

State of affairs and challenges of political theatre in a neoliberal era in France

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« The theatre is an essentially political art form ». Who has not heard this catchphrase, proudly proclaimed by all and sundry among the players in the French theatrical world, ... or to be more precise, by all the players of the « public theatre » ? The publicly-funded theatre in France is grounded on a specific ideology, co-built and commonly shared by all the workers in the field as well as by the central and regional public authorities. For the players in the theatrical field, the notion that the theatre is an updated version of the ancient Greek agora, with the audience acting as a miniature model of the civil community as a whole is so widespread that it is never called into question, indeed not even consciously entertained. For my part, I propose to consider this notion and the metaphor of the agora not as self-evident truths but as social constructs whose aesthetic and political causes and effects need to be assessed. In so doing, I will not take up the comfortable stance of the radical researcher observing the scene with a critical eye from a high, distant vantage point. Rather, it is my hope that a careful scrutiny of the many different ways of conceiving and putting into effect the political function of the theatre will provide tools for better apprehending, if not resolving the structural as well as cyclical crisis the public theatre is currently going through in France.