



## NOSTALGIA IN THE THEATRE

### International Colloquium

Collège d'Espagne (CIUP) & Département des Arts du spectacle (BnF), Paris

April 10-12, 2019

*Theatre is nostalgia for the present.*

Olivier Py

Closely related to the expatriated seafarer's violent desire for his fatherland, today nostalgia appears to be a protean concept. Nostalgia is not simply deprivation or a quasi-pathological regret born of the impossibility to reach a familiar place, time, or state. It is also the impotence felt by those who aspire to an ideal, by those who seek—forcefully and passionately—a certain value or quality.

Homesickness, fantasy of a Golden Age, vintage fad, “morbus helveticus”, or simply outdatedness, nostalgia does not have a set definition. Rather, it constitutes a cultural praxis whose forms and meanings evolve continuously between three spatio-temporal poles: the space-time of actors mobilizing nostalgia as a practice, the space-time of the desired object, and the space-time of researchers who study these phenomena.

If Nicola Savarese's “passion for a return” seems to evoke a specific state, the object of this nostalgia can take a multiplicity of forms: (hi)stories that are personal or collective, one's own or appropriated, idealized or imagined; authenticity, primal states, integrity. Indeed, as Barbara Cassin notes, the practice of nostalgia is characterized on the one hand as “rootedness” and on the other as “wandering”. Whatever the object of this desire, nostalgia is predicated upon a present experienced as loss, migration, or exile. Alien in his own environment and home,

Vladimir Jankélévitch reminds us that “the nostalgic person is at the same time here and there and neither here nor there, present and absent doubly present and doubly absent.”

Nostalgia represents a posture responding to an unsatisfactory present and to what is absent. At the same time, it demands judgment. Moreover, nostalgia can be considered “bourgeois” or even reactionary with respect to forward-looking optimism. In order to better understand the practices that stem from nostalgia, Olivia Angé distinguishes between its two faces: the “nostalgic disposition” linked to sentimental loss and lack, on the one hand and on the other the “nostalgic discourse” that manifests itself in the form of strategic narratives linked to political, economic and other instrumentalizations.

The arts can be the transposed products created by these two figures that are simultaneously nostalgia and the triggers for nostalgic sensations that Albert Camus suggested gave “such flesh and contours to the ghosts of regret”.

The theatre, this art of the senses, this shared space of smells, physical matter, taste, light, shadow, sounds, and silence is not limited to representation. Theatre, like Proust’s famous madeleine, has the capacity to render present that which is absent, that which is distant and inaccessible. In Antonin Artaud’s visions, for instance, the desire for that which is out of reach goes beyond the limits of memory. “We feel violent physical need like that of organic nostalgia for magic art and for the magic word and since the theatre is the only art capable of constituting a unified synthesis of all the means of expression and all languages, we expect that theatre will give us back the sensation of a new vital magic that will reconcile us with it and perhaps with life.”

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theatre professionals and critics sought to orient themselves using Shakespeare, *commedia dell’arte*, pantomime, puppets, circus acts in their quest for a magic formula for theatrical forms that would capture the fantasized vital sources of communal inspiration and genius. Jean Starobinski identified this as “one of the biggest primitivistic nostalgias of Romanticism”. Alternatively, from the mid 19th- mid 20th centuries, what is commonly thought of as *commedia dell’arte*—which as Roberto Cuppone reminds us was “liberated from the constraints of “historical fact” and has always been an abstraction, partly nostalgia, partly utopia”—became focus of a numerous nostalgic projections.

The Golden Age focused on the community linking actors and the public, the actor-artist and theatre. If we consider for example, the forms and themes from the Spanish Golden Age that Hugo revisited in *Hernani* and *Ruy Blas*, what knowledge, relationships, and intentions are connected to this specific period in theatrical history? We note that echoes of this moment continue to resonate in the theatrical experiments at the beginning of the 20th century. The objects of this nostalgic practice are characterized by their hybrid nature between fact and fantasy. Theatre and theatrical techniques have the specificity of providing a range of different means for remembering, commemorating, presenting, analysing, and quoting the past and the state of absence, the nostalgic disposition and nostalgia itself.

Research on nostalgia is expanding. Examination reveals that in the past four year several academic meetings have examined the question of nostalgia in the arts and the social

sciences. In July 2015, the *Association européenne François Mauriac* directed by Nina Nazarova organized a colloquium entitled *Nostalgie : entre le mal-être et le désir* in Metz. In Fall 2016, the Department of English Philology and the Lithuanian Association for the Study of English at University of Vilnius organized the conference *Histoire, Mémoire et Nostalgie : Représentations littéraires et culturelles*, in 2017, Estelle Zunino and Patrizia Gasperini organized the colloquium *La nostalgie dans tous ses états* and in May 2018, the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi held the colloquium *Nostalgies, mémoires et cultures médiatiques : entre esthétique, marchandisation et politisation*. Despite the richness and variety of the problematics and the broad calls for contributions made by the organizers, the theatre occupied only a marginal place in these four academic meetings.

The international colloquium planned for April 10-12, 2019 aims to open a new field of research in theatre studies by focusing attention on the study of the mobilization and the rhetoric of nostalgia in the theatre. Researchers are encouraged to identify and problematize how nostalgia as a practice has been used in the theatre in the past and how it is used in contemporary performing arts today in order to better understand how theatrical practices can generate a counter-history or alternative historical narratives. Equally promising would be analysis of the impact of exoticism and historicism on these phenomena and the study of theatrical experimentation with the memories of the future for a post-humanistic era. “But Paradise is locked and bolted, and the cherubim stands behind us. We must make a journey around the world to see if a back door has perhaps been left open.” (Heinrich von Kleist) If the theatre is characterized by presence in the here and now, how is it related to nostalgia, this “baby sister of the Apocalypse” that erases the present?

Particular attention will be given to new research based on primary source material (written documents, iconography, etc.) on the theatre, the circus, dance, opera, marionettes, and performance art. Proposals should focus on one or more of the following issues:

- Staging (set design, lighting, costumes, masks, music, sound, gesture, pantomime, dance, voice, etc.)
- Pedagogy (theory and practice of training for performers in the different areas mentioned)
- Labour organization and structures (troupes, traveling companies, laboratories, communities, collectives, etc.)
- Dramaturgy (subject, themes, characters, style, material text, dramatic structure, etc.)
- Pro- and anti-nostalgia rhetoric in the theatre

## Research Angles:

- A. **A mythographic theatre:** production of alternative historical narratives; nostalgia in the theatre as a vector of an idealistic deformation of the past (David Lowenthal).
- B. **A theatre of collective identities:** (re)presentations of the “community of loss” (exile, diaspora, states of ruin, “eastalgia” etc.) and the crucial role of nostalgia in the “construction, maintenance, and reconstruction of our identities” (Fred Davis) as well as the challenges to this. Nostalgia can be “*triggered* not by empirical passion but rather by the eruption of a word and of a promise” (Jacques Derrida).
- C. **A theatre of mnemonic objects:** fetishes, secular relics that were in contact with the past. Like Proust’s madeleine mentioned earlier, objects can play a role as intermediaries in the relation that individuals establish with their past.
- D. **A golden age for performers:** “retheatricalization” et quest for corporeal mastery as well as abandon, ranging from formal imitation and citation to social and creative utopia (artistic community, “nature”, popular theatre, etc.), return to archaic or archaicizing characters in the founding of a ritual or spiritual foundation for theatrical praxis.
- E. **Anti-nostalgia and criticism of nostalgic theatre:** accusations regarding passive posture (memory refuge) in opposition with didactic theatre of denunciation, struggle (Olivier Neveux), or which is linked to economic opportunism. “I cannot understand the withdrawal that follows behind the fourth wall, in the acarian theatre [...]. If the theatre pushes towards the 19<sup>th</sup> century (or was pushed there by a lucrative nostalgia), whereas the curse of my late birth pushes me towards the canteen.” (Heiner Müller)
- F. **Institutionalization of nostalgia:** theatres, professional companies, and amateurs dedicated to spectacular forms of the past; a theatre that serves as a refuge to protect theatrical forms that are in danger of extinction.
- G. **Industrialization of nostalgia:** Creation and diffusion of spectacles on the basis of regional, national, and global markets for collective nostalgia.

## Deadline for proposals: September 15, 2018

Proposals should be submitted to [nostalgie.theatre@gmail.com](mailto:nostalgie.theatre@gmail.com).

**Proposal format:** Abstracts should be approximately 250 words long and include the theoretical and methodological approach, the title of the paper, a bibliography and five key words. Proposals should be accompanied by a short bio-bibliography and the contact information including email address for the author. Proposals in French and in English are welcome.

Acceptance of proposals will be sent out by the organizing committee on September 30, 2018.

**Colloquium languages:** English and French.

Contributions are strictly limited to 30 minutes.

**Registration costs:** Faculty, researchers, and artists: 50 euros; Students, doctoral candidates: 30 euros. Registration payment is due at the conference.

The organizing committee regrets that it is not be able to cover any of the costs for travel or lodging. These costs are entirely the responsibility of each participant.

**Publication:** Publication of the proceedings is planned.

#### **SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE**

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#### **THE COLLOQUIUM IS ORGANIZED BY**

Laurette Burgholzer (University of Bern); Vincenzo Mazza (University Paul Valéry – Montpellier 3)

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