

The People Staged
Julia Eilers Smith

This text accompanies the exhibition

A Stage for Rebellion

Curated by Julia Eilers Smith

With the participation of Wingston González, Clara Ianni, Onyeka Igwe, Bouchra Khalili, Amol K Patil, Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa, The Living and the Dead Ensemble and Ashes Withyman

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“I thought there was a message to convey and that this message could be conveyed more broadly and accessibly through theatre than poetry. Poetry is a bit like man alone with himself, while theatre offers exposure and understanding. It seemed to me the form best adapted to the new situation that I was living through, this tremendous event of the 1960s that is decolonization [...]”

—Aimé Césaire¹

“The function of the theatre is to explode fears by bringing them out into the light of day.”

¹ « J'ai pensé qu'il y avait un message à transmettre et que ce message pouvait être transmis de manière plus large et plus accessible par le théâtre que par la poésie. La poésie, c'est un petit peu l'homme seul avec lui-même, et le théâtre, c'est un donner à voir, un donner à comprendre. Cela m'a paru la forme la plus adaptée à la nouvelle situation que je vivais, cet événement formidable qu'est la décolonisation des années 1960 [...] » From *Aimé Césaire: A Voice for History. III: The Strength to Face Tomorrow*, directed by Euzhan Palcy (California Newsreel, 1994) 52 min (our translation).

—Sylvia Wynter²

The second half of the twentieth century is frequently described as a period marked by the disruption and erosion of colonial empires under the pressure of struggles for independence and the aspirations for freedom by colonized peoples. A number of artists, intellectuals, and militants engaged in these emancipation movements turned to community and radical theatre to reclaim their histories and help forge a political alternative to the dominant colonial narrative. With their immediate audience in mind, these works broke, for the most part, with theatrical conventions of the time, and directly addressed the preoccupations and local histories that affected their public.

The artists assembled in the exhibition *A Stage for Rebellion* look back on these twentieth-century theatre traditions that served revolutionary struggles. By echoing their political demands and revisiting plays and actions that have faded from history, they draw into the present the emancipatory project of these theatre movements, examining it in light of the political issues of our time.

This exhibition brings to light a range of groups and experiences of radical theatre, from the militant performances of São Paulo's Arena theatre to travelling medieval troupes as precursors to contemporary radical street theatre. We also find the Arab Workers Movement's

² From Sylvia Wynter, "An introductory essay to an adaptation of Federico García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* and an extract from the adapted play *The House and Land of Mrs. Alba*," in *We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Decolonising Essays, 1967-1984* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2021) 75.

agitprop theatre in France, a university theatre group during the civil war in Guatemala, theatres serving anticolonial movements in the United Kingdom and working-class resistance in India, and, finally, an artists' collective in Port-au-Prince taking hold of theatre to amplify their cries of revolt. Not simply performing or representing rebellion, these different movements instead inscribed their struggles into reality at the very moment that it took shape.

To resurrect these dissident voices from the past, the artists in the exhibition meet with protagonists or witnesses of the time, exhume archives when they exist, visit the places where their ideas and actions were born, or fill in—through rewriting and imagination—the gaps in official history, time, and memories. The works presented also renew the poetic and subversive scope of political theatre, reactivating methods of resistance, protest, and consciousness-raising to rethink today's collective struggles.

The Body's Act

Artist Clara Ianni dives into the history of São Paulo's experiential theatre company Teatro Arena and the political and ideological context that emerged in 1950s Brazil. Her video *Repetições* (Repetitions) (2017–2018) reactivates one of the troupe's plays by way of the memory and experience of one of its key players, Izaias Almada, who is recorded as he tries to memorize the musical play *Arena Conta Zumbi* (Arena recounts Zumbi), which he played in 1965. Directed by

renowned Brazilian dramaturge and theorist Augusto Boal (later founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed) and co-written by Gianfrancesco Guarnieri and Edu Lobo, this iconic play was the first to denounce the 1964 military coup in Brazil.

Arena Conta Zumbi recounts Zumbi dos Palmares' resistance, a historic figure who led the first uprising of Brazilian slaves against the Portuguese colonizers at the end of the seventeenth century in Brazil's northeast. Following its presentation, authorities condemned the play as communist propaganda for its falsification of national historical facts and deification of the slave rebellion. Active until 1972, Teatro Arena regularly drew on national narratives of past struggles to address the quest for freedom and to oppose Brazil's despotic regime during the military dictatorship (1964–1985).

More than fifty years after taking part in the play, Almada finds himself again in Teatro Arena's fold.³ He returns to his memories, calling on his body's memory. We observe him while he conducts vocal exercises and preparations: humming the play's melodies, attempting to remember the words and dialogue, and trying to reconstitute an approximation of the roles, positions, and movements on stage. The centrality of Almada's body in Ianni's video, immersed and alone in the

³ The Teatro Arena company in São Paulo started as a collective composed of a few university graduates. Its mission was to create a socially engaged, realist, and affordable theatre, distinguishing itself from other contemporary theatres by focusing on works by national authors and dramaturges. Located in the heart of São Paulo's central Vila Buarque neighbourhood, the Teatro Arena stood out for its circular arena-like configuration, allowing close interaction with the public. The venue's capacity was roughly one hundred spectators.

black box, is matched by the absence of the collective body and public that animated this same space during the play's presentation. As fragments of his memories surface, the group's project for social transformation appears further and further away, withered by the passage of time.

Repressive political contexts instantiated by military governments, as in Brazil after 1964, prevailed in the majority of South and Central America from the 1950s to the late 1990s. In 1975, amid the civil war in Guatemala and under the U.S.-backed military regime, a group of theatre students at the Popular University of Guatemala elected to organize against violence and censorship in their country. The troupe staged an adaptation of Hugo Carrillo's 1962 political play *El corazón del espantapájaros* (The Heart of the Scarecrow). This revival caused a storm of controversy, triggering a series of repressive measures, notably the cancelling of showings, the burning of the theatre, death threats, and even the murder of one of the play's actors. To this date, no documentary trace of the 1975 production has been found, and the subject itself remains taboo among the public.

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa learned about this event through his uncle, who played a minor role in the play at the time. A source of inspiration for the artist in recent years, his uncle's testimony prompted him to devise works imagining the universe of the censored play. Rather than attempting to reproduce the lost version, these works

reinterpret its messages and meanings, making them part of the contemporary socio-political landscape.

The aquatint series *El corazón del espantapájaros* (2015) is one of the first results of this research. Ramírez-Figueroa produced images depicting various characters from the play, humans and non-humans, camped out in corn fields where the scarecrows, according to Carrillo's original script, symbolize the bodies of dissidents found dead in the fields. Since 1975, the scarecrow has been associated within the popular imagination with the deer, whose heart, it is said, is that of a hummingbird.

The artist's experiments around the 1975 play eventually led him to renew the dramatic format of the original. As with Ianni's work, the video *Lugar de consuelo* (Place of Solace) (2020) was shot at the same site at the Popular University of Guatemala where the play was originally presented. *Lugar de consuelo* is based on an eponymous script by Guatemalan poet and writer Wingston González, who reimagined Carrillo's play through five main characters representing authoritarian powers: the Oligarchy (the supreme ruler), the Church (sub-servient to the Oligarchy), the President (a military general), the Ranger (obedient to the President's orders), and the Scarecrow (the murdered rebel).

In the video, the characters wear imposing costumes that grant them their powers and bestow their privileged social statuses, but

which also hinder their movements and restrain their facial and verbal expression. González's reinterpretation highlights the collusion among the leaders and depicts characters who have lost the ability to express them-selves coherently. In the exhibition, González's script is printed on acetate sheets displayed on a transparent table, creating an effect where the words blend into the surroundings and the real world.

Through this act, González evokes the state of constant vigilance and the strategies of invisibility necessary in a context of surveillance and repression.

Ianni's, Ramírez-Figueroa's and González's works stage the body as a site for the resurgence of collective and social memory, acting as an antidote against the systemic amnesia imposed by that state upon certain periods of the past.

Montages of Buried Histories and Documents

For Amol K Patil, theatre and performance are devices for mediation and exploration to re-establish ties with his recent ancestors and his community. The artist comes from a line of militant, working-class performers: his grandfather, Gunaji Patil, was a poet and composer of *powada* (protest songs), whereas his father, Kisan Patil, who died while the artist was a child, was a Marathi avant-garde actor and dramaturge. Kisan Patil's plays addressed the living conditions of rural migrants in the city, the reality of factory workers, and the oppression of Dalits.

Working with inherited family archives—comprising of scripts, audio recordings, photographic documents, and testimonies—Amol K Patil sets out on the same path of combat as his father and grandfather against caste discrimination and the exploitation of the working class. Patil's work *Many Kilometres* (2019) reinterprets a play written by his father in 1982 that recounts a migrant's alienating experience working in a textile factory in Bombay by way of postcard correspondence with his wife back in their village in Maharashtra. The issues raised by this play were in direct response to an eighteen-month-long strike that paralyzed the textile industry in the west of the country at that time, affecting nearly 250 000 workers who demanded better pay and benefits. In the video, *Many Kilometres, Several Words* (2019), the artist positions himself before the camera, reproducing the repetitive gestures of factory work and revealing a body that gradually merges with the machine.

Artist Onyeka Igwe also calls on the memory of archives to trace a continuum of diasporic resistance in London in the 1940s and locate different networks of solidarity. At the time, the city was a hotbed of nationalist and pan-African militantism for numerous international artists and intellectuals from the Caribbean and African colonies under British rule, among them Amy Ashwood Garvey, C.L.R. James, Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and Sylvia Wynter. The two-channel video, *History is an Endless Play* (2023), imagines the 1947 London meeting of two women from

different generations and countries, involved in the decolonial movements in the British colonies. The two characters are freely inspired by the renowned Nigerian militant Ransome-Kuti and the Jamaican writer, dramaturge, and cultural theorist Wynter. Remarking on the interest in theatre shared by a number of these thinkers, Igwe imagines what could have been if these two women had collaborated to write a revolutionary play before their countries gained independence.

In the video, the artist juxtaposes a radical speech presented by a Nigerian political leader in London stressing the role of women in society with the ideas of a young activist and organizer (at the time, Wynter would have been a student at King's College in London) on the power of theatre in the British colonies' fight for independence. The work highlights Black women's active commitment at an international level to the denunciation of systems of inequality implemented by colonial powers. Interspersed with shots of historical buildings in London that served as sites of Black sociality and revolutionary politicization in the twentieth century, the video also documents conversations around the archives and rehearsals with the artist and actors in preparation for shooting the video. Accordingly, Igwe inscribes her research within a genealogy of transnational political engagement, reinvesting in theatre as a space where other narratives of history can be imagined and put into practice.

Following a similar method based on documentary fragments and entwining a range of sites and temporalities, Bouchra Khalili reconstructs the little-known history of agitprop theatre in 1970s France and places it in dialogue with recent displays of resistance. *The Tempest Society* is the name of a theatre troupe consisting of three young Athenians inspired by the protest tactics of the Al Assifa theatre collective (“The Tempest,” in Arabic), associated with the Movement des travailleurs arabes (MTA, Arab Workers Movement). Active in Paris from 1972 to 1978, Al Assifa employed techniques such as “newspaper theatre,” using current events as reference points to campaign for equality and recognition of the rights of immigrant workers. Their demands included legal status, access to housing, and the right for all to work under decent conditions.

In the eponymous video from 2017, three members of *The Tempest Society* with the participation of the only surviving member of the troupe, Philippe Tancelin, revisit the history of the troupe and the MTA by way of a panoply of visual and written documents. The group compares the denunciations and demands of the MTA with those emanating from the specific context of Greece between 2011 and 2016, shaken by numerous uprisings and political, economic and humanitarian crises. They underscore the profound convergences between the protests of the past and present, questioning how we inherit histories, particularly in the case of fragile memories that have not been archived, and how to impart them to future generations.

While the MTA used theatre as a platform to advance their struggle and defy repression, Khalili seizes upon it as a lens through which to reflect on cinematic forms and the construction of visual narrative.

Theatre in Service of Present Thought

Some artists consider the theatre movements that punctuated emancipation struggles in the last century as points of departure for reflecting on theatre's potential as an "act" that perturbs and transforms the concrete conditions of existence. This is the case of The Living and the Dead Ensemble, consisting of ten members from Haiti, France, and England, with backgrounds in dance, slam, stand-up, literature, and visual arts. Their work, *The Wake* (2019—present) is at once a video, a play, and an aggregation of the collective's ongoing research. Adopting an epistemological position influenced by Spiralist thought and an understanding of circular time, *The Wake* shows collective members as they recite texts while wandering through the urban environment, often following circular paths.⁴ They blend their voices with those of poets and dramaturges of the past, such as Frankétienne, Édouard Glissant, and René Depestre. The back-and-forth between the present and the past, and the performers' frequent

⁴ Spiralism is a literary movement based on the metaphor of the spiral as a generator of meaning and a way of understanding reality. Founded in the mid-1960s during the Duvalier dictatorship by Frankétienne, Jean-Claude Fignolé, and René Philoctète, this movement aims to break with the traditional aesthetics and writing predominant in the Haitian literary field at the time.

movement between screens, add to the work's polyphonic and chaotic structure, which is caught up in perpetual movement.

Moreover, the work is inscribed within the conceptual space of the *Lakou*, creole for the "yard," around which "revolves the life and space of speech, from storytelling to the wake."⁵ A site for gathering, speaking, and honouring the deceased, the *Lakou* links the worlds of the living and the dead.

Also on foot are Ashes Withyman's "character-troubadours" walking through the city while reciting texts. Imagined by the artist as part of his large-scale project *The Neanderthalish Proverbs* (2023—present), they spread their messages of insubordination and share their worldview in their wanderings. Taking the form of a large public procession, the project is built around thirty characters and integrates theatrical dialogue, songs, and discordant musical compositions. This approach reflects the peripatetic practice taken up by the artist in recent years (based on the Greek term *peripatetikos*, meaning "who likes to walk"). Processions, parades, and marches are forms of popular intervention and public demonstrations that are frequently used as means for direct action and social demands. *The Neanderthalish Proverbs* project is inspired by a range of theatre traditions from itinerant medieval troupes to the radical street theatre of the 1960s (notably the Diggers in San Francisco), through to

⁵ Olivier Marboeuf, email correspondance, Septembre 13, 2023.

absurdist theatre and popular traditions such as charivari and mummering practiced to this day in Newfoundland.⁶ Made of found objects, Withyman's sculptures presented in the exhibition serve as militant objects—costumes, masks, banners, decorations, musical instruments, to name a few—to be activated intermittently by the performers. Inspired by diverse forms of folk culture, these accessories call on humour, mimicry, and parody to transmit their messages and engage the public in a process of awareness-building and politicization.

Born out of resistance, carrying and holding up rebellion, evolving from the street to the stage and vice versa, the theatre movements referenced and explored in the exhibition put into question the established order and called for the often-risky mobilization against state-led oppression, rising authoritarianism, racism and colonial dispossession, worker exploitation, material precarity, discrimination, and social inequalities. The meticulous contemporary re-readings by these artists create, for their part, a space to rethink the political project underlying these theatrical performances, exposing their limits, adding to their meaning, and, above all, making a case for the persistence of their indelible traces today. Beyond the

⁶ The tradition of "mummering" was introduced in America with the arrival of settlers within the numerous communities along the Atlantic coast. It consists of dressing up, forming processions, and visiting houses without invitation to sing, dance, drink, or collect funds. This custom took place during holidays and involved people of all ages. The disguises were generally improvised and eclectic. In Canada the practice all but disappeared in the nineteenth century but has been revived in recent years, enduring principally in Newfoundland. The term "mummer" refers to the mimes of English theatre. Dale Jarvis, *Any Mummies 'Lowed In? Christmas Mummering Traditions in Newfoundland and Labrador* (Paradise: Flanker Press, 2014).

transmission of stories and memories, consciousness-raising or the reactivation of methods, the exhibited works trace a path toward new genealogies of thought and contestation of injustices, while offering space for reflection, support, and healing.

Translated from French by Robin Simpson.