

Theatre (trad. de l'article « Théâtre »)

The dramatic text may seem very far removed from autobiography, if we adhere to Philippe Lejeune's definition of the latter: a "retrospective prose narrative that someone makes of their own existence, in which they place the main emphasis on their individual life, and in particular on the history of their personality" (*L'Autobiographie en France*, Colin, 1971). In contrast, playwrights supposedly disappear behind their characters, who are involved in an interpersonal action in the present, in a dialogue taking place here and now. Moreover, since a play is intended to be performed on stage, any form of "I" testifying or recalling facts will be performed by an actor, and therefore perceived by the audience from the outside.

The fact remains that, for a very long time, theatre has taken steps towards autobiography, for example when an authorial figure emerges: in the parabasis in Aristophanes's plays, in Adam de la Halle's *Le Jeu de la Feuillée* [*Play of the Greensward*] (1276) or Molière's *L'Impromptu de Versailles* [*The Versailles Impromptu*] (1663), and more recently in Wajdi Mouawad's *Rêves* [*Dreams*] (2002). However, what is most significant in this respect is the transformation of drama – or more precisely its subjectivisation – in the second half of the nineteenth century. The theorist Peter Szondi locates the origin of this transformation in a "crisis" due to the emergence of a political and social functioning that is inimical to human relations and condemns people to solitude, therefore leading authors to move away from inter-human conflict in the present, and even from dialogue. Thus, in *Woyzeck* (1836), Georg Büchner developed a dramatic form centred on the eponymous character, and Arthur Miller took this form further in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by presenting the psychological state of an individual who has withdrawn into his memories. It should be noted that August Strindberg had earlier invented the interior perspective in *Till Damaskus* [*To Damascus*] (1898-1903) with the central, autobiographical character of "The Stranger". Finally, we must recall the crucial influence of the novelistic interior monologue – in Édouard Dujardin's *Les Lauriers sont coupés* [*The Bays are Sere*] (1887) or James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) – on the theatrical productions included by Joseph Danan in the category of the "theatre of thought".

In fact, the theatre of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries comes close to autobiography when it establishes a principle of retrospection, interiorisation, or confession, whether or not the first person is used. For example, August Strindberg's "Intimate Theatre" worked in this way from 1907 onwards, by presenting on each occasion a self-portrait by means of the play's central character. One can also mention the genre of the "monodrama", initiated in France by Saint-Pol-Roux and theorised in Russia by Nicolas Evreinov, which focuses on the drama of a single character, related in the first person or by several voices. Another example is that of the "life story", which, instead of a succession of actions in the present, provides the evocation of a character's past, filtered by that character's consciousness and reconstructed in a way that may or may not correspond to the chronology of the past events: these include Philippe Minyana's *Inventaires* [*Inventories*] (1987) and Jean-Luc Lagarce's *Le Pays lointain* [*The Distant Country*] (1995). Finally, we can point to monologue plays with a single character: Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1959) and *Happy Days* (1961), and those that proliferated in the 1970s and 80s in the works of Peter Handke, Heiner Müller, and Bernard-Marie Koltès, which may take as their subject the life of the author or that of a proxy character.

None of these works are included in Patrice Pavis's definition of "autobiographical theatre", since this critic adheres strictly to the definition of the "retrospective prose narrative that someone makes of their own existence", and therefore from the outset excludes the monologue play from his corpus. He first identifies the autobiographical dramatic text proper, which inscribes "the author's obsessive self", despite the fictionalisation that it has undergone, the presence of several characters, and the resulting transformation of the autobiographical pact when actors interpose themselves between the author's self and the audience. Examples of this type of text include Jean-Claude Grumberg's trilogy consisting of the plays *Dreyfus* (1974), *L'Atelier* [*The Workshop*] (1979) and *Zone libre* [*Free Zone*] (1990), which present three fictions – and three periods of history – relating to the fate of the Jewish community in Central Europe. But one could also think of two attempts to reinvent the dramatic form in connection with the autobiographical subject: firstly, in *Les Drôles* [*Strange People*] (1993), Élisabeth Mazev tells the story of her life chronologically, from childhood to marriage, in the form of a third-person dialogue, indicating the first name of the speaker at the beginning of each spoken line; secondly, Olivier Py, in *Théâtres* [*Theatres*] (1998), creates a "cerebral drama" centred on the figure of "Myself", and featuring the characters "My Father", "My Mother", and "My Tormentor", who allow him to reconstruct his childhood and adolescence, from different points of view, and without any chronology. Patrice Pavis also identifies "scenic autobiography", exemplified by the performance of the actor-author Philippe Caubère, who, in *Le Roman d'un acteur* [*The Story of an Actor*] (1994), relates his life story and his training at the Théâtre du Soleil. The coincidence in this play between the actor and the author's self becomes close to autobiography, even though the fact that the audience is attending a form of one-man show can produce a distancing effect.

Bibliographie

Joseph Danan, *Le Théâtre de la pensée*, Médiannes, 1995.

Nicolas Evreinov, *Introduction au monodrame* (1913), trad. de D. Konopnicki Miot, présenté par Joseph Danan, *Registres*, n° 4, Presses de la Sorbonne-Nouvelle, nov. 1999, p. 148-167.

Chantal Hébert et Irène Perelli-Contos (dir.), *La Narrativité contemporaine au Québec*, t. II. *Le Théâtre et ses nouvelles dynamiques narratives*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005.

Françoise Heulot et Mireille Losco, « Récit de vie », in *Lexique du drame moderne et contemporain*, dir. Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, Belval, Circé, 2005, p. 177-178.

Patrice Pavis, « Théâtre autobiographique », *Dictionnaire du théâtre*, Paris, Dunod, 1996, p. 361-362.

Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, *Théâtres intimes*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1989.

Peter Szondi, *Théorie du drame moderne 1880-1950* [1956], trad. P. Pavi, Lausanne, L'Âge d'Homme, 1983.



Auteur(s) de l'article:

[Jolly Geneviève](#)

[Ferguson Sam \(trad.\)](#)

Mots-clés:

[Écritures de soi](#)

[Théâtre](#)

Traducteur(s):

Ferguson Sam

Pour citer cet article:

Jolly Geneviève, Ferguson Sam (trad.), « Theatre (trad. de l'article « Théâtre ») », dans *Dictionnaire de l'autobiographie*, dir. F. Simonet-Tenant, avec la collab. de M. Braud, J.-L. Jeannelle, P. Lejeune et V. Montémont, Paris, Champion, 2017, p. , en ligne, URL : <https://ecrisoi.univ-rouen.fr/dictionnaire/theatre-trad-de-larticle-theatre>, page consultée le 24/01/2025.