

Cornice

Staging *11 September 2001* in the United States  
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*For Jim Carmody  
For my students in San Diego and Irvine*

Whether we acknowledge it or not, September 11, 2001 **has** changed our lives. Invited to teach in the United States at the University of California at San Diego and Irvine six months after the terrorist attacks on the New York towers, I decided to stage Vinaver's play as soon as it was published. What other work could be closer to the preoccupations of American students? My colleagues gave their approval for this spontaneous choice, even if some thought it "not very smart" in a country that was traumatized and little inclined toward the slightest criticism. Frankly, I wasn't very comfortable taking on this subject, but apart from its topicality, I very much wanted to make Vinaver's theatre, which I admire profoundly, better known. His most recent play, *Le 11 septembre 2001* (Paris: L'Arche, 2001) would be very suitable because it had just been "written in English (more precisely, in American), no doubt as a result of the location of the event and because it is the language of the reported words, coming from the daily newspapers" (9). I was convinced that the play would assist us in developing a perspective and that it would play its part in the group therapy of a wounded society. And, indeed, over the course of those three months, April to June, 2002, I felt a dull pain well up in the students, while my own made its presence felt, little by little.

In order to understand this experiment, the working conditions in the theatre departments of American universities must be described. They are excellent, thanks to the facilities and the organization of the course of study. The universities are more like our conservatories than our departments because they provide training for the professional theatre and are oriented toward practice. The students (undergraduate and graduate) perform in numerous professional-level productions, often for the university's theatre. The audience members come from the entire region to see these performances and often pay more than fifty dollars—like at San Diego's La Jolla Playhouse—to see a production in which students directed by professionals perform. If the students benefit from high-level technical training, intellectual ambitions are fairly limited (as they are in our Conservatoire National, for that matter), because the education all revolves around the professional placement of artists (actors, scenographers, directors) in the media industry. This highly "performative" training leaves little time for theoretical reflection on, or dramaturgical analysis of, theatre. I had the opportunity to make this observation while attending all of the end-of-the-year presentations of the different workshops and individual projects. Whatever the show may be, the work is technically beyond reproach and perfectly professional. The teachers also put on full-scale productions with their students. Thus, I will remember for a long time the staging of *Tartuffe* at the La Jolla Playhouse. The scenography was very beautiful and sophisticated, the diction very assured and cultivated, the acting comic and subtle, but the lack of knowledge of the French seventeenth century was astonishingly abysmal. The *mise en scène* sets Orgon's family in a rococo aristocratic milieu in which the Sun King arrives one day, *in extremis*, to guillotine Tartuffe! Very funny, but how uncultured, I said to myself! With such an attitude, wasn't I myself in the process of slipping into the role of the arrogant and elitist Frenchman, certainly not the best posture from which to begin a production that entailed tackling a subject clearly beyond my professional competence—terrorism and American politics?

Reflecting upon the causes of terrorism in these times, even under the guise of theatre, quickly provokes anger. In this "free" country, this so-called sanctuary of democracy and free expression, one must ceaselessly be alert against accusations from the person to whom one is speaking of male chauvinism, sexism, homophobia, lack of political correctness, or other sexual harassment. The

faculty is digging its own aseptic mausoleum, becoming mute as a tomb. It does nothing but deliver a product without any political vision of the theatre and the world; it is both actor and audience for its own utterly insipid comedy. The environment of the university and of Southern California is every bit as sterile. Everything is calm, clean, and right-minded. The Chicanos have picked up all the papers; not a blade of grass extends beyond the impeccable greens where retirees play golf, thanks to their pension funds which are highly valued on the stock exchange. My office at UCSD (University of California at San Diego) is every bit as clean and spacious as that of the neighboring premises that I previously occupied in 1980. The sea is very near; I am caught between the computer and the great disorganizer. Only the splendid nature of the national parks reconciles me with the great disorganizer, but not for long.

How, then, to approach Vinaver's play serenely? It is ingeniously and mysteriously constructed with the most up-to-date writing techniques, but one could not stage it without undertaking a political discussion of the causes of terrorism to???. And I feel myself in disagreement with the implicit final speech (60-68), which assimilates the positions of Bush and Bin Laden by suggesting that they share the same religious fanaticism and the same military aggressiveness (even if the speeches are *verbatim* quotes), because this parallel, which has moreover become a platitude of many of our politicians and intellectuals, seems to me dangerous and fallacious, and because it gives the Islamists some easy arguments. Like all the students, and like Vinaver as well—I'm sure of it—I would rather live in New York than in Kabul or Baghdad. I wonder if there really is a third European way, for example, which might elude Bush Jr. and Uncle Ben, if pacifism is not an otherworldly attitude. Seen from America, it seems a little facile to me to set two antithetical propositions against each other like a Hegelian dialectic lacking *Aufhebung*, with logical and political resolution, leaving this one in suspense, as if it was evident to all the European strategists.

But perhaps I was mistaken in this reading of the play and in the interpretation of the politics? I catch myself doubting the legitimacy of my staging project: can I stage a text whose virtuosity, even illegibility, I appreciate but with which I am surely (although it is not clear) in ideological disagreement? At the first meeting with the Irvine group, I organize a collective reading. The atmosphere grows progressively more charged as we proceed, not only as a result of the thematics but also because the polyphony of contradictory voices allows a doubt about the meaning of the work, notably the political meaning, to hover. A female student asks me candidly if the play isn't anti-American. I must convey to her my intellectual and moral caution while assuring her that it is not, of which, despite my reservations, I am fundamentally persuaded, because I know that neither the author nor his work is "attacking" America. They criticize it, perhaps, but how, exactly? Is not that precisely what must be determined in the interpretive work of *mise en scène*? At this stage of the project, I am still incapable of providing a dramaturgical and discursive analysis, perhaps because I, too, am blinded by suspicion and culpability, surely also quite simply because we have not adequately grappled with the putting into play of these overlapping discourses in a genuinely contradictory reading or with a representation of these discourses through performance. Whatever the case, I have the disagreeable feeling of equivocating, of not responding to expectations and to questions, of rejecting all true ideological analysis. The students, who are by the way very much in demand for many other more enjoyable productions, turn away from the project, and I find myself with only three of them, with whom I will nevertheless produce a staged reading, text in hand, for an audience of Irvine professors.<sup>1</sup>

Six weeks later with the second group, the San Diego group, I decide to proceed differently. I hold no collective reading of the play, leaving to each person the task of discovering it at home and deciding whether or not to participate.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, I organize five or six practical sessions of exercises to familiarize the potential participants with the type of writing and the style

of performance it demands. I invite the actors to remember what they were doing at the moment of the attacks and to create an abstract gestural and choreographical figure that takes into account both their activity at that moment and their reaction to the news. I ask them to move away from a realistic imitation of those activities in order to find a precise, repeatable figure—typical and personal at the same time—with a simple physical action. This figure, contained in a space of roughly six meters by six and of a duration of ten to fifteen seconds, will become the signature, at once public and intimate, of each person, the stable material, the “psychological gesture” (Chekhov), and the score to which the actor can at any moment connect himself. A part of the work will consist of arranging many such figures in a configuration, of imagining a choreographic dialogue that dispenses with words. To arrive at these figures, each actor tries to find a kinesthetic response to the figures of others. Positioned around the actor proposing his figure, they try to respond with a movement of the same style—tension, energy, score, then progressively vocal sounds, intonations, the vocal design of the phrase, and finally, linguistic text. I also experiment, like Anne Bogart, with the “technique of dissociation,” in which the actors create a physical score that does not double the vocal score and the signified of the text but dissociates from them. We retain many of these movements of dissociation, such as that of the air hostess who announces the hijacking of the plane, forming with torso and arms a complete non-imitative figure (10). This technique prevents the actors from characterizing their characters in a Stanislavskian or Strasbergian manner (a ghost roams America, the ghost of Strasbergism). From then on, at times unwillingly, the actors dispense with the accumulation of social and psychological notations to characterize their characters, which in any case exist only for a few seconds and never in a continuous fable or in a homogenous dramatic space. Nevertheless, they find very coherent and harmonious figures who “speak” the situation of the moment. Truly gifted, very disciplined, well trained, and perfectly “instrumentalized,” as our directors would say, they quickly become accustomed to this anti-naturalist mode of performance that breaks with what they ordinarily do.<sup>3</sup> This refinement of figures leads and contributes to a choral work (both gestural and vocal), not only for the interventions of the Chorus itself but also for the general placement of speakers on stage. The individual word takes on meaning only within the framework of an oratorio in which the interpreter is less a character than a performer, an instrumentalist in the service of an orchestra, a chorister in a vocal ensemble. Each individual score, often founded upon a dissociation between text and gesture, takes on meaning only within the choreography of the ensemble and, therefore, in the *mise en scène*.

This work on the ensemble’s figuration leads me to look for a setting that frames and justifies the presence of the speakers in the scenic stage space. For a long time, I look for a frame for the representation of the catastrophe and of terrorism. What I’m missing, in effect (as a good Brechtian?), is a point of view on the event and, consequently, a perspective and a frame with its center and its boundaries. To represent these boundaries, I think, in turn, of the music stands of an orchestra in rehearsal, or a dancer’s barre on three side of the stage. I constantly ask myself which persona, that is to say, which mask, which artifact, which role the students could project of themselves. What is in their minds when they speak the fragments of text? Not knowing them well and having neither the time nor the possibility of cracking them open in their Californian sociocultural universe—at a loss myself in my own American drifting—I don’t know what affects them or motivates them, what connects them to the actions they perform. So I’m not in a position to “frame” them correctly or even to put them in context. As a last resort, I suggest that they present themselves as students rehearsing a play, as if they had to do one of those countless auditions to which they endlessly submit themselves in order to join the ranks of the professionals. But instead of embodying their roles in a frenzied manner while persuading themselves that they are characters, I advise them to emphasize the technical aspects of their performances as instrumentalists or members of a chorus, not try to imitate or to embody the real but to signify it

with reference to certain indexes and, therefore, to emphasize the fictional aspect of the performance.

It is, however, problematic to frame the performance within the limits of a fiction and an esthetic artifact. The frame, in effect, doesn't stop breaking up, as if to make the dramatic subject communicate more effectively with the reality in which we bathe. Nevertheless, my task as director is to resist the temptation to transform the theatre into a pathetic commemorative ceremony or collective exorcism. But is this actually possible? The actors and, later during the two performances, the spectators twist the play in their own directions, conscious of being in contact with a living and painful subject in which are mixed their memories, their fears, and their anguish, a subject that is more and more confounded with the mediatized representations of terrorist attacks they continue to receive daily. The actors have great difficulty distancing themselves from this living and mediatized subject matter, from these media citations selected by Vinaver, to speak a text that seems to them very dry and abstract, if not cold and cynical. In order to get them to do so without, at the same time, losing the emotion of this quasi-commemorative evocation, I adopt the setting of an oratorio. In an entirely empty scenic space, open to the public on three sides in this studio theatre, each actor remains isolated in his bubble for most of the time and speaks his text toward the audience without visual contact with his partners. The speakers turn toward their partners only during dramatic exchanges between passengers and control tower. The dialogues of Lisa and Todd (18) just before the crash cross in space and are intensified by having them cross in space. As for the chorus, it assembles in a different formation at each intervention and each time becomes a collective body—each person says no more than a few words but all adopt the same tone and the same rhythm. At each new intervention of the chorus, the participants are positioned so as to rapidly form a body; organicity establishes itself thus on the basis of a rather empty, arbitrary, and abstract structure. Similarly, at certain dramatic moments—the impact of the plane, the assembly of the traders—the group forms, creates body and image, before dispersing once more. Alas, the absence of music (apart from the brief guitar interludes between sequences) and the modesty of the choreographic creation render the configuration fairly abstract, without flesh or “Venusity,” simple as an agit-prop chorus or as *skiny as a rake*<sup>4</sup> The tragic nature of the subject, the economy of the writing, appear to discourage any playful, unrestrained, or gratuitous use of theatricality.

In the absence of a genuine musical or choreographical score, that of an opera of which the play would be the libretto (as was originally envisioned), the director is responsible for coordinating the voices and rare movements and for controlling the tempo. The difficulty, paradoxically, is to limit oneself to this task of “stationmaster,” to present and juxtapose diverse material without suggesting such or such an interpretation. Is a similar attitude of **standing back** possible in the author or the director? And how far can neutrality or formalism go without risking the loss of the public's interest in the play? Often Vinaver's directors have called into question the sense and the finality of the plays. Jacques Lassalle, for example, asks, “Can the theatre depart from the territory of the story and points of view to that extent? Can it multiply in such a fashion the ways of saying while always eluding the stakes of ‘what to say?’” (93). According to Vinaver, the director of his plays should neither adopt a position nor provide a response, he should not privilege one meaning over another, he should pretend not to understand. The director must, and the rule applies to me as well, “play the idiot.” But this apparent incomprehension, this feigned neutrality, are never absolute, however, for the slightest act of enunciation adopts a position with respect to the enunciated, on stage more than elsewhere. Thus, in San Diego, perhaps under the ambient pressure, I construct and hierarchize in my own way the different voices of the oratorio. I ask the actors to insist on the human reactions of the survivors while at the same time avoiding sensationalism and pathos; I erase, or at least attenuate, any suggestion of Bush being every bit as fanatical as Bin Laden while

forbidding any facial caricature that might call to mind an evangelist television pundit; I emphasize the “young female voice” at the end of the play—she becomes the “average spectator,” with the uncertainties of America at that moment, but without tears in the eyes or sobs in the voice. She thus provides the average point of view from which the spectator begins to seek meaning. This representative of middle America, I imagine her not as a rebel, resistant to the capitalist system that has preferred her son to his boss, but on the contrary, like one of its cogs that has survived by chance, feels guilty for not perishing with her boss and who, for the moment, wonders if she will survive the destruction of her world. In place of exhorting the Gods or political conclusions, Vinaver has placed this final witness, simultaneously derisory and profoundly human. Fundamentally, with all the choices of the *mise en scène*, I do not have the impression of distancing myself from the instructions of the author.

Vinaver has been playing cat and mouse with his readers for a long time. Like a “*Dissident, he Goes Without Saying*,” he says nothing, but he registers his disagreement, suggests his skepticism, he conceals himself behind the symmetry of viewpoints. Here, the traders and the terrorists employ the same cynicism (22-28), Bin Laden and Bush engage in the same total war. In order to thwart this strategy of camouflage, the sole issue for the *mise en scène* is to mark the shift from one speech to another (rather than from one scene to another) and to observe why and in what way the perspective changes. We mark these caesuras and shifts with a few guitar chords composed for the occasion in a plaintive and lugubrious mode. We mark the move from one sequence to the next with a strong vocal attack that breaks with what comes before and launches the enunciation once again from a new foundation. We distinguish the following waves:

- we shift from the perspective of the victims just before the impact on the twin towers to that of the passengers in the other plane before the crash (10-22)
- the chorus, whose provenance we do not know, takes note of the catastrophe while Bush cries vengeance (22-28)
- the journalists comment on the crumbling of the towers and interview those who escaped (28-34)
- to the accounts of these witnesses is mixed in the reading of the terrorists’ instructions sheets (34-38)
- we return to the accounts of those who escaped (38-48)
- an aria for three voices links the interventions of the terrorist Atta, the traders, and the journalist: the first describes his death, the second envisage the future of a vital economy, and the third describes, not without admiration, the organization of the attack (48-52)
- we return to the evocation of the survivors at the moment of rescue from the towers (52 -58)
- without transition, we are confronted with the overlapping speeches of the President and the terrorist in chief (60-68)
- the final punctuation is provided by the last witness account, that of the “young female voice,” voice of American and conscience of the average spectator (70).

At first reading, this writing by shifts gives the deceptive impression of **drifting away** without direction or logic, while in reality it organizes the perspective and the reception of the reader or spectator. We continually move from “the perspective of the frog” (the *Froschperspektive* of the Germans, our [French] daisy-level vision, **down to earth**) to a bird’s-eye perspective that captures the sociopolitical mechanisms in a global view. The global path is fairly clear: Vinaver extracts himself from the traumatic event, seeking a comprehensive political explanation, then he “concludes” on the naive but vital reaction of the model employee. Unstable perspectives then, which make the play a text with variable geometry whose logic remains always to be discovered. I

see in this text Vinaver's indecision or oscillation. He is hesitating between an immersion in the material of reported words and media and a desire to move backwards, if not upwards, in order to explain the unprecedented event in a political manner. Two visions then, one naive and compassionate, the other politically engaged and cynical.

The *mise en scène* marks the shifts and transitions with the same musical interludes (the tragic leitmotif played on the guitar), while changing each time the configuration of the actors in the space. The actors move from one role to another as soon as a new sequence begins and they announce the names of their characters. This **device** breaks the illusion, sets their words at a distance, encourages the circulation if not the circularity of discourse. Always physically on stage, the actors tend to look out front, the gaze fixed on an invisible prompter, moving literally, with their witness accounts, above the heads of the spectators. They have learned to oscillate between presence and absence, and vice versa, without stopping. Absent when in neutral position, "all lights off," they are not involved in the scene; present when it is suddenly their turn to be and to speak—then the gaze lights up, the body commits, the voice localizes and affirms itself, the scene radiates from them.

When they move, they follow the patterns of strictly choreographed, large geometric figures. This formalization of human relations prevents the effect of the real but not of authenticity, it stylizes and estheticizes the real, keeps it at a distance. The stage is a chessboard, a neutralized surface upon which all moves are possible between the actants: criss-crossing, stopping and starting, interchangeability of readers and their discourses. Unlike the documentary theatre of the 1970s, this dramaturgy does not aim to render the real mimetically, to reconstitute it for the astonished eyes of the spectators. Paradoxically, the citations from newspapers and speeches, once assembled by the author and transmitted by the actors, produce no effect of the real and appear rather stylized and distanced. One becomes aware of it, among other things, when comparing the original English and the translation, or rather "the French adaptation, subsequently compiled by the author" (9). Curiously, and unfortunately for the French, the adaptation loses the precision, the rapidity, and the esthetic stylization of the English original. Whatever one thinks, in order to translate "Last to be hit first to collapse" (46), French slows down and makes more ponderous the punchy English journalistic formula, "dernière à être frappée/ elle aura été la première à s'effondrer" (47). The translations are not very accurate at times and adopt quite another stylistic level: "Grieving about Ramos" (46) becomes faded in "Triste au sujet de Ramos" (47). At times, the kinds of slang do not coincide from one language to another: "Are you guys ready?" (22) has none of the vulgarity of "les mecs vous y êtes?" (23). Having the opportunity to work on original material still impregnated with the entire American environment, I can conserve in the *mise en scène* its flavor of an authentic document that has nevertheless been reworked, stylized, remodeled by the discourses of the media and thanks to the "magic touch" of Michel (even though he seems not to have touched it) . . .

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Watching the video of the performance a year later, in June 2003, I obviously notice its imperfections and my conviction is confirmed: one cannot analyze one's own work or propose an "objective" semiological analysis of it. In the absence of an analysis, I can only take note of shortcomings and express regrets. I am surprised that the balance of the viewpoints, the refusal to come to a conclusion so dear to Vinaver, has been respected *grosso modo*. A good quality or a fault, I don't know. Vinaver is distrustful of the *mise en scène* of his plays. He sees in all *mise en scène* a "mise en trop" because "the director will quite simply do too much with it. He cannot not do too much with it" ("La mise en trop" 148). The author feels nostalgic for the days before directors when, according to him, works were "presented, what's the word, literally, with spontaneity and immediacy, with diligence and neutrality, with simplicity. . ." ("La mise en trop"

144). If in the present state of economic conditions in the professional theatre all *mise en scène* is, for Vinaver, a “*mise en trop*,” it appears difficult to avoid the “*mise en tropes*” and there is even every reason to believe that it will always be a “*mise en tropes*”—an allegorization of the text by visual means, by figures of scenic style. As for knowing if I made too much (*trop*) or too many *tropes* of it, or not enough, I am very divided. I find myself in the situation of the man who always has a “bad reputation”: like Brassens’s hero, “qu’je m’démène ou qu’je reste coi/je pass’pour un je-ne-sais-quoi !” (whether I drive myself crazy or stay quiet/ I’m taken for an I-don’t-know-what !).

At least this show doesn’t last too long (twenty five minutes), as if good functioning demands that it be expeditious. Nor it is too allegorical but, rather, schematic, even skeletal. It lacks, from all appearances, a more consistent substantiality, which it could have been given, not by fleshing out the characters, making them more complex, giving them pregnant silences, or in describing their environments, but in transposing the libretto into an opera-ballet. Vinaver’s libretto deserves to find the equivalent of Kurt Joos’s ballet, *Der grüne Tisch* (*The Green Table*), the first work of dance theatre, which announced Nazism in 1932 by showing its causes through the lens of the class struggle and the manipulation of diplomats and capitalists around the green table-cover. Thus magnified by the dance, Vinaver’s play would preserve the equilibrium of viewpoints and things unsaid, but would give flesh, thanks to the dancers, to all the readings of September 11.

For the time being, a cultivated American public like ours, in Irvine as in San Diego, was capable of detecting the source of the citations while appreciating the montage—certainly tendentious—of reported words. And moreover the hundred spectators, students and faculty for the most part, remained for a moment subject to a double shock—the painful evocation of the attacks and the unaccustomed form of the dramaturgy and the performance. The emotion and surprise passed, the community accepted this form and was able to extract the political message. But which one, exactly? In any case, there was no protest with respect to the confrontation between Bush and Bin Laden. Did it go without saying, or had my precautions, as a servile valet of Yankee imperialism, lessened the shock. One did not dare to dig too deep. Only two female Muslim students found the play insulting and complained about the discrimination of which their community was, in their eyes, once again victim. They gave me a letter of protest for the French author. Visiting the national parks with their thousand-year-old Sequoia trees before leaving America a few days later, I lost it, unfortunately, and was never able to pass it on to him.

#### NOTES

1. Performed at UC Irvine, May 2, 2002. Nixon Theatre. With Caroline Schlenker
2. Performed at UC San Diego, June 7-8, 2002. With Hénia Belalia, Nawal Bengholam, Monique Fleming, Roger Kuch, Dan K. Lee, Isabel Martin, Jennie Scanlon.
3. Discussing her experience of directing in the United States, Brigitte Jaques spoke about “des acteurs formidablement instrumentalisés” (“formidably instrumentalized actors”) (Féral 121-23).
4. The term is borrowed from Roland Barthes: “La vénusté, c’est-à-dire la beauté, la “désirabilité” des acteurs sur la scène” (Venusity, that is to say beauty, the “desirability of actors on stage) (124).

#### SOURCES

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