



Une théorie qui a lieu

Benoit Jodoin

Une théorie de la roulotte, c'est ce à quoi j'ai pensé, planté devant la caravane *Little Fun Palace* stationnée au fond d'une cour au nord du boulevard Gouin, alors que j'y avais été invité à réfléchir, avec mon collègue et ami Félix Chartré-Lefebvre, à la théorie comme un espace hospitalier. Je crois que la théorie trouve sa place pour accueillir le monde qu'elle tente de saisir. Elle est modulée par les lieux mêmes lui permettant de se situer, comme lorsque Gilles Deleuze, en conversation dans sa cuisine avec Michel Foucault, s'était avancé à la redéfinir comme « toujours locale, relative à un petit domaine ». Au *Little Fun Palace*, sur cette pelouse, ma présence était traversée par ce domaine précaire, mobile, qui abrite une utopie que ma prise de parole était presque contrainte d'incarner.

Espace éphémère de rencontre entre penseur·euses, artistes et citoyen·nes conçu en 2018 par la compagnie italienne Office for a Human Theatre, dirigée par Filippo Andreatta, et circulant en Europe depuis plusieurs mois dans les paysages naturels et les lieux urbains, le *Little Fun Palace* foulait en juin 2021 pour la première fois le sol nord-américain. L'équipe du fes-

Little Fun Palace
Idéation de Filippo Andreatta
Présenté dans le cadre du
OFFTA 2021, du 28 mai au
5 juin, puis en tournée au
Québec et à Ottawa

tival d'arts vivants OFFTA s'en est saisie et l'a investie sous le thème des « milieux hospitaliers », programmant autour de la roulotte des conversations animées par Julie-Michèle Morin et des performances, parmi d'autres, d'Éric Noël et d'Arkadi Lavoie Lachapelle dans divers lieux de la métropole, avant de lui faire prendre la route pour Québec, Marsoui, Le Bic, Sherbrooke et Ottawa.

L'idée d'Andreatta est de proposer un dispositif qui crée des rencontres joyeuses et des dialogues spontanés en marge des lieux de diffusion conventionnels. Entre le bord de scène devenu œuvre et le laboratoire de création, le *Little Fun Palace* cherche à replacer les arts vivants au centre de la vie publique. Il présente une dramaturgie de tout ce qui ouvre le théâtre aux formes de vie, à leur environnement, à leur situation sociale et politique, à leur sensibilité, dont la théorie, qui existe principalement dans la caravane par l'entremise de paroles échangées. Ensemble d'idées portées par plusieurs voix, la théorie y est une onde diffusée par des corps vibrants, un trait d'union entre des intellects, mais aussi quelque chose qui s'essaie, qui se lance sans être tout à fait formé encore, une pensée

A theory that takes place

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Theory of the caravan, that's what I thought of, standing in front of the Little Fun Palace caravan parked at the back of a courtyard on the north side of Gouin Boulevard, when I was invited to reflect, with my colleague and friend Félix Chartré-Lefebvre, on theory as a hospitable space. I believe that theory finds its place to welcome the world it tries to grasp. It is modulated by the very places that allow it to situate itself, as when Gilles Deleuze, in conversation in his kitchen with Michel Foucault, set out to redefine it as "always local, relative to a small domain".

At the Little Fun Palace, on this lawn, my presence was crossed by this precarious, mobile domain, which shelters a utopia that my speech was almost forced to embody. Ephemeral space of meeting between thinkers, artists and citizens conceived in 2018 by the Italian company Office for a Human Theatre, directed by Filippo Andreatta, and circulating in Europe for several months in natural landscapes and urban places, the Little Fun Palace will set foot on North American soil for the first time in June 2021.

The team of the OFFTA festival of living arts seized it and invested it under the theme of "hospital environments", programming around the caravan conversations animated by Julie-Michèle Morin and performances, among others, by Éric Noël and arkadi lavoie lachapelle in various places in the city, before taking it on the road to Québec, Marsoui, Le Bic, Sherbrooke and Ottawa. Andreatta's idea is to propose a device that creates joyful encounters and spontaneous dialogues on the fringe of conventional venues. Between the edge of the stage that has become a work of art and the creation laboratory, Little Fun Palace seeks to place the living arts at the center of public life. It presents a dramaturgy of everything that opens the theater to life forms, to their environment, to their social and political situation, to their sensibility, including theory, which exists mainly in the caravan through exchanged words. Set of ideas carried by several voices, the theory is there a wave diffused by vibrating bodies, a link between intellects, but also something that is tried, that is launched without being completely formed yet, an unstable and heterogeneous thought like these places where it instal. In Montreal, due to the pandemic, the meeting space was mostly digital. On the day of my visit, even if a few people invited to document the interventions and some members of the OFFTA team were scattered in this green corner at the back of a parking lot, sitting uncomfortably on cheap folding chairs, the conversations were above all addressed to invisible and intangible listeners. The audio of the exchanges was broadcast live and ephemerally, sometimes with some difficulty, thanks to the efforts of a technician, the only one to occupy the space in the caravan. All day long, the voices of writers, researchers, dramaturgs, directors and artists circulated in line and around this old 1980s caravan, as vintage as theater sets can be. The day's programming, entitled *Vueltas: Getting Along*,

was curated by Nicholas Dawson, who wanted to use the dialogues to create a living library for his writing project on the issues of memory and the stories of exile.

Filippo Andreatta attended my presentation without understanding French. He did manage to catch the name "Gramsci," which I must have pronounced eagerly, in the manner of the student (but not only) who associates his most radical ideas with a well-known, eminently more respected name, in order to relieve his anxiety by responding in advance to a criticism that may come. He seemed happy to engage in a conversation with me about the Italian Marxist philosopher and politician, one of the sources of influence of his theater, he told me. The concept of the organic intellectual, in fact, seems to translate this palpable need in his project to go out and meet people and to think from the lived life. There is around the caravan a conception of the work of the thought resolutely engaged, at the same time politically oriented and anchored in the meeting, what the director the director was also updating by pursuing with me in broken English a discussion on the possible interweaving between theater, theory and politics.

The caravan was conceived as a tribute to a project that was never realized, imagined in the 1960s by architect Cedric Price and director Joan Littlewood, the Fun Palace. Critical of a "constipated" modern city acting as a "straitjacket" disciplining its uses, Price wished to create a building, or rather a kind of social interaction machine, made of scaffolding, platforms and escalators, a place that would be impermanent, transformable, flexible, adaptable to the changing needs and desires of citizens. Favoring a participatory and emancipatory theater, a dramaturgy of the street and improvisation, the director was concerned with creating an "informal" environment that would destabilize the boundary between actor and spectator without imposing anything. It was necessary to anticipate the future boredom of these workers that the automation of work would free. In a society of leisure, there should be places like this Fun Palace dedicated to the playful, inventive and dynamic acquisition of knowledge of all kinds to feed an insatiable quest for personal development. Alongside an arcade, a music room where instruments would be made available to the public, and a playground reserved for the popularization of science, there would be agoras or kaffeeklatsch formed ad hoc which, in the evening, would allow "the Socrates, the Abelards, the Siren poets, the wandering seekers of the future, the mystics, the skeptics and the sophists, according to Littlewood, to discuss until dawn."

The idea is not just a utopia. The Fun Palace served as a model for the creation of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Jean-Max Colard, a professor of literature who is now the director of the Centre's Speech Department, told me nostalgically of his own visits as a child. As I was conducting an interview with him to better understand how art is used to give form to the theoretical word in museums of contemporary art, he described scenes to me almost in the words of Price and Littlewood. In his memory, on the first floor of the Center, originals would speak spontaneously for hours, taking over the place to share ideas with anyone who would listen. A true forum open to meetings and games, the Center's great hall, long before the terrorist attacks and the Vigipirate plan, responded, in its own way, to the ideal of citizen commitment animating the Fun Palace.

The era is today less to the freedom and to the let-go than to the dramaturgy of the word, that is to say to the contribution of the experimental methods of contemporary creation to arrange a framework from which protocols are activated. The role of these protocols is to go to the meeting of territories and to facilitate the circulation of the thought. It is that the society of leisure never arrived.

The inattention of brains exhausted by cognitive capitalism and the frantic race for increasingly partial and anecdotal information make this freedom of reflection and learning, which the designers of this dream project were celebrating perhaps a little too naively, completely anxiety-producing.

From now on, freedom must be parameterized to make the encounter possible. In the same way, around the caravan, the participants in the programmed conversations relied on the device to give shape to their ideas, tipping over into humor as if to put themselves in phase with the camping scene in which they were taking part, accepting to move literally out of the usual places of culture and thought, playing the game of spontaneity in spite of the vulnerability that it implies, questioning the host attending the exchanges to fill the silences and redirect the thread of their ideas. What was given to see in all its obviousness, it was professionals of the word displaced in their habits which relied on the ecology of a form imposing ways to make live the ideas in the fragility of the situation.

Engaged in this device myself, I gradually became aware of how much my ideas were modulated by the space configured by the caravan. And therein, in my opinion, lies the fundamental lesson of the Little Fun Palace: to make the theory of the exist as something that takes place. Helping theory to take its place is what the caravan seems to suggest, because it is this place that forms ideas beyond their capacity for abstraction and generalization, because it is this place that facilitates the hospitality of thinking activities and thus their effects in the world.

In the Little Fun Palace, theory resists its house arrest at the university and in its consecrated formats, even if the naturalness of their codes and automatisms is never far away. The device proposes

to inhabit theory in mobility and to rethink it in terms of hospitality, which forces a demanding injunction: to dethrone it radically so that it no longer designates a constructed and authoritative set of abstract concepts that look down on the world, that pretend to overhang the real, at a distance. In order for it to be a part of the reception, it must be weakened, familiarized, displaced, embodied, unbolted from its base. The theory is not a monument. It is a practice.

As a "street university", the Little Fun Palace is a place of thought that transcends the performance of expertise and de-hierarchizes knowledge.

By relying on space, Andreatta develops a kind of theory of the folding chair. It is not that he imagines on plan an adaptable architecture. He creates a simple, nomadic, uncomfortable, wobbly place that anyone can use. Modulated by the caravan, all the ideas that are expressed there never sleep in the page, but are transported, precarious, in the locality, according to the meetings.

This invitation I received to talk about theory as a space had therefore something of the order of the trap, of the gamic.

Placed in the center of the dramaturgy of the caravan, I activated by my speaking a definition of the theory that I had not chosen, and my tacitly assigned role was to make it true. It was necessary to let myself be taken in the game of activating a theory already defined and staged, with the difference however that I had to explain what was taking place theoretically in this place-format of the caravan where the speeches acted performatively as the exposition of a situated theory.

An ethics of the traditional research would condemn any participation to what one theorizes, what evokes the historian of the art Claire Bishop who, in introduction of a work however dedicated to the participative art, almost apologizes for its proximity with the projects that she analyzes. There is indeed something uncomfortable in this invitation to actualize modalities of thought determined by others, but I discover that this discomfort is in truth the symptom of a power of transformation.

The Little Fun Palace shifts habits and habitus towards new ways of thinking, and destabilizes the boundaries between the world and its theorization. The device makes theory its object, which leaves which leaves no one unscathed.

Gilles Deleuze spoke about the theory as a toolbox, which greatly influenced a whole generation of artists. He said on this subject to Foucault, in a conversation published in 1972 in the magazine *The Arc*: "It is that, a theory, it is exactly like a toolbox. [...] It must be useful, it must work. And not for oneself. If there are no people to use it, starting with the theorist himself, who then ceases to be a theorist, it is because it is worthless, or that the moment has not come. [...] Theory is not totalized, it multiplies and multiplies"

"Beware, the expression is pejorative," I was told when I used the expression "kitchen conversation" in an academic article to show that this exchange between the two French philosophers was basically about the place where it took place. "Precisely", I said to myself, before abandoning this little joke, which was in any case too anecdotal for an art history that must limit itself to theorizing about the works.

But this was to abandon the most precious thing I had learned about my discipline: I believe that we must rely on places to move our theoretical conducts, to offer us opportunities to circulate them among the world and to be affected by the world.
