

On

applause

PAY ATTENTION when you begin clapping this evening. Applause is a dangerous thing. Theatre-makers have always had a difficult relationship with it. You would think that every actor or author wants applause, but the histories of theatre and other media tell a different story.

APPLAUSE is often restricted or manipulated. That was also the case with the Greeks and Romans. Emperor Nero founded a school for applause and when he went on tour to give concerts, he took five thousand men along with him. In France, such a group of professional clappers is known as a *claque*. According to reports, the leaders of eighteenth and nineteenth-century *claqueurs* were well-dressed, erudite citizens.

FORMERLY, the only people to receive applause were those who had appeared on stage during a play. Apparently the first author to be applauded since ancient times was Voltaire.

BANISSONS LES APPLAUDISSEMENTS, le spectacle est partout! This idea could be seen in the streets of Paris in May '68. Artists and theatre-makers tried to introduce it in practice. Most performances do not take place on a stage, which makes it less natural to applaud. Some performances are today experienced individually or through headphones. Others are created for passers-by, on a town square or a street in a large city and their aim is to cause unease or surprise rather than admiration.

THOSE WHO APPLAUD become an audience (1). Inns, which were places of pleasure and iniquity, were in the past probably the scene of the loudest applause – these days it is in football stadiums. In the fifth and sixth centuries, applause was still often heard in churches, but it then gradually disappeared from the house of God. Throughout the history of theatre and opera, people have sometimes wondered whether it would not better to dispense with applause. However, in 1758 Diderot complained that the theatre was already too disciplined: “Fifteen years ago, uproar reigned in our theatres. The coolest heads thawed as soon as they entered and the sensible ones amongst us shared more or less in the ecstasy of the madmen. ... Today people enter coolly, they listen coolly, go coolly home and I don't know where this will end.”^[1]

CARDINAL RICHELIEU had the performances seen by the contemporaries of the Sun King Louis XIV divided into three categories – those of the aristocracy, those of the *honnêtes gens* and those of the *commerçants* and footmen. In Bayreuth, Richard Wagner dimmed the lights and made the audience invisible. Today there is generally no real audience present: people watch TV at home and over recent

years have sent millions of text messages to show which singer or beauty queen candidate they liked or who had to leave the house. The majority of people who populated the parterres on the eve of the French Revolution would no longer come to our arts centres today. Hegel, who once proposed doing away with the audience, seems to have got his way.

THOSE WHO APPLAUD BECOME AN AUDIENCE (2). In recent years, we have often heard about a nostalgia for applause and for a clear distinction between the audience and the stage. Perhaps also for a new distinction between life and art. For the viewer's own particular role? After all, do you not abolish this role if you give the viewer a role in the performance he has come to see? In the past, the applause greatly influenced what was seen and heard on stage. Performances were interrupted or actors had to perform something different to what had been planned. What would an eighteenth-century theatregoer make of the applause in our TV studios?

“SPONTANEOUS APPLAUSE BROKE OUT.” What is spontaneous applause? Did it exist in the past or was it just self-evident, so that nobody had to come up with a name for it? The verb used is also interesting. ‘Breaking out’ makes one think of a disease or rioting. Applause used to be riotous. However, it is also just as good at curbing discomfort or misfortune. If a glass is smashed in a cafe or restaurant, we also want to applaud. The reality (which in any case was not so bad) is then no longer a reality: the small catastrophe becomes a game.

IN THE MEANTIME, accident and uproar have been banished from many places. During the recording of television programmes, heirs to the *claqueurs* warm up the audience and also ensure that they clap at the right moments. In dance and theatre, applause mostly comes only at the end of the performance. It sometimes happens during the performance when the creator of the piece makes a clear reference to other formats, a conference for example, or when the production is divided up into a series of short shows or performances.

BY APPLAUDING, you show that you like something, but what happens if we don't like it? Mostly not very much. In Belgium, our applause sounds somewhat gentle – sometimes people don't clap at all – but booing is rarely heard. In other countries, the situation is often very different. It also depends on the type of performance one is seeing or listening to. In opera houses, the conductor can be showered with thunderous applause and two seconds later there is booing for the stage designer.

IN DUTCH, there is no plural form of applause. However, in French one can have *applaudissements*. Those who wish to define applause as a collective act (the joining together of individual applause?) generally use a plural form for it.

APPLAUSE CAN GROW. But where does it come from and where does it go? The polar opposite of applause, more so than booing or disapproving whistling, is silence. Dirk Lauwaert on film: “After each film, there is a great relief (that applause is no longer necessary), but also a great sense of shame (that the applause has

become superfluous). Especially when we are moved and impassioned, this sense of shame catches us by surprise: after all, the emotions cannot be verified by the others and cannot be given back to the performance.”

Applause is meant for people.

THESE DAYS, applause is also given for the dead. In English football stadiums, the minute's silence for someone who has died has been replaced by applause. In the match between Club Bruges and Westerlo played on 10th May 2008, two days after striker François Sterchele had been killed in a car accident, the crowd alternated between applause and silence. In London, there was applause when Princess Diana's hearse drove through the city. Earlier that day, people had applauded the words spoken by her brother – the applause transferred from the crowd standing outside to the inside of Westminster Abbey (applause had not been heard in the church since 1065). In Rotterdam, there was loud applause and acclaim when Pim Fortuyn's hearse passed through the city.

“APPLAUS VOOR JEZELF!” (De Grote Meneer Kaktus Show, VARA, 1986-1993)

MENEER KAKTUS understood May '68 well. The children, or at least a few of them, who screamed around the boxing ring, are now sitting in Dutch theatres. When they applaud, they are also doing it for themselves: life itself has become art. As a result, is the audience slower to anger? Never before in history have we related so obedient to what is happening on stage. Briefly disregarding the Romans, who used to applaud when a gladiator tasted defeat.

IN THE EASTERN BLOC, performers themselves even applauded after receiving their applause. In the summer of 1992, when the Eastern Bloc no longer existed and a new war was raging in Europe, Eric de Kuyper wrote of these performers that: “They applaud the audience. They acknowledge its ‘talent’ and the ideological message is, ultimately: we are all equal, we are as good as you, you as good as us, and together we are working on the advancement of our communist society. In doing so, they appropriate one of the privileges of the audience.”

LAST SPRING, I saw the performance called *Laugh* by Antonia Baehr. Antonia Baehr is someone with an impressive laugh. For *Laugh* she asked people, including a composer, a dramaturg and her personal laughing coach, to write scores for her laugh, and she also wrote some herself. She performed a number of these scores in *Laugh*. The audience laughed almost as much as Baehr herself. Where did the staging of the laugh begin and where did it end? Some bursts of laughter from the audience seemed to become part of what was supposed to be taking place on stage – the audience was listening to itself, with new laughter as the result. Historian Élie Konigson describes the social role the spectator played in the first mediaeval theatre performances in our part of the world as that of a *gardien du réel*. Whereas more than a thousand years later Baehr was laughing, the *gardiens du réel* shook and began to grow dizzy. Which laugh was real? Is Antonia Baehr real? Where does the game begin, where, in this case, did it stop? The confusion would have something sinister about it, were it not for the fact that we could always laugh, clap and cheer again.

FINALLY: applause is something universal. In August 1991, Moscow sent tanks to the borders of what then would for a few more months still be called the Soviet Union. While Mikhail Gorbachev was on holiday, hardliners in the capital had taken over power. I was sixteen and on holiday in Prague where the people were anxious. Thousands of people gathered in Wenceslas Square. President Václav Havel spoke to the people. I didn't understand a word of what he said, but I recognised the applause.

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NOTE

^[1] "Il y a quinze ans que nos théâtres étaient des lieux de tumulte. Les têtes les plus froides s'échauffaient en y entrant, et les hommes sensés y partageaient plus ou moins le transport des fous. ... Aujourd'hui, on arrive froids, on écoute froids, on sort froids, et je ne sais où l'on va." (Denis Diderot, 'Réponse à la lettre de Madame Riccoboni', quoted in: Marie-Hélène Huet, *Rehearsing the Revolution: The Staging of Marat's Death, 1793-1797*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982: pp. 31-32)

COLOPHON

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