

Alain Badiou

WITH NICOLAS TRUONG

In Praise of Theatre

Electric *Topical*



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Alain Badiou with
Nicolas Truong

translated, with an introduction and notes, by
Andrew Bielski

polity

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This book emerged out of a public dialogue between Alain Badiou and Nicolas Truong which took place on 15 July 2012 as part of the ‘Théâtre des Idées’ [‘Theatre of Ideas’] series, a program of intellectual and philosophical discussions at the Festival d’Avignon [Avignon Festival].

Alain Badiou and the Untimely Stage: Translator's Introduction

The appearance of *In Praise of Theatre* in English translation represents the most recent in a steady succession of publication and performance events related to the theatre of French militant philosopher Alain Badiou. Taken together with the worldwide release of *The Incident at Antioch* in a bilingual edition, the English publication of *Ahmed the Philosopher* recently made two of Badiou's plays available to anglophone audiences for the first time – three, if one takes his *Plato's Republic* as a dramatic work, for which there already exists a precedent: during the 2013–14 theatrical season, Badiou's “hypertranslation” of this foundational philosophical text was performed to considerable acclaim on the stage of the Théâtre

Nanterre-Amandiers, and plans have long been under way to bring the work to the screen in a film version titled *The Life of Plato*.¹ During the 2014–15 theatrical season, *Ahmed the Philosopher* will receive a new production at the Théâtre de la Commune d'Aubervilliers, where Badiou is an artistic associate, and to which his annual seminar, previously held at the École normale supérieure in Rue d'Ulm, was recently relocated. Appropriately, Badiou took the occasion of the seminar's first meeting in its updated venue as an opportunity to announce the completion of a new play, a comedy titled *Le second procès de Socrate* [*The Second Trial of Socrates*].²

This surge of activity surrounding Badiou's work as a dramatist has been complemented by a growing interest in his theoretical writings on the stage, which, like his plays, have only recently been introduced to the English-speaking world. In 2014, Badiou's masterwork of theatre theory, *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, was released in a new French edition with a fresh preface by the author.³ This second edition followed hard upon the book's appearance in English translation as part of an edited volume which also brings together several of Badiou's occasional

writings on the theatre.⁴ In the essay “Theatre and Philosophy,” included in this indispensable collection, Badiou reflects upon his choice of “a short philosophical treatise” as the subtitle for *Rhapsody*. Such a choice, he writes, “presupposes that, cutting diagonally across many centuries, there exists a singular relation between the artifices of the spectacle and the severity of philosophical argumentation.”⁵ Expanding upon the theory of the theatre established in *Rhapsody*, and in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics, In Praise of Theatre* solidifies the centrality of the stage for Badiou’s thought.⁶ In doing so, it makes clear the degree to which the theatre serves – from the early *Theory of the Subject*, to the in-progress *The Immanence of Truths* – as the diagonal for Badiou’s philosophical project, sweeping across its systematic armature like the clinamen of the ancient atomists, and animating its subjective possibilities. In the book’s opening pages, we find the following statement on the significance for Badiou of the relationship between theatre and philosophy in his project:

The theatre satisfies that part of myself for which thought takes the form of an emotion, of a pivotal

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moment, of a kind of engagement with what is given immediately to see and to hear. But I had – I still have – a need of a completely different order: that thought take the form of irresistible argumentation, of the submission to a logical and conceptual power which concedes nothing when it comes to the universality of its question. Plato had the same problem: he was also persuaded that mathematics proposed an unrivaled model of fully realized thought. But, great rival of the theatre that he was, he also wanted for thought to be found in the intensity of a moment, for it to be a hazardous yet triumphant path. He resolved his problem by writing philosophical dialogues in which mathematics are discussed, as in the *Meno*, with a slave met by chance. I myself am not capable of such dialogues, though – and besides, no one since Plato has been. So, I accepted to be divided between the classical form of philosophy, which is to say great systematic treatises, and the occasional incursion, a kind of joyful foray, into the domain of the theatre.

Like the 2012 *In Praise of Love*, the present volume emerged out of a dialogue between Badiou and Nicolas Truong which took place as part of the Avignon Festival's "Theatre of Ideas" series.⁷ Given both the significance of the theatre

for his project, and his conception of truth as inseparable from a certain understanding of the idea, it is fitting that Badiou should have such an intimate relationship with the series, now in its eleventh year. Indeed, the "Theatre of Ideas" takes its title from the work of Antoine Vitez, a towering figure of the French theatre who staged Badiou's "novel-opera," *The Red Scarf*, at Avignon, and to whose theoretical reflections on the theatre the latter's project is deeply indebted.⁸ It was Vitez who underscored the theatre's capacity, unique among the arts, to become a site for the immanent incarnation of transcendent ideas. In the present volume, Badiou provides his own definition of the idea as at once transcendent and immanent: "The idea," he explains, "presents itself as more powerful than ourselves and constitutes the measure of that which humanity is capable of: in this sense, it is transcendent; but it exists only precisely when it is represented and activated or incarnated in a body: in this sense, it is also immanent."⁹

Unlike dance, understood as the immanent representation of what the body is capable of without reference to the idea, or cinema, taken as the transcendence of the image, ungrounded

in corporeal immanence, the theatre, in Badiou's perspective, "treats immanence and transcendence *in the immediate*," making it "the most complete of the arts." In its oscillation between the pure celebration of the body's potential and the spectacular nature of the image, the theatre is the only art which "grasps the relation between immanence and transcendence from the point of view of the idea," making it particularly disposed to the eventual emergence of artistic truths. It is precisely this potential of the theatre to become "the site of the idea's living appearance" that makes it uniquely capable of illuminating the confusion of the times, thereby orienting its subjects in the obscurity in which they are situated.

If *Rhapsody* and the *Handbook of Inaesthetics* established Badiou's theory of a theatre of ideas, the present volume asks after the ways in which such a theatre might be adequate to the particular confusion of our "contemporary, market-oriented chaos." In Badiou's assessment, this chaos consists of two principal perspectives, the first, a nihilistic standpoint which "not only declares that ideas have disappeared, but adds that one can very well make do with this absence," and the second, a hedonistic point of view whose themes