



## **Performance of Testimony and Role of the Witness**

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The link between the spectator and the witness is multi-layered. What is the relationship between witnessing and spectatorship? Using what might appear to be a simplistic approach, one could try to decide whether the relationship is one of equivalence or of opposition. Either they are two different words with the same meaning or they differ in their very essence. Though this vision can sometimes be relevant, some nuances have to be introduced. The path between the witness and the spectator is not unidirectional and it includes many steps. One can take all the steps or stop anywhere in between, go one way or move back and forth.

The two words do not belong to the same field: one – spectator – is related to theater and art, whereas the second is related to law and, increasingly, to trauma. On the one hand, spectators belong to the world of what is often considered as entertainment and are in addition generally considered as the passive element in theater, due to their position of reception during the representation. On the other hand, witnesses participate in the legal process, intervene in trials and can sometimes be the “key” to a verdict. However, what brings spectators and witnesses together is that they share the same actions: seeing and hearing. One can wonder, however, whether those things are actions. Spectators and witnesses are receivers, which does not make them necessarily active. In their distinct field, witnesses are active because they use the information they received and transform it, whereas spectators do not seem to take hold of what they received or do anything with it. Is witnessing a step forward above and beyond spectatorship? Maybe the shift from spectator to witness lies in the action of telling, being responsible and accountable for what one saw. Spectatorship would be the first level, the first form of witnessing: witnesses are spectators to an event before they are able to bear witness to it, that is, to accept responsibility for seeing and reacting to what they saw. However, the situation is not that simple. Witnessing can occur in the primary situation. Indeed, Primo Levi evokes an «



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

unconscious preparation to testimony »<sup>1</sup>, acknowledging that he developed a very precise visual and auditory memory in Auschwitz. He was thus already a witness as he was receiving the information.

Spectatorship and witnessing are connected and it is relevant to explore this connection in relation to theater and trauma. Though a spectator and a witness are in the same position watching a performance or a traumatic event, their responses differ. Rather than opposing their responses as active for the witness and passive for the spectator, it seems more appropriate to oppose them as empowered and disempowered, especially in relation to trauma. Indeed, spectators can develop a narrative about what they saw and therefore be active; it does not necessarily mean that they are bearing witness. What matters is that the action they perform after their reception of the show empowers them. Therefore, spectator and witness are not opposed in essence but in modes of (re)action, and shifting from one category to the other is possible. The witness being an empowered spectator and the spectator a disempowered witness, I believe it is possible to turn spectators into witnesses if they are properly included and involved in the performance. I will first examine the shift from witness to spectator during and after the 9/11 attacks and offer a possibility to re-empower the spectators and gain witnessing back through theater work. This will lead me to study the role and necessity of the listener/spectator in the performance of testimony from a psychological point of view; and I will then transpose my observations to theater and elaborate a proposition of involvement of the spectators in the performance in a way that gives them the keys to witnessing.

### **From witness to spectator... back to witness**

The shift from witness to spectator unfortunately seems to be a recurrent pattern and studying it can offer some suggestions about how to reverse the process. The 9/11 attacks created a great number of witnesses and triggered a high level of trauma. The way the government, the citizens and the country as a whole reacted to this wound is very relevant to the problematics of spectatorship and witnessing. The reactions themselves question what is accepted and what is

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<sup>1</sup> Lévi, Primo, *Si c'est un homme*, Preface the edition of 1947, quoted in Agamben, Giorgio, *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz*, (trad.) Alferi, Pierre. (Paris : Payot et Rivages, 2003), 193 p.



Revue Baobab: numéro 4

Premier semestre 2009

silenced after a trauma. The 9/11 event was also at the origin of a theatrical response by the Theater Arts Against Political Violence, which explicitly addressed – and tried to give space to – the necessity of witnessing. I will focus on this particular trauma and its aftermath.

Those who experienced the traumatic event, lived through it and saw it with their own eyes felt like witnesses: “We stood transfixed, watching, witnesses without a narrative, part of a tragic chorus that stumbled onto the wrong set.”<sup>2</sup> They are part of the trauma; they are *superstes*, who can bear witness to 9/11 because they survived it. Nobody tried to silence them; on the contrary, for weeks, months, the media were hungry for “9/11 stories”. However, from the very day of the attacks, the roles had been distributed and the New Yorkers were lost somewhere between the heroes and the dead, involuntarily passive and disempowered. As a result, they were excluded from the event:

If this was a tragedy, we were not recognized as participants. The role of witness, as responsible, ethical, participant rather than spectator to crisis, collapsed in the rubble talk of victims, heroes, and the rest of us. [...] there was no place for us, no participation that could conceivably be meaningful.<sup>3</sup>

The question of participation and meaning is extremely relevant because both are what make witnesses “ethical” and bring them to relate to the event, therefore becoming accountable for it. Somehow, witnesses are always already responding and committing to what they see. From the day of the 9/11 attacks, witnesses were turned into mere spectators who could only watch and undergo what was happening around them. The government’s response in the weeks and months following the trauma did not help them to take on the role of witness but locked them further into spectatorship. Indeed, only five days after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush gave a speech on the US military response to the terrorists. In this speech, he declared: “Today, millions of Americans mourned and prayed, and tomorrow we go back to work.”<sup>4</sup> This declaration was emblematic of the government’s will to move on: it was already time to respond to the attacks, defend

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Diana, “Lost in the field of vision: Witnessing September 11” in *The Archive and the Repertoire : Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2003), p. 237.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Bush, George W., Remarks Upon Arrival, déclaration et interview du 16 Septembre 2001, site de la Maison Blanche, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

themselves and be active again. This aggressive attitude, this hurry to go past the acknowledgement of the wound and trauma to concentrate on an activity that apparently puts the country back in a position of power is characteristic of what psychologist Steven Reisner calls “trauma avoidance”<sup>5</sup>. This speech and those that followed praise the United States, their citizens and their values and call on their courage and endurance to go through and win the war. By avoiding the trauma, this attitude prevents any witnessing to it; it excludes and refuses witnessing: it is a symbolic equivalent to closing one’s eyes.

Caught in this urge to act, the New Yorkers, particularly those living in Downtown Manhattan, struggled to find a place for their suffering and their narratives. Indeed, it took a lot longer than five days for them to get past the material and psychological damage. Despite the psychologists, social workers and numerous volunteers sent to Ground Zero, New Yorkers could not find a satisfying answer to their pain and needs. They were denied any active participation and could not voice their experiences and concerns the way they wanted to.

Diana Taylor underlines the fact that though 9/11 is called a tragedy, it is not an Aristotelian one, which would follow an organic logic and end with the recognition – of the protagonist’s fault, identity or destiny - by the protagonist as well as the audience. On 9/11/2001, the audience was simply excluded from the representation.<sup>6</sup> The tragedy of 9/11 is not organized, it has no end because nothing is resolved, nothing is meaningful: who is the hero? Where is the chorus? What is the fault, the flaw? And how can a resolution be achieved? The attacks remain mired at the level of trauma; hence they cannot be read as a tragedy. However, there is no point in looking for answers to these questions to make this event a model tragedy. Marc Nichanian calls the Greek tragedy a “politics of witness”<sup>7</sup>, which gives an account of an event as well as the impossibility of accounting for it. Yet this politics is only possible in the context of Ancient Greece. According to Nichanian, we have lost this “politics of witness” because we have no space, anywhere, to make it happen. Theater is no longer this space.

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<sup>5</sup> Reisner, Steven, “Private Trauma/Public Drama : Theater as a Response to International Political Trauma”, *Public Sentiments*, ed. Ann Cvetkovich et Ann Pellegrini, Special Issue of S&F Online 2.1 (2003), <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ps/reisner.htm>. p.4.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, Diana, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

<sup>7</sup> Nichanian, Marc, “Catastrophic Mourning” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. Eng, D.L. and Kazanjian, D. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p.140.



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

It is true that the quest to come back to the Greek tragedy makes no sense today. As 9/11 and other traumas of the past century have shown, there is no meaning, no resolution, no full respite to find after such events. However, some elements of ancient tragedy, the ones that founded it and held it together, can still be useful to overcome trauma in theater as well as in public life. It may be time to think about reintegrating the chorus and listening to what it has to say. It would mean starting back from the origin: the people who make the city; the chorus that is the origin of theater and tragedy, long before the protagonist appeared.

The return to the chorus is one of the main characteristics of the work created by Theater Arts Against Political Violence in relation to the 9/11 attacks, *“Everything is back to normal in New York City: Below Canal, a Work in Progress.”* The TAAPV is part of the International Trauma Studies Program at Columbia University, and they aim at working closely with trauma survivors to create a performance designed to answer their needs. A group of actors went to Downtown Manhattan, the closest neighbourhood to the Twin Towers. They interviewed residents about their experiences of 9/11 and then started improvising from what they had gathered, eventually creating a play. In this play, they address many of the attitudes that led the witnesses of 9/11 to be disempowered. A character is interviewed by the media and sees it as a chance to finally voice what she and her community have to say; but she bursts into tears, and by the time she is able to control herself and ready to talk, the journalists leave. She protests, she has said nothing. The cameraman answers: “It was perfect.” Just what they needed. Tears and despair. Another character explains that he was feeling disconnected, being up in Harlem. So he went home and watched the events on TV; but it only made him feel more helpless. Those scenes, and many others during the performance, denounce the passive role pre-attributed to the potential witnesses. Whereas one character believes that it is useless to talk because everything has been said, another one encourages everybody to talk and share their story. To her, it is like touching one another, making the other real; “it’s an opportunity.” That certainly is the point of view of TAAPV. Their play addresses essential issues because it comes from the survivors themselves, though it does not by itself turn the survivors from spectators back into witnesses. What empowers the survivors is above all the process that leads to the creation of such a play.



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

One of the main goals of TAAPV is to prevent disconnection between the survivors they work with. They welcome the survivors in the theatrical process as a group. Jack Saul, a psychologist and the director of the International Trauma Studies Program, recalls a particular day when a group of survivors joined a rehearsal and they spontaneously began to tell their stories. Yet, they did not tell their own; each survivor told the story of another. Maybe they were too humble to tell their own, maybe it was easier not to be too personal; what is important is that this situation allowed them to listen to their own stories being told by someone else and turned them into spectators to their own trauma. TAAPV do not include survivors on stage precisely because they want to give to the survivors the spectacle of their own trauma. Jack Saul says that he is interested by “the bodies in the audience”<sup>8</sup>, and those bodies can be those of the survivors. The position of spectator favours a distancing from the event at the same time as it offers the possibility of identification. Thus, the survivors see their experiences transformed by art and embodied by others; it allows them to project the trauma out of themselves and then take it back under another form, re-appropriate it. This process is described by Dori Laub as re-externalization and it is essential to the healing of trauma:

A therapeutic process – a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event – has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside.<sup>9</sup>

The re-externalization is then directly linked to testimony and transmission. Before testifying and sharing their story, the survivors have no grip on their trauma. It has neither beginning nor end, it does not belong to the past but it is experienced, in the body and the mind, as the present. Testimony, through the process described by Dori Laub, allows the survivors to give a shape to the trauma and find a place for it in their history when they take it back. The trauma ceases to be trauma as soon as it becomes an articulate narrative. It becomes a marked and limited event and

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Saul, interview of the 02/18/08.

<sup>9</sup> Laub, Dori, Bearing Witness, in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. Felman, Shoshana et Laub, Dori (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.69.



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

the survivors can become active again in relation to it. Thus, the position of spectator empowers the survivors and makes them active, contrary to the effects one usually expects from it. The position of spectator is not active in itself though; it is a means toward activity. This psychological process can be found in theatrical practices such as Moreno's psychodrama at the beginning of the twentieth century and, more recently, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. One can see how the method used by the TAAPV is inspired by those practices. Indeed, spectatorship is used in their work as a transition towards further participation in the creation: the survivors then give ideas about how they would like their stories represented, they attend rehearsals and give advice to the actors: they participate in the artistic shaping of their stories. Spectatorship is somehow the condition of their participation in the spectacle; it is by seeing their story outside of themselves that they can act on it.

The survivors are empowered on many levels: first in their decision to go and see TAAPV and ask to collaborate with them; then in their effort to share their experiences and in their trust in the performers they work with; in their participation in the artistic transformation of their experiences; and finally in the presentation of this transformation to a larger audience. Each representation is followed by a talk-back, which further nourishes the perception the survivors have of their own stories. Those levels of empowerment correspond to steps in the transmission. It begins with the transmission of one's experience within the traumatized community, goes on with the transmission to artists, which leads to working on the form of the transmission, and eventually the transmission to a larger audience who responds to this transmission. It is indeed important that the survivors can see the impact of the transmission on the audience. Little by little, through the process of transmission, the survivors become the masters of their trauma and finally are empowered to bear witness again.

### **The role of the spectator in the performance of testimony**

The transition from spectator to witness is a long process, even when one was primarily a witness and then deals with a 'lost' witnessing that has to be 'recovered'. What about those who were not witnesses in the first place? They have no legitimacy within the traumatic event. Are they doomed to remain spectators, receivers of a narrative they can not relate to? Even though



Revue Baobab: numéro 4

Premier semestre 2009

they did not experience the trauma, their spectatorship to its account or its representation can be the gateway to secondary witnessing.

From a therapeutic point of view, Dori Laub values the role of the listener, who becomes a co-creator and even a co-owner of the traumatic event: “The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge de novo. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed”.<sup>10</sup>

The therapist, as a listener and a spectator, helps patients to deliver their story. The reexternalization of the event, or, we could say, the passage through spectatorship to the event, can only take place when the survivors “transmit” the story, and they can only transmit it if someone is here to receive it: their presence is the essential quality of the listeners. Laub insists that the absence of listeners, or an absence of attention from the listeners, can retraumatize the survivors; the listeners are thus a crucial condition for the occurrence of the narrative. To allow the story to be articulated by the witnesses, the listeners have to relate to them. Emotions are very important in the process of testimony; the listeners must be able to identify with the witnesses’ voice, language, and story.<sup>11</sup> That way they project themselves towards the witnesses and are able to reach them. The emotional investment is what keeps the narration alive and allows the witnesses to hold to their narrative: “Bearing witness to trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. [...] There needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other – in the position of one who hears.”<sup>12</sup> And sees.

The listeners are part of the witnessing as receivers, but they are already active in their reception, thus they are already witnesses. As Primo Levi wrote, witnessing does not necessarily mean providing a narrative. What makes Dori Laub’s listeners active is their emotional commitment, their identification, i.e. their projection of themselves towards the witness and the event, and their acceptance of closeness and intimacy. What makes them empowered is their choice of being touched. Indeed, they have to be witnesses not only to the primary witness, but also to themselves. They are conscious of their reception, their emotions and their transformation

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<sup>10</sup> Laub, Dori, *art. cit.*, p.57.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*, p.64

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*, p.70





Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

into witnesses. However, Dori Laub develops this conception of the listeners-witnesses in the context of therapy, a one-to-one relationship and exchange that makes the intimacy and the bond easier. The challenge is to see how it can be applied to theater.

In theater, the listeners are the spectators. The spectators usually are numerous and it is harder to create an intimacy with a group than with a single person. The issue is to make the spectators feel that the performance concerns them all. In her analysis of *Information for foreigners* by Griselda Gambaro, Diana Taylor writes: “We are the spectators, we are involved.”<sup>13</sup> Is that so? Are spectators involved by nature? They are undeniably involved in the representation, because they are here, present, sitting on a chair. Yet, they might not realize that this presence is an involvement. Laub underlines the fact that there is no story without a spectator: “the absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other [...] annihilates the story.”<sup>14</sup> How can a performance make the spectators aware of that responsibility? Many theories have focused on the modalities of their participation in the spectacle, from Aristotle with his notion of identification to Augusto Boal and his spectator. Even when they realize their responsibility, they have to be careful that they do not avoid it. Laub gives a list of mechanisms listeners can use to avoid witnessing: numbness, anger against the story-teller, utter admiration to avoid intimacy, hyper emotionality... One has to prevent that from happening to spectators too, to be sure that they are truly present and involved.

Having the spectators actively participate in the representation is the most obvious way to involve them in what they see. It can be done by the way of talk-backs, as TAAPV offer at the end of the representation, and more radically by the simultaneous dramaturgy and forum theatre invented by Boal. The spectators have a chance to step into the narrative and modify it; they can discuss the best way to end the play, the best attitude to adopt for a character, etc. Yet, these methods are essentially addressed to members of a traumatized community and might not be as effective with external spectators, who have no personal reason to relate to the story represented on stage. In addition, as the term “spectator” shows, Boal’s conception denatures spectatorship. It replaces the role of spectator by other roles, such as author or actor. Some spectators do not

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor, Diana, “Percepticide” in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p.138.

<sup>14</sup> Laub, Dori, *art. cit.*, p.68.



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

want to participate physically; indeed, these methods might appear as coercive to them. I believe the spectators should be *invited* to be a witness; one cannot force witnessing on someone.

Another way to reach the spectators is through emotions. Emotional investment is not a synonym of passivity. Of course, one has no way of checking if the spectators got emotionally involved. This work can only be done by the spectators and they are the only assessors to it. It is through emotions that the spectators can attain identification. Not identification as a passive invasion by feelings the spectators did not choose, as Boal sees it, but identification as an active implication. Identification can be coercive when the spectators are passive and get caught in feelings they do not master. An active identification does not submerge spectators with emotions but invites them to feel. The emotions are not projected onto the spectators; they recognize themselves in a character or a situation and identify with him/her/it through an active projection. They choose to have emotions. The Aristotelian process of recognition would be the invitation to identification; and as a choice, identification would therefore be empowering, triggering the spectators' power of imagination. Indeed, I suggest that identification is rooted in imagination. Analyzing *Among the ruins* by Zabel Essayan, Marc Nichanian underlines the idea that when she says that the suffering of the Armenian people in Cilician was unimaginable, it means that she tried to imagine and therefore identified herself to them. The identification is an effort of the imagination.

Imagination is the main strength of the spectators; it is a capacity they can use when attending a play and that enables them to become witnesses. Though the idea of spectatorship as a passive role seems to be accepted, I believe it is possible to leave to the spectators their original place and role and still make them active within this very place, the place of the ones who watch and listen. Meyerhold describes them as the fourth creators of theater, and they may have a greater creative role through imagination rather than by attempting to borrow roles that are not theirs. Isaac Tylim, a psychologist, studies the significant role of imagination in representing the horrors that resist representation. He is convinced that imagination assists patient and therapist in overcoming the limitations of memory. He gives the example of the therapy sessions between Dr. Prince and his patient Elsa, a Holocaust survivor. She refuses to talk about her experience in the camps, but in her narrative of her daily life and other concerns, she keeps giving hints leading to



Revue Baobab: numéro 4  
Premier semestre 2009

it. The therapist is therefore invited to acknowledge those hints and draw links between them to reconstruct the story of the trauma. Yet, Elsa will never tell this story. The goal here is not to find out what the true story is; it is for the survivor to trust the therapist enough to give out intimate elements and for the therapist to try to recognize them and imagine their linkage and meaning. This work of imagination can be transposed to theater. The representation does not have to give all the elements to the spectators; on the contrary, it must leave them some space to imagine and create so that they become involved as part of the theatrical process. The representation has to renounce being a meaningful Aristotelian tragedy and leave the building of meaning to the spectators. All of them will not understand the same things, but it does not matter because there is no right or wrong. Who knows, maybe they will build meanings the authors, directors and actors would never have imagined. Imagination is thus used in a Brechtian fashion, as a trigger to the spectators' intelligence and criticism. And maybe they will start thinking about and beyond the representation:

In order to be empowered by seeing, to be able to look back at the monstrous gargoyles without turning into lifeless stones, we must see beyond the theatrical frame and decode the fictions about violence, about torturers, about ourselves as audience, about the role of theater in this "pathetic drama"<sup>14</sup>

To invite the spectators to bear witness to the representation can be the first step towards a wider witnessing, a reaffirmation of the link between theater and politics and maybe of theater as the "politics of witness". Nichanian explains that after the major traumas of the twentieth century, the witnesses are no longer the witnesses of the historians, that is to say they are not bearing witness for the historians, they go beyond creating history; and they are not the witnesses the historians used to know. The new kinds of trauma that have emerged call for a new witness. Though, contrary to Nichanian, I believe theater can be our "politics of the witness". When the institutions fail, it may even be the only one. It is not classical tragedy, but it is still theater, a new one, that has to be made adequate to welcome the representation and transmission of witnessing.

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<sup>14</sup> Taylor, Diana, "Percepticide" in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p.137.



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