

ARTICLE

The Spirit in the Little Theatre (1917)

Jacques Copeau

Founder, Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, Paris

Ladies and Gentlemen,

[It] may be that never before in my life have I had to meet such a trial as I am undergoing today.

Never had I any special relish for lecturing even in my own language. I prize but one thing: work, realisation [*la réalisation*—direction].¹ I generally mistrust artists who speak of their art. And since I am in America, I have done nothing else but speak. I feel like a violinist who, instead of playing on his instrument, would compose lengthy speeches to the praise of the violin.

At last, after twenty conferences in New York and other places, I thought I was done with the job. One morning, I was half asleep, when over the treacherous telephone Philip Moeller obtained my unconscious promise to speak before you. These Washington Square Players are horrible people. They succeed in everything they undertake. They even succeeded in forcing me to speak in English. I am not to blame. They remarked that if I spoke in French, only half of the public would understand. Speaking in English, I fear to be understood by no one.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is with intention that I have chosen as subject for my to-day's lecture: "The Spirit in the Little Theatre." I might have been tempted by more ambitious titles as, for instance, "the theatre of today" or "the new art of the theatre.[""]

But I hardly think that, in speaking on either of these subjects, I would have conveyed any clear impression.

I deeply feel that we are still experimenting, working, in a state of complete transition. And, I may say, I do not see clearly what result will be obtained through our efforts; I am not sure that the conceptions of the many workers in the theatre are coherent and sound; I don't believe them very new, and I think it too ambitious to state that there is such a thing as a theatre of today, that there exists a form of art sufficiently complete to be worthy of this name.

But what I know, and what you know as well as I do, because it is strikingly evident, is that there exists a new spirit in the theatre.

This speech has been transcribed, with minor edits for clarity only, by J. Ellen Gainor and John Un from the previously unpublished, partially handwritten, and partially typed manuscript of the speech, "The Spirit in the Little Theatre—Washington Square Players," 1917, Jacques Copeau Collection, Department of Performing Arts, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), 4-COL-1(457). Reproduced with the permission of the BnF. The archive also holds a manuscript version of the lecture in French, which appears to be solely in Copeau's handwriting, and which appears to have served as the source for the 1954 published version, discussed in our preceding essay.

This spirit has spread all over the world. Its great characteristic is to be unanimous.

As a matter of fact, it is not a question of a new literary conception on our stage, such as change of schools has called forth at all times; it is not a question of one of these periodical reactions of the new generation against the one that preceded, it is not even a question, for the moment, of a degenerated [*en désuétude*—obsolete] dramatic form giving way to one more alive. The actual [*actuel*—current] movement has perhaps more tendency to tradition than revolution. Perhaps it is more moral in its essence than it is literary and esthetic. It is a change of spirit. The question is to breathe into the theatre a new soul, to purify its morals, to review [*renouveler*—to renew] it from top to bottom.

Newcomers are not clambering on the old stage and seeking to suit it to their demands. They do not even wish to destroy it. They do not touch it, but turn away with disdain and disgust. They modestly search aside, far from the theatrical fair, a small corner quite intact and pure where, with their unsoiled hands, and by the sweat of their brow, they may construct a new abode of their own, worthy of sheltering their dream. They are accused of pride, because they behave as if nothing else existed, because in fact nothing else exists for them except the few boards of their tiny new stage, a stage devoid of all modern improvements, but where already lives, burns, and grows that divine gift of youth and faith, that promise of life: a spirit.

What kind of a spirit?

I hope you will not find me too solemn if I name it a spirit of love and of liberty.

He who later will write the history of the renovation in the theatre of the twentieth century, will first of all be obliged to note that in all countries, at various stages, and without the slightest communication between the different leaders of the movement, and without a knowledge of their mutual efforts, the circumstances which favoured these efforts were similar. A same necessity, a same aspiration called forth identical undertakings. Men met, often by accident. They were strangers the day before. They discussed an entire night. Inspired by the same ardour and confidence of youth, they united their energies. Their intelligence, their savings—if they had any. They gathered around them a small company of amateurs: artists, artisans, labourers and workmen [*une petite troupe d'amateurs, artistes, artisans, gens du peuple et de la petite bourgeoisie*—and tried their luck. These pioneers are generally an author and an actor. Both, though still young, have had difficult experiences. The author has encountered the haughty stupidity of the so-called “man of the theatre” who again and again has told him to beware of all true delicacy, of all imagination, of all sincere originality, and has advised him to follow the precepts and tricks which lead to absolute success and money. Again and again he has heard theories on the ingratitude [*la bassesse*—the baseness, lowliness] of the public and means to win the latter's suffrage. He has witnessed the leniency of critics towards the vulgarity of everyday productions, and their callousness towards works of distinction. He has witnessed the defeat of the comrades of his youth, one after the other won over by the demands of the commercial theatre. But he has neither lost the respect of his art, nor the belief in himself.

The actor has been condemned to the gallows of the theatre. He has learnt, at his own expense, that the profession of an actor, if it is not practiced with a sublime

spirit, is the most degrading parody. He has been filled with the ignorance of his masters, with the vulgarity and ridiculous vanity of his fellow actors. He has soaked in the offensive and sterile atmosphere of the theatrical profession. He has known the waste of energy, the loss of time, the fatigue of rehearsals; he has known the intrigues of the green room, the frivolity of mind and scarcity of heart—in a word, all that we describe in French as *cabotinage*.²

Commercialism [*l'industrialisme*] and *cabotinage*. Here are the two plagues of the theatre. Here is the upstart of our mutual indignation. The hatred which we bear to commercialism and *cabotinage* has united us all. To these detestable realities, we oppose [*nous opposons*—we place in contrast or opposition] one desire, one aspiration, nay, we oppose these other realities, bread of our very life! Unselfishness and youth, love and liberty.

We thought it insufficient to protest, to fight for a lost cause, to criticize or scorn. We thought it impossible to admit that the theatre should have been forever handed over to businessmen, forbidden to artists, and considered by these as a house of ill fame. We wondered whether we were not able to oppose to the league of money interests and greedy appetites, a unity of good will; whether sacrifice guided by the spirit could not conquer the gross egoism of the matter; and we resolved to regain this domain of our art, this land which belongs to us and in which we have lost even standing room.

You know, ladies and gentlemen, the meaning of the word commercialism in the theatre.

But what is *cabotinage*?³

We hardly know what it is, so thoroughly are we saturated and infected by this malady. Everybody complains of *cabotinage*, and yet everybody is more or less *cabotin*. *Cabotinage* is a malady which does not only ravage the theatre—it is the malady of insincerity, or really of falseness. He who becomes a prey to this disease ceases to be a true individual; ceases to be a human being. He becomes unnatural. Exterior reality no longer reaches the *cabotin*; he no longer feels his own sentiments. These sentiments seem to become detached from his very personality at their birth. *Cabotinage* is not hypocrisy; it does not imply the desire nor the intention to deceive. On the contrary, it follows a sincerity which becomes more and more elusive. It is the “mirage” of the personality. It implies weakness, falseness, more than perversity. It contains every degree, every shade—that is why I say that we are poisoned by it, and that we only recognize the malady, there, where its grimace is the most gross and offensive: that is to say, on the stage / and then not always.⁴ But if we really had a notion of what simplicity is, in all its grace, its liberty, its equilibrium, a notion of the total absence of, I will not say convention, but affectation, a notion of harmony in the character, in the proportions, in sentiment as well as in gesture—then we could not even cast our eyes on the stage, for we would see that everything there is corrupt, sophisticated, and false. I am not only speaking of the so-called stars—these phenomena, these poor monsters, whose deformities are too visible to need description; I am speaking of every actor, of the smallest of them, and of their each gesture, of their “*automatisme*” [automaton-likeness] of the absolute lack of deep intelligence and of true spirituality.

We must not think, however, that we have solved the problem of interpretation by banishing from our little theatres⁵ all stars, and by adopting the principle of a

“*troupe d'ensemble.*” We are far from having reached simplicity. I do not say, realism, truth, or even nature—I say, simplicity, the superhuman quality which gives to all work of art its freedom of motion, its esthetic power, and which is to be found equally in the highest form of poetry, or sculpture, in a Greek vase, in a popular dance, in the interpretation of the most extreme farce, in the most measured comedy, or in the most noble tragedy. To find again this living simplicity, we must wash away all the smudges of the theatre, and free it of its habits. We shall obtain this result, not so much by teaching our young actors a new technique, as by teaching them to live and to feel, by changing their character, by shaping them into human beings. Let the actor become again a human being, and all the great changes in the theatre will follow. You know Eleanor [*sic*] Duse.⁶ You recall what a wonderful woman she is, her human qualities. We cannot of course hope to make all our actors and actresses into personalities equal to that of the Duse, but we may be able to impart to each one of these young souls a spark of that spirit of which the Duse is the highest incarnation. The most useful and immediate task to be accomplished by the small⁷ theatre is to work at the refreshing of the stage by calling in the aid of unprofessionals. Let them call us amateurs; that is of no importance. Molière himself, when together with a few gentlemen’s sons founded the Illustre Théâtre, was an amateur. There is no more beautiful word than amateur, and we are proud to be those who love the work they do. It will mean a great deal if the little theatre, for the moment, serves only to produce unpretentious actors with young faces not deformed by professional grimace, and the horrible mimicry of features accustomed to express too much. Quite lately I assisted at [*assister à*—to be present at, to attend] a performance in one of your little theatres, and I noticed on the stage a young woman of modest bearing, with a sensitive face, a voice tender and somewhat veiled.⁸ She lacked technique absolutely; she had not even the slightest notion of it. She did not know how to walk on the stage, how to make her entrance or her exit. She did not know how to accompany her words by gestures appropriate to the action and the dialogue, she kept her arms feverishly stiffened against her body; only at the end of her tirade did she open both arms simply, her speech stopped abruptly and her eyes remained fixed before her as if she continued to follow her thought in silence. This gesture was admirable, and there was in her look a human emotion which brought tears to my eyes. I had before me a real woman, and these tears were not the involuntary tears which the nervous excitement of the theatre sometimes calls forth. They, too, like the woman, were real, natural, and human. This is what we must preserve in the interpreter of the future drama. And to accomplish this end we must keep him in constant contact with life, with the duties, the pleasures, the obligations, the works of daily life. We must develop him harmoniously. We must forbid him to specialize, to become mechanical by the misuse of technique. To my mind, the technique of the dramatic interpreter must not be developed beyond a certain limit. Just as soon as he feels himself capable of expressing too much, he becomes a virtuoso. He is no longer a servant of his art. He plays with his means; he juggles with himself. A serious and respectful interpretation must have the quality of the drama interpreted, but it must remain subservient in measure and tone to the drama itself.

I mean to say, that to give a complete poetic pleasure, there must remain hovering about and around the interpretation something superior and intangible,

which is the impalpable spirit of the drama, the invisible presence of the poet's soul. It seems to me that we may expect this discretion, this modesty, from the young men and women who come to us to consecrate their lives to disinterested work, to the thought of being not only actors, but humble workers ready to accept all the duties of the theatre. Everything in the theatre is born of the ingenuity of their spirit, of the co-operation of their will, of the work of their hands. Nothing is more salutary than this common work, this unanimous and anonymous effort. It brings us back to the idea of fraternity, to the community of the spirit from which emanated the highest chef d'oeuvres of the past. Where this effort reigns, joy and concord are created. This effort makes man better and life more precious. And this joy of the work room, this exalted unity of the community, you will find them again during the performance on the stage. They become transformed into beauty. If the spirit of the little theatre were not what I have just said, then it would be nothing at all. It is essentially a spirit of abnegation, of discipline, of fervor. Our duty is to prepare the future, to prepare a home [*d'offrir une lieu d'asile*—to offer a place of asylum] for the chef d'oeuvres of tomorrow, to make possible a great dramatic dawn [*éclosion*—hatching, birth, blooming]. Those who anxiously see your attempts multiply, your efforts develop, those who attack you, young artists of the American theatre, pretend to insinuate that you are lacking in modesty, they attribute to you the pretention of re-presenting a great artistic achievement. Do not allow this rumor to circulate. Deny it by every means. The spirit of the little theatre would have no meaning, no future, were it not a spirit of expectation. You must not fear to wear for a long time that somewhat haggard expression of those who seek. The look of those, who think they have found, fades away. You must not hasten to become “a real theatre.” A thousand influences, subtle, cunning, unknown, wait for you, and if you do not take care, these influences will lead you unconsciously to the rut of routine and of vulgarity, from which you thought you were freed. Distrust success. Distrust the man from Broadway who will say, “Well, let us see, what is this new theatre.” Distrust the friend who advises you to enlarge, who advises you to “Achieve after all a little more technique,” and who insists that “imperfection is not a quality.” On the contrary, I tell you that at this period where, above all things, we are suffering from affectation, from complication, / imperfection today, when not itself a form of refinement and affectation, is the most precious and prolific of qualities. Don't go too fast. Don't hasten to conclude and to crystallize. Give yourself time to prepare the ground, to till it, to fertilize it, so that a few plants of slow and difficult germination may take root. Everything grows a little too strong, a little too fast, in your young American soil. Look how quickly your little theatres succeed. You tell me that is because they are excellent. I believe it is principally because they are a novelty. You tell me it is because they answer a need of the public. Maybe. But be careful that they do not become the rage, a *furore* as we say. The point where novelty touches fashion is where interior necessity gives way to exterior pressure. One may mistake for an aspiration that which is only a fancy. Distrust the actor who, driven away by the door, will wish to return through the window; and distrust, also, this modern malady, the malady of the new theatre, the malady of the *mise-en-scène*. This is a question which preoccupies me greatly, and on which I fear I do not agree with the greater part of my young confreres. The development of the art of producing as an art in itself, as a scenic elaboration, such

as we have seen, for instance, in Germany for the last fifteen to twenty years, is morbid. It has no reason of existence. It encroaches on the scenic equilibrium. It is not an art, but a pretension. It is a new form of *cabotinage*. There has been much talk of its principles, its theories, its novelty. The best of its theories and principles is but a reminder of the harmony of the old theatrical life. But at the time when this harmonious life was in existence, its principles were not proclaimed. At the time when this life was practically conducted by the heartbeat of the man Shakespeare, of the man Molière, there was no pretense to so much originality. Wherever abundant life of the heart is lacking, it is replaced by meagre intellectual intentions. Our theatrical ground is poisoned by the seed of intentions. The greed for novelty leads us every instant to grimace, and this novelty, where do we find it? Nearly always in material effects; that is to say, in more or less audacious disfigurements.⁹

It was right to wish to replace on the stage this accumulation of expressionless details by simplicity. But it was due more to the foresight of the mind, than to a sincerely felt necessity, to the interior necessity of creation. And the mind, the distinguished overworked mind of our critical artists of today, monopolized this idea of simplicity and ran it to death. A theoretical construction, an entire scaffolding of intentions and “*refinements*” [refinements] was erected around this idea of simplicity. They made of it this pretentious and offensive thing, this synthetic and very German simplicity, this shadowy and languorous¹⁰ dame [lady]¹¹ who parades on our stage anxious to convey her simplicity and repeating continually, “See, see how simple I am! [”]

There is no truth, no spontaneity in all this. And nothing could be further removed from the freshness which should be the very spirit of the little theatre—we have banished with horror the actor who sees nothing in the drama but himself, and is always seeking to push himself forward—Let us beware of another form of infatuation, that of the “artistic producer” who lays hand on a poetic work, takes possession of this work, and with the excuse of rendering it a service causes the work to say more or a different thing than it intended¹²—and by pretending to exalt the style, tears to pieces its spirit and composition. Certain great actors, thanks to their stupendous technique, have been amongst the greatest enemies of dramatic art. They possessed the terrible faculty of “making something out of nothing.” Unless we are very careful, the pretensions of the producer of today are of a similar nature.

I believe, and I think you will agree, that the role of the little theatre, no matter how modest is its spirit, does not only consist in receiving and staging dramatic works submitted from outside. Our aim, above all, is to recreate in our midst, in the interior of the theatre, the most favourable conditions to the birth of dramatic works, to the formation and development of the dramatic author. All the scattered efforts are held out to the birth of this hero of the future. When he appears, his personality will be an answer to all. All the problems of the theatre which torment us because they attack our mind in a dispersed manner, will find again their unity, that is to say their solution. Moreover, these problems will no longer exist. The man born for the theatre, the poet capable of realizing a new dramatic form, will impose his method of interpretation, will create his instrument, that is to say a certain

scenic architecture, which at all times in great theatrical epochs has corresponded to the demands of the work.

At first sight, it does not seem as if our stage of canvas and cardboard, from the flies of which dangle so much tinsel and incongruous matter, our eclectic stage, our shapeless stage, so impressionable to every style, could become crystallized and definite. The Repertory Theatres which multiply each day seem to give the lie to this opinion. And yet all those who have pondered deeply on the future of the dramatic form, initiators and judges such as Craig or Appia,¹³ think as I do that the eclecticism of the actual [*actuel*—current] theatre can lead to nothing, that the variety of the scenery is but a symptom of its interior poverty. They believe that the little theatre lacks an orientation and aim, that it is too much amused by the variety of its effort, that its youth will pass, and that its duty is to try from now on to leave behind something which will outlive its youth and freshness—“Something”—that is to say a reconstructed stage, a new stage for new drama, and not leave this infinitely plastic scene, lacking in beauty.

As far as I am concerned, ladies and gentlemen, my conviction is that the drama can only find a starting point, an original form and youth, if it is submitted to the discipline of a stage at once elementary in its medium and rich in aesthetic possibilities, such as the Greek stage and the stage of Shakespeare.

The task of the young theatres of America is particularly urgent and difficult, but it is singularly beautiful. Everything is ahead. The substance is magnificent and absolutely virgin. But, if I may end with a friendly request, young American artists and comrades, be yourselves, earnestly, humbly, modestly. Say what you have to say, earnestly and humbly. Be neither Russian nor German, Scandinavian nor French, nor even Japanese, be yourselves, be American, from top to toe. And belong to your time, the time of an America which is searching for her soul, worrying and suffering at not finding it, but daily drawing nearer. I salute your effort with sincere friendship. You have given me pleasure and honour in inviting me today in your home. I thank you. And I am glad to think that next season I shall be working close to you.

Notes

- 1 Here and elsewhere, we have retained the sporadic UK (as well as US) spellings as they appeared, inconsistently, in Copeau's manuscript.
- 2 That is, the insincere production style afflicting the commercial stage with tawdry acting, writing, and design. See our preceding essay for a discussion of this term.
- 3 The first handwritten section ends here, and the typed section, with handwritten emendations, follows.
- 4 Copeau appears to have used slash marks to indicate pauses for oral delivery.
- 5 Copeau speaks not of the Little Theatre movement (fl. 1912–25), but rather of little and alternative theatres around the world.
- 6 Famed Italian actress, 1858–1924. See also note 31 in our preceding essay.
- 7 Probably an inadvertent translation error from “*petits*” for “little,” as in “little theatre[s],” which he uses elsewhere.
- 8 Copeau's *Journal* provides more evidence indicating the identity of the actress, Susan Glaspell of the Provincetown Players. He notes there that he saw her on 4 April 1917. For more details, see our preceding essay.
- 9 The typed section ends here, and the original handwriting resumes at this point.
- 10 A new hand commences here.

11 Copeau may also be suggesting a haughty, “*grande dame*” actress who is calling our attention to her technique—her ability to convey simplicity.

12 The original handwriting resumes at this point.

13 Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966) and Adolphe Appia (1862–1928)—early pioneering theorists of modernist scenic design.

Jacques Copeau (1879–1949), French stage director, who, with his Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier company, developed influential modernist acting and staging techniques.