema has no collective public, hence no Spectator. Theatre also splits itself culturally, into those cultures which have Theatre and those that do not. So, Theatre becomes an Affair of the State, because it always raises the place of Theatre in society as a concern for the State. And it becomes morally suspicious, since theatre is "a heresy in action."⁷

What meaning does this have for readers of Badiou, who, perhaps, aren't overly concerned with theater? *Rhapsody for Theatre* fits into the same, anomalous territory as *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, in a number of complex ways. To understand this, it is perhaps necessary to elucidate the difficulties of *Saint Paul* for a thinker as profoundly consistent as Badiou. For it is erroneous to imagine that *Saint Paul* can 'merely' be assigned to the increasing publication of those works we might call 'minor' to Badiou's philosophical project, such as *The Adventure of French Philosophy* or, more pertinently, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*. Nor does it readily conform to the model set out in Badiou's exploration of the conditions, the *Brief Treatises*, *Handbooks*, the works on mathematics. It is not an activist's polemic, a wholly creative work, or a Sartrean Circumstance. Each of these sidestep-reflections provides a compelling enough narrative on the history of philosophy, or the exposition of a condition or a defense, or the analysis of a contemporary political moment, but they are secondary to the principal task Badiou has set himself: to think about the formation of the Subject in the founding of the Event, as the scission of the Situation, or the World. *Saint Paul* is not secondary, since Badiou cannot simply use this philosophy in his analysis of Paul: he must also develop it, often in conversation with an extensive theological oeuvre. *Rhapsody* is similarly implicated in the political ontology Badiou sets forth in his 'major' works, since it, too, clearly plays a part in the development of Badiou's thought.

⁶ Badiou, *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, ix.

⁷ *Ibid.*, i.

It is for this reason that the Verso publication occasions the criticism of my opening paragraph. The additional texts, however interesting on their own terms, are either 'minor' or 'conditional' in the ways I have already gestured towards. Their co-publication seems nothing less than a dilution of the originary force of the Rhapsody, a refusal to recognize its generative abnormality in Badiou's oeuvre. Just as *Saint Paul* occasions more thought than its 'mere' reduction to an exemplary antiphilosophy, the Rhapsody demands a stronger response than its 'apparent' representation of artistic conditionality. It is nothing less than a work of Architheater.

References

Alain Badiou. *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Alain Badiou. *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham. New York and London: Continuum, 2005.

Alain Badiou. *Handbook for Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Alain Badiou. "Rhapsody for the theatre: A short philosophical treatise," trans. Bruno Bosteels. *Theatre Survey* 49.2 (2008): 187-238.

Alain Badiou. *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels. London: Continuum, 2009.

Alain Badiou. *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, trans. Bruno Bosteels. New York and London: Verso, 2011.

Alain Badiou. *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, trans. Bruno Bosteels. New York and London: Verso, 2012.

Alain Badiou. *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, trans. Bruno Bosteels. New York and London: Verso, 2013.

Alain Badiou. *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano. New York and London: Continuum, 2009.