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2008

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/12572>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Callens, Johan: Mediating PHÈDRE. In: Henri Schoenmakers, Stefan Bläske, Kay Kirchmann u.a. (Hg.): *Theater und Medien / Theatre and the Media – Grundlagen – Analysen – Perspektiven. Eine Bestandsaufnahme*. Bielefeld: transcript 2008, S. 409–416. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/12572>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839410646-040>

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MEDIATING PHÈDRE

JOHAN CALLENS¹

The Wooster Group, the New York based performance company led by director Elizabeth LeCompte, is well-known for their iconoclastic productions of canonical texts. These productions mediate between different texts, languages, disciplines, genres, and cultures, the live arts and mechanically as well as digitally reproduced arts, now marking, now confounding the specificity of each and all. *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE! (PHÈDRE)* (2001) is an exemplary case in that it starts from Paul Schmidt's translation into American English of Racine's 1677 neo-classical play, reframes it by fragments from Euripides' *HIPPOLYTUS*, and expands it with choreographical and visual intertexts pertaining to the mythical material in which Phèdre's story is embedded. After briefly sketching this story's pre-text for comprehension's sake and summarizing Schmidt's performative view of translation, this article will discuss some of the production's technological interventions and gender implications, before ending with a consideration of Luis Buñuel's *BELLE DE JOUR* (1967), fragments of which were viewed on stage. These provide not only a gestural vocabulary and extend the intermedial web with occasional painterly and iconographic references, but also open up for debate women's ways of coping with patriarchal power structures.

Racine's play, as is well known, draws on Greek myth. Less familiar, and worth recapitulating, are the unsettling details of the story which provide a foil to Phèdre's illicit love for her stepson, Hippolytus, in the reckless adventures of her philandering and negligent husband. Phaedra and her sister Ariadne were the daughters of King Minos and Pasiphae, whose passion for a bull spawned the Minotaur, later kept hidden in the mythical labyrinth at Knossos. For three years Minos exacted from the city of Athens a human tribute, which he fed to the monster. To put an end to these sacrifices Theseus, the son of the Athenian ruler, Aegeus, sailed to Crete. After slaying the beast and finding his way back, thanks to the ball of string provided by an enamoured Ariadne, he took her and her sister with him when sailing home, but abandoned Ariadne on Naxos. In addition, Theseus forgot to change the ship's black sail into a white one to announce his victory to the watchmen, thus causing his father to drown himself before the arrival of his son's fleet. Theseus succeeded Aegeus, but instead of simply assuming his responsibilities as King of Attica, he again embarked on a series of expeditions. From that against the Amazons, he returned with Antiope, who bore him a son, Hippolytus, although Theseus repudiated her to marry Phaedra. On a subsequent foray into Sparta, he and his friend Peirithous carried off Helen, who fell to Theseus when the men drew lots. In compensation, he joined his friend into the Underworld to abduct

1 A complementary article, focussing on the choreographic intertexts, is forthcoming under the title »Reconfiguring the Text and the Self: The Wooster Group's *To You, The Birdie!* (Phèdre)« in: *Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classic Works: Critical Essays*, edited by Sharon Friedman and published by McFarland (Jefferson, NC).

Persephone, a hazardous journey from which Hercules had to rescue him. It was during this exploit that Phaedra's incestuous longing for her stepson took a turn for the worst, the disastrous consequences of which Racine, and prior to him Euripides, so poignantly dramatized (Larousse: 176-9).

Schmidt's first draft of Racine's play, dating from 1993 and commissioned by LeCompte, was a radically condensed version. The second one, made for Liz Diamond's 1998 premiere at the American Repertory Theatre (Cambridge, MA), was more faithful, though still written in the translator's rather typical colloquial idiom (Diamond: 94). In general, Schmidt (1934-1999) believed »translating is performing and performing is translating. You have to be able to let someone else's words come through you, and not impose your voice«, listen for the playwright's individual »voiceprint« and »recreate in American English a voice which echoes [...] the same way« in the target as in the source language (qtd in Langworthy: 16-7). Schmidt here compares translation to an act of ventriloquism that sets up an echo chamber, which becomes emblematic for the mediations involved in staging a pre-existing text.

When LeCompte finally tackled Racine, she used Schmidt's longer translation, yet adhered to the Wooster Group practice by, on the one hand, again cutting scenes and characters, and on the other hand, adding material. The story's Greek roots were visually referenced by two truncated pillars and the male performers' parodies of athletes' and classical sculptures' semi-nude poses. In Jim Findlay's set, sliding plexi-panels made for a baroque confusion since these could be made to look transparent or throw off reflections, so that echoes of the Minotaur's mythical labyrinth fused with the Sun King's spectacular court, full of intrigues. For the rest LeCompte's pseudo-classical palace complex seemed to include a gymnasium with pool, locker rooms, sauna, and badminton court, which explains some of the more arcane text additions. Venus, the goddess slighted by Hippolytus' vow of chastity, had been hoisted high on a video monitor, whereas the badminton referee and her two line-markers formed a depleted choir, delivering »love songs«, all but one built around phrases from the play and compiled on a CD marketed via the Wooster Group's website. Clearly, the performance company's reconfiguration of Phèdre spanned 2500 years, from ancient Greece to the postmodern culture industry. It never did so gratuitously, but with the effect of exposing the reigning power discourses, whether those put into place by Greek patriarchy, Louis XIVth's absolutist reign, houses of care, or theatre and film's technologies of perception and identity-construction. The power structures of the contemporary culture industry were involved, too, as the Wooster Group's independently produced and distributed audio CD represents a gesture of defiance to the official marketing circuit.

Different temporalities and geographies therefore intersected and overlapped in *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!*, playing fast and loose with the neoclassical unities. The Wooster Group's reliance on badminton, for instance, invoked the converted courts for ball games or *jeux de paume*, where seventeenth century plays were performed before buildings specifically conceived for theatre were erected (Lawrenson: 164). In turn, these improvised spaces conjure the Wooster Group's own Performing Garage, the product of the search for alternative venues by the experimental theatres of the nineteen-sixties, notably Richard Schechner's Performance Group under whose name LeCompte's earliest shows came into being (1975-1980). Badminton or tennis rackets were already featured in *MISS UNIVERSAL HAPPINESS*, a show from 1985 in which Richard Foreman directed LeCompte and other Wooster Group members. Despite eventual misgivings about reducing tragedies like *PHÈDRE* to

camp (Diamond in Kiger: 249), Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre would seem particularly apt to the protagonist's condition as portrayed by the Wooster Group, even if Foreman's interest in classical psychiatry's hysterical syndrome primarily pertains to nineteenth century naturalist drama and its basic psychological triangles, which his work tries to open up (Foreman in Aronson: 135).

In LeCompte's version, Racine's neoclassical protagonist suffered from bourgeois neuroses. After all, Foucault has identified the bourgeoisie as a privileged locus of sexual repression (1998: 1-13, 120-127). As played by Kate Valk, Phèdre displayed an obsession with interior decorating, shoes, and clothes, all failing fetishistically to substitute for a deeper satisfaction. Some of the video footage on the house monitors guiding the performers' movement patterns (including the cropped images of Valk's feet) were derived from Buñuel's *BELLE DE JOUR* (1967), a movie set in the nineteen-sixties and revolving around the secret activities (dreamt and real) of a bourgeois woman in a *maison close* or brothel, disguised as a fashion house. Setting, costumes, and props of *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!* also possess overtones of a psychiatric ward. Phèdre appeared cooped up and under constant surveillance by the goddess Venus, her line markers were acting like wardens equipped with straightjackets, the spying and eavesdropping Enone (Sheena See) was wearing handcuffs, and a Talker (Scott Shepherd) expropriated and echoed Phèdre's voice from a control booth reminiscent of the Wooster Group's *RUMSTICK ROAD* (1977), not to mention the wire mesh covering the smaller upstage monitor like the bars of a prison window. Once again, it is Foucault who chronicled the historical development of hospitals into houses of care reserved for criminals and the insane, with the Great Confinement of the poor and mad in seventeenth century France marking a particularly important phase of this process (1988: 38-64; 1994; 1995). Granted, the cartoon-like effects in *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!*, of slamming doors reverberating on the speakers and an ear magically expanding onto the large, downstage monitor, at times turned the intrigues into those of French boulevard theatre, that bourgeois genre par excellence. One critic, however, judged the hunting chorus opening Euripides' *HIPPOLYTUS* »more at home in the world of Viennese operetta than Greek tragedy« (Walton: 133-134) – so there are precedents for the Wooster Group's clashes of style and genre in their treatment of this neoclassical material.

Still, no matter how risible the Queen's hysterics in *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!* occasionally became, her symptoms (varying from faintness, lack of appetite, shortness of breath, and neurasthenic irritability to sexual fantasies) also formed the disturbing effect of patriarchal medical diagnoses and therapies. An important case in point are the repeated purgings and douchings to which Phèdre was subject, related as they are to the alleged congestion of blood in the sexual organ, retention of uterine »humours«, and constipation, thought to result from stimulated yet ungratified sexual desire (Maines: 22-33, 52-53, 60). In the nineteenth century developed techniques of vulvar and colonic irrigation, even flogging with wet towels, complemented the manual massage and baths honoured since antiquity, as means of restoring circulation and evacuating excessive fluids. If these treatments, popular from Bath to Saratoga Springs, offered so-called hysterical and frigid women vicarious satisfaction through the orgiastic »hysterical paroxysm«, they simultaneously pathologized their sexuality and exonerated their male partners from any responsibility (Maines: 5, 8, 36-7, 72-81).

Apart from being amply documented in the medical literature since Hippocrates, such androcentric hysteresis is also manifest in Euripides' *PHAEDRA*. Unlike

Racine's heroine, who poisons herself, Phaedra, in the absence of her husband, first starves, and then hangs herself in punishment for her unreturned love. She thereby confirms Plato's belief that the uterus of the hysteric (named after the Greek word for womb), whether crawling up into the chest and windpipe or full of unexpended »seed«, suffocated the patient. Nineteenth century physicians also subsumed anorexia under the hysterical syndrome (Maines: 8, 24, 130n31), and in one critic's interpretation of *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!*, the scatological allusions (Phèdre's onstage peeing and defecation) suggested that repressing her devouring passion had led to an eating disorder, causing intestinal problems and physical weakening (Maurin: 210). During her confession to Enone, Valk's Phèdre almost choked on Hippolytus' name, as if it were a piece of food. By the same token, the Wooster Group could have invoked particularly feminine eating disorders like bulimia after the abundant meals served to the aristocrats at Louis XIV's court to symbolize his wealth. In an equally perverse manner, the hydrotherapy in *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!* personalizes and mirrors Versailles's spectacular fountains (Apostolidès: 101-104). After all, the expensive water works and banquets were complementary means of disciplining the aristocracy and »impressing« it into the Sun King's service.

Phèdre's regimentation in *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!* was compounded by the Talker, who spoke most of her lines from what looked like a movie studio's sound booth. This filmic impression was enhanced by the theatre production's occasional appropriation of camera viewpoints. When during Theseus' massage the blurred image of Willem Dafoe's face on the central flat-screen monitor suddenly went into focus, it was as if the camera, and with it the spectators, had been allowed into the glass-panelled room, whether sauna or Turkish bath. Bathing's traditional association with licit and illicit sexuality was further underscored by Theseus' fondling of a line referee's breast. LeCompte also had Phèdre confess her love for Hippolytus next to the pool.

The dramatic implications of the secret's paroxysmal spilling were enhanced by showing Séverine's fantasized flogging and gang rape by two coachmen in the Bois de Boulogne, the opening scene from Buñuel's *BELLE DE JOUR*, on the stage monitors. In this crucial intertext, the icy Séverine (Catherine Deneuve) becomes involved with Marcel (Pierre Clémenti), the younger charge of a Murcian gangster, Hippolyte (Francisco Rabal), who adds the kicks of a breached decorum, social disgrace, and vicarious criminality to her enforced sensual pleasure (Wood: 29-30, 32, 42). Hippolyte's Spanish provenance and the country's tauromachia ostensibly explain the setting for another fantasized scene of defilement, this time in a pasture full of bulls, introduced by a tableau parodying Jean-François Millet's painting, *THE ANGELUS* (1857-59) (Wood: 35, 49-50). With equal irreverence, Theseus' martyr-like poses in *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!* play off Martin Scorsese's *THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST* (1988), in which Jesus (Willem Dafoe), while suffering on the cross, imagines having sex with Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey). Just so, Séverine's defilement while she is tied to a pole calls forth Pasiphaë's coupling with the Minotaur. The incest at the heart of the mythical story is implied during the gangsters' first visit to the brothel. Since Marcel immediately claims Séverine, Hippolyte, out of generosity, makes do with the other two prostitutes, but not without taking a premature interest in Mme Anais's underage niece, who, as the daughter of Pallas, the brothel's maid, cannot avoid being confronted with the clients. Conversely, Marcel's eagerness to make love to Séverine is somewhat cooled by her *tâche de naissance* or birthmark, which in Dutch is also called a *moedervlek* or »mother's mark«. By the end of the movie, Marcel's obsession for Séverine (fed by

her repeated inaccessibility and cool behaviour) has taken such proportions that it causes a falling out with Hippolyte, which indirectly leads to his death. No longer restrained by the father figure, Marcel shoots Séverine's husband Pierre (Jean Sorel) upon his arrival home and is shot in turn after a chase by the police. Or so it seems, since Séverine may have imagined this finale; whose chase conspicuously resembles that ending Jean-Luc Godard's *A BOUT DE SOUFFLE* (1960). And when Pierre gets up from the wheelchair to which the shooting seems to have confined him, the viewer cannot tell whether he is cured of his paralysis or was never paralyzed to begin with.

The neo-classical pretext does not allow for such eventual undoing of events or for an open ending. Upon learning of Phèdre's (fantasized) rape, Theseus rashly curses his son by asking Neptune to raise a sea monster, which causes Hippolytus' death by frightening his horses. The sea god obliges because of an earlier promise, and the power which this outstanding debt grants Theseus over his son is still mirrored in the control Marcel acquired over his surrogate father by once saving his life. In Euripides, however, Neptune's act confirms the god's mythical paternity of Theseus and thereby explicitly reasserts patriarchal rights in the face of Phaedra's and Hippolytus' infringement upon them, as does the father's absolution by the boy and Artemis. Racine's dying Phèdre still exonerates Theseus, who wishes the memory of her misdeed would die with her. But the dramatic emphasis shifts from the intimate parting of father and son to that of wife and husband. The latter's mourning for Hippolytus is even cut short with a rehabilitation of his beloved, Aricia, which LeCompte (after Schmidt) omitted, presumably because Theseus' recognition of her as his »daughter« all too obviously reduces the woman to an object of exchange, just as Helen had been a currency between Theseus and Peirithous.

The Wooster Group prolongs Racine's tentative shift of emphasis to Phèdre, also evident in his new title, by further problematizing her victimization, albeit in ambiguous and unprescriptive ways that provide no closure to the production. One preferred masculine strategy is to reclaim for women a Freudian Oedipal agency, in actuality or fantasy, personally or vicariously, by identifying with the male victimizer within the hierarchic patriarchal social intercourse. Venus' muscle-flexing from the recovered exposition of Euripides' *HIPPOLYTUS*, in this respect, hardly differs from that of Dafoe's Theseus when he is trying to discipline his apparently rebellious son. Equally befitting the strategy of inverting the patriarchal hierarchy is Phèdre's face to face confrontation with Hippolytus and her seizing his phallic sword upon which to immolate herself, whereas in the Greek play it is Enone who betrays her mistress's secret offstage. Both plays, however, as a corollary to the women's assumption of male prerogatives, feminize Hippolytus, who from the start is described and treated like a virgin waiting to be deflowered and silenced. In *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!* Ari Fliakos's skirt, which exposes his genitals during the opening scene with Theramenes (Scott Shepherd), is more than a historical touch, then. Like his nakedness during the confession scene, his exposure here turns a man rather than a woman into the object of the male and female spectators' voyeuristic gaze. LeCompte makes them conscious of this gaze by framing and mediating the men's genitals on the downstage flat screen monitor.

To all appearances, Buñuel's movie merely mirrors the stage situation. In the brothel Séverine is first made to look, and subsequently cannot prevent herself from looking, through a peep-hole in the wall at a male client's dealings with Charlotte. That this client is a gynaecologist (played by François Maistre) who is chastised by a female dominatrix doubles the gender inversion of the speculari-

zation, and the latter's compulsiveness, as in the case of *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!*'s opening scene, makes the viewers aware of the movie theatre's nature as disciplinary viewing machine: a setup that forces people to look. True, when Séverine and Charlotte later bungle their role in the doctor's sexual charade, he disrupts the illusion and chides them. This proves that like a theatre director he still controls the theatrical situation and the women performing in it, much as in the external world male doctors control and objectify women's bodies (Evans 160-161). This is a point LeCompte, the ultimate director figure framing all others, already made in *RUMSTICK ROAD*, when she and Spalding Gray questioned the psychiatric treatment of his mother. By the same token Séverine willingly returns to her bourgeois prison after being forced by Mme Anais to enjoy the liberating heterosexual contacts missing from her wedded life with Pierre, another doctor.

Buñuel, however, complicates the picture with additional reactions to patriarchal victimization, like the more egalitarian relationships and possibly lesbian pleasures among the women in the brothel, pleasures intimated when Mme Anais kisses Séverine, or Valk, Sheena See to seal Phèdre and Enone's pact against Hippolytus. From the feminine perspective, the satisfaction which Séverine, and the viewers identifying with her, derives from heterosexual contacts may also involve a pre-Oedipal and pre-Symbolic Deleuzian masochism, relinquishing agency and control. This much is argued by Gaylyn Studlar with regard to the movies of Joseph von Sternberg, whose *THE DEVIL IS A WOMAN* (1935) is based on the same book by Pierre Louys as Buñuel's *CET OBSCUR OBJET DU DÉsir* (1977) (Evans: 117-118, 153). Several of Séverine's fantasies indeed attest to a masochistic submissiveness that need not be castigated in the Freudian sense of a pathological perversion or sadism introjected (Freud 1984: 415; Evans: 131). In the case of Phèdre, such perverted enjoyment would only collapse discipline's dynamic of punishment and gratification into one (Foucault 1995: 180).

Séverine's masochistic fantasies may or may not include her childhood molestation in a bathroom, the traumatic cause for her self-prostitution in Buñuel's source, Joseph Kessel's 1928 novel, which lacks any daydreams altogether. The bathroom setting certainly helps to account for the hydrotherapeutic treatment of Phèdre's hysterics in *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!*. The postulated trauma, however, marks the revolution Freud caused in the two thousand five hundred year old history of hysteria, even if during his career he, too, prevaricated with regard to the actual or fantasized nature of this trauma (Maines: 44-45). So does Buñuel, now making Séverine's fantasies look real, now giving away the game (Wood: 45-47). LeCompte, too, plays tricks on her audience, when leaving open whether Valk relieves herself on stage or pretends to. If the director is here playing on the illusionism of traditional narrative film and the popular *trompe l'oeil* of Racine's baroque era, she is also aided by the transgressiveness of late twentieth century performances and art in which the body and its excretions have been used as legitimate material. And ever since the surrealists and Freud, fantasies should be included as another, less material product of lived experience, granted that Buñuel balked at the manner in which Freud's socially repressive psychology and psychotherapy tried to resolve the complexities and irrationalities of the human psyche (Wood: 57-58), and that LeCompte presumably recoils from the androcentric bias of Freud and some surrealists alike (Suleiman: 15-16, 124).

In the last resort, the filmic and theatrical levelling of fantasy and reality in *BELLE DE JOUR* and *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!*, like that of art and life, undermines the absoluteness of fictional events and their constitutive role with regard to the gen-

dered identity of the characters submitted to these events, just as Racine's text is opened up again by Schmidt's performative view of translation and LeCompte's framing of it with Euripides. To the extent that Séverine's and Phèdre's identities are shown to be permeable, conditioned by unpredictable fantasies like any other reality, the notion of a coherent individual psychology is exposed as a repressive social construct similar to the age-old clinical typology of hysteria. Like the brothel Séverine attends from two to five in the afternoon, her mind proves a performative space where fragments of different selves interact. It is an open house rather than a psychiatric ward, prison, or maison close. So, too, with the Wooster Group's inter-medial and intertextual *TO YOU, THE BIRDIE!*, which dissolves the integrity of Racine's PHÈDRE to demonstrate its social and historical construction and to expose the patriarchal forces at work in it.

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