

Theatre as a Shared Space of Exhaustion. Staging Contemporary Tragedies in Jan Fabre's 24-hour Performance

Abstract: The new conception of theatre in the 20th century is characterised by its attention to the actor's body and its performative possibilities as the main tool of communication with the audience. Avant-garde theatre practitioners started seeking out the roots of theatre with the intent of finding a new theatrical language. This in pursuit of what Richard Schechner has later defined as a "restored behaviour", that phenomenon which exists in every form of representation, from ritual to theatre, from shamanism to trance, and so on (Schechner, 1985). Using ritualistic practices and their power of inclusion, theatre reformers retrieved techniques filled with spiritual elements, providing the actor with tools to work on his/her awareness and to imbue the performance with new meanings, thus reshaping the canonical conception of the theatrical space. Bearing in mind this theoretical framework, it is possible to analyse the recent 24-hour performance *Mount Olympus* (2015), directed by Jan Fabre, as an outstanding example of contemporary theatre that, starting from avant-garde experimentation, redefines the spatial relationship between stage and audience. The paper will show how the performance achieves this by retrieving classical catharsis in a canonical, institutional theatrical setting while breaking the bourgeois rules of audience behaviour within the theatrical space, and by strengthening the bond between performers and spectators, reshaping their experiences by driving both to the edge of exhaustion due to its demanding duration.

Keywords: *actor's body, Mount Olympus, spectator's experience, relationship, ritual*

1. Introduction

The new conception of theatre in the 20th century is characterised by its attention to the actor's body and its performative possibilities as the main tool of communication with the audience. Avant-garde theatre practitioners started seeking out the roots of theatre with the intent of finding a new theatrical language. This in pursuit of what Richard Schechner has later defined as a 'restored behaviour', that phenomenon which exists in every form of representation, from ritual to theatre, from shamanism to trance, and so on.¹ Using ritualistic practices and their power of inclusion, theatre reformers retrieved techniques filled with spiritual elements, providing the actor with tools to work on his/her awareness and to imbue the performance with new meanings, thus reshaping the canonical conception of the theatrical space. This specific interest in source material and texts on mystic and ritualistic topics is strongly linked to what I will refer to as 'ritualistic spectatorship'. I am here particularly attracted to the quest for origins that seems inherent to many forms of research conducted in the past century by avant-garde theatre practitioners, which it is also possible to trace within more

¹ Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35-116.

recent forms of performance. In my analysis, I shall consider the 24-hour performance *Mount Olympus* (2015) by Jan Fabre and his theatre company Troubleyn as a case study. As my subtitle suggests, the performance is a contemporary attempt at restoring the glory of tragedy. It does so by not only pushing its performers to the brink of exhaustion and extreme sleep deprivation, but also by asking its spectators to offer up 24 hours of their time to be there. Apart from investing this time, not much else was asked of the audience. The auditorium was dark throughout, spectators were allowed to move in and out of the theatre at will, to visit the bathroom, eat, drink or sleep on the provided bunkbeds. This paper will show how *Mount Olympus* can be considered as an outstanding example of contemporary theatre that, starting from avant-garde experimentation, redefines the spatial relationship between stage and audience. It will also demonstrate how the performance achieves this by retrieving classical catharsis in a canonical, institutional theatrical setting but breaking the bourgeois rules of audience behaviour within the theatrical space, and by strengthening the bond between performers and spectators, reshaping their experiences by driving both to the edge of exhaustion due to its demanding duration.

Focusing explicitly on the role of the spectator in terms of movement, the spatial experimentation with the stage-audience relationship, I will question the relationship of the spectator to the performance in terms of ritualistic experience. Such shared ritualization places performers and their public in a specific participatory relationship. Part of my argument sets off from a historical point of view and consists in developing a historical frame that links Fabre with the avant-garde theatre practice and Reform of the 20th century. Before delving into the historical discourse, I wish to start by pointing out via a rather lengthy quotation from the writer of *Mount Olympus*, Jeroen Olyslaegers, the experience that was expected of the audience:

Afterwards it's weird to reflect on what we did with time. For me time is linked with catharsis; we have this old 19th century idea of theatre. We expect to look at a play, in a dark room filled with other people and expect a catharsis. For me it's a strange idea to expect an insight from a 2 or 3-hour play. What actually happened in ancient Greece were these big Dionysian festivals, competitions between different playwrights. People came to the theatre at dawn and watched for about 12 hours. They had dinner, had a drink, it was a coming and going and the catharsis was the entire experience. That's what we do with *Mount Olympus*. We actually stretch time, where the catharsis is totally different and much more violent for the audience to capture. After a couple of hours we strip away the intellectual human layer and what remains is pure emotion. It's not uncommon that people start to cry because there's no protection left. We've demolished it. That's the Dionysian power of it. I actually have Dionysus say this in the beginning of the piece: "we're all going to get you really, really crazy. We're going to get you mad". Which is what happens at the end.²

² Jeroen Olyslaegers in:
<http://www.etalorsmagazine.com/mount-olympus/>,
accessed 24 July 2017.

I am aware that one must be cautious when considering these assertions inasmuch as they are coming directly from inside the production. But I will take this quotation as a starting point after having experienced the performance as spectator. It raises numerous questions and can stimulate different reflections, especially concerning the role of the audience.

I will start by addressing the very beginning of the quote, in which the writer distances himself and the performance from “this old 19th century idea of theatre”, in this way recalling the discontinuity that characterized the Theatre Reform of the 20th century. And I will later address the interest of those avant-garde theatre practitioners towards ritualistic elements and practices in their attempt to trace an origin of theatre, which is strongly connected to Olyslaegers’s evocation of the ritualistic dimension of the Dionysian festivals.

2. A Step Back: Ritualistic Perspectives in the Avant-garde Theatre Practice

The 20th century Theatre Reform was inspired by a particular interest in the practice of acting in connection with its relationship with the audience. This century was characterised by reforms and new approaches that concerned not only theatre but also all those disciplines and arts related to the phenomenon of the avant-garde. As Christopher Innes wrote, the avant-garde movement “seems united primarily in terms of what they are against: the rejection of social institutions and established artistic conventions, or antagonism towards the public (as representative of the existing order)”.³ This same need for a concrete change, for a common coalition against the traditional/institutional vision of art was shared by many theatre practitioners of the same period, like Copeau, Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, Grotowski, just to name a few. This perspective inspired the need to go beyond theatrical practice of the time, go back to theatre’s origins and find a new ideology. Analysing the work of the theatre reformers of the 20th century, the Italian theatre historian Fabrizio Cruciani has identified the concept of ‘making’ as the essence of this ideology. “To make theatre without thinking about theatre, its institution, one can think of recovering the minimum but necessary elements (the laws) that allow for a new theatre”,⁴ therefore “the definition of theatre (what it is) is detected in its concrete existence with the precision and the absoluteness of making”.⁵ The roots of this new theatre, then, lie in the work of the actor, in his or her relationship with the gaze of an audience, which actually experiences the actor’s physical presence. To better explain this need to go back into history and trace the origin of the experiential relationship between actor and spectator, I would like to refer to the work of one of the most important and complex figures in theatre reform in the 20th century, Antonin Artaud.

In *The Theatre and its Double*, Artaud stated the necessity of a new physicality as new language and established the body as its basic unit of expression. His credo “No More Masterpieces”⁶ became a manifesto for many avant-garde artists,

³ Christopher Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre: 1892-1992* (London, Routledge, 1993), 1.

⁴ Fabrizio Cruciani, *Registi pedagoghi e comunità teatrali nel Novecento* (Roma: Editoria & Spettacolo, 2006), 73 (my translation).

⁵ Fabrizio Cruciani, “Il «duogo dei possibili»”, in Clelia Falletti, ed., *Il corpo scenico* (Roma: Editoria & Spettacolo, 2008), 167 (my translation).

⁶ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 74.

⁷ Christopher Innes, "Text/Pre-Text/Pretext: the Language of the Avant-Garde Experiment", in James M. Harding, ed., *Contours on the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 60.

⁸ Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 80.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 81.

¹¹ Innes, "Text/Pre-Text/Pretext", 61.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Richard Schechner, "From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Structure/Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad", *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26.4 (1974), 461.

whereas his *Theatre of Cruelty*, published in 1938 and almost totally unknown in the English-speaking world until the translation of 1958, became "a revolutionary catalyst that motivated the formation of counterculture performance groups".⁷ Especially in *The Theatre of Cruelty*, Artaud appealed to an archetypal notion of theatre as the primal force that could make possible a new relationship with the audience. Artaud proposed the idea of a *Total Theatre* that works on the spectator like Chinese acupuncture "which knows, over the entire extent of the human anatomy, at what points to puncture in order to regulate the su(b)tlest functions".⁸ He proposed a return "through the theatre to an idea of physical knowledge"⁹ that would break down all the barriers between the actor and the spectator. Through such physical knowledge the performing body, rather than through the thinking mind, can shake the spectators intimately/from the inside and charm them, like "the snake charmer" does, to finally "conduct them *by means of their organisms* to an apprehension of the su(b)tlest notions".¹⁰ Artaud suggests "an Affective Athleticism" which creates an affective attraction between the actor and the spectator and allows the power of the emotions grounded in the rhythm and tension of the actor's body to exert an influence on the same rhythm and tension in the spectator. The theatre proposed by Artaud completely opposes the bourgeois code that established a strict separation between the actor and the observer; on the contrary, he stated the principal unity between actors and spectators as a binomial formula in which both are indispensable to each other. In this manner, avant-garde theatre practitioners started searching for the roots of theatre with the intent of finding a new theatrical language.

The possibility of a new language, independent of the spoken words and made of gestures, actions and symbols "together with the sacred nature of the origin of theatre",¹¹ is what motivated the wide interest of the theatre reformers in ritual and spirituality as well as their resorting "to archaic, non-Western forms of religious theatre".¹² It is possible to trace a line of outstanding experiments by Western theatre practitioners who, since Artaud, saw ritualistic practices not as the answer, but as the tool with which they could examine theatre from a different perspective: The Living Theatre, The Open Theatre, Richard Schechner's Performance Group, Ariane Mnouchkine and Théâtre du Soleil, and of course Jean-Louis Barrault, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and, to some extent, Eugenio Barba. As will be demonstrated in what follows, it is possible to position Jan Fabre, and his latest work, in terms of continuing that kind of research in theatre making into the present day.

While analysing the relationship between theatre and ritual, it is interesting to outline, as Schechner suggests, "a process through which theatre develops from ritual; and also to suggest that in some circumstances ritual develops from theatre",¹³ thus putting the two terms Ritual and Theatre in a dialectical relationship. To do so, Schechner defined the characteristic of each term, naming them, respectively, "efficacy" and "entertainment", and opposing them to each

other.

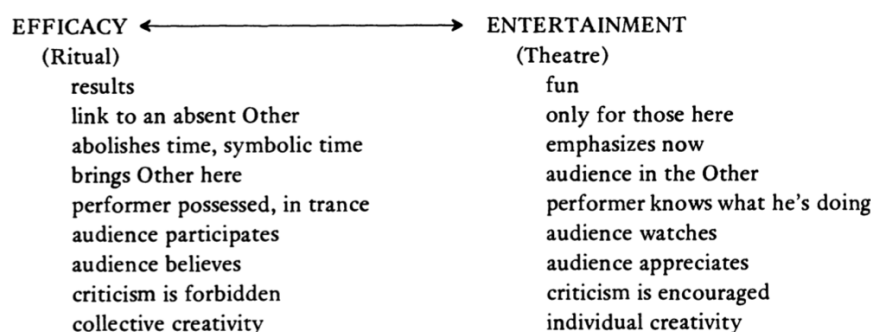


Fig. 1: Richard Schechner, "From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Structure/Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad", *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26.4 (1974), 467.

Each term has its own characteristics, which are apparently in antithesis, but what seems to be important in Schechner's perspective is the possibility of Theatre to use, absorb, and include some of the characteristics of Efficacy, stressing them for the performative needs. In Schechner's words: "The basic opposition is between efficacy and entertainment, not between ritual and theatre. Whether one calls a specific performance ritual or theatre depends on the degree to which the performance tends towards efficacy or entertainment. No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment".¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., 468.

One practical example is related to the concept of time: if in the 'entertainment-theatre' we are used to thinking of the event as happening in a precise moment; in the 'efficacy-ritual' time assumes an utterly different connotation. In the 'efficacy-ritual' time is symbolic and can be metaphorically abolished as a unit of measurement. However, the avant-garde theatre emphasized the concept of time by focusing on the actor's body, on its training, and on the creative process. Thereby the use of 'time' changes and this 'time' becomes efficacious: the attention paid to the creative process, "to the procedures of making theatre are ... attempts at ritualizing performance, of finding in the theatre itself authenticating acts".¹⁵ This

¹⁵ Ibid.

can be interpreted as a wish to provide the new theatre with the characteristics of efficacy, not at the expense of the entertainment, but working on the possibility of a simultaneous coexistence. "Avant-garde artists used terms like 'experimental' and 'research' to characterize their work, which took place in 'laboratories'. Efficacy lies at the ideological heart of all aspects of this new theatre".¹⁶ Thus, in its incorporation of ritual practices, the 'new theatre' is then based on the control of definite body skills related to the required concentration leading to its execution. This can be assimilated to what Victor Turner calls *flow*: that moment of extreme concentration and focus during which the actor/performer is totally in control and immersed in the execution of his/her activity, in which awareness and action melt

¹⁶ Ibid., 470.

¹⁷ See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Art Journal Publication, 1982), 52-58.

¹⁸ Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 48.

into one and their only goal is the fulfilment of the action itself.¹⁷ In order to achieve this *flow*, such an extraordinary state of awareness and inner control, the theatre reformers drew upon Asian traditions and techniques in which the ritualistic, the spiritual and the performative aspects are inseparable and in which ‘efficacy’ and ‘entertainment’ are both included in what Artaud defined as ‘Alchemical Theatre’.¹⁸ As will be later explained, this binary idea of ‘ritual’ and ‘theatre’ is subverted by Fabre. In fact, this strictly dualistic diagram takes a rather chiasmic shape when it comes to Fabre’s adaptation of the ritualistic forms of tragedy.

Seeking original, innovative forms, which strongly correlate to Antonin Artaud’s claim for an “Alchemical Theatre”, Fabre’s 24-hour work can be seen as a way of continuing to experiment with ritualistic elements and drawing upon ritualistic techniques, in order to explore mythological archetypes. These elements included non-verbal but bodily communication, spiritual healing, raising of collective consciousness, and especially the active engagement of performers with audience members. Fabre’s staging is in keeping with the use of ritual in avant-garde theatre as outlined by Schechner, where it is part of the attempt to “include their audience by creating special spaces and ritualistic-aesthetic actions”.¹⁹

¹⁹ Richard Schechner, “Performance Orientations in Ritual Theatre”, in Michael Issacharoff and Robin F. Jones, eds., *Performing Texts* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1988), 136. See also Robert J. Cardullo, “Ahistorical Avant-Gardism and the Theater”, *Neophilologus* 97 (2013), 446, accessed on April 1, 2016, doi 10.1007/s11061-012-9342-0.

²⁰ Innes, *Avant-Garde Theatre*, 3.

Christopher Innes identified as a unifying characteristic of the avant-garde its “quasi-religious focus on myth and magic, which in the theatre leads to experiments with ritual and ritualistic patterning of performance”.²⁰ In theatre terms this can be translated as a reversion to an ‘original’ form that can be explored in ritualistic practices such as, in the case of Fabre, the Dionysian rituals of ancient Greece. So, according to Innes: “Along with anti-materialism and revolutionary politics, the hallmark of avant-garde drama is the aspiration to transcendence, to the spiritual in its widest sense”.²¹ The theatrical exploration of ritualistic and spiritual elements, connected to the crossing of boundaries between the actor and spectator in the theatrical experience, has become one of the representative characteristics of 20th century Western theatre. Many avant-garde theatre artists experimented with ritualistic elements throughout the century, seeking to strengthen the bond between performers and audience and to recover the spiritual power that, in their opinion, theatre had lost. From this perspective, it is possible to detect in the work of Jan Fabre that connection between ritualistic and spiritual elements and their theatrical use and, in the specific case of *Mount Olympus*, it is possible to find the definition of a new scenic way of presenting the theatrical past. Clearly detectable is the application of principles retrieved from the ritualistic dimension of the performance to develop a new way of engaging with the audience experience, starting from his peculiar participatory conception of the theatrical space. In this sense, Fabre’s 24-hour-long performance, in its reconstruction of ritualistic, mythical, and tragic elements will be considered throughout this paper as theatrical research to rediscover the possibilities of the relational space between the performers’ and the spectators’ psychophysical

²¹ Ibid.

experience.

3. Sharing Tragedies in the Performative Space

One of the more eclectic artists of our time, Jan Fabre has over the past almost 40 years explored a wide spectrum of artistic practice, experimenting with boundaries and possibilities, whether working as a sculptor, performer, choreographer or director. A significant figure of the 'Flemish Wave', Fabre, along with prominent artists such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Alain Platel and Guy Cassiers, has continually negotiated those traditions – belonging first to avant-garde artistic practices, and then in to post-dramatic theatre – that, as I have pointed out at the beginning of this paper, have made of the rift with the establishment and the institution their distinctive feature.²² If many of above-named artists of the Flemish Wave were connected in a sort of elective affinity to the work and research of Jerzy Grotowski, especially concerning specific attention to the performer's body, Fabre more than anybody else has adopted the Artaudian lesson of cruelty by creating a form of 'Total Theatre' that can be put in direct filiation with the past century's experiments. Starting with his early works, he has re-read the concept of 'Body without Organs' from the theatrical philosophy of Antonin Artaud, deconstructing bodies, working on hyper-realistic sensitivity, and exploiting the idea of physicality in a visceral and anatomical way.²³ Artaud's concept of cruelty is often translated in Fabre's work as a sort of expanded idea of violence that revolves around the performers in every phase of their work, from training, to rehearsals, to the performance itself.²⁴ At the same time, Fabre's use of scenic cruelty is directed as an unconditioned reflex towards the spectators, who are subjected to an extreme form of shock, repulsion, and empathy. Transforming the actor, defined by Artaud as an 'athlete of the heart', into a 'warrior of beauty', Fabre brings on stage a sublime form of beauty that is never limited to the mere sphere of aesthetics or to the strict idea of form, but which unites the two with the keenness of feelings and the unworldly realm of the spiritual. There are some specific features that each Fabre production strictly maintains, such as the obsessive use of repetition, the brutal way of stressing the body, the fascination with everything that is tragic, and the fixation with the manipulation of time. All these characteristics reach their apex in the gargantuan operation that is *Mount Olympus*, the work that is probably his masterpiece, not just in terms of boldness and aspiration.

Mount Olympus: To glorify the cult of tragedy (a 24-hour performance), by Troubleyn|Jan Fabre, is a majestic contemporary re-adaptation of the rich corpus constituted by classical Greek tragedies. The production seems to have encountered extremely positive reactions and to have met the expected requirements for being what probably the director expected it to be: something to remember. All this, notwithstanding the risks of such an ambitious project. The production has been defined by one commentator as "historic", as a hallmark in

²² See Edith Cassiers et al., "Physiological Performing Exercises by Jan Fabre: An Additional Training Method for Contemporary Performers", *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 6.3 (2015), 274.

²³ See Christel Stalpaert, "The Reconfigurative Power of Desire. Jan Fabre's *As Long as the World Needs a Warrior's Soul*", *Arcadia International Journal for Literary Studies*, 40.1 (2005), 177-193.

²⁴ On the concept of the performer's body in the work of Jan Fabre see Luk Van den Dries, *Corpus Jan Fabre: Observations of a Creative Process* (Gent: Uitgeverij Imschoot, 2004).

²⁵ Freddy Decreus, "Jan Fabre's *Mount Olympus*, or How to Conceive Culture in Transitional Times?", *Critical Stages/Scènes Critiques*, 13 (June 2016), 1, <http://www.critical-stages.org/13/jan-fabre-mountain-olympus-or-how-to-conceive-culture-in-transitional-times/>, accessed 24 July 2017.

contemporary theatre inasmuch as it becomes possible to state that "there is a history before and after *Mount Olympus*".²⁵ And undoubtedly it is something magnificent that has never been hosted in a theatrical building as we know it today: a multiplicity of generations of performers on stage, a multiplicity of bodies, a multiplicity of languages, with one common denominator: tragedy. Ascribable to the form of contemporary tragedy, if such a category can be said to exist, Fabre's performance sneaks into the historical/cultural/social fabric we inhabit as witness of the inner tragedy that belongs to every human being in contemporary society. It does not suggest solutions, let alone the possibility of redemption. Rather it amounts to an opening up to the possibility of embracing the tragedy that never ends. It revolves around the possibility of celebrating it in a seemingly never-ending event, in which pain, desire, and excitement strip away any form of political correctness, giving space to the hyper-reality of a visceral physicality: a fest of the flesh. And if the tragic event is endless, the same goes for human tragedy itself. The possibility of accepting it, of feeling a sort of sadistic pleasure from it creates the opportunity, time and time again, of a new beginning. It is precisely in this obsession with time, its manipulation, its elusiveness, in the excruciating use of repetition that Fabre sounds his clarion call for a brand new need for catharsis, in an attempt to resolve the enigma of the tragic. The idea of purification, the possibility of emancipating oneself from the cage of tragedy by embracing it, becomes in *Mount Olympus* the means to build up the relationship with the spectators, who in a tacit agreement with the performers undergo and accept extreme forms of emotions by signing the pact of together experiencing tragedy for 24 hours. Last but not least, the spatial element allows for a holistic experience that overcomes the dualistic conception that distinguishes 'theatre' from 'ritual' as theorized by Schechner. In this paper I will specifically focus on the last-mentioned element, leaving aside the temporal realm, aware of the fact that this opens up relevant possibilities for further reflections.

There are two main considerations regarding the specific use of the theatrical space in *Mount Olympus* that will constitute the following section of this analysis. The first one concerns a discussion around the 'physical space', i.e. the space of the theatre, the stage/audience relationship, and the theatrical building. The second consideration, which evolves as consequent to the first, refers to a form of ideal space: the 'space of experience'.

In line with other 20th theatre practitioners, Jan Fabre transfers to his use of space a strong dramaturgical meaning, or, better, the space constitutes a prominent part of the performance's dramaturgy in a wider sense. Recalling and adapting the ideas of Marco De Marinis about the theatrical innovations of the past century, Fabre conceives the space in a dramaturgical dimension, refusing the restrictions that are given by the specific architectonical configuration of a certain theatrical building, and, at the same time using those same restrictions as part of the performative process, thus in a way forcing the space to re-adapt itself to the needs

of his work.²⁶ If, as De Marinis states, one of the main innovations of the avant-garde theatre reform is constituted both by the conception of the theatrical space as dramaturgical element and by the acquisition of new spaces outside the canonical, institutional buildings, thus turning to alternative locations, then Fabre's operation can be considered as counter-avant-garde insofar as he brings his experimental work back to the institution, staging his performance in canonical buildings, whether these are the Berliner Festspiele, the Toneelhuis in Antwerp, the Stadsschouwburg in Amsterdam, or Teatro Argentina in Rome. While it is undoubtedly true that the ideals of the avant-garde of abandoning the bourgeoisie's codes thus gave back to the arts their freedom, it is also true that what followed the pioneering actions carried out in the first half of the past century has been a re-appropriation of artistic experimentations by a new form of bourgeoisie who constitute theatrical audiences nowadays. Or, in Roland Barthes pungent words: "L'avant-garde n'est jamais qu'une façon de chanter la mort bourgeoise, car sa propre mort appartient encore à la bourgeoisie....".²⁷ *Mount Olympus* becomes, then, a sort of site-specific performance. The choice made by Fabre of bringing his work within the space of the institution creates a short circuit in the reception of the visceral and experimental form of the tragic adaptation. It was indeed one of my first questions as spectator: why here? Why am I sitting in a red velvet chair? But the staging and the preparation of an event such as this one transcends the mere duration of the performance. The space in use in *Mount Olympus* is not only the stage, and not because the performers move around the orchestra or directly interact with the public as some might think. It rather encloses a holistic conception of the theatrical space in which the foyer, the toilets, the space right outside the theatre door, become part of the whole performance, insofar as they are part of the director's choices. Every time members of the audience chose to leave their seat and go outside to smoke, or drink, or sleep, they are deliberately leaving a piece of their own tragedy behind. Fabre forces the bourgeois spectator, accustomed to certain norms of supposedly respectable behaviour to share not only the carnality of his tragic work, but the carnality of his 'warriors of beauty' as well as the carnality of the fellow audience member, who sometimes sleeps and snores while sitting in a chair nearby. He does so by asking, demanding, that his public step outside their comfort zone which usually belongs to those theatrical plays that result in a two or three hours' evening event and which most of the time meet their conclusion in 'foyer chitchat'. The 'physical space' becomes in this event liminal, fluid, and vulnerable. Vulnerability is a key word in the analysis of the experience of Fabre's work. It progressively becomes clear to the spectator that the relationship between vulnerability, space, and time is intertwined. In the current historical juncture we inhabit, we are every day becoming more accustomed to forgetting about how to be vulnerable. Or worse, we are told every day, by society, by advertising, by politics, that we must give up our vulnerability because this will cause us pain and shame. This specific characteristic concerning vulnerability

²⁶ See Marco De Marinis, *In cerca dell'attore. Un bilancio del Novecento teatrale* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2000), 32.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, "À l'avant-garde de quel théâtre?", *Théâtre populaire* (May 1956); republished in: *Écrits sur le théâtre* [1964], ed. by Jean-Loup Rivière (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 203.

brings the discussion towards the second consideration around the use of space in *Mount Olympus*, i.e. the space of experience. The kind of experience the spectator has access to throughout the duration of the entire performance reminds us that, especially now, in this time, in this era, is the moment to be free from social pre-construction and allow ourselves to be vulnerable. And when you offer yourself with vulnerability you gain empathy, and when you have access to empathy you gain trust, a form of trust you can learn to enjoy over a 24-hour timescale. It is important to underline that my conception of experience here does not refer to the experience of the tragic per se interpreted as theatrical and/or literary genre. It does not revolve around the idea of the perception of a hero that arouses feelings within the spectator's personal sphere. Specifically, I have no interest in this paper in debating tragedy and its adaptations along the lines of genre theory. Especially as, from this perspective, scholarly speaking, such debate is quite vivid and is mostly focused on texts.²⁸ I am rather inclined to consider the work of Fabre on space and time, and Olyslagers for what concerns the text, not merely as the work of a director together with an author, but as a work of an 'operator', who in the Deleuzian sense operates on the threshold of representation and subjectivity, in pursuit of an affective co-presence of performers and their audience.²⁹ Fabre and Olyslagers' 'operator mode' transcends the intellectual and literary understanding of the text, the hero's actions and reasons, and it sometimes rises above myth itself. Talking about the experience of the tragic it is worth mentioning Lehmann's words on the subject at issue:

Tragic experience – which must neither be reduced to sentimental reaction nor thought to provide any insight in particular – requires further elucidation, then. It does not occur simply via (mimetically) perceived representation, nor is it constituted by way of a certain mode of perceiving the presence of performers per se. Rather, tragic experience arises in and out of the concrete *theatrical situation*. On the one hand, it remains a matter of personal/individual experience; on the other, it is tied to a situation that is not experienced individually: all theatre – as a rule concretely, but structurally, in any case – addresses a plurality of recipients.³⁰

The experience of the tragic then depends on many factor and cannot be reduced to just emotions and feeling, nor to just rational understanding of the tragic significance. In the specific case of *Mount Olympus*, the tragic experience is a total experience, which affects those who are there to share the moment. Knowledge of the tragic content is mostly taken for granted; the performers recite their texts sometimes in English, sometimes each in their own language, and the event captivates the spectator on an emotional and sensorial level. The whole space is filled with smells, steam, and sweat that become almost a tangible, primary tool to create communication and contact with the audience, and, on a transcendental level, part of the tragic text itself. After all, as again Lehmann claimed: "ancient

²⁸ For a better understanding of this issue see Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* [2014] trans. by Erik Butler (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 115-122. See also George Rodosthenous, ed., *Contemporary Adaptations of Greek Tragedy: Authorship and Directorial Visions* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017).

²⁹ See Laura Cull, "How Do You Make Yourself a Theatre without Organs? Deleuze, Artaud and the Concept of Differential Presence", *Theatre Research International*, 34.3 (2009), 243-255.

³⁰ Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 127.

tragedy was above all and almost exclusively a *theatre experience*, and that as such it impressed itself on the bodies and minds of those who witnessed it”.³¹ In the 24-hour time period, the audience is psychophysiologically affected in an idea of experience, enclosed in a stretched and enlarged conception of space: the shared space of exhaustion between performers and spectators.³² The idea of exhaustion is repetitive, fluid, and endless. It does not end when the curtain drops, it keeps on going inasmuch as Dionysus and his heroes have passed the baton onto the spectators, who in the Eisensteinian understanding of ‘ex-stasis’ have reached the point of no return in their tolerance of pain and tiredness. The exhaustion is so unbearable that the only way to survive the tragedy seems to be not to conceal the need to move beyond oneself. And the theatre space becomes an arena, the performers gladiators, and the spectators avid supporters who cheer their heroes when they ask them by screaming all together “and now give me all the love you’ve got!”.

³¹ Ibid., 22.

³² The idea of exhaustion has been here applied to the specificity of the spatial element, considered as vehicle towards a new form of shared relation between performers and spectators. However, this same concept constitutes the base for further theoretical development if analyzed in relation to the concepts of time, duration, and repetition in Fabre’s performance.

The idea of ‘shared space of exhaustion’ vaguely recalls the ‘shared space of actions’ that belongs to the neuroscientific discovery of the mirror neurons system. Such space, as Clelia Falletti pointed out, is not a metaphorical or a mental one. It is a rather physical, concrete and measurable space in our brain in which our neurons activate each time someone carries out actions in front of us. It is that space that mirrors the doer’s actions making the relationship with the observer possible. All this at the level of our nervous system, thus transcending an intellectual understanding of the other’s intention.³³ And if cognitive neuroscience has told us what theatre already knew since the beginning of its existence, i.e. that ‘to see is to do’ and that to attend a theatre event is never a passive action, then, in the case of *Mount Olympus*, it will not be too bold to say that performers and spectators share in that cathartic space that is the theatrical event, a level of exhaustion that is unique and that cannot be elsewhere reproduced. The participation in this tragic theatrical event is then, simultaneously active, insofar as the spectator ‘actively’ chooses each time what to watch and when to watch, and also passive in a ‘pathetic’ way. The spectator is forced to attend the event in the sacred space of the theatre, reproducing the Greek concept of ‘theoria’. In this way creating, as Gadamer points out in his phenomenological analysis of the tragic experience, the form of true participation, the moment in which the spectator gives in to madness. In Gadamer’s words: “being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else. This kind of being present is a self-forgetfulness, and to be a spectator consists in giving oneself in self-forgetfulness to what one is watching”.³⁴ This form of true participation, this truth that only the tragic gives access to, becomes real throughout the whole performance and reaches its climax during Dionysus’s final monologue in which he claims: “truth is what eats you alive, and yes, truth is madness... It goes on, and on, and on, and on, until every single one of you screams with madness. And even that, I can ensure you, it’s just the beginning”.³⁵

³³ See Clelia Falletti, Gabriele Sofia and Victor Jacono, eds., *Theatre and Cognitive Neuroscience* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), 3-14.

³⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [1975] trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 122.

³⁵ For what concerns the script, this is a transcription from the video of the performance available online. The official publication of the script is available only in Flemish. See Jan Fabre and Jeroen Olyslagers, *Mount Olympus: Het Script* (Amsterdam-Antwerpen: De Bezige Bij, 2016).

The true experience of the spectator, together with the performers, in the tragic space of *Mount Olympus* then takes place at the ex-static level that belongs to the cathartic realm. Fabre's production revolves around an idea of experience that is not just aesthetic and also not merely conceptual; it is not purely affective, neither is it based on a psychological process of self-reflection. It is an active and participatory experience and yet passive and 'pathetic', based on the tacit agreement of the awareness of a fictional process that is really happening and consuming itself in the 'here and now', and is repeated all over again and does not end. And if performers and spectators share exhaustion, desires, passions, smells, and sweat in this 'shared space' of the tragic, they also share the responsibility of nurturing the tragedy within oneself. Or as the warriors of beauty – in a moment of final relief – say at the very end to their partners in crime: "Take the power back.

³⁶ Ibid. Enjoy your own tragedy. Breathe, just breathe, and imagine something new!"³⁶