

Introduction

The Discourses of Theatre and Governance

During its long history the stage has been subject to the hostility of moral and religious commentators, the contempt of philosophers and the ire of governments. It has been taken as a threat to the very existence of the political order: something to be censured, perhaps even suppressed. This study aims to revisit the peculiar discontentment that so infuses the social history of the modern European stage. It aims to tell anew the story of how theatre was thought by those who viewed it as symptomatic of the corruption of society, as expressing the image of the social malcontent, who perceived the stage to be a cradle of sedition – a spur to the grumbling hive – or who feared that it would incite and inflame the degenerate predilections of the vice-ridden multitude. Indeed, by the nineteenth century the theatre becomes a means, among some commentators, of defining and categorising those ‘dangerous classes’ who could not be assimilated into the vision of a harmonious social totality. And yet this is also the history of those who took a different view of the stage: who saw it as a tool for instructing the people, as something that, through the power of its pedagogical effects, could help found a more virtuous and coherent society. In their hands, theatre became an instrument of reform. It provided a means for sustaining the social order through the cultivation of a national identity – in short, this is also the story of how the stage was assimilated during the modern period to the interests of government.

In spite of this history, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the idea that the stage possesses any profoundly political influence is treated with a fair degree of scepticism in theatre and performance circles today.¹ It may even seem preposterously naive or incredible to think that

¹ See, for example, Alan Read’s intricate discussion of theatre’s political dimension, structured around the sceptical proposition: ‘Theatre is a total stranger to the instrumentality of political effects’, Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement: The Last Human Venue* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 27; Joe Kelleher’s *Theatre and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 72; and Brandon Woolf’s ‘Toward a Paradoxically Parallaxical Postdramatic Politics’, in *Postdramatic Theatre*

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such a view was once taken seriously. It is certainly difficult to envisage a time when the stage was held to have had such powerful and influential effects on those who frequented it in previous centuries. The most explicit expression of this line of attack against the pedagogical and political efficacy of the stage is found in a short but controversial article by the philosopher Jacques Rancière, who has popularised the view that the spectator is not, and never was, in need of being emancipated. I will not be detained by that debate here, except to say that for the purposes of the present study my approach is entirely agnostic when it comes to answering the question as to whether or not there is or can be such a thing as a genuinely ‘efficacious’ theatre.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the stage and politics must be self-evidently implicated in a study whose title is ‘Theatre and Governance’, and so it obliges me to say something about my view of that relationship at the outset. What I would like to suggest in this book is that far from being mistaken, or jejune, the questions that were addressed to the theatre, throughout its long history, concerning the social, moral and political efficacy of the stage are of profound import to us. The way the stage is governed today is very much a product of this history. It is a history that has shaped the stage in two fundamental senses, both germane to this enquiry. The first permits, through an analysis of its discourse, an explication of the way the theatre is positioned as a social institution. It speaks to the history of the social, political, moral, philosophical and economic influences that have informed the way the modern theatre developed. The second sense, although this is more difficult to discern, shows that the discursive positioning of the theatre had a profound impact on the way theatre was made. It requires an examination of how those discourses are implicated at the level of its shifting practices, to perceive the marks and traces of such discursive effects upon theatre’s material surfaces. To the extent that the various discourses on the stage have had an undeniable influence upon it, the proposition behind this study is that no full understanding of the relationship between the theatre and the political sphere will be complete without thoroughly comprehending how these two histories intersect. This brings me to the objective I have set myself in this book: to present a critical history of the discourses of the stage and, in so doing, to account for the haphazard development of European

and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance, ed. Jüri-Munby, Carroll and Giles (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 31–46.

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theatre and its practices in light of *another* genealogy – that of the modern practices of government that have influenced and shaped it.

In order to explicate the themes of the book, this introduction begins with a brief overview of the way Plato made use of the image of the theatre in the *Laws*. The reason for this is simple: the issues that recur throughout the discourse on the modern theatre inevitably align, in one way or another, with the Platonic vision of the stage. Having sketched these broad themes, I then consider the methodology of the book, where I return to the problem of governance in more detail, and specifically to Michel Foucault's notion of governmentality, upon which the study draws. In the final section, I turn to the theoretical rationale behind its argument and the exposition of its chapters.

Theme

Plato's Theatocratic Metaphor

In the third book of Plato's *Laws*, the unnamed Athenian visitor who is at the centre of the dialogue engages his two interlocutors (the Spartan, Megillus, and Clinias the Cretan) in a peregrination that seems at first blush to be quite an incidental and minor issue given their preoccupation with the laws and constitution of states: a discourse over the regulation of music in the ancient Athenian *polis*. It soon becomes clear, however, that far from regaling his listeners with a pleasant if trivial digression into the oddities of a long-since-lapsed Athenian law, what emerges is one of the most fundamental issues confronting any political state. It is a problem that places the theatre, and the problem of democratic licence with which it will be associated by Plato, at the very heart of government. It is therefore fitting that this study, which is concerned precisely with investigating the relationship between the stage and governance, should begin by first situating it in the context of a dispute that can be traced back to antiquity.

What is of concern to the Athenian visitor is the way in which the loosening up of the regulations governing music can be seen as analogous to the more general liberalisation of law that now defines the *polis* of Athens. The purpose of such a proposition is not simply to show how life has become 'progressively freer of controls';² it is to assess, more crucially, the consequences of this development for the government of the city. In

² Plato, *Laws*, III, 700b.

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the past, the visitor patiently explains, the old laws were rigidly imposed and the people adhered to them, living ‘in a kind of “voluntary slavery”’.³ Likewise, the musicians, composers and performers of Athens were subject to strict controls, which were applied through the systematic regulation of the approved categories, genres and forms of music. In this way, music was both tolerated in the *polis* and received the protection of its legislators. Its musicians were permitted to compose hymns, since through them the poet could sing praises to the gods. They could also compose laments, paeans and dithyrambs and, finally, nomes – that class of poems sung to the accompaniment of the lyre and whose name is significant due to its etymological link to *nomos*, the Greek word for law. These categories were known and fixed by legislation; and according to this ancient statute, it was prohibited to alter them or to employ any kind of tune in a composition that derived from a separate category. Since the form of music composition was so closely identified with the law that regulated it, the corruption of one would automatically entail the infringement of the other.

This strict regulation was not confined to composers of music, however; it also applied to the spectators – as the Athenian explains:

And what was the authority which had to know these standards and use its knowledge in reaching verdicts, and crack down on the disobedient? Well, certainly no notice was taken of the catcalls and uncouth yelling of the audience, as it is nowadays, nor yet of the applause that indicates approval. People of taste and education made it a rule to listen to the performance with silent attention right through to the end; children and their attendants and the general public could always be disciplined and controlled with a stick. Such was the rigor with which the mass of the people was prepared to be controlled in the theatre and to refrain from passing judgment by shouting.⁴

Where once the audience attended a performance in silent and respectful appreciation, now it indulged in the frenzy of applause. It is obvious to the Athenian that a vociferous crowd, which expresses its pleasure or displeasure by braying and howling, is also a disobedient and insolent crowd. What, though, he asks, explains such a stunning transformation in the behaviour of audiences? In fact, what precipitates this lamentable deterioration in their behaviour must be understood in terms of the power of manipulation that the composer possesses through the effects his composition has on them, and which explains exactly why composition must fall under the remit of the law. The problem is this: there came a time when

³ *Ibid.*, 700a. ⁴ *Ibid.*, 700c–d.

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composers grew tired of the restrictions placed on their art by legislators; they began to experiment, broke the rules, tore up the statutes and deliberately set out to offend good taste. Although one cannot say that these composers lacked talent – quite the contrary – what they did lack was sufficient respect for the ‘correct and legitimate standards laid down by the Muse’.⁵ The result was cacophony, the pandemonium unleashed by mixing incompatible melodies, rhythms, measures and genres: ‘Gripped by a frenzied and excessive lust for pleasure, they jumbled together laments and hymns, mixed paeans and dithyrambs, and even imitated pipe tunes on the lyre. The result was a total confusion of styles.’⁶ Not only did they offend against the law that ensured good taste; by abandoning that scrupulous rectitude of composition imposed by law, quite unintentionally they produced an effect that would be far more pernicious in its wider consequences. What these musicians inadvertently proclaimed through their compositions was the idea that ‘in music there are no standards of right and wrong at all, but that the most “correct” criterion is the pleasure of the man who enjoyed the performance, whether he is a good man or not’.⁷

I would like to mark the correlation here of good taste in music and good morals, since what the composers did not anticipate was precisely the social catastrophe that their experiments with composition would produce. In suspending the ancient law, they thoughtlessly imposed a new one. Not only did they effectively reject the only sound basis upon which discernment and judgement in matters of taste is founded; most calamitously of all, they delivered the power to judge music to those least capable of doing so – to the common member of the audience.

Consequently they gave the ordinary man not only a taste for breaking the laws of music but the arrogance to set himself up as a capable judge. The audience once silent, began to use their tongue; they claimed to know what was good and bad in music, and instead of a ‘musical meritocracy’, a sort of vicious ‘theatrocracy’ arose.⁸

It is hardly worth asking what this peculiar word, ‘theatrocracy’, signifies for Plato, for it is quite clear: it denotes the scandal of democracy itself. To be sure, says the Athenian, the oddity of the democratic form of spectatorship would not in itself be troubling if all that it signified was degeneracy in the conduct of audiences at the theatre. Although such a spectacle would be disgraceful and unedifying, no great harm would come

⁵ *Ibid.*, 700d. ⁶ *Ibid.*, 700d. ⁷ *Ibid.*, 700e. ⁸ *Ibid.*, 700e–701a.

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of it for the state. But at this point an elision emerges in the Athenian's argument that will be endlessly repeated throughout the centuries to come. On the one hand, the degeneracy of the laws over music composition is interpreted as the first sign of a more general slackening of the standards of obedience by which the people's submission to the rule of their governors can be demonstrated. The poor behaviour of audiences in the theatre thus becomes a convenient symptom with which to diagnose the ailments of the democratic form of government. On the other hand, what the composers of the *Laws*, and the poets of the *Republic*, initiate is the effective cause of the theatrocratic state insofar as they promote the general conviction that every man can be 'an authority on everything'.⁹ With such disregard for the law, the incipient democratic tastes of the theatre audience usher in a state of uncurbed license; and the former authority of the *polis*, once grounded in true knowledge and the wisdom of an eminent and educated elite, is quickly supplanted and usurped by the authority of 'each and all'. But what kind of authority is it that is grounded in nothing other than the 'assurance engendered by effrontery' and a 'reckless lack of respect for one's betters'?¹⁰ In the revolt of theatrocratic speech, what one finds is not just a total disregard for authority but the collapse of the rule of law as such. This is the vicious condition of government defined by the word 'theatrocracy': it names that government of the ungovernable – a government of the ungovernable by the ungovernable and for the ungovernable – which 'springs from a freedom from inhibitions that has gone much too far'.¹¹

The Corrective Use of the Theatre Metaphor in the Laws

It would not be farfetched to say, at this point, that for Plato all is not lost with respect to the theatre, notwithstanding the diabolical degeneracy of the theatrical state he describes. In the *Laws*, there is not only a corrective to the problem posed by the theatre, but also, in an astonishing twist in the argument, a solution that recuperates the theatre, transforming it into the very model of good government. In the *Philebus*, Plato had already prepared the ground for such an image of the theatre by drawing a vivid comparison between the theatrical stage and 'life's tragedies and comedies',¹² but it was not until the end of his life, with the writing of the *Laws*, that the metaphor of the theatre as the very form of the ideal state takes on, for the first time, its comprehensive and familiar shape. It is here that he

⁹ *Ibid.*, 701a. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 701a–b. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 701b. ¹² Plato, *Philebus*, 50b.

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employs the famous image ‘that each of us living beings is a puppet of the gods’,¹³ and in book VII he would even go so far as to compare the act of founding the state itself to the genre of tragedy.¹⁴ The statesman is pictured as composing laws, just as the tragedian composes his tragedies, although there is a notable difference between the two in that while the poet trades in pleasing representations designed to pander to the vulgar disposition of the crowd in the *agora*,¹⁵ the statesman crafts his representation in homage to the divine authority on which he models his design. Where the latter speaks of truth and justice, and thereby aims at a state founded on order and perfection, the former, according to the *Republic*’s well-known prescriptions, trades in falsehoods and serves only to undermine public and civic institutions, corrupting the integrity of the *polis* by introducing a plague of disorders.

All the same, these theatrical images come at a price, conjured as they were from a philosophical imagination that was in conflict with itself since it was also saturated by a profound affinity for the very thing it wished to exclude. Because of this the *Laws* might well be seen as an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable: the image, if not the reality, of the stage with the project of a perfectly regulated state. Even as he appeals to tragic poetry, Plato takes great care to ward off its excesses: theatre is employed as a means to defeat the theatre; or rather, and more precisely expressed, it is invoked to ward off what the theatre itself arouses and encourages: the calamitous state of affairs that befalls the state when theatre rules supreme. Was it by accident that Plato, a philosopher obsessed with symmetry, crafted two metaphorical functions for the theatre? To be sure, if the theatre is invoked by Plato to render philosophy a service, it is only inasmuch as it possesses a metaphorical power, and only insofar as one should, at least according to the kind of rationality that led the Greeks to the discovery of the *pharmacon*, administer poison if one wants to cure a sickness.

Nevertheless, the theatre metaphor proves to be profoundly metastable in Plato’s hands; its undercurrents produce deep uncertainties, not least because, according to Plato, and perhaps due to his own suppressed predilections, his very use of the metaphor concedes that theatre has already prevailed – here and everywhere, on earth and in the heavens – and precisely because the metaphor extends the theatrical *topos* to include the entire cosmological order, whose obscure shape and design it comes to define and render visible. And yet the instability introduced by the

¹³ Plato, *Laws*, I, 644d. ¹⁴ Plato, *Laws*, VII, 817b. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 817c.

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doubling of the metaphor never troubles the *Laws*. For one thing, it is never presented as a simple opposition. Plato does not present the two opposing images of the theatre as a brute juxtaposition: the theatre of the world – the cosmos imagined as a vast theatrical system – and the simulacral and inferior theatre of the tragedians. On the contrary, the theatre metaphor and its double are fixed by a logic of mutual exclusion, as demanded by an ontological and epistemic order whose normative arrangement was implicitly taken for granted. It is to assert that one theatre must necessarily preclude the existence of the other, and vice versa. The theatrocratic state is produced precisely when one disregards the divine provenance of the law, while the well-ordered society demands the suppression of those democratic predilections that lie at the heart of a theatrocracy.

The German philosopher Ernst Cassirer once remarked that, for Plato, '[t]he political cosmos is only a symbol, and the most characteristic one, of the universal cosmos.'¹⁶ What this recalls links the *Laws* to a previous work, the *Timaeus*, which Plato does not explicitly make reference to at this point; the connection was most certainly made by later commentators, however.¹⁷ In the *Timaeus*, Plato developed his cosmological understanding to its fullest extent in the figure of the *demiurge* – the divine fabricator, the 'maker and father of the Kosmos'.¹⁸ The Platonic notion of cosmogony, which casts God in the role of cosmic artist, would have a profound impact, later, on the cosmological imagination of the Renaissance when, during the fifteenth century, Ficino, for instance, would describe God as the 'great artisan'. For my present purposes, it is perhaps sufficient to note that in Plato's *Laws* what is prepared in the image of the theatre of God is a means of connecting a political order, the just state, to a cosmological and divine order. The intrinsic political meaning behind this spectacular design had already been asserted in the *Republic*, and in terms that were designed to show it to be self-evident: 'There is a model [of the *polis*] in heaven, for anyone who wants to look at it and to make himself its citizen on the strength of what he sees.'¹⁹ It is thanks to these peculiarly theatrical images that a form of government is able to be asserted that, insofar as it appeals to an authority that transcends the world, is granted an absolute right to dominate it.

¹⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, trans. Charles W. Hendel (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974 [1946]), p. 66.

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of this, see Lynda G. Christian's *Theatrum Mundi: The History of an Idea* (Harvard Dissertations in Comparative Literature) (New York: Garland, 1987).

¹⁸ Plato, *Timaeus*, 3.28. ¹⁹ Plato, *Republic*, IX, 592b.

Methodology

Discourse, Theatre and the Idea of Governance

To envisage the image of the theatre as the form that makes the cosmological order perceptible to the human mind is evidently not to speak of theatres in the particular or even of the theatre in general. Still less should Plato be understood to be proposing a 'Platonic theatre' in the manner suggested by Martin Puchner in *The Drama of Ideas* – the putative theatre (or otherwise) found in the Socratic dialogues.²⁰ Nor should he be seen as providing, even in embryonic form, a blueprint for what would later comprise the rationale by which the national theatres across Europe were developed. Theatre is here grasped as a pure figure of thought, as a metaphor with which to think the discernible arrangement and legibility of the world, immediately available to all those who have an eye for it, in its visibility and representability. In this manner, philosophy understands theatre to have a certain explanatory scope, a certain discursive radius; in short, a certain explicative value for the legislator who would seek to build a state. But it is far from clear where that leaves the actual theatre. If it is the 'theatre of the world' that was henceforth afforded an immense amount of prestige in the minds of philosophers and theologians, the material theatre of the poet entered history, more often than not, accompanied by a prestigious quantity of their condescension and contempt.

But what does history itself tell us about the 'old quarrel between philosophy and poetry', as Plato famously expresses it?²¹ Is it quite as polemically rigidified as it might at first appear to be? While theatre scholars are very familiar today with the history of this antipathy from the work of Jonas Barish, the 'anti-theatricalist' thesis he promotes, or such is the view of this study, only tells one-half of the story.²² And, as it happens, far from being the subject of an anti-theatrical prejudice, when it comes to the development of the modern stage, at least, the European theatre is invested by the polity with the kind of standing that would eventually qualify it for the emoluments of the state. As early as 1690, the first national theatre was inaugurated in Europe in the form of the Comédie Française; and although it would take until 1949 before

²⁰ See Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²¹ Plato, *Republic*, X, 607b.

²² Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

Parliament would pass the act that would see the building of a national theatre in London, already by the late nineteenth century the English stage had been taken up by the middle classes and given pride of place in the pantheon of its activities. Might it not be said that despite all the noise and bluster that condemns the stage as a diabolical artifice, the arguments of anti-theatricalists are of rather less significance than commentators such as Barish would have us believe, and that this is borne out precisely by the building of theatres across Europe whose sole purpose lies in promoting the prestige and self-esteem of nations?

There is another possibility, however: might it be the case that the arguments of anti-theatricalists and pro-theatricalists share rather more in common than they think and that such polemical attitudes would have us believe? It is this thought that provides the leading clue for the present effort. Indeed, what has guided me in this study began with the idea that if one moves beyond the level of polemics, and locates such anti-theatrical statements within a wider discursive terrain, as forming part of a broader system of statements concerning the stage, regarding its lawfulness or otherwise, what will be revealed is less the disparity between their respective points of utterance – even less will it be a matter of disagreement between the opinions and beliefs that motivated different speakers – than a question of discerning their structural filiation.

Tracing that filiation belongs to the task of uncovering a discourse. Such a task should not, for all its apparent similarities, be confused with works that seek to establish the meaning of the theatre in its different permutations, through a synoptic history of how the theatre was theorised, as can be found, for example, in Marvin Carlson's dauntingly compendious *Theories of the Theatre*.²³ The task I have set myself is rather more limited in scope. I take the temporal boundaries of the event by which this discourse can be demarcated as commencing in the late sixteenth century and coming to maturity in the late nineteenth century, and the principal geographical locus, for the sake of linguistic convenience, to be primarily, although not exclusively, the London stage. The reasons behind these choices are threefold. First, I have sought to trace the shifts and displacements, continuities and points of rupture in the discursive positioning of the stage in the specific context of the development of modern forms of government. Second, the modern form of government emerges during the sixteenth century, just as the modern European stage is born. In other

²³ Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).