

# A Theatre Against Totalitarianisms: *L'État de siège*, a Play by Jean-Louis Barrault and Albert Camus

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**Abstract:** *L'État de siège* [The State of Siege], a play by Jean-Louis Barrault and Albert Camus, is the result of a long history. In the mid-1930s, Barrault dreamed of making a show about the plague with Antonin Artaud, adapting Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, which had been published in 1722. With the long internment of Artaud, the project remained on hold until 1942 during the Occupation; Barrault decided to complete the adaptation of Defoe's book and sought a writer who would write the dialogues. Barrault first solicited Jean-Paul Sartre, who refused and suggested he should contact Camus instead. The author of *Caligula* asked the theatre director to wait for the publication of his novel *La Peste* [The Plague] which would not appear until June 1947. From that moment on, the two men collaborated closely for more than a year. On 27 October 1948, they presented *L'État de siège* at the Théâtre Marigny. The play, which was a resounding failure, represented the perhaps late reply of two theatre artists to the Occupation which France had suffered as well as to the European totalitarianisms which had led to the Second World War.

**Key words:** Albert Camus, Jean-Louis Barrault, theatre, collaboration, totalitarianism, adaptation, the Occupation, the press

## The theatre is value-laden

If you look closely at the title of the conference “Theatre as a Value-based Discourse”, the field of research they offer us is very broad. However, if we accept periphrastic theatre, where discourse is value-laden, then we are now faced with a virtual tautology because in the West since the time of Pericles, theatre has been a place where citizens, whose word is synonymous with “hero”, are both called upon and obliged to engage in better defining their function within society and above all their future. It is certain that over the course of more than twenty-five centuries, theatre has betrayed, nullified, and forgotten this ethical and civic function several times, but what we understand by live entertainment, in the structure which was defined and

“fixed” in the fifth century BCE, is endogamically value-laden. By virtue of its internal laws and its way of communicating, theatre conveys and generates the moral values of the individual as well as ideological values.

### ***L'État de siège*, a play by Albert Camus and Jean-Louis Barrault**

The play discussed here, *L'État de siège, spectacle en trois pièces* [The State of Siege, show in three pieces], is a play which was unsuccessfully staged (yes, unsuccessfully staged) by Albert Camus and Jean-Louis Barrault, who were two of the leading figures of the 20th-century French cultural scene. Why was it unsuccessful? It was certainly a resounding failure, given that between Thursday 28 October 1948 and Friday 14 January 1949 it was performed only twenty-two times to less than full houses. As we know, if it is to survive (i.e., stay open) in the ephemeral form of live shows, theatre needs to be successful. Despite all the authors' efforts, this success was not forthcoming.

Why should one even talk about *L'État de siège*? Because the collaboration between Camus and Barrault embodies profound values. It can be claimed without fear of contradiction that *L'État de siège* represents an attempt through theatre's intrinsic means to respond to the totalitarianisms that infested Europe between the 1920s and 1948, the year of the play's first production.

While Albert Camus is very well known thanks to his literary work and for his contribution to the theatre, Barrault is less well known; there is a big gap between what the theatre director achieved and what we are able to analyse today, which is simply the consequence of the ephemeral nature of all live theatre. For those who may be unfamiliar with Barrault, Michel Autrand defines him as the benchmark for the performing arts in 20th-century France:

“Jean-Louis Barrault is undoubtedly, through the steadfastness and energy that he displayed in the most diverse occupations, France's greatest 20th-century showman: mime, actor, theatre director, company manager, arranger of international tours, writer and editor of revues, and tireless organizer of life-enhancing encounters. If you add his triumphs as actor in two of Marcel Carné's films, “*Drôle de drame*” [“*Bizarre, Bizarre*”] and “*Les Enfants du paradis*”, you will search in vain for another such rich personality.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 AUTRAND, M. Jean-Louis Barrault. In GUÉRIN, J. *Dictionnaire Camus*. Paris : Éditions Robert Laffont, 2009, p. 73. All quotations and titles have been translated by the author of this article.

## The genesis of the show

The genesis of *L'État de siège* was a very long one. The first point to be made when talking about the history of the play is that it was not an original play by Camus. To understand the origin of this project, you have to go back to the years 1934 and 1935, when Barrault visited Antonin Artaud just before this Poet of Marseille left for Mexico and Ireland, where, following events that are still not really clear, he was interned (he would remain excluded from all social life, being confined in several institutions from 23 September 1937<sup>2</sup> to 26 May 1946<sup>3</sup>).

Barrault and Artaud intended to put on a show on the subject of the plague, making use of the ideas that Artaud had developed in his celebrated article *Le théâtre et la peste* [The Theatre and the Plague] published in *La Nouvelle revue française* in October 1934, where he mentioned that the scourge of the plague brought death but also excessive behaviour which served a cathartic function, which theatre can obviously do as well. The narrative framework, on the other hand, was to have been provided by a chronicle that for more than two centuries had been regarded as devoid of scientific interest and lacking in historical reliability. This was *Journal de l'année de la peste* [A Journal of the Plague Year], which Daniel Defoe had published in 1722. The journal recounts the difficulties that London experienced in 1665 at the time of a plague epidemic.

For the reasons mentioned, Artaud was unable to continue collaboration and Barrault had to leave the project in a drawer. It was only during the throes of the Occupation that the theatre director decided to adapt Defoe's book and write a play, and not a simple outline as has often been stated.<sup>4</sup> The play bore a title unknown even to specialists of 20th-century theatre: *Le Mal des ardents* [The Pestilence]. This adaptation was written between 1941 and 1942. Aware

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2 MAEDER, T. *Antonin Artaud*. Paris : Plon, 1978, p. 206.

3 THÉVENIN, P. 1896–1948. In *Cahiers de la Compagnie Renaud-Barrault*, 1958, Nos. 22–23, pp. 17–45; MAEDER, T. *Antonin Artaud*, p. 261; MÈREDIEU F. *C'était Antonin Artaud*. Paris : Fayard, 2006, p. 865.

4 Camus, who would have wanted to share the play's paternity with Barrault himself, as he states in the theatre programme conserved in the Fonds Barrault at the BnF, speaks of Barrault's work in terms of a "staging outline". However, given the quantity of manuscript and typed documents regarding the play, the outline here cannot be defined as a synonym of work limited in quantity and scope but is rather seen as a term indicating a phase prior to the definitive version of the dramatic text. For the theatre programme, see: Bibliothèque nationale de France [National library of France]: Fonds Renaud-Barrault, 4 COL-178 (238).

that he needed a writer to make the play's dialogue more effective, Barrault first turned to Jean-Paul Sartre, who declined for reasons to do with the staging of *Les Mouches* [The Flies], which was initially to have been done by Barrault but was eventually entrusted to Charles Dullin.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Sartre advised Barrault to approach Camus, because it was common knowledge in the writers' fraternity that Camus was writing a book on the effects of epidemics. Camus was enthusiastic at the idea of working with Barrault, because he knew of his work in the theatre to the point of making this comment in his notebooks in 1941 even though the two men had not yet met:

“In mime *Les Comédiens routiers* [Actors on the Road] use an incomprehensible language<sup>6</sup> (an Esperanto of farce) not for its meaning but in order to give it life. Chanceler rightly emphasizes the importance of mime. The body in the theatre: all contemporary French theatre (except Barrault) has forgotten this.”<sup>7</sup>

However, Camus wanted to finish the *récit* that he would call *La Peste* and asked Barrault to come back to him once the task was completed. *La Peste* arrived in Paris bookshops on 10 June 1947. The collaboration between Camus and Barrault began as soon as the book was in press and did not stop until the play was put on. But while Camus's contribution was initially confined solely to writing dialogue<sup>8</sup>, it quickly changed in nature. In his *Souvenirs pour demain* [Memories for Tomorrow], Barrault tells us what their collaboration of “more than a year of uninterrupted work”<sup>9</sup> was like:

5 Sartre withdrew his first play, *Les Mouches*, from Barrault because of a disagreement over the role of Electra, which was eventually played by Olga Kosakiewicz (who becomes Olga Dominique in the theatre programme), who was very close to Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre. The first performance of *Les Mouches* took place at the Théâtre de la Cité on 2 June 1943 and was staged by Charles Dullin. Cf. MAZZA V. *Albert Camus et 'L'Etat de siège' . Genèse d'un spectacle*. Paris : Classiques Garnier, 2017, pp. 94–108.

6 Did the use of *fatrasie* in *La Faim* have this origin for Barrault? Might this be another link before Camus and Barrault were to meet?

7 CAMUS, A. *Œuvres complètes*, t. II. (Ed. Jaqueline Lévi-Valensi). Paris : Gallimard, 2016, p. 928.

8 Initially Barrault wanted to use Camus as a “librettist” there in order to write some of the dialogue for his adaptation of Daniel Defoe's book. Cf. DUSSANE. *Maria Casarès*. Paris : Calmann-Lévy, 1953, p. 58.

9 BnF: Fonds Renaud-Barrault, 4 COL-178 (238). The theatre programme has twenty unnumbered pages. Advertising covers eight inside pages and three of the four cover pages.

“Camus accepted enthusiastically. I was joyous and already saw myself being involved with Camus for a good part of my life. Camus was my ‘opportunity’. We enjoyed complete understanding. (...) We worked in a state of euphoria. I would say even a state of innocence. We felt ‘in the ascendancy’. All we had to do was slap death for death to retreat. Throughout the period of composition and then during the rehearsals we savoured a kind of happiness. The word to describe it would be joy. The joy of creating, of shaping a spatial object.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The reasons for failure**

So why was the show a failure? In discussing the aesthetic reasons, Barrault and Camus declared in the Foreword to the published play that *L'État de siège*:

“...is not a play of traditional structure but a show whose avowed ambition is to mix all the dramatic forms of expression ranging from lyrical monologue to collective theatre through dumbshow, farce, and chorus.”<sup>11</sup>

One can imagine that the public at the Marigny Theatre, which runs alongside the Champs Élysée, did not like a show that was difficult to classify and where the text was merely one component amidst a whole panoply of “dramatic forms of expression”. However, part of the reason for this failure is also to be found in the political position of Camus, who was not aligned (quite the contrary) with the French Communist Party and who had also been very critical of the church, attributing it a negative role in the play. Moreover, Camus set the play in Cadiz in order to remind people that Spain was still under a dictatorship despite that war having ended. This was in order to send a message to the French Communists, who were very close to the positions of the Soviet Union, which they considered a land of freedom. The movers and shakers of Paris as well as the press – *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, and “the red” *Les Lettres française* – had the influence to determine the success of a show and decreed that *L'État de siège* was a failed and belated response to the painful questions linked to the dark period of the Occupation. Jean-Jacques Gautier and Robert Kemp, who were representatives of a more traditional France, as well as Aragon’s wife, Elsa Triolet, and the Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel, were very hostile and personally

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10 BARRAULT, J.-L. *Souvenirs pour demain*. Paris : Seuil, 1972, p. 204.

11 CAMUS, A. *L'État de siège*. Paris : Gallimard, 1948, p. 9.

attacked Camus, decreeing that he was neither a dramatist, philosopher, man of the theatre, or a novelist. Jean-Jacques Gautier opened his article in *Le Monde* the day after the premiere with a sentence smacking of an irrevocable indictment:

“This major visual, ideological, and dramatic spectacle is well worthy of our attention and discussion. However, it remains astonishingly inhuman because, while touching on the problems that move us deeply, it fails at any time to communicate to us the smallest scrap of emotion.”<sup>12</sup>

This journalist, who had won the Goncourt Prize in 1946 for *Histoire d'un fait divers* and who was admitted into the Académie française in 1972, aimed to strike at the three main aspects of the play: the staging, the ideological message, and the quality of the writing. The play was panned from the very opening words and before any analysis. Gautier then went on to attack the writer by accusing him of having chosen symbols and archetypes in order to speak by way of metaphor about the Occupation and the question of fear under the sway of dictatorship.

“You need human beings, you need real life and fewer symbols, you need more plot and fewer archetypes, more characters and less algebra, more action and less demonstration, more real people and fewer mere entities, less rhetoric, less grey matter, and more emotion....”<sup>13</sup>

Barrault and Camus's play was difficult to classify because it employed several dramatic forms. From an aesthetic viewpoint, the show eluded any kind of definition by becoming difficult even to define as theatre instead of a choreographic spectacle. From the ideological standpoint, the subject of the Occupation was too close in 1948 to the events really experienced to become the subject of a public debate, which is what a theatre stage is.

Camus had declared he wanted to write about totalitarianisms by treating them as a modern myth: a subject which aims to achieve a broader dimension of the tackled issue and a subject which aims at universality. Camus explains this clearly in the theatre programme, which affords the opportunity to give an account of the genesis of the show:

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12 GAUTIER, J.-J. “L'État de siège” d'Albert Camus. In *Le Monde*, 1948, (29. 10. 1948).

13 Ibid.

“In 1941 Barrault had the idea of staging a show on the theme of the plague, which Antonin Artaud had also attempted. In the following years, it seemed to him easier to adapt for the purpose Daniel Foe’s [sic] great book ‘*Le Journal de l’année de la Peste*’ [sic]. He then produced an outline staging. When he learned that I myself was going to publish a novel on the same theme, he proposed that I should write the dialogue for this outline. I had other ideas on the question, and in particular it seemed preferable to me to drop Daniel de Foe [sic] and revert to Barrault’s original idea. Our initial conversations then led us to imagine a sort of modern myth.”<sup>14</sup>

Along with the essay *L’Homme révolté* [The Rebel] and the play *Les Justes* [The Just Assassins], Camus’s novel *La Peste* was part of the revolt cycle. *L’État de siège* was not part of the programmatic plan conceived in June 1947 at the same time as the publication of his novel, but the play does contain certain ideas that you find in *La Peste*, namely the attempt to overcome fear and the defeat of evil thanks to collective action, or, to use Camus’ vocabulary, by revolt. Here is the plan that Camus drafted from 17 to 25 June 1947 shortly after the publication of *La Peste*:

“1st series. Absurd: *L’Étranger* – *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* – *Caligula* and *Le Malentendu*.

2nd – Revolt: *La Peste* (and annexes) – *L’Homme révolté* – Kaliayev.<sup>15</sup>

3rd – Judgement – the first man.

4th – Love torn asunder: *The Stake* – *Of Love* – *The Tempter*.

5th – Creation corrected or *The System* – major novel + major meditation + unplayable play.”<sup>16</sup>

### **The press against the show**

With *L’État de siège*, Camus and Barrault wanted to expose the horrors of totalitarianism, which they call the “scourge of the century”<sup>17</sup>, but they also wanted

14 BnF: Fonds Renaud-Barrault, 4-COL-178 (238). Some assertions would require correction, but the reconstruction of the genesis is right. The exceptions firstly concern Daniel Defoe’s novel, which is very present in *L’État de siège*, and secondly Artaud’s ideas, which do not appear in the play.

15 This was one of the titles chosen before the one that was adopted – *Les Justes*.

16 CAMUS, A. *Œuvres complètes*, t. II., pp. 1084–1085.

17 In the days running up to the opening performance, Barrault stated: “Camus is a man of

to convey a message of hope regarding the overcoming of fear and the possibility of victory over absolute evil if people are united, in other words, if they create the conditions to act together in order to revolt. While *Le Monde* tried to undermine the significance of Camus's commitment, *Le Figaro*, via a short review by Robert Kemp – who in 1956 was admitted into the Académie française like Jean-Jacques Gautier had been – communicates disappointment after so much expectation, given that this collaboration between Barrault and Camus was regarded as the main event of the 1948/1949 theatre season:

“What a let-down! What bitter disappointment! Terrible boredom.... Oh! Mr Camus's talent is not dormant, is not constantly out for the count, it does bestir itself.... But rarely so. Everything gets lost in words, words, words. And you think about all those martyrdoms suffered in silence, the concision of the farewells to their families by those who are to be shot, the discreet nobility of real complaints.”<sup>18</sup>

This passage shows how difficult it was to handle a sensitive argument, and that no matter what formal perspective was adopted, the risk of being criticized or ill received was considerable. However, there is another factor that needs to be stressed. *L'État de siège* was strongly criticized by the press at the time of its first performance not only because the allegories were defined as simplistic but also because of the abundance of choreographic movement and mimed passages. Jean-Jacques Gautier wrote of a “choreographic tragedy” and “dance theatre”<sup>19</sup>, and Jean Mauduit claimed that Barrault “tends to transform the theatre into a sort of symbolic choreography”<sup>20</sup>, to give just two examples. It is possible that this spectacle was so different from what the theatre of the time had on offer that the press was divided between those

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the theatre and an authentic individual. His play is of a total honesty. We will be performing it on 27th October. You could say, if you like, that it is about the scourge of the age.” Cf. JEENER, J.-B. *L'État de siège doit faire la preuve que nous sommes une vraie troupe nous dit Jean-Louis Barrault [L'État de siège is to prove that we are a real troupe, Jean-Louis Barrault told us]*. In *Le Figaro*, 1948, (20. 10. 1948). Some journalists also expressed themselves in these terms to indicate the forms of totalitarianism: FAVALELLI, M. *L'État de siège d'Albert Camus au théâtre Marigny expose (allégoriquement) notre “mal du siècle” [Albert Camus' L'État de siège at the Marigny Theatre exposes (allegorically) the “scourge of our age”]*. In *Paris-Presse*, 1948, (29. 10. 1948).

18 KEMP, R. *L'État de siège au Théâtre Marigny*. In *Le Figaro*, 1948, (29. 10. 1948).

19 GAUTIER, J.-J. *L'État de siège d'Albert Camus*. In *Le Monde*.

20 MAUDUIT, J. *L'État de siège, d'Albert Camus*. In *Témoignage chrétien*, 1948, (5. 11. 1948).



who saw an excess of text and those who saw over-dynamic staging. But the possibility that the movers and shakers and intelligentsia wanted to settle scores with Camus and Barrault for their success and their nonaligned position remains the most convincing hypothesis.<sup>21</sup>

### **Elsa Triolet and *Les Lettres françaises***

While almost all the journalists harshly criticized the play at the time of its first production, there are still some press reactions to consider individually, even if only briefly. There were two articles which did not confine themselves to just criticizing the play and took advantage of the prevailing orthodoxy of regarding the show as unsuccessful in order to discredit Camus as a writer and a committed one at that. Elsa Triolet was Louis Aragon's wife, and they both represented a model for communists in France. Aragon was the manager of *Les Lettres françaises* between 1953 and 1972, and at the time the show was put on Elsa Triolet was that publication's theatre critic.<sup>22</sup> She had sung Camus's praises over *L'Étranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* in a short book published in 1945.<sup>23</sup> At *L'État de siège*'s first production, Camus as its co-author was ultimately accused of not being a good dramatist and someone who used a journalistic technique to compose a dramatic text:<sup>24</sup>

“In fact, this modern myth amounts to a series of *Combat* editorials buried in the undergrowth of a learned staging. Editorials which are not a direct response to the events of the day are blunted, reaching no one. And the very way abjection, spinelessness, tyranny, courage, and love are expressed in no way impresses their image or moves us.”<sup>25</sup>

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21 The press was already stressing a few months after the Renaud-Barrault company was set up that it was overshadowing the Comédie française and that Barrault could become its administrator. Cf. BÉNÉDICK, C. Jean-Louis Barrault succèdera-t-il à M. André Obey? [Will Jean-Louis Barrault take over from Mr André Obey?]. In *Le Petit Poitou*, 1947, (11. 2. 1947); OUTIE, C. Jean-Louis Barrault administrera-t-il le Théâtre Français? [Will Jean-Louis Barrault administer the National Theatre?]. In *France libre*, 1947, (12. 2. 1947).

22 Elsa Triolet's first feuilleton théâtral appeared in issue No. 230 of *Les Lettres françaises*, (21. 10. 1948). The theatre reviews are to be found on page 7, which is the penultimate page.

23 TRIOLET, E. *Le Mythe de la baronne Mélanie* (with two drawings by Henri Matisse). Neuchâtel ; Paris : Ides et Calendes, 1945.

24 Elsa Triolet was not the only person to almost exclusively criticize Camus over *L'État de siège*, when both of the show's authors should have been addressed.

25 TRIOLET, E. Jouer sur le velours... Théâtre Marigny: "L'État de siège". In *Les Lettres françaises*, 1948, (4. 11. 1948).

The error lies, as it were, in using a genre unsuitable for dramatic writing, particularly as the journalistic register that Camus is said to have used clearly lacked the depth of reflection necessary to treat totalitarianism in an effective way. Triolet goes on raining blows on Camus, mocking his talent, a talent which eventually she fails to locate:

“All the same, I have been trying to find out how this text (I cannot bring myself to call it a play) might be rehabilitated. I have tried everything: Albert Camus is not a dramatic author, of course, but a philosopher... he is not a philosopher, of course, but a poet... he is not a poet, of course, but a psychologist... he is not a psychologist, of course, but an historian... he is not an historian, of course, but a politician... Nothing holds together, there is no excuse. But what, then, is he? A novelist?... And yet this show casts an odd light on these novels, on his philosophical thinking...”<sup>26</sup>

The more the review goes on, the more the criticism is broadened out in an attempt to strike down more than the dramatist and man of the theatre. Triolet seeks to undermine what might be the certainties of Camus’s readers, who regarded him as a novelist and philosopher. It is a real settling of scores by a member of the French Communist Party with someone who was nonaligned.

### **Barrault’s explanations**

Unlike Camus, Barrault sought to defend his show in the days following the deadly blows of criticism and later on when stock was taken of his company’s time at the Marigny Theatre. In 1954 the director revealed the major difficulties he had had to face since the company had been set up. Barrault recalled *Hamlet*, the company’s first show, which afforded him great satisfaction but which was the most difficult play from the physical standpoint due to the length of the performance and the efforts demanded as well as from the psychological standpoint because the characters’ anxieties weighed heavily on the shoulders of the actors before and after each performance. But the failure of *L’État de siège* was a great disappointment for Barrault and removed the possibility of creating a duo similar to that of Louis Jouvet and

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26 Ibid.

Jean Giraudoux.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Barrault anticipated that Camus “would, given his sensibility, bear it [the failure] gallantly, but would be no less affected by it, and I began to fear that he might be lost to us”<sup>28</sup>.

In seeking out the mistake, Barrault stressed that Camus’s wish to make a political play with easily identifiable allegories, while ultimately neglecting the metaphysical side sustained by Artaud’s ideas, turned the show into an incandescent object which unsettled both intellectuals and critics, who were forced to ask themselves questions about France’s position during the Occupation and the phoney war. Here is the passage on the failure of *L'État de siège* from Barrault’s second autobiography:

“What mistake did we make? For we surely did make one. Perhaps this one. For me, *La Peste* was salutary through the accumulation of dark forces brought to a climax: the initiatory, magical conception inspired by Artaud. This was to give to the play an Aeschylean lyricism. For Camus, *La Peste* or the dictator was Evil, a social Evil that fear alone sustained, but which the suppression of fear put to flight. The style was more modern but could also become Aristophanesque. The common point between our two feelings was the suppression of fear, overcoming the greatest despair”<sup>29</sup>.

### **Spain, the Church, and Gabriel Marcel**

Unlike Barrault, Camus did not respond to any of his peers except for Gabriel Marcel, who was indignant for several reasons of an ideological nature. One reason was because the church had been stigmatized by being given a minor role with decidedly negative connotations. In addition, the play was located on the Iberian peninsula instead of another place where individual freedom was not respected:

“First, I do not find it courageous or even very honest to have located the action in Spain, in Cadiz, rather than in some Dalmatian or Albanian port or sub-Carpathian city: I cannot help thinking that this fact is not to be imputed to Mr Camus himself whose bravery is obvious. Any impartial, well-informed

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27 BARRAULT, J.-L. *Mes deux grands chagrins de théâtre* [My two great sorrows of theatre]. In *Le Figaro littéraire*, 1954, (24. 4. 1954).

28 BARRAULT, J.-L. *Nouvelles réflexions sur le théâtre*. Paris : Flammarion, 1959, p. 33.

29 *Ibid*, pp. 33–34.

person will agree that for some time the news most likely to drive to despair those concerned for human dignity and freedom does not come at all from the Iberian peninsula.”<sup>30</sup>

In a long article, Gabriel Marcel shows that he does not know the origin of the show and compares the novel *La Peste* with *L'État de siège* while making a list of the changes said to be the basis for the show's failure. After declaring that he is entirely in agreement with Camus if “you confine yourself to the natural and political order”<sup>31</sup> concerning people's freedom, Marcel continues his attack on a moral and religious front:

“There is a dimension lacking in him, he knows it and suffers, I believe, from it: but why was it necessary to assign the Church only a ridiculous and odious role in the play, which was not the case in *La Peste*. On this point, too, the contrast is distressing.”<sup>32</sup>

The Catholic philosopher cannot stand seeing the character of the priest, who does not appear in the cast list, confined to a negligible position in an extreme situation like that of an occupation, even if it is constructed via allegorical figures. After recognizing the writer's status in the French literary panorama, Marcel's conclusion unfortunately has a cruelly prophetic air:

“I therefore continue to think that in our literature today he is one of the very rare men, one of the very rare consciences of which our country can be legitimately proud. But until further notice I will be unable to believe that he is a dramatic author.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Camus's only response and its connection with *L'État de siège***

Camus responded with an article entitled *Pourquoi l'Espagne ?* [Why Spain?], which became highly celebrated and appeared in the newspaper of which he had been editor-in-chief. His response seeks to show that the denunciation

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30 MARCEL, G. *L'État de siège*. In *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 1948, (11. 11. 1948).

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

of the deprivation of freedom does not belong to any ideology, and that no one can call this into question by accusing him of being partisan:

“You will probably find a great deal of passion here for a petty pretext. (...) There are ambitions which are not my ambitions (...) But it seems to me that there is another ambition that should be the ambition of all writers: to bear witness and to cry out whenever possible, to the extent of our talent, on behalf of those who are subjugated like us. It is this ambition that you have called into question in your article, and I will never cease to refuse you the right to do so as long as a man’s murder will seem to render you indignant only to the extent that the man shares your ideas.”<sup>34</sup>

The consequences of the failure for the two playwrights were considerable. Barrault would no longer work with another author of his generation in such a close way where the tasks are mixed to the point that you no longer know who was responsible for what aspect of the show. For Camus, the fallout was even simpler to describe. He would write no more original plays and stuck only to adaptations. *Les Justes*, which would be performed at the Hebertot Theatre on 15 December 1949 in the staging of Paul Cetty, was already ongoing at the time *La Peste* was being written.

In the hope of having generated a certain curiosity in a little-known play, whose dramatic content has not been under review here, it only remains to recall the very particular affection that Camus held for the simultaneously painful and euphoric experience that the *L'État de siège* venture represented. Presenting his plays for an American edition published in 1957, he wrote:

“At its premiere in Paris *L'État de siège* effortlessly obtained the unanimity of the critics. There are certainly few plays which will have enjoyed such a complete panning. The result is all the more regrettable in that I have never ceased to consider that *L'État de siège* is, with all its flaws, perhaps the piece of my writing that most resembles me.”<sup>35</sup>

*Translated by Robert Fowler*

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