
Press review



SUITE N°2

Encyclopédie de la parole / Joris Lacoste

Distribution and tours :

Garance Crouillère +33 6 51 14 62 63 - garance.crouillere@echelle1-1.org

Administration & production

Edwige Dousset +33 6 13 43 11 29 - administration@echelle1-1.org

assisted by Victoire Costes - production@echelle1-1.org

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We never use texts. We use the sounds of people talking as a kind of score.

18.11.2015 – Par Joost Ramaer

A snow-white expanse, filled with thousands of words, exquisitely shaped in a font called Delicious-Roman. That is what you see when you open the website of the French playwright Joris Lacoste. In spite of its surreal beauty, a modernist homage to old-fashioned calligraphy, it soon gets intimidating. The site opens with a list of the 36 works of performing art he made since 2000 – a daunting achievement in itself. The list is divided into four columns: Pieces, Formats, Activities, and Dates, stating the years when his shows premiered.

The header of the opening page also contains four chapters: Joris Lacoste, Presentation, Calendar, and a choice between French and English. At least try the French version. However hopeless you are in the language, it conveys the pristine, meticulous, elegant, somehow very French quality of what Lacoste is doing in the most satisfying way.

Then, click on Presentation. You will get a concise explanation of each category:

‘Activities are specific research processes. More or less all of them are group endeavors.

Pieces are the ways in which a process is made public at a given time.

Formats are the presentation modes of the pieces – shows, articles, exhibitions, games, lectures, etc.’

When you click ‘Joris Lacoste’ in the header, you will not get his biography – it is filed under Presentation – but that daunting list again, which adds to your feeling of awe. Apparently, this guy is his work. Click any show, and you open veritable caves of information. Pictures, sound fragments, and texts – long, long texts. To give you an idea, here is the entry for Purgatoire (Purgatory, from 2007):

‘It’s rather entertaining. It’s strangely hectic. It’s compulsive. It’s very impressive. It feels very uncomfortable. It can’t be explained. It’s noisy. It compels admiration. It’s in-your-face. It’s frontal. It’s a little self-indulgent. It’s longer than planned. It’s darker. It’s hard. It’s more resistant than planned. It reminds you of. It’s deep. It allows for. It’s meant to. It’s pathological. It’s contagious. It’s fast. It’s unexpected. It’s ruthless. It’s a little over the top. It’s sheer torture. It’s super funny. It’s good.’

Most of Lacoste’s shows are based on the Encyclopédie de la Parole, the encyclopedia of the word, a project he initiated in 2002 in the Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers. With a group of poets, musicians, scientists, visual artists, theater and radio directors, dramaturges, choreographers and curators, he has ever since been collecting audio fragments of what is said or uttered in public and private. Anything goes, basically – from work-out instructions via tapes helping people into hypnosis to famous speeches by Winston Churchill and Barack Obama.

The result is a worthy successor to Denis Diderot’s 18th century Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, a cornerstone of the Enlightenment and the first work minting the term encyclopedia. Meet Lacoste in person, however, and you will discover the

instigator of this new monument to be a fairly young (he was born in 1973), hip, witty and very unintimidating child of our present times. 'I have become hopeless in any company,' he told me with a disarming smile during our talk in the Dutch harbor city of Rotterdam, where he recently presented Suite No 2, his latest work, during festival De Keuze (The Choice). 'Most of the time I am very distracted. I don't really listen to the people surrounding me. I am constantly mining what they say for new ideas for my shows.'

Lacoste's work is deeply, heavily about language. Emphatically not about what is said and what it means, but about how it sounds. About the affects of the spoken word, and of the other noises we humans produce. 'All the work I've done is based on speech,' says Lacoste. 'But we never use texts. We use the recordings themselves. As a kind of score. Including the pauses, silences and rhythms in what is being said.'

In Suite N° 1 'ABC' (2013) Lacoste directed an ensemble of eleven professional performers and eleven amateurs from the communities where the show was staged to re-enact those recordings, assembled in such a way as to give them new meanings. In Suite N° 2, performed by five professionals, he went one step further. This show comes over as a concert, almost. The recordings are re-arranged in a musical way. For instance, Lacoste combines the shrieks of exertion of professional female tennis players with the groans of excitement of men watching porn on their computers, thereby alerting us to their striking similarity.

Suite N° 2 is performed in the fifteen different languages of the original recordings. The actors even painstakingly reproduce the accents of the original speakers. Among the highlights are George W. Bush's declaration of war against Iraq in 2003, the Gatling-gun reading of the verdict against Russian billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and a rugby coach prepping his team for an important match. At one point, the interminable and very boring speech of a Portuguese minister of Finance, meant to soften the blow of a policy of austerity, acts as the basso continuo to a chorus of wildly different other utterances.

As the show progresses, the actors increasingly resort to musical interventions. They drum, dance and sing in canon, thereby alerting their spectators to the affects of the tsunami of words and sounds constantly assailing us via television, radio and our modern digital appliances, which we inhale every day without giving it a moment's thought.

In spite of their great precision and craftsmanship, 'in my shows you will never hear the original recordings', Lacoste says. 'We always add some other layer, like music. In this way, I want to draw attention to the manner in which texts are being spoken.' The result is bookish, nerdy, sometimes moving, more often funny. And very musical. Towards the end, Lacoste builds a climax Ludwig van Beethoven could have approved of.

In the process of studying so much human speech for so many years, he discovered patterns that previously went unnoticed. 'You will always recognize a commercial,' he explained to me. 'And the television news! It always uses the same format, wherever on earth it is made. In a way, it even uses the same language, everywhere.' Part of the explanation, he thinks, is that 'television news readers never see their audience'. 'Talking to somebody who isn't there is quite a recent phenomenon,' as Lacoste points out.

Try to imagine Lacoste's huge group of collaborators, assembling, for the past thirteen years, this colossal library of sounds that is the Encyclopédie de la Parole. Listening to them, cataloguing them, organising them into groups and categories. It reminds you of medieval monks, patiently toiling away at beautifully illuminated bibles. A very serious labor, putting a heavy burden of duty and responsibility on its participants. Not on Joris Lacoste, though. He seems more like a

child dancing through a luscious garden, picking flowers at random and bundling them into ever changing elegant bouquets, singing a song while he's at it.

From the treasure trove of his Encyclopédie, over the years he picked Shows, Exhibitions, Articles, Performances and Games, to name just the most commonly used of his formats. He even came up with seven Activities which he calls 'hypnographies', explained by him as 'research on dream design and the possible artistic uses of hypnosis'.

The last one was 4 prepared dreams, commissioned by the festival Crossing the Line and presented there in 2012. Lacoste created 'four scripted dreams for four New York-based artists' – Tony Conrad, Annie Dorsen, April March and Jonathan Caouette – 'who experienced them throughout a one-on-one hypnosis session with the artist. The artwork is the dream experienced during the session, in which the invited spectator surrenders to the fiction Joris Lacoste presents him with. Each session is followed by a post-hypnotic discussion – open to the public – between Lacoste and his guest.' Culturebot's Jeremy Barker had an extensive talk with Lacoste about this show and his other experiments with hypnosis.

'You create hypnosis by speech,' Lacoste explained to me in Rotterdam. 'Seen from that angle, hypnosis is the exact opposite of psychotherapy. Therapists basically listen to their clients. They hardly say anything back.' One of his games is called Hmm hmm (2009). It was a blind test, in which the participants had to listen to unidentified recordings and then 'guess their provenance, recording situations, the identity of their speakers, and their status'. His first two works were 'radio playwritings', as the English version of Lacoste's website defines them.

In short, his creativity knows no bounds, and its source goes back a long way. 'My first approach to art was through literature,' Lacoste told me. 'My family didn't go to the theater, but we had a lot of books.' And boy, did he put them to good use. The Encyclopédie de la Parole will keep the child in the luscious garden dancing, picking and singing for many years to come.

Let's Talk: Joris Lacoste's Need for Speech

01.10.2015 – Par Dorothy So

For Joris Lacoste, the power of speech goes beyond words. “It’s a problem sometimes to focus on what people are actually saying to me because I’m distracted by their interesting tone,” the French theater director admits with a sheepish smile.

At 42, Lacoste retains a boyish charm accentuated by his thick-rimmed glasses, newsboy cap, and casual demeanor. Sitting in the low-lit Temple Bar in Manhattan’s East Village, he reminisces about his early career, when he often felt distanced from the stylized speech of classical theater. “I found it a little weird the way people spoke. ... I was always thinking of a way to have people on stage speak more normally,” he explains.

Now an established name in the European art scene, Lacoste has a portfolio that includes a range of speech-based projects, such as his most recent work, “Suite N°2.” The piece explores varying forms of verbal expression as five performers recite passages of speech taken from real-life sources in a complex medley of monologues and polyphonic mash-ups.

While pre-existing speech has been employed onstage by documentary theater practitioners such as Anna Deavere Smith, Lacoste’s works focus sharply on the aural experience. In 2007, he collaborated with like-minded artists to set up the Encyclopédie de la Parole, an online database of audio clips. The archive houses more than 800 globally sourced recordings, which have been mined in four of Lacoste’s performances, beginning with the one-woman show, “Parlement,” in 2009.

Most of the content is pedestrian, including a droning, 25-minute speech by Portugal’s Minister of Finance. Some entries are even too bizarre to be fabricated, notably one of an English woman addressing an ostrich in French at a zoo in Slovakia. “When you listen to [the clip] many times, you can find the form and beauty in it. It’s very musical and poetic. But it’s not meant to be poetic. It’s not meant to be beautiful,” Lacoste says. “When you are doing poetry, or theater, you are very conscious of it. ... But when you are talking to an ostrich in a zoo, there is no reason for you to be aware of producing any kind of aesthetic effect.”

To highlight the innate beauty of speech, Lacoste decontextualizes the recordings while remaining faithful to their original cadence, rhythm, and sonority. In a particularly ethereal moment during “Suite N°2,” a homeless man’s rant in the Paris metro is laid over an ice-skating commentary. In another scene, the disclaimer for the side effects of Abilify is given pop-song treatment thanks to an upbeat accompaniment composed by Pierre-Yves Macé. The aim, Lacoste explains, is to create a level of listening that allows audience members to focus on the aural atmosphere without the distractions of everyday life.

Lacoste compares this distilled experience to music. “What I like to do now is to listen to the music I listened to as a teenager, when I didn’t speak English at all. I was a big fan of The Cure. Now, I’m listening to the albums again and I’m like, ‘So that’s what the song was about!’ It actually means something that I had no idea about,” he says with a laugh.

That’s not to say that “Suite N°2” plays down the role of meaning in speech. In fact, he has found it useful to provide a framework for the speech in the process of decontextualizing it. Lacoste’s

team learned this from observing audiences during the 2013 tour of the choral production, “Suite N°1 ‘ABC’,” where no background information was provided during the show. “Some spectators rely on the meaning of what is said. It may not be the word by word meaning, but it’s about having some kind of anchor or identification,” says Barbara Matijevic, who performed in both “Suite N°1 ‘ABC’” and “Suite N°2.” In the latter performance, short descriptions of each recording appear onscreen behind the performers. Lacoste and his collaborators, including Florian Leduc, who handles the video and lighting, also came up with a visual method to subtitle the clips that would bolster their sonic quality. With the context provided upfront, spectators are free to listen to each speech for what it is, as opposed to what it might be.

It helps that the performance emphasizes the active quality of speech. Of the hundreds of sound clips at his disposal, Lacoste selected moments when oral expression was the action as opposed to passive description. What results is a composition that is extreme, dynamic, and – most of all – immersive.

Ironically, when asked about his favorite moment of the performance, Lacoste replies that at this point, it’s the minute of silence in tribute to Michael Jackson after his death in 2009. The clip was taken in Karachi, Pakistan, and was added to the show during its US premiere in New York. “In a whole piece about speaking, to have this minute of silence is very meaningful,” says Lacoste, “This is also a way to speak – a way to say something through silence.”

Review: 'Suite No. 2' makes music out of talk

18.09.2015 – Par David Patrick Stearns

Words as music. The idea has been explored in many ways over the decades, from the global chatter in Luciano Berio's landmark 1969 *Sinfonia* to music-over-sense dialogue of the 1994 David Mamet play *The Cryptogram*. *Suite No. 2* by the French group *Encyclopédie de la Parole* perhaps reached further than any, as seen in its regrettably short performance Tuesday and Wednesday as part of the curated section of the Fringe Festival. A five-member group re-created everyday voices, Anna Deavere Smith-style, grabbed from almost every imaginable source - a reality show, a webcam seduction, a guided meditation - from cities around the world that one has barely heard of, and in many languages.

More than just eavesdropping on the world, *Suite No. 2* lives up to its musical title, exploring the surprisingly vast gray area between speech and singing - speaking in prescribed harmonies (yes, like chords) and sometimes even singing in Beach Boys-style harmonies in a huge range of languages. A large screen behind the performers gave translations and historic context. One of the most powerful passages was a recitation of the air-traffic-control communication with Swissair Flight 111 that caught fire in 1998 and crashed off the coast of Nova Scotia.

Most intriguing were the juxtapositions, in which three unlikely threads of verbal thought were positioned against each other in complementary ways that could be compared to madrigals (a too-cute comparison, actually), but with a rigor suggesting the late-medieval isometric motets of Dufay. In one section, an extended news conference about economic recovery in Portugal was the underlying drone over which all sorts of more highly inflected voices held forth in counterpoint.

Time and silence were used daringly. A way-too-long rant by a disgruntled phone customer in Madrid underscored the intractability of nonfunctioning technology. When radio communication from the Swissair flight went dead, the silence felt deafening and eternal.

Group leader Joris Lacoste is credited with composition and direction, and Pierre-Yves Mace has a more specific composition credit, though the piece had to have evolved from intense collaboration with the cast of linguistic virtuosi - Vladimir Kudryavtseve, Emmanuelle Lafon, Nuno Lucas, Barbara Matijevic, and Olivier Normand under the direction of Lacoste. Possibilities for future suites are as dizzying as they are unimaginable.

Speak up

17.09.2015 – Par Molly Grogan

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but French artist Joris Lacoste literally shouts down that old saw in “Suite no. 2,” a counterintuitive display of the power of spoken language, that opened the French Institute Alliance Française Crossing the Line festival last week. There are no images here, or any dressing-up of the question Lacoste puts to us on a bare stage: even in our selfie world, isn’t language the most eloquent repository of human experience there is?

To prove his point, a quintet of actors with standing mikes and a drum machine (for cadence), shoot through a surprising mélange of 37 verbal documents, beginning with the opening announcement for the World Heavyweight Boxing championships in Atlantic City in 1997, and ending with a voicemail in French in 2015. In between are samples of human speech on an infinite spectrum of contexts from the mundane to the fraught to the bizarre: a countdown for an anesthesia procedure in Denmark, a stand-off between a protestor and police in Ecuador, a student’s improv in a therapy session for teenagers in Belgium. This eclectic source material comes in 17 languages, and, very impressively, is delivered in the original by the multilingual cast (the production boasts 5 language coaches). These snippets are placed end to end with no commentary other than an anonymous title projected behind the actors (for example, “Scene of Panic on New Year’s Eve, Shanghai, 2015”) and an emphasis on their performative aspects, as the actors pace themselves in their delivery, moving an arm in a conductor’s gesture, or keeping time by snapping their fingers, often singing them, too (with help from the composer Pierre-Yves Macé).

Though it might come off as a gag, the project is perfectly serious. “Suite no. 2” is the offshoot of Lacoste’s passion for sound poetry, which grew into an online collection of hundreds of voice recordings, taken from social media, television and film mostly, and classified by 18 oral qualities (emphasis, melody, repetition, tone, even “residues” and “sympathies”...). Known since 2007 as the Encyclopédie de la Parole, the collection is available online.

“Suite no. 2” is not always meant to be taken at face value, however. It’s hard not to laugh at a French rugby coach’s pep talk, a fitness class on Croatian TV, a wildly unbridled declaration of love left on a Chechen cell phone, or Amber’s meltdown in Season 8 of “Big Brother.” Other verbal documents incite more ironic laughter: a droning press conference by Portugal’s Minister of Finance (does he take himself seriously?), or a furiously vulgar customer complaint to a Colombian internet provider (we’ve all wanted to say that!), or Gwyneth Paltrow’s teary, ultra-rehearsed thanks for winning the Best Actress Oscar (if you can recognize her; the segment is titled only “Acceptance Speech at the 71st Academy Awards”).

Mostly, however, it is this kind of understated presentation, combined with the cast’s virtuoso performances as they replicate the rhythms, intonations and articulations of the original speeches (some of which may be accessed on the Encyclopédie de la Parole’s website) that build resonances and make this show a riveting exploration of the language we find – or don’t find – to describe situations and emotions. From the dangerously dull legalese of the verdict delivered at the Khodorkovsky/Lebedev trial in 2010, to the menacingly calm exchange between Nova Scotian air traffic control and the pilot of doomed Swissair flight 111, just before it crashed on a

routine flight from JFK to Geneva in 1998, language can be an instrument of violence and a mask on horror. It can also give voice to a burning desire to exist, as in an improvised speech by a homeless man in the Paris Métro, or a Syrian's enraged attack on Bachar Al-Assad. Or it can reveal us to be just silly, in "Address to an Ostrich in a Zoo," or, paradoxically, at a loss for words, as in the minute of silence improbably observed for Michael Jackson at government offices in Karachi, Pakistan.

Whatever can be heard or not, felt or not in "Suite no. 2," Lacoste's selections write their own meditation on human thought and behavior and its expression through spoken language. In a historical moment, also, when the founding ideals of the European Union are being tested by the continent's current immigration crisis, this multilingual, uber-cultural show is an example of what European art – and theater – can do best: remind us of our human unity in our astonishing cultural diversity.