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THE THEATRE OF BERNARD-MARIE KOLTÈS:  
EVOLUTION AND REVOLUTION IN POSTMODERN FRENCH DRAMA

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THE THEATRE OF BERNARD-MARIE KOLTÈS:  
EVOLUTION AND REVOLUTION IN POSTMODERN FRENCH DRAMA

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE  
GRADUATE COLLEGE

BY

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## Abstract

*The Theatre of Bernard-Marie Koltès: Evolution and Revolution in Postmodern French Drama* establishes an understanding of French playwright Bernard-Marie Koltès (1948-1989) as the most important figure in postmodern French drama. This dissertation also reflects the interdisciplinary dynamic of theatre, always taking into consideration both its literary and its performative aspects.

In the Introduction, I describe the noticeable divide between Koltès' importance in the realm of late twentieth-century French theatre and the problematic way in which the playwright is portrayed—that is, clearly underrepresented—in the most recent edition of Oscar Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy's widely used textbook, *History of the Theatre* (First published in 1968. 10<sup>th</sup> edition published in 2008).

In Chapter One, “Bernard-Marie Koltès, Heir to the Project of Décentralisation Théâtrale,” I explore the complex socio-cultural and political context that fostered the emergence of Koltès as one of the most celebrated French playwrights of the twentieth century. I then trace the development of public theatre in France through the contributions of five prominent figures, all of whom are known as distinguished authors and stage directors: Maurice Pottecher, Romain Rolland, Firmin Gémier, Jacques Copeau, and Charles Dullin. I also discuss cultural policies implemented in France after World War II, policies that facilitated the organization of a remarkable network of public theatres across the country, as well as the career of influential actor-director Hubert Gignoux, who became Koltès' friend and mentor. Finally, I devote the end of this chapter to the gradual public acclaim of Koltès, through a largely biographical

narrative that emphasizes the connections between the playwright's professional and personal achievements and the complex structure of public theatres that characterize the French theatre scene since the 1950s.

Chapter Two, entitled, “The Language of the Deal: Multilingualism and Identity in Koltesian Theatre,” is rooted in Koltès’ belief that all dramatic action is always transactional because characters can only interact within the context of a form of negotiation. Using this approach as a primary framework, I explore two crucial and interconnected characteristics of Koltès’ plays: their linguistic and racial diversity. In fact, some of the most interesting Koltesian transactions—which have become known as his “deals”—encompass the results of the encounter between characters who speak different languages and belong to different races. I begin the chapter with a discussion regarding the nature of Koltesian language, of which multilingualism represents one of the most distinctive features. Next, I provide an overview of multilingual theatre—an increasing trend in contemporary dramatic literature—and I offer an analysis of the role of multilingualism and race in *Combat de nègre et de chiens*. In the final part of Chapter Two, I discuss the challenges that emerge from the growing presence of multilingual drama, with special emphasis on questions related to the translation and production of multilingual plays, a topic quite relevant to the introduction of Koltès’ theatre in the United States.

In Chapter Three, “Myths and Mythification in *Roberto Zucco*,” I investigate the multidimensional relationship between myth, literature, and drama (with theatre simultaneously understood as a literary and performative art form) and I consider the concept of literary myth as a foundational element in theatrical practice. Following this



discussion, I present a four-part myth-analysis of Koltès' final play, *Roberto Zucco*, dating from 1989. The first part examines the mythification of the news event that inspired the play. The second, third, and fourth parts of this argument explore the emergence of three particularly prominent literary myths through the figure of Zucco: Hamlet, Samson, and Icarus. The deliberate incorporation of these mythical figures affirms Koltès as a playwright who belongs to the same twentieth-century tradition of French dramatic literature as Jean Cocteau, André Gide, Jean Giraudoux, and Jean Anouilh, among others.

In the Conclusion, I reflect upon the current state of teaching and production of Koltès' plays in the United States, an undertaking that leads me to further argue in favor of a more substantial representation of Koltès' contributions in the teaching of recent Theatre History. Finally, I offer some personal remarks, both formal and thematic, regarding my own experience directing *Quai ouest* in 2005 and translating and directing *Roberto Zucco* in 2014 for the University of Oklahoma Helmerich School of Drama.

## Introduction

When an individual has the opportunity to read Hervé Guibert's 1991 extraordinarily haunting text, *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*,<sup>1</sup> an auto/fictionalized telling of his losing battle with AIDS, one may well think of the last few months in the life of French playwright Bernard-Marie Koltès (1948-1989). In a climate of fear, chaos, and secrecy, he too was fighting a losing battle with the same invisible and—at that time—invincible physical enemy. Koltès ranks among many important figures of the French intellectual and artistic community of the era to succumb to this devastating disease, among them Guibert's companion, the highly celebrated philosopher Michel Foucault in 1984, the popular comedian Thierry Le Luron in 1986, the award-winning film director Jacques Demy in 1990 (among many others from the creative and critical realms), and the fascinating Guibert himself in 1992. Koltès' promising career, cut short by this new plague of the twentieth century, produced a phenomenon that playwright Michel Vinaver calls both an "[œ]uvre achevée"<sup>2</sup> and an "[œ]uvre interrompue" (7).<sup>3</sup> These examples all embody careers completed, in a way, because of their thematic and stylistic breadth, yet also tragically interrupted when the brilliance of the mind at its equinox is irrevocably shattered by the demise of the body, in a weirdly and truly horrible actual realization of the nineteenth-century motif of the *mal du siècle*.<sup>4</sup> There is no question that a feeling of incompleteness lingers, as if AIDS condemned part of

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<sup>1</sup> "To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life."

<sup>2</sup> "completed body of work."

<sup>3</sup> "interrupted body of work."

<sup>4</sup> "*malady of the century*." The *mal du siècle* refers to a concept developed by the French Romantics, in particular François-René de Chateaubriand and Alfred de Musset, which describes an unescapable sense of melancholy and disillusionment caused by the false promises of the 1789 revolution, as well as the continued discontent evidenced by the revolutions of 1830 and 1848.

Koltès' legacy to remain forever out of our reach. The draft of two scenes from an unfinished play about Coco Chanel and her maid bears witness to this unfulfilled potential, to the mystery of Koltès' stolen literary future.<sup>5</sup>

Following the announcement of Koltès' death on April 15, 1989, Colette Godard, journalist and theatre critic for *Le Monde*, one of the most respected daily newspapers in France, reminded readers of a paradoxical aspect of the playwright's career: "Bernard-Marie Koltès a peu écrit, il reste l'un des phares du théâtre contemporain" ("La mort").<sup>6</sup> Koltès' status as an iconic figure of French theatre may indeed be surprising considering that only six plays form the core of his work: *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* (1977),<sup>7</sup> *Combat de nègre et de chiens* (1979),<sup>8</sup> *Quai ouest* (1985),<sup>9</sup> *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* (1986),<sup>10</sup> *Le Retour au désert* (1988),<sup>11</sup> and *Roberto Zucco* (1989). In reality, Koltès deemed *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* the true beginning of his playwriting career and never pursued the publication of earlier texts that he had written during his formative years. It is only after the author's death that some of these earlier texts eventually reappeared. Since then, Éditions de Minuit and the playwright's brother, François Koltès, arranged for their gradual publication: among them, *Les Amertumes* (1970),<sup>12</sup> *La Marche* (1970),<sup>13</sup> *Procès ivre* (1971),<sup>14</sup> *l'Héritage*

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<sup>5</sup> These two scenes have been posthumously published as an addendum to *Roberto Zucco*, under the title *Coco*.

<sup>6</sup> "Bernard-Marie Koltès wrote sparsely, [yet] he remains one of the beacons of contemporary theatre." All translations are mine except where otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> "Night Just Before the Forest."

<sup>8</sup> "Black Battles with Dogs."

<sup>9</sup> "West pier."

<sup>10</sup> "In the Solitude of Cotton Fields."

<sup>11</sup> "Return to the Desert."

<sup>12</sup> "Bitterness."

<sup>13</sup> "The Walk."

<sup>14</sup> "Drunken Trial."

(1972),<sup>15</sup> *Récits morts* (1973),<sup>16</sup> *Des voix sourdes* (1974),<sup>17</sup> *Le Jour des meurtres dans l'histoire d'Hamlet* (1974),<sup>18</sup> and *Sallinger* (1977). Undoubtedly, the release of these plays made a significant contribution to our critical understanding of Koltès' work, in part by unveiling material that represents almost a decade's worth of significant dramaturgical experimentation. However, in my opinion, these early texts fail to display the same level of artistic maturity so evident in Koltès' later works, which may explain why they have to date generated little interest beyond the specific field of literary studies.

Today, the renown of Koltès' six major plays—from the uninterrupted monologue that unfolds in *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* to the cinematic journey that defines *Roberto Zucco*—continues to grow in France, as well as across the world. For example, earlier this year, a Spanish production of *Dans la solitude des champs de cotons*, directed by Joan Ollé lleva, at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya<sup>19</sup> received critical acclaim<sup>20</sup> and a production of *Roberto Zucco*, directed by Yann-Joël Collin, will be performed at the 2017 Festival d'Avignon.<sup>21</sup> It is now undeniable that Koltès' plays have become staples of the French theatre canon and continue to tell their stories on stages globally almost 30 years after the playwright's death.

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<sup>15</sup> “The Inheritance.”

<sup>16</sup> “Dead Tales.”

<sup>17</sup> “Deaf Voices.”

<sup>18</sup> “The Day of Murders in the Story of Hamlet.”

<sup>19</sup> “National Theatre of Catalonia.” This production was performed under the title *En la soledad de los campos de algodón*.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see “El desierto de los sentimientos” (“The Desert of Feelings”), the theatrical review by Marcos Ordóñez published in *El País*.

<sup>21</sup> “Avignon [Theatre] Festival.”

Despite what the critic Anne Ubersfeld describes as an undeniable “gloire internationale” (193),<sup>22</sup> Koltès has only been sporadically introduced to American audiences, who remain generally unfamiliar with the actually very rich output of French dramatic literature subsequent to the plays of Jean Genet. Unfortunately, this lack of awareness concerning Koltès’s work is equally true in the context of higher education. Most notably, the latest edition of Oscar Brockett’s *History of the Theatre*, which has long been considered one of the most comprehensive resources for the study and teaching of theatre history, simply does not rightly recognize the value of Koltès’ contributions to the development of postmodern drama, as we will see. In chapter 22, “Continental European and Latin American Theatre in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” the name of the playwright is only mentioned in passing in the section that covers theatre in France from 1968 to 1990. Instead, Brockett focuses the discussion on the reorganization of the national theatre system, the effort to decentralize the production of theatre, and the international success of the Festival d’Avignon (504). He identifies a few important figures of early French postmodern theatre, such as Jérôme Savory, leader of the Grand Magic Circus, and Ariane Mnouchkine, artistic director of the Théâtre du Soleil.<sup>23</sup> Brockett also highlights the contributions of Jean-Pierre Vincent and Antoine Vitez, two important directors associated with French national theatres. Finally, he discusses the work of two playwrights, Jean-Paul Grumberg and Vinaver, and mentions four others as “significant” without providing any details regarding their achievements: Koltès, Hélène Cixous, Olivier Py, and Xavier Durringer (509). Despite his generally successful painting of the French dramatic panorama of the period

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<sup>22</sup> “International fame.”

<sup>23</sup> “Theatre of the Sun.”

(especially given the scope of international theatre history and the limited space that can be allocated to each period and geographical location in a textbook), Brockett appears to ignore the consensus among French critics that Koltès stands as “le dramaturge le plus important en France depuis la génération des années cinquante” (Corvin 950).<sup>24</sup> In my opinion, this nearly entire omission of Koltès demonstrates a troublesome divide between Brockett’s perspective on postmodern playwriting in France and the reality of Koltès’ place in the pantheon of French theatre. Therefore, this inadequate representation informs the purpose of the present study, which is to help establish an understanding of Koltès as what may at first seem hyperbolic: the principal figure in postmodern French dramatic literature.

The title chosen for this study, *The Theatre of Bernard-Marie Koltès, Evolution and Revolution in Postmodern French Drama*, aims to recognize that all aspects of Koltesian theatre are equally influenced by the work of previous playwrights—in a form of artistic continuity—while they depart from contemporary standards—in a form of artistic transgression. Thus, Koltès should be understood as a literary bridge between the groundbreaking playwrights who reinvented theatre in the 1950s and 1960s—such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Genet—and the new generation of playwrights who emerged in the 1990s and who continue to thrive today. Among celebrated contemporary French playwrights, American audiences are most familiar with Yasmina Reza, for her plays “*Art*” (1994) and *Le Dieu du carnage* (2006)<sup>25</sup> have been produced on Broadway and have recognized Reza with two Tony Awards. However, the period between Genet and Reza appears nebulous and no one playwright surfaces as the

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<sup>24</sup> “the most important playwright in France since the generation of the 1950s.”

<sup>25</sup> “*God of Carnage*.” Both “*Art*” and *God of Carnage* have been translated in English by Christopher Hampton.

dominant force of the period when reading Brockett's *History of the Theatre*. Certainly, the 1970s did not produce French playwrights with careers as influential as that of Genet. Instead, reflecting a more general cultural tendency towards collaborative work, much creative effort was concentrated in collective theatres, such as Ariane Mnouchkine's company, Le Théâtre du Soleil,<sup>26</sup> which worked with the goal of absorbing the function of the playwright within its innovative structure. Indeed, Koltès' success represents the first sign of a true renewal in French dramatic literature, embodying a response to the yearning for new plays presented with a contemporary perspective in mind among the theatrical community of the early 1980s. Therefore, Koltès can and should be considered the literary and artistic anchor between Genet and Reza, between the Theatre of the Absurd and more contemporary authors.

The first chapter of this study examines the historical and socio-cultural context that shaped Koltès' career, in particular the development of public theatre in France throughout the twentieth century. Thus, this chapter aims to recognize Koltès as the heir to the project of "décentralisation théâtrale,"<sup>27</sup> or, in other words, to explore the subtle yet evident impact of cultural policy upon the fostering of his playwriting voice. This chapter also serves as a rich biographical introduction to Koltès, highlighting key episodes of and important contributors to his personal and professional development. Released in 2009 upon the twentieth anniversary of his passing, *Lettres*<sup>28</sup>—the archive of Koltès' correspondence with friends, family, and collaborators—provides an intimate look at his life and facilitates our understanding of his creative process. *Une part de ma*

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<sup>26</sup> "The Theatre of the Sun."

<sup>27</sup> "the decentralization of theatre."

<sup>28</sup> "Letters."

*vie* (1999),<sup>29</sup> an anthology of Koltès' press interviews, brings together a series of reflections that gradually defines his relationship with the art of theatre in general, and with the practice of playwriting in particular. Both *Lettres* and *Une part de ma vie* make a critical contribution to this chapter, as these publications provide the great, and sometimes rare, opportunity to discover Koltès through his own words.

The second chapter of this study considers the question of cultural identity in Koltès' theatre. Two fundamental elements stand out as particularly relevant to understanding Koltès as an innovative artist: the treatment of race and the use of multilingualism. Both notions take center stage in Koltès' first commercial success, *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, and emerge as prominent thematic and structural features of his entire œuvre. This chapter considers this confrontation between races and between languages within the context of the Koltesian "deal", a theorization of character-to-character relationships that defines all forms of interaction as transactional. Undoubtedly, racial diversity on stage was an issue of paramount importance to Koltès, as demonstrated by the many black and Arab characters that populate his plays, such as Abad in *Quai ouest* and Aziz in *Le Retour au désert*. David Fancy links this aspect of Koltès' work to a larger fringe tradition in French theatre:

Such a confrontation of members of white and non-white ethnic groups was clearly part of Koltès' long-term urge to destabilize the profound ethnocentrism he felt afflicted France, a strategy which clearly situates him in a theatrical and literary lineage of white authors—including the likes of Camus, Sartre and Genet—who have dealt in their work with the realities of France's (ostensibly) post-colonial and multicultural society. (72)

Despite being Caucasian himself, Koltès demonstrated a clear diligence toward the presence of non-white characters in his plays. Blacks and Arabs often function as

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<sup>29</sup> "A Part of My Life."



disruptive figures, who—sometimes by their presence alone—prompt white characters to reassess their fundamental understanding of the world.

Moreover, Koltès is concerned with another form of diversity, one even more elusive in the theatre: linguistic diversity. Indeed, his plays invite onto the stage characters who speak different languages, such as Léone and Alboury in *Combat de nègre et de chiens*. Certainly, Koltès' writing brings a global perspective prompted by his extensive world-wide travels and by his voracious appetite for international cinema and literature.<sup>30</sup> In *Bernard-Marie Koltès, Genealogies*, Christophe Bident notes that “[l]a forme décisive que prend son écriture dans les années soixante-dix emprunte, de manière postmoderne, aux langues, aux cultures et aux histoires africaines, américaines, et européennes” (32).<sup>31</sup> Thus, Koltès' characters exist within a comprehensive approach to the world, a perspective that reflects the playwright's lifelong attempt to escape his native town of Metz— and the shackles of his “petit bourgeois” education in a conservative Catholic family—as well as to expand continuously his cultural horizon, a passionate effort that he shared with the legendary poet Arthur Rimbaud, another truly adventuresome soul to whom he has been often compared. Of course, diversity remains at the heart of many debates in our contemporary theatre community, in France as well as in the United States, and therefore this chapter highlights one of the most relevant aspects of Koltesian dramaturgy.

The third chapter begins with an investigation of the relationship between literary myth and French dramatic literature. This section serves as a critical

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<sup>30</sup> Koltès had a wide variety of cultural interests, which included such figures and genres as the work of William Faulkner, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and William Shakespeare, as well as Reggae music and Kung Fu movies.

<sup>31</sup> “[t]he decisive form of his writing acquired during the 1970s borrows, in a postmodern way, from African, American, and European languages, cultures, and histories.”

methodological framework for the subsequent myth-analysis of Koltès' ultimate play, *Roberto Zucco*, in which I examine the appearance of three literary myths that present the figures of Hamlet, Samson, and Icarus. It is my intention to demonstrate that Koltès belongs to a long lineage of French dramatists known for their sophisticated use of literary myth as a prominent feature of their work, most notably Jean Cocteau, Jean Giraudoux, and Jean Anouilh. Moreover, this myth-analysis of *Roberto Zucco* provides an opportunity to highlight another important characteristic of Koltesian dramaturgy: a deliberate emphasis on intertextuality. In fact, a clear correlation between multilingualism and intertextuality comes forth here: they both allow the playwright to expand the world of the play beyond the limitations of language and space (the two pillars of theatrical performance), thereby transforming the stage into a vibrant cultural crossroad.

Koltès' success as a playwright can be attributed in part to his unmatched determination—for instance, he refused to pursue a career in any other field despite years of financial hardships—and to the many coincidences that led to decisive professional connections. Yet the most important reason behind his success can be found in his unmistakable and striking writing style, which revitalized an entire generation of dramatic artists. In *Chair et révolte dans le théâtre de Bernard-Marie Koltès*, Donia Mounsef explains:

C'est une écriture d'emprunts mais aussi de découvertes qui rallient puissance poétique et souffle épique qui nous font confronter nos plus profondes hantises: celle du nihilisme politique de la fin de siècle [sic], celle du mot au-delà de la disjonction signifiant-signifié, celle de l'Histoire collective et des histoires individuelles. (12)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "It is a writing of borrowing, but also of discoveries, one that combines poetic power and epic force, that confronts us with our deepest fears: political nihilism of the end of the century, language beyond the disjunction between signifier-signified, collective History and individual histories."

Koltès' plays are impactful, enchanting, and moving because they express the human experience in new and original ways. Their subject matter embraces universal themes, such as the mystery of life and death, the feeling of otherness, and the simultaneously threatening and enticing dynamic that defines the bond between individuals.

For an author whose influence upon the development of theatre was so critical, Koltès carried on a rather ambiguous relationship with his chosen art form. He unabashedly admitted that he rarely attended theatre performances (*Une part* 14)—to which he preferred the experience of watching films—and confessed his profound loathing for most of what he saw on stage: “. . . je ne supporte pas le théâtre. On s’emmerde au théâtre quatre-vingt-dix-neuf pour cent du temps” (*Une part* 144).<sup>33</sup> Moreover, he considered theatre as a dying art form: “Je crois très sincèrement que le théâtre est un art qui finit, tranquillement. Et c’est pour cela que ça devient intéressant” (*Une part* 66).<sup>34</sup> This assessment of theatre as an art form on the verge of disappearance provides Koltès with a kind of creative freedom that transpires clearly in the evolution of his style, which is best represented by the wide structural range of his plays. Nevertheless, he found great artistic and personal redemption within this conflictual rapport with the stage: “Bien sûr que je déteste le théâtre, parce que le théâtre ce n’est pas la vie; mais j’y reviens toujours et je l’aime parce que c’est le seul endroit où l’on dit que ce n’est pas la vie” (*Une part* 55).<sup>35</sup> This persistent return to the art of theatre results, perhaps, from the author’s primary literary interest, the creation of spoken

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<sup>33</sup> “. . . I can’t stand the theatre. The theatre is fucking boring 99% of the time.”

<sup>34</sup> “I truly believe that theatre is an art form that is gently coming to an end. And that’s why it’s becoming interesting.”

<sup>35</sup> “Of course I hate theatre, because theatre is not life; but I keep coming back to it and I love it because it’s the only place where we do affirm that it’s not life.”

language: “J’écris du théâtre parce que c’est surtout le langage parlé qui m’intéresse” (*Une part* 31).<sup>36</sup> In fact, considering Koltès’ entire œuvre, *Dans la solitude des champs de cotons*—a play centered exclusively around the dialogue between two strangers—may be the play closest to the essence of the Koltesian ideal of theatre. Overall, Koltès experienced a form of “anamour”<sup>37</sup>—a neologism I humbly borrow from singer-songwriter Serge Gainsbourg—with the art of theatre throughout his career. Yet the French, European, and even international theatre community embraced his legacy wholeheartedly, consecrating him as one of its most eminent contemporary icons. So, I argue that, once again, Koltès’ œuvre should be celebrated, this time on the American stage—the final frontier for his work.

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<sup>36</sup> “I write plays because I am mostly interested in spoken language.”

<sup>37</sup> Formed with the prefix “an” (indicative of a deficiency) and the word “amour” (“love”), this word expresses a kind of irreconcilable “love-hate” relationship.

**Chapter One**  
**Bernard-Marie Koltès, Heir to the Cultural Project**  
**of “Décentralisation Théâtrale”**

To truly understand Koltès’ œuvre and his place in the history of French theatre, one must carefully examine the environment that spawned, nurtured, and defined his career. When Koltès first took an interest in the stage in the late 1960s, the landscape of French theatre was undergoing important structural and ideological changes. The majority of these changes were precipitated by the gradual implementation after the Second World War of the “décentralisation théâtrale,” a political project envisioned primarily to create and support a strong network of publically funded regional theatres across France. Theatre historian Michel Corvin describes this effort as “le mouvement par lequel, depuis le lendemain de la Libération, l’État, bientôt secondé par les collectivités locales . . . , suscite et favorise l’implantation hors de Paris de foyers de création et de diffusion artistiques, notamment théâtrales” (599).<sup>38</sup> This network of theatres contributes to a vibrant artistic life across the country and asserts the importance of theatre in the cultural landscape of France.

Ultimately, Koltès’ career would benefit greatly from the notion of “décentralisation théâtrale,” first through the training he received at the Centre dramatique de l’Est (CDE)—which became the Théâtre National de Strasbourg (TNS) in 1968—but also through the exposure afforded to young artists at the Festival

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<sup>38</sup> “[T]he movement through which, since the end of the Second World War, the State, and soon after with the help of local governments . . . , encourages and fosters the development of structures dedicated to the creation and to the diffusion of art outside of Paris, particularly in the domain of theatre.”

d'Avignon, and through his long-lasting residency at the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers.<sup>39</sup> His unique playwriting voice was in fact discovered, nurtured, and celebrated by public theatre stewards, such as Hubert Gignoux,<sup>40</sup> who served as his mentor at the CDE, and celebrated stage director Patrice Chéreau, his close collaborator at Nanterre-Amandiers. Thus, Koltès can be considered as a natural heir to the project of “décentralisation théâtrale” and, on one important level, his plays can best be understood as a response to the call for a renewed French repertoire on a general scale.

To provide a brief yet comprehensive definition of “décentralisation théâtrale” proves difficult, ambiguous, and, in fact, somewhat impractical, because of the breadth of its influence and of its diversity. In *La Décentralisation théâtrale*, Robert Abirached describes the “décentralisation” as a convergence of several elements, “esthétique, théâtrale mais aussi sociale, politique, idéologique” (9),<sup>41</sup> which define this unique cultural project. With regard to my study, it is important to reflect upon the concept and the history of “décentralisation théâtrale” despite its complexity as they represent key factors in the development of the current chapter, which proposes to examine the social, cultural, and political context surrounding Koltès’ playwriting career.

First, the concept of “décentralisation théâtrale” is related to the enduring organizational challenges of France. “La décentralisation théâtrale s’inscrit contre l’hypertrophie et la suprématie culturelle parisiennes,”<sup>42</sup> explains Pascale Goetschel in

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<sup>39</sup> The Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers is a “Centre dramatique national” [“National Dramatic Center”], one of many publically funded theatres in France, located in the suburbs of Paris.

<sup>40</sup> Gignoux is an actor and stage director, who represents an important figure of the “décentralisation théâtrale.” He served as director of the Centre dramatique de l’Ouest (CDO) from 1947 to 1949, and as director of the CDE from 1949 to 1968. After the CDE became the TNS in 1968, Gignoux remained its director for three seasons, before returning to his acting career on a full-time basis.

<sup>41</sup> “aesthetic, theatrical but also social, political, ideological.”

<sup>42</sup> “The decentralization of theatre rises up against the cultural hypertrophy and cultural supremacy of Paris.”

*Renouveau et décentralisation du théâtre* (42). Still today, in a situation considered by many as unfortunate, France is understood as binary. On the one hand there is Paris, the historical capital and the center of the political, financial, and cultural life of the country. On the other hand, there is “la province,” a well-known expression that refers indiscriminately to the rest of the country, thereby erasing any claim to the values of regional identities and maintaining the various non-Parisian regions of France in a position of cultural submission.

Notable attempts to reorganize the French territory per se began immediately following the French Revolution. A series of laws were implemented in the 1790s in order to achieve a more homogenous administrative organization of France, which resulted in the creation of 83 departments. Although these new departments formed a modernized network designed to serve the centralized government in the spirit of Jacobinism, they also contributed, undoubtedly, to the development of future local institutions. Through the nineteenth century, several laws and decrees bestowed limited autonomy to local governments across the country, such as the “décret sur la décentralisation administrative”<sup>43</sup> of March 25, 1852, the “loi organique départementale”<sup>44</sup> of August 10, 1871 and the “loi municipale”<sup>45</sup> of April 5, 1884. These incremental changes represent important and practical steps in the transition away from the cultural and administrative model of the Old Regime in favor of a model that embraces the ideals of the Republic, in particular the concepts of equal representation of the people and self-governance as expressed in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Du Contrat Social ou Principe du droit politique*.

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<sup>43</sup> “decree on administrative decentralization.”

<sup>44</sup> “organic departmental law.”

<sup>45</sup> “municipal law.”

The golden age of the movement of decentralization began immediately following the Second World War and lasted through the presidency of François Mitterrand (1981-1995). During that period, laws and decrees reinforced the autonomy and the statutory standing of territories, regions, departments, and cities. Decentralization clearly was involved in a larger national project that aimed at restructuring the nation's identity after the collapse of the German occupation and through the succeeding instatement of the Fourth and Fifth Republics. Even today, the question of decentralization remains at the center of French political life, as demonstrated, for instance, by the recent laws adopted during the summer 2015, which redistributed—once again—the responsibilities of regions and departments and reorganized the French territory from 22 to 13 regions. This latest change aims at “économiser les dépenses publiques,”<sup>46</sup> as explains Alexandre Borde in *Le Point*. He adds that “[l]'autre motivation du législateur est d'atténuer les disparités démographiques et économiques entre régions.”<sup>47</sup> Although the administrative decentralization of France was originally designed to provide local governments with more autonomy, the transformation of the regional map enacted in 2015 mainly addresses spending concerns amid a challenging economic climate. The successive changes also suggest a cultural struggle to transition from the historical distribution of power in France, inherited from the monarchical system, to a new model that places the regions and the country squarely within the context of the European project.

In the 2007 documentary, *Roger Planchon: un conteur sur les planches*, Planchon notes that “c’est les théâtres, les pauvres théâtres, . . . qui pensent la

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<sup>46</sup> “reducing public spending.”

<sup>47</sup> “the other motivation of lawmakers is to reduce the demographic and economic differences between regions.”



décentralisation pour la France.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, Planchon suggests that theatre artists—whom he describes as “poor” in an effort to emphasize their place among the people at large and to highlight their underappreciated status—initiated the modern enactment of decentralization, in particular its manifestation as a cultural concept, after the Second World War. As a result, and despite the important role Paris continues to play in artistic issues, the successes of the “décentralisation théâtrale” have prompted a radical redistribution of powers across the territory, which has in turn redefined the audiences and creative players of theatre in France.

### **1.1 Five Precursors of the “Décentralisation Théâtrale.”**

The concept of “décentralisation théâtrale” is rooted in a series of continued—yet uncoordinated<sup>49</sup>—attempts from several prominent theatre practitioners of the first part of the twentieth century to connect with provincial audiences—particularly with the working class, which had become an ever-growing segment of the population since the industrial revolution—and to redefine the place and function of theatre in France. Among them, five artists played a fundamental role: Maurice Pottecher and his Théâtre du Peuple,<sup>50</sup> playwright and drama theorist Romain Rolland, Firmin Gémier and his Théâtre National Ambulant,<sup>51</sup> director Jacques Copeau, and actor and director Charles Dullin. These five artists shared substantial concerns regarding the deficit of theatre

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<sup>48</sup> “it’s the theatre practitioners, the poor theatre practitioners, . . . who envisioned the decentralization for France.”

<sup>49</sup> This lack of coherence is due to a variety of factors, including geographical and temporal differences, issues of public funding and oversight, and the rather brief existence of some of these projects because of financial or logistical pressures.

<sup>50</sup> “The People’s Theatre.” In this discussion, “Le Théâtre du Peuple” refers to the theatre in Bussang and to an artistic movement spearheaded by Romain Rolland, Maurice Pottecher, and Firmin Gémier. The name “Le Théâtre du Peuple” is also featured in the title of several books and articles published during that period.

<sup>51</sup> “National Travelling Theatre.”

outside of Paris and the predominance of theatre intended for the bourgeoisie. Indeed, these concerns led directly to the two central goals of the future “décentralisation théâtrale”: to provide the nation with regional structures able to produce quality theatre and to create a theatre that could serve all classes of society. Therefore, the process of “décentralisation théâtrale” suggests simultaneously a form of geographic and of social decentralization.

Le Théâtre du Peuple represents the first notable example of an effort to decentralize theatre activity in France. Founded by Pottecher in 1895, the theatre is located in his native town of Bussang in the Vosges department. In the preface to his book, *Le Théâtre du Peuple: Renaissance destinée du Théâtre Populaire*, Pottecher opposes his project to Parisian theatre, which he describes as “le privilège d’une aristocratie” (18),<sup>52</sup> and argues that “[le théâtre] ne peut que gagner à se retremper à ses sources populaires” (20).<sup>53</sup> Unlike the bourgeois theatre of Paris, which catered primarily to the upper class, and unlike the few existing avant-garde theatres, which catered to the intelligentsia, Pottecher’s Le Théâtre du Peuple welcomed all classes of society under the motto, “Par l’art, pour l’humanité.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, he envisioned his theatre as a civic and democratic enterprise aimed at serving the population of his native region. In the article, “Le Théâtre du Peuple de Bussang, histoire et sociologie d’une innovation,” Jean-Marc Leveratto explains that “[c]ette expérience, célébrée dès 1903 par Romain Rolland dans son livre sur *Le Théâtre du Peuple*, dédié à Maurice Pottecher, peut être considérée comme l’origine des institutions théâtrales actuelles qui font de la France un modèle de démocratisation culturelle et une patrie de l’art théâtral”

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<sup>52</sup> “the privilege of an aristocracy.”

<sup>53</sup> “[theatre] can only benefit from returning to its popular origins.”

<sup>54</sup> “Through art, for humanity.”

(5).<sup>55</sup> Rolland recognizes Pottecher as “le fondateur du premier Théâtre du Peuple”

(89).<sup>56</sup> Still active today, Le Théâtre du Peuple in Bussang stands as a unique and impactful experiment in the development of theatre in France.

The contribution of Rolland’s *Le Théâtre du Peuple* is, in large part, twofold. First, after a brief examination of the history of theatre in France, Rolland advocates for the reinvention of theatre at the dawn of the twentieth century. He calls for “un art dramatique nouveau pour une société nouvelle” (71).<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Rolland’s vision is comprehensive; he aims to “retrouver l’idéal grec, renouveler le répertoire, transformer les représentations en vastes manifestations populaires à l’image des fêtes révolutionnaires” (Goetschel 34).<sup>58</sup> He condemns the elitist aura of Parisian theatre and demands the emergence of new kind of theatre—which he refers to as “le théâtre du peuple”<sup>59</sup>—with a focus on social classes situated traditionally lower than the middle class. He explains that, “l’art ne peut s’abstraire des désirs de son temps. Le théâtre du peuple doit partager le pain du peuple, ses inquiétudes, ses espérances et ses batailles” (67).<sup>60</sup> In other words, Rolland rejects theatre as merely an entertainment platform for the privileged class and reclaims its civic, social, and even political dimensions in order to achieve “une révolution morale et sociale de l’humanité” (94).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> “[t]his experience, celebrated as early as 1903 by Romain Rolland in his book *Le Théâtre du Peuple*, which he dedicates to Maurice Pottecher, can be considered the origin of current theatrical institutions that make France a model of cultural democratization and a homeland of theatre arts.”

<sup>56</sup> “the founder of the first People’s Theatre.”

<sup>57</sup> “a new dramatic art for a new society.”

<sup>58</sup> “rediscover the Greek ideal, reinvent the repertoire, transform the performances into vast public events similar to the celebrations of the revolution.”

<sup>59</sup> “theatre of the people.”

<sup>60</sup> “art cannot cut itself off from the needs of its time. The people’s theatre must share the bread of the people, its worries, its hopes and its battles.”

<sup>61</sup> “a moral and social human revolution.”

The second important contribution brought forth by Rolland in his book *Le Théâtre du Peuple* is the practical discussion of the ideas proposed by Eugène Morel, a prominent literary critic of the Belle Époque of the late 1890s, regarding the development of an effective theatre network in France. First, Rolland examines the financial aspects of theatre and demonstrates the virtues of a subscription system as proposed by Morel, which would allow all classes of society to attend because of lower ticket prices, as well as to secure funding for the productions. Repeatedly quoting Morel, Rolland further explains how a network of theatre would be organized:

Mais dès ce moment, le théâtre du peuple ne doit plus être isolé. “Il importe, dès sa réussite, et profitant de sa réussite, de jeter immédiatement les bases d’un autre théâtre, dans un autre quartier. Alors une pièce ne sera plus jouée sept, mais quinze jours, et la diminution des frais viendra compenser la diminution prévue des recettes. Ce second théâtre jouissant du matériel et de la troupe du premier sera plus aisément fondé : il jouira de l’expérience acquise. Le matériel de décors et de costumes viendra aussi réduire les dépenses du premier.” Ce n’est pas seulement à Paris que ces théâtres devront se lever, c’est dans toute la France. “Nous voudrions couvrir de théâtre toute la France.” Ces théâtres formeraient entre eux des associations matérielles, où acteurs, costumes et décors, pourrait être mis en commun. . . . (95)<sup>62</sup>

The most striking aspect of this discussion resides in the similarities between the proposal described by Rolland and the actual implementation of the “décentralisation théâtrale” after the Second World War (which we will examine later in this chapter), such as the subscription system and the mobility of productions between regional theatres.

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<sup>62</sup> “And from that moment on, the people’s theatre must not be isolated. ‘It is important, as soon as it becomes successful, and by taking advantage of its success, to begin building another theatre in another neighborhood. Then, a play will be performed for 15 days rather than seven, and the lesser cost will compensate for the lower box-office revenue. This second theatre, which will profit from resources and actors of the first one, will be more easily funded: it will benefit from acquired experience. Scenic and costume resources will reduce expenses for the first theatre as well.’ These theatres should not only be established in Paris, but across France. ‘We would like to cover all of France with theatres.’ These theatres would form a material network, where actors, costumes, and scenery could be shared by all.”

Other precursors of the “décentralisation théâtrale” include Firmin Gémier, a successful actor and director during the Belle Époque, who has been recognized for the “major role he played in advocating the democratization of French theatre” (Brown 33). In the article, “Firmin Gémier, animateur des foules,” Paul Gsell provides a framework for Gémier’s theatrical endeavor: “sa principale idée était que le théâtre devait servir à unir moralement autant que matériellement toutes les classes de la société” (28).<sup>63</sup> Gsell also explains that Gémier conceived of theatre as “le lien social d’une grande nation” (31).<sup>64</sup> Certainly, these principles can be identified in his Théâtre National Ambulant, a large-scale travelling theatre company created in 1911. Through the Théâtre National Ambulant, Gémier introduced regional audiences to the repertory of the Théâtre Antoine—for which he served as director between 1906 and 1918—, accompanied by high production values (such as elaborate scenic, costume, and lighting designs), and presented in a classless seating arrangement reminiscent of that of a circus tent. Thus, despite the preponderance of theatre tours in France at the time, Gémier’s Théâtre National Ambulant was unique:

Gémier refused to limit his performances to cities with theatre buildings. Farmers and tradesmen of the smallest towns were presented with slightly scaled-down productions of the most substantial plays in the Théâtre Antoine repertory, mounted in a tent of his own design. The tent held a stage almost the same size as the one in the home theatre (which was small to begin with) and places for 1,650 spectators. (Pentzell 114)

After two successful seasons, Gémier abandoned the Théâtre National Ambulant without offering an official explanation. However, it could well be that the scale of the enterprise and the complicated logistics proved exhausting for the company, in comparison to the relatively stable and comfortable life of a Parisian theatre. Despite its

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<sup>63</sup> “his principle idea was that theatre should unite morally, as well as physically, all classes of society.”

<sup>64</sup> “the social cohesion of a great nation.”

short life span, the Théâtre National Ambulant remains even today an influential experiment in the development of theatre in France. In *La décentralisation théâtrale en France*, Denis Gontard notes that “pour la première fois, il s’agit d’une entreprise nationale qui ne vise à rien d’autre qu’à apporter le théâtre à la France entière” (51).<sup>65</sup> In addition, the legacy of the Théâtre National Ambulant directly inspired the creation of Tréteaux de France,<sup>66</sup> a travelling company established in 1959 by actor and director Jean Danet. In 1974, Tréteaux de France became the first—and remains today the only—travelling troupe to receive the label of “Centre dramatique national,”<sup>67</sup> a statute that grants the company a public service mission and provides it with generous public funding.<sup>68</sup> Currently, Tréteaux de France continues to thrive under the direction of Daniel Robin-Renucci, who was appointed by the Ministry of Culture in June 2011.

Gémier’s contribution to the project of democratization of theatre, and thereby to the spirit of the “décentralisation théâtrale,” goes beyond his brief experiment with the Théâtre National Ambulant. In 1920, after leaving the directorship of the Théâtre Antoine, Gémier became the first director of the Théâtre National Populaire (TNP),<sup>69</sup> a public institution which he envisioned as the home of “le Théâtre National, le Théâtre du peuple français, celui de la démocratie qui naît et s’organise, le Théâtre nouveau” (144).<sup>70</sup> In effect, Gémier proposes the TNP as the antithesis of commercial theatre, as it is intended for all classes of society rather than simply the elite, producing new plays

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<sup>65</sup> “for the first time there was a national organization which had no other goal than bringing theatre to the whole of France.”

<sup>66</sup> “Trestles of France.”

<sup>67</sup> “National theatre center.”

<sup>68</sup> In 2011, Martine Robert reported in the newspaper *Les Echos* that Tréteaux de France received a €1.8 million grant from the state, which represented 56% of the company’s budget.

<sup>69</sup> “National Popular Theatre.”

<sup>70</sup> “the National Theatre, the Theatre of the French people, of the young and growing democracy, the new Theatre.”

reflecting the experience of the people, rather than plays written to entertain merely the privileged class. Corvin describes Gémier's conception of "théâtre populaire" as follows: "le théâtre est conçu comme service public, comme moyen pédagogique: il s'agit d'éduquer le peuple, de le fortifier dans ses vertus civiques et morales" (1319).<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Gémier advocates for a return to the Greek ideal of theatre as a unifying experience and for a rehabilitation of the role of theatre in society as a catalyst in the democratic process.

Alongside the contributions of Pottecher, Rolland, and Gémier, the work of Copeau during his retreat to Burgundy between 1924 and 1929 also paved the way to the post-war project of "décentralisation théâtrale." In the spring of 1924, Copeau announced the closure of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier and the launching of a new adventure far from Paris. This decision, which seems at first glance perilous and inconsistent with Copeau's successful Parisian career as a director, as a theorist, and as the manager of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, reflects his desire to further his research without the pressures of running a company and an acting school in bustling Paris. In the preface to Copeau's *Anthologie inachevée à l'usage des jeunes générations*, Christophe Allwright examines the heart of Copeau's project:

Avec un carré de fidèles composé de comédiens de la troupe et d'élèves de l'école, Jacques Copeau décide en effet de créer en province une communauté de travail qui présenterait ses projets dans les villes et villages du pays. Il veut tenter, enfin, de donner le jour à cette "Comédie nouvelle," cette commedia dell'arte moderne qui puiserait dans le monde contemporain ses personnages et ses canevas. (67)<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> "theatre is conceived as a public service, as a pedagogical means: the focus is on educating people and fortifying their civic and moral virtues."

<sup>72</sup> "With a few faithful collaborators, actors of the company, and students of the school, Jacques Copeau decided to create a work community in the provinces that would perform its projects in towns and villages. Finally, he wants to create this 'New comedy,' this modern commedia dell'arte that would draw its characters and its plots from contemporary society."

At first, the move seems to have been difficult, as demonstrated by Copeau's journal entry on February 6, 1925: "Je me demande si je ne me suis pas entièrement trompé. Des semaines, des mois stériles s'écoulent. La fatigue ne me quitte pas. Je ne retrouve aucun élan" (219).<sup>73</sup> But for four years, the new company, known as "les Copiaus," toured Burgundy with collectively written plays inspired by the region and titles from the French repertoire, as it grew increasingly more successful. Allwright describes the journey of Les Copiaus:

Ils vont créer des spectacles qui mêleront le chant, le mime, la danse, le jeu masqué. Ils joueront pour des célébrations annuelles, des fêtes de village, et écriront des arguments pour la circonstance. Ils ont la naïveté et l'enthousiasme de la jeunesse. Ils partiront en tournée, l'aura du Vieux-Colombier sur leurs jeunes épaules. On les réclame en Belgique, en Suisse, au Luxembourg, en Angleterre. Ils rencontreront souvent le succès. (68)<sup>74</sup>

But despite the good fortune encountered by Les Copiaus, regionally and internationally, "l'expérience bourguignonne"<sup>75</sup> came to an end in 1929. In his article, "Léon Chancerel, le Vieux-Colombier et les Copiaus," former member of the company Jean Villard-Gilles recalls the dissolution of the troupe: "Hélas ! La réussite ne nous réussit pas. Il y avait un ver dans le fruit. Ambitions, jalousies, isolement, pauvreté, travail au ralenti, ennui, et le patron de plus en plus lointain, nous étions engagés dans une voie sans issue" (161).<sup>76</sup> Following the demise of Les Copiaus, Copeau returned to Paris, where he continued to work as a stage director, while others formed a new troupe

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<sup>73</sup> "I wonder if I made a huge mistake. Sterile weeks and months go by. I am always tired. I cannot find new momentum."

<sup>74</sup> "They created shows that featured songs, mimes, dances, and masks. They performed during annual events, town fairs, and wrote pieces for special occasions. They were youthfully naïve and enthusiastic. They went on tour, accompanied by the aura of the Vieux-Colombier. They were invited to Belgium, to Switzerland, to Luxembourg, and to England. They were often considered a success."

<sup>75</sup> "the Burgundy experiment."

<sup>76</sup> "Alas! Success did not serve us well. Ambition, jealousy, isolation, poverty, idle work, boredom, the boss becoming more and more distant: we were facing a dead end."



known as La Compagnie des Quinze.<sup>77</sup> Under the leadership of Copeau's nephew, Michel Saint-Denis, they reopened the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in 1931. La Compagnie des Quinze dedicated its work exclusively to contemporary texts, until its dissolution in 1934 when Saint-Denis left France to found the London Theatre Studio (Corvin 1351).

Copeau's contribution to the concept of "décentralisation théâtrale" emerges most clearly in the way Les Copiaus created a sustained and prosperous life for theatre in Burgundy. Gontard explains that "[i]l est incontestable qu'un succès obtenu avec une telle rapidité est dû, avant tout, à la valeur des membres de la troupe" (74).<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Copeau remains one of the most important theatre figures of the twentieth century and the adventure of Les Copiaus highlights his unique inclination for experimentation.

Although it is not the primary focus of this study, it is in fact also important to note that part of this movement—in particular the theories advanced by supporters of the Théâtre du Peuple—was intertwined with the emergence of socialist ideas. Therefore, it is understandable that this conceptualization of theatre continued to take root during the rise of the Front Populaire<sup>79</sup> in the 1930s. At that time, Charles Dullin, a disciple of Copeau and a vocal opponent to the tyranny of commercial theatre, submitted a valuable document to Jean Zay, who served as *Ministre de l'Éducation nationale et des Beaux-Arts*<sup>80</sup> from 1936 to 1939. In the "Rapport sur le Théâtre Populaire," Dullin advocates for the decentralization of theatre and argues in favor of

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<sup>77</sup> "The Company of the Fifteen."

<sup>78</sup> "[i]t is indisputable that this rapid success was, above all, due to the quality of the company members."

<sup>79</sup> "Popular Front." The Front Populaire was a left-leaning political movement in the mid-1930s that won the elections of 1936. Although the Front Populaire lost power in 1938, its legacy for the defense of workers' rights shaped governmental policies for decades to come.

<sup>80</sup> "Minister of National Education and Fine Arts."

permanent companies, distributed across the territory, and lead by a well-respected theatre practitioner:

Dans chacun de ces vastes "préfectorats artistiques" s'exercerait la puissance et la personnalité d'un homme de théâtre ayant fait ses preuves. Sa propre nature, pactisant avec la région de la France où son activité devrait s'exercer, il en résulterait l'éclosion de "styles" différents. . . . De la capitale de ces "préfectures artistiques" (j'emploie cette expression à défaut d'une meilleure) toute une organisation ambulante rayonnerait, de manière à aller porter les effets de cette régénération artistique jusque dans les cantons les plus reculés. (211)<sup>81</sup>

As demonstrated above, the government-led “décentralisation théâtrale” of the late 1940s was preceded by the theories and experimentations of many artists, among them Pottecher, Rolland, Gémier, Copeau, and Dullin. These artists formed a heterogeneous movement unified however by a central aim: the desire to comprehensively reform theatre practice in France.

## 1.2 Cultural Policies After World War II

As a governmental project, the official “décentralisation théâtrale” began immediately following the Second World War. As Gignoux recalls in *Histoire d'une famille théâtrale*, “[e]n 1946, la décentralisation théâtrale n'était pas neuve en tant qu'idée mais en tant que volonté” (309).<sup>82</sup> Rapidly, between 1946 and 1952, the state coordinated the creation of five regional theatres under the label “Centre dramatique national” (CDN)<sup>83</sup>: Centre dramatique national de l'Est in Colmar (CDE), Centre

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<sup>81</sup> “Each of these large ‘artistic districts’ would be spearheaded by a powerful, charismatic, and experienced theatre artist. His unique personality, combined with the French region where he would work, would produce different ‘styles.’ . . . An entire touring organization would be centered around the capital of these ‘artistic districts’ (I am using this expression until I find a more suitable one), and would spread the effect of this artistic renewal to the most remote areas.”

<sup>82</sup> “[i]n 1946, the decentralization of theatre was not new as an idea, but it was new in terms of willpower.”

<sup>83</sup> “National Theatre Center.”

dramatique national de Saint-Étienne (La Comédie de Saint-Étienne), Centre dramatique national de l'Ouest in Rennes (CDO), Le Grenier de Toulouse, and La Comédie de Provence-Centre dramatique du Sud-Est in Aix-en-Provence. Although the development of the CDE in Colmar and CDN in Saint-Étienne required the creation of new companies, in Rennes local companies merged to create the CDO, and in Toulouse and Aix-en-Provence, existing companies received the name of CDN, which in turn provided them with the support necessary to grow and serve their region. Indeed, these new institutions were guaranteed substantial financial and organizational support from the state and from local governments.

In *Modern French Drama, 1940-1990*, David Bradby places this government-led experience within its larger historical context: the liberation of France from German occupation. For Bradby, the quest to rebuild a strong, unified national identity after the Second World War enticed the French government to take an active role in the domains of culture and the arts. Thus, he describes the creation of the first CDN after the liberation:

There was the desire for permanent regional theatre companies on the part of certain cultural and political organizations, combined with the belief in the importance of regional theatre on the part of certain actors and directors. In fact the first permanent company to be established came as a result of a specific request by representatives of Colmar, Mulhouse and Strasbourg. These towns were situated in Alsace, a province that had been disputed territory between France and Germany for the past century, and after the German defeat they were keen to re-establish their cultural links with France. (87)

Goetschel confirms the influence of the specific situation in Alsace-Lorraine in the establishment of the first CDNs: “Il y eut peut-être une réelle volonté politique liée à l’occupation allemande et au *souci* de laver l’affront culturel qui avait constitué la

politique culturelle nazi pendant la guerre” (50. Emphasis in original).<sup>84</sup> Overall, the process of “décentralisation théâtrale” provided a means to reaffirm the national identity of France through a network of strategic theatres anchored across the country.

Undeniably, the central figure during this period was Jeanne Laurent, who served as assistant director of the performing arts and music unit in the Ministry of National Education from 1946 to 1952.<sup>85</sup> Laurent facilitated the creation and development of the first five CDNs and appointed their directors, whom she selected from a network of theatre artists: Roland Piétri at the CDE, Jean Dasté (a former student of Copeau’s) in Saint-Étienne, Dullin as co-director of Le Grenier de Toulouse with the company’s founder Maurice Sarrazin, Gignoux at the CDO, and Gaston Baty at La Comédie de Provence. It is worth noting that Piétri, Dasté, Sarrazin, Gignoux, and Baty were respected and skilled theatre practitioners with valuable experience acquired independently from the Parisian commercial theatre system.

The success of the first five CDNs was remarkable. Bradby describes their achievements as follows:

By the middle fifties, the five companies were providing theatre performances in about three-quarters of the French *départements*. The influence of the Centres was seen as a shining light spreading outwards through a process described as “*le rayonnement*” (a term commonly used in French to designate the spread of cultural influence). (*Modern French* 90)

Two more theatre institutions were added: the Théâtre Populaire des Flandres in Lille in 1953, followed by the Théâtre de Bourgogne in Dijon in 1955. However, these theatres

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<sup>84</sup> “There may have been real political motivation connected to the German occupation and the desire to expunge the cultural affront constituted by German cultural policies during the war.”

<sup>85</sup> The Minister would not allow a woman to hold the title of director; therefore, Laurent was named assistant director, although she was actually in charge of the performing arts and music division (Goetschel 58).

did not receive the label of “Centre dramatique national” until the late 1960s, the delay in part due to growing discontent within the private theatre community, which considered the public funding policies of the “décentralisation théâtrale” as unfair competition for their own business model. Indeed, private theatres were entirely dependent on their box-office revenue, while public institutions received most of their funding through state and local subventions.

The Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, opened in 1983 under Chéreau’s artistic directorship, provides insight into the financial structure of the CDNs and highlights the crucial role of public funding for the institutions of the “décentralisation théâtrale.” Between 1983 and 1990, this specific theatre received an average of 28 million francs per year in public funding allocated by the state and by the city of Nanterre. Meanwhile, box-office revenue averaged 5.8 million francs per year during the same period, which represents only 13% of its annual budget (Nussac 337). The financial independence brought forth by public funding engendered artistic freedom for the creative team at Nanterre-Amandiers, which, in turn, allowed for the production of contemporary plays that may or may not prove to be box-office successes. On the other hand, private theatres remained financially and artistically bound to producing shows that ensured profitability in order to fund their next season. As demonstrated by this brief note on the financial structure governing Nanterre-Amandiers, we can infer that the “décentralisation théâtrale” provided public theatres with resources much greater and much more predictable than the funding available to private theatres.

In 1951, Laurent appointed Jean Vilar as the new director of the Théâtre National Populaire (TNP), a decision that could be considered her final symbolic

gesture in favor of the development of public theatre before leaving office under growing opposition to her policy agenda from prominent Parisian theatre figures such as Jacques Hébertot (Denizot 115). Vilar was in charge of re-launching the institution once led by Gémier. “The plan for Vilar’s directorate of the TNP was that it should be modeled on the Centres Dramatiques, taking theatre out to the culturally underprivileged Parisian suburbs” notes Bradby (*Modern French* 92). Thus, the TNP was to produce shows at the theatre located in the Palais de Chaillot, and, as with the CDNs, to tour the greater Paris metropolitan area.

This mission was in line with Vilar’s own conception of theatre, which aimed at building “un théâtre populaire pour tous qui rassemble et réconcilie” (Corvin 1709).<sup>86</sup> Thus, the thrust of Vilar’s project was that “[le] TNP est donc, au premier chef, un service public” (“Le TNP” 262).<sup>87</sup> His strategy to attract large audiences in order to fill the 1200-seat theatre at Chaillot began with lowering admission prices. This decision is also central in Roland Barthes’ article, “Pour une définition du théâtre populaire.”<sup>88</sup> Barthes explains that “[t]oute la sociologie du théâtre tient dans le prix des places: abaissez le prix de l’entrée, et peu à peu le peuple viendra au théâtre” (99).<sup>89</sup> For Barthes and for Vilar, the civic dimension of theatre, its unique position as a public space, and its role as a guarantor of democracy are fundamental. Barthes advocates for “un théâtre de la cité,”<sup>90</sup> based on the Greek ideal, which he opposes to “un théâtre de l’argent,”<sup>91</sup> which refers to commercial theatre crafted for the privileged class.

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<sup>86</sup> “a popular theatre for all, which federates and reconciles.”

<sup>87</sup> “[le] TNP is, above all else, a public service.”

<sup>88</sup> “To Establish a Definition of Popular Theatre.”

<sup>89</sup> “[t]he entire sociology of theatre resides in ticket prices: lower the cost of tickets, and gradually people will come to the theatre.”

<sup>90</sup> “a theatre of the city.”

<sup>91</sup> “a theatre of money.”

Vilar also scheduled earlier performances to accommodate commuters and reached out to workers' unions across the Paris region to promote the shows at the TNP. In *De la tradition théâtrale*, he describes his communication plan during his first year in charge of Chaillot: "Nous avons l'intention de développer les contacts que nous avons déjà pris avec *les organismes syndicaux, les comités d'entreprise et les mouvements de jeunesse*. La presse, de quelque opinion qu'elle soit, devrait nous aider dans cette tâche national" (177. Emphasis in original).<sup>92</sup> But despite Vilar's commitment to create a popular theatre, the success of the TNP to do so remained debatable. In a 1955 interview with Bernard Dort, Jean-Paul Sartre provided his perspective:

En fait, le TNP n'a pas de public populaire, de public ouvrier. Son public, c'est un public petit-bourgeois, un public qui, sans le TNP et le prix relativement bas de ses places, n'irait pas ou fort peu au théâtre—mais pas en public ouvrier. Il y a des ouvriers qui viennent au TNP ; le TNP a donné des représentations pour des ouvriers, mais le TNP n'a pas de public ouvrier. Même quand il se déplace et va jouer dans la banlieue. (279)<sup>93</sup>

In contrast with Sartre's assessment, Laurent celebrates Vilar's achievements at the TNP. She recalls that "[g]râce à Vilar, un théâtre naissait en France, s'adressant à tous sans distinction de nationalité, de croyance, de classe sociale . . ." (261).<sup>94</sup> Indeed, during his tenure as director of the TNP, from 1951 to 1963, Vilar transformed the institution through his vision for a popular theatre and contributed to the diffusion in France of Bertolt Brecht's theatre, which he considered as exemplary of popular theatre

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<sup>92</sup> "We plan to develop further our relationship with *workers' unions, work councils, and youth movements*. The press should support this national project regardless of its specific ideology."

<sup>93</sup> "In reality, the TNP does not attract a popular audience. It attracts a petit-bourgeois audience. And this audience would not go to—or rarely go to—the theatre if the TNP did not offer relatively low-priced tickets. But it is not a working-class audience. Working-class individuals do come to the TNP. The TNP performed for workers. But the TNP does not have a working-class audience. Even when it tours in the suburbs."

<sup>94</sup> "[b]ecause of Vilar, a new theatre was emerging: a theatre intended for all, regardless of nationality, religion, or social status . . ."

for the modern repertoire. Bradby commends Vilar for his extraordinary achievements at the TNP: “The strength of Vilar was in his utopian vision of the theatre for all and the patient intelligence which he brought to the realization of this vision. In the first ten years after the war, his contribution to revitalizing the theatre, especially in the Parisian region, was tremendous” (*Modern French* 103). However, the critic also considers that “Vilar had failed in one of his most cherished ambitions, which was to stage the work of new playwrights” (102). Certainly, Vilar had remained relatively conservative in his season selection choices. Yet, one could also question the compatibility of the TNP’s mission with the ability to produce new plays. It is obviously easier to attract the large number of audience members required to fill the Palais de Chaillot with classics by Molière or William Shakespeare than it would be with new titles put forward by unknown playwrights.

Apart from his work at the TNP, Vilar’s most highly recognized success remains the creation of the Festival d’Avignon in 1947, which he developed and administered until his death in 1971. Alongside the political effort to decentralize the creation of theatre under the leadership of Laurent, a growing number of art festivals flourished across the country after the war. Among these seasonal events, the Festival d’Avignon endures as the most celebrated example:

L’effervescence artistique est d’ailleurs réelle dans le pays. Les festivals de théâtre et de musique abondent depuis la fin de la guerre, à Strasbourg, à Besançon, et dans toutes les villes du Sud—Orange, Arles, Nîmes, Vaison-la-Romaine, Saintes, pour n’en citer que quelques-unes. Le festival d’Avignon créé par Jean Vilar fait partie du dispositif. (Goetschel 75)<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> “The country is teeming with artistic activity. Numerous music and theatre festivals have been created since the war ended: in Strasbourg, in Besançon, and in all the cities of the South—Orange, Arles, Nîmes, Vaison-la-Romaine, Saintes, to only name a few. The Festival d’Avignon, which was created by Jean Vilar, identifies with this system.”



Part of Avignon's unique appeal resides in its extraordinary performance space: the courtyard of the medieval papal palace at the heart of the city. Every summer, a growing number of festival goers flood the streets of the "City of the Popes"—as it has been nicknamed—and attend an eclectic program of shows created for the festival or invited to perform at the festival. For example, the 2016 edition hosted productions from Teheran, Moscow, Santiago de Chile, Brussels, and Stockholm. Today, the Festival d'Avignon stands as a major international cultural event, described by Edward Baron Turk as "one of the grandest theatre jamborees on the planet" (259). Further, it represents an alternative form of "décentralisation théâtrale" to the CDNs and provides an influential venue for international theatre within the cultural life of France.

This process of decentralization continued through the 1960s under the energetic leadership of Minister of Cultural Affairs, André Malraux, as well as through the 1970s, with the creation of new CDNs and national theatres, and then found renewed support from the government of socialist president François Mitterand in the 1980s. Today, the network of public theatres in France encompasses six national theatres: five located in Paris (Comédie-Française, Théâtre de Chaillot, Théâtre de l'Odéon, Théâtre de la Colline, and Théâtre National de l'Opéra-Comique) and one located in "la province," the Théâtre National de Strasbourg.<sup>96</sup> The network also includes 35 CDNs, three "Centres dramatiques régionaux" (CDR),<sup>97</sup> and 70 "Scènes nationales."<sup>98</sup> This important network receives generous public funding from state and local governments

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<sup>96</sup> Some of the CDRs use the name "Théâtre National" in their titles but are administratively considered CDNs. Such examples include the Théâtre National de Bretagne (ex-CDO) and the Théâtre National de Nice.

<sup>97</sup> "Regional Theatre Centers."

<sup>98</sup> "National Stages."

in order to carry out a public mission of production and diffusion of high-quality theatre accessible to Parisian and regional audiences alike. Moreover, these public theatres are gathered under the general umbrella of the Ministry of Culture and Communication. Two of these institutions of the “décentralisation théâtrale” played an especially important role in the career of Koltès: the CDE, which revealed in the young man a deep passion for the stage and provided him with his first formal training as a theatre artist, and the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, a CDN of which he would take on the role of the unofficial yet very active playwright-in-residence.

### **1.3 Hubert Gignoux**

During the early years of “décentralisation théâtrale,” Gignoux, who would become Koltès’ mentor at the CDE, emerged as a leader and one of the most influential figures in post-war French theatre. Gignoux began his career in the 1930s as an actor for Les Comédiens-Routiers,<sup>99</sup> a group of boy scouts assembled by Léon Chancerel, himself a former member of Les Copiaus and a disciple of Copeau. Les Comédiens-Routiers quickly evolved into a semi-professional company, touring modest productions, as described by Philip Nord in the article, “Catholic Culture in Interwar France”:

The band offered up a mix of Molière and medieval mystery plays and was remarkable on several counts: for its experimentation with acrobatics and masks, for its willingness to travel, and for the talent of its young troopers . . . all destined to make a mark in French regional theater. (7)

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<sup>99</sup> “Actors on the Road.”

In 1935, Gignoux joined Chancerel's new company, Le Théâtre de l'Oncle Sébastien,<sup>100</sup> a troupe dedicated to theatre for young audiences. Undoubtedly, he gained valuable touring experience during these formative years, which surely served him well to organize the first regional tours at the CDO.

Drafted during the war, Gignoux was captured by the German army in 1940 and spent the remaining years of the conflict in various prison camps. Despite his dreadful situation as prisoner of war, Gignoux enthusiastically participated in theatre activities in each camp (272). Indeed, the situation for French soldiers who had been captured "n'avait rien de comparable au sort des déportés"<sup>101</sup> and Gignoux was able to create substantial theatre during these five years, a period of his life he compares to a "longue parenthèse" (273-74).<sup>102</sup> Certainly, theatre provided men in these camps "une occasion de s'évader à bon compte, de revivre"<sup>103</sup> argues André Tissier (958).<sup>104</sup> Moreover, many of them were discovering theatre for the first time: "Que de braves garçons se sont, avec des moyens de fortune, improvisés comédiens, metteurs en scène, chanteurs! Et, grâce à eux, que de paysans, d'ouvriers, d'artisans ont appris ce qu'était le théâtre" (Tissier 958).<sup>104</sup> The surprising amount of resources available in some camps becomes evident, as Gignoux describes his experience:

Le théâtre occupait à lui seul un pavillon dans un groupe de constructions . . . disséminés à l'intérieur d'un parc, presque tous les acteurs et techniciens y logeaient, la "jauge" de la salle montait à plus de 200 places, scène et dégagement s'étendaient en proportion, et, surtout, nous disposions d'une seconde salle pour les répétitions ou les

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<sup>100</sup> "The Theatre of Uncle Sebastian."

<sup>101</sup> "had nothing in common with the fate of the deportees."

<sup>102</sup> "long period on hold."

<sup>103</sup> "an opportunity to truly escape, to live again."

<sup>104</sup> "Without much help, many brave young men suddenly found themselves actors, directors, and singers! And, thanks to their work, many farmers, factory workers, and craftsmen discovered the art of theatre."

fabrications légères et d'un petit atelier de menuiserie. . . . (Gignoux 281)<sup>105</sup>

Although in captivity, Gignoux had access to a fully functional theatre and continued to practice his craft, teach others, and contribute to the cultural life of the seemingly uncultured prison camp. He also had the opportunity to read a wide variety of plays, to expand his knowledge beyond the education he received during his collaboration with Chancerel, and to develop a relationship with an audience:

En somme ma captivité, quoique trop longue, ne s'était pas mal agencée. . . . J'y avais expérimenté, pour le meilleur et pour le pire, la plus grande contrainte des rapports de l'homme de théâtre avec son public. Je m'étais exercé à des styles dont mon apprentissage ne m'avait rien dit, ouvert, par la lecture, au roman, à l'histoire, à la philosophie. (Gignoux 300)<sup>106</sup>

In short, Gignoux' experience as a prisoner of war clearly contributed to the furthering of his development as an artist and his understanding of his craft. Also, it parallels Jean-Paul Sartre's experience during the same period. While prisoner of war in Trier, Germany, Sartre "undertook to write, produce and direct, in a mere six weeks, a Nativity play" (Leak 54). The play, *Bariona, ou le fils du tonnerre*,<sup>107</sup> had a significant impact on the camp community because "it was able to convey to its despairing public a message of resistance, freedom, and hope" explains Christine Mohanty, in "*Bariona, the Germination of Sartrean Theatre*" (1094). In fact, as Andrew Leak notes: "[I]t was

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<sup>105</sup> "The theatre occupied an entire building within a larger complex scattered throughout a park. Most of the actors and technicians lived there. The house could seat more than two hundred. The stage and the wings were sized proportionally. And most importantly, we had access to a rehearsal hall, where we could also build small structures, and a small scene shop."

<sup>106</sup> "In the end, my time in captivity, despite being too long, proved to be productive. . . . I had the opportunity to experience, for better or for worse, the most difficult relationships between a theatre practitioner and his audience. I experimented with styles left unexplored during my training, and, through reading, I opened myself to the novel, to history, and to philosophy."

<sup>107</sup> "Bariona, or the Son of Thunder."

to be his plays . . . that would bring his ideas directly to the public, in France and all over the world” (55). Thus, his production proved fundamental for Sartre, who embraced the power of theatre as a collective experience and as a collective response to the human tragedy of war, even under the most challenging circumstances.

After the liberation of France, Gignoux and his friend Henry Cordreaux, also a former member of Les Comédiens-Routiers, founded La Compagnie des marionnettes des Champs-Élysées<sup>108</sup> in Paris. Moreover, Gignoux and Cordreaux were appointed “instructeurs nationaux d’art dramatique,”<sup>109</sup> a position that allowed Gignoux to begin a relationship with a young troupe of actors visiting Paris, Les Jeunes Comédiens de Rennes.<sup>110</sup> This connection between the company and the director continued to grow and, in 1949, Laurent selected Gignoux to become director of the future CDO in Rennes. Gignoux summarizes the vast task at hand:

[I]nstaller dans les chefs-lieux choisis des sortes d’ambassade du théâtre national dont le personnel, vivant au milieu de son public potentiel, composé d’un mélange opportun de natifs et d’immigrés, soutenu par des subventions, aurait la charge de desservir une région autour de son port d’attache, comme une tournée, mais moins fugace, mieux unie à son terrain, avec l’espoir de susciter, par entraînement, une création locale. (Gignoux 309)<sup>111</sup>

Thus began a new period of experimentation and innovation. The new CDO needed to become a federative theatre center, but also to tour productions regularly to serve the rural population of towns and villages between the principal cities of the region: Rouen, Poitiers, and Brest. Gignoux and his team developed a strategy to establish the CDO as

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<sup>108</sup> “The Puppet Theatre of the Champs-Élysées.”

<sup>109</sup> “national instructors of theatre.”

<sup>110</sup> “The Young Actors of Rennes.”

<sup>111</sup> “[T]o establish in selected regional capitals a kind of national theatre embassy, of which the staff, living among its potential audience, made up of a balanced mix of natives and immigrants, funded by subventions, would have the responsibility to serve a region around its home base, in the style of a tour, but less elusively, more connected to its territory, with the hope to thereby generate local productions.”

a significant player in the cultural life of its region. They introduced a subscription system to gain the loyalty of their audiences and to stabilize financial resources. They also encouraged the local press to promote their productions and developed a network of volunteers—teachers, booksellers, shopkeepers, etc.—to serve as intermediaries between the company and the population of each town, to encourage attendance, and to establish the CDO as a local institution rather than a Parisian appendage (Gignoux 323).

The season selection process during the early years of the CDO was rather conservative. Molière, Paul Claudel, and Shakespeare were the playwrights most often produced between 1949 and 1957. “[T]ous les répertoires annuels obéirent à des dosages semblables de grands classiques français et étrangers, lot majoritaire, d’œuvres plus récemment consacrées par l’investigation parisienne et de quelques créations prudentes” explains Gignoux (324).<sup>112</sup> It is sure that, through the first phase of the CDO, the main objective was to attract as many audience members as possible in order to affirm the legitimacy of the new institution. Thus, it was necessary to produce predominantly plays from the theatrical canon. Defending his program choices, Gignoux adds: “des salles trop longtemps mal remplies auraient condamné notre entreprise et, à cette époque, la Décentralisation tout entière” (226).<sup>113</sup> This concern about season selection would also be central during Chéreau’s tenure at Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers. Indeed, Chéreau, who was known primarily for his staging of classics—in fact, his production of Pierre de Marivaux’s *La Dispute* would make a lasting impression on Koltès—chose the young playwright’s *Combat de nègre et de*

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<sup>112</sup> “[E]very season featured primarily great classics of French and foreign theatre, some plays recently consecrated in Paris, and a few cautious new creations.”

<sup>113</sup> “undersold performances for long periods of time would have undermined our project and the entire process of Decentralization.”

*chiens* to open the inaugural season of his Centre dramatique national. Undoubtedly, this decision denotes Chéreau's intention to give contemporary theatre a significant place at Nanterre-Amandiers, a choice that was not granted to Gignoux during the first years of "décentralisation," due to the concern that it may hurt the number of attendees and cause the failure of the CDO.

Ultimately, Gignoux left the CDO in 1957 in order to become the new director of the CDE, a position he would hold until 1971. By the late 1950s, the CDE, which had moved from Colmar to Strasbourg in 1954, was a more prestigious institution than its equivalent in Rennes. First, it was the original institution of the "décentralisation," its "pièce maîtresse,"<sup>114</sup> granting the CDE highly symbolic importance (Goetschel 107). Additionally, the company had recently moved into brand-new facilities in Strasbourg, making it the first Centre dramatique national to enjoy its own permanent theatre space in France. Lastly, the company shared this space with the École supérieure d'art dramatique, one of the most respected acting schools in the country, a link which helped to create a tight creative network in the city of Strasbourg.

For Gignoux, the mission of the CDE must be focused primarily on "un théâtre d'intérêt civique" (351).<sup>115</sup> The CDE's long history in the region allowed Gignoux to take more risks with his season selection choices and to regularly produce plays by contemporary authors, such as Swiss-German playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt. During Gignoux's tenure, the national and international renown of the CDE grew exponentially. It is not surprising then that in 1968, Malraux granted an important change of status for the CDE. From "Centre dramatique national de l'Est," the

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<sup>114</sup> "centerpiece."

<sup>115</sup> "a theatre of civic interest."

institution became known as the “Théâtre National de Strasbourg” (TNS).<sup>116</sup> Gignoux explained that this change reflected the reality of the funding, which was primarily provided by the state:

Cette mutation ne faisait qu’entériner franchement une situation de fait, le jacobinisme ne s’y aggravait que dans une appellation, nullement dans l’esprit, et je me suis réjoui quelques années plus tard que mon troisième successeur, Jean-Pierre Vincent, ait pu dire qu’elle avait “*mis à l’abri une expérience exemplaire*.” Consécration, et non perte, ajoutait-il, de la décentralisation dramatique. (348. Emphasis in original)<sup>117</sup>

Today, the TNS remains the only Théâtre National located outside of Paris. This privileged situation (the direct result of the institution’s transition from Centre dramatique to Théâtre National) could be considered the crowning achievement of Gignoux’s public theatre career. Today, the two main performance spaces at the TNS honor its first director and his special mentee: “Salle Hubert Gignoux” and “Salle Bernard-Marie Koltès.”

In 1971, Gignoux left the directorship of the TNS and returned to his acting career. He became resident actor in the company at the Comédie-Française from 1983 to 1986, and he was featured in numerous films and television series. In 2000, he received a Molière Award honoring the whole of his theatre career and his contributions to the development of public theatre in France. Gignoux died in Paris on February 26, 2008. In a posthumous article published in *Le Monde* the following week, Gignoux is

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<sup>116</sup> “National Theatre of Strasbourg.”

<sup>117</sup> “Frankly, this transition acknowledged an existing situation. Its apparent Jacobinism only affected our name, not our spirit. And I am pleased that a few years later, my third successor, Jean-Pierre Vincent, said that it ‘protected an exemplary endeavor.’ He added that this changeover was a consecration, not a loss, for the decentralization of theatre.”



remembered as “un des maîtres du théâtre français, tout simplement” (“Hubert Gignoux”).<sup>118</sup>

#### 1.4 Emergence of a New Playwright

Born and raised in Metz, an industrial town with an important military presence in far-eastern France, Koltès moved to the nearby city of Strasbourg after receiving his Baccalauréat<sup>119</sup> in 1967. During his first year in Strasbourg, Koltès was enrolled as a journalism student, but his career interest soon shifted under the influence of his new friend Elisabeth Meyrand, a theatre student at the CDE. In January 1968, Meyrand invited Koltès and others to attend a performance of *Médée* directed by Jorge Lavelli and starring the renowned stage and film actress Maria Casarès, who had—among a multitude of other credits—appeared in prestigious productions at the Comédie-Française and at Vilar’s TNP. This production of *Médée* had been first staged at the Théâtre de l’Odéon in Paris in the spring of 1967, and played at the Festival d’Avignon the following summer. Gignoux, the influential director of the CDE, invited the production to perform in Strasbourg as part of the twentieth season of the institution. It was relatively easy for the production to transfer from the Théâtre de l’Odéon to the CDE because both institutions were connected through the rich cultural network created by the “décentralisation théâtrale.”

For Koltès, this incredible opportunity to watch Casarès play Medea was a true revelation. Just two months after the performance, he announced his plan, in a long and passionate letter to his parents, to devote his life to the theatre: “Me voici . . . à la veille

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<sup>118</sup> “one of the masters of French theatre, quite simply.”

<sup>119</sup> “High School diploma.”

de me mettre au service du Théâtre” (*Lettres* 56).<sup>120</sup> Many years later, during an interview with Jean-Pierre Han for the magazine *Europe*, Koltès evoked this first theatrical experience: “La première fois que je suis allé au théâtre, c’était très tard, j’avais vingt-deux ans. J’ai vu une pièce qui m’a beaucoup ému . . . avec une grande actrice, Maria Casarès. Elle m’avait beaucoup impressionné, et tout de suite je me suis mis à écrire” (*Une part* 9).<sup>121</sup> Clearly, this production of *Médée*, and the impact of Casarès in particular, unveiled to Koltès a deep and sudden desire to write for the stage.

Throughout his career, Casarès remained an important figure for the playwright, who described her a few months prior to his death as one of his “grand[s] amour[s] de théâtre” (*Une part* 120).<sup>122</sup> It seems that Koltès remained eternally grateful for the role she played in his artistic awakening. Hence, he pursued a professional relationship with the Spanish actress, who agreed in 1972 to perform in Koltès’ *L’Héritage*, a play that would be recorded and broadcast on Radio France Culture. This collaboration further inspired the budding playwright who imagined future projects: “Je rêve inefficacement à un film avec Casarès” reveals Koltès in a wishful but frustrating letter to his friend Bichette (*Lettres* 183).<sup>123</sup> This film venture, out of reach for a penniless young man of “la province,” never came to fruition. However, an other rewarding collaboration between Koltès and Casarès was still to come with the 1986 production of *Quai ouest* at the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers. Koltès had formulated the role of Cécile specifically for Casarès, which she performed under the direction of Chéreau (*Bernard-Marie Koltès*, 54).

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<sup>120</sup> “Here I am . . . about to dedicate my life to Theatre.”

<sup>121</sup> “The first time I went to the theatre, it was very late, I was 22. I saw a play that moved me immensely . . . starring a great actress, Maria Casarès. I was very impressed by her and I started writing right away.”

<sup>122</sup> “great love[s] of the theatre.”

<sup>123</sup> “I dream inefficiently of a film starring Casarès.”

In the spring of 1968, only a few weeks after attending the transformative performance of *Médée*, Koltès applied to the Technical Theatre and Directing program offered by the school at the CDE. The institution represented undoubtedly the finest theatre in eastern France and its school offered the best training in the region. As demonstrated by his repeated attempts to be admitted to the CDE, Koltès longed to be a part of that exceptional artistic environment. Unfortunately, due to civil unrest across France, the interview process was delayed until July, and Koltès, who was traveling through North America during that summer, was unable to attend (*Lettres* 72). Thus, his application to join the CDE was at that time rejected.

However, Koltès did not forfeit his plan and reapplied the following year. This time, he applied both to the Acting program and to the Technical Theatre and Directing program at the CDE, which had been recently transformed into the Théâtre National de Strasbourg. For the acting audition, Koltès presented a monologue from *Lorenzaccio* by Alfred de Musset, followed by a piece from *Le Père humilié* by Claudel (*Lettres* 92). But in May of 1969, Koltès learned that his audition had been unsuccessful, and a month later, he was informed that his second application to the Technical Theatre and Directing program had also been rejected (Salino 57). One can imagine that these failures were due to the fact that Koltès not only faced a great deal of competition attracted by the prestigious status of the TNS, but also suffered from his relative inexperience in theatre compared to other potential applicants. In the end, Koltès was devastated by his repeated failures to attend the school at the TNS. Indeed, the institution that had ignited his passion for the stage seemed unwilling to welcome him, a situation that created a sense of doubt and disillusion in his life. Left without a plan, he

contemplated with horror the perspective of living a conventional life, the type of existence he deliberately he had left behind in Metz:

Pour ma part évidemment, c'est le vide . . . Aucune solution, si ce n'est un accident d'avion qui serait bienvenu et qui règlerait la question. L'autre solution : la vie rangée ; mais pour cela il faudrait « m'opérer vivant » et m'extraire du cerveau pas mal de choses, pour ne laisser que ce qui est assez con pour continuer à vivre. (*Lettres* 99. Ellipsis in original.)<sup>124</sup>

The inability to be granted admission at the TNS also deprived Koltès of an established structure that might well have supported his future creative endeavors. He writes: “[J]e ne sais pas quoi faire; où proposer mes idées?” (*Lettres* 100).<sup>125</sup> Koltès was in search of something other than merely a school and sought instead a more inclusive artistic community. In fact, the deep disappointment triggered by the rejection he experienced at the TNS stands in contrast with the long-lasting and productive relationship he enjoyed with Chéreau at the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers in the 1980s.

Despite the setbacks, Koltès did not abandon his newly-found passion for the theatre and took a position in a “Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture” (MJC),<sup>126</sup> a publically funded associative structure in which he was in charge of developing theatre activities (*Lettres* 102). Nevertheless, he was still adamant about his future at the TNS and decided to bypass Pierre Lefèvre, the director of the school, and to contact Gignoux, the artistic director of the theatre, directly. As Salino describes it, this bold move paid off well: “Sensible à son charme et à sa personnalité, Gignoux s’engage à lui ouvrir les portes de l’école. . . . Ainsi commence une histoire d’amitié et de théâtre ; elle

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<sup>124</sup> “In my case, obviously, there is nothing left . . . No solution, though I would welcome a plane crash, which would resolve the issue. The other solution: a conventional life. But that would require surgery to remove many things from my brain and leave behind only what is stupid so I could continue to live.”

<sup>125</sup> “[I] don’t know what to do; where to propose my ideas?”

<sup>126</sup> “House of Youth and Culture.”

va jouer un rôle fondamental dans la naissance de l'œuvre de Koltès" (Salino 58).<sup>127</sup>

Indeed, Koltès was finally admitted to the TNS' Technical Theatre and Directing program, and the required application process was waived, thanks to Gignoux's support. Likewise, Gignoux would continue to play a pivotal role in Koltès' career, first by mentoring him at the TNS, and then by introducing and recommending his work to established theatre artists, and to his friend Chéreau in particular, who later became Koltès' closest collaborator.

In January 1970, Koltès sent Gignoux a draft of his first play, an unfinished piece adapted from Maxim Gorky's autobiographical novel, *Childhood*, that would later become *Les Amertumes*. The manuscript was accompanied by a long letter in which Koltès begged Gignoux for feedback: "Je ne sais si vous aurez le temps de le lire, ni du temps à utiliser pour me faire savoir votre opinion. J'ose cependant vous le demander, compte tenu de l'importance que j'attache à votre avis et à l'éventualité de votre intérêt" (Lettres 107).<sup>128</sup> Koltès had undoubtedly understood that Gignoux held a position both regionally and nationally influential as director of the TNS, and that the fruit of his support would far exceed what other local theatre artists could provide. If Gignoux could bring Casarès from Paris to the TNS, he could also perhaps send Koltès from Strasbourg to Paris.

Although this document has apparently been lost, Gignoux did respond to Koltès' letter and gave him feedback about the play. In a subsequent letter, Koltès countered the criticism expressed by Gignoux and clarified his concept of playwriting:

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<sup>127</sup> "Sensitive to his charm and his personality, Gignoux promises Koltès admission to the school. . . . And so begins a story of friendship and theatre, which would play a fundamental role in the birth of Koltès' œuvre."

<sup>128</sup> "I don't know if you will have time to read it, or time to share with me your opinion. But I dare send it to you, considering how much I value your opinion and the potential interest you might take in it."

“Vous m’avez parlé de formalisme. En fait, la raison profonde d’un travail formel—et qui peut surprendre de prime abord—c’est que le personnage psychologique ne m’intéresse pas – pas plus d’ailleurs que le personnage ‘raisonnable’ (ce qui me fait redouter presque autant Stanislavsky que Brecht)” (*Lettres* 114).<sup>129</sup> Through their correspondence, Gignoux empowered Koltès to define more clearly the kind of theatre he was trying to realize. This formulation of a new playwriting voice was first expressed by a strong desire to distance itself with popular styles such as Realist and Epic theatre. Moreover, this determination to redefine playwriting may be what Gignoux most admired in Koltès, potentially recognizing the young man as a precursor of postmodern French drama.

During the Spring of 1970, Koltès and a group of friends—many were aspiring actors—rehearsed *Les Amertumes* in the most modest of conditions, confined in a basement borrowed from a church group affiliated with the university of Strasbourg. This was the genesis of the Théâtre du Quai,<sup>130</sup> a small theatre company centered around Koltès that would produce all of his early plays over the next few years. *Les Amertumes* opened on May 8, and the production was well received by the local press. In his review for *Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace*, Paul Ecket commends Koltès for his “excellent travail”<sup>131</sup> and describes the production as “un moment d’intense poésie, d’intenses émotions” (qtd. in Salino 65).<sup>132</sup> Also attending the show, the journalist and radio producer Jacques Taroni organized the recording and the broadcasting of *Les*

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<sup>129</sup> “You wrote to me of formalism. In reality, the reason for a formalist work, which can be surprising at first, is that I have no interest in characters developed through psychology. I have no interest in ‘reasonable’ characters either (which is why I am equally suspicious of Stanislavsky and Brecht).”

<sup>130</sup> “The Theatre of the Pier.”

<sup>131</sup> “excellent work.”

<sup>132</sup> “a moment of intense poetry, intense emotions.”

*Amertumes* on the local public radio station at the end of May. Overall, the play and its production by the newly formed Théâtre du Quai proved to be very successful, corroborating Gignoux's first impressions of Koltès' work.

After almost a month of performances, *Les Amertumes*, Koltès' first theatre project, came to an end. In a letter to Bichette, he describes his first encounter with the ephemerality of the theatrical experience. He writes:

La tension est tombée ; les yeux se referment. C'est un peu cette sensation de l'aube quand on était éveillé toute la nuit : le vide, la fausse hésitation au milieu de chimères, l'état. Le sentiment d'une masse énorme qui s'est vidée, et dont les contours à présent informes ne savent plus que faire, et cherchent à se contracter pour retrouver une force. C'est un filet gonflé de poissons et qui s'est crevé, et qui flotte doucement, avec des algues et des cailloux passant au travers des mailles. (*Lettres* 122. Emphasis in original)<sup>133</sup>

In this remarkable opening paragraph, Koltès seems to capture most precisely the essence of a production's journey: the frantic image of the fish-swollen net symbolizes the state of unrest and anticipation before opening night, the sudden moment when the net bursts represents the immediate rush of the performance, and, finally, the shapeless net floating aimlessly embodies the artist grieving one project before starting another.

In the fall of 1970, Koltès finally arrived at the TNS. But he behaved as a visitor, an observer rather than a true student, and would ultimately leave at the end of his first year: "Heureusement que je n'ai jamais envisagé ce temps au TNS que comme un apport supplémentaire pour 'autre chose': parce qu'en soi . . . C'est un peu maigre ; pour le moment en tout cas," writes Koltès to Bichette at the end of September (*Lettres*

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<sup>133</sup> "The stress is gone; my eyes are shutting down. The feeling resembles that sensation at dawn when you spent the night awake: emptiness, false hesitation in the middle of dreams, the state. The feeling of a huge mass emptied, of which the outlines no longer know what to do, trying to contract in order to regain their strength. It's a net swollen with fish, and now torn open, and gently floating, with seaweed and pebbles going through the mesh."

129. Ellipsis in original).<sup>134</sup> Despite his apparent disappointment, his admission to the TNS is highly emblematic: it represents Gignoux's explicit endorsement, his trust in Koltès' talent, and a significant form of trust from the established director to the young artist.

In reality, Koltès was already preoccupied with new projects for the Théâtre du Quai. First, there was *La Marche*, a loose adaptation of "The Songs of Songs" from the Bible. The production benefited from a short tour organized by company members, and was recorded and broadcast on the radio in February 1971, thanks to Taroni's continued interest in the work of the young playwright. Immediately following *La Marche*, Koltès began a new project: *Procès ivre*, an adaptation of *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The company toured *Procès ivre* in the Bretagne region during the summer, but the endeavor was a financial disaster and Koltès was forced to go into debt to see it through.

The desirability of financial stability and, to extrapolate further, the drive to follow social norms, were notions Koltès had rejected early in life. As a true representative of the "génération mai 68,"<sup>135</sup> he wanted to embrace a more authentic life than the one his parents had envisioned for him. Perhaps in an attempt to comfort his mother, Koltès writes to her: "[I]l y a aussi beaucoup de plaisirs, tu sais, à aller à contre-courant: dans une société d'argent, ne pas en avoir; dans une société où l'amour est réglé, l'avoir déréglé; ce n'est ni plus absurde ni plus angoissant que de faire le chemin

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<sup>134</sup> "Thankfully, I only thought of my time at the TNS as a supplement to 'something else': because in itself . . . it's a little thin; right now at least."

<sup>135</sup> "generation of May 68."



inverse : ce doit être une question de conformation physiologique” (*Lettres*, 168).<sup>136</sup> As with a confession, Koltès abjures the values of his middle-class family and affirms his homosexuality, which allows the reader to perceive his profound desire for emancipation. This letter is also a pronouncement of Koltès’ status as someone who lives at the fringes of society. His sexuality intrinsically sets him apart from the French heteronormative culture of the 1970s. One can thus draw an important connection between Koltès’ relationship with society and the characters he develops in his plays: outcasts, immigrants, and criminals. By the end of 1971, Koltès was ready to leave Strasbourg, the comfort of the school at the TNS, and “la province” and its conservatism. Koltès was ready to become Koltès.

It was also a transition period for Gignoux who, after 14 years in Strasbourg, left the directorship of the TNS and returned to Paris to pursue his acting career. Gignoux’s departure probably contributed to Koltès’ decision to abandon his studies at the TNS and to move to Paris as well. But unlike Gignoux, Koltès was unknown on the national theatre scene. His situation was precarious: part-time work for a movie theatre, short-term rentals in second-rate hotels, yet fueled by a desire to write more theatre. In search of inspiration, Koltès lived a “vie de bohème”<sup>137</sup> but could always count on Gignoux’s material and moral support: “Ma pièce n’avance pas, je piétine, je me consume, et pas un mot sensé qui sorte; et Gignoux qui me talonne, qui veut voir, qui espère, qui est sûr,

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<sup>136</sup> “[o]ne can find a lot of pleasure going against the current, you know: to have no money in this society that glorifies money; to love against the rules in this society that sets rules for love. It is neither more absurd nor more dreadful than to make the opposite journey: it must be a question of physiological conformity.”

<sup>137</sup> “Bohemian life.”

qui projette, et moi avec cette merde entre les doigts” (*Lettres* 159).<sup>138</sup> Soon, Koltès presents to his mentor a new play, *L’Héritage*, which is his first original story. Once again, Gignoux provided his help: he recommended the manuscript to theatre critic Lucien Attoun who offered to record and broadcast the play on France Culture, a public radio station dedicated to the arts. Familiar figures of the Koltesian universe voiced the characters of *L’Héritage*: among them, Gignoux and Casarès. Despite this national broadcast, *L’Héritage* did not benefit from a stage production, and remained unpublished until 1998.

The 1970s were a period of geographic and artistic wandering for Koltès. He wrote four additional plays that also remained unpublished until after his death: *Récits morts* in 1973, which became the Théâtre du Quai’s final production; *Des voix sourdes* in 1974, specifically written as a radio play and recorded by Taroni in Strasbourg; followed the same year by *Le Jour des meurtres dans l’histoire d’Hamlet*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; and *Sallinger* in 1977, also an adaptation loosely based on J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Yet even at the height of his career, Koltès never pursued the publication of these early texts. Salino explains:

Ses premières pièces sont signées de son nom, Bernard Koltès. Bernard-Marie est venu plus tard, avec la publication de *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, qu’il considérait comme sa première vraie pièce. Marie était son deuxième prénom. Le tiret qui le relie à Bernard signe la marque revendiquée d’un écrivain, et la séparation résolue de la vie et de l’œuvre. (12)<sup>139</sup>

<sup>138</sup> “I’m not making any progress on my play, I am at a standstill, I am consumed with myself, and not a good word out of me. And Gignoux, hot on my heels, who wants to have a look, who hopes, who knows for sure, who plans. And here I am with this piece of shit in my hands.”

<sup>139</sup> “He signed his first plays with Bernard Koltès, his real name. Bernard-Marie appeared later, with the publication of *Night Just Before the Forests*, which he considered his true first play. Marie was his middle name. The dash that unifies Bernard and Marie embodies the decisive mark of an author, and the sheer separation between his life and his œuvre.”

In an interview with journalist Jean-Pierre Han in 1983, Koltès confessed that “[l]es anciennes pièces, je ne les aime plus, je n’ai plus envie de les voir montées. J’avais l’impression d’écrire du théâtre d’avant-garde ; en fait elles étaient surtout informelles, très élémentaires” (*Une part* 10).<sup>140</sup> Additionally, Chéreau notes that all the plays that Koltès wrote before *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* were either adapted or inspired by other works, and considers that “[l]a première fois où il a véritablement écrit seul un texte qui venait entièrement de lui, c’est *La Nuit*. Et c’est, je crois, cela le tournant” (“Quand Patrice” 20).<sup>141</sup> Thus, critical consensus dictates that Koltès’ œuvre for the stage can be divided into two categories. The first category includes his early plays that he refused to publish during his lifetime: *Les Amertumes*, *La Marche*, *Procès ivre*, and *Sallinger* (four adaptations of other texts written by authors whom he admired), *L’Héritage* and *Récits morts*, and unfinished works for the stage such as *Tabataba* and *Coco*. The second category includes six full-length plays: *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, *Combats de nègre et de chiens*, *Quai ouest*, *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, *Le Retour au désert*, and *Roberto Zucco*. These plays do represent best Koltès’ seminal literary legacy because he actively pursued their production and their publication, a gesture that suggests that he considered them to be the most exemplary of his playwriting project.

The 1970s were also a period of artistic experimentation. Koltès adapted *Récits morts* into a screenplay titled *La Nuit perdue*<sup>142</sup> and, with members of the Théâtre du

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<sup>140</sup> “[m]y previous plays, I don’t like them anymore, I don’t want to see them produced. I thought I was writing avant-garde theatre, but in fact they were mostly informal, very basic.”

<sup>141</sup> “[t]he first time he truly wrote a text that came completely from himself was *La Nuit*. And I believe that was the turning point.”

<sup>142</sup> “The Lost Night.”

Quai, began production in 1973. Although shooting was underway, they were forced to abandon the project due to technical and financial difficulties. This failure to complete *La Nuit perdue* surely contributed to the end of the Theatre du Quai the following year. In 1984, Koltès' passion for cinema inspired a second screenplay, *Nickel Stuff*, that he described to Bichette as "(Saturday Night Fever N°3). Casting: John Travolta, Robert De Niro, etc" (*Lettres* 482). Cinema—particularly American films and Kung Fu movies—represented an important part of Koltès' life, and its influence doubtlessly contributed to his postmodern and episodic style, which we will explore later in this study.

Another project stands out as a stylistic departure from theatre: Koltès' only novel, *La Fuite à cheval, très loin dans la ville*,<sup>143</sup> completed in 1976. In *The French Review*, Nina Hellerstein provides a critical analysis of the text:

The work is a curious mixture of different tendencies: along with the theme of disjointed, anonymous urban life, there is a surprising amount of fantasy, which alternates between the poetic and the repugnant. . . . The book is almost all dialogue, including some interior monologues; the style is surprisingly traditional, including many almost "oratory" or poetic passages. . . . In all, the work is an enigmatic, somewhat uncomfortable reading experience; however, it does contain certain unusual traits which signal it as a relatively original contribution to the present-day French novel. (648)

Koltès embraced the experimental and eclectic qualities of *La Fuite à cheval, très loin dans la ville* and submitted the text to Attoun in hope that it would be recorded and broadcast on France Culture, as had been the case with *L'Héritage* and *Des voix sourdes*. In the letter sent with the manuscript, Koltès explains: "Ce texte-ci est d'une forme beaucoup moins définitive, empruntant au théâtre, au découpage cinéma, au

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<sup>143</sup> "Escape on a Horse, Far Away in the City." Salino mentions that the original title was *La Ville aux chats*, which translates to *The City of Cats* (116).

poème, au roman” (278).<sup>144</sup> Editors rejected *La Fuite à cheval, très loin dans la ville* and the novel remained unpublished until 1984, after Koltès came to fame with Chéreau’s production of *Combat de nègre et de chiens*.

The 1970s were also a period during which Koltès travelled extensively. He embarked on many trips abroad, which included the U.S.S.R., the United Kingdom, the United States, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Guatemala, Mexico, and Morocco. These travels provided the playwright with a global perspective of the human experience, which in turn can be identified in his work for the stage. For example, *Combat de nègre et de chiens* is set in West Africa; Cécile in *Quai ouest* is an immigrant from South America; and the entire plot of *Le Retour au désert* springs from North-African post-colonial history. Thus, this period of Koltès’ life may be marked by instability, experimentation, and artistic failures, but it also represents a crucial step in the journey of a maturing artist.

Despite the numerous rejections, Koltès embarked on a new project. Actor Yves Ferry, a graduate of the TNS and a former member of the Théâtre du Quai who had recently moved to Paris, contacted Koltès about a potential collaborative project. Koltès agreed to write a piece for Ferry and Gignoux helped secure a rehearsal space for the new endeavor. This new play, *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*,<sup>145</sup> is structured as a long monologue spoken by an Arab immigrant. Bradby notes that “[t]his form of monologue was to be integrated into all of Koltès’ full-length plays. All of these are constructed on the pattern of a ‘deal’ that is done, and it is in the bargaining, the give-and-take that

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<sup>144</sup> “The structure of this text is less definitive. It borrows from theatre, from film editing, from poetry, and from the novel.”

<sup>145</sup> Originally titled *La Nuit juste avant les forêts du Nicaragua*, the last part of the title was dropped because it simply did not fit on the poster (Salino 122).

build up to the ‘deal’ that dramatic tension of this work is located” (*Modern French* 270). Koltès and Ferry decided to unveil *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* at the Festival d’Avignon during the summer of 1977. But despite Koltès’ best efforts, the show was not part of the official festival lineup and remained confined to one of Avignon’s many alternative performance spaces. Nevertheless, the production managed to generate interest from audiences and critics (Salino 124). During the following months, Ferry continued to perform *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* in various theatres across France. In his review for *Politique-Hebdo*, journalist Gilles Sandier encouraged audiences to attend a performance of the show: “[Q]uand vous apercevrez l’affiche quelque part, courez-y” (qtd. in Salino 126).<sup>146</sup> It is fair to conclude that the Festival d’Avignon served as a fundamental springboard for Koltès’ career and allowed him to return to success.

*La Nuit juste avant les forêts* was followed by two new projects. First, Bruno Boëglin asked Koltès to write a play inspired by *The Catcher in the Rye*, a novel by J.D. Salinger, for his theatre company based in Lyon. Koltès agreed and wrote *Sallinger*, which was produced in 1978 at the Théâtre de l’Eldorado. Despite this production, Koltès did not pursue the publication of *Sallinger*, which was finally first published in 1995. Thus, one can only assume that the author was not particularly satisfied with the final product, and that the success of his following play, *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, ultimately eclipsed *Sallinger* in his œuvre.

Koltès began writing *Combat de nègres et de chiens* in 1978 during a long trip in Central America. Closely guided by Gignoux, he continued working for months on the script of what is now considered his masterpiece. Then, Gignoux encouraged his

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<sup>146</sup> “[W]hen you spot the show poster somewhere, run to see the show.”

friend Chéreau to read *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* and *Combat de nègre et de chiens*.

Chéreau recalls:

Hubert Gignoux, me parle de cet auteur. Il a travaillé avec lui à Strasbourg. Il me dit qu'il faut lire ces pièces. Je le fais. Jusqu'à cette date, je n'avais jamais vraiment croisé d'auteur contemporain, peut-être parce que je n'avais pas suffisamment de curiosité pour eux. C'est le premier écrivain d'aujourd'hui auquel je me sois vraiment attaché. A partir de cette rencontre, je l'ai côtoyé et je l'ai accompagné dans son œuvre. J'ai un peu été un passeur : oui, j'ai fait « passer » son œuvre, me semble-t-il. (Chéreau 20)<sup>147</sup>

Indeed, Koltès' rapid rise to success is in part due to his close relationship with Chéreau and their long-lasting collaboration at the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers.

Chéreau was a well established film and stage director when, in 1982, Minister of Culture Jack Lang appointed him artistic director of the new state-funded theatre. Obviously, he was quite prepared for the task at hand, having served as co-director of the Théâtre National Populaire de Villeurbanne—another beacon of the “décentralisation théâtrale”—from 1971 to 1977. During his tenure at the TNP-Villeurbanne, he began working with scenographer Richard Peduzzi, who would also join the artistic team at Nanterre-Amandiers and would design the sets for Chéreau's productions of *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, *Quai ouest*, *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, and *Le Retour au désert*.

It is particularly notable that, to open the first season of what would become a leading cultural institution in the greater Parisian metropolis, Chéreau selected Koltès' *Combat de nègre et de chiens*. This production marks the beginning of a crucial

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<sup>147</sup> “Hubert Gignoux talks to me of this author. They worked together in Strasbourg. He tells me I should read his plays. I do it. Until then, I had never really met a contemporary playwright; maybe because I did not have the curiosity to seek them out. He is the first contemporary playwright I really cared about. After we met, I spent time with him and I accompanied him throughout his career. I became a facilitator: yes, it seems to me that I ‘facilitated’ his œuvre.”

collaboration between the playwright and the renowned director, who appear to find in each other a new and especially promising creative partner. In her study, *Koltès dramaturge*, Anne Françoise Benhamou compares the exceptional relationship between Koltès and Chéreau to the equally rich one between Chekov and Stanislavski (whose theories Koltès ironically rejects) and acknowledges the reciprocal artistic influence they must have had upon each other:

[L]a reconnaissance réciproque d'un auteur et d'un metteur en scène est un point d'impact où deux esthétiques se renforcent aussi bien en s'inspirant qu'en se démarquant l'une de l'autre. De ce choc superbe, une pièce comme *Combat de nègres de chiens* garde la trace vive.  
(166)<sup>148</sup>

The relationship between Chéreau and Koltès turned out to be so rewarding in fact that Chéreau insisted on directing any new play Koltès wrote, an arrangement to which Koltès readily agreed (Ubersfeld 52). Their collaboration continued with *Quai ouest*, followed by *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, and finally by *Le Retour au désert*. Chéreau's enthusiasm for Koltès's work provided him with the rare opportunity to see his work produced in one of the most critically acclaimed public theatres of Paris. It also allowed Koltès to establish himself as an important, unique, and prominent voice in French literary circles and beyond.

Further, it is also worthy to note that this relationship was beneficial to Chéreau, as well. In a 2013 interview published in *Le Magazine Littéraire*, Chéreau describes how Koltès influenced his appreciation for contemporary playwriting:

C'est aussi quelqu'un qui m'a permis de croire à nouveau en l'écriture théâtrale contemporaine. Il a ouvert une réflexion sur le monde d'aujourd'hui, il m'a fait comprendre ce monde. Koltès a su trouver les

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<sup>148</sup> “[T]he reciprocal recognition of an author and a director is the impactful moment of conjunction when two aesthetics strengthen each other through mutual inspiration as well as demarcation. A play like *Combat de nègre et de chiens* vividly reflects this superb sense of shock.”



bons instruments pour en parler, même s'il ne le fait pas d'une manière strictement réaliste. Jusqu'à ma rencontre avec lui, je croyais que le théâtre n'était pas, ou plus, accessible au contemporain, ne pouvait pas raconter le monde actuel. Je me trompais.<sup>149</sup>

When appointed artistic director of the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, Chéreau was in need of contemporary playwrights to fulfill the mission of the new theatre. For him, Koltès represented the long-awaited voice of contemporary theatre.

Other positive events that contributed to Koltès' rise preceded the production of *Combat de nègre et de chiens* at Nanterre-Amandiers, which would open in the spring of 1983. Among them, Jean-Luc Boutté directed Richard Fontana in a production of *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* at the Petit Odéon. For his performance, Fontana was awarded the prestigious Gerard Philippe acting award in 1982. Koltès was recognized with an award for his play by the "Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques" (SACD).<sup>150</sup> Meanwhile, Koltès also learned that Attoun had agreed to include *Combat de nègre et de chiens* in the collection *Théâtre Ouvert*<sup>151</sup> published by Stock, a series designed specifically to introduce new authors. Soon after, Koltès left for New York City where Françoise Kourilsky was working on the world premiere of *Combat de nègre et de chiens* at La MaMa Annex with the Ubu Repertory Theater in 1982. The review of the production, which appeared in the *New York Times*, explains that Kourilsky's Ubu Repertory Theater is "devoted to the worthwhile purpose of presenting contemporary French works in English translation" (Gussow). After being noticed at the

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<sup>149</sup> "He was also someone who helped me believe again in contemporary playwrighting. He launched a reflection upon today's world; he made me understand this world. Koltès found the right tools to discuss it, even if he does not do it in a strictly realistic manner. Until I met him, I believed that theatre was not, or no longer, accessible to that which is contemporary, that it could not recount today's world. I was wrong."

<sup>150</sup> "Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers." SACD is an organization in charge of advocating on behalf of authors and composers, particularly regarding issues of copyright.

<sup>151</sup> "Open Theatre."

Festival d'Avignon in 1977, Koltès incarnated an ideal candidate for the Ubu Repertory Theater: he was young, talented, and he advocated for the rebirth of French playwriting.

Chéreau and his creative team took possession of Nanterre-Amandiers in the summer of 1982. The opening season featured two productions: *Combat de nègre et de chiens* by Koltès and *Les Paravents*<sup>152</sup> by Genet. Chéreau explains his decision:

[J]'avais choisi deux œuvres contemporaines. . . . Cette double programmation, autour du continent africain et de l'Afrique du Nord, répondait à une logique : replonger dans l'empire colonial français. Avec tous les comédiens algériens, nord-africains ou blacks sur le plateau, il régnait à Nanterre une ambiance très forte et très sauvage. (Ubersfeld 44)<sup>153</sup>

Although stylistically different, the plays examine similar themes, in particular the relationship between Europe and Africa—specifically between whites and blacks—considered within the context of cultural domination and submission. Chéreau's preoccupation coincided with the emergence of a different vision of French society, one more diverse and more inclusive of its immigrant population. This social movement may be best embodied by the creation in 1984 of the advocacy group SOS Racisme, which fights racism, anti-Semitism, and a variety of other forms of discrimination. Chéreau's choices may have also resonated well with the residents of Nanterre, a lower-middle class community in the suburbs of Paris, characterized by a large student population and a left-leaning political ideology.

*Combat de nègre et de chiens* opened on February 21, 1983. According to the data presented in *Nanterre Amandiers: les années Chéreau, 1982-1990*, the show, headlined by veteran actor Michel Piccoli, was a box-office success (Nussac 20). "Ce

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<sup>152</sup> "The Screens."

<sup>153</sup> "I had selected two contemporary plays. . . . This double bill, which was centered around the African continent and North Africa, was designed to revisit the French colonial empire. With all the Algerian, North-African, or black actors on the stage, the atmosphere at Nanterre was intense and wild."

n'est pas un succès. C'est un triomphe" notes Salino (214).<sup>154</sup> After the initial run, the production moved to the TNP-Villeurbanne, followed by limited performances at the Munich Theatre Festival. Then, the production returned to Nanterre for a final run in June 1983. The critical response was mixed but passionate, as revealed by the following excerpts, which pertain specifically to the script and the playwright. These critics provide a broader understanding of how Koltès' work was first received in the national press. In *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Guy Dumur celebrates Koltès' style:

[K]oltès possède intelligence, charme et sensibilité et . . . ses obsessions sont celles d'un véritable écrivain, admirateur de Melville et de Conrad—de bonnes références. Bien que spectateur assidu de cinéma, il croit au langage et à l' "écriture." Sous une apparente simplicité, son style est très élaboré. . . . Sans démagogie aucune, il sait capter les lieux communs, la sottise, les angoisses de l'*homme quelconque*. (qtd. in Nussac 31. Emphasis in original)<sup>155</sup>

Likewise, Godard also praised the playwright's work in her review of the production for *Le Monde*:

Les personnages de Bernard-Marie Koltès pourraient appartenir à Faulkner ou à John Huston, ils sont de la famille des "misfits". Ils en ont la charpente solide et simple, la complexité vitale, hors psychologie. La complexité des forces primitives. Leur langage semble, lui aussi, simple, presque banal. Les mots le sont, mais ils s'articulent en phrases extrêmement composées, qui démultiplient les possibilités d'interprétation, expriment d'infinies nuances par les variations de rythme. Un langage très écrit, qui permet aux acteurs de jouer "direct" sans rien gommer des ambiguïtés ; même dans les longues tirades qui paraissent tout à fait naturelles.<sup>156</sup>

<sup>154</sup> "It's not a success. It's a triumph."

<sup>155</sup> "[K]oltès is intelligent, charming, and sensitive. His obsessions reflect those of a true author who admires Melville and Conrad—good references. Although he is a fervent aficionado of cinema, he believes in language and in 'writing.' His style may appear simple, but it is rather quite complex. . . . Without resorting to demagoguery, he knows how to capture the banal environment, the absurdity, and the fears of the everyday man."

<sup>156</sup> "Koltès' characters could be those of Faulkner or John Huston; they belong to the family of 'misfits.' Indeed, their framework is strong and simple, their complexity is intrinsic, and they exist beyond psychology. They are characterized by a complexity of primitive forms. Their language also appears simple, almost banal. The words are simple, but they form extremely intricate sentences, which multiply the possibilities of interpretation and express endless nuances through variations in rhythm."

Despite these positive reviews, other journalists were more critical. Most notoriously, Hervé Gauville and Jean-Pierre Thibaudat co-wrote a scathing three-page article for the daily newspaper *Libération*. “Koltès n’est pas Racine” proclaims Thibaudat, in a clear attempt to undermine Koltès’ emerging status as the next great French playwright (qtd. in Salino 212).<sup>157</sup> But in the end, *Combat de nègre et de chiens* stood out as the theatrical event of the season and Koltès became a part of the most prestigious literary circles.

Ultimately, Koltès became the unofficial playwright-in-residence during Chéreau’s tenure at Nanterre-Amandiers: “J’ai décidé, tout seul d’ailleurs, sans le dire à personne, que la prochaine pièce qu’il écrirait, je la monterai. Et après, j’ai décidé que toutes les pièces qu’il écrirait, je les monterai” reveals Chéreau during an interview on the literary television program *Le Cercle de minuit* (“Patrice Chéreau à propos”).<sup>158</sup> Thus, an exceptional and long-lasting artistic collaboration began between two extraordinary contemporary artists. As suggested by Vinaver, it represented a true commitment on behalf of the acclaimed director: “Chéreau a reconnu l’œuvre dans sa totalité et dans son devenir, indépendamment peut-on dire de toutes ses contingences. Sans doute cette élection a-t-elle aidé l’œuvre à se faire” (7).<sup>159</sup> Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine what Koltès’ œuvre may have become without Chéreau’s contribution to its materialization on the stage.

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<sup>157</sup> “Koltès is not Racine.”

<sup>158</sup> “I decided, on my own, without saying a word to anyone, that I would direct the next play he would write. And later, I decided that I would direct every play he would write.”

<sup>159</sup> “Chéreau recognized the œuvre in its entirety and understood what it would become, independent of its contingencies. Without a doubt, this choice contributed to the development of the œuvre itself.”

Moreover, this artistic partnership would not have flourished without the key institution that nurtured it. In this sense, the CDN at Nanterre-Amandiers played a fundamental role in the emergence of Koltès onto the national stage. Clearly, in the early 1980s, private theatres—organizations funded by box office revenue—would not have gambled on a production of *Combat de nègre et de chiens*. However, institutions of the “décentralisation théâtrale,” such as the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, had both the financial freedom and a public mandate to produce the work of new authors as part of their mission to cultivate theatrical life across France.

After *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, Chéreau directed *Quai ouest* in 1986. The production failed to attract audiences, but he remained true to his commitment to Koltès’ œuvre and programmed *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* for the following season. This latter show was a critical and box office success. “C’est magnifique” declares Salino in her review for the weekly magazine *L’Événement du jeudi* (qtd. in Nussac 167).<sup>160</sup> Meanwhile, Koltès accepted a new professional opportunity: in 1988, director Luc Bondy commissioned an original translation of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* for his upcoming production at Nanterre-Amandiers. Chéreau comments on this artistic endeavor:

Je crois que Shakespeare est mieux traduit par un écrivain comme Koltès . . . que par un traducteur. Je préfère toujours au théâtre une interprétation même un peu fausse, mais écrite par un poète, plutôt qu’un texte plus juste dans lequel on ne sent aucune langue. . . . C’est peut-être Bernard qui m’a fait comprendre cela avec son étrange traduction du Conte : il vaut toujours mieux de travailler avec de vrais auteurs. (“Quand Patrice” 20)<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> “It’s wonderful.”

<sup>161</sup> “I believe that Shakespeare is better translated by an author like Koltès . . . than by a translator. At the theatre, I always prefer a slightly flawed interpretation written by a poet to a more accurate text deprived of a true sense of language. . . . Bernard might be the one who made me understand this through his strange translation of *The Winter’s Tale*: it is always more interesting to collaborate with true authors.”

Clearly, this particular request underscores the idea that Koltès' use of language was relevant and innovative, and therefore an attractive feature that would help set apart Bondy's production of the classic play. After the translation of *The Winter's Tale*, Koltès explained that "[c]e fut une expérience incroyable; je referai une traduction de Shakespeare pour mon seul plaisir. Ce mec m'a appris la liberté. Il m'a beaucoup libéré par rapport aux règles du théâtre" (Une part 90).<sup>162</sup> Indeed, Koltès' interest in Shakespeare's work would, in part, inspire his last full-length play, *Roberto Zucco*.

In the fall of 1988, *Le Retour au désert* marked the final chapter in the Koltès-Chéreau collaboration. For this ambitious play, which tells the story of a provincial family in the context of the Algerian war of independence, Koltès envisioned the framework as a comedy. Amazingly, he convinced Chéreau to cast Jacqueline Maillan, queen of the "théâtre de boulevard"<sup>163</sup> and star of a multitude of private theatre productions, to play the female lead, Mathilde. But hiring Maillan was an expensive undertaking, so Chéreau had to build a co-production between Nanterre-Amandiers, the Théâtre du Rond-Point<sup>164</sup> (where the play was performed), and private investors. Undoubtedly, Koltès, Chéreau, and Maillan were all under tremendous pressure to produce excellent work: Koltès, because his last play had been so successful; Chéreau, because he had invested so much in Koltès' work; and Maillan, because she was taking an unprecedented professional risk by accepting a leading role in what some may have

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<sup>162</sup> "[i]t was an amazing experience; I will translate another of Shakespeare's plays for my own pleasure. This guy taught me freedom. He really liberated me from the conventional rules of theatre."

<sup>163</sup> "boulevard theatre."

<sup>164</sup> The Théâtre du Rond-Point stands as an especially important venue for contemporary theatre, since the institution is dedicated exclusively to producing plays by living playwrights.

considered an overly “intellectual” play. The show was not a smashing hit but the reviews were fairly positive. For example, Pierre Marcabru writes in *Le Figaro*:

*Le Retour au désert* est d’abord un grand sac, un fourre-tout, où l’enfant Koltès jette ses fantoches, ses pantins, son immense désespérance, sa soif d’autre chose, son angoisse, ses peurs, et son besoin quasi suicidaire d’aller ailleurs, nulle part, comme un Rimbaud qui met la clef sous la porte. C’est un patchwork aux couleurs contradictoires, mal fichu, mal cousu, avec ses soliloques, ses dialogues heurtés, ses aveux forcés, ses terreurs, ses dégoûts. C’est une pièce ni faite ni à faire mais où on sent, dans le meilleur comme dans le pire, un homme libre, debout, qui avec sa voix bien à lui nous dit des choses qui le concernent, qui le tarabustent, qui le blessent jusqu’à peut-être en mourir. Ce romantisme noir, insolent et sincère ne manque pas d’allure. On y sent un destin. (qtd. in Nussac 273)<sup>165</sup>

While this review points out some imperfections of the script, it also manages to capture the timeliness of the piece, particularly regarding the playwright’s life. In fact, Koltès long knew he was dying from complications from AIDS. But despite his diagnosis, he never wrote about his condition and continued to work, although he did so with an apparent sense of urgency, which may be what Marcabru intuitively perceived in *Le Retour au désert*.

Salino notes that Koltès was probably disappointed by the production of *Le Retour au désert* (321). Regardless of his true appreciation for the show performed at the Théâtre du Rond-Point, which remained undisclosed in his correspondence, this experience surely played a role in Koltès’ decision to break away from his exclusive relationship with Chéreau and to pursue a different director for the original production

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<sup>165</sup> “*Le Retour au désert* is, primarily, a large sack, a catch-all, where Koltès, like a child, throws his fantasies, his marionettes, his immense hopelessness, his thirst for something different, his anxiety, his fears, and his life-threatening need to go elsewhere, nowhere, like a Rimbaud who gave it all up. It is a patchwork of contrary colors, poorly made, poorly sewn together, with its soliloquies, its impaired dialogues, its forced confessions, its terrors, its disgusts. This play is a fool’s errand, but within which we recognize, through the best and the worse, a free man standing up, who tells us with his own original voice about the things that concern him, that bother him, that hurt him, maybe as far as things that can kill him. This dark romanticism, insolent and sincere, looks impressive. In this play, we perceive a real destiny.”

of his next play, *Roberto Zucco*. Hence, he asked Peter Stein, a director whom he had met at Nanterre-Amandiers, and whom he admired greatly, to create the play in Germany. It was a time of rupture for Koltès and Chéreau. It was also the end of an exceptional chapter in the history of French theatre. Chéreau provided his perspective:

Bernard m'a demandé de ne pas le faire, tout simplement. Il était sûrement très encombré par le fait que je monte toutes ses pièces : personne en France n'y touchait plus après. Il a dû en souffrir d'autant que dans le même temps les créations à l'étranger se multipliaient. La confusion entre mon univers de metteur en scène et l'œuvre de Koltès prenait, à l'époque, un tour gênant et injuste. . . . Finalement, je suis content de ne pas avoir monté *Roberto Zucco*. Je ne voulais pas apparaître comme la veuve ou le gardien de la flamme. ("Patrice Chéreau: Retour" 50)<sup>166</sup>

Koltès agreed with Chéreau and, by the end of 1988, considered their exclusive collaboration detrimental to the future of his plays. "[L]'étiquette Koltès-Chéreau est fausse" explained the playwright in an interview originally published in the German newspaper *Die Tageszeitung* (*Une part* 140).<sup>167</sup> It is possible that Koltès had outgrown their artistic relationship. It is also possible that, before his imminent death, he decided to free Chéreau and himself from a restricting legacy. Indeed, Koltès' attempt to divorce his œuvre from the work of Chéreau could have changed the way we examine his career. However, Koltès' death on April 15, 1989, a few months before Peter Stein's production of *Roberto Zucco* opened at the Schaubühne theatre in Berlin, sealed forever our understanding of Koltès as the playwright of one director: Chéreau.

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<sup>166</sup> "Bernard simply asked me not to do it. He was likely bothered by the fact that I was directing all of his plays: no one else in France worked on them after my intervention. It probably made him unhappy, especially because there was a growing number of productions abroad. At the time, the confusion between my world as a director and the world of his oeuvre had become embarrassing and unfair. . . . In the end, I am grateful I did not direct *Roberto Zucco*. I did not want to be considered the widow or the keeper of the flame."

<sup>167</sup> "The Koltès-Chéreau label is misleading."



## 1.5 Conclusion

The process of “décentralisation théâtrale,” which reshaped the landscape of French theatre throughout the twentieth century, played a determining role in the making of Koltès’ playwriting career. The CDE/TNS, the first institution of the “décentralisation,” ignited the love of theatre in Koltès’ heart, with a performance of *Médée*, starring the unforgettable Casarès. This public institution is also where Koltès received his sole formal training as a theatre student. But most importantly, the CDE/TNS served as a bridge between Koltès and Gignoux, the man who became his life-long mentor and the most enthusiastic advocate of his work. Later, the Festival d’Avignon, an alternative stage of the “décentralisation,” provided Koltès with a platform for his first mature play *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, and contributed to his rapid rise in literary circles. Finally, due in large part to Gignoux’s infallible support, Koltès began a close collaboration with Chéreau at Nanterre-Amandiers, which allowed him to take on the role of unofficial playwright-in-residence at a major CDN.

As explored in this first chapter, the founders of the “décentralisation théâtrale” often called for the renewal of the French repertoire and advocated for the active development of contemporary work. After the radical work of the great playwrights of the 1950s and early 1960s, such as Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Genet, new authors struggled to make a lasting contribution to French dramatic literature during the following decade, because the focus of the theatrical experience had shifted to more collective endeavors, such as works developed by Ariane Mnouchkine’s company Le Théâtre du Soleil.<sup>168</sup> Consequently, Koltès’ plays, which were brought to the stage in part via the phenomenon of the “décentralisation théâtrale,” embody the rebirth of

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<sup>168</sup> “The Theatre of the Sun.”

playwriting in the postmodern period. Moreover, Koltès' tragic death contributed to the iconization of his persona and to the crystallization of his œuvre as representative of the early postmodern period.

Of course, as noted by Judith Bernard, Koltès is “l’arbre qui cache la forêt” (166).<sup>169</sup> Other significant French playwrights emerged during the same period: among them, Vinaver, Jean-Claude Grumberg, Jean-Luc Lagarce, and Michel Azama. Thus, not a sole man, but an entire generation of authors reaffirmed the vitality of French dramatic literature, and, in turn, that of a new wave of playwrights, such as Reza, Joël Pommerat, and Laurent Gaudé, individuals who have carried on this tradition into the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, Bradby reminds us that Koltès “was undoubtedly the most important new young playwright of the 1980s” (*Modern French* 270) and that he stands as “an icon of high postmodernist art” (*Plays* xv). Certainly, Koltès' literary legacy, his magnetic beauty aesthetic immortalized by period photographs, and his premature death all contributed to the making of his iconic status as the principal figure in postmodern French drama.

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<sup>169</sup> “the tree hiding the forest.”

## Chapter Two

### The Language of the Deal: Multilingualism and Identity in Koltesian Theatre

#### 2.1 Koltesian Language

Among the six seminal plays written by Koltès, *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* presents a unique structure that stands apart from traditional theatre because of its departure from the dialogic form. Although two characters are featured in *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, only one of them speaks, while the other remains permanently silent. Thus, this play embodies, in fact, a long monologue that is entirely directed toward a mysterious and inactive interlocutor.<sup>170</sup> Koltès structures the play using curious punctuation—or rather, lack thereof—without periods, as one continuous sentence, which has the effect of a single, uninterrupted linguistic surge. It seems that, if the protagonist stopped speaking, if there was any space for a breath or for a doubt, his interlocutor might, somehow, shift the balance of power. However, the function of this language is not only hypnotic but also transactional. For Ubersfeld, Koltès' theatre is based on “l'acte de langage fondamental de la demande” (156).<sup>171</sup> In *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, as well as Koltès' other plays, this “demande” exists simultaneously as a request for material things, as an appeal for action, and as the expression of a desire, the object of which often remains undisclosed.

For example, about *Quai ouest*, Koltès explains that “on ne se trouve que devant des scènes de commerce, d'échanges, de trafic” (*Une part* 54).<sup>172</sup> Koltès reaffirms this

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<sup>170</sup> Although ‘interlocutor’ also refers to a particular role in Minstrel shows, I am using ‘interlocutor’ as understood in the field of socio-linguistics.

<sup>171</sup> “the request as the fundamental act of language.”

<sup>172</sup> “we only witness scenes of trade, exchanges, and trafficking.”

emphasis on the transactional relationship between characters in the brief introduction to the play *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, in which he identifies and defines what can be understood as the anchor point of his theatre: the concept of the *deal*.

Un *deal* est une transaction commerciale portant sur des valeurs prohibées ou strictement contrôlées, et qui se conclut, dans des espaces neutres, indéfinis, et non prévus à cet usage, entre pourvoyeurs et quémandeurs, par entente tacite, signes conventionnels ou conversation à double sens—dans le but de contourner les risques de trahison et d’escroquerie qu’une telle opération implique—, à n’importe quelle heure du jour et de la nuit, indépendamment des heures d’ouverture réglementaires des lieux de commerce homologués, mais plutôt aux heures de fermeture de ceux-ci. (7)<sup>173</sup>

Bradby explains that all of Koltès’ plays “are constructed on the pattern of a ‘deal’” and that “it is in the bargaining, the give and take that build up to the ‘deal’ that dramatic tension of his work is located” (*Modern* 270). Indeed, these fundamental deals, of which the nature can be explicit or implicit and material or immaterial, permeate Koltès’ playwriting work. It is especially this aspect of his use of language that I aim to analyze in the current chapter.

In *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, for instance, the nature of the deal set forth in the first scene is explicit and material: Alboury wants Horn to return the body of his dead brother, while Horn wants Alboury to accept a monetary payment, then leave without the body. Several deals in *Quai ouest* are also explicitly stated and revolve around tangible rewards: Claire promises her virginity to Fak if he gives her the distributor cap so she can prevent Charles, her brother, from leaving with the car. In

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<sup>173</sup> “A *deal* is a commercial transaction, based on values that are banned or subject to strict control, and that is concluded in a neutral space, indeterminate and not intended for this purpose, between suppliers and consumers, by means of tacit agreement, conventional signs or conversations with double meanings – with the aim of circumventing the risks of betrayal or swindle implied by this kind of operation—at any hour of the day or night, with no reference to the regulated opening hours for officially registered trading establishments, but usually at times of closure on the part of the latter.”

*Roberto Zucco*, the protagonist negotiates with his mother for the return of his beloved army fatigues, then la gamine<sup>174</sup> bargains with Zucco to learn his name, and later, in a scene unequivocally titled “Le Deal,” Le frère<sup>175</sup> parleys with le mac<sup>176</sup> for the right to force la gamine into prostitution (70-75).

On the other hand, the nature of what is being negotiated between Le dealer<sup>177</sup> and Le client,<sup>178</sup> the only two characters in *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, remains opaque and elusive. Are they negotiating a drug deal? Are they searching for a sexual partner? What could be at the center of their mysterious conversation? The text simply denies identification of a single clear answer. Philippe Sireuil, who directed the show in 1994, suggests that “il faut accepter qu’il y a une énigme et qu’on ne la découvre pas” (121).<sup>179</sup> Indeed, by depriving the audience of knowing what is at stake in the deal that unfolds on stage, Koltès redirects the attention to the act—and to the art—of negotiation itself, which gives to the play the breadth of a philosophical dialogue and the timelessness of a universal metaphor. Because the concept of “the deal” manifests itself in both form and content in *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, Bident considers it as a key to Koltès’ entire œuvre, “une pièce *transcendantale*, celle qui rend toutes les autres possibles à posteriori : c’est le degré zéro de l’œuvre, l’énergie impulsée, l’origine mais qui arrive à la fin” (“Je lis” 63).<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, Bident concludes that, in this play, “le véritable évènement, c’est l’évènement de parole,”<sup>181</sup> an

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<sup>174</sup> “the girl.”

<sup>175</sup> “the brother.”

<sup>176</sup> “the pimp.”

<sup>177</sup> “the dealer.”

<sup>178</sup> “the client.”

<sup>179</sup> “one must accept that there is an enigma and that it is not deciphered.”

<sup>180</sup> “a *transcendental* play, the one that makes all the others possible a posteriori: it is the zero degree of the œuvre, the first impetus, the origin but which comes at the end.”

<sup>181</sup> “the true event is the event of speech.”

observation that places language, which is the principal means to the negotiation of these deals, at the heart of Koltès' theatre ("Je lis" 63). In fact, the transactional quality of the dialogue is prompted by the structure of every Koltesian scene, which, according to Bradby, begins with "a tension arising from an encounter between two people, each of whom wants something from the other, each of whom is trying to *do* something to the other through the words that he or she speaks" (*Modern* 271. Emphasis in the original). Koltès himself acknowledges that language is what first drew him to playwriting: "Quand j'ai vu mon premier spectacle à vingt-deux ans, j'ai eu le sentiment que le principal, c'était le langage parlé. Au début, en tout cas, ce qui m'importait, ce n'était pas tant de raconter une histoire que de rendre des manières de langage" (*Une part* 31).<sup>182</sup> Thus, from the beginning of his career, Koltès was concerned with the possibilities of language in the context of a theatrical event and with the power of language as the primary element of dramatic action.

Koltesian language is immediately recognizable for its unique style, which the author and journalist Frédéric Martel describes as "[à] la fois très littéraire et très urbain," a striking "poésie moderne" (19).<sup>183</sup> Indeed, when Chéreau first read the manuscript of *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, he was particularly attracted to the innovative qualities of Koltesian language: "J'aimais la façon qu'avaient les gens de s'y exprimer et je n'avais lu ça nulle part ailleurs : le langage magnifique d'un poète qui semble venir d'une longue tradition, d'un usage incroyable de la langue française par

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<sup>182</sup> "When I saw my first show at age 22, I had the feeling that spoken language was the most important. At first, at least, to tell a story was not as important to me as to present various kinds of language." Koltès is referring to watching Maria Casarès play the role of Medea at the Centre dramatique de l'est.

<sup>183</sup> "both very literary and very urban" / "modern poetry."

les peuples colonisés, un usage inventif et dérangeant” (“Les années” 20).<sup>184</sup> Actor Isaach de Bankolé—whom Chéreau cast as the key characters of Abad in *Quai ouest*, Le dealer in *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, and le grand parachutiste noir<sup>185</sup> in *Le Retour au désert*—shares a similar admiration for Koltesian language, which he understands as the most important dramatic device in the playwright’s theatre: “Le théâtre de Koltès est un théâtre où le quotidien et le mythique, le langage direct et le métaphorique s’enchevêtrent magistralement. Le mode d’échange et les armes de ses protagonistes résident dans la parole et le verbe. Les personnages se construisent, s’affrontent ou se détruisent entièrement par le langage. . . .” (51).<sup>186</sup> In *Modern French Drama*, Bradby analyzes the structure of Koltesian language in *Combat de nègre et de chiens*:

The language has all the power and precision that we associate with French classical theatre, it is in no sense a copy of the language in which people on a West African construction site would really address one another. And yet Koltès does not use abstruse or unusual words: he remains strictly within the limits of the vocabulary that might be used in such circumstances and by such people. The consequence is that, as the characters speak, the audience sees their rhetoric undermined and understands clearly the discrepancy between their real intentions and the alibis they repeatedly try to construct. (273-75)

As suggested by Bradby, Koltesian language does not attempt to mimic realistic everyday speech. Instead, this language earns its heightened quality especially from its unique rhythm and complex grammatical structure, which support its rhetorical role, without relying on flowery vocabulary. Playwright and director Heiner Müller, who

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<sup>184</sup> “I loved the way people expressed themselves and I had never read this anywhere else: the magnificent language of a poet born out of a long tradition, of the incredible use of the French language by colonized people, inventive and disturbing.”

<sup>185</sup> “the great black paratrooper.”

<sup>186</sup> “Koltès’ theatre is a theatre where reality and myth, direct language and metaphorical language are superbly intertwined. The way its protagonists interact and the nature of their weapons are rooted in the word. The characters grow, fight and destroy each other entirely through language. . . .”

translated *Quai ouest* in German in 1986, echoes Chéreau's, Bankolée's, and Bradby's observations in speaking of Koltès: "Pour moi ce qu'il y a d'énorme, c'est ce mélange de Rimbaud et de Faulkner. Les personnages sont construits et développés entièrement à partir du langage" (12).<sup>187</sup> By comparing Koltès' writing style to an unexpected fusion between the styles of Symbolist French poet Arthur Rimbaud and American novelist William Faulkner (two pioneers of modernity and two authors whom Koltès admired greatly), Müller captures the complexity, the multiplicity, and the originality of Koltesian language.

In addition to the undeniable literary quality of his work, Koltès also introduces characters and situations that had remained until then vastly unexplored on the French stage. In *French Theatre Today*, Turk notes that Koltès was "among the first of his times to grapple with contemporary issues of race, gender, and postcolonialism," and that, through his extensive travels around the world and his eclectic cultural interests, he developed a theatre with an "international vision" (278). Turk also explains that "[h]is plays focus on foreigners, exiles, and the displaced—individuals who are literally always *en route*" (278). Certainly, Koltès' œuvre was deeply influenced by the phenomenon of rapid globalization that took place during his lifetime, which resulted in the ever-growing intersection of cultures and languages through constant and unprecedented migration of populations. In turn, Koltès reflects these complex cultural and linguistic realities in his work in a variety of ways, principally through the interweaving of multiple languages—a system of communication known as "multilingualism". Therefore, to better understand the function of multilingualism in

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<sup>187</sup> "What is most incredible, in my opinion, is way his texts combine Rimbaud and Faulkner. His characters are constructed and developed entirely on the basis of language."



Koltesian theatre, we must first reflect upon the nature of multilingual drama and the role it plays in postmodern dramatic literature.

## **2.2 Multilingual Drama**

Ranging from the direct insertion of a single word borrowed from a foreign language into a character's line, to an entire scene written in a different language, multilingual theatre encompasses a wide range of discursive configurations and features stories in which languages coexist, compete, and interact. These various forms of alternation of language result from deliberate "code-switching" (a term borrowed from the field of sociolinguistics) that establishes the existence of at least two distinguishable languages (i.e., codes) within the play.

There is often a primary language—French, obviously, in Francophone theatre—and one or several secondary languages, juxtaposed with and often used in contrast with the primary language. In Koltès' *Le Retour au désert*, for example, the primary language is French and the secondary language is Arabic. In *Quai ouest*, there are two secondary languages: Spanish and Quechua (a language spoken primarily in the Andes in South America). Theoretically, it is possible that a play could be written using two distinct languages somewhat equally, an interesting approach that would render the use of the terminology "primary language" and "secondary language" equivocal, blurring the more clear-cut lines of a monolingual perspective. Additionally, in the context of stage representation, the audience may not necessarily identify the primary language as the language most spoken in the play, but rather the language they consider to be their own primary language.

As noted by Dirk Delabastita and Ton Hoenselaars, evidence of multilingualism can be found throughout the history of dramatic literature because theatre is recognized as “the art form *par excellence* that manipulates ‘oral’ and ‘aural’ signs, and whose public and performative nature makes it particularly suitable for the construction and/or subversion of linguistic ideologies and identities” (1). One of the most notable examples of this phenomenon is found in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, in which the action takes place during the Hundred Years’ War between the Kingdom of France and that of England. The play is set in both countries and features both English and French characters. This setting alone “would justify that the French language appeared in some of the dialogues when communication occurs between French and British speakers,” as M. Gomez da Torre suggests (39). Indeed, when reading this play, it seems natural to witness the alternation between English and French because Shakespeare attempts to reflect the linguistic differences between the characters according to their country of origin. For example, Act III, scene 5 features an entire conversation in French between Katharine and Alice, her lady-in-waiting. Also, the final scene between King Henry V and Katharine features both languages:

KING HENRY V:	An angel is like you, Kate, and you are like an angel.
KATHARINE:	Que dit-il? que je suis semblable à un ange?
ALICE:	Oui, vraiment, sauf votre grace, ainsi dit-il.
KING HENRY V:	I said so, dear Katharine, and I must not blush to affirm it.
KATHARINE:	O bon Dieu! les langues des hommes sont pleines de tromperies. (146-47) <sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> I will not be providing a translation for excerpts from Shakespeare’s *King Henry V* and Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* since I use these texts simply to illustrate the composition of multilingual drama. However, I will provide translations for excerpts from Wajdi Mouawad’s *Sœurs* and Koltès’ *Combat de nègre et de chiens* as I refer to these texts to explore structural and literary aspects of multilingualism in playwriting.

There is clearly an effort on the part of Shakespeare to use language in order to polarize the characters and to emphasize the political and cultural conflict that serves as the historical background for the play. Indeed, one could argue more generally that multilingualism in *Henry V* works towards unifying the English-speaking audience of the time against the French-speaking characters. Hence, Shakespeare appeals (intentionally or not) to a latent linguistic nationalism, which had permeated the recent history of England since the reign of Henry V, a period during which “the French language appeared more and more as an occupying enemy” (Steinsaltz 320). Beyond the political importance of the scenes that feature interactions between characters who speak different languages, multilingualism also provides an opportunity for humor, as demonstrated by Shakespeare’s willingness to wholeheartedly embrace “the comic spectacle of French people mispronouncing English” (Steinsaltz 326). Thus the element of ideology, and even bias, can come into play in the dynamics of multilingualism.

The way in which Shakespeare and other playwrights, such as Carlos Lacámara, Tom Coash, and Roger Auger,<sup>189</sup> use foreign languages is similar to the manner by which they use regional dialects and a wide range of linguistic registers, which both represent playwriting devices aimed at creating a unique idiolect for each character. In turn, these idiolects provide the audience with a wealth of information regarding the character’s origin, education, cultural affiliations, and much more. However, it is important to point out a substantial difference between the use of various dialects or registers and the dynamics of multilingual drama. In the first case, there is an implicit agreement between the playwright and the audience, the result of an age-old deal

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<sup>189</sup> For example, *Nowhere on the Border* (2006) by Carlos Lacámara, *Veils* (2014) by Tom Coash, and *Je m’en vais à Regina* (1975) by Roger Auger.

between theatre-makers and theatre-watchers, that the text in its entirety is understandable by all. But in the case of multilingualism, the playwright intentionally inserts elements that may well not be understood by a large portion of the audience. Thus, multilingual theatre further multiplies the potentially complex relationships between the audience and the play in performance. As explained by John B. Weinstein in his study of multilingual theatre in contemporary Taiwan, “[t]hese works incorporate multiple languages into a single performance, providing a viewing experience that differs for each member of the audience, depending on their own language skills and family background” (269). Therefore, multilingual drama deliberately creates a rift within the audience between those who have the capacity to understand all the languages spoken on stage and those who do not have those skills. I believe this challenge represents one of its most provocative aspects.

Occasionally, multilingualism can result in the creation of a new hybrid language, as demonstrated in Luis Valdez’ 1979 play, *Zoot Suit*, an iconic work of the Chicano Theatre. For Valdez and his theatre company, El Teatro Campesino, theatre was a political act designed in part to “encourage Mexican-Americans to take pride in their heritage,” as Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy have argued (519). In *Zoot Suit*, Valdez uses constant code-switching to combine the grammar and the vocabulary that belong to two distinct languages—English and Spanish—in order to recreate a language unique to the Chicano community. The following excerpt provides a typical example of the rapid code-switching in this particular play:

DOLORES: (*Sighs, resigns herself.*) Mira, hijo. I know you work hard for your clothes. And I know how much they mean to you. Pero por Diosito santo. I just don’t see what you see en esa cochinada de “soot zoot.”

HENRY: (Smiling) Drapes, 'amá, we call them drapes.  
DOLORES: (Scolding playfully) Ay sí, drapes, muy funny, ¿verdad?  
And what do the police call them, eh? They've put you in  
jail so many times. ¿Sabes qué? I'm going to send them  
all your clothes! (33-34)

It is also worthy of note that many characters in *Zoot Suit* are bilingual and that a detailed study of each character's idiolect could help us further understand and appreciate their political, social, and cultural relationships. For example, actors could conduct such an analysis to inform the development of their characters during the production process. In other words, the hybrid language that Valdez proposes has the potential to be as nuanced and complex (or even more so) as the language found in a play written solely in English or one written solely in Spanish.

After a smashing run in Los Angeles in 1978, *Zoot Suit* opened on Broadway the following year. Despite enjoying a very modest success in New York, this atypical production managed to legitimize the Chicano Theatre movement and effectively “brought issues of the Mexican-American community into mainstream consciousness,” as Shakina Nayfack asserts (164). For Yves-Charles Grandjeat, *Zoot Suit* on a commercial Broadway stage represents “une tentative de prise de pouvoir culturel” (251).<sup>190</sup> Indeed, the power of multilingual theatre is often rooted in the desire of a minority community to be more authentically represented in the dominant culture. Certainly, this facet of multilingual theater is critical, and calls for future scholarly analysis.

Multilingualism can also be identified as an especially important trend in Francophone dramatic literature, particularly in Canada; as Julie Byczynski notes, “[c]ontemporary Canadian plays that are by and/or about immigrants often employ

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<sup>190</sup> “an attempted cultural coup.”

untranslated minority languages” (68). This choice reflects the rich linguistic diversity of that country and brings to the stage the historical contention between English and French speakers, as well as the languages newly introduced by immigrant populations, particularly from the Middle East and from Asia, such as Persian and Punjabi. Thus, it is not surprising to discover that code-switching is a predominant characteristic of works by contemporary Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad. For example, in the 2015 play, *Sœurs*,<sup>191</sup> which focuses on the cultural tensions underlying Canada’s linguistic landscape, Mouawad makes use of French as the primary language and English as the secondary one. The play tells the story of Geneviève Bergeron, a bilingual speaker and member of the Franco-Manitoban community, which is a relatively small French-speaking community established in the central Canadian province of Manitoba. While traveling, Geneviève spends a tumultuous night in a hotel room entirely controlled by domotic systems. The technology forces her to speak only in English because the French setting for the vocal commands no longer works properly. Unable to locate a light switch, Geneviève finds a leaflet in the bedside table and reads the directions. Then, she attempts to use the vocal command to turn on the lights:

GENEVIÈVE BERGERON: Lumière?  
*Il ne se produit rien.*  
 GENEVIÈVE BERGERON: Lumière!  
*Toujours rien.*  
 GENEVIÈVE BERGERON: Light!  
*Les lumières de la chambre s'allument. (18)*<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Sisters.

<sup>192</sup> “GENEVIÈVE BERGERON: Lights? / *Nothing happens.* / GENEVIÈVE BERGERON: Lights! / *Still nothing.* / GENEVIÈVE BERGERON: Light! / *The bedroom lights turn on.*”

This brief moment from the work encapsulates the oppressive linguistic dominance of the English language in Canadian society and highlights “l'exil 'intérieur' des Québécois dépossédés de leur culture,”<sup>193</sup> as noted in a theatre review published in *Les Échos* (“Les deux ‘Sœurs’”). When Geneviève speaks French, the technology does not recognize her command; therefore she is ignored, literally and figuratively left in the dark.

Not only does the technology deny Geneviève any kind of power, it also acts to erase her identity. When she opens the mini-bar in her hotel room, an automated voice greets her in English. The voice is unable to pronounce correctly her Francophone name, and instead delivers a butchered version of it, as if that name itself did not belong within the framework of language.

RÉFRIGÉRATEUR: Dear Dgenevivi Burguer-on. You are a privileged customer, and we wish to remind you that you can purchase all items in this refrigerator at a discount price. (21)

The stubborn attitude of the appliances in the hotel room represents in many ways the ever-growing dominance of the English language in our rapidly globalizing society. Geneviève is thus presented as unable to exist outside of the linguistic parameters set by the machine, a figure that symbolizes the mainstream cultural norm. After a frustrating experience with the refrigerator, and later the television, Geneviève calls the hotel manager to complain about the malfunctioning technology:

GENEVIÈVE BERGERON: . . . Ahhhh! L’anglais fonctionne toujours par défaut / Oui, mais si la personne ne sait pas parler l’anglais, qu’est-ce qu’elle fait ? Elle est punie ? Vous la punissez d’avoir été mauvaise à l’école et d’avoir coulé son cours de langue seconde, c’est-tu ça ? /

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<sup>193</sup> “The ‘inner’ exile of Quebecois deprived of their culture.”

Madame, je suis avocate et je vous rappelle qu'en vertu de la loi canadienne sur les langues officielles vos clients devraient pouvoir être servis en anglais et en français, que ce soit par des humains ou par des machines / . . . Ben oui ! J'en fais une affaire personnelle Madame, c'est mon nom, y'a pas plus personnel, c'est une question de principe . . . . (26)<sup>194</sup>

This question of identity is central in Mouawad's work and it reflects the complexity of his own cultural journey from being raised in Beirut to moving and working, first in Quebec, and later Paris. In *Sœurs*, Mouawad demonstrates that code-switching can be a valuable playwriting device to tackle such timely and significant themes as multiculturalism, shifting cultural identity, and immigration.

### 2.3 Multilingualism and Race in *Combat de nègre et de chiens*

Multilingualism appears primarily in four of Koltès' plays: *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, *Quai ouest*, *Le Retour au désert*, and *Roberto Zucco*. These plays present a diverse set of languages rooted in the characters' cultural origins. In *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, the character of Albourey speaks Wolof and the character of Léone speaks German. In the final scenes of *Quai ouest*, Cécile, an immigrant from South America, speaks Spanish and Quechua. In *Le Retour au désert*, Mathilde, Aziz, and Saïfi, three characters who previously lived in Algeria, express themselves both in French and in an

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<sup>194</sup> "GENEVIÈVE BERGERON: . . . Ahhhh! English always works because it's the default language / Yes, but if the person doesn't speak English, what are they supposed to do? Are they punished? You punish them because they were a bad student at school and because they failed their foreign language course, is that it? / Madam, I am an attorney and I would like to remind you that according to Canadian law regarding official languages, your clients should be served in English and in French, whether by humans or by machines / . . . Of course, I take this personally Madam, it's my name, there is nothing more personal than that, it's a matter of principle. . . ."



Arabic dialect throughout the play. And in *Roberto Zucco*, at the end of scene XIII,<sup>195</sup> entitled “Juste avant de mourir,”<sup>196</sup> Zucco, drunk and beaten, quotes Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* in his native Italian (50). Although these characters are fluent in French, they choose not to speak French in certain situations and opt instead to use another language. Through the use of multilingualism and through the racial and cultural diversity of his characters, Koltès challenges the deep-seated conservatism of the French stage, a theatrical space traditionally inhabited by white characters who speak in the language considered most deferential to the rules of the Académie Française, which is of course French. Nevertheless, and despite a significant body of critical material on the subject of Koltesian language,<sup>197</sup> scholars have not yet explored the question of multilingualism in his plays. Yet the striking presence of multilingualism throughout Koltès’ œuvre represents a defining postmodern characteristic of his work, certainly worthy of further study.

Koltès hails from Alsace-Lorraine, a historically bicultural and bilingual region of north-eastern France, where one could assume that he experienced, at least moderately, the constant interactions of French and German cultural and linguistic influences. Metz itself, the city in which Koltès spent his formative years as a student, provided him with another significant cultural and linguistic experience. Koltès attended the Collège Saint-Clément from 1959 to 1967. Saint-Clément was a Jesuit boarding school located at the heart of Pontiffroy, a working-class neighborhood home

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<sup>195</sup> In *Roberto Zucco*, Koltès identifies each scene with roman numerals and a specific title.

<sup>196</sup> “Just before dying.”

<sup>197</sup> See for example *Bernard-Marie Koltès: L'Esthétique d'une argumentation dysfonctionnelle* (2011) by Samar Hage, “Du dialogique au dialogal” (2013) by Marie-Hélène Boblet, and *Koltès dramaturge* (2014) by Anne-Françoise Benhamou.

to a large population of first-generation immigrants from North Africa. In an interview published in *Le Républicain Lorrain*, Koltès recalls the importance of Pontiffroy in his understanding of his cultural and linguistic identity:

Entre douze et seize ans, les impressions sont décisives; je crois que c'est là que tout se décide. Tout. Moi, évidemment, en ce qui me concerne, c'est probablement cela qui m'a amené à m'intéresser davantage aux étrangers qu'aux Français. J'ai très vite compris que c'était eux le sang neuf de la France; que si la France vivait sur le seul sang des Français, cela deviendrait un cauchemar, quelque chose comme la Suisse, la stérilité totale sur le plan artistique et sur tous les plans. (*Une part* 116)<sup>198</sup>

It appears that, for Koltès, Pontiffroy provided a kind of cultural oasis in vivid contrast with the conservative atmosphere of Metz, which was, at that time, a city dominated by a notable presence of military forces. The fundamental memories of that period resurfaced in *Le Retour au désert*, which takes place in an unnamed town (yet clearly similar to Metz) that the stage directions describe as “[u]ne ville de province, dans l’est de la France, au début des années soixante” (9).<sup>199</sup> Among other themes, the play explores the tensions between the members of a bourgeois family—centered around brother and sister Mathieu and Mathilde Serpenoise—and takes place after the end of the Algerian War of Independence, an event which remains divisive in the history of France, unfortunately renown for its violent and chaotic consequences. To bring this moment in history to life, Koltès introduces several Arabic-speaking characters as early as the opening scene of the play, which establishes a multilingual and multicultural

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<sup>198</sup> “Between twelve and sixteen years old, impressions are decisive; I believe that is when everything falls in place. Everything. For me, of course, that is probably what prompted me to be more interested in foreigners than in French people. I quickly understood that they were the new blood of France; that if France only lived through the blood of French people, it would become a nightmare, something like Switzerland, total sterility when it comes to the arts and everything else.”

<sup>199</sup> “[a] provincial city, in Eastern France, in the early 1960s.”

environment that, we could presume, echoes the voices that surrounded his childhood at Pontiffroy.

But unlike Valdez and Mouawad, Koltès explores multilingualism far beyond the particular circumstances of his own community. In fact, he actively sought out the experience of cultural and linguistic dissonance by travelling abroad frequently, including repeated trips to Africa, South America, and the United States. Koltès describes how the linguistic isolation that he encountered during extended trips abroad contributed to his writing process: “On entretient un rapport avec le langage dans un pays étranger qui est étonnant. . . . On prend une espèce de plaisir parce qu'on est très seul. C'est une langue qu'on ne parle pas un ou deux mois. L'écrire à côté, c'est étrange. On a l'impression de retrouver sa langue. De la retrouver autrement” (*Une part* 77-78).<sup>200</sup> By allowing himself to experience this kind of linguistic rupture and the isolation that often accompanies it, Koltès was able to both reexamine his relationship with the French language and to further explore the function of language in playwriting:

La langue française, comme la culture française en général, ne m'intéresse que lorsqu'elle est altérée. Une langue française qui serait revue et corrigée, colonisée par une culture étrangère, aurait une dimension nouvelle et gagnerait en richesses expressives, à la manière d'une statue antique à laquelle manquent la tête et les bras et qui tire sa beauté précisément de cette absence-là. Par exemple, dans ma prochaine pièce, tous les personnages parlent le français sans qu'il soit la langue maternelle d'aucun d'eux. Cela apporte une modification profonde de la langue, comme lorsqu'on fait un long séjour dans un pays étranger dont on ignore la langue et que l'on retrouve la sienne modifiée, de même que ses propres structures de pensées. (*Une part* 26-27)<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> “We experience a surprising relationship with language while traveling abroad. . . . There is a kind of pleasure because we are very much alone. It's a language that we don't speak for a month or two. To write it on the side is strange. We feel like we are rediscovering our language. Rediscovering it transformed.”

<sup>201</sup> “I am only interested in the French language, or French culture in general, when it has been altered. A French language revised and corrected, colonized by a foreign culture, would have a new dimension and would gain in expressivity, not unlike an ancient statue that is missing its head and its arms and that

Koltès examines and challenges the relationship between language and identity (which represents a fundamental component of the Koltesian deal), a project that reminds us of the one that lies at the heart of Jacques Derrida's *Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ou la prothèse d'origine*, in which the philosopher questions the legitimacy of any language considered as intrinsically authentic to oneself. Through the lens of colonialism—also a central theme in *Combats de nègre et de chiens* and *Le Retour au désert*—, Derrida suggests the following paradox: “Je n’ai qu’une langue et ce n’est pas la mienne, ma langue ‘propre’ m’est une langue inadmissible. Ma langue, la seule que je m’entende parler et m’entende à parler, c’est la langue de l’autre” (47).<sup>202</sup> If, according to Derrida, our control over language is only an illusion, the Koltesian deal appears compromised and, potentially, unachievable. The questions raised by Derrida, when considered in relation to the work of Koltès are potentially very rich and call for future exploration. Moreover, further questions regarding language and identity arise in all of Koltès’ plays and transpire, in part at least, through the repeated use of multilingualism. As a result, the French language, and by extension everything it represents, such as France’s political, social, and cultural histories, is simultaneously erased and summoned, condemned and celebrated, in a unique and challenging gesture on the part of the playwright.

In January 1978, Koltès embarked on a truly formative trip to Nigeria where he witnessed first-hand the relationship between European managers and African laborers

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draws its beauty precisely from that absence. For example, in my next play, all the characters speak French but it is not their mother tongue. It brings a profound modification to the language.”

<sup>202</sup> “I have only one language and it is not mine; my ‘own’ language is, for me, a language that cannot be assimilated. My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other.”

on a large construction site run by a multinational company. In a long and thoughtful letter to Gignoux, his friend and mentor, he describes the transformative effect of this journey, reflects lengthily upon his leftist political views, and, perhaps surprisingly, discloses his attraction to black men: “Je suis tenté de reconnaître la supériorité de la race noire sur la race blanche! Alors, je me contiens, . . . je refoule toutes ces choses le plus bas possible, je les emballe hermétiquement et mets les pieds dessus en disant : 'tout cela c'est des histoires de cul'" (*Lettres* 314).<sup>203</sup> The complex ideas surrounding race relationships, the taboo attitudes often associated with same-sex attraction and interracial sex, and the culture shock experienced during this specific trip become major elements in his next play, *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, which Chéreau directed as the inaugural production at the new Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers in the spring of 1983.

*Combat de nègre et de chiens* takes place on the construction site of a French company in an undisclosed area in West Africa. The play tells the story of Alboury, a young black man who broke into the site in order to claim the body of his brother, a laborer killed in a truck accident on the previous day. Cal and Horn, his European interlocutors, live in complete autarky in this culturally sealed enclave where they work as engineer and project manager. Alboury observes that the white men are “de la même race,”<sup>204</sup> “de la même langue,”<sup>205</sup> and “de la même tribu,”<sup>206</sup> at once effectively interweaving the question of race, language, and community, while establishing black and white as opposites, even adversaries (84). Koltès reinforces the conflict between the

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<sup>203</sup> “I am tempted to recognize that the black race is superior to the white one! This, I contain myself, . . . I repress all of these things as deeply as possible, I wrap them hermetically and step on them while saying: ‘all of this is just about sex.’”

<sup>204</sup> “of the same race.”

<sup>205</sup> “of the same language.”

<sup>206</sup> “of the same tribe.”

characters by borrowing the name “Alboury” from King Alboury Ndiaye, a quintessential figure of the resistance against French colonial expansion in West Africa in the nineteenth century. Certainly, Koltès underscores that the dramatic conflict—the worker’s death that happened before the play begins—exists within a larger economic and political context that opposes two continents: Europe and Africa.

The opening scene of *Combat de nègre et de chiens* reveals two strangers, Horn and Alboury, staring at each other in the middle of the night. A notable motif in his plays, the confrontation of two opposites engaged in some sort of dealmaking appears often: Koch and Charles—rich and poor—in *Quai ouest*, Le dealer and Le client—black and white—in *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*—, or Zucco and le monsieur—young and old—in *Roberto Zucco*. For the playwright, the process of negotiation between the two strangers is laundered when the dialogue begins: “L’échange des mots ne sert qu’à gagner du temps avant l’échange des coups, parce que personne n’aime recevoir des coups et tout le monde aime gagner du temps” (“Si un chien” 25).<sup>207</sup> Immediately, Horn emphasizes the importance of language as if he were comparing his weapon to Alboury’s in order to assess his chances of survival:

HORN. — En tous les cas, vous vous exprimez admirablement en français; en plus de l’anglais et d’autres langues, sans doute; vous avez tous un don admirable pour les langues, ici. (11)<sup>208</sup>

Horn’s observation is significant especially for two reasons. On the one hand, it establishes that the European man fears to be at a linguistic disadvantage: he only speaks his own language, while Alboury speaks French and possibly, even probably,

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<sup>207</sup> “The exchange of words is only meant to play for time before the exchange of punches, because no one likes to be punched and everyone likes to play for time.”

<sup>208</sup> “HORN. — In any case, you express yourself in French admirably well; as well as in English and other languages, I suppose; everyone here seems to have a notable gift for languages.”

other languages. On the other hand, it reveals the perceived socio-cultural superiority of Horn, through the fact that he can work in West Africa without having to learn Wolof, or, in other words, without having to engage—or even acknowledge—the culture of the country. It is implied that business on the construction site is conducted in French because it is the primary language of the management team. Thus, the site still retains the socio-political structure of the by-then defunct French colonial empire. Indeed, Alboury's community seems to be presented with a choice: if one wants to work for this foreign construction company, one must abandon Wolof and learn French. Koltès writes that Alboury “est le seul qui se sert des mots dans leur valeur sémantique: parce qu’il parle une langue étrangère” (*Une part* 21).<sup>209</sup> Alboury's language is clear and concise, constructed with an accumulation of short sentence fragments: “Je suis Alboury, venu chercher le corps de mon frère, monsieur” (9).<sup>210</sup> He appears linguistically forthright and honest. “[P]our lui un chat est un chat” explains Koltès (*Une part* 21).<sup>211</sup> On the contrary, Horn and Cal use French, their native language, to manipulate the situation, especially through lies, connotations, and double-meanings. Koltès imagines that “si Horn employait le même langage qu’Alboury qui lui dit: ‘je viens chercher le corps de mon frère,’ il répondrait: ‘il est en train de flotter dans l’égout’” (*Une part* 22).<sup>212</sup> In order to retrieve the body of his brother, Alboury must reach a deal with Horn, for which he must conduct the negotiation in French, the language of his oppressor. Because Alboury does not master the French language with the dexterity of a native speaker, and despite his ability to speak several languages, he may, in turn, be

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<sup>209</sup> “is the only one who uses words for their semantic value: because he speaks a foreign language.”

<sup>210</sup> “My name is Alboury, here to retrieve my brother's body, sir.”

<sup>211</sup> “[F]or him a cat is a cat.”

<sup>212</sup> “if Horn used language as Alboury does, when Alboury says ‘I am here to claim my brother's body,’ he would reply to him ‘he is floating in the sewers’.”

considered at a linguistic disadvantage, emphasizing yet again the perceived superiority of the white men.

For some scholars, *Combat de nègre et de chiens* has been interpreted as “une fable sur les méfaits du néocolonialisme,”<sup>213</sup> as Michel Bertrand suggests (61).

Nevertheless, Koltès advocates for a more nuanced interpretation of his play; he states:

“C’est sûr, il y a cette dimension politique, mais pas au sens dogmatique” (*Une part* 35).<sup>214</sup> Although neocolonialism and racial relationships between Blacks and Whites embody undeniably prominent themes in the play, Koltès repeatedly redirects their central role and argues for a more universal reading of his work:

De quoi parle *Combat de nègres et de chiens* ? . . . Elle ne parle pas, en tous les cas, de l’Afrique et des Noirs—je ne suis pas un auteur africain—, elle ne raconte ni le néocolonialisme ni la question raciale. Elle n’émet certainement aucun avis. . . . Ma pièce parle peut-être, un peu, de la France et des Blancs—une chose vu de loin, déplacée, devient parfois plus symbolique, parfois plus déchiffrable. (*Une part* 11-12)<sup>215</sup>

So, rather than confining the play to a limited commentary on neocolonialism and race, Koltès also explores these themes in order to reveal the deep feeling of alienation that he experienced personally during the trip to Nigeria, as well as by all the characters in the story. In “Comment porter sa condamnation,” a conversation with Guibert originally published in the newspaper *Le Monde* and later included in *Une part de ma vie*, he further develops this idea: “Quand on va au Nigeria on se retrouve face aux Noirs, on se regarde, on se rencontre, on sent un fossé immense. On en cherche l’origine : est-ce parce qu’on ne parle pas leur langue, est-ce parce qu’on est blanc ? N’est-ce pas plutôt

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<sup>213</sup> “a fable depicting the negative consequences of neocolonialism.”

<sup>214</sup> “Certainly, this political aspect is present, but not in a dogmatic sense.”

<sup>215</sup> “What is *Combat de nègre et de chiens* about? . . . It is not, in any way, about Africa or Blacks—I am not an African author—, it does not treat neocolonialism nor race. Certainly, it does not provide an opinion. . . . Maybe, my play is a little bit about France and Whites—something observed from a distance, displaced, sometimes becomes more symbolic, more decipherable.”



une chose plus énorme et plus compliquée?” (19).<sup>216</sup> In *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, this feeling of alienation and the experience of loneliness transpire in a sophisticated and kaleidoscopic approach: spatially through the enclosed construction site, visually through race, and aurally through multilingualism.

This understanding of Blacks and Whites as predestined opposites, which Jean-Marc Lanteri refers to as “[l]e conflit Noir-Blanc,”<sup>217</sup> is inherent to Koltès’ vision of the world and stands as a recurring characteristic in his œuvre (20). Certainly, Koltès openly stated that black characters would remain an essential feature of his plays: “Me demander d’écrire une pièce, ou un roman, sans qu’il y en ait au moins un, même tout petit, même caché derrière un réverbère, ce serait comme de demander à un photographe de prendre une photo sans lumière” (*Une part* 61).<sup>218</sup> Indeed, Lanteri clearly identifies a Koltesian tetralogy of plays articulated around the figure of the black man: *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, *Quai ouest*, *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, and *Le Retour au désert*. It is worth noting that, however, there is an unexplained rupture with *Roberto Zucco*, Koltès’ final play, which does not feature any explicitly black characters. Despite this apparent dramaturgical shift, Koltès still awakens the soul of Africa during the scene between Zucco and La Gamine:

ZUCCO. — Je connais des coins, en Afrique, des montagnes tellement hautes qu’il y neige tout le temps. Personne ne sait qu’il neige en

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<sup>216</sup> “When you travel to Nigeria, you find yourself in front of Blacks, you look at each other, you meet each other, you discern a huge divide. You look for the origin of that divide: is it because you do not speak the same language, is it because you are white? But instead, is it not something much larger and complex?”

<sup>217</sup> “[t]he Black-White conflict.”

<sup>218</sup> “Asking me to write a play, or a novel, without at least one, even tiny, even hidden behind a street light pole, that would be like asking a photographer to take a photograph without light.”

Afrique. Moi, c'est ce que je préfère au monde : la neige en Afrique qui tombe sur des lacs gelés. (25)<sup>219</sup>

The playwright surprises the reader by unexpectedly associating the color white with the African continent, a powerful choice that immediately, and by omission, evokes the opposite color: black. Moreover, Zucco describes this blindingly white African landscape, where he saw “des rhinocéros blancs qui traversent le lac, sous la neige,”<sup>220</sup> as a world deserted by men, without a soul in sight. This absence of black men in Zucco's African vision mirrors the absence of black characters in the *dramatis personæ* of the play itself.<sup>221</sup> Thus, by considering *Roberto Zucco* in the context of Koltès' entire œuvre, black characters become unavoidably present in the play, in a paradoxical sense: because of their very absence. Lanteri reminds us that director Jean Louis Martinelli<sup>222</sup> decided to cast Cameroonian actor Apha Atangana as Le balèze,<sup>223</sup> in his 1995 production of *Roberto Zucco* at the Théâtre National de Strasbourg. For Lanteri, Martinelli's decision to cast a black African in this pivotal role at the heart of the play revives one of the critical elements of Koltesian dramaturgy: “[le] duel fondamental du Noir et du Blanc” (17).<sup>224</sup> In fact, Chéreau agrees with this pertinent casting choice

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<sup>219</sup> “ZUCCO. — I know some places, in Africa, mountains so high that it snows there all the time. No one knows it snows in Africa. That's my favorite thing in the world: snow in Africa falling over frozen lakes.”

<sup>220</sup> “white rhinoceroses walking across the lake, under the falling snow.”

<sup>221</sup> Zucco's description of a deserted Africa resembles Horn's political vision of a world in which all men live in one city that covers half of France and that leaves Africa uninhabited, a sort of Garden of Eden: “l'Afrique serait belle, vide, généreuse, sans souffrance, mamelle du monde!” / “Africa would be beautiful, empty, generous, free of suffering, breast of the world” (*Combat* 36).

<sup>222</sup> Jean Louis Martinelli served as artistic director of the Théâtre National de Strasbourg from 1993 to 2000 and artistic director of the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers from 2002 to 2013, two institutions that, earlier, played an important role in Koltès' career.

<sup>223</sup> “The brawny.”

<sup>224</sup> “[the] fundamental Black-White conflict.”

because he believes that “Le Balèze, c’est forcément un noir dans l’esprit de Bernard” (“Mon travail”).<sup>225</sup>

Koltès’ dedication to exploring what he perceives as a rift between Blacks and Whites seems to emerge especially from the playwright’s personal experience, as revealed in a 1983 interview for *Bwana Magazine*, in which he describes his first impressions upon arriving in Nigeria:

Dès que j’ai franchi les portes de l’aéroport, toutes les idées de l’Afrique que j’avais emportées dans mes bagages se sont figées en cette scène: un policier noir était, à grands coups de matraque, en train de battre un de ses frères. J’ai avancé dans la foule et je me suis heurté immédiatement à une barrière invisible mais omniprésente, qui mettait symboliquement les Blancs d’un côté et les Noirs de l’autre. J’ai regardé vers les Noirs. J’avais honte des miens; mais une telle haine brillait dans leur regard que j’ai pris peur, et j’ai couru du côté des Blancs. (qtd in *Salino* 135)<sup>226</sup>

However, this opposition between Blacks and Whites should not be reduced to racial bias or even to a form of Romantic racism, a concept that suggests a glorification and idealization of minorities as most famously represented by the figure of the Noble Savage.<sup>227</sup> Instead, one could argue that, for Koltès, the relationship between Blacks and Whites epitomizes the relationship between strangers because Blacks and Whites may be seen to represent visually and, by extension, culturally (albeit in a simplistic manner), polar opposites in the human experience. Therefore, Koltès uses the figure of the stranger to prompt a form of introspection and self-discovery within the other

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<sup>225</sup> “Le balèze must be black in Koltès’ mind.”

<sup>226</sup> “As soon as I walked through the doors of the airport, all the preconceived ideas about Africa that I had brought in my luggage coalesced in this scene: a black police officer was beating one of his brothers with a baton. I moved through the crowd and I immediately encountered an invisible yet omnipresent barrier, which symbolically divided Whites on one side and Blacks on the other. I looked towards the Blacks. I was ashamed of my own kind; but their eyes glimmered with such hatred that I got scared, and I ran to the side of the Whites.”

<sup>227</sup> The Eurocentric perspective in cultural and literary analysis has been identified and denounced of course by the critic Edward Said in his controversial book *Orientalism* (1978), as well as by many other cultural critics, up to the present day.

characters, just as his personal experience with foreignness becomes a fundamental component of his own development, in a kind of larger cultural formulation of the deal, especially in a psychological realm. Indeed, Bankolée confirms that the function of black characters in Koltésian theatre is to reveal through the confrontation of opposites:

L'homme de couleur non blanche, et en particulier le Noir, apparaît chez Koltès comme un miroir dans lequel se réfléchit une part substantielle de ses propres sentiments et émotions. L'étranger est ce reflet—son propre reflet, dont il avait peut-être besoin parce qu'il se sentait "à l'étroit" en France, par rapport à ses origines, par rapport à la société Française.  
(51)<sup>228</sup>

The metaphor of the mirror introduced by Bankolée—described as an inverted Lacanian mirror—suggests that the figure of the stranger reveals the subject not through its reflection but rather through the reflection of its opposite. Certainly, the function of multilingualism in the play can also be understood through the image of the inverted mirror and within the greater context of the deal. For example, when Alboury speaks to Horn in French—that is, when he reflects Horn's language and culture—, Alboury allows him the illusion of being in control. However, later in the play, when Alboury meets Léone, Horn's wife-to-be, and speaks to her in Wolof, he fulfills her African fantasy.

Koltès introduces the character of Léone in the second scene of the play. She has recently arrived from Paris, where she worked as a hotel maid, to live with Horn. Léone is uneasy about her decision to travel to Africa, in part because the two barely know each other—a situation in which the negotiation of a deal clearly becomes even more challenging. In scene V, a conversation between Cal and Léone reveals that Horn has

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<sup>228</sup> "Non-white men, and in particular Blacks, appear in Koltès' work as a mirror that reflects a substantial part of his own feelings and emotions. The stranger is that reflection—his own reflection, that, perhaps, he needed because he felt 'constrained' in France, in regard to his origins, in regard to French society."

suffered an injury that has left him impotent, a revelation that casts additional doubts on the future of their relationship. Immediately, Léone's potential sexual frustration transpires metaphorically through her seemingly unquenchable thirst. She tells Horn: "Vous me laissez mourir de soif!" (17)<sup>229</sup> and ends her conversation with Cal with "J'ai trop soif" (41).<sup>230</sup> This "thirst" also represents Léone's strong desire to escape her own culture and to embrace a new one, an experience offered by Africa.

Eventually, in scene VI, Léone meets Alboury, who was hiding behind a tree. The stage directions emphasize the mystical dimension of this encounter: "*L'Harmattan, vent de sable, la pousse au pied de l'arbre.*"<sup>231</sup> Claude Stratz notes that, once again, Koltès enjoyed "mettre face à face des personnages qui ne devraient jamais se rencontrer" (24),<sup>232</sup> thus posing the thought-provoking image of a deal that should in fact remain unrealized. Indeed, Léone and Alboury appear as if they were complete opposites, yet they experience similar situations: they are both alienated, in a foreign territory, and seemingly powerless against the will of the white male domination embodied by Horn and Cal. Ultimately, and despite their differences, they find some common ground and engage in what could be described as a forbidden deal, a relationship condemned by the color of the character's skin. Stratz explains that "[c]'est une scène fondamentale. Koltès les réunit parce que Léone est une paumée, une déshéritée, celle qu'on traite de conne et qu'Alboury est condamné, parce que Noir"

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<sup>229</sup> "You are letting me die of thirst!"

<sup>230</sup> "I am too thirsty."

<sup>231</sup> "*The Harmattan, the wind of the sand, pushes her to the tree.*" Here, Koltès may also be making reference to the successful French publishing house, L'Harmattan, which was created in 1975, only three years before the completion of *Combat de nègre et de chiens*. L'Harmattan, named after the African wind, specializes, in part, in cross-cultural studies and maintains several collections dedicated to Africa, such as "Afrique Liberté" / "Africa Freedom," "Afrique Poésie" / "Africa Poetry," and "Afrique Théologique et Spirituelle" / "Theological and Spiritual Africa."

<sup>232</sup> "putting characters, who should have never met, face to face."

(24).<sup>233</sup> Léone approaches Alboury, who hides in the dark and remains silent during the scene, despite her many questions. She asks him for water:

LEONE. — Je cherche de l'eau. Wasser, bitte. (*Elle rit.*) Vous comprenez l'allemand ? Moi, c'est la seule langue étrangère que je connais un peu. Vous savez, ma mère était allemande, véritablement allemande, de pure origine ; et mon père alsacien ; alors moi, avec tout cela... (*Elle s'approche de l'arbre.*) Ils doivent me chercher. (*Elle regarde Alboury.*) Il m'avait pourtant dit que... (*Doucement :*) Dich erkenne ich, sicher. (42)<sup>234</sup>

At first, Léone believes that Alboury is uneducated and does not speak a European language. Thus, she begins to address him in French and German—two languages that constitute her own cultural heritage and could be seen to best exemplify the core of Europeanism—with the hope that communication, the means to reach the Koltesian deal, can transcend formal language. Alboury appears to Léone as the personification of a mystical and romanticized Africa. It becomes clear that she can only conceive this exotic encounter through the westernized myth of Tarzan.<sup>235</sup> From this slanted perspective, Alboury must be a primitive man, almost a wild animal, silent, while the female character represents civilized society, flooded with incessant verbiage.

LEONE. — Je préférerais rester ici ; il fait si doux. (*Elle le touche sans le regarder.*) Komm mit mir, Wasser holen. Quelle idiotie. Je suis sûre qu'ils sont en train de me chercher ; je n'ai rien à faire là, c'est sûr. (*Elle le lâche.*) Il y a quelqu'un. J'ai entendu... (*Bas :*) Teufel ! Verschwinde, pschttt ! (*À son oreille :*) Je reviendrai. Attendez-moi. (*Alboury disparaît sous les arbres.*) Oder Sie, komme Sie zurück! (44)<sup>236</sup>

<sup>233</sup> “[i]t’s a fundamental scene. Koltès brings them together because Léone is lost, abandoned, called an idiot and because Alboury is condemned because he is black.”

<sup>234</sup> “LÉONE. — I am looking for water. (*She laughs.*) Water, please. Do you understand German? That’s the only foreign language I know. You see, my mother was German, actually German, of pure origin; and my father was Alsatian; so with all this... (*She gets closer to the tree.*) They must be looking for me. (*She looks at Alboury.*) But he told me that... (*Softly:*) I know you for sure.”

<sup>235</sup> Again, this is reminiscent of Said’s work, and in particular of his essay, “Jungle Calling,” which provides a critical analysis through the perspective of postcolonial studies of the original *Tarzan* film series starring white actor Johnny Weissmüller as Tarzan.

<sup>236</sup> “LÉONE: I would rather stay here; it feels so warm. (*She touches him without looking at him.*) Come with me to get water. What an idiot. I am sure they are looking for me, I have no business being here,

Apart from French and German, this scene features a third language: the language of action as transcribed through the numerous stage directions. Koltès provides specific details regarding Léone's behavior such as "*Elle le regarde*" (42),<sup>237</sup> "*Lui montrant une fleur de bougainvillée*" (43),<sup>238</sup> and "*Elle le touche sans le regarder*" (44),<sup>239</sup> language which compels the reader to visualize the characters' actions through the scene.

Furthermore, in the context of performance, and despite the initial inability of Léone and Alboury to communicate verbally, the audience witnesses their developing relationship through the way they interact spatially. Alboury and Léone are, in fact, engaged in a form of primal dance, a fundamental ritual of the human species, leading, ultimately, to sexual intercourse, which can be seen as the original deal between two individuals. Furthermore, this sexual deal presents itself as simultaneously biologically compulsory and culturally proscribed. Thus, Koltès juxtaposes the unfruitful multilingual dialogue with the universal language of behavior, thereby reinforcing the audience's understanding of Léone's sexual desire for Alboury.

Later in the play, in scene IX, Alboury and Léone meet again. In this scene, Alboury speaks to Léone in Wolof, and Léone answers in French and in German. Léone's lines include verses from the poem, "The Erlking," by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, which tells the story of a feverish child to whom a mythical creature appears while he is traveling with his father in a forest. The creature speaks to the child in an attempt to lure him away from his father, and, in the end, the Erlking takes the child by

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that's for sure. (*She lets go of him.*) Someone's here, I heard... (*Low:*) Devil! Get away! (*Whispering into his ear:*) I will be back. Wait for me. (*Alboury disappears under the trees.*) Or you, you'll come back!"

<sup>237</sup> "She looks at him."

<sup>238</sup> "Showing him a bougainvillea flower."

<sup>239</sup> "She touches him without looking at him."

force. At the end of the poem, the father, who has finally arrived home, discovers that the child has died. The story told in “The Erlking” mirrors the journey between Léone and Alboury, in the sense that, just as the mysterious creature appears the child and condemns him to death, Alboury appears to Léone and, eventually, becomes instrumental in her demise. Certainly, this foreshadowing device is concealed by the use of the foreign language to introduce the intertextual reference.

Although this trilingual dialogue between Léone and Alboury is fragmented and opaque, it allows the characters to recognize each other both as foreigners and outcasts and begin to develop an intimate bond:

ALBOURY. — Man naa la wax dara?

LEONE. — Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind...

ALBOURY. — Walla niu noppi tè xoolan tè rekk.

LEONE. — Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind. (*Elle rit.*) Moi aussi je parle étranger, vous voyez! On va finir par se comprendre, j’en suis sûre.

(58)<sup>240</sup>

This multilingual scene deemphasizes language itself as a means to exchange information and highlights instead its function as an action. As noted by Mounsef: “[T]he theatrical text is always in a state of displacement, always at play with what is said and what is done” (“The Desire” 85). As with Beckett or Eugene Ionesco, Koltès distorts language and guides the audience’s attention toward what is happening physically and emotionally, rather than focusing on only the intellectual realm. In “Ambivalences et ambiguïté dans *Combat de nègre et de chiens*,” Michel Bertrand provides the following analysis of the scene:

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<sup>240</sup> “ALBOURY. — Can I tell you something? / LÉONE. — Who rides so late through night and wind? / ALBOURY. — Or else we can remain silent and simply look at each other. / LÉONE. — He is the father with his child. (She laughs.) I speak a foreign language too, you see! We’ll end up understanding each other, I’m sure.”



Si la langue parlée par chacun des locuteurs est incompréhensible pour son interlocuteur, il est en revanche aisément compréhensible par chacun d'eux que s'ils agissent de la sorte c'est afin de ne pas employer la langue française que tous deux parlent et comprennent. L'échange ne réside pas dans le sens que l'on désire transmettre, mais dans l'acte même de cet échange. (69)<sup>241</sup>

Unlike Horn and Cal, who consider Alboury and the rest of the native population as a threat, Léone seeks to engage directly with him. She explains that “[i]l ne faut pas avoir peur des langues étrangères, au contraire; j'ai toujours pensé que, si on regarde longtemps et soigneusement les gens quand ils parlent, on comprend tout. . . . Moi je vous parle étranger et vous aussi, alors, on sera vite sur la même longueur d'onde” (58).<sup>242</sup> The only way for Alboury and Léone to connect is to bypass the French language, which stands as a formidable cultural wall between Blacks and Whites.

The final scene between Alboury and Léone reveals what Mounsef calls a “corporeal symbiosis confounding any distinction between the linguistic and the embodied, between the said and the lived” (“The Desire” 92). Léone expresses her sexual and cultural desire for Alboury, an act that results in an attempt to self-appropriate *négritude*,<sup>243</sup> a concept that clearly mirrors Koltès' own fascination with black African males.

LEONE. — Vous avez des cheveux super.

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<sup>241</sup> “Although the language spoken by each speaker is incomprehensible by his/her interlocutor, they easily understand that they act in this way in order to avoid using the French language, which they both speak and understand. The exchange does not reside in the meaning that one wants to communicate, but rather in the very act of exchanging.”

<sup>242</sup> “[o]ne should not be afraid of foreign languages; quite the opposite; I always thought that, if you look at someone long and hard while they speak, you'll understand everything. . . . I speak to you in a foreign language and you do too, so, we'll soon be on the same page.”

<sup>243</sup> *Négritude* is a literary and political movement that began in the 1930s and that was spearheaded by, among others, the authors Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. These intellectuals embraced their identity and their cultural heritage as black Africans, in order to counter what they perceived as the oppressive cultural, political, and economic dominance of the French colonial empire, which established de facto its model as superior. The concept of *négritude* encouraged black Africans to reclaim and affirm their identity in a realm situated far beyond the dynamics of colonialism.

ALBOURY. — On dit que nos cheveux sont entortillés et noirs parce que l'ancêtre des nègres, abandonné par Dieu puis par tous les hommes, se retrouva seul avec le diable, abandonné lui aussi de tous, qui alors lui caressa la tête en signe d'amitié, et c'est comme cela que nos cheveux ont brûlé.

LEONE. — J'adore les histoires avec le diable ; j'adore comme vous les racontez; vous avez des lèvres super; d'ailleurs le noir, c'est ma couleur. . . . Je crois que j'ai un diable dans le cœur, Alboury ; comment je l'ai attrapée, je n'en sais rien, mais il est là, je le sens. Il me caresse l'intérieur, et je suis déjà toute brûlée, toute noircie en dedans. (69-70)<sup>244</sup>

Ultimately rejected by Alboury, who remains focused on the retrieval of his brother's body, Léone grabs a piece of broken glass and cuts deep into her cheeks, creating scars similar to Alboury's facial tribal painting, bringing the play to a violent and symbolic climax. The act of self-mutilation yields an indelible sign, which marks the transition from aural to written language. In a sense, the world can now read Léone's fantasized identity on her face.

In the world of Koltès' œuvre, which unveils a multifaceted picture of the African figure, this gesture evokes different aspects of its mythos. Most recognizably, Léone's facial scars correspond to the tradition of tribal scarification in West Africa, which developed as a way for individuals to express a common identity. In that sense, Léone demands her place within Alboury's tribal community by deliberately marking herself. However, one could also argue that this act evokes the scars found on the bodies of African-American slaves, which resulted from repeated whippings administered by their white owners. In that sense, the scars on Léone's face become a

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<sup>244</sup> "LÉONE. — You have great hair. / ALBOURY. — We believe that our hair is frizzy and black because the ancestor of black people, who had been abandoned by God and then by all men, was left alone with the devil, who had also been abandoned by everyone, and who stroked his head in a sign of friendship, and that's how our hair was burned. / LÉONE. — I love stories featuring the devil; I love how you tell them; you have great lips; in fact, black is my color. . . . I think I have a devil in my heart; how I caught him, I have no idea, but he's in there, I feel him. He strokes my insides, and I am already all burnt, all blackened within."

symbol for her exclusion and her suffering. This second and, perhaps more ambiguous interpretation echoes the title of Koltès' antepenultimate play, *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, which clearly offers another allusion to the experience of African American slavery. Therefore, one could understand Léone's scars as both a symbol of empowerment and one of condemnation. In fact, Koltès provides some insight on Léone's gesture as a symbol of her condemnation:

De plus en plus, de façon à la fois vague et décisive, je divise les gens en deux catégories: ceux qui sont condamnés et ceux qui ne le sont pas. . . . [L]es Noirs sont des gens qui portent une condamnation sur leur visage, au sens propre, mais qui ne leur appartient pas en propre : c'est davantage une malédiction globale à laquelle ils sont assimilés. Léone sent la sienne d'une façon beaucoup plus secrète et individuelle, elle ne peut pas s'appuyer sur l'idée d'être le morceau d'une âme, comme disent les nègres. Avec sa condamnation, elle se retrouve seule, et incapable d'exprimer son sens ou sa nature : cette condamnation est dessinée derrière elle de façon immémoriale et apparemment précise. Celle des Noirs lui semble plus enviable, elle voudrait échanger, elle est jalouse, elle trouve son fardeau plus lourd et plus con, plus con surtout. (*Une part* 21)<sup>245</sup>

In this reflection, Koltès suggests that Alboury and Léone experience a condemnation—most clearly embodied by a feeling of alienation and rendered unfixable by the failure of language—seemingly intrinsic to the human experience. Although at first Léone embraces her violent gesture, she later regrets it and recognizes the impossibility to connect with Alboury. In fact, when the character reappears, she refuses to show her face to Cal and seems to be ashamed of her actions, as suggested by the stage

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<sup>245</sup> “Increasingly, in a way that is simultaneously vague and decisive, I divide people into two categories: those who are condemned and those who are not. . . . [B]lack people are people who wear condemnation on their face, literally, but which does not belong to them: it is more of a global curse with which they are associated. Léone understands her own in a more secretive and personal way, she cannot rely on the idea of being a piece of a soul, as Black people say. With her condemnation, she finds herself alone, and unable to express her purpose or her nature: this condemnation has been drawn behind her in a way that is immemorial and apparently precise. The condemnation of black men appears to her as more desirable, she would like to exchange it, she is jealous, she finds her burden heavier and more stupid, especially more stupid.”

directions: “*Léone se cache le visage derrière son bras, et demeure ainsi pendant tout le temps qu’il la regarde*” (103).<sup>246</sup> At the end of the play, Léone’s condemnation has become as visible through her scars as Alboury’s is through the color of his skin.

In the final scene of *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, Koltès abandons the French language and almost eliminates language itself, apart from a few words that Léone speaks in German. Rather than with proper language, the scene, which presents the final confrontation between Alboury and Cal, is constructed of sounds, screams, and unintelligible voices, accompanied by striking visual images, with a special emphasis on the contrast between light and darkness, described in detail in Koltès’s stage directions.

Throughout these final moments, fireworks light up the night sky: “L’horizon se couvre d’un immense soleil de couleurs qui retombe, avec un bruit doux, étouffé, en flammèches sur la cité” (106).<sup>247</sup> We hear a series of sounds: “*bruit mat d’une course, pieds nus, sur la pierre,*”<sup>248</sup> followed by a “[r]âle de chien,”<sup>249</sup> then “[p]etit air sifflé,”<sup>250</sup> and “[b]ruit d’un fusil qu’on arme” (106).<sup>251</sup> The dramatic action, long withheld by the flow of language, seems to rapidly accelerate. Suddenly, we hear “*la voix d’Alboury,*”<sup>252</sup> “*un appel, guerrier et secret*” (106).<sup>253</sup> This moment evokes the awakening of a threatening force, which transforms into a collective conscience as the guards, black men posted on the observation towers around the construction site and

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<sup>246</sup> “Léone hides her face behind her arm, and remains like this while he looks at her.”

<sup>247</sup> “The horizon is filled with an enormous, multicolored sun, which falls back down, with a soft and muffled sound, scattering sparks on the town.”

<sup>248</sup> “[m]uted sound of someone running, barefoot, on the stone.”

<sup>249</sup> “[d]og growling.”

<sup>250</sup> “[w]histled little tune.”

<sup>251</sup> “[s]ound of a gun being loaded.”

<sup>252</sup> “Alboury’s voice.”

<sup>253</sup> “a call, warlike and mysterious.”

who have remained silent throughout the entire course of the play, begin to answer the call in what Koltès describes as “*un dialogue inintelligible entre Alboury et les hauteurs de tous les côtés*” (107).<sup>254</sup> Finally, Cal is shot by the guards, first in the arm, then in the stomach, and, lastly, in the head. The balance of power has shifted: the deal between the black man and the white men has failed. In fact, this deal was, undoubtedly, impossible to reach from the beginning, as explained by Koltès in the text, “Si un chien rencontre un chat”.<sup>255</sup> “[L]orsqu’ils s’arrêtent l’un en face de l’autre, il n’existe rien d’autre entre eux que de l’hostilité, qui n’est pas un sentiment, mais un acte, un acte d’ennemis, un acte de guerre sans motif.”<sup>256</sup> Thus, it seems that violence was the only possible outcome for the protagonists of *Combat de nègre et de chiens*.

Interestingly, Alboury is not the one who kills Cal but rather it is an entire community that does, invisible but present, silent but suddenly vocal in revolt. After Cal falls to the ground, Koltès reveals that “*Alboury a disparu*,”<sup>257</sup> almost magically, as if, unable to retrieve his brother’s body, the murder of Cal reinstated a sense of balance, bringing justice and peace to Alboury’s community (107). This climactic moment, punctuated by a blackout, is followed by a return to the civilized world: “*Le jour se lève, doucement*”<sup>258</sup> writes Koltès. Then, we hear the cries of birds in the sky and the sounds of empty whisky bottles clanking against each other in the sewers. The birds, perhaps, could be understood as a symbol for the natural beauty of Africa while the empty whisky bottles, probably Horn’s, may represent the corruption brought on the

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<sup>254</sup> “an unintelligible dialogue between Alboury and the surrounding heights.”

<sup>255</sup> “If a dog meets a cat.” This text was originally published in the program of Patrice Chéreau’s first production of *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*.

<sup>256</sup> “[W]hen they stop facing each other, there is nothing between them but hostility, which is not a feeling, but an act, an act of enemies, an act of war without a motive.”

<sup>257</sup> “Alboury has disappeared.”

<sup>258</sup> “Day breaks gradually.”

continent by colonial Europe. In any case, this is a remarkable and unexpected association of sounds. The bizarre melody is suddenly interrupted by the sound of a truck's horn, followed by Léone's voice, which remains distant and barely audible as per the stage directions. She speaks to the driver in German:

LÉONE. — Haben Sie eine Sicherheitsnadel? mein Kleid geht auf. Mein Gott, wenn Sie keine bei sich haben, muss ich ganz nackt. (*Elle rit, monte dans la camionette*), toute nue! nach Paris zurück. (*La camionette s'éloigne.*) (107-08)<sup>259</sup>

It seems highly improbable that the truck driver, most likely one of the daily workers, would speak, or even understand, German. Thus, Koltès' decision to write Léone's final monologue in German suggests that her experience with Alboury has been profoundly transformative, to the point that she prefers to abandon French almost entirely—"toute nue" stands as a remnant of the French language—and communicate in a language that she barely masters and that her interlocutor does not understand. Language, it seems, cannot be trusted and never bridges the gap between strangers.

As exemplified by this analysis of Koltès' *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, the phenomenon of multilingual theatre has seen a resurgence since the 1970s, in large part because it provides playwrights with a potent tool to explore the profound social changes that result from an increasingly globalized world. Thus, multilingual theatre is a characteristically postmodern and contemporary type of dramatic literature. Plays such as *Zoot Suit*, *Sœurs*, and *Combat de nègre et de chiens* seek to bring forth complex intercultural interactions substantially through the use of multiple languages. The role of these languages is multidimensional, as language affects all aspects of our existence. In

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<sup>259</sup> "LÉONE. — Do you have a safety pin? My dress is coming open. My God, if you don't have one on you, I'll have to go completely naked. (*She laughs, gets in the truck*), naked! back to Paris. (*The trucks drives away*)."

*Combat de nègre et de chiens*, Alboury and Léone choose to communicate—to negotiate deals—in Wolof and German to escape the socio-political weight and the cultural boundaries embodied by the French language. The juxtaposition of the two languages creates a highly poetic, but ultimately sterile, dialogue that accentuates the divide between Léone and Alboury, yet paradoxically brings them closer in their loneliness. Koltès explains that “c’est le langage qui est le véritable sujet de la pièce; le langage qui vous désigne, vous enferme, ne vous permet pas de communiquer” (qtd. in Ubersfeld 154).<sup>260</sup> For Koltès, foreign languages represent also, and possibly most importantly, a means to highlight the deep isolation that language more generally imposes on us and a way to uncover a feeling of alienation that prevailed in his life, and that he believes to be part of the general human experience of us all.

## **2.4 Multilingualism in Translation and Production**

To complete this study of multilingualism in Koltesian theatre, we must also consider the play in the context of stage production, in France and abroad, in particular translation strategies, audience expectations, and casting challenges. To produce a play is to negotiate a delicate deal between the many constituencies of the theatre: producer, director, actors, designers, playwright, etc. This deal is double in nature and multileveled in practice: it is simultaneously a business deal (a contract between the producing agent and the right holder) and an artistic deal (embodied by the collaborative process leading to the realization of a unifying vision). Thus, the Koltesian deal exists as well outside the plays themselves, beyond the literary metaphor, as a

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<sup>260</sup> “it is language that remains the true subject of the play; language that identifies you, that limits you; that prevents you from communicating.”

means by which to consider the relationships between playwright and reader, playwright and director, director and audiences, etc. In the context of production, the text becomes fantasized and desired: it becomes the object of the deal.

Although Koltès conveniently provides a translated version of the lines written in Spanish and Quechua as an appendix to *Quai ouest* and one for those written in Arabic as an appendix to *Le Retour au désert*, he does not include a translation in *Combat de nègre et de chiens*. This omission may be due to the fact, perhaps, that *Combat de nègre et de chiens* was not written within the context of immediate stage production, unlike the plays that followed and that Chéreau had pledged to direct as soon as Koltès would finish them. In *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, the lack of translation forces the reader—and eventually the actor, the director, and the designer reading the script for the purpose of stage production—to confront these moments conceived as potential hermetic linguistic capsules, according to their probably unlikely knowledge of Wolof and German. The reader continues to see text on the page—signs of language that have been selected, organized, and printed—but can no longer grasp their meaning. Thus, the reader has been excluded from the play's narrative and made to experience abrupt linguistic ostracization. Nevertheless, the reader has the ability to put down the play and seek external resources to help translate the passages written in the secondary language or languages, if they desire to do so.

However, a member of the audience watching a live performance is not afforded the same privilege and must continue, without help, to watch the play as it unfolds on the stage. Thus, in the case of multilingual drama, it seems that the long-standing implicit deal between audiences and theatre practitioners, which is that a spectator is



entitled to understand the text spoken on stage—if not what the text connotes, at least what the text denotes, has been broken, purposefully, by the playwright. Consequently, multilingualism clearly raises important practical and theoretical questions in the context of production. To provide a framework for these questions, let us imagine a fictional production of *Combat de nègre et de chiens* that would take place somewhere in France. Undoubtedly, the audience for this production would be comprised of a majority of native French speakers with few skills (or none at all) in German or Wolof. First, one must ask the following question: should this audience be provided with a translation of the lines written in those languages? And, if so, by what means?

I suppose, for example, that a translation could be included in the program if the length of the passages written in a foreign language does not prohibit such an addendum and if all proper authorizations to do so have been granted to the producers. In this way, the audience's curiosity can be satisfied by a quick read before the show begins—at the risk of spoiling any element of surprise, during intermissions, or even after the performance. As a similar solution, but one with an ecological and technological edge, the producing team could make the translated text available on a digital platform, such as the theatre's website. This solution could be advantageous since many theatre companies have downsized their actual paper programs significantly in an effort to reduce cost and paper waste. Live subtitles projected on a large screen above the stage provide yet another option, which has proven to be very popular, for instance, with the production of operas since the 1980s. The audience can read these projections while watching the play, as if they were reading subtitles while watching a foreign film. Moreover, newer technology allows patrons of prominent opera houses around the

world, such as the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, to read subtitles in a variety of languages on a small personal screen nestled in the back of the seat in front of them, much like the personal screens found frequently on airplanes. The screen, of course, can be turned off at will if the spectator, whether fluent in the languages of the performance or simply in quest of a purer theatrical experience, does not need or does not want access to these subtitles.

Despite a range of options available to successfully give audiences access to translated material, one must also ask if such options would, in the end, benefit the production, that is, truly serve the play. I would argue that, in the case of *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, the audience's experience of linguistic rupture is more important than its understanding of the meaning of the lines spoken in German and Wolof, for a number of reasons. First, code-switching compels the audience to focus on visual cues and, more generally, to appreciate what is happening outside of the text. Also, code-switching—and the opacification of meaning—strengthens the role of Koltesian language as an action, which implies that, instead of looking for the meaning of the lines, the audience should simultaneously observe the way the actor delivers the line and look for the effect of the line on the character toward whom the line is directed. Moreover, code-switching instantly provides a more realistic auditory experience for the audience, who is, then, transported further into the world of the play. Because members of the audience are unlikely to understand “Man naa la wax dara,” Alboury's first line in scene IX, they are condemned to experience the scene from Léone's perspective as she, too, is unable to speak Wolof. This abrupt linguistic rupture may represent, perhaps, how Koltès most successfully transforms his haunting personal

struggle with the unshakable feeling of perpetual alienation into a powerful theatrical moment that invites members of the audience to experience alienation in one of the most unexpected way in the theatre: multilingualism.

New challenges emerge when we consider the production of Koltès' plays abroad, in particular, his multilingual plays. In the early 2000s, Franck Meyrous describes Koltès as "l'auteur français contemporain le plus représenté à l'étranger"<sup>261</sup> and explains that his plays had already been translated in 27 languages and produced in 47 countries (60). Koltès' popularity around the world continues to grow today, as demonstrated by many notable international productions during the 2016-2017 season, which includes *Roberto Zucco*<sup>262</sup> at the prestigious Myeongdong Theater in Seoul, South Korea, *En la solitud dels camps de cotó*<sup>263</sup> at the Teatro Nacional de Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain, and *Kampf des Negers und der Hunde*<sup>264</sup> at the Schauspielhaus Bochum in Germany. Such continued success abroad suggests that translated versions of Koltès' plays have adequately rendered the quality of the original texts, despite notable challenges with Anglo-American translations, as thoroughly discussed by Maria Delgado and Fancy in the article, "The Theatre of Bernard-Marie Koltès and the 'Other Spaces' of Translation." Delgado and Fancy attribute the lack of success of Koltès' plays in English speaking countries to a correlation of obstacles, which includes "[t]he divergence in culturally held assumptions about the nature of theatre" between continental Europe and the Anglo-American stage; as well as the difficulty to transcribe Koltès' unique style (155). Bradby also considers the translation of Koltès' plays to be

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<sup>261</sup> "the contemporary French author most performed abroad."

<sup>262</sup> This production opened September 23, 2016.

<sup>263</sup> *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*. This production is scheduled to open January 19, 2017.

<sup>264</sup> *Combat de nègre et de chiens*. This production is scheduled to open May 19, 2017.

linguistically problematic: “Certainly in the translating I’ve done of Koltès, I’ve found that to marry, as his language does, the Marivaux tradition going back to Racine is almost impossible” (qtd in Delgado 156-57). Moreover, Roger Baines and Fred Dalmasso suggest that “existing translations do not completely engage with the fundamentally important rhythmic qualities of Koltès’ writing” (49). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the effort to introduce Koltès’ œuvre to English-speaking audiences continues, as demonstrated by the recent publication of Amin Erfani’s new translation of *The Night Just Before the Forest* (2014).

Of course, the process of translating a multilingual play presents additional technical challenges, in particular when one of the secondary languages in the original text is also the anticipated language of translation. To solve this particular question in his German translation of *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, Simon Werle chose to underline the lines that Léone speaks in German in the French version of the play in order to distinguish the translated text from the original. Werle also included the following note: “Die im folgenden unterstrichenen Passagen spricht Léone im französischen Original in deutscher Sprache” (44).<sup>265</sup> The translated script is written as follows:

LEONE. — Ich suche Wasser. Wasser, bitte. *Sie lacht.* Verstehen Sie deutsch? Das ist die einzige Fremdsprache, die ich ein bisschen kann.

What is most notable about the translation of this scene is that, despite the fact that Werle attempts to maintain the linguistic integrity of the moment by prompting the reader about the ongoing code-switching, the experience of linguistic rupture has been compromised. In fact, in Werle’s translation, Léone is, in all practicality, no longer a

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<sup>265</sup> “In the following underlined passages, Léone speaks in the German language in the French original.”

bilingual character, which represents a move that creates a linguistic landscape at odds with Koltès' original text.

Pilar Sánchez Navarro, who translated *Quai ouest* in Spanish under the title *Muelle Oeste*, opted for a similar solution to approach the scene between Cécile and Claire—“Cecilia” and “Clara” in this Spanish version, in which Cécile switches from French to Spanish and later from Spanish to Quechua. Navarro added a footnote after each line originally written in Spanish by Koltès in order to distinguish these lines from the translated text. The footnote reads: “En español en el original” (207).<sup>266</sup> Similarly to Werle's translation of *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, Navarro's translation of *Quai ouest* removes one degree of linguistic dissonance, despite the translator's best efforts to honor Koltès' work. These two examples reveal the difficulty to provide an ideal model for the translation of multilingual plays when one of the secondary languages becomes the primary language of the required translation. As a result, passages of these plays appear somewhat handicapped, falsified, or even patently incomplete in their translated versions, which may affect the reader's ability to fully appreciate aspects of Koltesian language and complicate the work of directors who aspire to bring these foreign translations to the stage.

Multilingual theatre also presents a practical challenge while casting the play. The production team must find actors appropriate for the respective roles and able to speak the various languages as written in the play. Although it is hypothetically possible to find bilingual actors who also meet all the requirements of the roles—type, age, skills, etc., it is more likely that directors would cast actors who require specialized vocal coaching to adequately master the lines in the secondary language within the

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<sup>266</sup> “In Spanish in the original.”

traditional five-week rehearsal process. Of course, the level of linguistic proficiency depends on the specific role. For example, the audience would expect some characters to speak their secondary language with an accent, as with, for example, Mathilde in *Le Retour au désert* and Léone in *Combat de nègre et de chiens*. In turn, the audience would also expect actors playing characters such as Alboury or Aziz to give the illusion of linguistic authenticity because they are created by the playwright as native speakers of Wolof and Arabic. Thus, the growing presence of multilingualism in theatre, film, and television should inspire training programs to develop a course component dedicated to the difficult task of performing a text in a foreign language.

Beyond the issue of multilingualism, Koltès was also deeply preoccupied with racial authenticity in casting practices. In “Pour mettre en scène *Quai ouest*,” a short text published as an appendix to the play and that provides insight on Koltès’ staging expectations, he challenges the casting standards of his time: “Je me suis aperçu que, s’il semblait évident à tout le monde qu’un rôle d’homme devait être joué par un homme, un vieillard par un vieillard, une jeune femme par une jeune femme, il est d’usage de considérer que le rôle d’un homme noir peut être joué par n’importe qui . . .” (107).<sup>267</sup> For the playwright, this practice of colorblind casting—also referred to as “non-traditional casting”—betrays his plays and his vision for a truly genuine postmodern theatre.

In fact, when directors would disregard his wishes about casting, Koltès did not hesitate to express his dissatisfaction. In the fall of 1988, following the production of *Le Retour au désert* directed by Alexander Lang at the prestigious Thalia Theater in

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<sup>267</sup> “I noticed that although it seems obvious to everyone that the role of a man should be played by a man, an old man by an old man, a young woman by a young woman, it is common to consider that the role of a black man can be played by anyone . . .”.

Hamburg, Germany, Koltès sent a scolding letter to the production's dramaturg, Brigitte Landes. In the letter, the playwright objected to the casting of white actors to portray Aziz, Saïfi, and the Great Black Paratrooper and expressed his complete disapproval of the production:

Quant au personnage du "Grand parachutiste noir," il m'aurait semblé grotesque de préciser dans le contrat qu'il devait être évidemment joué par un acteur africain habillé en parachutiste. . . . Vous avez pris la responsabilité de la création de cette pièce en Allemagne. C'est donc cette pièce qu'il fallait représenter, et non vos propres visions. . . . Je désavoue totalement ce spectacle. (*Lettres* 517)<sup>268</sup>

The next day, Koltès sent a letter to Jacques Boncompain, who was managing foreign productions of French plays for the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques (SACD).<sup>269</sup> In this second letter, Koltès demanded to be better informed about the foreign productions of his plays before licensing rights for performance could be approved. He also insisted that Boncompain inform international agents of his casting preferences: "Vous pouvez dès maintenant les avertir que je n'accorderai jamais l'autorisation de représenter mes pièces si les rôles d'Africains ne sont pas joués par des Africains" (*Lettres* 519).<sup>270</sup> Koltès' desire to control aspects of the production of his plays grew with his popularity, as more and more theatres, in France and abroad, took interest in his work. The author's position demonstrates that he viewed his plays not only as scripts or works of literature, but also as three-dimensional works for the stage. His attitude towards casting, in particular, suggests that Koltès imagined the

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<sup>268</sup> "About the character of the Great Black Parachutist, stipulating in the contract that he should obviously be played by an African actor dressed as a parachutist would have seemed grotesque to me. . . . You undertook the responsibility to stage this play in Germany. Therefore this play is what should be performed, not your own vision. . . . I completely disavow this production."

<sup>269</sup> "Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers."

<sup>270</sup> "You can inform them immediately that I will never grant permission to have my plays produced if the roles of Africans are not performed by Africans."

postmodern stage as responsible for featuring actors who represent the cultural and ethnic diversity of the actual French population.

The ramifications of Koltès' position on casting long outlived the playwright. In 2007, when the Comédie-Française chose to present *Le Retour au désert* in the Salle Richelieu, the playwright's brother, François Koltès, attempted to shut down the production after it was revealed that director Murielle Mayette chose to give the role of Aziz to Michel Favory, a Caucasian actor, rather than to a North-African actor. After hostile negotiations between François Koltès, who owns the rights to his brother's œuvre, and the Comédie-Française, the run of the show was limited to 30 performances, effectively breaking the initial deal between the two parties and, thereby, prohibiting the company to perform the show as part of its repertoire the following seasons.

Nevertheless, as documented by Cyril Desclés in *L'Affaire Koltès*, the "House of Molière"<sup>271</sup> decided to sue François Koltès, arguing, among other legal claims, that the requirement to cast an Arab actor to play Aziz equates to a form of reversed racism (42). After a lengthy court battle, both parties settled, but, as noted by Desclés, "[p]our l'opinion publique, la Comédie-Française continue en effet d'apparaître la victime d'une 'interdiction' de la part du frère de Bernard-Marie Koltès qui, plusieurs années après la résolution de cette affaire, continue d'être régulièrement pris pour cible dans les théâtres ou à la radio à ce sujet" (60).<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> The Comédie-Française is often referred to as "The House of Molière" for its historical ties with the troupe of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, a French actor and playwright better known as Molière. After the death of Molière in 1673, King Louis XIV ordered the merger of the three theatre companies of Paris (Théâtre du Marais, Hôtel de Bourgogne, and Molière's Palais Royal), which resulted in the creation of a single state-sponsored theatre company: the Comédie-Française.

<sup>272</sup> "[f]or the general public, the Comédie-Française continues to appear to be the victim of the censorship of Bernard-Marie Koltès' brother, who, several years after this controversy, continues to be a regular target in theatres and on the radio on this subject."



Indeed, the quarrel between François Koltès and the Comédie-Française became a public affair, opposing those who defended the playwright's authority and those who affirmed the creative freedom of the director. In "Respectons la volonté de Koltès," an article published in *Le Monde* in June 2007, actor and director Georges Lavaudant argued that Koltès' rationale revealed the general lack of diversity on the French stage:

Koltès voulait que dans chacune de ses pièces un Noir ou un Arabe soit présent sur le plateau. Cette volonté, chez lui, est tout à la fois politique, amoureuse, ontologique, esthétique. Il a systématiquement écrit des rôles afin que ce désir soit réalisé. On peut passer outre cette volonté, mais on ne peut pas faire comme si elle n'existait pas.<sup>273</sup>

Certainly, the controversy suddenly highlighted the lack of diversity within the Comédie-Française, which, at the time, did not include any Arab actors, despite the large presence of people of North-African descent within the French population. This quarrel—which recalls the figures of Pierre Corneille and Victor Hugo, who in their day triggered animated public debates surrounding the publication and production of their plays *Le Cid* and *Hernani*—raises important questions about the representation of immigrant populations in French dramatic literature, production practices, and authorship of a theatrical production. Surely, Koltès would have disagreed with Mayette's casting choices, but it remains unclear if the fact that his play was finally being performed by the most prestigious theatre company in the world might have softened his opposition.

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<sup>273</sup> "Koltès wanted a Black or an Arab on stage for each of his plays. For him, this request was simultaneously political, passionate, ontological, and aesthetic. He systematically wrote roles in order to see this wish come true. One can disregard his wish, but one cannot act as if it did not exist."

## 2.5 Conclusion

The issue of race, or ethnicity, and the motif of multilingualism are deeply connected in Koltès' yearning to profoundly reform and expand the presence of minorities and minority cultures on the French stage. Desclès suggests that Koltesian theatre embodies "un désir de voir un théâtre qui ne se joue pas uniquement entre Blancs policés devant d'autres Blancs policés" (89).<sup>274</sup> In a sense, the production of Koltès' plays automatically triggers a form of linguistic, cultural, and racial mixing through the use of multilingualism and the introduction of characters specifically written as immigrants and foreigners. Thus, Koltès gives a voice to the immigrant populations of France and celebrates their cultural contributions to the nation: "Le seul sang qui nous vienne, qui nous nourrisse un peu, c'est le sang des immigrés. . . . Le sang neuf naît de cette présence des Noirs et des Arabes" (*Une part* 126-27).<sup>275</sup> Even if Koltès declares: "[J]e n'ai jamais eu d'idées politiques dans mes pièces,"<sup>276</sup> the deliberate mixing of races and languages that permeates his œuvre reveals a keen political conscience, which emerges both through the reading and through the production of his plays. Certainly, this call for a renewed and diversified French stage materialized during the first season at Nanterre-Amandiers, which featured Koltès' *Combat de nègre et de chiens* and Genet's *Les Paravents*, as vividly remembered by Chéreau: "Avec tous les comédiens algériens, nord-africains ou blacks sur le plateau, il régnait à Nanterre une ambiance très forte et très sauvage. Je m'en souviens comme d'une période formidable, d'une confrontation à une matière théâtrale brûlante et

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<sup>274</sup> "a desire to see a theatre that would not be reduced to educated Whites playing for other educated Whites."

<sup>275</sup> "The only blood that comes to us, that nourishes us a little, is the blood of immigrants. . . . The new blood is born out of the presence of Blacks and Arabs."

<sup>276</sup> "I have never had political ideas in my plays."

magnifique” (qtd in Ubersfeld 44).<sup>277</sup> It was, in fact, during this extraordinary first season, that Koltès, untiring traveler and citizen of the world, found his artistic home and began to write a new page in the history of French theatre.

Koltès’ push for the representation of ethnic and linguistic diversity on stage exists within the larger socio-political context of the early 1980s, in particular the election of François Mitterand as the first Socialist president under the Fifth Republic (a sign of hope for those who believed in a more diverse society), and, at the same time, the rise of far-right movements, such as the Front National,<sup>278</sup> which openly blamed minorities and immigrants for the country’s economic woes. Nevertheless, notable activist organizations, such as SOS Racisme, emerged from popular street protests and worked to counterbalance the xenophobic discourse of anti-immigrant voices. Of course, Koltès valued the presence of immigrant populations in France in part because he understood their ability to enrich the socio-cultural life of the country: “[S]i la France vivait sur le seul sang des Français, cela deviendrait un cauchemar, quelque chose comme la Suisse, la stérilité totale sur le plan artistique et sur tous les plans” (Une part 116).<sup>279</sup> In fact, Jean-Luc Eyguesier reminds us that Koltès invites foreigners into his plays in order to awaken other characters: “Noirs (ou Arabes) viennent pervertir l’ordre des choses et surtout, dans le commerce des relations humaines qui intéresse le théâtre de Koltès, sont porteurs de vérité et d’ouverture” (50).<sup>280</sup> Indeed, the confrontation with a linguistic and cultural Other reveals a hidden truth and prompts a process of self-

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<sup>277</sup> “With all the Algerian, North-African, or black actors on stage, the atmosphere at Nanterre was very powerful and very wild. I remember it as a wonderful period, as the discovery of intense and glorious theatrical potential.”

<sup>278</sup> “National Front.”

<sup>279</sup> “[I]f France only lived off the blood of French people, it would become a nightmare, something like Switzerland, total sterility when it comes to the arts and to everything else.”

<sup>280</sup> “Blacks (or Arabs) corrupt the order of things, and, most importantly, within the traffic of human relations that are central to Koltès’ theatre, are bearers of truth and openness.”

examination that, most often, leads to the violent and unescapable sense of alienation experienced by the characters.

Of course, this mixing of languages and ethnicities evokes the myth of Babel, as if, for Koltès, the desire for and the fear of the Other was, in fact, a form of transcendent condemnation. In his study of Derrida's *Des Tours de Babel*, Craig Bartholomew recognizes that "Babel is clearly a symbol which resonates deeply with contemporary culture and its concern with pluralism" (317). It seems that Koltès was deeply preoccupied by these themes and that the multiplicity of languages and their inability to help us escape our inner alienation resonate through his œuvre. Thus, the surge of language and the presence of multiple languages render the Koltesian deal ultimately sterile, impossible, and unsatisfying because the world is permanently fragmented. Moreover, François Regnault proposes a different metaphor, that of cubist art, to consider multilingualism in Koltesian theatre:

[L]a langue française s'y voit par là-même assigner ses limites, ou encore le réalisme théâtral se découpe en pans de discours, comme si le français était sommé de se montrer aussi fort, aussi solide, aussi carré que le quechua, par cet effet proprement cubiste qui réclame de la pomme, du compotier sur le tableau, autant d'arêtes et de forces que la table, le mur, ou la montagne qui les entourent. (324)<sup>281</sup>

Perhaps, and to continue Regnault's analogy of painting, one could argue that Koltès' use of multilingualism allows him to paint the world with new colors, colors that do not exist in the French language, a uniquely artistic move that creates a picture that is both strange and familiar.

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<sup>281</sup> "[T]he French language is thereby assigned its limitations, or theatrical realism divides itself into fragments of discourse, as if French was required to appear as strong, as resilient, as sharply defined as Quechua, through the lens of cubism, which demands that the apple and the fruit bowl in the painting display as many ridges and as much power as the table, the wall, or the mountain around them."

The fact that the myth of Babel resonates so strongly throughout Koltès' entire oeuvre is not fortuitous. Koltès loved to read, and, as noted by Ubersfeld, he enjoyed all types of literature, including novels, poetry, theatre, and philosophy (17-18). Indeed, in the first chapter, I mentioned that his early plays were all adapted from the work of other authors. The following chapter will consider the role of literary myths in Koltesian theatre, and in particular in Koltès' last play, *Roberto Zucco*. Clearly, there is a striking similitude between the way multiple languages and the way literary myths coexist, compete, and interact in Koltesian theatre. This wealth of seemingly endless linguistic and literary layers is, perhaps, what ultimately makes Koltès' plays so fascinating, what gives them their depth and their power: two parallel mirrors that reflect the human experience into the infinite distance.

## Chapter Three

### Myths and Mythification in *Roberto Zucco*

At the close of the previous chapter, I suggested that Koltès' repeated integration of multilingualism deliberately evokes the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel, for, as one example among others, it highlights the failure of language to serve as a bridge between individuals. More generally, the concept of myth permeates Koltès' entire œuvre and thus emerges as one of the most evident marks of filiation between his plays and those of the great masters of French dramatic literature, many of whom (especially in the twentieth century, as with Jean Cocteau, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre) took as inspiration for their own work various hero figures, historic events, and other cultural elements from the Greek and Roman world, among many ancient and more modern sources. Within this framework, the third chapter of this dissertation focuses on the role of literary myths in Koltès' ultimate play, *Roberto Zucco*. To begin, a brief discussion surrounding the concept of myth, the dynamics of literary myth, and the relationship between mythic forms and the art of theatre appears necessary to provide a useful contextual backdrop for the analysis to follow.

#### 3.1 Myth, Literature, and Drama

A myth can be defined as an archetypal story, an episode which belongs to a larger collection of myths, known as a "mythology", that "expands into an account of the origin, situation, and destiny of mankind" (Frye 31). The Western literary tradition highlights three primary sources of myths: Greco-Roman mythology, Judeo-Christian

mythology, and, more generally, universal human history. For literary theorist Northrop Frye (one of the pioneers of myth criticism)<sup>282</sup>, “myths are not stories told just for fun: they are stories told to explain certain features in the society to which they belong” (27). Another noted critic, John Sutherland, adds succinctly: “Myths have been a way of helping people make sense of our world” (8). Indeed, the primary function of many myths is to provide a framework of reference for the body of beliefs that binds together members of a given society. In addition, Sutherland highlights the specific and substantial correlation between myth and literature: “Myths makes sense out of the senselessness in which, as human beings, we all find ourselves. Why are we here, and what are we here ‘for’? Typically, myth supplies an explanation through stories (the backbone of literature) and symbols (the essence of poetry)” (8). Thus, a convergence of origin becomes evident between myth and literature. Certainly, ancient myths, vestiges of long, often forgotten times, reveal themselves, for instance, at the heart of Homer’s epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, two of the oldest foundational texts of the Western literary canon.

Likewise, the surviving plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the great dramatists of the Classical period, embrace myths as their primary subject matter. Yet the bond between myth and drama exists beyond what could at first glance be considered merely as a thematic predilection on the part of these poets, for it actually takes root in the very function of drama itself. By the fifth century B.C., the people of Athens gathered during the City Dionysia, the largest religious festival of the time, to witness the telling of their great stories—the adventures of gods and heroes of a distant past—through elaborate ritualistic performances. Donald Watson explains: “The

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<sup>282</sup> See for example Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957).

antique theatre was eminently responsible for keeping the old myths alive. Its history is essentially bound up with myth” (192). The theatre represented clearly the most significant site in which myths were brought to life, and bringing myths to life was, in fact, the primary concern of the theatre. Moreover, Corvin recognizes that drama and myth, above and beyond the thematic parallels they both display, also share interconnected structural features: “[L]e théâtre . . . partage avec le mythe le resserrement et l’objectivité d’un récit nécessaire, présenté à la communauté d’un public. Il reste par son rituel le mode d’expression naturel du mythe” (1164).<sup>283</sup> Despite the fact that the record of the development of drama in Ancient Greece reaches us fragmented and incomplete, it is true that historians and critics express nearly unanimous consensus in the theory that theatre developed within the context of religious celebrations devoted to the cult of Dionysus, a particularly popular form of ceremonial myth-telling. As Brockett notes in *History of the Theatre*, “[t]he most widely known theory, championed by anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, envisions theatre as emerging out of myth and rituals” (1). Although the theory of ritualistic origins has been challenged,<sup>284</sup> including by Brockett himself, who acknowledges that “it is by no means the only theory about how theatre came into being” (4) and that theatre could have evolved out of “[s]torytelling,” “out of imitation of animals,” “or out of narrative forms of dance and songs” (4-5), the fundamental relationship between myth and theatre remains unmistakable as this chapter will demonstrate.

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<sup>283</sup> “[T]heatre . . . shares with myth the conciseness and objectivity of a necessary tale, presented to the community of an audience. Through its ritual, it remains the natural means of expression of the myth.”

<sup>284</sup> See for example *The Root of Theatre* (2002) by Eli Rozik.



Strong evidence of this relationship subsists, first and foremost, in Aristotle's *Poetics*, an unquestionably crucial text in the field of dramatic theory and criticism. While discussing the six defining elements of tragedy (plot, character, intellectual argument or thought, language, music, and spectacle), Aristotle asserts the absolute primacy of the plot. In a frequently cited comment, he states that "[t]he most important element is the construction of the plot" and that "the story is the foundation of and as it were the soul of tragedy" (24-25). In other words, Aristotle suggests that the telling of the myth belongs at the heart of the playwriting project. Indeed, as Anthony Kenny notes, *muthos*, the archaic word for *myth*, "is often translated as 'plot,' but it is just the ordinary Greek word for any story" (xix). This semantic overlap between the notions of "story", "plot", and "myth" further reinforces my understanding of theatre as the ideal venue for the performance of myths.

### 3.2 From Myth to Literary Myth

Originally, myths were transmitted orally, a fact that implies that each storytelling experience would necessarily be slightly different from all others, an element that permitted—and even invited—the constant editing and developing of the myth itself. In *Greek Theatre Performance*, David Wiles emphasizes the contextual importance of myth within a society that relied primarily upon oral transmission, including through the performance of plays:

The very word *mythos* implies "something spoken". For the classical Greek audience, myths were, only and always, *performances*. There was no sacred text declaring the truth about the gods, equivalent to the Bible, the Torah or the Koran. No definitive version of any Greek myth fixed the story forever in writing. Myths in multiple variants were transmitted and circulated through songs, dances, recitations of poetry and pictures.

In an oral culture, the performers of myths were free to reshape their material in response to new audiences and situations. (12. Emphasis in original)

In oral societies, myths would have been therefore somewhat fluid in structure and, of course, in content as well. Nevertheless, a significant shift in the transmission of myths occurred when poets began simply to write them down. In Western Europe, this shift from oral to written transmission coincides with the development of theatre in classical Athens, a period from which only 46 plays have survived.

Two aspects of Greek drama may have played a truly substantial role in encouraging the formalization of myths through the writing of plays. First, by the fifth century B.C., Athenian theatre had become a highly sophisticated event that featured numerous performers and combined many distinct elements, such as spoken scenes, dances, songs, costumes, and scenery. Consequently, the formal writing of plays may have helped poets to communicate more clearly their creative visions, and thereby also helped to guarantee the cohesiveness of increasingly complex performances. Moreover, the nature of Greek theatre had evolved from a purely ritualistic religious ceremony to a popular festival. In Athens, the City Dionysia became the most important of these festivals, the opportunity for actors and playwrights to compete for coveted prizes awarded by judges chosen by lot.<sup>285</sup> As a result, the name of authors became inextricably associated with the plays that they created, thus asserting the authority of the author and the literary significance of individual versions of myths. At the dawn of Western literature, the fluidity of myths began to erode as they crystallized in an ever-growing corpus of written works.

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<sup>285</sup> For a detailed description of the official proceedings of the drama competition at the City Dionysia, see the second edition of *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* by Arthur Wallace Pickard-Cambridge, pp. 95-96.

Each subsequent written version of a myth is connected to its predecessors as in a series of chain links: the myth has become *literary myth*. Pierre Albouy, a prominent literary (and literary-myth) critic of the mid-twentieth century, explains that a literary myth must be rooted in a preexisting mythology or tradition, must enhance the myth with new meaning, and must guarantee the plurality of significations carried by the myth:

Pour être réputé mythe littéraire, un texte devrait satisfaire à une première condition nécessaire, mais non suffisante: ou bien se référer à un récit fourni par une tradition, ou bien offrir des références plus ou moins explicites à un mythe traditionnel, dont le texte reproduirait les significations. . . . Seconde condition, indispensable: se présenter comme une palingénésie du mythe, c'est-à-dire lui ajouter des significations nouvelles. . . . La difficulté résiderait dans une pluralité des significations, interdisant qu'aucune ne puisse subsister sans l'autre. (1061-62)<sup>286</sup>

The dynamic relationship among the different chain links of the literary myth is also explored by Raymond Trousson in "Servitude du créateur en face du mythe." In this article, the critic underlines the impossibility for the artist to escape the many anterior references that form the history of a specific literary myth:

[Q]u'il s'agisse d'une figure de l'histoire ou d'un type légendaire, l'auteur est enchaîné par le sujet même. Il lui faut en outre compter avec un public prévenu, prêt à la comparaison avec une sorte d'archétype culturel: écrit-on aujourd'hui un *Faust* sans redouter l'ombre de Goethe, un *Prométhée* sans s'inquiéter d'Eschyle? (89)<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> "To be considered literary myth, a text should satisfy the first condition necessary, but not sufficient on its own: to call upon a traditional story or to feature somewhat explicit references to a traditional myth, of which the text would reproduce the meanings. . . . Second condition, indispensable: to present itself as a palingenesis of the myth, that is to say create new meanings. . . . The challenge is to be found in the plurality of meanings, which prohibits that one could survive without the other."

<sup>287</sup> "[W]hether it be a historical or legendary figure, the author is bound by the subject itself. He must, among other things, deal with an informed audience, ready to undergo comparison with a form of cultural archetype: today, does one write a *Faust* without encountering the shadow of Goethe? A *Prometheus* without a thought for Aeschylus?"

For example, when Giraudoux writes his play *Amphitryon 38*, he both deliberately and inevitably awakens the myriad of other literary works inspired by the myth of Amphitryon that preceded him. Among these literary works, Giraudoux was certainly familiar with Plautus', Molière's, and Heinrich von Kleist's plays (all of which are titled *Amphitryon*), as documented by Renee Zenon in her comparative analysis, *Le traitement des mythes dans le théâtre de Giraudoux*.<sup>288</sup> It is also worth noting that Giraudoux willingly acknowledges the continuity of the literary myth by adding the number "38" after Amphitryon, a move that necessarily categorizes his play as one piece of a large, rich, and multifaceted literary lineage. On this subject, L. R. Shero explains that Giraudoux may have compiled a list of 37 other versions of the myth before deciding on his final title. However, Shero adds that it is equally possible that Giraudoux "knew the earlier works had been numerous and that he fixed on a number for his own play at random" (229n41). Beyond the historically anecdotal nature of this information, it is evident that Giraudoux's *Amphitryon 38* embraces directly the form of literary myth and, thereby, cannot help but become a part of it. In fact, the diversity with which Giraudoux calls upon myth in his works for the stage stands as a particularly interesting example of the possibilities of literary myth in a writer's corpus.

### 3.3 Myth and Theatre: Bound through History

The interdependent relationship between myth and drama continued long after the collapse of the Roman Empire. During the Middle Ages, the Catholic church gradually adopted theatrical techniques to communicate its own mythology—the stories featured in the Bible—to a largely illiterate population, particularly through the forms

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<sup>288</sup> "The Use of Myths in the Theatre of Giraudoux."

of liturgical dramas, mystery plays, and morality plays. The Mass itself can be considered a sacred drama that brings to life a complex mythology throughout the calendar year, with its heightened language—more sophisticated than everyday speech—and its elaborate rituals. For example, Brockett observes that “[s]ymbolic objects and actions—Church vestments, altars, censers, and the pantomime of the priests—constantly recalled the events which Christian ritual celebrates” (73). Today, communities around the world continue to celebrate pivotal episodes of Christian mythology with dramatic performances, most notably during Christmas and Easter commemorations and pageants.

The secularization of theatre practice, which began during the High Medieval period (Cohen 84), as well as the renewed appreciation for Greek and Roman ethos that characterized the Renaissance, prompted a vigorous resurgence of classical myth in the dramatic arts. Greek and Roman theatre served as references, above and beyond their role as models to imitate, thematically or structurally or both, for several generations of playwrights, including at the height of Elizabethan drama in England (a period that lasts between the mid-sixteenth through the mid-seventeenth centuries) and Neoclassical drama in France (during the second half of the seventeenth century). Certainly, countless plays feature mythological characters as well as historical figures, effectively blurring the line between myth and history, and, interestingly, further contributing to the mythification of history. Among these plays we note Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1607) and *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1595),<sup>289</sup> Pierre Corneille’s *Cinna* (1643)

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<sup>289</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* rethinks numerous elements from the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe as related by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Shakespeare’s familiarity with this work is undeniable, as demonstrated for instance in the final act of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in which amateur actors (known as the

and *Œdipe* (1659),<sup>290</sup> and Jean Racine's *Britannicus* (1669) and *Phèdre* (1677).<sup>291</sup> While the context of the theatrical performance shifted gradually from the religious to the profane, the telling of myth endured as a core component of theatre. Indeed, one can uncover the presence of myth throughout the history of dramatic literature.

To narrow the discussion and further prepare for the myth-analysis of *Roberto Zucco*, I shall limit the examination of more recent theatre history and its relationship with myth to the realm of French dramatic literature. To begin, I recognize that for the literary critic and for the theatre historian, myth can appear as a line, as a sort of Ariadne's thread woven through the labyrinthine development of theatre in France. So, it is not surprising that the crucial role of myth in French dramatic literature has been the subject of many critical studies. For example, Robert J. North's *Myth in the Modern French Theatre* (1963) presents a chronological analysis of works from the 1920s to the 1960s. In this book, the author observes that playwrights continue to use myth to "express contemporary men's view of the universe" (3). Equally noteworthy, the collective study, *Myth and Its Making in the French Theatre* (1988), explores the multiple relationships between myth and theatre in the works of many great masters of theatrical art, from Corneille to Vinaver, from Alfred de Musset to Sartre. The broad nature of this particular collection of essays endorses the idea that myth has enjoyed and continues to enjoy a predominant role, both as a subject and as a form, within the French literary tradition. Furthermore, the field of literary criticism owes, of course, a great deal to Albouy, whose book, *Mythes et mythologies dans la littérature*

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mechanicals) give a dramatic performance of the very myth of Pyramus and Thisbe in honor of the Theseus' wedding.

<sup>290</sup> "Oedipus."

<sup>291</sup> "Phaedra."

*française*,<sup>292</sup> presents a comprehensive mytho-critical examination of French literature, including a useful section dedicated to modern drama, “Les mythes antiques dans le théâtre français, de Jean Cocteau à Jean Anouilh,”<sup>293</sup> from the fourth section of the second chapter, “De Chateaubriand à Robbe-Grillet” (70-131).<sup>294</sup>

Even though the studies cited above demonstrate the continued omnipresence of myth in dramatic literature, Albouy mentions a clear “*retour aux mythes antiques*”<sup>295</sup> in the works of playwrights of the twentieth century (126. Emphasis added). This “return” stands as a counter-response to certain theatrical movements of the nineteenth century, such as Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism, all of which were affected by the unrelenting erosion of the relationship between myth and theatre. Following the downfall of the Ancien Régime and the subsequent apparent triumph of the ideals brought forth by the French Revolution (many of which remained unfulfilled), a great desire to abandon old models prompted many authors to reject the thematic and structural norms of Neoclassicism, such as the traditional use of Greco-Roman mythology as a popular source of dramaturgical material. This effort is perhaps best articulated in Stendhal’s pamphlet *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823-1825), in which the author denounces his contemporaries as mere imitators of the great dramatists of the seventeenth century and upholds the Romantics as the true voice of the new generation:

Le *romantisme* est l’art de présenter aux peuples les œuvres littéraires qui, dans l’état actuel de leurs habitudes et de leurs croyances, sont susceptibles de leur donner le plus de plaisir possible.

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<sup>292</sup> “Myths and Mythologies in French Literature.”

<sup>293</sup> “Ancient Myths in French Theatre, from Jean Cocteau to Jean Anouilh.”

<sup>294</sup> “From Chateaubriand to Robbe-Grillet.”

<sup>295</sup> “return to ancient myths.”

Le *classicisme*, au contraire, leur présente la littérature qui donnait le plus grand plaisir possible à leurs arrière-grands-pères. (32-33. Emphasis in original)<sup>296</sup>

In an energetic effort to dismantle the rigid structure of Neoclassical drama, Stendhal argues against the conventional use of the then sacrosanct alexandrine verse, to which he prefers the modernity and fluidity of prose (2). Moreover, he celebrates the freedom bestowed by the legacy of Shakespearean drama, which ignores the cumbersome rules of such conventions as the unities of time and of place:

Toute la dispute entre Racine et Shakespeare se réduit à savoir si, en observant les deux unités de *lieu* et de *temps*, on peut faire des pièces qui intéressent vivement des spectateurs du dix-neuvième siècle . . . [C]es unités ne sont nullement nécessaires à produire l'émotion profonde et le véritable effet dramatique. (7. Emphasis in original)<sup>297</sup>

The dramaturgical modernization urged by Stendhal was equally defended by another great literary figure of the Romantic movement, Hugo, despite the two men's profound distaste for each other's literary output.<sup>298</sup> In the preface to *Cromwell* (1827), Hugo recognizes the work of Shakespeare as a model for Romantic drama and specifically commends Shakespeare's ability to blend tragedy and comedy, a move that clearly opposes the purity of genres required by Neoclassical norms. Moreover, Hugo identifies an important shift in the history of dramatic literature: "Les personnages de l'ode sont des colosses: Adam, Caïn, Noé; ceux de l'épopée sont des géants: Achille, Atrée,

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<sup>296</sup> "*Romanticism* is the art of presenting to the people literary works that, in the current state of their habits and beliefs, can potentially give them as much pleasure as possible.

On the other hand, *Classicism* presents to the people literature that gave as much pleasure as possible to their great-grand-parents."

<sup>297</sup> "The heart of the dispute between Racine and Shakespeare comes down to knowing if, when applying the unities of *time* and *place*, one can write plays that will truly arouse the audience of the nineteenth century."

<sup>298</sup> See "A Note on Stendhal and Victor Hugo" by William M. Dey.



Oreste; ceux du drame sont des hommes: Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello” (29).<sup>299</sup> Certainly, Romantic playwrights prefer to tell the stories of somewhat ordinary men rather than those of mythical heroes, a reflection of the changing values reflected by the ideals of the 1789 revolution, which aimed to give voice to the man on the street. It is also important to note that Hugo does not advocate for the use of prose but rather for that of a liberated verse: “un vers libre, franc, loyal, . . . passant d’une naturelle allure de la comédie à la tragédie, du sublime au grotesque” (54).<sup>300</sup> Hugo’s argument in favor of versification reveals his avowal of dramatic dialogue as a sophisticated and artistic mode of expression, which he considers superior to the apparently more realistic prose for which Stendhal fervently advocates in *Racine et Shakespeare*.

The literary dispute between traditionalists and the Romantics reached its peak famously during the first performances of Hugo’s *Hernani* at the Comédie-Française in late February 1830. Loyal representatives of the two factions gathered in the audience: Hugo’s supporters hoped to witness the triumph of Romanticism, while his vocal detractors were determined to see the play fail. In *Histoire du romantisme*,<sup>301</sup> Théophile Gautier insists that, before the rise of the curtain, “l’animosité était grande de part et d’autre” (92).<sup>302</sup> Indeed, once the play began, vicious heckles and fervent ovations accompanied the entire performance, as the house had become a true battlefield of ideas. In the end, despite the months-long controversy fomented by Hugo’s critics and their effort to sabotage the premiere, *Hernani* emerged as a resounding success. Such

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<sup>299</sup> “The characters of the ode are colossal figures: Adam, Cain, Noah; those of the epic are giants: Achilles, Atreus, Orestes; those of the drama are men: Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello.”

<sup>300</sup> “a free, straightforward, and faithful verse, . . . inherently disposed to serve comedy and tragedy, the sublime and the grotesque.”

<sup>301</sup> “History of Romanticism.”

<sup>302</sup> “there was palpable animosity on both sides.”

passion on both sides of the debate reminds us of the critical role that theatre played as a literary genre and as a cultural apparatus at the heart of society in the nineteenth century, a role obviously quite different from the one it plays today. Of course, the battle of *Hernani* holds great significance in the history of French theatre, which is due more to its status as a symbol of artistic renaissance and resistance rather than to the dramaturgical merits of the play itself. Nevertheless, *Hernani* has regularly returned to the Comédie-Française, even as recently as 2014 under the direction of Nicolas Lormeau.

The presence of myth in dramatic literature continued progressively to collapse during the latter part of the 1800s under the forces set in motion by the rise of two correlated artistic movements: Realism and Naturalism. Continued profound changes in the socio-cultural landscape of rapidly industrializing Western Europe prompted a new shift in artistic interests and aesthetic norms. As a result, theatre artists began to embrace the aesthetics of Realism and Naturalism, for these two movements were fueled by the growing popular faith in the hegemony of science and technology and the influence of early behavioral psychology, as well as by drastic changes in other disciplines, such as philosophy and economics. In *Le Naturalisme au théâtre* (1881),<sup>303</sup> Émile Zola presents a strong argument in favor of Realism and Naturalism on stage, which he begins by questioning the seeming obsolescence of theatre: “Il semble impossible que le mouvement d'enquête et d'analyse, qui est le mouvement même du dix-neuvième siècle, ait révolutionné toutes les sciences et tous les arts, en laissant à

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<sup>303</sup> “Naturalism in the Theatre.”

part et comme isolé l'art dramatique" (34).<sup>304</sup> He continues with a call for the foundation of a new theatre aesthetic: "le drame vrai d'une société moderne" (39).<sup>305</sup> For Zola, the coming stylistic revolution of theatre would certainly emerge from Naturalist thought and practice, as Romanticism was merely a transitory phase in the evolution of drama: "[I]l est bien visible que le romantisme n'a été que le chaînon nécessaire qui devait attacher la littérature classique à la littérature naturaliste" (43).<sup>306</sup>

The Naturalist theatre draws its inspiration from the immediate context of contemporary society, thereby deliberately abandoning traditional myths and celebrated figures of Greco-Roman mythology, Judeo-Christian mythology, and the notion of an idealized image of history. Rather than discovering what is universal about the human experience through myth, proponents of the Naturalist stage vowed to uncover universality through the study of individual experiences grounded in a temporal and geographical present. For André Antoine, who established himself as one of the leading theatre artists at the forefront of Naturalist drama through his pioneering directorial work at the Théâtre Libre from 1887 to 1894, the focus of theatre became the scientific study of human behavior in its natural environment. This stance is evident in the fact that Antoine took notable interest in material elements, such as the design of sets, costumes, and lighting, which he carefully coordinated to create the illusion of everyday life. Brockett notes that Antoine "sought to reproduce environment in every detail" and that he went as far as hanging "real carcasses of beef on stage" for his 1888 production

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<sup>304</sup> "It seems impossible that the movement of inquiry and analysis, which is the very movement that defines the nineteenth century, revolutionized all the sciences and all the arts, somehow leaving behind and isolating the art of theatre."

<sup>305</sup> "the true drama of modern society."

<sup>306</sup> "It appears quite obvious that Romanticism was merely the necessary link between Classical literature and Naturalist literature."

of Fernand Icre's *Les Bouchers* (375).<sup>307</sup> Such production practices reveal how artists at the Théâtre Libre developed a theatrical process inspired by scientific methodology (through the filter of Naturalist aesthetics), with the aim of reaching an understanding of general human experience. In other words, the Naturalists attempted to demystify and rationalize the mysteries of life, effectively moving away from the originally mystical and mythical roots of theatrical practice.

Although the influence of early Realism and Naturalism in European and Russian theatre had a significant and lasting impact on the development of theatre and film—particularly in acting with the emergence of new training methodologies best exemplified by the work of Constantin Stanislavski—many in the next generation of artists abandoned these ideals and began to investigate other forms of theatre. In the article, “The Theatre Theatrical” (1920), Russian actor and director Vsevolod Meyerhold takes a stand against what he sees as the failures of Naturalism: “The Naturalistic Theater denies that the spectator has the ability to finish a painting in his imagination, or to dream as he does when listening to music. And yet the spectator possesses such an ability” (165). Hence, Naturalist theatre may have been so efficient at reproducing and dissecting everyday life that it could have also caused its own eventual downfall, becoming as boring and undramatic as everyday life itself can be at times.

In response to the restrictions of Naturalist drama, a new generation of artists began a quest to redefine modern theatre. Innovative playwrights and experimental directors emerged in support of this complex and at times, not surprisingly contradictory avant-garde movement. Two particular trends simultaneously developed out of the work produced by this cohort: a rising interest in recapturing the mystical

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<sup>307</sup> “The Butchers.”

qualities of dramatic performance, prompted by a belief that theatre should reclaim its identity as a metaphysical experience, and a profound desire to reinvestigate myth as the ultimate source of dramatic narratives. During the first half of the twentieth century, this avant-garde followed multiple paths and articulated a great diversity of perspectives on the future of theatre arts, as demonstrated by the long list of “-isms” that punctuate this period, such as Modernism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and beyond.

As early as 1890, Lugné-Poe, a former student of Antoine, argued that “the theatre should offer something more satisfying than the brutal Realism of the Théâtre-Libre” (qtd. in Jasper 41). Lugné-Poe began his professional career as an actor at the Théâtre d’Art, an experimentally based theatre managed by poet and playwright Paul Fort, where he participated in the first efforts to develop a Symbolist theatre. The Symbolist movement stood against Realism and Naturalism by celebrating the mysterious, the unexplainable, and the wonders of the mind that escape from the constraints of concrete materiality. In a sense, the project of a Symbolist theatre was less likely to succeed than was Symbolist literature, best exemplified by the hermetic and abstract poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, for theatre is the art of representation and embodiment par excellence. Nevertheless, Lugné-Poe and Fort collaborated on productions of new plays written by authors associated with the Symbolist movement, including Rachilde’s *Madame la Mort* (1891)<sup>308</sup> and Maurice Maeterlinck’s *L’Intruse* (1890),<sup>309</sup> as well as the staging of Symbolist texts, such as Mallarmé’s celebrated poem, “L’Après-midi d’un faune.”<sup>310</sup> Moreover, Fort valued cross-disciplinary collaboration and regularly invited “important Symbolist painters from the Nabis group

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<sup>308</sup> “Madame Death.”

<sup>309</sup> “The Intruder.”

<sup>310</sup> “The Afternoon of a Faun.”

. . . to design sets and program notes for [the] Théâtre d'Art" (Deak 142).<sup>311</sup> Despite its short existence—it lasted for only two seasons—Fort's Théâtre d'Art represents the first crucial step toward the re-mystification of theatre.

In 1893, following the financial difficulties of the Théâtre d'Art and, therefore, its ultimate closure, Lugné-Poe created the Théâtre de l'Œuvre where he further explored the possibilities of a Symbolist theatre. The work at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre embraced non-Realist techniques, such as puppetry and stylized staging, and continued to feature new and innovative plays, including Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*—a production that marked the creation of the company in 1893—and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1895).<sup>312</sup> Jarry shares with Lugné-Poe a sharp aversion toward Realist theatre, which he considered a disengaged experience, as such theatre tends to describe the world of the play in great detail and thus condemns the spectator to the passive role of a simple observer. In his article, "De l'inutilité du théâtre au théâtre,"<sup>313</sup> he calls for a form of theatre that would reclaim "le plaisir actif de créer" (18)<sup>314</sup> for the spectator, who should always be a participant rather than an observer.<sup>315</sup> Although his contributions to the theatre are in large part limited to the *Ubu* series, Jarry remains one of the most radical figures of this avant-garde movement and his *Ubu Roi*<sup>316</sup> portends the multiple attempts to depart from the traditions of the commercial theatre and the

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<sup>311</sup> "Les Nabis" (The Nabis) was the name given to a group of avant-garde Parisian artists who met at the Académie Julian, including celebrated artists, such as Pierre Bonnard, Paul Sérusier, and Edouard Vuillard. Their most influential works are associated with the Art Nouveau period (1890s-1910s) and embraced a variety of media, including painting, printmaking, murals, and decorative arts.

<sup>312</sup> "King Ubu."

<sup>313</sup> "From the Uselessness of Theatre to Theatre."

<sup>314</sup> "the active pleasure to create."

<sup>315</sup> Jarry's distinction between "observer" and "participant" foreshadows Roland Barthes' much later distinction between "readerly" and "writerly" approaches to reading. Jarry's participative and Barthes' writerly approaches invite the spectator/reader to take on an active role in the construction of meaning of the work of art at hand. This idea is particularly interesting in the case of dramatic texts expressly based on popular myths, of which the meaning may be shapeshifting, according to its specific audience.

<sup>316</sup> "King Ubu."

principles of the Naturalist drama that characterize the history of theatre in the twentieth century. Certainly, the figure of Ubu himself has become an archetype, a modern, ironic myth, as argued by Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) (357). The dissemination of this archetype clearly transpires through the entrance of the adjective “ubuesque” in the French language: “Digne du personnage grotesque créé par A. Jarry, le ‘père Ubu’, ”<sup>317</sup> explains the Larousse Dictionary. As recently as January 2017, American President Donald Trump himself was described as an “Ubu” in an op-ed for the newspaper *Libération*, proof that, over a century after the premiere of *Ubu Roi*, the myth of Ubu continues to resonate vividly within contemporary society. Therefore, it is not surprising that the character of Père Ubu remains Jarry’s most famous creation by far. He appears in four plays: *Ubu Roi*, *Ubu Cocu* (1897),<sup>318</sup> *Ubu Enchaîné* (1899),<sup>319</sup> and *Ubu sur la Butte* (1906),<sup>320</sup> as well as in two additional texts, *Almanach du Père Ubu Illustré* (1899)<sup>321</sup> and *Almanach Illustré du Père Ubu (XX<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (1901).<sup>322</sup> Unlike *Ubu*, which belongs to its own category, most of the plays written by the Symbolists have since faded into obscurity. Nevertheless, the avant-garde drama produced at the Théâtre d’Art and at the Théâtre de l’Œuvre in the 1890s—a clear reaction against Realism and Naturalism—can be credited for imagining a new path toward a theatre, perhaps ironically closer to its most important original functions: the communication of myth.

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<sup>317</sup> “Similar to the grotesque character created by A. Jarry, ‘Père Ubu’.”

<sup>318</sup> “Ubu Cuckolded.”

<sup>319</sup> “Ubu in Chains.”

<sup>320</sup> “Ubu on the Mount.”

<sup>321</sup> “Illustrated Almanac of Father Ubu.”

<sup>322</sup> “Father Ubu’s Illustrated Almanac (Twentieth Century).”

In the first half of the twentieth century, this desire to reaffirm the natural relationship between myth and drama prospers through the growing interest in sacred, primitive, and ritualistic theatre. In France, the plays of Claudel—strongly influenced by the Symbolist movement, by the author’s Catholic faith, and by his discovery of Eastern theatrical traditions—exemplify this resurgence of sacred drama. Amid a social and political context of sweeping secularization, Claudel calls upon familiar themes, figures, and stories from Judeo-Christian mythology as most evidently demonstrated in *L’annonce faite à Marie* (1912).<sup>323</sup> In the introduction to Claudel’s *Théâtre*, Jacques Madaule notes that the rest of Claudel’s works for the stage are equally metaphysical:

Il ne faut pas oublier que, d’un bout à l’autre, le théâtre de Claudel est un théâtre chrétien. Depuis les mystères du Moyen Âge et le théâtre espagnol aucun théâtre n’avait été aussi chrétien que celui-ci. Il ne l’est pas seulement par l’intention de l’auteur. Il l’est encore par le ressort même de l’action. Ce ne sont plus les jeux de l’amour et du hasard ; ni même ceux de l’homme et du destin ; mais bien ceux de l’homme et de la grâce. (xviii-xix)<sup>324</sup>

The striking and often cited opening stage directions of *Le Soulier de satin* (1925)<sup>325</sup> echo Claudel’s desire to reveal the universality of his characters’ journey: “La scène de ce drame est le monde” (15).<sup>326</sup> Unlike the Realists—who were primarily interested in the concrete, detailed everyday reality of the world—Claudel prefers to stage a universe of great distances and foreign lands, in which time, space, histories, and cultures coexist and emulate the rich symphony of the human experience. Gabriel Marcel explains that

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<sup>323</sup> “The Tidings Brought to Mary.”

<sup>324</sup> “We should not forget that, through and through, Claudel’s theatre is a Christian theatre. Since the mystery plays of the Middle Ages and the Spanish theatre, no theatre has been as Christian as this one. It is so not merely because of the author’s intention. It is also because of the unfolding of the action. These are no longer games of love and chance; nor those of man and fate; but rather those of man and grace.”

<sup>325</sup> “The Satin Slipper.”

<sup>326</sup> “The stage on which this play unfolds is the world.”



“le drame claudélien est non seulement cosmique, mais avant tout ontologique” (49).<sup>327</sup>

Indeed, Claudel presents a theatre of magnitude that departs from the social drama of the Realists and embraces archetypically mythological and metaphysical proportions.

Along with the influence of faith, the discovery of world theatre practices (made possible by a long and far-reaching diplomatic career) left a significant mark on Claudel’s plays of the 1920s and 1930s and help to define his conception of theatrical practices. In *Paul Claudel, le nô et la synthèse des arts*,<sup>328</sup> Ayako Nishino describes the intersection of Claudel’s literary journey with the Noh tradition, a highly codified and ritualistic form of Japanese theatre:

Ce spectacle complet japonais se déroule dans une ambiance surnaturelle et sacrée, et il intègre le public spirituellement dans l'univers dramatique fondé sur la concordance des arts en lui attribuant un rôle important. Ainsi Claudel a trouvé dans le nô une étonnante réalisation de ce qu’il imaginait pour l’art dramatique tel qu’il voulait le pratiquer. (15)<sup>329</sup>

The influence of Noh becomes apparent in Claudel’s *Le Soulier de satin*, an epic drama that he began to write in 1919 and completed in 1925 while serving as French ambassador to Japan. Nishino notes the presence of numerous Japanese elements throughout the play, in particular in the Doña Prouhèze dream scene in the “troisième journée”<sup>330</sup> (506-508), and conducts a rich comparative study between the traditional characters of Noh theatre and those that populate *Le Soulier de satin* (509-16).

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<sup>327</sup> “the Claudelian drama is not simply cosmic, it is above all ontological.”

<sup>328</sup> “Paul Claudel, Noh, and the Synthesis of Arts.”

<sup>329</sup> “This complete Japanese spectacle unfolds in a supernatural and sacred atmosphere, and spiritually integrates the audience into the dramatic universe founded on the harmony of arts by giving them an important role to play. Thus Claudel found in Noh a surprising embodiment of what he envisioned for the art of theatre and its practice.”

<sup>330</sup> “third day.” Claudel divides the play into four “days” instead of four acts, a choice that reflects its unusual length. Indeed, a production of *Le Soulier de satin* directed by Antoine Vitez for the 1987 Festival d’Avignon, lasted 12 hours (from 9:00 p.m. to 9:00 a.m.).

Claudél's unique writing style further contributes to the departure from the aesthetic tone cherished by the Realists. Most notably, Claudél prefers a type of free verse, which has become forever associated with his name, "le verset claudélien,"<sup>331</sup> rejecting more conventional dialogue in prose. This gesture emphasizes the incantatory quality of the actor delivering the text and restores the mystical aura of drama through the use of heightened language (Vilar 36). Moreover, Corvin notes that Claudél innovates his plays on a variety of other levels:

Le théâtre de Claudél est neuf et incongru par rapport aux traditions occidentales: par le dépouillement de l'espace, la discontinuité des séquences, le jeu délibéré avec l'impossible et la dérision, la multiplicité des personnages, le recours au sublime à la fois passionnel et religieux, la force du lyrisme et la présence caractéristiques dans sa dramaturgie d'images scéniques choc. (348)<sup>332</sup>

Although Claudél's plays are rarely produced, most likely because of their prohibitive length and the characteristic density of the texts, Claudél remains one of the great experimenters of the early twentieth-century avant-garde, predominantly because of his interest in the renewal of a metaphysical drama, in which myth and ritual animate the theatrical experience at its very foundation.

Further, Antonin Artaud's abundant theoretical and critical works appear similarly concerned with the question of myth and ritual. Artaud, perhaps the most influential and radical theorist of modern French theatre, began his career in the early 1920s among a group of artists of the Surrealist movement. The Surrealists were largely influenced by the field of psychoanalysis, popularized by the theories of Sigmund Freud

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<sup>331</sup> "the Claudelian verse."

<sup>332</sup> "Claudél's theatre is new and incongruous when compared to Western traditions: by the bareness of the stage, the deliberate play between impossibility and derision, the multiplicity of characters, the use of the sublime in both devotional and religious forms, the power of its lyricism, and the characteristic presence of bold stage images in his dramaturgy."

and Carl Jung. They found great inspiration in the idea of the vivid alternate reality of the unconscious mind, which regularly surfaces in our dreams. As Joseph Campbell (one of the most important and influential writers who have ever considered the notion of myth) observes in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, “[d]ream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche” (19). The quest to liberate the reality imprisoned in our unconscious—a necessary step toward the construction of a fulfilling artistic experience—resides at the heart of André Breton’s “Manifeste du surréalisme” (1924).<sup>333</sup> In this foundational text of the Surrealist movement, Breton suggests that one can access the riches of the subconscious by nurturing one’s imagination and sense of wonder, and he calls for the reconciliation between dream and reality into a superior experience: “Je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de *surréalité*” (24. Emphasis in original).<sup>334</sup>

In 1926, Artaud founded his own theatre company dedicated to the production of non-realist drama, the Théâtre Alfred-Jarry, in association with Surrealist author Roger Vitrac. The experience was short-lived and the Théâtre Alfred-Jarry closed after two seasons, due in part to financial difficulties, as it is often the case, as we have seen, with experimental theatres. Nevertheless, Artaud continued to work on numerous articles and essays, in the effort to articulate his own bold vision for the theatre, which would come to life most clearly in his remarkable 1938 book, *Le Théâtre et son*

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<sup>333</sup> “Manifesto of Surrealism.”

<sup>334</sup> “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, which seem so contradictory, embodied by dream and reality, into a kind of absolute reality: a *surreality*.”

*double*,<sup>335</sup> a collection of pieces written through the 1930s. The revelation of a hidden facet of the human experience prompts Artaud to celebrate and explore that which is mysterious and unexplainable. In “Manifeste pour un théâtre avorté,”<sup>336</sup> an article published in the literary magazine *Les Cahiers du Sud* in 1927, he strongly condemns the commercial theatre and calls for a reinvestigation of ritualistic drama:

Nous ne croyons plus qu’il y ait quelque chose au monde qui se puisse appeler le théâtre, nous ne voyons pas à quelle réalité une semblable dénomination s’adresse. . . . Si nous faisons un théâtre ce n’est pas pour jouer des pièces, mais pour arriver à ce que tout ce qu’il y a d’obscur dans l’esprit, d’enfoui, d’irrévélé se manifeste en une sorte de projection matérielle, réelle. (232)<sup>337</sup>

In 1931, Artaud attends a performance of the Balinese dance troupe at the Paris Colonial Exposition, an event that undeniably had a considerable impact on his theorization of theatre practices (as well as on more general questioning of France’s colonial practices). Patricia A. Clancy explains that the reason for which Balinese performance made such a profound impression on Artaud, is that it captured his idea of a theatre rooted in ritual:

The Balinese in one performance revealed what he had been dimly seeking in the Japanese Noh drama, in the Eastern and medieval Jewish mystics, in his work with the Theatre Alfred-Jarry. Here at last was a living drama of movement and gesture, stylized but at the same time capable of expressing strong basic emotions; a drama both concrete and abstract that springs from ancient religious and tribal sources, and a time when man was still in direct contact with the natural world and with the ebb and flow of the cosmos; a drama in which music and costume form an integral part of the spectacle, suggesting a wealth of interrelated significances and symbols, both visible and invisible. (397)

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<sup>335</sup> “The Theatre and its Double.”

<sup>336</sup> “Manifesto for an Aborted Theatre.”

<sup>337</sup> “We no longer believe that there is something in the world that could be called theatre, we cannot recognize to which reality such a term refers. . . . If we create a theatre it is not in order to perform plays, but to let all that is obscure, buried, and concealed in the mind uncover itself as a kind of real and materialized projection.”

As with Claudel (as well as many other artists and writers of the time), Artaud found in the Eastern theatrical traditions a mode of performance extremely well aligned with his own personal vision for the stage: a ritualistic theatre, rich in symbols and signs, representing the ultimate gateway to a hidden superior beauty. The prominence of myth and ritual in Artaud's theatrical project—to which he refers as “le Théâtre de la Cruauté”<sup>338</sup>—arises from his deep admiration for their extraordinary power. In *Le Théâtre et son double*, he imagines a theatrical event capable of generating such power by developing new myths that he describes as “les Mythes de l'homme et de la vie moderne” (580).<sup>339</sup> For Artaud, the true purpose of theatre is in fact the making of myths: “Créer des Mythes voilà le véritable objet du théâtre, traduire la vie sous son aspect universel, immense, et extraire de cette vie des images où nous aimerions à nous retrouver” (*Le Théâtre* 576).<sup>340</sup> Thus, myth reveals itself as a true *double* of theatre.

Artaud's keen interest in the potential of myth resembles that of many French playwrights of the twentieth century, who, in a kind of collective fervor, embraced literary myth as a rich source of inspiration, if not also as a reliable dramatic device. Often, the chosen myth is used explicitly and transpires directly through the title of the play or through one of its fundamental aspects, such as the name of its protagonist or the basic construction of its plot. Many of the most celebrated dramas of the interwar period belong to that category: Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1926)<sup>341</sup> and *La Machine infernale* (1934),<sup>342</sup> André Gide's *Œdipe* (1931), and Giraudoux' *La Guerre de Troie*

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<sup>338</sup> “Theatre of Cruelty.”

<sup>339</sup> “the Myths of men and of modern life.”

<sup>340</sup> “The true purpose of theatre is to create myths, to translate life through its universal and boundless nature, and to extract from this life images in which we would like to recognize ourselves.”

<sup>341</sup> “Orpheus.”

<sup>342</sup> “The Infernal Machine.”

*n'aura pas lieu* (1935)<sup>343</sup> and his *Électre* (1937).<sup>344</sup> This trend continues during the dark years of the Second World War, with, among others, Sartre's *Les Mouches* (1943),<sup>345</sup> a reinterpretation of the quest of Electra and Orestes to avenge the murder of their father, and Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944), the playwright's most acclaimed work for the stage.

Sartre's *Les Mouches* and Anouilh's *Antigone* were among the many plays written and produced during the perilous years of the German occupation of Paris. Undoubtedly, the use of myth afforded both playwrights the ability to discuss contemporary issues under the cover of a celebrated story, thus avoiding the threat of Nazi and the Vichy government's censorship. In this sense, the literary myth can function as a textual layer that simultaneously reveals meaning, while it also renders it opaque. The integration of myth allows the playwright to tell several stories concurrently, thereby multiplying the reading strata available to the audience. Two layers of meaning appear quasi immediately. The first is unambiguous: the narrative of the myth itself as told on stage. The second is revealed to the audience through the unique relationship between the narrative of the myth and the contemporary context in which it is presented. And, many other layers of signification could well be contained in the modern rewriting of ancient mythic tales.

In *Antigone*, Anouilh takes advantage of the multiplicity of meanings triggered by the myth to call attention to the universality of its narrative. He combines the traditional plot with remarkably modern dialogues and multiple anachronisms that

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<sup>343</sup> Published in the United States as "*Tiger at the Gates*." The original title can be literally translated as "*The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*."

<sup>344</sup> "Electra."

<sup>345</sup> "*The Flies*." It is notable that this title evokes the titles of three of Aristophanes' comedies named after animals: *The Birds*, *The Frogs* and *The Wasps*.

continuously remind the audience of the story's significance to the contemporary horizon. For example, the prologue mentions "trois hommes rougeauds qui jouent aux cartes" (12),<sup>346</sup> Antigone compares the landscape to "une carte postale" (14),<sup>347</sup> La Nourrice prepares "un bon café et des tartines" (31),<sup>348</sup> and Hémon comments on Antigone's "rouge à lèvres" (37).<sup>349</sup> Later, Créon mentions his "fusils" (51)<sup>350</sup> and recalls a moment when Polynice was smoking cigarettes (87). Such modernity and simplicity in the language—which works to close the gap between the ancient myth and its contemporary audience—clearly represents a deliberate stylistic and temporal rupture between Anouilh's *Antigone* and Sophocles' ancient tragedy. Yet both plays do share similar plot structures, as Anouilh does not question the narrative nor the outcome of the myth, but rather constructs a more ambiguous atmosphere that refuses to provide definitive answers to the questions raised by the myth. Further, the play delivers its most unique contribution to the literary mythology by altering fundamentally the relationship between Creon and Antigone. In the essay, "Pour une lecture politique de l'*Antigone* de Jean Anouilh,"<sup>351</sup> Jean-Yves Guérin describes the manner in which Anouilh has shaped his heroine:

Elle a perdu la "supériorité éthique" de l'héroïne sophocléenne. Elle n'invoque aucun principe supérieur, théologico-civique; elle est d'abord celle qui dit "non" à tout et à tous, à Créon comme à un Hémon lui aussi immature, au bonheur et à la vie même. (95)<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> "three red-faced men playing cards."

<sup>347</sup> "a post card."

<sup>348</sup> "a good coffee and slices of buttered bread."

<sup>349</sup> "lipstick."

<sup>350</sup> "rifles."

<sup>351</sup> "For a Political Reading of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*."

<sup>352</sup> "She has lost the 'ethical superiority' of Sophocles' heroine. She does not invoke a superior, theological, and civic principle; she is primarily the one who says 'no' to everything and everyone, to Creon as to a similarly immature Haemon, to happiness and to life itself."

Antigone's stubbornness, freed from the religious context of ancient Greece, shifts the focus of the play to Créon's attempts to reason with her. In such a way, it becomes apparent that the changes introduced by Anouilh have unlocked a multitude of possible interpretations for the age-old myth of Antigone.

Indeed, some readers and spectators may perceive in Anouilh's work an argument in favor of Vichy partisans, embodied by Créon and his soldiers, while others may discern a certain admiration for members of the Résistance, as portrayed through Antigone's uncompromising revolt.<sup>353</sup> But the political *parti pris* is, in a certain sense, ultimately irrelevant: Anouilh's play extends far beyond a specific historical commentary because it functions primarily as an invitation to debate larger moral and philosophical questions. In fact, Albouy suggests directly that myth liberates theatre from the restraints of a specific cultural context. He writes:

Dispensant de tout souci de réalisme, de vraisemblance, d'analyse psychologique, le jeu avec le mythe libère le théâtre et laisse toute la place à la réflexion, à la pensée; grâce au mythe, le théâtre devient le lieu idéal où s'affrontent les idées, où l'on discute de la fatalité de la guerre, de l'art de gouverner et si le crime qui a fondé le bonheur d'Argos doit demeurer impuni, si c'est Électre ou Antigone qui ont raison, ou bien un Égisthe ou un Créon, singulièrement plus intelligents que les brutes antiques dont ils portent le nom. (128)<sup>354</sup>

For Albouy, myth functions as a formidable liberating device, which unlocks the potential for a theatrical experience that exceeds the limitations of mundane entertainment to further engage its audience intellectually.

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<sup>353</sup> See "Fascist Ideology and Theatre Under the Occupation: The Case of Anouilh" (1993) by Mary Ann Frese Witt.

<sup>354</sup> "With no concern for realism, verisimilitude, or psychological analysis, the use of myth liberates theatre and leaves room for reflection, for thought. Through myth, theatre becomes the ideal venue for debating ideas, for discussing the fatality of war, the art of governing, and the question of whether or not the crime behind the founding of Argos should remain unpunished, if Electra or Antigone is right, or rather an Aegisthus or a Creon, notably smarter than the ancient thugs after whom they are named."



Cocteau, Gide, Giraudoux, Sartre, and Anouilh, among other playwrights of the mid-twentieth century, present plays in which ancient myths become catalysts for this theatre of ideas. Of course, stories stemming from mythology tend to appeal to a large public that instantly recognizes well-known plots and characters. Such familiarity with the subject matter may well prompt the audience to compare the new version of the myth—as presented in the modern play—to its earlier incarnations. What are the differences and similarities between Bertolt Brecht’s *Antigone* and Anouilh’s? Or between Anouilh’s and Sophocles’? How do these differences and similarities influence our understanding of the myth? These complex intertextual relationships influence the perception of each play: their meaning is no longer encapsulated in a single work but is rather revealed through the network of references that connects each text treating of the same literary myth. Moreover, one must keep in mind that the multilayered structure of literary myth can be simultaneously accessed by myth scholars and myth neophytes, thus creating several possible levels of understanding as well as multiple interpretations that never cease to emerge.

A new shift in the relationship between myth and drama takes place during the 1950s with the rise of an especially experimental movement known as the Theatre of the Absurd. Although the playwrights associated with this movement—among them, Ionesco, Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Genet, and Harold Pinter<sup>355</sup>—did not form a

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<sup>355</sup> It is interesting to note that French was a secondary language for three of the most prominent playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd—Ionesco, Beckett, and Adamov—all of whom hailed from outside of France. Such a unique positioning vis-à-vis the language in which they wrote surely influenced their understanding of discourse as a complex and inherently imperfect mode of communication. This critical outlook is most recognizable in Ionesco’s *La cantatrice chauve*, (*The Bald Soprano*) by the end of which language itself disintegrates into disjointed words, broken syllables, and, finally, unrecognizable sounds. Moreover, there is a clear parallel between the works of the Absurdist and that of other playwrights who explore multilingualism: in both cases, language is recognized and embraced as a shifting, volatile, and potent socio-cultural force.

cohesive artistic school, their work came to prominence shortly after the Second World War and displays important thematic and structural similarities, which undoubtedly prompted Esslin and other critics to consider them as a group. The “Theatre of the Absurd”—a term coined by Esslin himself in his eponymous 1961 book—is characterized by a radical departure from the most fundamental traditions of dramatic literature, a rejection of genre classification, and a notable emphasis on the breakdown of language. Esslin’s decision to gather these plays under the label “Theatre of the Absurd” results from the critic’s understanding of them as expressions of Absurdism, a philosophy developed by Albert Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942).<sup>356</sup> In this book/essay, Camus articulates the concept of the absurd as “the confrontation between an irrational world and the frantic desire for clarity that stirs in the deepest part of man” (Amoia 82) and, in the final chapter, compares the human condition to that of Sisyphus, a mythological figure condemned for eternity to push a boulder up a mountain and see it roll back down as soon as it reaches the top.

On the one hand, the Theatre of the Absurd generally abandons the explicit use of myth, in particular, Greek mythology, thus leaving behind a trend that had been so popular during the interwar period. On the other hand, Albouy claims that this cohort of playwrights, such as Camus, “inventent leurs allégories, symboles, ou mythes” (129).<sup>357</sup> The critic argues that the dramatic works of the Theatre of the Absurd lay the groundwork for the advent of a new mythology of the theatre:

Le chef-d’œuvre de Sartre, *Huis Clos*, vision moderne de l’enfer, constitue-t-il un mythe? Ce serait aussi un mythe moderne, un peu trop allégorique, peut-être, que *Le Rhinocéros* d’Eugène Ionesco, ou encore *Les Bâtisseurs d’Empire* de Boris Vian. Plus sûrement, Samuel Beckett

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<sup>356</sup> “The Myth of Sisyphus.”

<sup>357</sup> “create their own allegories, symbols, or myths.”

invente une mythologie à lui et, depuis 1953, *En attendant Godot* semble, de plus en plus, faire figure de mythe de notre temps. (129-30)<sup>358</sup>

North shares with Albouy the opinion that new myths emerge in both *Rhinocéros* and

*En attendant Godot*:

Like Beckett, [Ionesco] has refrained from using established myths and has even gently parodied them. Nonetheless, a valid claim can be made for including these two plays in the category of myth. They are extended metaphors; they present in a compelling fashion an imaginary world that parallels the world we know and casts on that world a new light. (17)

It seems indeed that Ionesco's characters, Jean and Béranger, as well as Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, have become recognizable archetypes of the twentieth century, iconic figures of modern theatre. Certainly, the role of myth in Beckett's plays has been extensively documented by studies such as Katherine H. Burkman's *Myth and Rituals in the Plays of Samuel Beckett* (1987) and Mary A. Doll's *Beckett and Myth: An Archetypal Approach* (1988). Thus, the Theatre of the Absurd, despite its transgressive and radical output—Ionesco labels *La Cantatrice chauve* as an “anti-pièce” (37)<sup>359</sup> —, remains firmly intertwined with myth, as it creates its own mythology and explores new forms of performative rituals.

Genet's plays—most notably *Les Bonnes* (1947),<sup>360</sup> *Les Nègres* (1958),<sup>361</sup> and *Les Paravents*<sup>362</sup>—exalt the ceremonial aspects of theatre, leading us back, once again, to the sacred and ritualistic roots of drama. Like Artaud and others before him, Genet too admires the traditions of Eastern drama, for they tend to promote the theatrical event

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<sup>358</sup> “Could Sartre's masterpiece, *No Exit*, a modern vision of hell, be considered a myth? Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, although perhaps a bit allegorical, could in turn be considered a modern myth. The same could be said about Boris Vian's *The Empire Builders*. Surely, Samuel Beckett invents his own mythology and, since 1953, *Waiting for Godot* appears more and more like a myth of our times.”

<sup>359</sup> “anti-play.”

<sup>360</sup> “*The Maids*.”

<sup>361</sup> “*The Blacks*.”

<sup>362</sup> “*The Screens*.”

as a celebration, a rite of an almost sacred nature. In the “Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert” (1954),<sup>363</sup> he writes:

Ce qu'on m'a rapporté des fastes japonais, chinois ou balinais, et l'idée magnifiée peut-être qui s'obstine dans mon cerveau, me rend trop grossière la formule de théâtre occidental. On ne peut que rêver d'un art qui serait un enchevêtrement profond des symboles actifs, capables de parler au public un langage où rien ne serait dit mais tout pressenti.  
(815)<sup>364</sup>

Moreover, in the “Lettres à Roger Blin” (1966),<sup>365</sup> a series of documents in which the playwright discusses the staging of *Les Paravents*, Genet outlines a conception of theatre that evokes an event capable of uniting the world of the living and that of the dead. He writes: “Personne ne doit être écarté ou privé de la fête: il faut qu'elle soit si belle que les morts aussi la devinent, et qu'ils en rougissent” (845).<sup>366</sup> This ceremonial spectacle, which also transpires clearly in the decisively stylized *Les Nègres*, represents a recurring theme in Genet's dramaturgy and recalls the religious roots of theatre. Indeed, Lewis Cetta's article, “Myth, Magic, and Play in Genet's *The Blacks*,” emphasizes the importance of myth and ritual in this complex and controversial play about race and identity: “Genet's interest in archetype and myth and their relationship to the playful ritual which is the drama itself becomes especially significant in his use of masks in *The Blacks* . . . . Using masks, Genet carries us back to the primeval world of myth” (512). Clearly, Genet creates a theatre of representation, a theatre of

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<sup>363</sup> “Letter to Jean-Jacques Pauvert.”

<sup>364</sup> “What I have been told about Japanese, Chinese, and Balinese pageantry—along, perhaps, with the idealized vision that has settled in my brain—has rendered my understanding of the Western theatre formula as too crude. One can only dream of an art born out of the entanglement of profound and active symbols, capable of speaking to the audience through a language in which nothing would be said but all would be understood.”

<sup>365</sup> “Letters to Roger Blin.”

<sup>366</sup> “No one should be excluded or left out of the celebration: it must be so beautiful that the dead themselves should sense it, and all should blush because of it.”

theatricality,<sup>367</sup> in which the accumulation of performative acts suggests the rituals that punctuated ancient theatre traditions.

Before returning to literary myth, a few observations about Genet as seen through the lens of this Koltès study could prove useful at this point in the discussion. Undoubtedly, Genet represents the last great French playwright of what might be described as the twentieth-century “modern era” and an artistic bridge between Modernism and Postmodernism. In fact, one could argue that the inaugural season at Nanterre-Amandiers—which featured *Combat de nègre et de chiens* and *Les Paravents* (1964)<sup>368</sup>—invited the audience to witness on the stage a tangible transition between Genet, at the time nearing the end of his career, and Koltès, poised at the threshold of his. Thus, this brief episode in the history of public theatre in France holds great symbolic value, even though little is known about the personal interactions that might have occurred between the two playwrights, who undoubtedly crossed paths during the spring of 1983 while collaborating with Chéreau. That being said, critics do often compare Koltès to Genet, as with Pierre Marcabru in his review of *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* (Salino 174), introducing a notion that Koltès resented throughout his career. In a 1988 interview for *Théâtre Public*, he declared:

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<sup>367</sup> In “Le théâtre de Baudelaire”, Barthes defines theatricality as “le théâtre moins le texte,” “une épaisseur de signes et de sensations qui s’édifie sur la scène à partir de l’argument écrit,” and “une sorte de perception œcuménique des artifices sensuels, gestes, tons, distances, substances, lumières, qui submerge le texte sous la plénitude de son langage extérieur” (123). (“the theatre minus the text” / “a layer of signs and sensations that builds up on stage from the written argument” / “a kind of ecumenical perception of the sensual devices, gestures, tones, distances, substances, lights, which floods the text under the plenitude of its external language”). Artaud and other theorists go on to explore the potential of this idea, as we know.

<sup>368</sup> It is interesting to note that Maria Casarès, an actress greatly admired by Koltès and whose performance as Médée marked the beginning of his interest for the theatre, played the role of La Mère in the original production of *Les Paravents* in 1966. Moreover, in 1983, Casarès returned to *Les Paravents* under the direction of Chéreau on the stage of Nanterre-Amandiers.

Mes rapports avec Genet sont un peu bizarres; je me sens d'un autre monde, je ne me sens pas de familiarité avec le sien. J'éprouve une grande admiration pourtant pour son écriture; incontestablement, c'est le seul auteur dramatique contemporain qui m'intéresse. Ce sont surtout ses romans que j'aime, car ses pièces sont marquées par le théâtre des années 50. (Une part 126)<sup>369</sup>

One can easily empathize with Koltès' lack of enthusiasm for the critics' frequent tendency to draw parallels between his work and Genet's. Indeed, no artist wants to be hastily defined as a copy of his acclaimed predecessor; and it is reasonable to assume that he or she would prefer to be considered as an innovator, as an original voice fully contributing to his or her art form. Despite Koltès' best efforts to distance himself from Genet, the two authors are, it seems, condemned to be forever remembered together, as, ironically, they passed away on the same day three years apart (April 15, 1986 and 1989, respectively).

In fact, it is undeniable that Koltès' œuvre displays significant similarities with Genet's. One immediately recognizes, for example, the importance of characters coming from ethnic minorities, which stands in contrast with the traditionally white *dramatis personae* of French theatre and, because of the rarity of such choices, results in an immediate politicization of race on stage. Moreover, the two authors paint a merciless, cruel, and perverted picture of the world through the ongoing presence of social, psychological, physical, and sexual violence that underscores many of their plays. Bradby observes that "Koltès clearly felt that violence was one of the defining features of our society: one that we try not to see and that should not be explained away" ("Chronology" 84). And finally, the figure of the criminal—and more generally

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<sup>369</sup> "My relationship to Genet is a bit odd; I consider myself from a different world, I don't feel that I belong to his. Nevertheless, I greatly admire his work; undoubtedly, he represents the only contemporary playwright who interests me. I mostly like his novels, for his plays feel dated by the theatre of the 1950s."

the figure of the outcast— appears quite frequently in both the Genetian and the Koltesian universes. This anti-hero represents perhaps the most important literary myth that emerges in the œuvre of both playwrights, a figure that finds one of its most striking incarnation in Koltès' *Roberto Zucco*.

Throughout the history of French dramatic literature, and in particular during the twentieth century, myth and rituals reveal themselves as fundamental in the making of theatre. The role of these two pillars of drama shift under the influence of new artistic movements: they are wholeheartedly embraced by the Classics, questioned by the Romantics, forsaken by the Realists, and later reaffirmed as crucial by the diverse experimental voices of the modern avant-garde. In his own way, Genet bequeaths this rich literary legacy, so vividly colored by the quasi-omnipresence of myth, to Koltès. Thus, it is not surprising to encounter in Koltès' plays a myriad of myths that haunt the texts like ghosts of past literature. This abundance of literary myths can be partially explained by Koltès' life-long enthusiasm for reading, one result of his rich Jesuit education at the collège Saint-Clément in Metz.

Given this backdrop, I propose, in the second half of this chapter, to explore the literary myths that generously populate the pages of *Roberto Zucco* in hope that this analysis will provide the reader with a better understanding of the complex intertextuality that characterizes Koltès' playwriting style. In my view, four aspects of the play reveal themselves as remarkably important: the mythification of the *fait divers*,<sup>370</sup> as well as the weaving of three literary myths: Hamlet, Samson, and Icarus. Finally, I should add that myth continues to appeal to contemporary playwrights across the world. Recent examples stand out even by the very resonance of their titles: Tony

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<sup>370</sup> "News item."

Kushner's *Angels in America* (1993), Janusz Glowacki's *Antigone in New York* (1993), Marie Zimmerman's *Metamorphosis* (1996), Olivier Py's *Le Visage d'Orphée* (1997),<sup>371</sup> Dea Loher's *Manhattan Medea* (1999), Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* (2003), Gaudé's *Médée Kali* (2003), Charles Mee's *Iphigenia 2.0* (2007),<sup>372</sup> and Sam Shepard's *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)* (2016). Such new interpretations demonstrate the unrelenting draw and the unmatched versatility of myth acquired through the power of its polysemic dimensions, which Marc Eigeldinger summarizes as "le langage pluriel du mythe" (15).<sup>373</sup> In reality, the question of the role of myth in the art of theatre can even be described as unnecessary to ask, for the original purpose of theatre is, at its very heart, to tell myths—ancient or new, discernable or concealed—and, as a result, bring to light the deepest mysteries of the human experience.

### 3.4 From *Fait Divers* to Myth

For his final play, *Roberto Zucco*, Koltès found inspiration in a sensational news story that riveted France during the spring of 1988. The police suspected a young man of Italian origins, named Roberto Succo, of multiple gruesome murders, rapes, and kidnappings (among other crimes). On the run across Europe for several months, Succo proved difficult to capture and his story galvanized the press. In *Crime and Media in Contemporary France* (2007), Deborah Streifford Reisinger explains how "police launched a full-blown search for Succo, posting his photo in police stations and public

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<sup>371</sup> "The Face of Orpheus."

<sup>372</sup> What Charles Mee calls his "(re)making project" features numerous plays based upon traditional Greek myths told within a contemporary context. These new works include *Iphigenia 2.0*, *Orestes 2.0* (both 1992), *The Bacchae 2.1* (1993), *Trojan Women: A Love Story* (1994), and *Agamemnon 2.0* (1994). In the manner of Giraudoux's *Amphitryon* 38, the titles of Mee's plays often indicate their identity as a version of a popular narrative, a key facet of literary myth.

<sup>373</sup> "the plural language of myth."



spaces alike throughout Italy, Switzerland, and France” (67). The criminal’s face had become a part of the urban landscape, his photo hauntingly watching over passersby and onlookers. Yet, as Reisinger notes:

No name was attached to the pictures, as Succo had managed to survive on invented first names Kurt, Pol, Fred, and André; still, the media dubbed him otherwise: “l’assassin de la pleine lune” (“the full-moon assassin”), “le tueur polyglotte” (“the polyglot killer”), and “l’homme au treillis” (“the man in military fatigues” as the killer was seen in military garb). (67)

One easily understands how Succo could become such a fascinating figure in the collective imagination: he was young, devastatingly handsome, seemingly uncatchable, and cloaked in danger and mystery. For months, his ability to vanish into thin air bedeviled the system of law and order that desperately sought his arrest. Reisinger provides further details regarding the manhunt:

On 6 February 1998, the police issued three additional photos on a second wanted poster, which was plastered throughout Parisian metro stations and in the pages of *Le Figaro* (8. Feb. 1988). So different was Succo in each photo that police could not come up with a composite sketch of the killer. Succo seemed to resist definition in physicality as in his actions, his slippery representation mirroring his motiveless crimes. (67)

Ultimately captured in Italy following a tip provided by an ex-girlfriend of his (an episode that Koltès reimagines in the penultimate scene of the play, “L’Arrestation”<sup>374</sup>), Succo gave the world one final thrill when, a day later, he escaped from his cell and climbed onto the roof of the Trévisa prison. There, he stayed for several hours, pacing on the roof, disrobing to his underwear, and taunting journalists and security guards alike. Pascale Froment, who wrote a detailed biography of Succo, explains that “tous avaient compris que la démonstration de Roberto n’était pas une tentative d’évasion.

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<sup>374</sup> “The Arrest.”

C'était quelque chose de gratuit, un cri sans revendication précise ni préméditation.

L'occasion de se montrer, de se donner en spectacle. Du théâtre pur" (409).<sup>375</sup> The end of Succo's journey, most of it captured on camera, evokes the most astonishing scenes of Hollywood blockbusters:

At last, Succo put his clothes back on and walked over to an electric cable; grabbing onto the cord and suspending himself by his hands and ankles, he shimmied across the wire over the empty prison yard. Suddenly, Succo dropped his feet, swinging as if from a trapeze. As the crowd below held its breath, Succo fell eight meters into the yard below. (Reisinger 69)

The security guards took advantage of this opportunity to take Succo into custody again and return him to his cell. Yet, six weeks later, the young criminal managed another dramatic form of escape (its ultimate expression): he was found dead after suffocating himself with a plastic bag.

Koltès is undeniably fascinated by Succo and decides to make him the central figure of his next play. In the fall of 1988, while *Le Retour au désert* plays at the Théâtre du Rond-Point, he shares with Godard, journalist at *Le Monde*, how he came to fathom Succo's feats as more than the sum of a sordid *fait divers*:

En février de cette année, j'ai vu, placardé dans le métro, l'avis de recherche de l'assassin d'un policier. J'étais fasciné par ce visage. Quelques temps après, je vois à la télévision le même garçon qui, à peine emprisonné, s'échappait des mains de ses gardiens, montait sur le toit de la prison et défiait le monde.

Alors, je me suis très sérieusement intéressé à l'histoire. Son nom était Roberto Succo; il avait tué ses parents à l'âge de quinze ans, puis redevenu "raisonnable" jusqu'à vingt-cinq ans, brusquement il déraile une nouvelle fois, tue un policier, fait une cavale de plusieurs mois, avec prise d'otages, meurtres, disparitions dans la nature, sans que personne ne sache qui c'était exactement.

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<sup>375</sup> "everyone had understood that Roberto's demonstration was not an attempt to escape. It was something gratuitous, a crying out for something unspecified, without premeditation. An opportunity to show himself, to make himself into a spectacle. Pure theatre."

Puis, après son spectacle sur les toits, il est enfermé à l'hôpital psychiatrique et se suicide de la même manière qu'il avait tué son père. Un trajet invraisemblable, un personnage mythique, un héros comme Samson ou Goliath, monstres de force, abattus finalement par un caillou ou par une femme. (*Une part* 96)<sup>376</sup>

Koltès immediately identifies some of the contradictions that make Succo such a captivating figure: he is young and beautiful, yet monstrous and terrifying; he appears as unstoppable, yet his weakness for women leads to his downfall. In *Bernard-Marie Koltès*, Ubersfeld synthesizes Koltès' project: "Transformer un tueur fou en objet mythique, métaphore de la violence de notre monde" (70).<sup>377</sup> Unlike Froment, whose book presents a detailed account of Succo's tumultuous life, Koltès is not particularly interested in the specifics of the actual investigation and prefers to focus instead on the incredible metaphorical power of Succo's trajectory. Koltès describes the killer as "tout à fait conforme à l'homme de notre siècle, peut-être même aussi à l'homme des siècles précédents" (*Une part* 109).<sup>378</sup> In his quest to render this "assassin sublimé" (*Ibid.* 110),<sup>379</sup> Koltès underscores the significant distance he aimed to establish with regard to the real-life Succo: "Je n'ai pas fait de recherches. Pour moi, c'est un mythe et cela doit rester un mythe" (*Ibid.* 111).<sup>380</sup> Further, I imagine that Koltès' eagerness to recognize

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<sup>376</sup> "In February of this year, I saw, in the subway, the wanted poster for the killer of a police officer. I was fascinated by this face. Soon after, I saw on television the same boy who, barely captured, broke free from his guards' hands, climbed onto the roof of the prison, and defied the world. So I took a serious interest in the story. His name was Roberto Succo; he had murdered his parents when he was 15, then considered 'sane' until the age of 25, when suddenly he gets off track again, and he kills a police officer, he is on the run for several months, with a kidnapping, murders, he vanishes and no one knows who he is exactly.

Then, after his display on the roof, he is locked up in a mental hospital and kills himself using the same method by which he had killed his father. An incredible trajectory, a mythical figure, a hero like Samson and Goliath, creatures of strength, taken down in the end by a pebble or a woman."

<sup>377</sup> "to transform an insane killer into the object of a myth, a metaphor for the violence of our world."

<sup>378</sup> "in all points a true man of this century, and perhaps as well a man of previous centuries."

<sup>379</sup> "sublime assassin."

<sup>380</sup> "I did not do any research. As far as I am concerned, it's a myth and it must remain a myth." It is interesting to note that, contrary to his claim, Koltès did indeed conduct a good deal of research on

Succo as a type of mythical hero, as a stranger with whom he could identify, may have been precipitated by the tragic circumstances of his own life. Indeed, both Succo and Koltès were young, handsome, and running toward death more quickly than those around them: Succo, condemned by his unrelenting life of crime, and Koltès, condemned by the disease that took his life in the spring following his writing of the play.

The first notable step in the mythification of the *fait divers* takes place through the shift in the spelling of the protagonist's name: from "Succo" to "Zucco". Salino observes that this transition comes from early reports published by the French media, in which journalists simply misspelled the last name of the suspect (298). At first, Koltès intended to keep Succo's name spelled properly:

Il s'appelait Roberto Succo, et je garde le nom. J'ai voulu le changer parce que je n'ai jamais fait de pièce sur un fait divers, mais je ne peux pas changer ce nom. Et puis après, l'idée m'est venue que le titre de la pièce sera évidemment *Roberto Succo*. Ainsi, j'aurai le plaisir de passer dans la rue et de voir sur les affiches le nom de ce mec. (*Une part* 146)<sup>381</sup>

However, Koltès chooses in the end to embrace the alternate spelling: "Zucco". This decision automatically releases the playwright from the limitations of Succo's biography and from the need to contend with the potential motives of his protagonist. In other words, it helps to eliminate the burden of psychological drama. Moreover, it is possible that Koltès considered "Zucco" as a much more impactful spelling since the letter "Z" is one of the rarest letters in the French language, especially when serving as

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Roberto Succo, a fact best illustrated by the many lines in the play inspired by or even directly transcribed from statements made by the killer.

<sup>381</sup> "His name was Roberto Succo, and I am keeping the name. I wanted to change it because I had never written a play about a *fait divers*, but I can't change this name. And then, I had the idea that the title of the play should obviously be *Roberto Succo*. So, I will have the pleasure to walk down the street and see on the posters the name of this guy."

the first letter of a word. I will add that the shift from “Succo” to “Zucco”—from “S” to “Z”—evokes the words of Roland Barthes in *S/Z*, a truly original rethinking of Honoré de Balzac’s 1830 novella, *Sarrasine*:

Or Z est la lettre de la mutilation: phonétiquement, Z est cinglant à la façon d'un fouet châtieur, d'un insecte érinnyque; graphiquement, jeté par la main, en écharpe, à travers la blancheur égale de la page, parmi les rondeurs de l'alphabet, comme un tranchant oblique et illégal, il coupe, il barre, il zèbre . . . . (113)<sup>382</sup>

Undoubtedly, the letter “Z” makes the name Zucco more unique and more striking, as confirmed when Le commissaire<sup>383</sup> and L’inspecteur<sup>384</sup> question La gamine at the police station. In the spelling of her lover’s name, she insists on the importance of the letter “Z”: “LA GAMINE. — Zucco. Zucco. Roberto Zucco. / L’INSPECTEUR. — Tu en es sûre? / LA GAMINE. — Sûre. J’en suis sûre. / LE COMMISSAIRE. — Zucco. Avec un Z? / LA GAMINE. — Avec un Z, oui. Roberto. Avec un Z” (55).<sup>385</sup> In this brief exchange, again Koltès seems also to want to remind the public that his character stands as separate from the real-life killer, thus injecting the object of the literary myth with a sense of independence from the individual that inspired it. Roberto Succo is one killer and one anti-hero. Roberto Zucco embodies all killers and all anti-heroes.

Earlier in the play, the question of the protagonist’s name becomes the focus of the third scene, “Sous la table,”<sup>386</sup> in which La gamine relentlessly questions Zucco about his identity. At first, Zucco refuses and prefers to remain an anonymous face, in a gesture that recalls the first posters that caught Koltès’ attention in the subway: “LA

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<sup>382</sup> Now, Z is the letter of mutilation: phonetically, Z stings like a chastising whip, a punishing insect; graphically, cast slantwise by the hand across the even blankness of the page, amid the curves of the alphabet, like an oblique and illegal blade, it cuts, it slashes, like the stripes of a zebra. . . .”

<sup>383</sup> “The chief of police.”

<sup>384</sup> “The detective.”

<sup>385</sup> “THE GIRL. — Zucco. Zucco. Roberto Zucco. / THE DETECTIVE. — Are you sure? / THE GIRL. — Yes. I am sure of it. / THE CHIEF. — Zucco. With a Z? / THE GIRL. — With a Z, yes. Roberto. With a Z.”

<sup>386</sup> “Under the table.”

GAMINE. — Comment tu t'appelles? Dis-moi ton nom. / ZUCCO. — Jamais je ne dirai mon nom. / LA GAMINE. — Pourquoi? Je veux savoir ton nom. / ZUCCO. — C'est un secret" (25).<sup>387</sup> We see that the girl's tenacity forces Zucco to speak, yet he does not give the full truth and claims that his first name is "Andreas" or "Angelo" (26). She refuses to believe him. Eventually, Zucco does divulge his first name to La gamine, but, unsatisfied, she demands to learn his last name as well. When Zucco agrees to tell her his last name (a serious mistake that results in his arrest at the end of the play), her reaction reveals the power of that name alone: "LA GAMINE. — . . . Dis-moi ton nom, dis-moi ton nom. / ZUCCO. — Zucco. / LA GAMINE. — Roberto Zucco. Je n'oublierai jamais ce nom" (27).<sup>388</sup> The idea is further reinforced at the beginning of scene XII, "La gare,"<sup>389</sup> in the exchange between Zucco and La dame:

ZUCCO. — Roberto Zucco.

LA DAME. — Pourquoi répétez-vous tout le temps ce nom ?

ZUCCO. — Parce que j'ai peur de l'oublier.

LA DAME. — On n'oublie pas son nom. Ce doit être la dernière chose que l'on oublie.

ZUCCO. — Non, non; moi, je l'oublie. Je le vois écrit dans mon cerveau, et de moins en moins bien écrit, de moins en moins clairement, comme s'il s'effaçait; il faut que je regarde de plus en plus près pour arriver à le lire. J'ai peur de me retrouver sans savoir mon nom.

LA DAME. — Je ne l'oublierai pas. Je serai votre mémoire. (76)<sup>390</sup>

<sup>387</sup> "THE GIRL. — What's your name? Tell me your name. / ZUCCO. — I will never say my name. / THE GIRL. — Why? I want to know your name. / ZUCCO. — It's a secret."

<sup>388</sup> "THE GIRL. — . . . Tell me your name, tell me your name. / ZUCCO. — Zucco. / THE GIRL. — Roberto Zucco. I will never forget that name."

<sup>389</sup> "The Train Station."

<sup>390</sup> "ZUCCO. — Roberto Zucco. / THE LADY. — Why do you say this name over and over? / ZUCCO. — Because I'm afraid that I'll forget it. / THE LADY. — People don't forget their name. It must be the last thing people forget. / ZUCCO. — No, not me; I keep forgetting it. I see it written in my brain, less and less well written, less and less clearly, erasing itself; I have to look closer and closer to be able to read it. I am afraid that I will end up not knowing my name. / THE LADY. — I won't forget it. I'll be your memory."

The exchange between Zucco and La gamine, as well as the one between Zucco and La dame, underline the importance of the name “Roberto Zucco” and reinforce its place among the names of unforgettable mythical heroes: Zucco has become an archetype.

Finally, Koltès strengthens the impact of the name “Roberto Zucco” by making it the only proper name in the play. Indeed, the name of the other characters is never revealed. They are simply known by their social function, (Le commissaire, Un flic, Le mac<sup>391</sup>), by their place in the family (La mère, Le père, Le frère<sup>392</sup>), or by their physical appearance (Le balèze, Le vieux monsieur, La dame élégante<sup>393</sup>). This approach to the *dramatis personae* recalls Genet’s *Le Balcon*,<sup>394</sup> a play in which most characters are also named after their function in society: among them are the three most symbolic characters: L’évêque,<sup>395</sup> Le juge,<sup>396</sup> and Le général.<sup>397</sup> In both *Roberto Zucco* and *Le Balcon*, characters whose names are defined by their occupation embody authority figures, such as members of law enforcement, the judicial system, the Church, and even powerful figures of the criminal sphere, such as Le mac and La patronne.<sup>398</sup> As a result, Zucco emerges as an anti-hero, a dissident who resists all forms of social structures, which are personified by these nameless characters. Therefore, Koltès’ choice helps the play remain focused on the figure of Zucco rather than that of his victims, whose humanity is erased by their neutralizing anonymity.

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<sup>391</sup> “The chief of police, A cop, A pimp.”

<sup>392</sup> “The mother, The father, The brother.”

<sup>393</sup> “The brawny, The old man, The elegant lady.”

<sup>394</sup> “The Balcony.”

<sup>395</sup> “The bishop.”

<sup>396</sup> “The judge.”

<sup>397</sup> “The general.”

<sup>398</sup> “The boss.” In Genet’s work, both Le mac and La patronne represent authority figures in the prostitution ring to which Le frère abandons his sister.

### 3.5 Zucco and Hamlet

Critics have long recognized the complex layers of intertextuality that distinguish Koltès' plays. For example, Delgado notes that "voices of authors Koltès admired resonate through [his] writing" and that they function as "fragments displaced and designed anew, an archive of sounds, images, and texts fused in a context that 'speaks' of a late twentieth-century culture" (33-34). Among these authors, Shakespeare emerges most prominently in *Roberto Zucco*, with notable references to his masterpiece, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Yannick Hoffert explains that "*Roberto Zucco* fait écho à *Hamlet* à travers des éléments ponctuels qui désignent des territoires communs, sans que l'on puisse superposer les formes et les manières d'arpenter ces territoires. Le rapport entre les deux œuvres est celui d'une série de résonances et de diffractions" (192).<sup>399</sup> One must keep in mind that Koltès had long been a great admirer of Shakespeare. In a 1968 letter to his friend Bichette, who was then studying in London, he requests that she makes a purchase on his behalf: "[J]'aimerais que tu me ramènes un Shakespeare complet (au moins le théâtre); si tu le trouves en bilingue, ce serait formidable, car ici, cela n'existe pas; sinon en anglais. . . . Thank you d'avance" (*Lettres* 89).<sup>400</sup> In the spring of 1974, the interest in the Elizabethan playwright resurfaces: Koltès decides that his next play would be an adaptation of *Hamlet*, which he describes as "du Shakespeare remanié" (*Lettres* 211).<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> "*Roberto Zucco* echoes *Hamlet* through certain elements that reveal shared territories, without being able to superpose the forms and ways to explore those territories. The relationship between the two works is one based especially on a series of resonances and dissonances."

<sup>400</sup> "I would like you to bring back a copy of the complete works of Shakespeare (at least the theatre); it would be wonderful if you could find a bilingual edition; because it's impossible to find here; otherwise in English. . . . Thank you in advance."

<sup>401</sup> "something from Shakespeare, revisited."



The final script, titled *Le Jour des meurtres dans l'histoire d'Hamlet*,<sup>402</sup> presents a condensed version of Shakespeare's tragedy centered around four central characters: Hamlet, Gertrude, Ophélie, and Claudius. The production of the play was repeatedly delayed because of financial difficulties (*Lettres* 228-29) and was finally abandoned after the dissolution of Le Théâtre du Quai. But Koltès' relationship with Shakespeare was far from over. Indeed, more than a decade after *Le Jour des meurtres dans l'histoire d'Hamlet*, Bondy commissioned Koltès, then at the height of his career, to write an original translation of *The Winter's Tale* for Bondy's 1988 production at Nanterre-Amandiers. Salino stresses the influence of this translation on the writing of his final play: "Cet exercice, qui lui plaît infiniment, est une expérience décisive. Elle va l'inciter à s'affranchir des règles du théâtre classique—unité de temps, de lieu, et d'action. Ce sera éclatant dans *Roberto Zucco*" (288).<sup>403</sup> Undoubtedly, this translation of *The Winter's Tale* provided Koltès with an opportunity to rediscover and reimagine Shakespeare, especially with regard to the earlier dramatist's language, the structure of his plays, and his most iconic characters.

Immediately following the inspiring translation process of *The Winter's Tale*, Koltès enjoyed another Shakespearean revelation when he attended a performance of *Hamlet*, directed by Chéreau, at the 1988 Festival d'Avignon.<sup>404</sup> For this production, Chéreau chose a translation by the then contemporary poet Yves Bonnefoy, the same translation on which Koltès based his adaptation project, *Le Jour des meurtres dans*

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<sup>402</sup> "*The Day of Murders in the Story of Hamlet*." As with all plays written by Koltès before *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, this piece remained unpublished until his death. It was finally published by the Éditions de Minuit in 2006.

<sup>403</sup> "This exercise, that he enjoys immensely, is a decisive experience. It will prompt him to break from the rules of Classical theatre—unity of time, place, and action. This will be most vividly expressed in *Roberto Zucco*."

<sup>404</sup> This production of *Hamlet* was revived the following season at Nanterre-Amandiers.

*l'histoire d'Hamlet*. Although the playwright was clearly very familiar with the text, he acknowledges that his experience at Avignon was uniquely transformative:

Un choc pareil, je n'en avais pas eu depuis *La Dispute* montée par Chéreau. Plus loin, ç'avait été l'émotion de Maria Casarès dans *Médée* en 1972. Cela fait un choc de théâtre tous les dix ans . . .

Pour *Hamlet*, j'ai eu l'impression de comprendre cette pièce que je n'avais jamais comprise. (*Une part* 89)<sup>405</sup>

Chéreau's production of *Hamlet* would also have a significant influence on the development of *Roberto Zucco*. Later that fall, in an interview, Koltès told *Théâtre Public* about his continuously growing interest in Shakespeare and envisions potential projects for the future: "Je termine actuellement l'écriture de ma nouvelle pièce; peut-être me remettrai-je ensuite à traduire Shakespeare, soit *Richard III*, soit *Le Roi Lear*" (*Une part* 133).<sup>406</sup> Tragically, Koltès' rapidly degrading health prevented these projects from materializing; nevertheless, he was able to complete *Roberto Zucco* before his death in April, 1989.

The first scene of *Roberto Zucco*, "L'Évasion,"<sup>407</sup> borrows multiple elements from the opening of *Hamlet*. Koltès introduces two guards watching over the roof of a prison—parallel figures to Shakespeare's Bernardo and Francisco, and later Bernardo, Marcellus, and Horatio watching over Elsinore castle. Moreover, the two scenes take place in the middle of the night: "'Tis now struck twelve" says Bernardo (143), while the stage directions of *Roberto Zucco* place the action "[à] l'heure où les gardiens, à force de silence et fatigués de fixer l'obscurité, sont parfois victimes d'hallucinations"

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<sup>405</sup> "I had not felt a shock like this since *The Dispute* directed by Chéreau. Before that, it was the emotion of Maria Casarès in *Medea* in 1972. It amounts to one theatre shock every ten years . . .

In the case of *Hamlet*, I had the impression that I understood this play that I had failed to understand."

<sup>406</sup> "I am currently finishing a play; perhaps I will go back to translating Shakespeare afterward, either *Richard III* or *King Lear*."

<sup>407</sup> "The Breakout."

(9).<sup>408</sup> These “hallucinations” materialize when Zucco appears walking on the roof and effortlessly escapes from the prison. This moment evokes the first apparition of the ghost in *Hamlet*, who, like Zucco, emerges from the darkness and then disappears almost instantly. Hence, as early as in the first scene of *Roberto Zucco*, Koltès deliberately invites one of the most celebrated plays of all times, *Hamlet*, to become a part of his narrative and to stir the reader’s imagination through intertextual references.

Despite the similarities between the two scenes, there are also important differences to bring forward. The first concerns the direction in which the ghost figure moves. In *Hamlet*, the function of the guards is to prevent enemy forces from entering Elsinore castle. The ghost, in his attempt to speak to the prince, moves from the outside to the inside, thus focusing the action of the play within the confines of the castle. However, in Koltès’ play, the function of the guards is to prevent criminals from escaping from the prison. Zucco, as he breaks free, moves from the inside to the outside. This cinematic movement—not unlike a camera shot that travels from the roof of the prison to the surrounding cityscape—propels the audience through an episodic journey following the steps of Zucco’s itinerary, and conferring to *Roberto Zucco* a decisively outward dynamic. The second difference to note concerns the figure of the ghost, considered specifically as the object of the apparition. Indeed, in Shakespeare’s tragedy, the ghost—the spirit of King Hamlet—is the hero’s father. He comes to demand that his son avenge his wrongful death; as the playwright has his ethereal character state: “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (186). On the other hand,

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<sup>408</sup> “The time of night when prison guards, because of the silence and strain of staring into the dark, can at times succumb to hallucinations.”

in *Roberto Zucco*, the figure of the ghost is the hero himself, identified by the guards as his father's killer:

DEUXIEME GARDIEN. — Je dirais même qu'on dirait Roberto Zucco, celui qui a été mis sous écrou cet après-midi pour le meurtre de son père. Une bête furieuse, une bête sauvage. (12)<sup>409</sup>

In both plays, the murder of the father serves as the trigger of a series of violent deaths in the development of the plot. In *Hamlet*, the violent act sparks the hero's determination to avenge the injustice suffered by his father and permeates the entire piece. In *Roberto Zucco*, the hero is the one guilty of the original crime. Yet, rather than act as the focal point of the play, the father's murder serves rather as a structural frame. The patricide is mentioned in the first two scenes, "L'Évasion" and "Meurtre de la mère,"<sup>410</sup> then mentioned again at the end of the play when two police officers arrest Zucco: "PREMIER POLICIER. — Qui es-tu? / ZUCCO. — Je suis le meurtrier de mon père, de ma mère, d'un inspecteur de police et d'un enfant. Je suis un tueur" (89).<sup>411</sup> This circular structure is also evident through the similarities between the first and last scenes: both of them feature Zucco's escape via the roof of a prison.

Koltès explicitly evokes the literary myth of *Hamlet* a second time by titling the eighth scene of his play "Ophélie" (83).<sup>412</sup> The scene is composed of a long monologue delivered by La sœur,<sup>413</sup> who is wandering around the deserted train station in hope of finding La gamine. Although this additional reference to *Hamlet* is unmistakable, there are no characters named "Ophélie" in *Roberto Zucco*, an observation that raises the

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<sup>409</sup> "SECOND GUARD. — I would even say he looks like Roberto Zucco, the one who was locked up this afternoon after he murdered his father. A beast: wild and furious. A savage beast."

<sup>410</sup> "Murder of the Mother."

<sup>411</sup> "FIRST POLICE OFFICER. — Who are you? / ZUCCO. — I am the murderer of my father, of my mother, of a police inspector, and of a child. I am killer."

<sup>412</sup> "Ophelia."

<sup>413</sup> "The sister."

following question: Which character embodies *Zucco*'s Ophélie? It could be La sœur, whose unstable mental health unmistakably reminds us of Shakespeare's Ophelia. For example, in an earlier scene, she admits to La gamine: "Je deviens folle" (21).<sup>414</sup> Moreover, Hoffert observes that there is an imagistic naturalistic similarity between La sœur's obsession with calling La gamine by various names of birds and Ophelia's obsession with flowers in Act IV scene 5: "sa manière de solliciter sans fin des métaphores ornithologiques pour designer sa cadette pourrait être un pendant de l'obsession des fleurs qui caractérise Ophélie devenue folle" (194).<sup>415</sup> The figure of Ophelia could also refer to La gamine. Indeed, a line in La sœur's monologue compares the smell of Le Petit Chicago,<sup>416</sup> the neighborhood where La gamine works as a prostitute, to "des rats dans les égouts, des cochons dans la vase, une odeur d'étang où pourrissent des cadavres" (83).<sup>417</sup> This reference harks back to Gertrude's description to Laertes of Ophelia's death, which she delivers at the end of Act IV scene 7 (318-20). It is particularly interesting to note that Shakespeare's "muddy death" (319) is translated by Bonnefoy as "mourir dans la fange" (178), that is, "dying in the mire," a creative word choice that could have prompted Koltès to include the image of the pigs in La sœur's monologue.

There is no question that the figure of Ophelia simultaneously emerges in both La sœur and La gamine, as demonstrated by the examples above and as argued by Hoffert. But it is also essential to keep in mind that the figure of Ophelia represents a

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<sup>414</sup> "I'm going crazy."

<sup>415</sup> "the way she always calls upon ornithological metaphors to nickname her younger sister could be a response to Ophelia's obsession with flowers once she goes mad."

<sup>416</sup> "Little Chicago." Le Petit Chicago is the name of a crime-ridden neighborhood in the southern town of Toulon.

<sup>417</sup> "rats in the sewers, pigs in the mud, amidst the smell of cadavers rotting in a pond."

macro-myth throughout *Roberto Zucco*, continuously awakened by Koltès' return to the lexical field of insanity: "LA MERE. — Tu es fou, Roberto" (13),<sup>418</sup> "LA MERE. — Tu dérailles, mon pauvre vieux. Tu es complètement dingue" (16),<sup>419</sup> "LA SŒUR. — Calme-toi, ou je vais devenir folle" (22),<sup>420</sup> and "LE MONSIEUR. — On peut toujours dérailler jeune homme, oui, je sais que n'importe qui peut dérailler, n'importe quand" (38).<sup>421</sup> In scene VIII, "Juste avant de mourir," the crowd comments upon Zucco's odd behavior: "UN GARS. — Il est saoul, ce type. / UN GARS. — Impossible. Il n'a rien bu. / UNE PUTE. — Il est cinglé, c'est tout. Il faut le laisser tranquille" (45).<sup>422</sup> Later, when Zucco kidnaps La dame, she tells him "Vous êtes cinglé" (59).<sup>423</sup> Bystanders say about the woman, "C'est une folle" (66),<sup>424</sup> and about Zucco, "C'est un fou" (67).<sup>425</sup> About his possible capture, Zucco explains to La dame: "Si on me prend, on m'enferme. Si on m'enferme, je deviens fou" (78).<sup>426</sup> About the crowd at the train station, Zucco observes: "Regardez tous ces fous" (79).<sup>427</sup> Before the arrest, two police officers debate the possibility that Zucco might return to the scene of his crimes:

DEUXIEME POLICIER. — Un tueur n'a jamais l'air d'un tueur. Un tueur part se promener tranquillement au milieu de tous les autres comme toi et moi.

PREMIER POLICIER. — il faudrait qu'il soit fou.

DEUXIEME POLICIER. — Un tueur est fou par définition.

PREMIER POLICIER. — Pas sûr, pas sûr. Il y a des fois où j'ai presque envie de tuer, moi aussi.

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<sup>418</sup> "THE MOTHER. — You're crazy, Roberto."

<sup>419</sup> "THE MOTHER. — You're deranged, my dear, you're completely crazy."

<sup>420</sup> "THE SISTER. — Calm down or I will go crazy."

<sup>421</sup> "THE OLD GENTLEMAN. — You can always be forced off the tracks, young man, yes, now I know that anyone can be forced off the tracks, at any time."

<sup>422</sup> "A GUY. — This dude is wasted. / A GUY. — Can't be. He hasn't been drinking. / A HOOKER. — He's nuts. That's all. Leave him alone."

<sup>423</sup> "You're nuts."

<sup>424</sup> "She's a madwoman."

<sup>425</sup> "He's a madman."

<sup>426</sup> "If they catch me, they lock me up. If they lock me up, I go crazy."

<sup>427</sup> "Look at all these lunatics."

DEUXIEME POLICIER. — Eh bien, il y a des fois où tu dois être presque fou. (87)<sup>428</sup>

Finally, the play ends with a conversation that raises once again the question of Zucco's sanity: "UNE VOIX. — Il est fou. Il va tomber. / UNE VOIX. — Arrête, Zucco; tu vas te casser la gueule. / UNE VOIX. — Il est fou. / UNE VOIX. — Il va tomber. / *Le soleil monte, devient aveuglant comme l'éclat d'une bombe atomique. On ne voit plus rien.* / UNE VOIX (*criant*). — Il tombe" (95).<sup>429</sup> This accumulation of references about insanity demonstrates that the figure of Ophelia functions as a textual lens that colors the entire play and that it cannot be reduced to a simple comparison between Shakespeare's character and either La sœur or La gamine.

### 3.6 Zucco and Samson

The immortality of heroes—the ability of the myth to remain vivid in the collective imagination—seems appealing to Koltès and to his protagonist. In the scene between Zucco and Le monsieur, which takes place on a deserted subway platform, Zucco addresses directly the nature of the heroic figure:

ZUCCO. — Je ne suis pas un héros. Les héros sont des criminels. Il n'y a pas de héros dont les habits ne soient pas trempés de sang, et le sang est la seule chose au monde qui ne puisse pas passer inaperçue. C'est la chose la plus visible du monde. Quand tout sera détruit, qu'un brouillard de fin du monde recouvrira la terre, il restera toujours les habits trempés de sang des héros. (37)<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> "SECOND OFFICER. — A killer never looks like a killer. A killer goes for a stroll peacefully alongside everyone else like you and me. / FIRST OFFICER. — He'd have to be mad. / SECOND OFFICER. — A killer is mad by definition. / FIRST OFFICER. — Not necessarily, not necessarily. Even I can think of times when I felt the desire to kill somebody. / SECOND OFFICER. — Then those are times you nearly went mad."

<sup>429</sup> "A VOICE. — He's mad. He's going to fall. / A VOICE. — Stop, Zucco; you're going to fall on your face. / A VOICE. — He's mad. / A VOICE. — He's going to fall. / *The sun rises higher, with the blinding brilliance of an atomic explosion. Nothing else can be seen.* A VOICE (*shouting*). — He's falling."

<sup>430</sup> "ZUCCO. — I'm not a hero. Heroes are criminals. There is no hero whose clothes aren't drenched in blood, and blood is the only thing in the world that never goes unnoticed. It's the most noticeable thing in

Zucco's assessment that heroes are criminals implies clearly that—contrary to the first sentence he pronounces in the passage quoted above—he does consider himself as a potential hero and that his name could become legendary. As for the claim that all heroes are in fact criminals, a rapid consideration of Classical and Biblical heroes reveals that these figures, from Jason to Achilles, from David to Joshua, are often warriors with much blood on their hands. In such a way, the question of the morality of the acts of those honored as war heroes arises, and thus, Zucco's line could be interpreted as a tool to denounce the glorification of violence in the foundational myths of Western civilization, as well as the exaltation of violence in popular culture. Certainly, the media frenzy and public interest that surrounded the Succo case tend to support that theory.

Specifically, in interviews about the process of writing *Roberto Zucco*, Koltès revels in pointing out the similarities between Succo and the biblical figure of Samson:

Il est le prototype de l'assassin qui tue sans raison. Et la manière dont il perpétue ses meurtres nous fait retrouver les grands mythes, comme par exemple le mythe de Samson et Dalila. Cet assassin qui est au centre de ma nouvelle pièce, a été trahi par une femme, comme Dalila qui coupât les cheveux de Samson, le privant ainsi de sa force. (*Une part* 109-10)<sup>431</sup>

Early in *Roberto Zucco*, Koltès plants an important thematic seed suggesting a possible parallel between the story of Zucco and the myth of Samson when La gamine begs Zucco to reveal the secret that could be interpreted as the one most closely related to his

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the world. When all will be gone, when a fog of doom lies upon the earth, the blood-drenched clothes of heroes will still remain.”

<sup>431</sup> “He is the prototype of the killer who kills without a motive. And the way in which he carries out his murders evokes the great myths, like, for example, the myth of Samson and Delilah. This assassin, around whom my new play is constructed, was betrayed by a woman, like Delilah who cut Samson's hair, which made him lose his power.”



innermost identity: his name. This moment recalls two episodes in the *Book of Judges*. The first describes how Samson's bride begs her husband for the answer to the riddle given to the Philistines (14:12-16). The second depicts how Delilah, Samson's new love interest, pleads with him to learn the origin of his unrivaled physical strength (16:17). In both situations, Samson eventually surrenders and reveals his secrets, a fatal flaw that leads to the murder of the Philistines and to the loss of his exceptional strength. Zucco makes the same misstep by revealing his true identity to La gamine, who could well be understood as a combination of the two different women in the story of Samson. The metaphor depicting Zucco as a modern Samson is furthered in the scene titled "Dalila,"<sup>432</sup> one of the text's few explicit references to the biblical story. In this scene, La gamine betrays the fugitive by revealing his name to the police, much like Delilah betrayed Samson by revealing his secret to the Philistine rulers. As a result, Zucco is recognized and arrested by the police, while Samson loses his strength when the Philistines cut his hair, thus rendering him weak.

The comparison between Zucco and Samson is again explicitly stated in the last scene of the play when a crowd of prisoners recognize mythical figures, as if they were emerging from Zucco: "UNE VOIX. — Tu es un héros, Zucco. / UNE VOIX. — C'est Goliath. / UNE VOIX. — C'est Samson" (93).<sup>433</sup> For the prisoners, Zucco becomes legendary by managing to escape—not only once, but twice—from the walls that have taken their liberty. What truly seems to separate Zucco from ordinary men transpires in his striking ability to defy prison security and evade captivity, a skill worth as much as the extraordinary physical strength that contributes to the legends of great heroes, such

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<sup>432</sup> "Delilah."

<sup>433</sup> "A VOICE. — You are a hero, Zucco. / A VOICE. — He's Goliath. / A VOICE. — He's Samson."

as Goliath and Samson. At times, Zucco does appear strong like the heroes to whom he is compared. For example, at the end of the second scene, he kills his mother without much effort, in a tender moment that turns fatal: “*Il s’approche, la caresse, l’embrasse, la serre; elle gémit. / Il la lâche et elle tombe, étranglée*” (18).<sup>434</sup> However, he is also portrayed as physically fragile, in descriptions that suggest the opposite of the great heroes of the past. In scene VIII, “Juste avant de mourir,”<sup>435</sup> Zucco gets beaten down by Le balèze: “Une fois encore, je l’écrase comme un moustique” (47).<sup>436</sup> Koltès creates a substantial ambivalence regarding his character’s physique. One of the prostitutes describes him as a “gamin” (46)<sup>437</sup> and a “bébé” (46),<sup>438</sup> and Le balèze repeatedly calls him by the name “petit” (49).<sup>439</sup> Zucco makes several remarks that lead the reader to believe that he feels physically threatened by the 14-year-old boy in scene X:

ZUCCO. — C’est quoi, ce type ? Il vous regarde tout le temps ?  
 LA DAME. — C’est mon fils.  
 ZUCCO. — Votre fils ? Il est grand.  
 LA DAME. — Quatorze ans, pas une année de plus. Je ne suis pas une vieille peau.  
 ZUCCO. — Il a l’air plus vieux que cela. Il fait du sport ?  
 LA DAME. — Il ne fait que cela. . . .  
 ZUCCO. — Il a l’air fort pour son âge. (58)<sup>440</sup>

Despite his apparent lack of physical strength, Zucco obviously wants to be perceived as the bearer of an incredible power. He claims: “J’écrase les autres animaux non pas par méchanceté mais parce que je ne les ai pas vus et que j’ai posé le pied dessus”

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<sup>434</sup> “He gets close, caresses her, kisses her, holds her tight; she moans. / He lets her go and she falls to the ground, strangled.”

<sup>435</sup> “Just Before Dying.”

<sup>436</sup> “Once again, I crush him like a mosquito.”

<sup>437</sup> “kid.”

<sup>438</sup> “baby.”

<sup>439</sup> “little guy.”

<sup>440</sup> “ZUCCO. — What’s the story with this guy? He keeps looking at you? / THE LADY. — He’s my son. / ZUCCO. — Your son? He’s grown. / THE LADY. — Not a day over fourteen. I am not an old bag. / ZUCCO. — He looks older. Does he play sports? / THE LADY. — That’s all he does. . . . / ZUCCO. — He looks strong for his age.”

(93).<sup>441</sup> Through this statement, Zucco portrays himself as a giant creature reminiscent of the mythological Titans, “gigantic beings” that the Greeks believed “had ruled the world in a primitive age” (Grant 405). Undoubtedly, Koltès fosters a dichotomy in the representation of Zucco, a move that further contributes to the fluidity of the protagonist’s identity: sometimes small and defenseless like a child, sometimes strong and powerful like a hero. In turn, this fluidity prevents the reader from constructing a simplified image of Zucco, for the character is continuously transforming and forever escaping, literally, as well as figuratively.

### 3.7 Zucco and Icarus

Apart from Hamlet and Samson, Koltès associates Zucco with a third celebrated mythological figure: Icarus. However, before the image of Icarus is revealed in the final scene, Koltès meticulously weaves together threads from different solar myths, through a unique textual construction that produces a multifaceted foreshadowing of the play’s climax. For example, he introduces a quote from the liturgy of Mithras—a Persian god worshiped by the Romans through the fourth century A.D.—before the play even begins: the citation acts as a sort of textual gateway. Of course, the presence of quotes from secondary texts—often included between scenes, like brief literary escapades nestled within the world of the play—is a characteristic aspect of Koltesian dramaturgy, an explicit invitation to the boundless experience of intertextuality.<sup>442</sup> In the case of *Roberto Zucco*, the quote that opens the play underscores the omnipresence and

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<sup>441</sup> “If I crush the other animals, it’s not out of wickedness but because I didn’t see them and I stepped on them.”

<sup>442</sup> Such explicit examples of intertextuality can also be found in *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, *Quai ouest*, and *Le Retour au désert*.

inescapability of the Sun: “si tu tournes ton visage vers l’Orient, il s’y déplacera, et si tu tournes ton visage vers l’Occident, il te suivra” (7).<sup>443</sup> Moreover, the liturgy of Mithras serves as a discursive frame that emphasizes the circular structure of the play—from prison escape in the first scene to prison escape in the last—as it resurfaces in Zucco’s final line: “Tournez votre visage vers l’orient et il s’y déplacera; et, si vous tournez votre visage vers l’occident, il vous suivra” (95).<sup>444</sup> Indeed, the Sun emerges as an important motif throughout *Roberto Zucco*.

The most important episode in the myth of Mithras—occasionally referred to as “Lord of Light” (Adkins 157)—recounts the slaying of a sacred bull under the watch of the Sun. In various representations of this episode, known as the “tauroctony”, Mithras is depicted planting a large knife in the back or in the neck of the animal, as can be seen in the rich illustrations of Manfred Clauss’ *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien* (1990).<sup>445</sup> Afterward, Lesly Adkins and Roy A. Adkins explain that “its blood spread over the earth, from which all life spring” and that “[t]hrough this act, the sun yielded supremacy to Mithras” (157). In *Roberto Zucco*, an evident analogy can be recognized between the moment Mithras plants his knife in the back of the sacred bull and the moment Zucco stabs L’inspecteur to death at the end of scene IV. La pute<sup>446</sup> witnesses and describes the crime as it unfolds offstage:

Il marche derrière l’inspecteur qui semble plongé dans une réflexion profonde; il marche derrière lui comme son ombre; et l’ombre rétrécit comme au moment de midi, il est de plus en plus près du dos courbé de

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<sup>443</sup> “if you turn your face toward the East, it will move there, and if you turn your face toward the West, it will follow you.”

<sup>444</sup> “Turn your faces to the east and there it will move; and, if you turn your faces to the west, it will follow you.”

<sup>445</sup> “*Mithras: Cult and Mysteries*.” See in particular pages 89-90.

<sup>446</sup> “The hooker.”

l'inspecteur, et brusquement, il sort un long poignard d'une poche de son habit, et le plante dans le dos du pauvre homme. (30-31)<sup>447</sup>

The method of killing is similar: Mithras and Zucco stab their victims from the back, both making use of a long knife. Moreover, despite the absence of the word “sun” in the La pute’s monologue, Koltès implicitly invites its commanding presence by mentioning “l’ombre”, a consequence of sunlight, and “midi”, the time of day when the sun is at its highest point in the sky.

In scene VIII, another instance of Koltesian intertextuality provides a new opportunity for embedded references to solar myths. The scene begins when Zucco is violently thrown out of a “bar de nuit,”<sup>448</sup> most likely as a result of a fight. It is unclear how inebriated Zucco really may be since one character claims that he has had nothing to drink at all (45). Yet, Zucco himself reveals at the end of the scene that he has, in fact, been drinking beer (50). Intoxicated or not, his behavior is quite peculiar: he quotes works by Hugo and Dante Alighieri, provokes a much larger man into a fight, and delivers a long and heartfelt monologue into a broken payphone. Zucco opens his tirade with verses borrowed from Hugo’s poem, “Les sept merveilles du monde,”<sup>449</sup> while a small crowd gathers on the sidewalk and listens:

ZUCCO.  
“C’est ainsi que je fus créé comme un athlète.  
Aujourd’hui ta colère énorme me complète.  
Ô mer, et je suis grand sur mon socle divin  
De toute ta grandeur rongant mes pieds en vain.

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<sup>447</sup> “He walks behind the detective who seems deeply preoccupied; he walks behind him like his shadow; and the shadow gets smaller and smaller like it does in the midday sun, he gets closer and closer to the rounded back of the detective, and suddenly, he takes out a long knife from one of his pockets, and stabs it in the poor man’s back.”

<sup>448</sup> Literally a “night bar.” Usually the type of bar that only opens at night and welcomes clients from all walks of life, including prostitutes and criminals.

<sup>449</sup> “The Seven Wonders of the World.”

Nu, fort, le front plongé dans un gouffre de brume.” (45)<sup>450</sup>

Soon after, he continues with a few more chosen verses: “Enveloppé de bruit et de grêle et d’écume / Et de nuits et de vents qui se heurtent entre eux / Je dresse mes deux bras vers l’éther ténébreux” (45).<sup>451</sup> In this section of the poem, the narrator is the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. This gigantic bronze statue, built at the dawn of the third century B.C., stood astride the port entrance of Rhodes until 226 B.C., when an earthquake forced its collapse in the Aegean Sea (Maryon 68). The Colossus of Rhodes represented Helios, the divine personification of the Sun in Greek mythology. The relationship between the statue and the Sun is further reinforced in the final line quoted by Zucco, which describes Helios as raising his arms toward the sky.

In the poem, Hugo insists on the resilience and strength of the statue, undeterred by the relentless assaults from the sea storm unleashed around him. Hugo’s Colossus perceives himself as indestructible, tragically oblivious to the fate that awaits him. This image of the legendary statue standing tall and powerful above the city of Rhodes—before he ultimately tumbled into the sea and disappeared forever—reminds us of the television footage that immortalized Succo, mighty and unreachable, standing for hours atop a prison roof before unexpectedly falling out of sight. Moreover, since the prison roof episode serves as the final scene of *Roberto Zucco*, the myth of the Colossus of Rhodes foreshadows the ending of the play: the literal and metaphorical downfall of a figure that seemed invincible.

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<sup>450</sup> “Zucco. / ‘And thus I was created like an athlete / Today your wrath completes me / O sea, I stand tall on my divine pedestal / with all your immensity gnawing at my feet in vain. / Naked, strong, my brow deep in a chasm of mist.”

<sup>451</sup> “Wrapped in row and hail and foam / And nights and winds fighting all together / I raise these arms towards the gloomy sky.”

Later in the scene, Zucco continues to contemplate the irreconcilable dynamic between man's desire for immortality and the reality that all things are on this earth only temporarily. He tells Le balèze: "Je ne veux pas mourir. Je vais mourir" (49).<sup>452</sup> This brief and paradoxical statement encapsulates the most fundamental mystery of human existence: its irrevocable condemnation to death. Finally, before the break of dawn, Zucco recites in Italian a few verses from Dante's *Vita Nova*<sup>453</sup>: "Morte villana, di pietà nemica, / di dolor madre antica, / giudizio incontastabile gravosa, / di te blasmar la lingua s'affatica" (50).<sup>454</sup> In this speech, the hero ponders once more the inevitability of death before he finally falls asleep on the sidewalk. In the end, it is undeniable that the Colossus of Rhodes contributes to the rich tapestry of solar myths woven by Koltès throughout his play. It also brings to the forefront the question of the hero's mortality, a theme also explored through the quote from *Vita Nova*.

The structural movement of *Roberto Zucco* takes the reader on a journey from deepest night to pure sunlight and the title of the final scene, "Zucco au soleil,"<sup>455</sup> announces the completion of that journey (90). The stage directions further emphasize this upward movement toward the Sun: "*Le sommet des toits de la prison, à midi*" (90).<sup>456</sup> In fact, when the other prisoners ask Zucco how he manages to escape, he explains to them that the direction of the Sun represents the only path to freedom:

UNE VOIX. — Comment tu fais?  
 UNE VOIX. — Par où as-tu filé? Donne-nous la filière.  
 ZUCCO. — Par le haut. Il ne faut pas chercher à traverser les murs, parce que, au-delà des murs, il y a d'autres murs, il y a toujours la prison. Il

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<sup>452</sup> "I don't want to die. I'm going to die."

<sup>453</sup> "New Life."

<sup>454</sup> "Cruel Death, enemy of Mercy, / ancient mother of grief, / severe sentence without appeal, / my tongue tires in cursing you."

<sup>455</sup> "Zucco under the sun."

<sup>456</sup> "The highest point on the prison rooftops, at noon."

faut s'échapper par les toits, vers le soleil. On ne mettra jamais un mur entre le soleil et la terre. (92)<sup>457</sup>

Throughout the scene, the stage directions continue to describe the ever-growing presence of the Sun (undoubtedly creating exciting opportunities for lighting designers) until the brightest of lights blinds the audience and makes the entire stage disappear: "*Le soleil monte, devient aveuglant comme l'éclat d'une bombe atomique. On ne voit plus rien*" (95).<sup>458</sup> The Sun seems to be Zucco's final destination, as if the hero was swallowed by the shining star, carried to a divine zenith. However, this breathtaking stage picture is betrayed by the last line of the play, which suggests that Zucco has in fact fallen from the roof: "UNE VOIX. — Il tombe" (95).<sup>459</sup>

Of course, it is in this final moment that the image of Icarus, one of the most emblematic figures in solar mythology, emerges from the text. The traditional narrative describes how Icarus and his father, Daedalus,<sup>460</sup> attempted to escape the island of Crete, on which they were kept prisoners by King Minos. Daedalus, the architect of the labyrinth that held the Minotaur, envisioned an escape through the air and thus constructed two pairs of wings made of feathers wedged by wax. Before he and his son took flight, he warned Icarus not to get too close to the Sun as its heat would surely melt the wax and send him plummeting into the sea (Keightley 353-54). Despite the instructions given by his father, "Icarus soared so near the sun that the wax with which

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<sup>457</sup> "A VOICE. — How do you manage? / A VOICE. — How did you sneak out? Tell us your trick. / ZUCCO. — Go upwards. Don't try going through the walls, because beyond these walls stand other walls, an eternal prison. You must escape from the rooftops, towards the sun. They'll never put a wall between the sun and the earth."

<sup>458</sup> "The sun rises higher, with the blinding brilliance of an atomic explosion. Nothing else can be seen."

<sup>459</sup> "A VOICE. — He's falling."

<sup>460</sup> The figure of Daedalus is also implicitly present in scene VI as the subway could be considered as a kind of labyrinth in which the old man became lost. Through this analytical lens, Zucco appears as a modern interpretation of the Minotaur, the monster imprisoned at the heart of the labyrinth. In turn, the Minotaur evokes the sacred bull killed by Mithras for the Sun.



his wings were fastened to his body melted, and he fell into the Icarian Sea, to which his name was given” (Mackenzie 112). Icarus’s hubristic behavior—trying to fly ever higher, even as high as Helios—caused his tragic downfall and ensuing death. Here, one can easily recognize the parallels between Icarus and Zucco: both young men trying to escape through the sky, both fascinated by the Sun, and both mortally struck down by their hubris. Like the Colossus of Rhodes crumbling into the Aegean waters, like Icarus plunging into the sea, and like Succo falling from the roof and disappearing behind the prison walls, Zucco vanishes into a sea of light, completely out of sight from the audience.

### 3.8 Conclusion

The intricate weaving of literary myths—most notably Hamlet, Samson, and Icarus—throughout *Roberto Zucco* contributes to the rich intertextuality that characterizes Koltès’ playwriting style and firmly establishes his work as the continuation of the twentieth-century French theatrical tradition. Yet Zucco must be considered as much more than the amalgam of several literary myths, for its magnetic radiance makes of him the most prominent figure in Koltesian mythology.

The playwright’s description of Succo as “mythique” (*Une part* 146) seems misleading, for it is perhaps more accurate to describe Succo as the catalyst for the creation of the mythical figure, Zucco. In other words, the myth can only be revealed through a work of literature. Therefore, one could argue that Koltès’ assessment of Succo’s crimes as pure and without motive represents an ambiguous simplification of the real-life criminal case: “Succo a une trajectoire d’une pureté incroyable.

Contrairement aux tueurs en puissance—il y en a beaucoup—, il n’a pas de motivations répugnantes pour le meurtre, qui chez lui est un non-sens” (*Une part* 154-55).<sup>461</sup> Of course, the mystery surrounding the motives behind Succo’s murders will never be solved as his death forever abolished the possibility of new first-hand explanations. Yet that truth is different from asserting that there are no motives at all, a convenient claim that Koltès made on several occasions. Through this lens, it becomes clear that when Koltès discussed in various interviews the development of his new play, *Roberto Zucco*, he already understood Succo as Zucco because he had, perhaps unconsciously, identified the myth implied in the *fait divers*.

The mythification of Roberto Succo should also be considered as a precursor to the mythification of Koltès himself. In the spring of 1989, the author’s health began to deteriorate rapidly. On April 10, a day after his birthday, he suddenly fell into a coma—not unlike the statue of Helios collapsing into the sea—and he never regained consciousness. Admitted to the Hôpital Laënnec,<sup>462</sup> Koltès died in the early hours of April 15, as the light of day broke over the streets of Paris. The last words spoken during his funeral were those of his former professor and mentor, author Jean Mambrino, who quoted Horatio after the death of Hamlet: “Dors mon doux prince. Que les chants des anges te portent à ton suprême repos” (Salino 334).<sup>463</sup> What text could be better suited to lay Koltès to rest than the words of Shakespeare?

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<sup>461</sup> “Succo’s trajectory is incredibly pure. Unlike other serial killers—there are a lot of them—, he doesn’t have any grisly motives to kill, as in his case the act remains senseless.”

<sup>462</sup> “Laënnec Hospital.” Built in 1634, this impressive medical complex was first known as the Hospice des incurables (“Hospice of the incurables”), a historic name that must have resonated strongly with AIDS patients admitted to the facility. It was permanently closed in 2000 and was later converted into various real estate projects, including new housing developments.

<sup>463</sup> “Good night sweet prince: / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!” (Act V, Scene 2).

Soon, the press shared the news with the wider public. *Le Monde* published a brief article titled “Mort de Bernard-Marie Koltès,”<sup>464</sup> which begins with two simple facts: “Bernard-Marie Koltès vient de mourir du sida. Il était l'un des auteurs dramatiques contemporains les plus talentueux.”<sup>465</sup> As if speaking for the family of all theatre artists, Anne-Françoise Benhamou concludes her article in a special issue of the magazine *Alternative Théâtrale*<sup>466</sup> with: “Il nous manque terriblement”<sup>467</sup> (3). Undoubtedly, the theatre community was left grieving the loss of this literary prodigy, author of six remarkable plays (the rest of his work remained unpublished for several years after his death) that represent some of the finest examples of French dramatic literature written in the 1980s. Further the mythification of the author is also a visual one: a small group of portraits—many in black and white—have immortalized the undeniable beauty of his eternal youth. Salino opens her book with this laconic description: “Koltès était très beau. Mieux: il a la grâce. Quelque chose de solaire” (9).<sup>468</sup> Today, Koltès appears as a modern *figure rimbalienne*,<sup>469</sup> the quintessence of the tormented artist, young and handsome, who ends up dying prematurely. Coincidentally, the playwright, a voracious reader, cherished the complexity of Rimbaud’s œuvre: “Je me repais de Rimbaud (plus je l’approche, plus il m’échappe!)”<sup>470</sup> (*Lettres* 85). In turn, Koltès has now become a mythical figure himself, as noted by Olivier Goetz who identifies the emergence of the “*figure koltésienne*”

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<sup>464</sup> “Death of Bernard-Marie Koltès.”

<sup>465</sup> “Bernard-Marie Koltès has just died of AIDS. He was one of the most talented contemporary playwrights.”

<sup>466</sup> “Theatrical Alternative.”

<sup>467</sup> “We miss him terribly.”

<sup>468</sup> “Koltès was very handsome. Better: he has grace. Something solar.”

<sup>469</sup> “Rimbaudian figure.”

<sup>470</sup> “I am feasting on Rimbaud (the more I dive into it, the more it gets away from me!)”

(7).<sup>471</sup> Today, the myth of Koltès permeates the reading of his plays and our understanding of his œuvre, for one can hardly ignore the parallels between the author and his heroes. This is particularly true for Roberto Zucco, whose central figure resembles most closely the ever-more enigmatic Koltès—young, handsome, and condemned. Other parallels promptly emerge when looking through this biographical lens: for example, the strained family dynamic in *Le Retour au désert* and the business of the deal—which can be understood as a metaphor for homosexual cruising—in *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, *Quai ouest* and *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*.

From this point on, additional mytho-analytic projects can be envisioned. Among them, the study of Koltès' plays as metaphors for the mythical labyrinth seems to be the logical step to pursue such research. This labyrinth exists spatially, for example the forsaken warehouse in *Quai ouest*, the family home in *Le Retour au désert*, and the city in *Roberto Zucco*. It also emerges from the structure of Koltesian language—a form of verbal labyrinth—, most notably in the long sentence that meanders throughout *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* and in the enigmatic dialogue that traps Le dealer and Le client in *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*. Moreover, it could be argued that Koltès' entire œuvre is a sort of literary labyrinth, of which Zucco escapes in the final scene of the author's final play as he moves towards the blinding light. Finally, this multilayered Koltesian labyrinth, like all labyrinths, hides a monster. Its incarnation is shapeshifting: Alboury, who lurks in the darkness in *Combat de nègre et de chien*, Abad, who prowls silently through the warehouse in *Quai ouest*, and the ghost of Marie, who haunts the house in *Le Retour au désert*. To take the metaphor a step further, one could imagine the experience of going to the theatre as that of a

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<sup>471</sup> "Koltesian figure."

collective visit of the labyrinth. It begins with our journey from light to darkness. Then, we encounter the monster who appears on stage. This monster is nothing else than a reflection of ourselves, which in turns produces a form of catharsis. Koltès simply holds a great mirror on stage and asks the audience to look at itself. Isn't that what the best theatre compels us to do?

## Conclusion

For the past three decades, a significant number of studies devoted to Koltès have been published in France, demonstrating a sustained and even growing interest in his plays and his contributions to postmodern theatre. Among these studies, I have found three to be particularly well conceived and insightful: *Bernard-Marie Koltès* (1999) by Ubersfeld, *Relire Koltès* (2013) by Hubert et al., and *Koltès dramaturge* (2014) by Benhamou. Comparable scholarship written in English is much scarcer, thus I hope that this dissertation will make a significant contribution to the current state of research on Koltès' plays, and more generally to the field of French dramatic literature, thereby further disseminating Koltès' legacy in the United States. Because, after all, the true purpose of this dissertation is to help others discover the work of an author that has so deeply resonated with me—ever since I played the role of Charles in *Quai ouest* as a high school student at the Lycée Bristol performing arts program.

My earlier observation that Brockett understated Koltès' importance as an icon of postmodern drama in the *History of the Theatre* reveals important challenges inherent in the teaching of Theatre History in undergraduate courses. First and foremost, this quasi-omission serves as a reminder to instructors and students that even the most prestigious and respected textbooks often are obliged to provide only a form of overview of the broad and complex field of study that we call Theatre History, because of a host of pragmatic and ideological elements. Indeed, given the scope of Theatre History and the limitations imposed by the traditional format in which it is taught—usually a one-, two-, or three-semester-course, depending on the institution—the

majority of students receive at best a brief introduction to the most critical aspects and players of each period covered by the book's scope. In this context, several important questions emerge as instructors must make strategic choices and decide upon the content of their course: Which periods should receive the most attention? Which playwrights' works should be thoroughly discussed? Does the teaching of Theatre History inherently require a form of chronological approach? How has widespread access to the internet changed the fundamental nature of teaching Theatre History over the past two decades? For example, is it necessary for students to memorize the birth and death dates of Shakespeare, now that this information is available to all via a quick internet search? If, let us imagine, the task of memorizing dates, names, and facts of history is now deemed obsolete, what then should be the focus of teaching Theatre History? These questions fall outside the scope of the current discussion and should be, in my opinion, destined for another future study that could closely examine and perhaps attempt to answer such queries, yet they remain with me, not simply as abstract ideas, but particularly as pressing issues, as I prepare to teach one of these very courses in the next academic year.

However, one strong belief that I hold is that the teaching of twentieth-century French drama in the United States should not stop with the plays of Genet, presented as a concluding segment to the Theatre of the Absurd—as it was so often the case in my own experience as a student. Instead, such training should extend at least through the work of Koltès, who undeniably represents the most important figure in postmodern French theatre. Koltès' plays, as well as his remarkably progressive vision for the stage, remain tremendously relevant: not only are they artistically elegant and intellectually

challenging, they can also easily serve as a literary vehicle to address questions of diversity and social justice, two extremely important issues on many of today's college campuses, both here in America and abroad. Moreover, the power of these plays resides in large part in their ability to speak of the human condition in an uncannily universal way, a fact which is supported by Koltès' international success. Nevertheless, the realization of this recognition has been slow to develop in the United States, to some extent because of the lack of English translations adapted for the American public, whether in university classrooms or in theatre halls.

As of the completion of this dissertation, in spring 2017, the most widely distributed English translations of Koltès' plays are available from a single source, a two-volume collection translated by Bradby, Delgado, Martin Crimp, Joel Anderson, Fancy, and Jeffrey Wainwright, published by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama in 1997 (Part 1) and 2004 (Part 2). The breadth of this publication is ideal, for it presents Koltès' six major plays, with the addition of *Sallinger*, thereby introducing an English-speaking audience to the playwright's most acclaimed works. The first volume includes *Black Battles with Dogs*, *Return to the Desert*, and *Roberto Zucco*. The second volume includes *Night Just Before the Forests*, *Sallinger*, *Quay West*, and *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields*. Yet in spite of its aim of inclusiveness, the project seems ultimately contradictory and inadequate, for, on the one hand, the collection aspires to introduce Koltès' œuvre to an English-speaking audience, while on the other, it denies the existence of Koltesian language by relying on so many translators. I feel that this is a particularly significant problem, as the translation process is unbalanced. Some plays, such as *Black Battles with Dogs*, represent the collaborative product of the work of



several translators, while others, such as *Roberto Zucco*, were translated in isolation by a single author. Ultimately, these translations, written by six different translators—which is to say, six different perspectives on the question of what exactly defines Koltès’ writing style—fail to provide a cohesive view of the playwright’s true œuvre. Also, these translations, whether by a single author or co-authored, are unsuited for an American audience because the text is encumbered with British vocabulary, idioms, and jargon. Finally, the translators appear to treat the texts as examples of pure Realism, as they focus exclusively on the translation of meaning, while ignoring the subtle structural qualities of Koltesian language. Clearly, questions of the vast differences in ideology of translation theory could and perhaps should be brought into the discussion, but again, I believe that is the subject of another study. Ultimately, translations in American English have been introduced, often because they have been commissioned for specific productions. For example, in 2003, “Koltès/New York,” a three-week festival at the Ohio Theatre, celebrated the work of this French playwright with four of his plays performed in repertory. In his review for the *New York Times*, D. J. R. Bruckner praised the new translation of *Quai ouest*, which opened the festival under the title *West Pier*. About the language of the play, Bruckner notes: “Koltès now sounds like Dante speaking in the voice of Sam Shepard” (“Lost Souls” 5). The critic’s description of Koltesian language as an amalgam of Dante and Shepard seems to truly capture the unique and hard-to-describe dialogical texture of the original text: simultaneously classic and modern, simple and sophisticated.

In Chapter Two, I mentioned that Koltès expressed a form of ambivalence vis-à-vis the production of his plays abroad. Within the context of the present discussion, it is

worthy to note that he appeared particularly uninterested in the idea of having his work performed in the United States:

Je ne suis pas joué aux États-Unis mais je n'en ai pas envie. Je suis un fanatique de leur cinéma, mais pour le reste, ils ne sont pas bons. J'ai très envie d'être joué en Angleterre. Pourquoi ne suis-je pas joué dans un grand théâtre à Londres ? Peut-être parce que les traductions ne sont pas encore assez bonnes. J'aimerais être joué là-bas, je suis un Européen jusqu'au bout des ongles. (*Une part* 94)<sup>472</sup>

He further insisted on the specifically European identity of his plays, anticipating that they would not resonate with an American audience (*Une part* 78). Moreover, Koltès was not especially impressed by the work he saw on the American stage and strongly condemned what he perceived as a flawed American approach to acting: “Je déteste les acteurs américains au théâtre. C'est terrible. Ils ont une dégénérescence d'Actors Studio. Ils jouent hyper psychologique. Comme les mauvais films américains sur les histoires de couple, les femmes hystériques et les maris cruels!”<sup>473</sup> (*Une part* 78). We also know that Koltès never praised American playwrights as models and that he even despised one of the most celebrated among them, Tennessee Williams. Chéreau recalls how the two of them occasionally mocked Williams' work: “Quand on voulait rigoler, on allait chercher quelques répliques particulièrement ridicules de Tennessee Williams, et on se les lisait à haute voix!” (26).<sup>474</sup> Still, one wonders if they were reading Williams in the original English or reading the French translation of his work. The latter would

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<sup>472</sup> “My work is not performed in the United States but I really do not care if it is. I am a fan of their cinema, but for the rest, they are not good. I would love to see my work performed in England. Why is my work not performed in a large theatre in London? Perhaps because the translations are not quite good enough yet. I would love to see my work performed there; I am a European through and through.”

<sup>473</sup> “I hate American stage actors. They are awful. They display a degeneracy of the Actors Studio. They have an overly psychological approach to acting. Like bad American movies about couples' relationships, hysterical women, and cruel husbands!”

<sup>474</sup> “When we needed a laugh, we would look up a few particularly ridiculous lines from Tennessee Williams, and we would read them out loud!”

suggest that Chéreau and Koltès may have been sneering at the translation more than at Williams' words.

Koltès' apparent lack of interest in seeing his plays performed on the American stage may seem at first surprising. Indeed, as noted in Chapter One, the world premiere of *Combat de nègre et de chiens* took place at La MaMa Annex in New York City in 1982, before the beginning of Koltès' collaboration with Chéreau and his subsequent rise to success in France. Moreover, Koltès loved traveling, especially to New York City, a site he visited regularly and for weeks at a time between 1981 and 1985. In a letter to his friend Michel Guy, Koltès declares his love for the Big Apple: "je l'aime, je l'aime à en perdre l'appétit, à ne plus avoir envie de dormir" (*Lettres* 442).<sup>475</sup> In another letter, one to his brother François, he even celebrates American food culture: "Coca-Cola, mayonnaise, Kentucky fried chicken, hamburgers, montagnes de ketchup, toutes les horreurs colorées me ravissent" (*Lettres* 444).<sup>476</sup> And in correspondence with his friend Madeleine, Koltès repeatedly shares his growing love for the city: "ma vie à New York (que j'aime),"<sup>477</sup> "je suis à New York (que j'adore),"<sup>478</sup> and "New York (dont je suis éperdument épris) ne me lasse pas" (*Lettres* 446).<sup>479</sup> Like many other artists and writers in France—during his lifetime, long before, and ever since—Koltès was fascinated by American culture, and particularly with New York City, which he may have seen as the center of creative liberty and cultural anarchy, in contrast to what he might have considered to be a Parisian conservatism.

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<sup>475</sup> "I love it, I love it to the point of losing my appetite, of never wanting to sleep again."

<sup>476</sup> "Coca-Cola, mayonnaise. Kentucky fried chicken, hamburgers, mountains of ketchup, I am delighted with all the colorfully monstrous junk food."

<sup>477</sup> "my life in New York (which I love)."

<sup>478</sup> "I am in New York (which I adore)."

<sup>479</sup> "New York (with which I am desperately in love) never disappoints me."

Despite Koltès' lack of enthusiasm for all endeavors he associated with the American theatre, efforts to produce his work in the United States have in fact occasionally materialized. For example, 7 Stages Theatre in Atlanta hosted the first International Koltès Symposium and presented the American premiere of *The Day of Murders in the History of Hamlet* in 2011. This production was part of the U.S. Koltès Project, a long-term initiative designed to provide new American translations for six plays by Koltès, to be produced at 7 Stages Theatre. Unfortunately, however, the project has now been abandoned because of reported artistic differences among the project leaders. Other recent American productions include *Combat de nègre et de chiens*—under the title *Battle of Black and Dogs*—at Yale Repertory Theatre in 2010, and *Roberto Zucco* at the University of Florida in 2012. There is also a growing interest in the work of Koltès in the specific realm of the study of French literature. For example, in 2010 at Princeton University, the Princeton Atelier, the Department of French and Italian, and the Center for French Studies joined together to present a production of *Roberto Zucco*—performed in French. In 2011, the Department of French and Italian at Emory University presented a ten-day conference focused on the work of Koltès and a new translation of his play *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* by Amin Erfani. The play was published in 2014 in the collective critical study, *Bernard-Marie Koltès: Les registres d'un style*, edited by André Petitjean. Most recently, Koltès' theatre was the topic of two conference presentations given at the 2017 International Colloquium for 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century French and Francophone Studies: “*Des voix sourdes* de Bernard-Marie Koltès: la promesse d'un théâtre sans la vue” by Audrey Lemesle and “Le corps dans le temps et l'espace de la postcolonie. Poétique politique du théâtre de Patrice Chéreau. À

travers l'œuvre de Bernard-Marie Koltès" by Selim Rauer. This series of recent productions and academic studies demonstrates an important new interest in Koltès' plays in the United States, although it remains mostly limited to institutions of higher education. Nevertheless, this cultural trend confirms that American audiences can appreciate the playwright's work, if given the opportunity to discover it on the stage (or in the classroom).

To conclude this dissertation, I would like to offer some remarks on the subject of my own experience working on Koltès' plays as a stage director and as a translator. In 2005, I had the great privilege to direct a production of *Quai ouest* for the Peggy D. Helmerich School of Drama at the University of Oklahoma. This production utilized the translation authored by Fancy et al, which was then and remains now the only English translation widely available. Despite the many accomplishments of this production—I fondly remember especially Tyler Kaufman's bold and innovative lighting design (remarkable work for an undergraduate student)—the fact that we were using a British translation proved to be very challenging, even to the point of frustration. The language simply felt neither true to Koltès' original text nor adapted to our American cast and audiences. Moreover, choices in vocabulary and syntax implied a specifically British setting, at odds with the purposefully ambiguous circumstances described by Koltès, as with the following example: "Dans un quartier à l'abandon d'une grande ville portuaire occidentale, séparé du centre-ville par un fleuve, un hangar désaffecté de l'ancien port" (7).<sup>480</sup> Thus, this translation seemed inadequate to serve as a communicative bridge between the original text and our American audience.

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<sup>480</sup> "An abandoned warehouse, across the river from the city-center, in a deserted neighborhood of a large port city somewhere in the West."

In 2014, I had another opportunity to direct one of Koltès' plays for the Helmerich School of Drama. That time, I selected *Roberto Zucco*, both for practical reasons—as it offers a great variety of roles that can serve well the diversity of undergraduate student actors—and for personal ones—as I find it to be Koltès' most moving play. Rather than repeat the self-imposed mistake I made with *Quai ouest* by relying upon a British translation, I decided to create my own. I had previously done an original English translation of Azama's *Iphigénie ou le péché des dieux* (1989),<sup>481</sup> which served as the script for a production that I directed in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MFA in Directing at the University of Oklahoma. This experience further gave me the confidence that I could complete the translation of *Roberto Zucco* in enough time to satisfy the deadlines dictated by our stringent production calendar. In fact, the process of translation began at the end of June and ended by mid-August, which allowed us to make the script available to actors ahead of auditions taking place at the end of that month. To ensure that the translated text would be as effective as possible with American audiences, I collaborated with Dr. Judith Pender, who served as a helpful editor throughout the process. As expected, my experience translating *Roberto Zucco* confirmed the intricacies that I suspected of Koltesian language, always on the edge between prosaic and poetic. Despite the occasional difficulties we encountered, I found the process of translation to be artistically very satisfying, and I was most grateful for having had this opportunity, as it provided me with a more thorough understanding of the play, and it served me well in

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<sup>481</sup> "*Iphigenia or the Sin of the Gods*." Members of my thesis committee included Dr. Judith Pender, Ms. Susan Shaughnessy, and Dr. Pamela Genova. All three also served on this dissertation committee; I am most grateful for their guidance and mentorship over the years.

my subsequent directorial tasks by providing me with a much more comprehensive understanding of the script.

The experience of translating *Roberto Zucco* led me to the idea of considering the role of the director and the role of the translator as somewhat comparable. First, the translator manages the complex transition of the play from one language to another—in this case, from French to American English. But also, the director leads the equally complex transition of the play—a true metamorphosis, in fact—from a work of literature to a live performance, itself conceived through the collaborative efforts of the entire production team. Thus, it could be argued—as a means to further develop the central idea of Chapter Three—that the role of the translator and that of the director contribute directly to the development of the literary myth. The translator invites the connotations and denotations of a foreign language to enrich and express the work of an author. The director selects and coaches actors, as well as coordinates the visual and aural elements—generally categorized as scenic, lighting, costume, and sound design—that supplement the text to create the final theatrical performance. However, unlike the translator’s work that can be published and preserved, the director’s contribution is often condemned to ephemerality, as the art of theatre only exists in the live experience.

Translators and directors both make crucial decisions that impact fundamentally the ways in which a play will ultimately be received by the general public and critics alike. Therefore, they have the common responsibility to, as we say in the theatre, “serve the play”, which means that they must make decisions that buttress the playwright’s intent to the best of their abilities to identify that original motivation. This obligation toward the playwright was always in my mind while translating and directing

*Roberto Zucco*. For example, I found it important to cast African-American performers, given how passionately Koltès argued in favor of more diversity on stage. Thus, I cast an African-American actor as Le mac, for this character engages in a typical Koltesian transaction in “Le deal,” a scene in which he haggles with Le frère over the price to exploit La gamine as a prostitute (70-75). This particular casting decision helped recreate the essential “white man vs. black man” transactional relationship that characterizes so many of Koltès’ plays, most notably *Combats de nègre et de chiens*, *Quai ouest*, and *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*. There is, of course, no way for an audience member watching a Koltès’ play for the first time to recognize that this is a pattern of his work. However, it felt essential to me to honor the playwright’s legacy by making directorial decisions that would present his universe as authentically as I was able.

Finally, I must recognize that this double opportunity to present Koltès’ work at the University of Oklahoma fostered a special kind of cultural exchange between the theatrical tradition in which I grew up and the new one that adopted me. I certainly discovered a plethora of American playwrights whose work I had never known while studying in France, and it was both a special privilege and a serious responsibility to introduce our community to the work of someone I consider one to be counted among the greatest masters of twentieth-century dramatic literature.



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