

SOUND DIMENSION IN THEATRE. HOW SOUND INFLUENCES SPACE: THE JOËL POMMERAT'S THEATRICAL CASE STUDY

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Our contemporary society is reinforcing the hegemony of image. First cinema, then television, followed by computer, smartphone screens have educated the spectators eyes, but also ears, to a necessary immersive and dynamic environment. On theatre stages, the cinematographic scope is more and more employed to enhance the dramaturgy, blurring the limits between the 6th and the 7th art¹. Stage directors such as French Cyril Teste and Julien Gosselin, Brazilian Christiane Jatahy, British Katie Mitchell, German Thomas Ostermeier or Belgian Ivo van Hove², are using cameras and wide screens on stage. One of the artistic reasons for such devices is either to zoom or to give alternative views and angles impossible to watch from the seats or to show offstage (off-screen!) events. The cameramen are directly on stage, following actors' movements and focusing on their faces and expressions in a cinematic style. Teste is calling it "performance

¹ It's generally considered dance, theatre and circus being 6th art and cinema the 7th, classification inspired by the italian *paragone*.

² Cyril Teste (Collectif MXM company): *Nobody, Festen*; Julien Gosselin (Si vous pouviez lécher mon cœur company): *2666, Joueurs/ Mao II / Les Noms*; Christiane Jatahy: *What if they went to Moscow, Notre Odyssée 1 & 2*; Katie Mitchell: *La maladie de la mort*; Thomas Ostermeier director Berlin Schaubühne am leninerplatz, shakespearean *Richard III* or Edouard Louis *Histoire de la violence*; Ivo van Hove artistic director Amsterdam Toneelgroep, staging Aynd Rand-King Vidor's *The Fountainhead* or Lucchino Visconti's *The Damned*.

filmique” when Jatahy is making “ciné-théâtre”. Certain shows are literally using the set as a cinema studio, while the film is projected simultaneously. At what point this cinema dimension on stage become a means to reach the ‘theatre experience’? In the same way, amplified sounds, microphones, recorded music diffused, and even headphones for spectators, are now oftently used for theatre.

I. Sound dimension on stage

Before the arrival of sound amplification on stage, theatrical voices were fully recognizable like actors such as Louis Jouvet or Maria Casares for the French stage and the voices of British Alec Guinness or Lawrence Oliver were fully participating to their dramaturgy. They were able to strengthen their voice and to make it intelligible, but theatrical, as they projected their voice to the audience. During the early mediatization of actors’ voices on stage, from the 1930-1960s³, microphones were used for dramatic effects rather than to suggest reconciliation between audience and actors. Later on, to amplify voices on stage, some microphones were hung above actors’ heads, giving an uneven sound restitution and creating an artificial dimension on stage.

To have actors’ voices supported by speakers is now accepted. In the most recent decades, sound technology has significantly progressed, with the spreading of headset microphone use, to support actors’ voices but also to avoid having theatrical voices. This participates to balancing the experience of spectators listening from the first to the last row, as the actors can be up or downstage, facing the audience or turning their back. These devices can bring similar effects as the cinema sound spatialization, we will develop. Theatre is not always two separated halls but devices are trying to make only one: in *Roman Tragedies*⁴ (2008), Ivo van Hove invited spectators on the stage set as on a TV studio, when Thomas Ostermeier had spectators wear headphones to create the effect of being

³ Jeanne Bovet (2019), *Premières médiatisations de la voix, de la Comédie des Champs-Élysées au Théâtre de l’Athénée*, revue Sciences/Lettres [en ligne] 6/2019.

⁴ Play created with parts of the Shakespeare tragedies *Coriolanus*, *Julius Cesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

on stage with the actors of *Abgrund* (2019), as left and right ears corresponded to stage left and right. But, as the spectators are changing their place or wearing prosthesis, doesn't it change his appreciation of the play? This clearly isolates each one from the other, transforming theatre in an individual experience. How far sound devices could be used for the live, original and shared theatre experience?

II. Joël Pommerat “théâtres en présence”

In contemporary French theatre, Joël Pommerat (1963) is leading a specific approach, as he's both writing and directing all of his shows⁵. His plays are written as the result of collaborative work with actors. Since the founding of his theatre company Compagnie Louis Brouillard in 1990, various methodologies have been applied. He's writing “from” the plateau, as the text is not given to actors at the beginning, but constructed through a long process with theatrical improvisations guided by Pommerat, on research topics or texts pieces he gives to his actors. This rough material is live transformed to reach the final text⁶. This so called “prospective dramaturgy”⁷ is specific to his work and as Pommerat explains: ‘I need them (the actors) to appropriate the text, to be in the speaking, and not reciting or giving a restitution of a text. (...) I am trying to break the play machine, theatrical attitude, artificiality’⁸.

Through dramaturgic writings and playings, each play is the opportunity to reach an intimate relationship between spectators and actors. To support this approach, stage set is to the bare minimum, empty boxes with some removable furniture. Main spaces are created by the contrasts between light beams and

⁵ Among more than thirty texts, the only exception are the fairy tales, inspired by known authors, such as *Le petit Chaperon rouge* / little red Riding Hood, *Cendrillon* / Cinderella or *Pinocchio* and one text: *Une Année Sans Été* (Catherine Anne).

⁶ All of his texts are published by Actes Sud–Papiers, Arles.

⁷ “Dramaturgie prospective”, in Marion Boudier (2019), *Avec Joël Pommerat, Tome II, L'écriture de Ça Ira (1) Fin de Louis*, Actes Sud-Papiers.

⁸ Joël Pommerat (2007), *Théâtres en Présence*, Actes-Sud-Papiers, pp.9-10.

‘J’ai besoin qu’ils (les comédiens) s’approprient le texte, qu’ils soient dans la parole, et pas dans la récitation ou la restitution d’un texte. (...) J’essaie de casser la machine à jouer, à produire du jeu théâtral, de l’artificiel’. Our translation.

darkness created by stage and light designer Éric Soyer. Pommerat's work is often suggestive. Actors can appear like spectra, either moving forms in the darkness or light irradiated-like bodies, as lightings often comes from the fly loft or from stage left and right (as in choreography), rarely from the front. Pommerat explains he's seeking for some reality not for the truth and to make it happen, the actors' presence (présence) is his first act.

In my shows, I am searching for the same relationship we can have with the characters in a novel. That's the reason why, I think, I am looking for the light balance between showing and hiding, desire to watch and preventing that, and that seeking this balance also finds itself in all other aspects of the writing of the text and directing⁹.

Pommerat generally says he's a 'show writer'. At the beginning of the compagny, he's been using for the set some panels mounted on wheels to make appear and disappear actors and props in a few seconds. It has been transformed in blackouts used as director's cuts to switch from one scene to the other, thanks to the theatre magic box. In this cinematographic process, there are neither cameras nor screens with projected images used to make changing points of view. If stage sets and lights contribute to create a physical atmosphere, the sound dimension is equally as important and we will see the different ways he's using it to suggest several dimensions. As theatrical act is based on relational phenomenon, Pommerat is following Peter Brook's lessons, founded on respect for presence-based communication¹⁰ and to reach this presence Pommerat is aiming for, the actors voices are the main medium to lead the dramaturgy.

⁹ Ibid. p.32. 'Je cherche dans mes spectacles le même rapport que celui que nous entretenons avec les personnages d'un livre à la lecture. C'est pour cela, je crois, que je cherche dans mes spectacles cet équilibre de la lumière entre montrer et cacher, désir de voir et empêchement, et que cette recherche d'équilibre se retrouve également dans tous les autres domaines de l'écriture du texte et de la mise en scène'. Our translation.

¹⁰ Joël Pommerat and his compagnie has been in residence at the Bouffes du Nord, Peter's Brook theatre in Paris, at the turn of 2010s.

II.A. Pommerat's voices spectrum

This is important to “invite” spectators on stage and the light amplification of actors' voices enables Pommerat to tighten the space and François Leymarie, Pommerat's sound designer since the early 1990s, had been trying to realize Pommerat's vision for some time. In the early years of the Compagnie Louis Brouillard, due to a low budget, they used microphones on the side of the stage. Discontent by the blurred sound rendering, as soon it was financially possible, they equipped the actors with high frequency microphones (HF)¹¹, then headset microphones.

From the beginning, considering HF micros, Joël's main aim is to bring the voice of the actor closer to the spectator, to enable the actors to have natural voices, as in everyday life, avoiding the traditional vocal projection – the HF (microphone) has solved this problem, of the theatrical need to project the voice¹².

As for the French semiologist Roland Barthes: the actor's voice is an ‘intimate signature’, Pommerat can use his actors' spectrum of voices levels. Amplification enables sound, inaudible in reality, to be used – until whispering or even breathing. Since *Grâce à mes yeux* in 2002, the director equips the actors with HF. Considered by some as a technical assistance, in his work this enable him to reinforce the presence of characters, in different ways. First, playing with colouring characters' voices: strong or soft, twangy or warm, child's voice or

¹¹ Skin coloured microphones, held by actors or performers to amplify their voice wherever they are on the stage. One of the first test of this technical device has been proved in 1979 “Tour of Life” by Kate Bush, a dance and singing show. With the help of her sound engineer Martin Fisher: he rigged a wireless headset microphone, using a wire clothes hanger, giving the freedom to the singer to move and dance on stage while singing.

¹² “L'orientation principale de Joël, et ce depuis le début, par rapport aux HF, c'est le désir de rapprocher la voix du spectateur, de sorte qu'il puisse faire jouer ses comédiens d'une manière naturelle, comme dans le quotidien, sans être dans une projection vocale traditionnelle – le HF ayant résolu cette problématique de la nécessité théâtrale de projeter la voix”. François Leymarie, interview with Christophe Triau (2013), in the *Cendrillon* dedicated dossier, June 2013, Arts au singulier, Théâtre, p.60. Our translation.

elderly person's voice, etc., sound devices are used to lightly amplify the voice and to make this intelligible to the whole room. 'For many years, the headsets have enabled the actors to speak with their own voice intensity, without projecting the voice. That gives an impression of proximity and reality' says Marion Boudier, who's been collaborating on *Ça ira (1) Fin de Louis*¹³. More than this, it enables Pommerat to attain a level of natural effect with voices and avoids theatrical projection to the audience, in order to reach the intimate experience he aims. Second, these devices lead to suggest several identities and characters. Pommerat can choose to distort voices to express several levels of behaviours: in *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*, the mother's voice is completely distorted when she's playing a monster to frighten her daughter to forbid her to go out to visit her grandma. This reminds Lynch's process, with 'characters presenting an invisible part, a part of themselves being offered to the imagination of the spectator'¹⁴. At last, he can trouble image and sound, as in *Cendrillon*, the male narrator on stage is dubbed by a woman voice.

In addition, the microphone in hand is one of the specific accessories in Pommerat's theatrical direction. They are often used to elucidate the use of the amplified sound. In *Je tremble 1 & 2* (2010): actor Lionel Codino is playing a ringmaster who's talking directly to the public "Ladies and gentlemen, good evening", though he's the central character telling his own life and death on stage¹⁵. Then, a playback song is playing and he's dancing as he was acting the singer, revealing the micro is a fake. Later on, an actress used a microphone in a stand – blackout – one second later, this device is left alone and accentuated by droplight, and embodies a presence. We imagine this to be another Lynch quote, while Rebbekah del Rio is fainting while performing "Llorando" (Crying) in

¹³ Marion Boudier (2015), *Avec Joël Pommerat. Un Monde Complexe*, Arles, Actes Sud-Papiers, coll. Apprendre, p.141.

¹⁴ Marion Boudier, Guillermo Pisani (2008) "Joël Pommerat: Une Démarche Qui Fait Œuvre", (2008. 2, Jeu 127, pp.150-157) 'des personnages présentant une part d'invisible, une part d'eux-mêmes offertes à l'imagination du spectateur'. Our translation.

¹⁵ Ibid. Stage directions are given in the book and mentioning the microphone.

the *Mulholland drive* Silencio Club (2001): the song is going on, disclosing the playback track. Playback moments are repeated in Pommerat's show to enhance a transition, such a device following Eisenstein "attraction" concept¹⁶.

Lastly, in *Ça ira (1) Fin de Louis*¹⁷, dedicated to the French Revolution, the microphone is like a 'weapon' as the show is based on political speeches. 'Using the microphone on the stand is a contemporary way of imposing on the world' says François Leymarie. It was a 'starting axiom, they (the actors) took possession of it. (...) Each voice then appropriates the microphone with different dexterity'¹⁸.

II.B. Atmospheres: a large sound palette

Pommerat's sounds range is quite large, from illustrative with some audio dubbing to abstract atmospheres used during the play or for transitional effects. This combination between diegetic sounds – relative to the space and time of the story – and extra diegetic sounds – external as background music or special sound the characters can't hear – are either illustrative or suggestive. Sound features are giving clues to what is happening on stage, or backstage. In *Les Marchands*, engines noises are giving clues to what the main characters are mimicking on stage: an assembly line. In *Ça ira (1) Fin de Louis*, different frequency bombing noises are expressing the army rapprochement to the building where the newly established Assemblée Nationale is discussing the French constitution. Some diegetic sounds can be exaggerated in *Le petit Chaperon rouge* (2004) the French director is dubbing the actress walking with footsteps noises, accentuating with a reverb the sound effect recorded though the carpeted stage floor. Referring

¹⁶ In his 1925-27 films, the famous Russian director used this "trick" as a metaphorical tool to reach the spectators through emotional pictures or pictures associations.

¹⁷ Created in 2015 for Mons Capital of Culture.

¹⁸ Alisonne Sinard (2016), *La Multitude des Voix: Représentation Sonore de la Foule au Théâtre* (Dossier J. Pommerat), entretien avec François Leymarie, Alternatives Théâtrales 130, octobre 2016.

to Raymond Murray Schafer *Soundscape*¹⁹, this sound-based storytelling looks like a ‘show soundscape’, as a combination of sounds that forms or arises from an immersive environment²⁰ as movies can be lead by original soundtracks. Pommerat’s range of sounds is well balanced, and combines with voices to support them²¹. These levels of sound contribute to the close relationship Pommerat wants to install between audience and stage, with the aim to immerse the spectators in a specific space-time dimension.

At last, Pommerat never wants the set to be silent, explains us Leymarie. Show soundscapes contribute to the transitions as his dramaturgy is based on very quick scene changes, akin to a live movie montage. This obliges to cover the actors come and go to the plateau while blackout is done²². To reach this level of sound, combining soundscape and voice amplification, with the aim to enable image / body of characters and sound / voices to match, the use and implementation of speakers is very important. Leymarie’s son, Anthonin, is also composing specific music pieces for Pommerat shows.

II.C. A strategic speaker implementation

The Pommerat’s case is quite experimental as he has developed shows in several stage settings. A result of a long-term experimentation, Pommerat has reached this space organization with the help of theatre technical teams and partners of the compagnie Louis Brouillard, Leymarie reached a specific sound

¹⁹ Raymond Murray Schafer (1977) *The Tuning of the World, a Pioneering Exploration into the Past History and Present State of the Most Neglected Aspect of Our Environment The Soundscape*, Random House / french translation by Sylvette Gleize, Wildproject 2010.

²⁰ This is combined by the sound designer François Leymarie, with his nephew Grégoire Leymarie, who’s work consists in mixing, distorsing, and also balancing voices and added sounds and musics, while Antonin, François’ son is composing since 2006 (*Cet Enfant*) harmonies that will give a sound identity to the show – mostly extra diegetic sounds.

²¹ At early years, before HF, audience was complaining that in Pommerat’s plays, it was difficult to hear the actors’ voices, as the director asked his characters not to project voice. The HF has been compensating this loss of text information.

²² The Pommerat blacks in the theatre hall are complete. Stage designer Éric Soyer is even hiding the emergency lamps to reach a total blackout and to make changes without being seen by the spectators, like cinema director’s cuts. There could be dozen of blackout per play depending on the writing.

implementation²³.

(...) it's very important to have a sound diffusion in the middle of the stage, that's a bit powerful and distinct for the intelligibility of the voice (...). Upstage speakers are used to create sonorous spaces which would not be visible on stage, which represents an exterior to that which we see on stage. (...) Finally, other speakers are dispersed in the room, around the public space, to wrap the audience and to create some unrealistic, fictional exaggerated sounds as close as possible to the spectator's ear.

The implementation diagram of speakers for *Cendrillon* shows central clusters for voices relayed by left and right upstage and downstage speakers combined with halls speakers in the middle at each side. This general disposal works in historical theatres or contemporary ones. This is more complex when it's developed for the arena in the circle *Cercles / Fictions* – Bouffes du Nord 2010, and *Ma Chambre froide*, Odéon-Berthier 2011. Different levels of speakers hang over the stage disc and a larger circle is installed over the spectators heads. In a traverse space organization as in *La réunification des deux Corées* (Odéon-Berthier, 2013), due to the long corridor and the distance from spectators to actors, small speakers have been integrated in the low partition walls that separates audience from the stage rectangle, balanced with speakers rigged above the heads of the rear rows, organized in three areas: left, center and right, used depending on the actors positioning. Depending on the room – as shows are turning in France and abroad –, the implementation is always studied to immerse the audience in the

²³ François Leymarie interview with Christophe Triau (2013), p.57. “Il est très important d’avoir une diffusion au centre du plateau un peu puissante et distincte, pour l’intelligibilité de la voix. (...) Des enceintes au lointain sont utilisées pour diffuser des notions d’espaces sonores qui ne seraient pas visibles sur la scène, qui représenteraient un extérieur par rapport à ce que l’on voit sur le plateau; (...) Enfin, d’autres enceintes sont disposées un peu partout dans la salle, dans l’espace du public, pour envelopper ce dernier à certains moments, pour soutenir des événements sonores qui seraient plus irréalistes, fictionnelles et qui demanderaient à ce qu’ils soient exagérés, rendus plus proches de l’oreille du spectateur dans la salle”. Our translation.

space and time aimed.

At last, for *Ça ira (1) Fin de Louis*, the spectators represented members of the assembly while actors were playing on stage AND in the auditorium. Pommerat has been using live voices in the hall to embrace the audience in his dramaturgic action²⁴, and to recreate the assembly hall where debates were taking place. Speeches were given to persuade of the ideologies held by each political side, being “Tiers état” (main population), nobility or clergy. Some reactions have to come from the hall and supported not only by actors. After several essays, holophony-like²⁵ tests installed among the seats, sounding like ventriloquism, ultimately, the solution has been to incorporate into the public some extras. ‘We quickly understood that the problematic of this show was more sonorous than musical’ Leymarie explains²⁶. Called “Forces vives”, these are fifteen people, separated in two political groups (left and right wings), applauding their leaders or booing their opponents. Spread into the rows of the hall, they unfold a large spectrum of reaction, depending on the ideas expressed²⁷.

III. When sound creates image and space

As in cinematographic technologies, sound perspective is used to zoom in on space, situation, or character, to render dull or reverberating spaces. “In the first sense, the term ‘perspective’ is applied to visual perception and graphic techniques. However, our hearing system allows us to perceive plans, to assess the relative distances of different sound sources. And, since the advent of stereophony, the techniques of sound capture and reproduction aim tot the

²⁴ I can attest about this as I have been playing an extra Force vive while a week in may 2019 while the repise of *Ça Ira (1) Fin de Louis*, at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin.

²⁵ Holophony is a principle of spatial distribution, it is to the sound what hologram is to the image. This has been tested in collaboration with IRCAM (Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique) in Paris, where François Leymarie organized some voices rehearsals with 130 professional and amateur actors. Some recorded parts have been used to represent the rebellious nation and to give the idea of a mass of people hurrying against the palace gates.

²⁶ Alisonne Sinard (2016).

²⁷ It even happen some spectator are reacting at the same time or at other moments of the show, though it's not a participative play.

realization of an ‘image sound’²⁸ explains Jean Chauteret in *La perspective sonore*. “The sound creates the image, plays the role of the camera and influences the gaze”²⁹ offstage can be depicted. Pommerat sound dimension research aims to create a special atmosphere, to suggest spaces and to realize an intimate relationship with the public. From this complex of levels with soundscape, voices, etc, Pommerat is able to build or unbuild space, to open or close the walls. He generates images with sounds, most of all spaces and atmospheres, without any cameras nor screen to establish a special relationship between actors and spectators. If necessary, he creates his own architecture, as happened in the arena in the circle or in the traverse theatre. So he can virtually “invite” the audience on stage while keeping spectators on their seats, aiming to treat equally each row of the room. The power of sound is here to create an intimate proximity or an estrangement, possibly a distancing, still as both an individual and a collective experience. Thanks to technology and speakers implementation studies, Pommerat’s sound ‘score’ is composed or assembled to create the intended atmosphere and complete the stage set, the writing reduced to the bare minimum to be evocative. Contrary to his contemporaries using projected image to underline their dramaturgy, Pommerat creates three-dimensional theatrical spaces by means of sound, combined with lights, costume and poem. Thus, he opens a free space to the spectator to build his own understanding as an invitation to travel into space and also time.

Compared to other directors playing with stage / backstage using cameras, Pommerat composes stage limits blurred by Soyser’s lights and darks. ‘In art,

²⁸ Jean Chateuret (2009), *La Perspective Sonore*, Communications, issue 85 “L’homme a-t-il encore une perspective?”, p.139. “C’est à la perception visuelle et aux techniques graphiques que le terme de perspective, au sens premier, s’applique. Cependant notre système auditif nous permet de percevoir des plans, d’évaluer des distances relatives de différentes sources sonores. Et les techniques de captation et de reproduction du son visent, surtout depuis l’avènement de la stéréophonie, à la réalisation d’une image sonore”. Our translation.

²⁹ Philippe Couture (2010), *Présences au Théâtre des Codes Sonores du Cinéma. À Propos de Jean Boillot, Joël Pommerat, Jérémie Niel et Marie Brassard*. Cahiers de Théâtre Jeu (134), p.96. “Le son crée l’image, joue le rôle de la caméra, influence le regard”. Our translation.

I prefer infinite to finite' says Pommerat³⁰. Then the fourth wall is used either to create a heterotopy disconnected to the room or it is broken to involve the audience in the action. Pommerat can easily open or close the box, as he desires.

³⁰ Joëlle Gayot & Joël Pommerat (2009), *Joël Pommerat, Troubles*, Actes Sud, p.70.

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