

## Towards a Poetics of Affect: Staging Sound in Wajdi Mouawad's *Theatre of Compassion*

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### Article abstract

Erin Hurley and Sara Warner in their insightful study “Affect/Performance/Politics” (2012) remind us that the humanities and social sciences today experience a new sweep of theoretical inquiry, focusing on studying affect or thrill experience as a leading mechanism of our cognition and communication, as well as the making and reception of art works. Today, “the affective turn signals [our] renewed interest in embodiment and sensorial experience” (2012 : 99), allowing scholars to examine a theatrical performance as a venue to reinforce the subjectivity of the artist and that of the receiver. A theory of affect strives to describe the mechanisms of reception in theatre as our psycho-physical experience, regardless of our linguistic, cultural, social, or ethnic background, and thus aspires to bring the question of universals back to the rehearsal hall and the theatre auditorium. This article takes such a theoretical framework further to argue that in today's theatre it is the multiple soundscapes of performance – actors' voices, music, artificially produced and live sound, the architecture of performance aurality – that has the most potential for instigating the audiences' visceral experience. Hans Thies Lehmann (2006) in his influential book on post-dramatic theatre aesthetics names this phenomenon as *chora*, the sonoric space of the performance, which possesses the great power to deconstruct the semantic meanings of words, turning them into mechanisms of performative psycho-physical affect as experienced by the audience (*ibid.* : 145). In order to illustrate how words (as poetry) and sounds (as singing and music) generate affect in today's performances, an example of Lehmann's *chora-graphy* (2006 : 146), I examine Wajdi Mouawad's *theatre of compassion* (Naugrette 2008 : 88), emphasizing his dramaturgy, directorial choices (mise-en-scene), use of sound, and work with actors, as an artistic project called to shock and shake audiences emotionally. In the first section of my study I outline the major principles of the theory of affect; in the second, I discuss Mouawad's approach to staging a canonical dramatic text and investigate how sound serves as the leading compositional element of affect in his 2011 production *Des Femmes*, an adaptation of Sophocles' three tragedies *Les Trachiniennes*, *Antigone* and *Électre*.

# Towards a Poetics of Affect : Staging Sound in Wajdi Mouawad's *Theatre of Compassion* <sup>1</sup>

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Erin Hurley and Sara Warner in their insightful study “Affect/Performance/Politics” (2012) remind us that humanities and social sciences today experience a new sweep of theoretical inquiry, focusing on studying affect or thrill experience as a leading mechanism of our cognition and communication, as well as being essential to the making and receiving of art products. Today, they write, “the affective turn signals [our] renewed interest in embodiment and sensorial experience”, allowing scholars to examine a theatre performance as a venue to reinforce the subjectivity of the artist and the subjectivity of the receiver (99). The theory of affect strives to describe the mechanisms of reception in terms of our psycho-physical experience, regardless of linguistic, cultural, social, or ethnic background, and in this context it aspires to bring the question of universals back to the rehearsal hall and the theatre auditorium. This theory invites scholars to examine a theatre performance using three critical lenses :

On the personal level, it promises a more emancipated and autonomous conception of subjectivity. For performance, it elevates aesthetics of experience over those based in representation, freeing dramaturgy and spectacle from the Aristotelian requirements of wholeness and unity. [...] In the political realm, affect relocates the barometer of change from collective movements based in commonality to the more intimate (and immediate) registry of intensities that are incremental yet palpable. (Hurley& Warner 2012 : 100)

This article takes this theoretical framework further to argue that in

today's theatre it is the multiple soundscapes of performance – actors' voices, music, artificially produced and live sound, the architecture of performance aurality, etc. – that has the most power of instigating the audience's visceral experience and affect. Hans Thies Lehmann in his influential book on post-dramatic theatre aesthetics (2006) names this phenomenon *chora*, the sonic space of the performance, which possesses the great power of deconstruction of the semantic meanings of words and turns them into the mechanisms of performative affect as experienced by the audience. As Lehmann explains,

[space as chora] is something like an antechamber and at the same time the secret cellar and foundation of the logos of language. It remains antagonistic to logos. Yet as rhythm and enjoyment of sonority it subsists in all language as its 'poetry'. Kristeva refers to this dimension of the 'chora' in all processes of signification as the 'Semiotic' (as distinguished from the 'Symbolic'). What is emerging in the new theatre, as much as in the radical attempts of the modernist '*langage poétique*', can therefore be understood as attempts towards a restitution of chora : of a space and speech/discourse without telos, hierarchy and causality, without fixable meaning and unity. (2006 : 145)

In order to illustrate how words (as poetry) and sound (as singing and music) generate affect in today's performance, exemplifying Lehmann's *chora-graphy* as "the deconstruction of a discourse oriented towards meaning and the invention of a space that eludes the laws of telos and unity" (*ibid.* : 146), I examine Lebanese-Québécois theatre artist Wajdi Mouawad's *theatre of compassion* (Naugrette 88) – his dramaturgy, directorial choices (*mise-en-scène*), use of sound, and work with actors, as an example of an artistic project called to shock and shake its audiences emotionally. I demonstrate that Mouawad's theatre presents an instance of a multi-sensorial *performative event*, commanding recognition and analysis of multiple semiotics that intervene in its performance. Focusing on the use of sound in Mouawad's work takes away from the emphasis on questions of visibility as the most arresting qualities in his theatre (Preston 2009). In the first section of my study, I outline the major postulates of the theory of affect; in the second, I discuss Mouawad's approaches to staging a canonical dramatic text and investigate how sound serves as the leading compositional element of affect in his 2011 production *Des Femmes*, an adaptation of Sophocles' three tragedies *Les Trachiniennes*, *Antigone* and *Électre*.<sup>2</sup>

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## Theatre and Affect : The Rise of Subjectivity in Theatre Studies

Theater studies today has experienced a renewed interest in subjectivity and recognizes affect as one of the conceptual frames to study the making of theatre performance and its reception. For example, Josephine Machon describes spectators' mechanisms of reception as the

work of (syn)aesthetics, similar for any theatergoers regardless of their linguistic, cultural or ethnic background. (Syn)aesthetic hybrid, Machon writes, presents “intertextual layering of performance languages [that] goes far beyond linguistic analysis and demands the sensate approach of the (syn)aesthetic strategy of appreciation. The (syn)aesthetic style celebrates the physical image as much as the spoken word. It explores the potential of spoken language to affect on a physical level. Its visceral impact is emphasized by the immediacy of the live experience” (2009 : 80). The focus on (syn)aesthetics and affect presents a logical search in theatre practice that goes beyond established methodologies of performance analysis (from semiotics to intercultural theories, for instance), which are heavily rooted in the social discourses instigated by historical and economic conditions post World War II. The re-mapping of geographies and economies, along with the emergence of traveling, migratory and displaced identities, instigated the rejection of essentialist theories and insisted on recognition of diversity and historical individualism of spectators. Using the lenses of affect and (syn)aesthetics allows one to address today’s socio-economic reality of globalization as reflected in theatre and as defined by the artists and their audiences’ transnational multiplicity of social, cultural, linguistic, political, and ethnic positioning. (Syn)aesthetics focuses on the subjectivity of the artist/perceiver and studies Self as the only non-negotiable (although dynamic) element in making and perceiving a work of art, particularly that of theater. Seeking the affectual turn of contemporary performance marks these exercises in (syn)aesthetics by the performative power of shock and not catharsis (Fischer-Lichte 2008).

In psychology, the term “affect” refers to the active processes of experiencing a strong emotion, our instinctual reaction to any psycho-physical stimuli. It is also “associated with action”, for example when “our blood rushes faster, our mirror neurons spike new synaptic activity throughout our bodies, [and] adrenalin courses throughout the system” (Bogart 2010 : XII). In the case of theatre, affect indicates our “thrill of being in the presence of actors who are radiantly experiencing the present moment” (*ibid.*).<sup>3</sup> Affect has a set of expressive physical mechanisms common to all individuals, but as Hurley suggests, it “can be a very subjective experience marked by durational and mimetic categories related to the experiential definitions of Self” (2010 : 13). Our experience of affect precedes our experience of empathy, compassion or catharsis, the emotions directly connected to our system of moral, ethical, social, cultural and aesthetic values. Affect “exceeds us by happening against our will” (*ibid.* : 14). An example of the psycho-physical response to outside stimuli, affect can be “traced phylogenetically, which means that we can see [it] across the evolutionary history of the human species”; hence it can be used as the “beyond or above-cultural category” of performance analysis (*ibid.* : 15). Theatre, as we experience it as theatergoers and/or practitioners, “can’t help but make us feel, even when it doesn’t mean

to, when it isn't particularly trying to, or when its design fails outright" (8). Thus, the uniqueness of a theatrical event rests with the volatility of an emotional outcome. Such an event "requires two sentient bodies : one to act, another to apprehend" (26); and it is based on the encounter between two embodied experiences : that of the actor and that of the spectator. As a relational and temporal encounter between bodies, affect leads to excessive creative expressions that in their own turn can rely upon a number of mechanisms found in various art forms.

Deleuze and Guattari recognize affect as a type of thinking done through art: something that relies upon creating emotional stimuli by using "vibrations, harmonies and dissonances of literary words, musical tones, or painterly colors" (Cull 2012 : 193). Studying affect in theatre forces one to recognize, as Deleuze and Guattari do, that "the role of artists is to stage affects as encounters that exceed 'those who undergo them'; they [the artists – YM] must invent affective works that 'make us become with them'" (175). One can argue that the objective of a theatre artist is not to represent emotion but to devise a procedure to extract the affect, to reconstruct in performance the power of another human being "to pierce us like an arrow, force us to think, and enable us to act in new ways" (193). Language can become one of the most enigmatic territories of a theatrical performance, where the power of affect can be tested. For example, in post-dramatic theatre, as Lehmann argues, dramatic text loses its semantic significance and meaning making power and turns into "the bearer of sound" only :

The principle of exposition applied to body, gesture and voice also seizes the language material and attacks language's function of representation. Instead of a linguistic re-presentation of facts, there is a 'position' of tones, words, sentences, sounds that are hardly controlled by a 'meaning' but instead by the scenic composition, by a visual, not text oriented dramaturgy. The rupture between being and meaning has a shock-like effect : something is exposed with the urgency of suggested meaning – but then fails to make the expected meaning recognizable. (146)

In post-dramatic theatre, therefore, words do not need to be used because of their semantic, pragmatic or referential functions; rather they often appear either because of their emotive function or because of their inherited materiality or thingness of the sign. The thingness of a word as a sign is manifested through its sound quality, the emotion inherited in the audio-information it carries (Lehmann 2006 : 145-150), and in the power of the performative act of enunciation in which this word/sound is spoken or created (Deleuze & Guattari 1993 : 75-94). Indeed, in their emotive functions, words as sounds can create performative atmosphere and rend theatre space as tonal : "sound calls attention to itself, and as a result, is an effective manipulation of our response" (De Benedetto 2010 : 141). The audience becomes aware of their own reactions because people share these reactions with other people, they share the process of reception and affect itself. From here, the phenomenon

of *phonetic empathy* emerges, which works as a result of sharing an emotional moment when the audience follows the patterns of speech spoken by other people (*ibid.* : 142). The audience attunes themselves to speech as sound, *i.e.* “we attune ourselves to more than the words [he/she] speaks, but also his/her tone of voice and the rhythms and cadences of his/her speech to discern what is really being said” (*ibid.*). Hence, if in the visual arts image and color can be used as physical stimuli of affect, in theatre, much like in live music, it is word as sound that triggers our emotional reactions (*ibid.*). Moreover, theatre as a shared experience of many relies on the effects of *atmospheric togetherness* in which the emotional qualities of the rhythms and the silences create meaning (*ibid.* : 144). As Di Benedetto explains, this atmosphere of togetherness appears as the result of the audience’s affectual reaction to the corporeal presence of the actors onstage :

[...] by engaging the web of our sensations, the event becomes accessible to our consciousness by both physical and intellectual means. The use of sound is a useful example because we can both listen to dialogue as well as monitor the ambient noises of the space that we share with the performers or their proxies. We are able to understand alternative performances that use aural means as a central communication medium because we know how to apprehend the world using our senses. We do not need to understand the words being spoken to get a sense of what is meant. [...] Sound artists may challenge conventional modes of listening and hearing, but aural stimulation becomes significant because it evokes other bodies. Being attendant to those stimulations will enrich our experience of what we see, taste, smell, touch and hear. (144)

Historically, these experiments in *aural viscosity* (145), or using sound as a means to evoke feelings, go as far back as Wagner’s Total Work of Art, Futurists’ Seratti and noise-machines, as well as Artaud’s aspiration to turn noise into artistic expression. Semiotically, Di Benedetto argues, all these experiments with words, sounds and noises can produce meaning only if they are created and perceived in the context of a theatrical event (146), within its certain spatial arrangement (150).<sup>4</sup> Noise, abstract sound and music are capable of communicating “specific emotional states without engaging the conscious workings of the brain” (151); they can create the sense of authenticity of the event (153), as theater makers would engage with our daily dependence on sound and noise (161). The devices employed include : splitting and divorcing sounds from both the visual source and the source of their production; and distorting, minimizing, amplifying or re-arranging sound from its original source (162). To summarize, theatre makers use sound to create a shared atmosphere of the production and to establish or disrupt the sequence of actions (162), so as to suggest images and evoke emotions associated with them.

Wajdi Mouawad’s *theatre of compassion* is an example of such work. It presents an artistic site to investigate and perform the hybrid subjectivity of its author – the subjectivity of an exilic child. It engages

the soundscape of the production to invite and allow the work of affect as a mechanism of compassion as well as a tool of our (the audience's) meeting with our own selves. Aesthetically, Mouawad's theatre approximates the *performative event* (Fischer-Lichte 2008) and insists on the privilege of the autobiographical as the artistic principle of creating a work of art and as the principle of its reception, when the spectator's experience of catharsis (purgation) is exchanged with those of shock and affect. Mouawad's work presents a meeting point between politics, autobiography and poetry. The *mise-en-scène* of Self (that of the artist and spectator) predetermines the playwright/director's practice of translating his personal experience into the newly constructed dramatic and stage images, a process which involves directorial work in both sound (audio) and space (video) aspects of performance, in addition to pedagogical endeavours and working methods with actors.

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### Intentionality of Affect : Wajdi Mouawad Stages Greek Tragedy

Born in Lebanon in 1968, Mouawad belongs to the generation of Lebanese artists/exiles who had to flee their country during the 1970s civil war and seek refuge in the West. His family relocated to Paris and then to Montreal, when Mouawad was still a young adolescent. This early exposure to the adult world of double standards made a discernible imprint on the language, devices, and themes of the exilic author. In its subject matter, Mouawad's work presents an example of the exilic child's disengagement from the land of his ancestors – the theatricalization of collective and individual memory, as well as the objectification, fictionalization, and translation of a communal history. His protagonists are eternal strangers trying to reconcile their past with their present, their experience as young Québécois equated with that of refugees from a faraway country. At the same time, Mouawad escalates the story of his personal suffering to the universals of abandoned childhood. He borrows the devices of testimony to “bear witness to the national tragedy of Lebanon, work through the trauma it caused, and offer hope to the survivors” (Moss 2001 : 174). In his *theatre of compassion*, the artist's autobiography, childhood trauma, and cultural and personal impressions dictate not only the themes and images of his writing but also his theater aesthetics, which can instigate the audience's emotional/affective reactions to the work in question.

Through his artistic inquiry, Mouawad seeks to resurrect the structures and the affective powers of Greek tragedy. As Hurley explains, “the formal organization of the tragedies, the way the plays were put together – acts as a feeling-technology” : the speeches of chorus with their self-reflective and performative powers and the alternating dialogue-based episodes “not only separate incident from reflection in Greek tragedy;

[they] also mitigate or otherwise digest the incidents and their affective effects” (40). The tragedies function as the mechanisms of catharsis, and the particular structural elements of feeling-technology are found throughout Mouawad’s dramaturgy. In his plays as in the texts of Greek tragedies, the children “bear the heavy legacy of their parents’ fate, along with the ethical sense of responsibility and the tragic sense of belonging” (Telmissany 2012 : 54). At the same time, his plays exhibit the influence of Romantic philosophy, specifically Friedrich Hölderlin’s vision of tragedy as the characters’ and the reader’s highly personalized experience, the experience of catastrophe (Davreu 2011 : 37). In Hölderlin’s romantic vision of Greek tragedy, *fatum* reigns – “a superior power that forces mortals to follow a path they were designed to follow in order to be free” (Telmissany 2012 : 54). *Fatum*, also an instrument of punishment, is introduced to awaken the character’s self-awareness, his/her subjectivity, and to make one responsible for his/her actions. *Fatum* paves the path for the emotion of shock to take over Aristotelian catharsis, and thus invites the audience’s sympathy with the characters.

With this emphasis on our sympathy to the characters and the personalized view of Greek Gods’ actions and motivations, Hölderlin also justified the affectual power of Romantic tragedy, the force widely used by Mouawad’s own theatre. For example, when it comes to the devices of *mise-en-place*, i.e. positioning of the bodies onstage, Mouawad often creates visual images that have strong connotations with Christian icons and Renaissance paintings (*Seuls*). At the same time, these images borrow from today’s popular culture (*Littoral*, *Incendies*); and so they suggest the romanticized or Hölderlin-like take on tragedy. This desire for the tragic pathos and affect is seen nowhere better in Mouawad’s work than in his directorial endeavors, specifically his use of sound (the actor’s voice and the music) onstage. The feeling of compassion comes with our understanding of the traumatic nature of Mouawad’s personal experience, instigated by the artist’s persistent desire to return to the terrors of his past and expressed through the writer’s continuous projection of his own emotions onto the fictional world of his characters. The violent images of abandoned and murdered children, tortured and raped women, broken families and homes are there to emotionally shake or rather shock Mouawad’s audiences. Hence affect in Mouawad’s theatre creates a sense of an emotionally roused and politically activated community, even if only an imaginary one.

As Dominique Lafon writes (2011 : 14-16), however, the dominance of the autobiographical subject matter over the coherent dramaturgical narrative in Mouawad’s works cannot serve as a guarantee of the audience’s emotional engagement. Even in such emotionally charged one-man shows as *Seuls*, in which Mouawad plays a semi-autobiographical character Hawran as his dramaturgical and performative alter-ego, spending the last 35 minutes of the performance painting his own body, *the effect of the autobiographical* is fragile and quickly loses its power.



As soon as the surprise of the initial encounter is over, the repetition of the device creates the sense of boredom and predictability, not affect. My own task is not necessarily to evaluate how successful Mouawad's project is, rather it is to demonstrate that the effect of the autobiographical constitutes one of the major emotion-building commands in his theatre as a semantic gesture, even if the dramatic material does not directly reflect the artist's own or his collaborators' personal experience. My other task is to show that the power of a sound-score holds the second most important place in Mouawad's theatre, when it comes to stimulating and manipulating audiences' emotions. In Mouawad's theatre, visuals and soundscapes, including the director's work with actors and designers, take on the role of emotional stimuli in creating affective encounters between the stage and the audience, something that Hurley identifies as the process of *feeling-work* or *feeling-labour*. These processes characterize "the work [that] theatre does by making, managing, and moving feeling in all its types (affect, emotions, sensations) in a publicly observable display that is sold to an audience for a wage. [...] Theatre's *feeling-labours* – the display of larger-than-life emotions, the management of our sensate body, and the distribution of affect between stage and auditorium – [...] draw us in, compel us to return, and most capture our imagination" in the theatrical event (Hurley 9). Although Mouawad's theatre originates at the cross-roads of textual and non-textual performative scores – on one hand, it worships the power of logos; on the other, it eagerly employs the mechanisms of non-textual emotional stimuli – it is the supremacy of sound, the power of spoken word, music and singing that stimulates the audience's emotions. Thus, I see Mouawad's theatre actively seeking the oratorio-type expressivity onstage: loudness, noise, pauses, rhythmical syncopation, and melody turn into mechanisms of authorial intention or semantic gesture that would characterize his work's intentionality (Levitin 2006 : 168-170). As Georges Banu writes,

*C'est un fait connu, chez Mouawad l'écriture avance de pair avec la mise-en-scène, suivant une logique de tressage qui lui est propre. Et le spectacle, dans son architecture temporelle, préserve la dynamique de cette relation, car l'auteur-metteur en scène exerce, avec soin, un travail subtil de ralentissements et accélérations en prenant soin d'élaborer une structure musicale. Rien de plus contraire à ces spectacles que le déroulement étalé ou la précipitation compulsive, car Mouawad pratique un savant jeu de temps qui anime la durée et construit une véritable figure sonore, équivalent sensible des agitations dont la fable apporte le témoignage. (2011 : 46-47)*

In other words, Mouawad's theater heavily relies on the rhythmical and temporal architecture of performance aurality expressed through the power of the actor's command of his/her stage presence and voice. The actor's ability to conduct his/her stage performance with regards to the loudness, tone, vibration, intonation, volume, or pitch of his/her voice, along with his/her rapport with the given text as a vehicle and genera-

tor of theatrical meaning and emotion, creates a particular theatrical environment in which the process of performative infection can take place (Fischer-Lichte 2008), an experience a spectator undergoes either individually or together as a group.

The 2011 production *Des Femmes* is an example of this process, although the history of its making and reception is rather controversial. *Des Femmes* received extensive but mostly disapproving critical attention both in Europe and Quebec, not only because Mouawad invited Bertrand Cantat (the leader of the now-dissolved rock group Noir Désir and an indicted murderer) to perform and sing the part of the Chorus, but also because, for many critics, it lacked tragic pathos. As Shine commented, despite the fact “the leitmotifs of Mouawad’s own writing [would] make his move to the classics so natural : his memorable *Forêts* and *Littoral* intricately unravel secrets across generations burdened by mysterious trauma [;] here, his direction lacks tragic resonance and fluidity [...]”. Mouawad seems more comfortable with intimacy – characters as damaged children – than outsized, implacable forces of fate” (2011 : online). Nevertheless, I argue, *Des Femmes* is a very telling example of how the devices of musical composition can become the major semantic and affectual force in theatre.

### On Dramaturgy and Translation

As Mouawad (2011a) explains, although *Des Femmes*’ 6-hour theatrical marathon is based on Sophocles’ tragedies and not his own dramatic material, working on these plays presented an opportunity to enter a personal dialogue with classical forms, not necessarily in the role of a theatre director but as a fellow poet. *Des Femmes* tells the story of women “who have suffered harm at the hands of men” (Gauthier 2012), and for Mouawad the transition from directing his own plays to working on Sophocles’ masterpieces was only natural. The poeticity of Greek tragedy with its openness for narrative modes has been Mouawad’s dramatic ideal for many years. Storytelling devices, monologic tendencies in dialogue, descriptive passages demanding a literary rather than purely theatrical imagination from the audience, repetitions in themes and images found in the texts of Sophocles, also constitute the signature style of Mouawad’s theatrical writing. With *Des Femmes* Mouawad wished to address younger audiences, who by watching Sophocles today would appreciate the power of poetry to express the violence and suffering of the world. To help him with this project, Mouawad invited the French poet and translator Robert Davreu, whose rich and abstract language was to carry over the vividness and rough physicality of the action and of the Mediterranean landscape in which the tragedy is situated. In Davreu’s translations Mouawad sought the multilayered dimension of the poetic word to convey the wealth of dramatic and sensual experience found in the original.

Initially Mouawad wanted to organize Sophocles' plays around the given narrative themes, such as those found in the Thebes trilogy or the Oedipus trilogy; but later he decided to group them on the principles of dramatic adaptation. He focused *Des Femmes* on the fate of women with an objective to reclaim the ethical questions found in the original and to evoke its existential anxieties in this new staging (Mouawad 2011b : 13-21).

In Davreu's new translation of Sophocles' text, Mouawad sought to approximate the language and narrative devices of contemporary dramaturgy. Curiously, the device of the autobiographical found its echoing in Davreu's work as well. In his description of the translation process, Davreu emphasized the intimate character of collaboration between himself and Mouawad's company. He acknowledged the fact that by inviting him to work on Sophocles' text, Mouawad provided the translator with a unique opportunity to re-live his own childhood experience of the Mediterranean landscape, his summer vacations at the seashore, and his overall sensorial memory of the region. Without this embodied approach to translation, Davreu felt he could not undertake the task of evoking the images, conflicts and philosophy of the original (24-25). He also understood that translating for Mouawad and his company would be a very special experience : he would be confronted with a theatre company where the artist's personal and the group's collective experience dominate (26). The translator's and actors' personal memories, the feelings and sensations each of the participants would associate with their own past as evoked in each of them and collectively via Sophocles' text, would mark the company's affectual take on the tragedy. As Davreu explains, in translating Sophocles for Mouawad he was able to listen to the grandeur of this poetry, to open himself to the magnificence of the Greek text, and to escape the minutia of everyday life (27). In other words, Davreu sought through the translation to reflect his personal experiences of the world, the inherited and accumulated beauty and violence of human experience. He wanted to reveal the ways in which he is enchanted and disenchanting with the world, using the power of oral expression and the poetry of language, relying especially upon rhythm and cadence (30). As a result, in Mouawad's work, "*La traduction de Robert Davreu est magnifique. Le texte jaillit avec violence de tout un ensemble de temps anciens et nouveaux, agrégés dans un magma d'affects explosif, en pleine lave. L'alternance entre le texte et le chœur rock est exaltante. Par moments, vous êtes scotchés par ces transitions, comme celle entre le galop des chevaux et la batterie*". ("Des femmes de Wajdi Mouawad à Avignon" in *Le Monde*, July 29, 2011).

It comes as no surprise that Mouawad's belief in the power of the word is similar to that of Davreu. They share this enchantment and disenchantment with the rhythms of the Mediterranean landscape, and with the poetic power of storytelling, singing and praying from Mouawad's home culture. Often, Mouawad cites the pervasiveness of

oral interaction in his childhood, and he speaks of the power of aural presence that his father had over their family table, recalling his father continuously speaking at his children, not to or with them. One can argue, therefore, that Mouawad's worldview has been shaped by the experience of listening, which he translates into all his artistic endeavours, be it writing plays, staging productions or composing novels. A French second-language speaker, Mouawad is also self-conscious of the way he uses French words. As a cosmopolitan theatre artist, he confronts the inevitability of exploring the power of words and sounds onstage, thus nurturing the aural mechanisms of affect in his theatre.

In his work Mouawad resists the culturally specific mechanisms of reception in text-based theatre. The mechanisms of storytelling in text-based theatre reflect our understanding of dramatic narrative and the theatrical codes that constitute it. Such theatre expects its audiences to follow the dramaturgical canvas and the narrative techniques that make the storytelling; it also clearly articulates the production's moral, artistic, or pedagogical messages. The practices of today's theatre often reject the semantic power of logos and rely to a large extent on the imaginative power of a *play-text* (Machon 2009 : 18).

As Lehmann explains, "in postdramatic theatre, breath, rhythm and the present actuality of the body's visceral presence take precedence over the logos. An opening and dispersal of the logos develop in such a way that it is no longer necessarily the case that a meaning is communicated from A (stage) to B (spectator) but instead a specifically theatrical, 'magical' transmission and connection happen by means of language" (2006 : 145). Accordingly, instead of seeking our intellectual involvement, post-dramatic theatre engages with the "physiology and neurology of the human body as a receiver of outside stimuli" (Di Benedetto 2010 : 1). It repeatedly investigates how theatrical lighting, sound, acting techniques and other material mechanisms of production "can assist the artist in using sensorial stimuli to compose a live theatrical event and create an in-between state of experience and awareness" (*idem*). Relying upon aural, visual and other sensorial stimuli to manipulate spectators' attention and to "[break] in below the cultural surface" (Di Benedetto 2010 : 165), such theatre rouses our senses. It requires the spectators' psycho-physical involvement in making a show and therefore stages the audiences' affect. According to Di Benedetto, "we do not have to know anything about the specific culture. We do not have to read a culturally specific image subtly; the visceral nature leads us to the experience" (165). When it comes to the use of words and sounds, contemporary theatre instigates the (syn)aesthetic style of performance and reception, which is often concerned with "harnessing the full force of the imagination and in breaking down boundaries between the 'real' and the imaginable" (Machon 2009 : 18). Specifically through the use of sound, as Fischer-Lichte explains, we are immersed in the atmosphere of a performance and become aware of our own cor-

poreality: the performative space of a theatrical encounter becomes its liminal space of transformation (2008 : 119). Sounds, Fischer-Lichte adds, “surround and envelop the perceiving subject and penetrate their bodies. The perceived sounds resound through the body [...] Once more, sound enters the body and breaks down limits. When a sound resounds in the listener’s chest [...] they no longer hear it [...] but feel it from within as a physical process” (*ibid.*).

Mouawad’s theatre in general and his work on Sophocles’ adaptation specifically relies on “graphic images, palpable forms and visceral words to (re)present ideas and experiences” (Machon 2009 : 18). In his theatrical expression of absolute relevance is the insistence on verbal language as a corporeal, defamiliarized and sensate act. Significant here is the way in which the neurological condition of synaesthesia provides experiential evidence that words, both on the page and spoken, have the potential to be perceived in a new and exhilarating way. With the visceral-verbal *play-texts* of the (syn)aesthetic style, the word is defamiliarized and has to be (re)cognized and made sense of via a sensate fusion of verbal and non-verbal means. Following this, within a (syn)aesthetic appreciation process a certain ‘semanticizing’ of the somatic experience of words occurs during and/or following a performance, where the ‘meaning’ of the words is reflected in the sound and the *feeling* they embody” (*ibid.*). With Mouawad’s work on *Des Femmes*, the dynamics of this *play-text* are ultimately rooted in collaboration, first with the translator and then with his company.

### Rehearsing *Des Femmes*

Working on *Des Femmes* Mouawad proposed his actors to rehearse Sophocles’ text listening to music, to search for the inner rhythm of the production by approximating it to the external rhythm of the music. The company tried many styles from The Beatles to Pink Floyd, until they stumbled upon the American rock-group Nirvana, whose lyricism and accentuation was close to their own inner rhythms. Mouawad asked his actors to listen to the music and speak the lines of their characters from this disembodied position, so they would eventually turn into the ventriloquists for Sophocles’ text, the living channels to transmit the melody, rhythm, and timbre of his poetry.

This technique has a sensual aspect as well, proposed by Michael Chekhov (2002) who trained the psycho-physical sensitivity and imagination of his actors using the devices of reciting text and moving with music. Mouawad went further, asking his actors to listen for the rhythms provided by the music, the outside stimuli, and speak the lines following the imposed rhythmical structure, free from their tasks to create a character, to seek this character’s own inner rhythm and other psycho-physical characteristics. This trust in the psycho-physical interconnectivity between the actor’s self and the given text, one which

each performer must seek for himself, is for Mouawad the manifestation of the inseparable unity between the actor's 'I' and the character 'I' he/she portrays. Hence as a director/pedagogue, Mouawad helps his company to work through their emotions, be it the physical experience of repeating sounds and words, or the psycho-physical experience of listening to the music and speaking the text from a place of trance. In this approach, therefore, sound is recognized as the most powerful mechanism of making an actor *feel*, aural vibrations becoming sensual. When sound becomes a leading mechanism of communication in theatre, similar to a concert or an opera, with spectacle taking a subordinate position, then this theatre approximates the effectual force of music.

By staging the soundscape of *Des Femmes* in a manner analogous to how the radio-drama stages sound, Mouawad relies on our *imaginative mind* (Rattigan 2002 : 120), securing the "effectual" power of speech and taking into account the time-reception dichotomy particular to a radio play's reception (121).

Radio drama or the dramatic play, based on the laws of sound theatre/radio theatre, allows for the listener's very particular level of emotional and sensual intimacy. As Rattigan explains,

As radio is exclusively concerned with the production of sound, both voice and word are inseparable. In radio drama the spoken word is in reality the 'acted word'. Isolated in sound and devoid of any form of visual stimuli, the 'acted word' is charged with a far greater responsibility for carrying emotional power, meaningful intent and the physical sense of character. Words, which will have to come alive through the actor's voice, need to be razor sharp and precise, yet colorful and evocative. They are merely the measured threads of the playwriting-weaver that will be passed on to the skilled tailor – the vocal actor. (2002 : 152)

Sound, as a mechanism of feeling technology based on the effect of the autobiographical, allows a special meeting with the individual's self. Rattigan continues, "in radio-drama the spoken-word, sound, music, silence, pause, aural distance and technical considerations are the acoustic elements of a sonic theatre that is isolated in sound and transmitted to where the 'suspension of the time-space world of performance' unites the drama with the individual self" (121). The subjectivity of the receiver/listener determines the effects of the radio-drama performance. Similarly, listening to the soundscape of *Des Femmes* allows for the connection between the spectator's Self and the stage action to occur, as much as it allows for the actor's autobiographical Self to be expressed. For example, when Mouawad decided to invite Bertrand Cantat to collaborate with him on this production, he expected the musician to only compose the sound score of *Des Femmes* and the songs of the chorus. Later, however, the two artists were "determined that Cantat might also play a role onstage. After re-reading the texts, [Mouawad] was struck by how the ancient tragedies could also be applied to the tragedy of Cantat's life" (Mouawad 2011d), a reference which created one more important

autobiographical link within his production. The stage presence of Cantat became important not only theatrically, it also reinforced the affectual force of the autobiographical performance by collapsing the performer's autobiographical self with the fictional world of the play. Spellbound by Cantat's voice, the audience can focus on the biographical, *not-acting* (Kirby 1987) presence of the singer and his horrific deed, an effect that instigates ethical and moral debates around the show.

To defend his position, Mouawad stated (2011a) that having Cantat onstage allowed him to make the discussion about justice and morals in the Greek play very modern. Cantat's chanting determined the mood of danger into which Mouawad forced his actors and audiences; it signified the moments of emotional rupture, when one has no words left; so when the Chorus would sing, nobody could stop him. For Mouawad, Chorus is not the protagonist, rather it is the environment in which the story unfolds; the protagonists are the adults played by more experienced actors like Clytemnestra or Creon. In casting Cantat as the leading physical and vocal presence onstage, Mouawad was looking for a singer, poet, bass player, drummer, and a theatre performer who would be able to follow the director's instructions and find himself at ease in theatre space, together with other actors – someone who could also take on the role of this scenic environment (2011c). At the end, the characters/actors are left alone onstage in its spatial and sonic emptiness, the voice of Cantat still resonating in the ears of the audience :

*Les Trachiniennes est récité de façon robotique aussi lourde que la machinerie qui entoure le spectacle: pluie battante sur scène pour l'entame du spectacle avec un Cantat chantant, placé – sous protection? – au centre des comédiens; mécaniques et poulies pour la fin de ce même spectacle où l'on découvre la momie d'Héraclès dans un tour de magie digne de Copperfield. "Il paraît que la première pièce est la moins bonne" se console-t-on au bar. [...] Cantat excelle une nouvelle fois dans des vocalises à couper le souffle. Le rock fait taper du pieds quelques spectateurs, sans bruit, juste ce qu'il faut pour le sentir à travers les fauteuils de la salle. [...] Les musiciens sont remplacés par une bande son sur laquelle Cantat pose toujours aussi bien sa voix éraillée. Celui-ci est assis sur le côté, il se prend la tête dans les mains alors qu'il est encore question de mort, de femmes, d'injustice. C'est du jeu ou du vécu? Malgré ses postures de fatigue et de lassitude, il porte très haut la part du chœur. Je me suis souvenu qu'il me l'avait vaguement avoué après un énième concert de toute turbulence avec Noir Désir : "Je préfère ma voix quand je suis fatigué". (Salem 2011)*

Such an autobiographical approach characterizes Mouawad's rehearsal process too. Mouawad insists that out of all possible geographical places where he could belong (from Lebanon, to Québec, to France), it is only in the rehearsal hall, working on his new theatre project, where he feels at home. In his plays, Mouawad reconstructs his own lost home and that of his characters as a *palimpsest history* (Brooke-Rose 1992 : 125), an alternative fictional world similar in its distinctiveness to science fiction. Hence, he considers theatre as the place

of his professional affiliation and expressivity, the place to which he truly belongs. Seeking a communal feeling of belonging marks Mouawad's artistic and personal view of theatre, a practice he puts in place anew every time he embarks on a new staging project. Working on Sophocles' tragedies was not an exception to his usual practice :

*L'aventure des Sophocle est née de ces sensations qu'aujourd'hui je tente de mettre en mots. Vivre une grande aventure de création en compagnie de gens qui me sont chers, comédiens, concepteurs, techniciens ou poètes. Passer le plus clair de mon temps avec eux, rassemblés autour d'une oeuvre qui, justement, raconte la perte et la chute de l'enchantement tout en relevant l'horizon de la poésie. Je ne veux pas être ailleurs. Je ne veux pas être étranger. Je veux appartenir à cette communauté qui est celle de ces personnes rassemblées dans le local de répétitions. 'Par le sang qui nous lie, oui, toi, Ismène ma sœur' est la première phrase d'Antigone. Ce sang est celui de l'aventure théâtrale dans laquelle nous nous sommes engagés. [...] C'est cela que je veux. C'est cela que je recherche. C'est en cet endroit que je me sens vivant.*  
(Mouawad 2011b : 18-19)

To go further with these ideas, Mouawad looked for the autobiographical sensations of his company. It was their communal experience of living together through the adventure of reading, contemplating and acting Sophocles' lines that marked the actors' stage presence, their oral and visual performance in *Des Femmes*. Mouawad invented his own exercises in emotional recall and affective memory, somewhat similar to Strasberg's Method Acting and seen by Hurley (60-70) as the element of feeling-technology. During the period of rehearsals and later onstage, he repeatedly used the contrasting physical stimuli of pouring cold water on the actors and exposing their bodies to the hit of stage lamps, until "pneumonia seem[ed] a bigger risk than the wrath of hostile gods" (Shine). He also sought to create more intimate affairs between the actor and his/her text, affairs marked by their physical distress. This way the actors became witnesses to the horrors of fate and hate, the Greek tragedy's *hyper-historians* (Rokem 2000 : 13). They turned into the witnesses of the past and also performed the act of witnessing for the spectators, who in their own turn became the secondary witnesses of the depicted events (*ibid.* : 13). At the same time, by watching actors' exposure to cold water, stifling mud, and the hit of the stage lamps, the audience turned into a secondary witness to the characters/actors' trauma and thus experienced affect.

### Performing *Des Femmes*

Translating for Mouawad's company, Davreu had to take into consideration the actors' vocal performance. He saw the actor-enunciator of *Des Femmes* adapting the text to his/her vocal and corporeal particulars, and so decided to turn his translation into a sound-based, almost opera-score. Listening to opera, the spectator is not always able to distinguish all the words sung by the singer, but follows the



rhythm, musicality and emotion found in music.<sup>5</sup> As Levitin writes, “music appears to mimic some of the features of language and to convey some of the same emotions that vocal communication does, but in a nonreferential, and nonspecific way. It also invokes some of the same neural regions that language does, but far more than language, music taps into primitive brain structures involved with motivation, reward, and emotion” (2006 : 187). Hence, if music can mimic the power and structural features of verbal communication, the soundscape of a theatre performance can mimic musical composition. It can use rhythm, groove, tempo, harmony, and loudness as the mechanisms of affect to rouse the theatregoers emotionally.

Mouawad is fully aware of the power of the music’s affectual mechanisms, often directing his productions on the principles of musical composition. In this sensitivity, he follows the history of a theatre performance, where “cultivating a receptive mood in audiences that may enhance their experience of a given act has been a job for theatrical music” (Hurley 2010 : 22). He arranged the space of *Des Femmes* to evoke the emptiness of the Greek skena or Lehmann’s *chora* where the human tragedy would take place. Its universe would consist of primary elements (such as water, earth, stone and wood) and man-made objects (such as wooden chairs and plastic sheets).

For example, *Antigone*, the 2nd play of the trilogy began with the chorus of Elders, dressed in white and golden attire suggestive of the Mediterranean geography, sitting on the narrow bench across the empty stage and passing a jar of water while saying the lines of prologue. As the show unfolded, the world would turn into black and greyish colors of decay and disintegration, while the natural elements of sand and water turn into mud and rubbish. What dominates this world is the voice of fate : the music and the singing of Cantat remain the leading mechanism of feeling, a major theatrical device of affect in this production.

What does work magnificently is the music, responding to Mouawad’s bold interpretation of the chorus as Dionysian frenzy. Filling the night, and by turns strident, lyrical and elegiac, Cantat’s hauntingly beautiful recorded voice takes over the production’s charge of emotional tension and release. [...] The timeless dilemma of vengeance versus redemption is evoked with the incantatory force of a muezzin. (Shine 2011 : online)

As if echoing this critic, Mouawad explains the importance of soundscape as a device of feeling technology onstage. For Mouawad the genius of Sophocles is in how the Greek poet would draw upon the conflicts of the heart (Chorus) situated between reason and foolishness (the characters themselves). To him it was only the music of Cantat and his singing that could translate this ancient conflict for today’s audience, and so it became the “heart” of Mouawad’s production (2011c). The soundscape of the show functioned as a testimony of “*d’une démarche menée entre nous, l’ensemble des acteurs, des musiciens, des concepteurs et des*

*techniciens. [...] Cet ébranlement, qui pouvait s'exprimer chez chacun de diverses manières, reconnaissait pourtant, et de manière fondamentale, que le chœur grec pouvait avoir l'accent de la musique de notre jeunesse. En cela, et par l'adhésion de la plupart des personnes qui ont été mises devant notre démarche, un chœur a été formé"* (Mouawad in Cantat *et al.* 2011 : 3).

The power of Cantat's voice is one of the intentionally pre-structured mechanisms of feeling technology that Mouawad employs to stimulate affect. The voice and the music – Cantat's use of bass notes, amplified sound of anxious drumming, and chanting *a cappella* – takes over the stage-audience interactivity. His voice determines the mood of danger and anxiety into which Mouawad forces his actors and audiences; and so it makes us feel empty when the sound stops. This is how Lehmann explains the mechanisms of affect we associate with the work of voice and word in post-dramatic performance :

Between the body and the geometry of the scene, the sonic space of the voice is the unconscious of spoken theatre (Sprechtheater). The theatre of drama, the *mise-en-scène* of textual meaning, does not bring the auditive semiotics to prominence in its own right. Reduced to transporting meaning, the word is deprived of the possibility to sketch a sonic horizon that can only be realized theatrically. In postdramatic theatre, however, the electronic and corporeal/sensory disposition newly discovers the voice. As it makes the presence of the voice the basis of an auditive semiotics, it separates it from meaning, conceiving of the sign-making as a gesticulation of the voice and listening to the echoes in the dungeons of the literary palaces. This is a sonoanalysis of the theatrical unconscious : behind the slogans the scream of the body, behind the subjects the vocal signifiers. It is not 'I' but 'it' that is speaking, namely through/as a complex machinized composition (Deleuze's 'agencement'). (2006 : 149)

It is not surprising that Mouawad uses the power of Cantat's voice to signify the moments of emotional rupture : the moments when one has no words left. As Lehmann suggests, "the voice (just like the gaze) belongs to the fetishized objects of desire that [Lacan] refers to with the term '*objet a*'. The theatre presents the voice as the object of exposition, of an erotic perception" (2006 : 147).

[Voice as liveness on stage manifests] presence and possible dominance of the sensual within sense/meaning itself and, at the same time, makes the heart of the theatrical situation, namely the copresence of living actors, palpable. Owing to an illusion constitutive to European culture, the voice seems to be coming directly from the 'soul'. It is sensed as the quasi-unfiltered mental, psychic and spiritual charisma of the 'person'. The speaking person is the present person par excellence, a metaphor of the 'other' (in the sense used by Emmanuel Levinas) appealing to the responsibility of the spectators – not to a hermeneutics. The spectators find themselves exposed to the 'meaningless' (sinnfrei) presence of the speaker as a question addressed to them, to their gaze as corporeal creatures. (Lehmann 2006 : 148)

In *Des Femmes*, the action moves from the introductory/transi-

tory overtures of the chorus/narrator to the story of the characters : Clytemnestra, Electra, Antigone. By putting emotional emphasis on Cantat's singing, which contrasts with the actors' aural performance as the communicative device of meaning, Mouawad engages with our sensorial and sonoric thresholds of (in)tolerance. The non-miked voices of the actors do not match the power of Cantat's auditory presence : they get lost in the dead and dusty space of an empty stage. In this way, Mouawad violates the audience's aural expectations and makes it difficult for us to naturally adjust our mechanisms of listening to the constantly shifting pitch, tone, and timbre in the production. Hence, one can say that Eisenstein's *montage* – a device of creating a composition by selecting and juxtaposing the conflicting elements within it – becomes the leading principle of Mouawad's soundscape and one of the major mechanisms of rousing affective emotion. Mouawad's own montage is aggressive and compliant at the same time : he organizes *Des Femmes* by juxtaposing separate elements within a single composition “without really showing that he is doing montage” (Banu 2011 : 47). This does not mean he “emphasizes the rhythmical interruptions, but integrates them organically” (*ibid.*).

\* \* \*

To conclude, in staging *Des Femmes* Mouawad once again demonstrates his artistic preferences for a theatre of poetry in which the power of a spoken word, the aurality of performance, prevails, and to whom the emotional attachment of the audience – affect – is the determining factor of one's theatrical experience. Mouawad uses his emotional biography to tell a horror story, whether he stages his own text or that of Sophocles. His acting pedagogy is based on the principles of community-building and creating the emotional interdependence within the group; and his staging employs theatre's audio-mechanisms to create compassion in his audiences. Here the conjunction of sound and voice functions according to the laws of radio-drama and thus creates the “sound affect” when Mouawad plays on our sonoric levels of threshold. He makes our ear move from the highly amplified voice of Cantat to the un-miked voice of the performers. It is difficult to say whether this device creates empathy; it definitely shakes us out of our comfort sound zone, *i.e.* creates affect.

*Les spectacles de Mouawad [...] restent traversés par une énergie musicale qui les anime d'un bout à l'autre. Elle se constitue en véritable architecture sonore. Mouawad fait de la musique des mots son partenaire, musique nécessaire et dramatique, musique-partenaire qui vient s'ajouter aux répliques et aux monologues grâce à une intervention nullement secondaire, mais complémentaire. Et ainsi les sons et les mots réunissent leurs pouvoirs afin d'ériger la fable en figure de la destinée humaine qui concerne tous les plans d'être. Cette alliance des moyens conjugués explique sans doute le pouvoir d'impact des spectacles de Mouawad.* (Banu 2011 : 47)

In other words, in Mouawad's *theatre of compassion* the Aristotelian catharsis is exchanged with the emotions of affect and empathy. Recognizing the theatrical performance as an example of rhythmical composition similar to music, Mouawad creates a particular theatrical language that seeks the phenomenon of the audience's infectious participation. He relies on the atmosphere produced by the actors and on instigating the audience's reaction, so that they can challenge it with either positive/stimulating or negative/interrupting physical reactions, such as laughing, crying, clapping, or leaving the theater. By shifting the focus of a theatrical encounter from the producing/acting team to the spectator as the producer of meaning, Mouawad makes this spectator the subject and the object of a theatrical encounter. By approximating his performance to a musical composition, he provokes the spectators' audio-visual receptors to convey an emotional, spiritual and intellectual meaning, resulting in a theater that often manages to put its audiences through an emotional knockout (Banu 2011 : 53), for better or for worse.

## Notes

1. A significantly shorter version of this article "Staging *Des Femmes*: On Theatre of Compassion in the Works of Wajdi Mouawad" was published in *alt.theatre* magazine (Meerzon 2013).
2. *Des Femmes* is the first part of Wajdi Mouawad's five-year Sophocles project that he groups thematically: "Women", "Heroes" and "The Dying". The text is translated by the French poet Robert Davreu, and the project involves a Franco-Québécois artistic team. *Des Femmes* had its world premiere in 2011, at the Avignon Theatre Festival. I saw it in April 2012 in Ottawa, when it toured to Centre national des Arts.
3. I am familiar with the contingency between the terms emotion, thrill, affect, and shock; and the fact that affect can be read as shock, thrill or even pleasure. For example, thrill can be understood as the Freudian uncanny, an emotion one feels when witnessing a scene involving something dangerous or unfamiliar (Balint 1987 : 23-25). Watching an acrobat performing life-threatening jumps and summersaults, the spectator experiences three emotions, all characterized as attitudes of thrill, such as "a) some amount of conscious fear, or at least an awareness of real external danger; b) a voluntarily and intentional exposing of oneself to this external danger and to the fear aroused by it; c) [...] having the more or less confident hope that the fear can be tolerated and mastered, the danger will pass, and that one will be able to return unharmed to safety." (Balint 1987 : 23) In this article I associate the word affect in close relation to Balint's thrill as a "mixture of fear, pleasure, and confident hope in face of an external danger" (*ibid.*). At the same time, I do not propose that affect is always based on external danger or involves a desire for self-inflicted violence. I rather follow Jacob Smith's definition of thrill, who suggests that thrill can be experienced in two ways : as a force produced by material bodies and an action produced by non-material forces. In both cases, one experiences "a subtle nervous tremor of the body caused by 'ntense emotion or excitement'" (2012 : 124). In this study, I am more interested in how theatre soundscape – including actors' vocal performance and music – produces a sense of affect in an audience, one which borders on an uncanny fascination with violence.
4. In the context of a museum/performance art event, "the sonic isolation fore-

- grounds the potential of theatrical sound as something more than dialogue or music” (Di Benedetto 2010 : 146); whereas in a dance performance, sound is perceived as intertwined with the movements of the actor, “our bodies are tuned to the movement of the performers, as we are influenced by the vibrations of the soundscape. [...] the social body is made one with the others within the shared atmosphere” (*ibid.* : 148). Hence, watching a dance performance we tend to comprehend movement in relation to the sound (*ibid.* : 149); in this way sound becomes a part of our thought process (*ibid.* : 150).
5. Speaking of post-dramatic theatre practices, Patrice Pavis insists on the methodological necessity to employ three major principles of reading/analyzing theatrical staging: working a contemporary text as a verbal score, to listen and not to follow its semantic meaning; to be able to lose oneself in the action of the word and in its sensations; to move from the power of authority to alterity, *i.e.* to recognize the otherness of performance as in the practices of cultural alterity or intercultural performance; and to focus on the work of embodiment (2013 : 43-44).

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## Abstract

Erin Hurley and Sara Warner in their insightful study “Affect/Performance/Politics” (2012) remind us that the humanities and social sciences today experience a new sweep of theoretical inquiry, focusing on studying affect or thrill experience as a leading mechanism of our cognition and communication, as well as the making and reception of art works. Today, “the affective turn signals [our] renewed interest in embodiment and sensorial experience” (2012 : 99), allowing scholars to examine a theatrical performance as a venue to reinforce the subjectivity of the artist and that of the receiver. A theory of affect strives to describe the mechanisms of reception in theatre as our psycho-physical experience, regardless of our linguistic, cultural, social, or ethnic background, and thus aspires to bring the question of universals back to the rehearsal hall and the theatre auditorium. This article takes such a theoretical framework further to argue that in today’s theatre it is the multiple soundscapes of performance – actors’ voices, music, artificially produced and live sound, the architecture of performance aurality – that has the most potential for instigating the audiences’ visceral experience. Hans Thies Lehmann (2006) in his influential book on post-dramatic theatre aesthetics names this phenomenon as *chora*, the sonic space of the performance, which possesses the great power to deconstruct the semantic meanings of words, turning them into mechanisms of performative psycho-physical affect as experienced by the audience (*ibid.* : 145). In order to illustrate how words (as poetry) and sounds (as singing and music) generate affect in today’s performances, an example of Lehmann’s *chora-graphy* (2006 : 146), I examine Wajdi Mouawad’s *theatre of compassion* (Naugrette 2008 : 88), emphasizing his dramaturgy, directorial choices (mise-en-scène), use of sound, and work with actors, as an artistic project called to shock and shake audiences emotionally. In the first section of my study I outline the major principles of the theory of affect; in the second, I discuss Mouawad’s approach to staging a canonical dramatic text and investigate how sound serves as the leading compositional element of affect in his 2011 production *Des Femmes*, an adaptation of Sophocles’ three tragedies *Les Trachiniennes*, *Antigone* and *Électre*.

**Keywords :** Theatre Sound and Affect; Wajdi Mouawad; Compassion; Greek Tragedy; The Work of Chorus; Sound Space of Performance.

## Résumé

Dans un judicieux article intitulé “Affect/Performance/Politics” (2012) Erin Hurley et Sara Warner nous rappellent à quel point les sciences humaines et sociales connaissent aujourd’hui d’importantes mutations théoriques, notamment en ce qui concerne l’étude des affects et des sensations perçus comme des mécanismes fondamentaux pour la cognition et la communication, de même que pour la réception des œuvres d’art. Elles expliquent comment le “tournant affectif” marque aujourd’hui “un intérêt renouvelé pour l’incarnation corporelle et l’expérience sensorielle” (2012 : 99), et nous permet d’envisager la performance théâtrale comme un lieu où se trouve renforcées tant la subjectivité de l’artiste que celle du spectateur. Une théorie de l’affect permet de décrire les mécanismes de réception au théâtre en tant qu’expérience psycho-physique, et ce, sans égard pour le contexte linguistique, culturel, social ou ethnique, de manière à remettre en scène la question des universaux. Notre article adopte ce parti pris théorique afin de montrer que c’est la dimension sonore – les voix des acteurs, la musique, les son artificiels et ceux générés en direct sur la scène, l’architecture de la performance sonore – qui est aujourd’hui l’aspect de l’expérience théâtrale le plus enclin à produire chez le spectateur une expérience viscérale. Dans

un ouvrage important sur l'esthétique du théâtre post-dramatique, Hans Thies Lehmann (2006) nomme ce phénomène "*chora*". Espace sonore de la performance, la *chora* possède le pouvoir de déconstruire le sens des mots et de les transformer en un mécanisme performatif et affectif de nature psycho-physique agissant sur le spectateur (106). Afin d'illustrer comment les mots (la poésie) et les sons (le chant et la musique) peuvent générer des affects dans le théâtre contemporain – ce que Lehmann nomme : *chora-graphie* (146) – nous prendrons pour objet d'étude le "théâtre de la compassion" (Naugrette 2008 : 88) de Wajdi Mouawad. En particulier, nous montrerons comment la dramaturgie, les choix de mise en scène, l'usage du son, et le travail avec les acteurs concourent à remuer le spectateur au moyen d'une série de chocs affectifs. La première partie de notre article résume les principaux postulats de la théorie des affects. La deuxième partie examine la manière dont Mouawad envisage, avec *Des Femmes* (2011), la mise en scène de textes dramatiques canoniques – il s'agit d'une adaptation de trois pièces de Sophocle : *Les Trachiniennes*, *Antigone* et *Électre*. Plus spécifiquement, nous étudierons la manière dont Mouawad utilise le son comme principal élément compositionnel créateur d'affects.

**Mots-clés** : Son et affect au théâtre; Wajdi Mouawad; compassion; tragédie Grecque; le chœur théâtral; espace sonore de la performance.

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