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Mortals to Death



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old filmmakers feel distanced from the world by the approach of death, their films manifest an increasing indifference toward the audience, who are part of the world, and an abatement in effects of and occasions for identification.

²³ The non-concurrence also takes the form of the non-coincidence of the body with itself in out-of-the-body experiences and/or of the body with the voice (for instance a man's voice for a woman's body—cinema has given disconcerting examples of this: Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, *Rashomon*).

²⁴ While proper names are substitutable in death, this is not necessarily the case with epithets—in this respect, it is symptomatic that Sanā' Muhaydlī's testimony ends with: "My will is that you call me *the bride of the south*." In which case while in death, I, Jalal Toufic, can exclaim, "I am the martyr Sanā' Yūsif Muhaydlī," I cannot say: "I am *the bride of the south*." In case epithets too are substitutable in death, then the Christian messiah's dying for us is multiple through his various names: the Son of Man, the Son of God. . . .

²⁵ In Tony Chakar and Rabih Mroue's *Come in Six, We Will Wait for You Outside*, 1998, a "moving" shot of a woman crying and wiping her eyes is "deconstructed": we are told that the strong emotional charge conveyed by that shot required first the selection of the appropriate woman, then changing the speed of the wiping of the eyes to slow-motion, then the removal of the natural sounds, then the addition of music, and, optionally, of a poem; and in an episode of the TV program *Image* (*Sima*, directed by Mirza Shbaro) Mroue presents and attributes to himself as photographer photographs that were taken by others. At one level, in *Three Posters* Mroue is continuing these two strategies: "deconstructing" the heroic testimonies by revealing the possible unsaid in them—uncharacteristically we are frankly told by the fictional Rahhāl that his father went along with his joining of the communist party and even encouraged him to do so only because he thought that that was his son's only way to get a scholarship to study in the former Soviet Union, etc.; attributing to himself fictional events: having been ambushed in Hāsbayya along with the other members of his communist cell by combatants from the Amal militia, etc.

²⁶ More risky than "I am comrade Khalil Ahmad Rahhāl" but still less risky than "I am the martyr comrade Khalil Ahmad Rahhāl," is the false information Mroue attributes to himself in *Three Posters* (see previous footnote) and giving to the fictional characters of *Extension 19* (*Muqassam 19*), 1997, his actors' real-life names.

²⁷ "Picasso Speaks," *The Arts*, 1925.

The heavy sleep within my head was smashed
by an enormous thunderclap, so that
I started up as one whom force awakens;
I stood erect and turned my rested eyes
from side to side, and I stared steadily
to learn what place it was surrounding me.
—Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto IV: 1–6
(trans. Allen Mandelbaum)

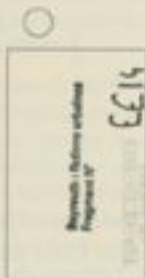
Tayyib Rah Farjik Shighli (OK, I'll Show You My Work)

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

Translated by Jalal Toufic

In 1997, during the months of July and August, we presented at the Arab World Institute in Paris an exhibition of photographic installations, *Beirut: Urban Fictions*. In July 2000, we were asked by Jalal Toufic to write an article on our installation works, in specific *Wonder Beirut*, 1998. But three years have already passed since *Beirut: Urban Fictions*. We have tried to write this text in various forms: analysis, inquiry, documents, the visitors' book of the exhibition, false documents, review of the press, retroactive analysis of our work . . . After a month of attempts—it's a failure: the text is either too descriptive, or too analytical, or too abstract, or too removed from our current preoccupations or by all means interesting but incapable of implicating the audience who had not seen the exhibition. The deadline is approaching; the writer's bloc is intensifying. It is then that we remembered Pierre Menard. Pierre is a writer, a fan of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, of which he wrote anew, in a version absolutely respectful of the original, chapters IX and XXXVIII of the first part, as well as a fragment of chapter XXII. He did not want to compose another *Quixote*—which is easy—but *the Quixote itself*.

We have met this amateur of cinema and photography at the exhibition *Beirut: Urban Fictions*, where he was photographing the last installation, "The Circle of Confusion": a large, 4m x 3m photograph representing an aerial view of Beirut that we had cut into 3800 fragments and stuck to a mirror. The visitors were invited to



choose a fragment and to take it with them. As the photograph disappeared, the mirror appeared, sending each visitor back to his or her own image. Each visitor spent a long time in front of this photo, carefully choosing a fragment representing his or her ancient house, a section of his or her school, the sport club, the seaside promenade, or a section of the sea, of the downtown, of the Green Line¹ . . . to finally find himself or herself with a tiny green fragment evoking the sea and that had a significance only to himself or herself—for by itself, the fragment did not represent much, a grain, a simple abstraction.

During the exhibition, we noticed this man who returned all the afternoons and photographed the evolving image, trying to retrace the "losses of the day," the vanished fragments. Moreover we have surprised him a number of times photographing only the fragments of images—"before they disappear," he once confessed to us. He did statistical work to establish the most coveted fragments. Thus he noted that the sectors of the city that disappeared the quickest were a) the green spaces, b) the sea; c) the old houses; and d) the seaside promenade . . . This installation titillated his obsessional side, his collector's soul. He thus came back every day, tirelessly photographing the image. He often talks of doing something with these images . . .² But as he says to justify himself: "There is no exercise of the intellect which is not, in the final analysis, useless."

Since then we've become friends, virtually inseparable—or let's say that he follows our work from elaboration to concretization. The ideal critic? No comment! It is to him that we turned for the writing of this article, thinking that an interview would be easier to read. And despite the great resistance of Pierre to being translated—he believes neither in translation, nor in cultural links, nor in globalization, nor in universalism—he accepted that this interview be translated into English, and we thank him for that. Here then is the partial transcription of an interview that lasted two hours and ten minutes.

— You are aware that I refuse generally the oral form, which is often comfortable and repetitive . . . but I have resigned myself to it this time because it is you who have asked me and because you have really not left me any choice. But I insist on making clear before starting this interview that whatever the nature of my interventions, censure and praise are sentimental operations which have nothing to do with criticism. How are we going to start about Beirut: Urban Fictions? You always work within a certain actuality, and in 1997 the question of the ruin had a different pertinence than today.

— For years, we photographed Beirut but with the impossibility of making an exhibition that would say, "That's it!" and would present the end result of a work rather than the process that led to it. Then one day, we laid all our contact prints on the floor and we did what



we solemnly called "the archeology of our gaze," its formation. The exhibition was articulated as a stage design proposing a prologue, five acts and an epilogue. This photographic journey took the form of an investigation around the body of the city, searching through indices and traces for the victim's body in order to write the crime.

— It was a very vague period. The central question was: What to do with the ruin today? The reconstruction effort was attempting to give back to Beirut its position as a center, boosting the economy as the sole factor of progress. Despite a new dynamics, this society was profoundly modernist and repeated the same schema, the same modes of production of images as those that had led to the war. The ruin was at the same time emblematic of the problem and the platform from which the project could shine forth; both the essential part of this new system and its impasse. This is why it occupied so much of our work.

— They were trying to make us believe that the war was an accident, an excrescence that had to be disposed of as soon as possible. And, naturally, the postcards of the 1960s were still being sold: Martyrs' Square, the souks, policemen on camels . . . This enduring mythology interested us and we worked for a long time on the postcard as an official image, a cliché, not only at the Arab World Institute but also for the exhibition *Wonder Beirut: The Novel of a Pyromaniac Photographer*.⁵

— Oh Yes! I liked it a lot! Let's talk about Wonder Beirut. Here the metaphor is evident given that you establish a tight correlation between the photographs and their genesis—that's what gives it its force. Let's recount the story . . . May I?

— Please do, Pierre.

— The exhibition presented the story of a photographer who worked with his father. In 1969, the Lebanese State commissioned them to do an official calendar as well as postcards. Ten years later, during the war and after the death of his father, the photographer, shut up in his studio, takes down all these images, these postcards and burns them patiently, aiming at them his proper bombs and his own shells, inflicting on them holes, breaches, thus making them closer to him, conforming better to his reality. When all was burned, it was peace.

He had burned his postcards, which had become nostalgic, sacred relics and which no longer referred to anything. Today, this photographer no longer develops his photographs. It is enough for him to take them. At the end of the exhibition, hundreds of rolls of film, 6452 to be exact, were laid on the floor: rolls containing photos taken by the photographer but left undeveloped.

— You've counted them?

— Yes, certainly. The exhibition presented photographs of postcards from the 1960s, reproduced and then burned. We had spoken together about

them and I had keenly advised you to do a literal version of the literal version, a literal photograph of the literal photograph. To photograph anew these postcards—you have my accord. But why burn them? You should have stopped prior to that.

— We studied this procedure . . . but discarded it as too easy.

— I was not proposing to you a mechanical reproduction of the original, a copy. I rather encouraged you to go beyond the idea or the concept in order to find the coincidence, what makes things coincide, their encounter.

— To know Arabic well, recover faith in the nation and the community, forget the history of Lebanon between the years 1975 and 1990, be this photographer and arrive at the postcards—this tempted us. But all this seemed less arduous to us—and, consequently, less interesting—than to go on being Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige and reach the postcards. The photographer of *Wonder Beirut* did not refuse the collaboration of chance: he composed his photographs somewhat *à la diable*. We have taken on the mysterious duty of reconstructing literally his spontaneous work. To photograph these photos and make of them postcards in 1969 was one thing, to redo them in 1998 was another, almost impossible thing. It is not in vain that twenty-nine years have gone by, filled with exceedingly complex events. Amongst them, to mention only one, are the postcards themselves.

— I have here two images, one taken by the photographer in 1969, the other a 1998 photograph of this same preexisting postcard. (He shows them.) Even if the two photographs are, as you say, basically identical, the 1998 one is infinitely richer and subtler than that of the photographer. It is stupefying. By simply photographing these images you invent a new path, that of the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution. To simply reproduce them in 1998 would have been a revelation; to burn them is an understatement that weakens the force and the power of the work.

— No, on the contrary. The photographs of 1969 and of 1998 are basically identical, but they then are burned, cooked differently, this bringing out the indexical specificity of each in a very tactile manner. We wanted to return to an ontological definition of these images: the inscription of light by burning.

— It is a reaction to the penury of images of the present; a reflection on the representations of Beirut and of ourselves; and a fight against the recycling, the mythicizing of the standard images. We have also worked on touristic icons. In the installation of the prologue of *Beirut: Urban Fictions*, the walls of the entrance hall were covered with wallpaper composed of postcards. A tulle was hung in front of these thousands of postcards, and in front of this tulle was placed under Plexiglas and in a box a classically-constructed image representing an artisan at work. We have here a window-

pane that maintains the spectator at a distance, a pane behind which we play at exposing Beirut, showing a part of what is supposed to be "the authentic Beirut."

— You are still within an anecdotal actuality from which you have to disengage yourselves. Concepts, historical criticism, "the gaze at," while profoundly interesting attitudes, are nonetheless contingent, do not seem—how shall I say it?—inevitable. But you, you prefer to adopt a critical attitude that places you often in the role of analysts, of researchers of, to my sense, a regrettable historical process. I was nonetheless enormously relieved to see your last installation, *Wonder Beirut: the photographed but undeveloped films, the 6452 undeveloped rolls that covered the floor. Here were juxtaposed the photographer's visible oeuvre (his postcards), and his subterranean oeuvre (the undeveloped photographic rolls), interminably heroic, peerless and—such are the capacities of man!—unfinished—a sublime attempt to capture each minute that passes.*

— This photographer complained that he found it impossible to retain the images of the present, that they eluded him constantly, out-of-focus, almost off-frame, and never centered in the frame. He had started an undertaking that consisted in photographing each minute that passes, wishing to counter the fact that photography is life but always a little too late. This reflection on time was in fact a profanation of photography-as-result in order to show photography's interest as an act.

— To this photographic act was added the pure pleasure of physically destroying, through burning and bombardment, these clichés, these postcards erected as founding and federating myths of the "community."

— One thing saddened me: at no point did you reveal the name of the photographer—as if to protect him or to distance yourselves from him.

— We indeed wanted to protect this photographer, who is presently undergoing a period of great psychic trouble and of compulsive work. As for the distance, I believe it is interesting; it is a breach that allows a certain ambiguity and renders the limits between things less clear.

— To continue with this notion of distance. For me, *Beirut: Urban Fictions* is an attempt to reproduce the gigantic and daily installation that Beirut is. In the exhibition, the image is *mise en scene*, implicated in a mechanism where you refuse to let the spectator maintain a distance, pushing him to participate.

— It is not simply a matter of participation; it is a matter of knocking about the image. Our questioning of the city has called into question the power of the image. One had sometimes to be more explicit, give the image anew an aura, consider it a site of work, of life. During the exhibition, the visitor entertains few frontal

relations with the photographs: it is a matter of turning, touching, moving, seeing oneself, dismembering.

— *Perhaps, but the resistance that you display toward the reproduction of existing images cannot be simply justified by a political reasoning and procedure: fighting nostalgia or official images . . . When I speak of participation, I have the impression that it is a wish for reunion and homecoming—like a residue of a communal illusion—that is expected here.*

— No, I do not believe so.

— *What I do not understand then is what you expect from such interactivity and from its real efficacy. It strikes me as a trick of the trade, somewhat too ludic.*

— It is not our little game. What did you feel in the third installation when removing the photographs of human scars to see beneath them the photographs representing urban destructions?

— *A discomfort, perhaps, but mainly because of the notion of tearing human skin. Moreover, the material on which the image was manifested evoked the texture of the skin. But this does not alter what I am saying.*

— This implication of the visitor engenders the distance that you were taking about, because the relation subject/object is problematized. At the level of the mechanism, such work evokes the fact that during that war, there was no such thing as a civilian, no innocence. Thus, for example, the theater installation that functions as a metaphor, where the visitor passes through three levels or forms of vision. He is first a spectator watching the images of the severely destroyed City Center movie theater. In order to leave the hall, he has to walk up a ramp and turn on a projector. At that



point, a violent scene is projected on a screen in front of him. Given that the spectator's shadow falls on the screen, he or she finds himself/herself a participant in the scene. Finally, in order to leave, the visitor has to cross the ramp to get behind the screen. At that point, his image is reflected again on the translucent screen: he thus finds himself in the position of the cinema or TV spectator, for he is now watching another spectator who entered after him and is presently in the position of participant in the scene. There are thus three stages or gaze positions.

— *All this is interesting, but we cannot describe everything. I know that many people have not seen the exhibition, especially among both the Lebanese public and the American public; but you've asked me for an interview: it is a dialogue we're keeping up here and not a formal presentation of the work. One has to accept to overlook certain things; otherwise things become cumbersome.*

— But there will be too much that's missing, too many gaps in the reading. I insist, moreover, on going back to the installation with the images of scars and the images of buildings. We have shown these photos of scars over which we had written personal texts with the goal of reflecting the voyeurism and the obscenity of the relation to the image.

— Khalil is right to insist on this. We have not spoken about the fact that placing in parallel the images of the scars and the images of the buildings shows the impossibility of simultaneously getting hold of the two realities. The photograph of the scar becomes a trace of a trace.

— *What does it mean to talk today of the exhibition and to return to the traces of the war, to the ruin or to memory—all this contingency—when one knows that historical truth is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened. How to get out of this? Are you not tired of repeating the same gesture?*

— You really think that Pierre Menard would say such a thing on notions like repetition, memory or the gesture?

— *Maybe it's the resigned or ironical habit of propagating ideas which are the strict reverse of those one prefers—or maybe not. Answer my question.*

— You have changed your behavior since the start of the interview. Perhaps because you have noticed a certain evolution. We have moved from a dialogue "around Pierre Menard" to a dialogue "around us."

— *Yes, you want me to be a simple interviewer, a midwife. I am carrying out the task while bitterly regretting it. My project was more ambitious. But*

you are concerned with explanation in order to remain in proximity to your work, to what you are. You want Pierre Menard to become Khalil Jomrig; to become Joana Hadjithomas; to talk in Arabic; to be concerned with history and war, and conditioning; to be efficacious—even more to be concerned with efficacy. A philosophical doctrine begins as a plausible description of the universe; with the passage of the years it becomes a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or a name—in the history of philosophy. You have chosen to lead me toward discourse in the unacknowledged, but nonetheless quite present aim of claiming recognition and thus ending up with a hypothetical double in an art book. Let's then return to my new function.

— I know that what you say here is the exact opposite of your true opinion—you've already given Paul Valéry a bit of a shock in a similar manner. We understand your behavior as such, so our friendship is not endangered and this interview can continue.

— Answer the question!

— Since the end of the war, the grand modernist project has been a bulldozer that has unified and buried things under a carpet—beneath which swarm specters that try to erupt and that will return. The repressed traces erupt, the unfinished business has for consequence that, as Derrida says, "the revenants always return." The image is also a buried specter; the image is a revenant that returns. The reconstruction presents a project: "The Future"; the postcards of the 1960s mythicize the past. Between the two, there's no place for the present. The image is an "it was" or "it will be." *Solidere*¹ is mainly an image, a large photo, a showcase as in the prologue of *Beirut: Urban Fictions*, or a façade as in the film *Around the Pink House* (1999)—pink only from the outside.

— What was interesting in *Beirut: Urban Fictions* was that the investigation that searched for the body of the city led to our own body. But like the territory, our body is difficult to define; it becomes a fragmentary fiction that's never really captured. Beirut does not exist, Beirut makes us exist. These were the last words of the exhibition.

— Ah! *The Lacanian references* . . . Like the aerial puzzle with its mirror, these fragments of the cut-out photo, this abstraction and dismemberment of the body can also bring to mind a critique of the financial process, the issuing of stocks, the virtual transfer . . . One cannot truly talk about this last installation; all I can say is "EE14," the number of my fragment. (Pierre takes out from his pocket the fragment of the photograph.)

— You carry it on you!

— This is fetishism.

Beirut : fictions urbaines Fragment N°

ILFOCHROME
CLASSIC EE14

— No, I brought it for the occasion. While watching your work the first time around, I thought of the powerlessness of the image. What you manifest is the incapacity of photography, that it cannot really capture reality. With you, one senses the necessity of a fictional relay. There is always a script behind—maybe that's a professional deformation: not mine, yours. For example, I counted three genres of photographed details in three of the exhibition's installations, each narrating something different:

Roughly:

— The detail falling within the category "Beauty" (composed of two subdivisions).

— The detail falling within the category "Absurd" (composed of three subdivisions).

— The detail falling within the category "Search for Seas" (without subdivisions).

Let's start with the last detail. I remember those street lamps destroyed by the war and that were photographed in such a manner as to completely abstract the matter and to represent something unexpected: animals, a personal bestiary.

— The stage design of *Beirut: Urban Fictions* followed a long movement of tightening of the focal angle: we started with wide-angle shots to arrive at the detail taken with a macro lens. For example the completely abstract images refer only to a personal imagination, as a poetic act. That's the reason the image is exposed in a sort of camera obscura that has for one of its facet a magnifying glass; the visitor had to place himself within a certain perspective, ours, in order to see the image.

— The street lamp becomes an elephant, a dolphin or an insect. It is our bestiary, a detail that points (to) me, and that puts fiction into gear.

— Hum . . . Barthes' punctum.

— The images coming under the category a)—Beauty as you put it—are treated as cultural objects, as if the chance ruins visited the

art world. This installation manifested how much the ruin has been endowed with an esthetic power. Burns on the wall or peeled off paint refer then to contemporary artworks. We have exposed these photos in golden frames in a museum where blue dominated.

— The photographs of the category b) refer to the absurdity of certain details, like an unreachable faucet, tangled up balconies, a tree in the midst of a living room, a staircase with vertical steps. The photographs were placed on plates that formed the facets of a rotary cube. The spectator had to turn the cube to find the sense of the image: high, low, vertical, horizontal. The photograph of details manifests its powerlessness to dominate space in its classical topographical sense.

— The photographic act moves away completely from realism, from "reportage." It is here close to the bomb; it hijacks the object from its context, diverts it from its function, destroys its primary sense. The image no longer aims to impose a reconstitution, a clear delimitation of space.

— *What, for you, delimits a certain space? A body? Its displacement? Its imprisonment? The notion of imprisonment is a recurrent theme, indeed an obsession that one finds in *Wonder Beirut* (the photographer imprisoned in his studio), but also in your latest works, *Khiam*, *Don't Walk*, and *Around the Pink House*, where the neighborhood in which the action takes place is a sort of cinema studio without an elsewhere.*

— In the documentary *Khiam*, six freed detainees recount what they did while alone in a 1.8m x 0.8m cell or with five others in a 2.25m x 2.25m room. Questioned about their physical activities—sitting, standing, walking—some of them recounted how they walked back and forth four and a half kilometers in a 1.80m x 0.8m cell while



keeping their heads in the same direction because there was no space to turn. The term *course* acquires here a surprising dimension, somewhat surrealistic, a fiction that abstracts the camp itself.

— Let's take up again the equation: either a body or its displacement. Vital space is lacking and things are adrift. That's what interests us in imprisonment: to work in a particular frame; to make the frames and borders stick out; to have them sever the real before a breach is opened; and that these same frames become also a fiction, a relay for another world, a field, a mask . . . as in *Don't Walk*. The latter video recounts the four and a half months during which Joana was bedridden and unable to move. She was pregnant and completely immobilized, with for only space the room and for only horizon two modern buildings whose windows, without shutters, were like screens.

— Khalil brought me images of the city that I've never wished to see. I filmed my neighbors daily. In this role of a perfect voyeur, I waited, like James Stewart in *Rear Window*, for an event. But it's not like in the movies: there's never a murder. The event assumes then a very different dimension: a fly on the window pane, the neighbors moving boxes, a little girl taking a stroll, and, one day, a manifestly impassioned phone conversation that while inaudible becomes nonetheless all of a sudden an event—peculiar situation where the spectacular mutates in a stupefying way.

— *The spectacular—a vast subject. We've succeeded until now not to quote Debord. Let's continue this way. The photographs of Beirut: Urban Fictions reveal at first glance a quasi absence: the human. I have counted 24 characters or human representations—of which two group photos and two abstract images—in a total of 165 images that show architectural ruins. That is, only 6.8% of the images include humans. That's little.*

— The photographs function by a tightening that is increasingly precise, from the wide shot to the close, almost abstract shot. They linger apparently more on the object, for the rest architectural, on the ruin, than on the human. But in reality, to capture the ruin is to search for those who inhabit it, who haunt it.

— The ruin is not standing; it is buried. It is eminently haunted; it reveals absence, the lack of what we really look for: the body of the other and our own body. As I've already said, let's remind ourselves yet again that the revenants always return.

— We have talked about many parts of *Beirut: Urban Fictions*, but I had much more to say.

— *The interview is already too long. Sometimes while listening to you I have the feeling that you consider the exhibition Beirut: Urban Fictions of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige as if it were by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige.*

— Can we listen again to the entire conversation?

Notes

¹ Translator's Note: The Green Line, aka *the demarcation line*, bisected the city into two enclaves: East Beirut, predominantly Christian and controlled till the late 1980s by Christian militias; and West Beirut, controlled by Moslem, Leftist, and, up to 1982, Palestinian militias.

² He graciously accepted to give us some of these photographs to publish in this article.

³ Translator's Note: Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, July 1998.

⁴ Translator's Note: Solidere is a private joint-stock company in charge of the reconstruction and development of Beirut's city center. See its web page at <http://www.solidere.com.lb/>

Come in Sir, We Will Wait for You Outside

Tony Chakar and Rabih Mroue
Translated by Tony Chakar

This play was presented in the Théâtre de Beyrouth, from 3 to 6 July 1998, during a series of presentations and lectures entitled "50 Nabba and Resistance."¹ It was staged and played by Rabih Mroueh, Tony Chakar, Abba Khoury and Samer Qaddoura. The play was produced by Fumûn-Théâtre de Beyrouth.

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The stage is reduced to a strip measuring 1 x 10 meters. A fixed black wall that extends all the way to the ceiling forms the background. Niches in the wall contain three televisions; underneath each one is a VCR. A small rotating lamp is placed next to each television. In front of the wall, three video cameras are fixed on three tripods. The lamps and cameras are turned towards three rotating office chairs.

The three televisions are turned towards the audience; the chairs face the televisions and have their backs to the audience. Next to each chair lies a microphone; the actors will hang the microphones around their necks.

A black table is set on the stage to the left of the audience; the light control panel and a stereo are placed on the table. Behind it are a chair and a microphone similar to the ones mentioned above.

A slide screen is set to the right of the audience on the stage. Many VHS videotapes are stacked next to each chair.