

WALKER

Fourth Wall

RABIH MROUÉ

Testimony for the Living (Or: Metabolic Theater)



Rabih Mroué, Lina Majdalanie, and Mazen Kerbaj perform *Borborygmus*, January 10, 2019, McGuire Theater. Photo: Bobby Rogers

I.

In the beginning there is pulse. Asynchronous yet side by side, overlapping, underscoring, striking the field of time, turning it into a sieve—like a skin. In the beginning, there is three of each: actors, metronomes. One for each. In the beginning, there is silence pierced by the tac-tac-tac-tac of the relentlessly mechanical. In the beginning there are three middle-aged bodies, sitting on chairs, behind a long, brightly lit, white table, facing their audience, facing the asynchronous tempi of the three wooden metronomes chipping away the presentness of the present, each at its own pace.

In the beginning then, two totally different modes of time face off: the

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chronometric, measured, mechanical, self-repetitive time of the metronomes and the durational, without-measure, metabolic, self-differentiating time of the actors. Such is the minimal, yet dense, opening scene of Rabih Mroué's latest piece, the theatrical production *Borborygmus*. In the vast stage of the Walker Art Center, where the work had its world premiere in January of 2019, that first image—simultaneously acoustic and percussive, silent and passive—operates as an epigraph, which will haunt and (in)form the rest of the piece. The abstract time of machines, the experiential time of meat: between one and the other, humans build their more or less violent, more or less joyful, worlds.

scholars, curators, and artists to examine key moments from the center's past. While these essays help shed light on our history, they also draw upon curatorial and artistic strategies from the past as a means of informing our future.

Nothing seems to happen for a while, except for the metronomes' oscillatory motions, slowly going in and out of phase with each other. A tumultuous cavalcade over a quiet background of two men in black suits sitting next to a woman in red dress. Then, suddenly, the three lift the metronomes, which are standing on a wooden plank, and place the plank on top of two tin cans. Then, more waiting. And seeing. And hearing. Now, suspended, the oscillatory movements start to establish a wave harmony. Almost miraculously, the different tempi start to converge. In a moment, all three metronomes beat at the same time. Agreement. According to philosopher Michel Serres, Leibniz saw in those rare moments of harmony, of attunement between pulsating, self-differentiating parts, whether those parts are objects or subjects, animals or plants, a sign of God, a proof of the divine. To those witnessing that opening scene, it all looks and sounds like a magical trick: theater. But things may be simpler than that. It may very well be that, given the right resonant conditions, the plainest of matters and their singular, discordant rhythms, bind in intracoherent wave patterns. Thus, if it is theater we are witnessing, the facts of matter tell us that there will be no place for tricks in it. Just raw materials in interaction.

Then, each actor stops and removes from the table one metronome at a time. Silence. Second action. Time to rebegin.



Lina Majdalanie, Rabih Mroué, and Mazen Kerbaj in *Borborygmus*, January 10, 2019, McGuire Theater. Photo: Bobby Rogers

II.

Rabih Mroué is part of an influential generation of Lebanese artists—along with Jalal Toufic, Joana Hadjithomas, Akram Zaatari, and Walid Raad—who, growing up during the country's civil wars of the late 1980s and 1990s, have addressed in their different works the effects of violence in the production of personal, social, cultural, and historical memories and amnesias of experiencing the war. Deeply invested in interrogating what are the elements that constitute, or allow for, both the writing *and* the erasure of history, all of these artists set up ways of producing works that navigate not only distinctions between artistic genres—creating videos, photography, poetry, drawings, and films, as well as sculpture and installation works—but blur as well any distinctions between fictional narrative and historiography. Significantly, one of the genres or modes of delivery that became essential to the transmission of these ficto-factual experiences, and that these artists took to a whole new level, is the lecture-performance—of which Raad, Toufic, and Mroué in particular have transformed, each in their own specific ways, into a new genre of documentary theater, or forensic performance. Indeed, in their ficto-critical performances, where usually the artist him- or herself appears as a mix of public-intellectual, actor, critical theorist, historian, forensic investigator, political theorist, and stand-up comedian, the main issue for the artists just mentioned was to identify the gaps between events and their documents (or lack thereof). And, once those gaps had been identified, the task of the artist was to then provide a narrative that would fill that gap—not necessarily with information, but with a set of sensations, significations, and sense. Some of the most important performances in this genre include Mroué's *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012), a detailed analysis of sniper shootings of civilians, the terrible violence of the Syrian civil war documented through their cellphones, and *Sand in the Eyes* (2017), a lecture-performance about web videos designed to recruit Islamic extremists in Germany.



Rabih Mroué in *Borborygmus*, January 10, 2019, McGuire Theater. Photo: Bobby Rogers

Borborygmus is Rabih Mroué's latest theatrical production. Co-created, co-written, co-directed, and performed collaboratively with musician/artist Mazen Kerbaj and actor/director/writer Lina Majdalanie, this 90-minute piece both continues Mroué's previous works but also adds significant new elements. If Mroué had contributed to the definition of what Eyal Weizman has called a "forensic aesthetics," *Borborygmus* shifts the tone from the forensic to the affective. But affective here does not mean the work becomes more emotional or exploits a dramaturgical arc fueled by pathos. Rather, in the case of *Borborygmus*, the turn towards affect means simply this: the work becomes even

more raw. While forensic aesthetics, as Weizman defines it, is predicated on the demise of the witness and the supremacy of the object as ultimate repository of the truth of the event, and thus, the human agent speaks as an expert on behalf of the object, as we can see so clearly in Mroué's lecture performances, *Borborygmus* is predicated on relentless narratives—personal, impersonal, fictional, true—of each actor's lived experiences, memories, and mismemories. It is in these narratives that we can locate, actually, not merely the facts surrounding violent acts, but the effects of violence upon the entire social body, its nervous system.



Lina Majdalanie, Rabih Mroué, and Mazen Kerbaj in *Borborygmus*, January 10, 2019, McGuire Theater. Photo: Bobby Rogers

III.

Once the opening scene, with its chronometric tempi, is over, the actors leave the table and arrange themselves in semicircle around a microphone, each behind a music stand. Kerbaj had already walked downstage and turned on a turntable which plays the epic overture of Verdi's *La Forza de Destino* (*The Force of Destiny*). Following the epic rhythm of the orchestral arrangement, the actors start a litany, which sets the tone for the whole evening:

In the beginning, nothing.

Then...

Then... Then... Then we entered.

Then... Then we were seen.

[...]

Then we jailed, we sequestered, we tortured.

Then we beat, we smashed, we mutilated.

Then we barbecued, we squashed, we dismembered.

Then we crushed, then we ate.

Then we conspired, then we planned.

Then we charged, then we disemboweled.

Then we stood erect, then we divided.

Then we dispersed, then we bribed.

Then we supported, then we pledged.

Then we got politicized, then we enrolled, then we discriminated, then we pilfered, then we sailed, then we progressed, then we executed.

Then we castrated.

Then we flogged.

Then we flayed.

Then we electrocuted, then we rejoiced.

Then we rejoiced, then we feasted.

Then we feasted, then we “fireworked”

Then...

This is not a poem: it is a turbulent testimony. And a testimony is not a personal confession. As Shoshana Felman wrote so poignantly on the relations between trauma and testimony, “by the virtue of the fact that the testimony is addressed to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension beyond himself”¹. The affective layer here becomes a crucial dimension on how an actor may convey an experience. The actor is the “vehicle of occurrences,” of realities that bypass his or her self—in this sense, to witness is to answer an imperative call to account to the event and to those who will have not been there.



Lina Majdalanie in *Borborygmus*, January 10, 2019, McGuire Theater. Photo: Bobby Rogers

In an interview with the performance's co-curator, Mellon Interdisciplinary Fellow Allie Tepper, the three artists insist on one aspect: *Borborygmus* is not about death, it is not about time passing, it is not about nostalgia. It is about loss. With this simple affirmation we can see how the three collaborators created a dramaturgical machine that entangles past, present, and future into one plane of collective experience. It's as if all dimensions of time fall into the same sac, and begin a process of metabolic dilution, a kind of autophagic rumination. Thus, the question of chronological, measured, linear, time of how events took place is replaced by the political question of affect as duration. The question is less about knowing, or determining, when things happened (a specific bomb or one person's death), but *how* does one remember, *how* does one access loss, *how* does one act in face of the fact of loss, *how* does one respond to endless events of violence, of untimely deaths, of fear, of passion, of the mundane in the human? Under the pressing spell of the beats of the now-silent metronomes, the whole piece retains as its undertow an urgent pulse, which is further enhanced by every new scene, every new piece of text delivered by the three actors. In each *Borborygmus* scene, fear and loss loom—even in the humorous and lighthearted scene where all three actors lift up shot glasses and drink to the health of (among many others) Palestinians, of Ibn Khaldoun, of Rosa Luxemburg, of hashish, of “gays and lesbians and bi and trans and queer and inter,” and of everyone in the audience that evening. Thus at each moment the play asks, from both actors and audience alike: how never to be unworthy to whatever happens to you, to your family and friends, to those you love, but also how to act in relation to those who, truly, really, intensely, want to kill you?



Rabih Mroué, Mazen Kerbaj, and Lina Majdalanie in *Borborygmus*, January 10, 2019, McGuire Theater. Photo: Bobby Rogers

IV.

Borborygmus's structure is modular. The actors proceed to perform a series of clearly self-contained scenes, where, incrementally, the theme of loss sutures all scenes into one dramatic arc. This suturing is also linguistic, since the actors speak Arabic and the whole play is supertitled. In other words: to watch *Borborygmus* is to be immersed, fully, into the inevitability of translation. There is always a fraction of a second of delay therefore, between an actor's speech, or action, and the audience's reaction. This lag sets up a fine temporal membrane between each scene and its after-effects, thus emphasizing how every experience or event—even an event as unmediated as live theater—is always slightly ahead or slightly behind the moment of its occurrence. Again, just as in the opening scene, asynchronous tempi: a theater less of ephemerality than of time lapses and cultural-linguistic-historical-traumatic gaps. Thus, the task of the audience becomes that of filling those gaps. But how does one fill the affective gap between an expression and its translation? The answer *Borborygmus* offers is: by introducing throughout the piece a steady accumulation of increasingly brutal narrative elements, which are made even more matter of fact by the fact that these elements are accompanied by the actor's undetermined gestures. The gaps and lapses are filled with a sense of absurdity or chance—destiny's or history's or life's ultimate force.



Lina Majdalanie, Rabih Mroué, and Mazen Kerbaj, *Borborygmus*, January 10, 2019, McGuire Theater. Photo: Bobby Rogers

In one particularly striking moment—right after the long litany of “and thens”—the three actors go about the stage picking up from its black floor dozens of scattered white sheets of paper containing the text they had just read, which had been placed on the three music stands and that they discarded on the floor as they read. Each actor picks up a sheet of paper, crunches it into a ball, and throws it back on the floor. As the stage becomes dotted with these abstract white shapes, we suddenly notice that each crunched sheet starts to quiver. Surreptitiously, the actors had inserted small vibrating gizmos inside each crumbled piece of paper. A quiet buzzing takes over the whole stage and overflows into the audience as the crumbled pieces of paper tremble gently and the actors roam about this odd landscape of discarded, scattered, vibrating, debris of text. Then, still in this buzzing quasi-silence, Kerbaj, using a trash pickup stick, methodically proceeds to collect the pieces paper, placing them all in a large, blue, plastic bag. He ties up the bag, suspends it from a string about six feet high upstage left and brings a microphone close to it. Coming from the sack we can hear the faint noises of the vibrating mass of paper. Mechanical butterflies stirring in a blue, plastic stomach.



Lina Majdalanie, Rabih Mroué, and Mazen Kerbaj in *Borborygmus*, January 10, 2019, McGuire Theater. Photo: Bobby Rogers

We arrive thus to the theme announced by the piece's title. The word borborygmus refers to the rumbling and gurgling noises made by fluid or gases in our entrails. Indeed, as Mroué explains in an interview with Allie Tepper, "the stomach is the organ that actually reveals all of these uncontrollable things that happen to our body. [...] You can hide things, you can control things, or you can pretend you are controlling your body. But the belly does not allow this." But the stomach is not only the place where the involuntary motions of our bodies make themselves heard. It is also the place where the external world is turned into a pulp, so parts of it may be metabolized, i.e., literally turned into our bodies. The stomach is the alchemical furnace where bits of world are dissolved in acid so to become meat.



Rabih Mroué in *Borborygmus*, January 10, 2019, McGuire Theater. Photo: Bobby Rogers

V.

In the last third of *Borborygmus*, we find Mroué standing on a small circle made of shards of broken plastic glasses, alone under a sharply focused spotlight and surrounded by darkness, delivering one of the most extraordinary odes to what Michel Serres once identified as uniting what he called the essential metabolic nature of the cosmos with the stomachal nature of philosophy into a “justice of the stomach.” As Serres wrote in his book *The Parasite*, “What we take as equilibrium is only a slowing down of metabolic processes. My body is an exchanger of time.”² The metabolic-stomachal nature of the body as “exchanger of time” leads us back to the theme of the political value of testimony—since facts of violence are always already falling prey of the constitutive forces of stomachal (in)justice inherent to human and planetary metabolic processes or destinies. Thus, after the celebratory scene where the three actors drink to the health of humans, objects, countries, audiences, friends, and other matters, Mroué, hunched and in a feverish tone in his solitary spot, unfurls a scroll of paper, and delivers a relentless, as well as surreally tragicomic, epitaph for the absurdity of human life in this planet, at the cusp of the 21st century:

Hey ooooh! ... Oh nebula! Oh nothingness!

Hear this call,

You are the almighty, and we are but scum,

By your honor, please answer our call and don't let us down,

You are generous, and we are worthy of it,

What do you want us to do, kneel for you? Implore you? Beseech you? Kiss your hands and feet? You are precious and your demand is so inexpensive...

Take us to you hey oooh... and throw us into the shadows,
Color us with darkness and soot,

Imprison us in a dark hole so deep that no one can get out of it.

[...]

Stomp this earth with your foot, then kick it high, let it fall and burst into a million pieces...

Let the sound of your blows provide a musical accompaniment that fills the entire universe...

Let each blow bring a city down on the heads of all its residents, let its dead rise from their graves even deader than they were...

Ground us, hey oooh, into raw meat, feed us to the worms, let stray animals fight over us, and shred us with their fangs,

Make us a place among the glutinous insects... Send industrial chicken to eat us, then cook them in vinegar and garlic, and feed it back to us, so that we freeze and become immobile,

Let us become the plague that has no cure, the virus that will attack every living thing including ourselves. Make us a place among the glutinous insects, then stomp us with your foot like some cockroach.

Metabolism as destiny's only force, as "justice of the stomach." Everything else is mere theater.



Mazen Kerbaj in *Borborygmus*, January 10, 2019, McGuire Theater. Photo: Bobby Rogers

VI.

In the last three minutes of *Borborygmus* the audience finds itself enveloped by almost unbearable noise: the stage is utterly dark, with only a few, tiny, blueish spinning lights scattered here and there, revolving around themselves, like pulsars beaconing from the edges of the galaxy or some genetically modified firefly revolving in empty space. Surrounding us, swallowing us, devouring us, attacking us from everywhere, high frequency sounds modulate and explode, evoking emergency sirens piercing the night announcing some unspeakable tragedy, or maybe some cryptic intergalactic exchange between alien spaceships in some B sci-fi movie. Once in a while, a very bright white flash illuminates one of the actors roaming about the stage, exposing a silhouette in a fraction of a second. Darkness punctuated by bursts of lights or light being overtaken by fields of light. Bullets of light. Bullets of darkness. Piercing sounds slicing space and time. Spinning blue electric fireflies. A whole cavernous world in autophagia, consuming even time itself. Metronomic pulse: gone. Cardiac pulse: fully present. Nervous system: overspilling. Gut wrenching, we are left to witness the uncanny rumbling of endless impersonal metabolic processes, the underbelly of our shared history, the impersonal force of destiny.

Notes

¹ Shoshana Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3.

² Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 71.