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WFH at the Maison de Molière: the Comédie-Française's use of rehearsal to respond to Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

France's policy of *confinement* in response to Covid-19 posed an existential threat to theatres. The Comédie-Française responded with a range of digital and cinematic programming. This article examines Christophe Honoré's film *Guermantes* (2021), created following the cancellation of his stage adaptation of Marcel Proust's *Le Côté de Gueremantes*, and *Théâtre à la table*, a series of staged readings posted to YouTube between November 2020 and June 2021. These projects are notable for how they centred rehearsal. The article shows how the Comédie-Française mobilised the intimacy of the rehearsal room to compensate for the loss of corporeal presence, and then interrogates *Guermantes*'s argument for the aesthetic value of rehearsal as an end in itself. However, while these works claim to show the process rather than the product, they in fact show little of the repetitive work of the *répétition*. Both were also preceded by rehearsals to which audiences were not given access. Noting the proliferation in recent years of rehearsal diaries and documentaries in France, the article concludes by arguing that the Comédie-Française's response to the pandemic reflects a broader interrogation in contemporary French theatre of the aesthetic value of the rehearsal.

RÉSUMÉ

Les mesures de confinement annoncées par la France en réponse au Covid-19 représentèrent une menace existentielle pour les théâtres. La Comédie-Française répondit avec des créations numériques et cinématographiques. Cet article examine *Guermantes* (2021), film réalisé par Christophe Honoré suite à l'annulation de son adaptation du *Côté de Gueremantes* de Marcel Proust, et *Théâtre à la table*, une série de lectures théâtralisées diffusée sur YouTube. La répétition est mise en avant dans les deux projets. L'article montre comment la Comédie-Française mobilisa l'intimité de la salle de répétition pour compenser la perte de la présence physique des spectateurs, et il interroge la défense de la répétition comme fin en soi que l'on trouve dans *Guermantes*. Quoique ces projets prétendent montrer des processus de création, le spectateur voit peu du travail répétitif de la répétition, et les deux projets comportaient des périodes de

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répétition auxquelles le public n'avait pas accès. Constatant la prolifération ces dernières années de livres et de films documentant des processus de répétition, l'article conclut en soutenant que les projets lancés par la Comédie-Française en réponse à la pandémie font partie d'une interrogation plus large dans le théâtre français contemporain de la valeur esthétique de la répétition.

Introduction

The Comédie-Française responded to the closure of its theatres during the Covid-19 pandemic by moving online. From March 2020 to the spring of 2021, the troupe produced four waves of digital programming, with content ranging from monologues, concerts, poetry readings and films of past performances, to masterclasses and interviews. Some of this was pre-recorded and some live, some filmed in theatres and some filmed in actors' homes (Deregnoncourt 2022). This vast corpus reflects the urgency and determination with which the troupe tried to remain in contact with its audiences, and the scattergun nature of its response to France's various *confinements*. Much of this content proved to be ephemeral, but some remains accessible online; some of the formats the troupe piloted have even carried on into the present. In this article, I propose to look in depth at two of the Comédie-Française's flagship creations in response to the pandemic: Christophe Honoré's film *Guermantes* (filmed in the summer of 2020 and released in 2021) and a series of staged readings called *Théâtre à la table*. In both the table reads and the film, rehearsal is embraced as a response to the pandemic. Éric Ruf, the director of the Comédie-Française, stated in interviews that he had conceived *Théâtre à la table* as a glimpse behind the scenes at the troupe's rehearsal process, and in *Guermantes*, Christophe Honoré, playing a version of himself, convinces the troupe to continue rehearsing his adaptation of Marcel Proust's *Le Côté de Guermantes* despite the cancellation of the show.

In this article, I will examine *Guermantes* and *Théâtre à la table* from three angles. Firstly, I will compare *Théâtre à la table* to the programming produced by large theatres in the United Kingdom. While British theatres responded to the loss of 'bodily co-presence' of actors and spectators, which Erika Fischer-Lichte identifies as the precondition of performance (2008, 32), by doubling down on temporal co-presence, the Comédie-Française largely forsook liveness. Instead, it turned to what its members described as the inherent intimacy of rehearsal as its strategy for drawing virtual spectators closer. Secondly, I will discuss what is at stake in positioning rehearsal as an aesthetic object in its own right. Honoré encourages his actors to see rehearsal as an end in itself, with an aesthetic value distinct from, and possibly superior to, that of the public performance. I will position his argument within a constellation of theorisations of performance that have, by privileging process and *inachèvement*, problematised the distinction between rehearsal and spectacle. At the same time, as I will demonstrate, neither *Guermantes* nor *Théâtre à la table* truly gives us access to the rehearsal process. Both projects were the products of rehearsal processes which audiences were not allowed to view. This raises the question of whether rehearsal that becomes spectacle can still be called rehearsal. The article will conclude by interrogating the limits of the visibility of rehearsal, comparing the Comédie-Française's activities to the growing number of books and films that stage directors in France have

sanctioned in recent years to give the public a glimpse of their creation processes. I will argue that the Comédie-Française's pandemic programming reflects a wider re-examination in French theatre of the relation between process and end product.

***Théâtre à la table* and the proximity of rehearsal**

The Comédie-Française uploaded the first video in the *Théâtre à la table* series to YouTube on 7 November 2020. France was one week into its second *confinement*. For the Comédie-Française, the country's second lockdown differed from the first in that its actors were allowed into its facilities instead of being required to remain at home. *Théâtre à la table* was the troupe's way of taking advantage of this relative freedom and also a way to engage with the absurdity of a company allowed to rehearse but not perform. The format was inspired by Arnaud Desplechin's decision in the summer of 2020 to create a telefilm of his staging of *Angels in America*, whose run at the Comédie-Française had been abridged by the pandemic, and to film it in the Salle Escande rehearsal room (Desplechin 2021). *Théâtre à la table* would consist of one new reading posted to YouTube each week until theatres were officially reopened to audiences in June 2021: 27 videos in total. (The troupe has revived the format since then, and it is now part of its regular programming.) The majority of the texts were well-known works by French authors, consistent with the institution's remit to preserve the canon. Early-modern authors like Molière were particularly well represented, although the series also included the transcript from Delphine Seyrig's documentary film, *Sois belle et tais-toi*—an inclusion in line with the institution's 2016 decision to begin admitting screenplays to its repertoire.

I have so far referred to these performances alternately as 'staged readings' and 'table reads'. The former term is typically used for public performances that involve some blocking, but in which actors read rather than memorise their lines, often as a low-cost method for workshopping new writing. It is in many ways the more appropriate term for the Comédie-Française's programme. However, Éric Ruf insisted in interviews that *Théâtre à la table* were table reads: exploratory readings that typically take place behind closed doors in the early stages of a rehearsal process. In a conversation with Béline Dolat filmed as part of an interview series produced by the troupe called *Quelle Comédie!*, Ruf says that the videos would give access to 'des moments de répétition qui sont un peu notre secret à nous' (Dolat 2020, 1:25–1:30). We would see actors 'au travail comme rarement on les voit' (1:47–1:50). He clearly positions the videos as offering glimpses of the rehearsal process rather than as staged readings.

Ruf's characterisation of *Théâtre à la table* is dubious: almost none of the plays featured would be staged following the reopening of theatres. There was no more work to come on these plays after the reading. In fact, each video was preceded by four days of rehearsal. Footage of the first discussions with the director was appended to the end of some episodes of *Quelle Comédie!*, but these clips end before the actors start reading. The directors in these clips tend to speak about what will be filmed at the end of the week as a show, not a rehearsal, highlighting the public's exclusion from the actual exploratory reading process. The idea that the *Théâtre à la table* videos were shows, not rehearsals, is also reflected in their staging. While most were staged to evoke the table read—the actors are usually in street clothes, seated around a folding table, pencils at hand (Figure 1)—there is no director present to offer feedback. Whereas Ruf told Dolat that in a table read 'on



Figure 1. The table for the 21 November 2020 reading of *Les fausses confidences* was covered with pens, highlighters, coffee cups and sticky notes to evoke work in progress. The actors are dressed in their own clothes (Comédie-Française 2020b, 31:49).



Figure 2. In the 8 May 2021 performance of *Le Soulier de Satin*, one of the final readings produced before the reopening of theatres, the table has been replaced by a set, and the actors wear costumes and stand up (Comédie-Française 2021, 32:55).

n'a pas embarqué notre corps' (Dolat 2020, 6:53–6:59), in relatively few performances do actors remain around the table. Some even feature costumes, sets and blocking (Figure 2). Despite this, Ruf continued to insist the videos were table reads: in an interview with France Culture after the release of the seventh video in the series, even while acknowledging that the videos were 'en train de devenir de plus en plus des mises en scène', he compared the experience they offered to that of '[les] quelques personnes qui, de temps en temps, ont le droit de venir à une répétition' (Grossin 2020). Nicolas Lormeau, a *sociétaire* of the troupe, likewise told France Culture that *Théâtre à la table* was 'une façon d'ouvrir les salles de répétition aux spectateurs' (Grossin 2020).

My purpose in highlighting the ways in which these performances diverge from the format of the table read is not really to contest Ruf's framing of them, but to make clear the degree to which that framing was a rhetorical strategy. What did Ruf have to gain by positioning these videos as table reads? The answer lies in the quotation that served as the title to his interview with France Culture: Ruf observed with pleasure that, paradoxically, 'on n'a jamais eu autant de proximité avec notre public que depuis que nous ne le croisons plus' (Grossin 2020). In his view, it was the troupe's mobilisation of rehearsal that made that proximity possible.

To explain the troupe's strategy, it helps to contrast *Théâtre à la table* with the responses to the pandemic adopted by theatres in the United Kingdom, which have already been the subject of a book by Heidi Liedke (2023). As Liedke frames it, the key problem facing theatres was the loss of one of the major preconditions for performativity as defined by Erika Fischer-Lichte: the ability for 'actors and spectators [to assemble] to interact in a specific place for a certain period of time' (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 32). Liedke separates the strategies deployed by theatres in England into two typologies: viral theatre and streaming theatre (2023, 156). In both cases, the loss of shared space was compensated for by an insistence on the 'certain period of time', the temporal liveness that Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander each see as primordial to performance (Auslander 1999; Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2015; Phelan 1993). London's Old Vic Theatre provides an example of viral theatre, in which companies sought to preserve some degree of interactivity. Its *In Camera* programme consisted of livestreamed performances broadcast via videoconference. To simulate the feeling of sharing an ephemeral event with a small community of other spectators, virtual audiences were limited in size and streams began at typical theatre curtain times. The Old Vic even asked spectators to book seats in a virtual theatre. For Liedke, the fact that the staging alluded to the pandemic by having actors socially distance, along with the use of Zoom's split-screen tools, helped convey the impression that performers and audience were united in a shared context (2023, 157).

By 'streamed theatre', Liedke means archival productions broadcast over the internet. These are best represented by London's National Theatre (NT), which turned for its pandemic programming to its *NT Live* archive of filmed versions of its stage shows, rebranded as *NT at Home*. While these were pre-recorded performances, the emphasis remained on liveness. The NT has always referred to its *NT Live* films, which are screened in cinemas, as 'as-live', meaning the footage was taken from a single performance. The term also points to a host of strategies that the NT uses to make a pre-recorded film feel theatrical, such as showing footage of spectators entering the theatre before the performance. Consistent with Rick Altman's parsing of the phrase 'live television', the liveness of these screenings derives not from the liveness of the performance but from the liveness of the viewing experience (Altman 1986). As Lauren Hitchman points out, *NT Live* and programmes like it have always devalued the 'here' (their 'very *raison d'être* is to make geographic location irrelevant') in favour of the 'now' that 'distinguishes the live theatre broadcast from filmed or digital theatre' (2018, 174). As the NT stated in an internal report on its cinema screenings, "'actual" or simultaneous liveness' is less important to it than 'capturing a sense of event' (quoted in Hitchman 2018, 176). Liedke sees this pursuit of a feeling of liveness in the NT's 'countdowns to the respective opening nights of their selected shows', and in the decision to only make videos available for one week (Liedke

2023, 154). In both viral and streaming theatre as Liedke defines them, liveness served as the bulwark against the loss of theatre's essential theatricality.

The Comédie-Française, by contrast, made little effort to make *Théâtre à la table* feel like a live, ephemeral event. While the performances were released to YouTube using the platform's 'Premiere' feature, one did not have to tune in at a specific time to see a performance. While some videos were taken down months later, during the *confinement* the full archive of videos was freely available for on-demand viewing, and many are still available today. Whereas the NT imposed a one-week time limit on viewing its videos as a way to generate urgency, the Comédie-Française's one-week restriction was on rehearsal as a way to limit polish. *Théâtre à la table* also differed from the British examples in how theatrical the performances were. Unlike in the Old Vic's livestreamed plays and the *NT Live* films recorded in front of a live audience, the actors of the Comédie-Française did not perform as if they were addressing the gallery. On the contrary, they at times spoke as if addressing an individual via the camera. In Jean-Luc Lagarce's *Juste la fin du monde*, for example, Laurent Lafitte, playing Louis, delivers multiple monologues directly to camera (Figure 3). The camera operator at times sits at the table with the actors, crossing over from the public into the community of players. One is led to feel not that they are a member of a collective audience experiencing a fleeting event together, but, as with many videos on YouTube, that they are an insider with privileged access to the performers, directly interpellated by the subjects on screen. Intimacy instead of liveness generates the feeling of proximity.

Indeed, the rhetoric deployed by Éric Ruf in his discussions of *Théâtre à la table* is consistent with strategies multiple critics have identified as central to YouTube's vlogging culture. Anne Jerslev 'contrasts the distance, scarcity and privacy cultivated by old-style



Figure 3. In the 14 November 2020 reading of *Juste la fin du monde*, Laurent Lafitte addressed several monologues directly to camera, rather than to an imagined theatre audience. Techniques like this positioned the viewer as an individual allowed to sit in on the private rehearsal rather than as a member of a collective audience (Comédie-Française 2020a, 34:35).

media celebrity with the proximity, accessibility and immediacy of YouTubers' (Jerslev 2016; quotation comes from Arthurs, Drakopolou, and Gandini 2018, 10). One of the primary ways YouTubers cultivate a feeling of identification with their audiences (or their 'community') is through seemingly unscripted, behind-the-scenes, unpolished content. Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka use the example of a beauty vlogger going without makeup and filming herself crying on the kitchen floor as a way to generate a feeling of intimacy with the audience. Such videos 'visually reflect the rawness of the self-exposure they document' (2018, 94). This rawness, they say, helps create what Lauren Berlant calls an 'intimate public', a virtual community mediated by shared emotions (Berlant 2008), and what other commentators have referred to in more negatively connoted terms as parasocial relationships (Kurtin et al. 2018). Whichever term one uses, the key point is that through the performance of rawness and vulnerability, by offering supposed peeks behind the curtain, performers produce feelings of intimacy that transcend the real distance between them and the spectator.

When Ruf discusses these 'rehearsals', he continually invokes rawness and vulnerability. Rehearsal, he says, is a space where mistakes are made—'On aime bien la table', he says, 'parce que c'est encore l'époque où on peut se tromper' (Dolat 2020, 6:53–6:59). He concurs with Béline Dolat when she suggests the table read is 'le théâtre dans sa forme la plus brute' (Dolat 2020, 2:55–2:57). Enhancing that rawness was the goal of the decision to limit preparation to four days. It was likewise important to keep mistakes in the filmed readings as a marker of authenticity: 'On ne le touche pas. Les bafouilles sont les bafouilles qu'on a faites' (Grossin 2020). The presence of the table, pencils and notes in the videos is another way to perform rawness. Ruf presents every aspect of the staging of *Théâtre à la table* as a conscious departure from the distancing effect of performance in the Salle Richelieu: 'on n'a pas de costumes, on n'a pas de décors, on a des tables et des chaises. [...] Et en fait, on a les brochures en main, donc ce qui peut vous impressionner, du par cœur par exemple, eh bien, on n'est pas au par cœur!' (Grossin 2020). This rhetoric of rawness coexists with one of vulnerability. Ruf describes rehearsal as a space of erotic mysticism. 'Il y a des gens', he says, 'qui considèrent qu'au théâtre il ne faut rien montrer de la préparation, sinon on déflore quelque chose, on dévoile quelque chose qui ôte du mystère. Moi je fais plutôt partie des gens qui disent "plus tu montres, plus c'est mystérieux!"' (Dolat 2020, 1:52–2:04). He portrays spectators as desperate to see inside the theatre's inner sanctum. The verb 'déflorer' in particular gives a sexual connotation to the dynamic, as though in asking the troupe to perform with neither costumes nor the time to memorise their lines, Ruf was asking them to perform in the nude. Yannick Mancel used similar language two-and-a-half decades earlier, saying that the public perceives rehearsal rooms as 'ces lieux de franchise et de transgression où l'impudeur ainsi fantasmée s'apparent[e] tantôt au camp de naturisme, tantôt à la psychothérapie de groupe' (Mancel 1996, 191). In activating this rhetoric of voyeuristic transgression, Ruf was setting the viewing experience of *Théâtre à la table* up to be, in a word, intimate.

In summary, *Théâtre à la table* dispensed with the rhetoric of liveness, urgency and the event deployed by institutions like the Old Vic and NT, and instead portrayed its programming as messy, behind-the-scenes and vulnerable. The rehearsal room was invoked as an incarnation of those features. Whereas many theatres approached the pandemic via longstanding debates on the nature of liveness, the Comédie-Française centred its strategy on intimacy instead and (somewhat surprisingly, given its reputation as

a tradition-laden institution) adopted techniques used by social media personalities to create feelings of proximity. Taken at face value, Ruf's boast that 'on n'a jamais eu autant de proximité avec notre public que depuis que nous ne le croisons plus' (Grossin 2020) indicates that liveness is not the only path to creating a virtual substitute for theatrical presence. The intimacy of rehearsal can also make audiences feel close by.

Guermantes: rehearsal as end in itself

Théâtre à la table was not the only component of the Comédie-Française's pandemic programming in which rehearsal served to compensate for the loss of live performance. In May 2019, Christophe Honoré began work with the troupe on a new adaptation of Marcel Proust's *Le Côté de Guermantes*, the third instalment of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The production was scheduled to open in the Théâtre Marigny in April 2020. The closure of France's theatres in March 2020 due to the outbreak of Covid-19 resulted in the cancellation of the show. As Honoré recounts, Éric Ruf, uncertain as to whether it would be possible to reschedule the show when the *confinement* was lifted, invited Honoré to film a behind-closed-doors performance. Honoré refused: 'For me, to film this play was to bury it. To deny it.' Instead of a *captation* of the stage show, he suggested 'a film on the idea of being prevented from performing the work', a film 'in mourning of the play' (Gerstner 2023). *Guermantes*, which imagines the cast's response to a second cancellation of the play, was the result. Within the film, characters refer to the cancelled play as 'un spectacle fantôme' (Honoré 2021, 24:32), 'mort-né', 'avorté' and 'stérile' (51:28–51:55). This language is consistent both with Honoré's description of the film as an act of mourning and with his description of the *confinement* as a creatively fallow period (Gerstner 2023; Grosset 2021). The imagery of the death of the play also evokes the existential threat *confinement* posed to theatre more generally—a rhetoric deployed during a ritual burial of the artform performed in Besançon in April 2021 by protesting theatre workers (Allemand 2021). And yet, as in much of Honoré's cinema, mourning proves to be generative. *Guermantes* does not simply narrate the events that led to the real-life cancellation of the stage show. Instead, Honoré creates what he called a 'système d'échos' between fiction and reality, present and past (Comédie-Française 2023) in which the cast's regret at the loss of their play is sublimated into questions about the nature and value of unfinished, unseen art. To generate that system of echoes, the film oscillates between documentary, 'autofiction collective' and *cinéma vérité* (Grassin 2023). Virtually all of the actors in the film play a version of themselves, but most play blurrily fictionalised versions that merge with characters in *La recherche*. The film opens with Honoré being informed, mid-rehearsal, that his play cannot go ahead. His character responds to this news by informing the cast that he would like to keep rehearsing for three days. The actor, Sébastien Pouderoux, also playing a version of himself, protests that that would be pointless: 'On a un objectif quand on répète.' Rehearsal is subordinate to the spectacle that is ordinarily its telos. But Honoré persists. It is still possible, he argues, to 'aboutir à quelque chose' without a public performance (Honoré 2021, 10:49–14:26). In convincing the cast to continue their work, he establishes the film's thesis: that rehearsal holds value as an end in itself.

Honoré was not the only director in France to explore this issue during the pandemic. Denis Guénoun had already questioned how necessary spectators were to theatre in his 1997 essay, *Le théâtre est-il nécessaire?*, inspired by the observation that the number of

applicants to theatre schools was surging while the number of spectators was in decline. The essay asks what would remain of theatre if that trend were taken to the extreme. Guénoun notes that ‘theatre’ comes from the Greek *theastai* (to behold), and originally meant the place from which one watches (Guénoun 1997, 18). At the beginning, it was not the act of roleplaying, but the coming together of viewers in a specific place that defined theatre. And yet, he underscores that there is a rich history of theatre without spectators, from Racine and Bertolt Brecht’s pedagogical plays to Jerzy Grotowski’s performance-based research at his Pontedera Workcenter that was never shown to the public. In these examples, the experiential process of staging the work is more important than performing to spectators. In a 2020 interview, Guénoun suggested those practices could offer inspiration to troupes during the pandemic. Coincidentally, he put forward *La recherche* as emblematic of an art in which ‘le résultat du processus, c’est le processus lui-même!’ (Robert 2020).

Indeed, while Honoré’s decision to stage Proust was taken long before coronavirus had entered the popular lexicon, his film discovers uncanny resonances between the *Recherche* and the pandemic. Proust was one of the literary emblems of *confinement*, both as someone who famously spent long periods confined to his bedroom and as the author of a book long enough to last a lockdown. *Slate* magazine called him ‘le plus célèbre des confinés’ (Frémont 2020) and multiple commentators at the time noted that Marcel’s father, the hygienist Adrien, was a pioneer of the *cordon sanitaire*, making the whole family seem like social distancing experts (Watt 2021). The resonances were not lost on the Comédie-Française, whose online programming included videos of actors reading *La recherche* aloud. If Proust’s meditation on lost time seemed to speak directly to the pandemic, Honoré finds support for his effort to articulate the aesthetic value of the process in the *inachèvement* that, for Jean-Yves Tadié, characterises the Proustian oeuvre. As Tadié writes, ‘toute la pratique de Proust consiste donc à avoir toujours *fini, clos* son livre, sans l’avoir achevé’ (1986, 83). Honoré’s character in the film places his stage adaptation in a lineage with the abandoned attempts at screen adaptation by Luchino Visconti and Joseph Losey, suggesting that it is ‘peut-être pas par hasard’ that his adaptation has been ‘avorté’ (Honoré 2021, 50:48–51:08). Like Guénoun, he positions rehearsal as a more Proustian mode of aesthetic creation than spectacle.

The rehearsals that Honoré stages in the film provide opportunities for him to develop this argument. Honoré opens the film’s version of the Villeparisis salon scene with Marcel’s reflections on his inability to write despite his determination to do so, and ends it prematurely (compared to the script of his stage play) with Madame de Guermantes’s description of Rachel’s rehearsal of Maeterlinck’s *Les sept princesses*. Rachel takes several minutes to deliver each line of text, and when asked why, replies: ‘Il faut toujours dire une chose comme si on était en train de la composer soi-même.’ Elsa Lepoivre, who plays Madame de Guermantes, delivers this punchline with tears in her eyes, saying (as does the character in the novel), ‘si vous y réfléchissez, c’est monumental, cette réponse’ (Honoré 2021, 47:56–48:10). Honoré turns Madame de Guermantes’s joke about an actress who misunderstands the clichés of the rehearsal room into a serious reflection about what it means for a performer to work without a preconceived idea of the telos to which the work is leading. In the sequence that immediately follows, Honoré hesitates to say well done, because he sees it as a ‘prise de pouvoir’ for a director to have ‘une idée précise’ of what a given scene should look like in its finished form. To do so testifies to a failure to be

attentive to ‘ce qui se passe ou ce qui advient’ in the rehearsal process (48:30–49:40). He proceeds to problematise the pre-eminence of performance over rehearsal more generally. He says he refuses to see his shows after the premiere, finding that the introduction of spectators destroys the honesty of the performances and represents a violation of the intimacy that existed between him and the cast: ‘Je vous trouve très exhibitionniste, je comprends pas que, ce que vous m’avez donné pendant huit semaines de répétition, vous soyez prêts à le donner à des gens que vous connaissez même pas’ (52:20–53:20). While he doesn’t imagine dispensing with the premiere in favour of a Grotowski-esque, permanently open-ended rehearsal process, he still locates the majority of the aesthetic interest of the work in the process rather than the product.

However, these arguments for the aesthetic value of process are undercut by the presence of the camera. As with *Théâtre à la table*, the claim that the spectator is witnessing the rehearsal process cannot be taken at face value. Instead, the notion that the film has simply usurped the theatrical spectacle as the telos of the process is introduced during the very first rehearsal depicted. We see Honoré explaining to Serge Bagdassarian, who plays Baron de Charlus, how he should interact with a boom mic operator integrated into the mise-en-scène. Honoré used microphones onstage in *Le Côté de Guermantes* as an analogue for the cuts that would structure film montage: by controlling whose voice was projected, he could focus the audience’s attention on specific characters within the hubbub of the Villeparisis salon. The onstage boom operator was a liminal figure, at times interactive and at times as invisible to the characters as a stagehand. Honoré instructs Bagdassarian to use the soundman as a lackey, manipulating the microphone to guide Marcel into Charlus’s web of control (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Honoré (centre) explains to Serge Bagdassarian (right) how Charlus should use the onstage boom mic operator to move Marcel around the stage. The sequence is representative of Honoré’s preference for medium shots from shoulder-mounted cameras onstage (Honoré 2021, 20:14).

Bagdassarian’s frustrated replies speak both to Honoré’s hybrid use of technology in his staging of the play and to the growing layers of mediation that characterised the Comédie-Française’s work during the pandemic: ‘tu vois, c’est tellement pas du vocabulaire du théâtre. Ton vocabulaire à toi, c’est du cinéma, c’est une chose, et d’un seul coup il

faut l'intégrer.' This double-layered reflection on the relationship between theatre and film is accompanied by a cut to a blurry full-length mirror framing Honoré and the boom operator, visualising the meta-theatrical and meta-cinematic stakes of the argument. At the same time, the fact that Bagdassarian's character says that he needs to come to terms with these techniques 'd'un seul coup', despite the fact that the use of onstage microphones is hardly cutting edge on the French stage, even at the Comédie-Française, suggests that his frustration is directed less at the intradiegetic boom operator than at the extradiegetic cameraman, whose presence onstage is the actual novelty in this filmed performance. That interpretation is strengthened by the fact that when Honoré tells Bagdassarian that the mic will allow him to 'jouer [...] moins théâtre'—a justification many directors have given for their use of microphones onstage¹—Bagdassarian hears this not as a statement about onstage acting style, but as implying that the theatre spectator is no longer the imagined addressee of the performance. He angrily retorts, 'c'est qu'il va y avoir quand-même un public à un moment donné, hein? On fait du théâtre ici' (Honoré 2021, 19:08–21:03).

Honoré's character will himself undermine his argument for process over endpoint later in the film, lamenting to the cast that because of the *premier confinement* in March 2020, 'on n'a jamais eu ce moment où on fige un peu les choses en disant "maintenant c'est comme ça"' (Honoré 2021, 49:50–50:04). This desire for fixity is at odds with the film's valorisation of process. The contradiction is manifest in the lack of repetition in this film about *répétition*. The Charlus scene is the only time we see Honoré giving actors direction, and there is only one sequence where we see actors trying a scene multiple ways: a late-night readthrough between Laurent Lafitte and Yoann Gasciorowski of an excerpt from *Cyrano de Bergerac*. (Lafitte and Gasciorowski had been cast to play Cyrano and Christian respectively in a new staging, directed by Emmanuel Daumas, that would premiere in December 2023 [Hénot 2021].) Most of the scenes from *Le Côté de Guermantes* are shown uninterrupted, including the Villeparisis salon, which ends with Honoré breaking his rule against congratulating the cast on a job well done. Marcel's visit to Saint-Loup at the Doncières barracks is filmed on an empty stage with the theatre shrouded in darkness. The only moment in which the actors break character comes at the very end, when Varupenne laments: 'et dire qu'on va pas jouer ce truc, putain' (Honoré 2021, 1:20:50–1:20:56). The implication is that both scenes have reached their final form and are ready for an audience. As with *Théâtre à la table*, while we are promised we will see the process of staging a play, most of what we are shown is the end of the process (or an end), with the camera there to preserve these scenes in a polished form.

Unusually, video recordings of several rehearsals of *Le Côté de Guermantes* from September 2020, when the cast was preparing for what would turn out to be a brief run of performances in the weeks preceding France's second *confinement*, are available to consult in the Bibliothèque de la Comédie-Française. Typically, only dress rehearsals and premieres are kept in this archive. The recordings, in addition to allowing one to see how the pandemic continued to insinuate itself into the cast's reading of Proust (at one point Anne Kessler asks Honoré if she should change the name of Saint-Loup's favourite cigars

¹For example, Joël Pommerat explained in a 2020 talkback following a performance of *Contes et légendes* that he had deployed microphones for over 20 years 'parce que je voulais pouvoir travailler sur des énergies vocales basses. [...] Je voulais pouvoir [...] chuchoter au théâtre' (Pommerat 2020).

from Corona to avoid getting a laugh [Honoré 2020c]), allow us to compare the staged rehearsals in *Guermantes* to rehearsals undertaken without a spectator in mind. While there are some similarities between the video recordings and what we see in *Guermantes*—Honoré demonstrates how to manipulate the boom mic in a similar way (Honoré 2020a)—overall the recordings cast in sharp relief how little the process of rehearsal is actually present in the film. The Villeparisis salon, for example, which takes up several hours of the recordings, is repeatedly interrupted by Honoré. New blocking is suggested and then abandoned. Whereas in *Guermantes*, made two months earlier, he says he is happy with the scene, in the 16 September rehearsal, he debates making radical changes (Honoré 2020c). Most of the interruptions to rehearsals trigger the appearance of a half-dozen stagehands—a group that is mostly absent from *Guermantes*. The crew are very visible in the archival recordings, at times too visible: on 10 September, Honoré complains that he can see backstage stagehands in the large mirrors on both sides of the set (Honoré 2020a). Honoré acknowledged that ‘il manque beaucoup de monde’ from the film in the Comédie-Française’s online seminar ‘Université Théâtrale’. He justified the crew’s absence by saying that rehearsals in March had been interrupted before the technical team became significantly involved and that he wanted to foreground the intimate relationship between actors and director. Even if it is true that ‘souvent [...] en répétition vous êtes seul en tant que metteur en scène avec les acteurs’ (Honoré 2022, 1:06:27–1:07:14), it is nevertheless the case that the omission of the labourers from Honoré’s representation of rehearsal goes hand in hand with the omission of the iterative process of refining a scene with all of its dead ends. We see relatively little of people at work.

The absence of stagehands from *Guermantes* differentiates Honoré’s film from the best-known backstage film made with the Comédie-Française: Frederick Wiseman’s 1996 documentary *La Comédie-Française ou l’amour joué*, which foregrounded the manual labour and bureaucracy of the institution. *Guermantes* also differs from Wiseman’s film in the way it is shot. Wiseman adopts a fly-on-the-wall approach to documenting rehearsals, filming from a single camera located in the auditorium or at a distance from the actors. While Wiseman’s camera pans and zooms to follow the action onstage, it largely maintains an objective distance from the performers. This distance from the performance is similar to what one experiences watching the archival footage of Honoré’s rehearsals, which were filmed from a fixed camera in the back of the auditorium. In *Guermantes*, by contrast, Honoré uses shoulder-mounted cameras and dollies, filming mostly in medium shots and closeups, with the camera onstage. Consistent with the complaint lodged by Bagdassarian’s character, Honoré’s camera does not just document the work, but gradually imposes its cinematic vocabulary. This is most striking in the scene of the grandmother’s death. This scene, more than any other in *Le Côté de Guermites*, echoes strangely in the pandemic context given the particular risks Covid-19 posed to the elderly. Proust’s narrator fixates on his grandmother’s struggle to breathe, and the haunting *rôle* Claude Matthieu brings to her performance could easily be taken for a symptom of Covid rather than uraemia. In this scene, *Guermites* tips over from theatre into cinematic costume drama (Figure 5). Film lighting gives the image a different signature. Extradiegetic sound effects accompany the scene, and it is punctuated by multiple close-ups. Unlike the Charlus scene, which continually cuts between what is happening onstage and off, here the image is framed so as not to show backstage



Figure 5. Claude Matthieu in the grandmother's death scene. Honoré uses closeups throughout this sequence. The camera carefully avoids showing backstage areas. Honoré projected this footage onstage when he was eventually able to stage *Le Côté de Guermantes*. (Honoré 2021, 30:40).

areas. Honoré would himself comment on the cinematic qualities of this sequence in the September 2020 rehearsals. In the revised, socially distanced staging of *Le Côté de Guermantes*, he chose to project a recut version of the sequence onstage rather than have Matthieu perform it live. In the archival videos, he justifies the choice by saying camera closeups are a way to mimic the absence of metaphor in Proust's depiction of the death, but he expresses anxiety that the footage is too cinematic for live theatre (Honoré 2020b).

The grandmother's death marks the beginning of the film's overarching journey out of the theatre. The sequence ends with Matthieu breaking character, saying she has had a panic attack. The lighting changes, and Honoré refers to what we have just seen as a rehearsal, but the film lingers in the domain of cinematic realism: the camera follows Matthieu, in full costume, as she walks out of the Théâtre Marigny into the Jardin des Champs-Élysées to use the public toilet, reproducing the circumstances in which the grandmother in *Le Côté de Guermantes* suffers her first cerebral haemorrhage. This trajectory out of the theatre and towards mimetic reproduction of Proust's Paris reaches its climax in the final 20 minutes of *Guermantes*, during which the actors visit the Ritz Hotel in full costume in search of sensory experiences that will allow them to identify with Proust. They order *Barbue à la sauce blanche* through room service, a reference to the luncheon described in the opening section of *Le temps retrouvé* (Proust 1989, 18), and a cold beer as a nod to the drink Proust requested on his deathbed. The film ends with Varupenne alone in bed, like Proust, and then staring out the window in awe at 'un petit pan de mur jaune' on the side of an apartment building (Honoré 2021, 2:22:49–2:23:30). In an earlier scene, Varupenne tapes a poster of the 'pan de mur jaune' to the wall of the stage, explaining its significance to Sébastien Pouderoux while expressing regret, again, that the play will not be performed (Honoré 2021, 1:10:00–1:11:10). Whereas the facsimile of Vermeer's painting in the theatre generates little emotion in Varupenne, what he sees from the window of the Ritz triggers ecstasy. It is ultimately not in the rehearsal space but

in the real hotel frequented by Proust that the actor is finally able to access the sublime experience he has been searching for.

Ultimately, *Guermantes*, like *Théâtre à la table*, deploys rehearsal as a symbol or rhetorical position rather than showing spectators an actual rehearsal process. Like Éric Ruf, Honoré portrays rehearsal as an intimate space, but whereas for Ruf the intimacy of rehearsal primarily appeals as a tool with which to close the distance between performers and audiences, for Honoré that intimacy is an argument for the superiority of rehearsal as an aesthetic experience over public performance. While his film does not give the spectator access to that experience, it offers a radically different response to the threat posed to theatres by Covid-19. *Guermantes* sees the pandemic not as a challenge to maintain contact with audiences through whatever virtual means necessary, but as a challenge to imagine theatre without spectatorship and to articulate the meanings generated by the process of theatre-making.

Conclusion

In my discussion of *Guermantes*, I have focused on the rehearsals depicted in the film and those recorded in the Comédie-Française archives. But there is another layer to Honoré's rehearsals. Speaking with *TROISCOULEURS* magazine, Honoré stated:

Au cinéma, c'est la première fois que je fais autant appel à l'imprévu. En revanche, au théâtre, c'est vraiment ma manière de fonctionner, j'ai donc transposé cette méthode. [...] On commence par une impro que je filme, on en discute, on la refait, et le soir avec mes assistants je la retranscris. De là, je compose un texte que je leur fais retravailler le lendemain. (Grosset 2021)

The method described here is an example of what Bruno Tackels has dubbed *écriture de plateau* (2015). Tackels coined the term in the early 2000s to describe the practices of artists like Ariane Mnouchkine and François Tanguy, and the techniques of writing through collaborative improvisation that he described have since gained widespread adoption in French theatre. Honoré's approach in *Guermantes* resembles the method of Wajdi Mouawad, who regularly begins his writing process by asking each performer for a desire they would like to act out onstage (Mouawad 2009, 10). Honoré asked the actors in this film, 'qu'est-ce que tu aimerais qu'on raconte de toi?', and proceeded to 'structurer des mini-fictions sur chaque membre de la troupe' (Grosset 2021).

It is fitting that Honoré's first use of *écriture de plateau* methods in his cinematic work occurred in a film that argues for the aesthetic value of rehearsal, not only for the obvious reason that the film is set in a theatre, but also because the spread of *écriture de plateau* in France has coincided with a proliferation of texts mediating rehearsal processes. Directors including Joël Pommerat (Boudier 2019; Pommerat 2016), Thomas Ostermeier (Cuvillier 2016; Podalydès 2021) and Julie Deliquet (2022) have sanctioned books and films in recent years that document the collaborative, improvisational processes behind their stage shows. These documents showcase rehearsal as a site of political praxis, as a 'lieu de recherche complémentaire à l'espace académique' (Boudier 2019, 163), and as an aesthetic object. They are evidence of contemporary theatre-makers questioning the idea that rehearsal, like the draft of a novel, is simply a precursor to the finished work, and that it should remain out of view of the public. If these texts exist, it is because the artists who

authorised them believe there is something in their rehearsal process that overflows the spectacle it was intended to irrigate, and that this excess, communicated through another channel, can complement the spectacle. Denis Podalydès describes in the dedication to his book about working with Ostermeier on *La nuit des rois* feeling that the rehearsals were ‘si singulières dans [sa] vie artistique’ that they compelled him to document them (2021, 7). Caroline Guiera Nguyen has gone as far as questioning whether it is the rehearsal that feeds the spectacle or the other way around. In the preface to *SAIGON—À l’origine*, a collection of notes and images that she used as a starting point for the improvisations that fuelled the writing of her 2017 play *SAIGON*, and which she chose to publish instead of the play text, the dramaturg Jérémie Scheidler writes, ‘ce livre ne contient [...] pas l’origine de *SAIGON*, mais contient *SAIGON* comme sa propre origine’ (Guiera Nguyen 2018, 4). Scheidler inverts the timeline and positions the spectacle not as the endpoint but as the starting point of the creative process.

Honoré’s film can thus be seen as part of a growing corpus of texts by theatre practitioners in France that are tentatively bringing rehearsal into the view of the public—with the caveat that whereas the texts cited in the previous paragraph seek to document processes of *écriture de plateau*, the improvisational scaffolding of Honoré’s film is not shown on screen. It is accessible only through his occasional allusions to it in publicity interviews (Honoré 2022; Pierrette 2021, 1:00:50–1:01:10). This is consistent with the argument above, that Honoré’s film does not give viewers authentic access to rehearsals—either of the play or, in this case, of the film. This additional invisible layer of rehearsal is comparable to the four days of rehearsal that preceded each *Théâtre à la table*. In both cases, viewers are promised access to the intimacy of the rehearsal room, only for there to be another, more authentic rehearsal hidden behind a closed door. However, rather than take this as an indication that the mediations of rehearsal in *Guermantes* and *Théâtre à la table* are more mendacious than those cited in the previous paragraph, I take the existence of additional layers of rehearsal in these projects that the spectator cannot see as a reminder that the documents sanctioned by Guiera Nguyen, Deliquet, Pommerat and Ostermeier are edited films and books that mask as much of the rehearsal process as they show. Boudier writes that her account of Pommerat’s rehearsals is ‘loin de représenter la totalité des nuances et des procédés développés en répétition’, and that it remains ‘incomplet’ (2019, 16). In all of these attempts to render rehearsal visible, some part of the process remains out of view.

Setting *Guermantes* and *Théâtre à la table* in this broader context, one can see that experiments in the visibility and valorisation of rehearsal in France did not start or end with the pandemic. On that note, I want to conclude by briefly considering the Comédie-Française’s choice to continue *Théâtre à la table* to the present day. Superficially, the programme might seem obsolete after the lifting of social distancing rules. In fact, its continuation follows naturally from the arguments Ruf and Honoré made during the pandemic. In responding to the loss of the physical co-presence of actors and spectators, the Comédie-Française distinguished itself from other theatres by mobilising what Ruf and Honoré described as the supercharged intimacy of rehearsal. Rather than attempt to recreate the experience of live theatre, it offered a glimpse—albeit artificial—of the process of making theatre. Both directors argue that that process is the locus of aesthetic experiences distinct from, and occasionally more powerful than, those to be found in the auditorium. This acknowledgement of the ‘moments [en salle de répétition] dont on sait

qu'on n'arrivera plus à les retrouver parce qu'ils sont fragiles' (Ruf quoted in Grossin 2020) is implicitly a concession that the spectacle to which the public is admitted is incomplete. Some part of the process is always, as it were, left on the table. There is thus something to be gained by continuing to make *Théâtre à la table* after the pandemic. This same insight applies to the recent flurry of texts in France mediating rehearsals, and it invites further reflection on the evolving relationship between process and end product in French theatre today.

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