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Theatre and Protest in 1968: An Interview with Judith Malina, Co-founder of the Living Theatre

Pierre-Antoine Pellerin

Introduction

For more than seventy years now the Living Theatre has been creating political plays based on audience participation and collective creation, often performing in the streets for free or in support of a political cause. In the anarchist perspective of its founders, Julian Beck (1925–85) and Judith Malina (1926–2015), avant-garde theatre had to emancipate the audience and encourage them to engage with the injustice around them. “We insisted on experimentation that was an image for a changing society. If one can experiment in theatre, one can experiment in life,” Beck once remarked (qtd. in Wilmeth and Miller 234). (1) In order to put those ideas into practice, the pair created the Living Theatre in 1947 in New York City, the first performances taking place in their own apartment at 789 West End Avenue. Malina had studied drama under the guidance of Erwin Piscator at the New School for Social Research; Beck had dropped out of Yale to become an Abstract Expressionist painter, producing paintings in the style of Wilhelm de Kooning. Together, they conceived of a theatre that would be different from what had existed before—a theatre that would be both poetic and political, a theatre at odds with Broadway’s commercial productions. Their first performances consisted in plays by avant-garde playwrights like Bertolt Brecht, Jean Cocteau, Federico García Lorca, Gertrude Stein, Jackson MacLow, Paul Goodman, and John Ashbery, among others. After the successful staging of Jack Gelber’s *The Connection* (1959) and Kenneth Brown’s *The Brig* (1963), their venue on Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue was shut down by tax authorities, and the troupe went on a four-year exile to Europe. During this period the members lived a nomadic lifestyle together and started to write ritualistic plays based on audience participation and formal experimentation. It began with *Mysteries and Other Pieces* (1964) and *Frankenstein* (1965) and culminated with *Paradise Now*, a play they had written and rehearsed in Sicily during the early months of 1968, which was to open at the Avignon Festival (directed by Jean Vilar, founder of the Théâtre National Populaire) on July 24. *Paradise Now*, with its reliance upon spontaneous improvisation, Artaudian physicality, and anarchist principles, was meant to bring about revolutionary change; the political upheavals that shook France in 1968 were to provide a testing ground for such a theatrical enterprise.

The company came to Avignon in early May to prepare and rehearse, their bohemian lifestyle causing an uproar among the local population. During that time Beck and Malina were in Paris as the May 1968 events were unfolding. Massive demonstrations, general strikes, and the occupation of factories and universities were taking place throughout the country, bringing the economy to a halt. Beck and Malina supported and participated in the movement, although their nonviolent ethos often stood in contradiction with the

insurrectional strategies of Maoist and Trotskyist students. They were involved in the occupation of the Théâtre de France, directed by Jean-Louis Barrault. Meanwhile, filmmakers François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Claude Berri had succeeded in shutting down the Cannes Film Festival. After the movement died down in June, the Living Theatre went to Avignon, where members stayed in a school that they shared with students from the École des Beaux-Arts. The company supported the Chêne Noir, a French theatre company founded and directed by Gérard Gélas in 1967, after its play *La Paillasse aux seins nus*, which was to be performed on July 18, was canceled, because certain scenes showing nudity were deemed to pose a risk of causing a breach of the peace. Tension ratcheted up a notch when, a few days later, the Living Theatre was prevented from playing in the streets for free and was required to replace the performance of *Paradise Now*, which was judged too controversial by local authorities, by *Antigone*. This decision led the company to withdraw from the festival and to publish a pamphlet titled *15 Questions to the Organizers and Participants of the Festival d'Avignon* on July 28, a text that pointed out the bourgeois, exploitative, and repressive ethos of the festival. Demonstrations followed to denounce the interdiction and call for the cancellation of the festival, the crowd famously chanting, “Vilar, Béjar, Salazar.” Vilar defended the idea that the festival should go on, arguing that even during the French Revolution of 1789, theatres remained open every night. On the morning of July 29 the police arrived at the school occupied by the Living Theatre, and the company was ordered to leave both the festival and country at once. Desperate and powerless, Vilar witnessed the scene, assuring Beck and Malina that he had nothing to do with the decision. The event was a turning point in the history of the Living Theatre, which went on to create a series of plays called “The Legacy of Cain” throughout the 1970s (*The Money Tower*, *Seven Meditations on Political Sado-Masochism*, *Six Public Acts*, *Turning the Earth*, and *The Strike Support Oratorium*), which they performed in nontraditional venues to reach new audiences—for example, prisoners in Brazil, slum dwellers in Sicily, and factory workers in Pittsburgh.

In France during the months that preceded the following interview in 2008, the fortieth anniversary celebrations of the May 1968 protest revived debates about its import and impact, while many conservative intellectuals and politicians had called for an end to its legacy. The year before, then-candidate Nicolas Sarkozy had expressed his desire “to turn the page of May ’68, . . . to get rid of the legacy of May ’68, of the intellectual and moral relativism of May ’68.” “The heirs of May ’68 disseminated the idea that all opinions are equally valid,” he argued in a political rally, “that there was no difference between good and evil, between truth and falsehood, between beauty and ugliness” (qtd. in Mayaffre 129).(2) On election night, soon after Sarkozy’s election was announced, French philosopher Alain Badiou remarked that Sarkozy’s obsessive desire to put an end to May ’68 at a time when the political Left seemed at its weakest was perhaps a sign that the legacy of the protest was in fact alive and well: “For the Rat Man, it seems, May ’68 is still with us—and that’s good news! Let us hope it is true, and that May ’68 is still alive in minds

and situations, present and to come” (37). Within this specific context—and considering the central role the Living Theatre played in the events of May 68 in France—Malina agreed to be interviewed about her particular perspective on the events, the involvement of the Living Theatre, the legacy of the spirit of May ’68, and the role of theatre in political protest more generally. The interview was conducted in mid- November 2008; Barack Obama had just been elected; the Occupy Wall Street movement, which owed so much to the Living Theatre, had not yet emerged. (3)

The Interview

The interview was conducted on November 17, 2008 at the Clinton Street Theatre in New York City.

As you know, this year is the fortieth anniversary of May 1968 and there are various celebrations that are planned in Paris and elsewhere in France. Yet, many French politicians and intellectuals have expressed their desire to eradicate this political legacy and erase it from the collective imagination. You were in Paris in May 1968; what are your memories of those events?

Oh, a beautiful year, 1968! I like to boast that on May 13th, 1968, I was in rue Gay-Lussac and helped build the first barricade that went up in Paris, and I remember walking through stones and the police. It was a wonderful time, because it was a time when everybody had the hope that we could very soon create the world we wanted to create. And we were well on our way to do that, but we weren’t prepared, and we didn’t know how to achieve the positive aspects of revolutionary work, as well as how to avoid the negative aspects, for so much ended in violence, which led to discouragement and dissipated the energy. But I feel that 1968 is an ongoing event—I don’t feel that it is over. Hopefully, we will be able to make it work next time the energy surges up. I don’t think we will retreat again.

Julian Beck once said that the occupation of the Odéon Théâtre (also called Théâtre de France then) by students and activists in May 1968 was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen inside a theatre. Can you describe what happened in the Odéon?

It was a beautiful and interesting event. There were many artists and activists who gathered together and reflected upon what had to be done. There were many plans. Some people wanted to take the Eiffel Tower; some people wanted to take the Folies Bergère. I was sure that if we tried to take the Eiffel Tower we would be shot dead. And I thought that taking the Folies Bergère was foolish. Julian and I were very much in favor of taking the Théâtre de France and so we did. It was after a dance performance by Paul Taylor. I talked to him before and tried to bring him to cooperation, but he was very angry at those young people whom he thought were too contemptuous, but his opinion didn’t seem relevant. At that point there was already a tremendous amount of upheaval in the street, and people were talking about which streets were open and which streets were closed. Many

of us gathered at the Odéon, and as the audience came out we came in. And then the occupation began. There were all sorts of talk about all sorts of things. People stood up and talked about their hopes and their fears, about what they should do and what they shouldn't do, and read poetry. Late that night, Jean-Louis Barrault [a French actor and director of the Théâtre de France from 1959 to 1968; his support of the occupation of the theatre led to his firing by the then-Secretary of State for Culture, André Malraux] came through the back of the house and Julian was onstage, and Barrault said "what a great show you're putting on here. What a wonderful performance!" Then there began a long siege during which, twenty-four hours a day, there was talk, talk, talk—revolutionary planning, beautiful poetic visions and nonsense, all mixed up. Anyone could get up and speak. Then there was a period during which there was a lot of street fighting and all the boxes of the theatre became used as first-aid stations, and those who were there helped with bandaging wounds, healing broken bones, and calming people down. Barrault was in his office very often at this time. Julian and I spoke to him several times and he asked us to be careful that the costumes were not destroyed and we tried to help with that. There were some people who thought we were very reactionary to want to save the costumes, but I am enough of a theatre person to respect that. And it went on for a long time, and then from there we went to Avignon.

Can you say a few words about what happened at the Avignon Festival in July 1968?

It started with a protest in support of the Chêne Noir. They had been closed for exposing a woman's breast during a performance. I don't think it had anything to do with pornography. We were performing *Antigone* a few days later and we had the whole troupe of the Chêne Noir sitting in the background with their mouths taped. Then we decided that we were going to do a street performance of *Mystery* in one of the quarters of Avignon. When we got there, we were surrounded with police vehicles, the place was completely blocked, and we couldn't perform. I remember the mayor of Avignon saying, "What you cannot do is give away free haricots verts where I have a stand full of haricots verts for sale," meaning we could not do free theatre in his festival while he was selling tickets. I thought it was absurd from an economic and theoretical point of view. The next morning, we were struggling with what we were going to do next. We were staying in a school which had been built for 400 people and we were only thirty or forty. We were sharing the place with the "Enragés" [a Situationist-influenced movement of political agitators founded in February 1968], which, after closing the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, came to Avignon and moved into the school with us. At first we thought it was wonderful. They made these marvelous posters which I stashed in my bedroom. But unfortunately they were of a violent nature and we didn't want them in our section, and we had a terrible struggle with them. Suddenly that morning many police vehicles came into the school and they said, "All Living Theatre members, get into your cars, we are taking you to the border right away."

What is your response to those who have accused you and Julian of having killed Jean Vilar, the creator and then director of the festival?

There's a book on Vilar that explicitly said that we killed Jean Vilar, which is absurd. I can't imagine how we could be accused of that. Jean Vilar died of a heart attack two years after we were at the festival, and he had a mild stroke during the festival in 1968 and there are still people who think we are to blame for his death. Ten years ago, I was in Paris and some people shouted, "You should be ashamed of yourself, you killed Jean Vilar!" I was a student of Erwin Piscator and for him, Vilar's Théâtre National Populaire [a public theatre company based in Lyon and directed by Vilar from 1951 until 1963] was a great example of his socialist, communistic vision of what theatre could be. He had lectures on Vilar, he taught us to honor Vilar, and I still do. I even understand why he did what he did in order to protect his festival against us, although he made many mistakes in the way he dealt with the situation. He wasn't on our side, while he could have been. The morning we were arrested in Avignon, Jean Vilar came and told us that he had nothing to do with this. Of course, we knew so. Vilar told us: "Do me a favor, when you get to Switzerland would you please write me a note saying you know I had nothing to do with calling the police." So when we got to the border Julian sent him a telegram saying we were sorry we had to leave the festival so suddenly and that we knew he had nothing to do with calling the police.

In your eyes, what is left of 1968 today?

Young people today are so much smarter than we were. They have more experience and have reflected on that vision of '68 and are ready to see it in a new way. So I think we're closer, that we're getting there. I'm just heartbroken that I can't be in Paris in the coming months, but my heart is there. Yet, it is strange how the anecdotal incidents were heavier than what it was really about. You see, to the American youth, who was not educated politically, 1968 means a certain style of clothing and music—and sure, who would deny it? But that is not what really happened. And what really happened is still going on and that is that in every schoolroom, there's a different attitude on who the students think they are to the teacher and who the teachers think they are to the students. And it's not like it was before 1968; it may be better or worse, but it's different. And this is true in every store, in every plant: who the worker thinks he is to the foreman, who the foreman thinks he is to the boss. It's a sort of an ongoing educational growth, it's happening all the time. America certainly has advanced enough to elect a black president—that's very good, I hope it will be very good. And what we do every day, every one of us influences how it goes: what we do in the subway, in our families, what we say to each other, how we behave to each other, how we behave to strangers, what we do in our theatres.

How about the changes that those political events brought to your way of doing theatre over the last forty years?

One of the things we try to do is not only to use the subject matter of anarchism, but to create a play in an anarchist form, which is very difficult, because we are taught from the

very beginning that we cannot overcome the worst part of our nature. Certainly, the Living Theatre is still looking to encourage the libertarian and the anarchist principles in various ways. For instance, we feel that audience participation encourages the sense of empowerment, that “I can do something about this.” If the spectators feel they can do something about what’s happening inside the theatre, then it will affect their ability to make changes outside the theatre and to act upon that. In sixty years I’ve never managed to do that until now, with *Eureka!* (2008). With audience responsibility we have the enthusiasm to create the action, and the whole play is about creation, which happens right here and now. Creation is going on for everyone all the time, even for people who have no idea that it is going on. What our contribution is is to make that creative process aware so that we understand it has responsibilities, that it has advantages, that it has difficulties. In *Eureka!*, we are aware they are part of our creative process and we are working on transcending them. After all, our whole anarchist vision is about seeing a different world before us, and when we take the next step in that direction. I think we are committed to this and so are a lot of people—we are not alone. We do lots of workshops with young people all over the world—Brazil, Korea, Italy, the US—and our workshops always begin with the proposition that we’re going to create a play together. Whoever is in the room, we sit and we say, “What’s important? What do we think is important?” And all kinds of people come with all kinds of ideas. Some people think about stopping the war, some people think about the conditions in their school, some people about the way we treat the cafeteria workers, some people are interested in feminist issues, and some people think of foolish things, of course. And then we try to talk about what our play should be about, and we try to include everybody. We don’t need consensus; some people can think one thing and other people the opposite—theatre allows for that. Then we proceed to create a play, and in the process we learn about what people want and what is important to them.

Anarchism, a political philosophy that has always informed your work, was quite influential among French students and artists in 1968. Yet, some people have also held it to be responsible for the failure of the movement, its violent and chaotic aspects. What is your opinion on this?

Anarchism was not born in ’68. There were free spirit and revolutionary spirits before. There has always been an avant-garde and a pacifist, anarchist impulse. Sometimes history allows us to be very optimistic and find new ways to be productive and be organized. The great anarchist Alexander Berkman said anarchism is about organization, and nothing but organization. And I think too many anarchists do not take that into account. Many people study what anarchism means, what freedom means, and we are beginning to understand what kind of organization we need. We have wonderful historic examples of where it was tried and worked—Makhno in the Ukraine, the Paris Commune, or in Spain where an anarchist council ran the beautiful city of Barcelona for several years. However, the Spanish anarchist movement was destroyed by fascism and the Civil War

which ended that adventure and that experiment. In the Ukraine, the burgeoning change toward Stalin-ism ruined the original beautiful vision of idealistic communism. The change from that vision of the early communists to the tyranny of Stalinism and the oppression it represented came in and killed all the anarchists. In the Paris Commune, anarchists were shot. And yet, in all those cases, the internal functioning was successful. On top of that, they don't teach anarchism, it's not in the curriculum: the story of what happened in Barcelona, the story of what happened in the Ukraine or who Makhno was, nobody teaches that, it is so forgotten, it is suppressed. People are afraid that, with all this freedom, there would be chaotic horror. The only answer is a long educational process, of which you and I are a part. Whether we succeed or not depends really on whether we have time to progress with the educational process before our progress is destroyed.

You wrote an account of those years called *The Great Despair*, in which you describe the disappointment that followed the return to normalcy after those events. How did you regain optimism in order to keep doing theatre during all these years?

I'm a professional optimist, though I don't like to call myself an optimist. I like to call myself an optimalist. Optimists think things are going to be alright; optimalism is to proceed from the actual situation and think of the best scenario: "How can I with this situation do the optimal thing?" When I say that I am optimistic about young people's capacity to change the way things are, I'm talking about a certain group of people. There are others who have retreated into a safety zone and are afraid to protest, because it is hard to change the status quo. So there's a lot of work to do. To keep the vision while taking the little steps is a difficulty everyone has. Everyone has a big hope that something is going to happen in America with Obama, but it could also lead to great disappointment and sorrow. We will see.

Pierre-Antoine Pellerin is a lecturer in American literature and translation at the Université Jean Moulin–Lyon. His doctorate focused on the experience and representation of masculinity in Jack Kerouac's autobiographical cycle. He has published several articles on Beat Generation authors, most recently "Masculinité, immaturité et devenir-enfant dans l'œuvre de Jack Kerouac" (2016) and "Re-dressing Whitman: Jack Kerouac and the Anxiety of Queer Influence" (2018). His other research interests include gender studies ("Reading, Writing and the 'Straight White Male': What Masculinity Studies Does to Literary Analysis" [2016]) and ecocriticism ("Jack Kerouac's Ecopoetics in *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*: Domesticity, Wilderness and Masculine Fantasies of Animality" [2011]).

Notes

1. For more information about the company's views on theatre, see Julian Beck, *The Life of the Theatre*; and Judith Malina, *The Enormous Despair*.

2. Translation by the author

3. See Cindy Rosenthal, “Judith Malina and the Living Theatre.”

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