

Migrants at La Commune theater : Discourses and practices of ‘hospitality’

My own first encounter with La Commune theatre and some of the immigrants taking part in this social space was on November 2018 as I attended *Sur La Grand'route* an adaptation of Tchekov's *On the Hight Road* by Émilie Heriteau. This play had been recommended to me in relation to my research interests as it featured immigrants performing the migratory journey. As a regular theatre-goer, I often went to see plays that dealt with social issues whether it be historical events or current affairs. I had seen several plays on the subject of migration, particularly in the last few years in the Paris region, where there were more and more of them. Since the summer of 2015, and the beginning of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe, the migration issue had been at the centre of media attention and public debate. In Paris and its suburbs, makeshift camps made visible the precariousness and vulnerability of people arriving on French soil. They also attested to the authorities' inability and/or unwillingness to welcome these people with dignity. In Europe as well as in France, many civil society stakeholders, including in the academic and artistic sectors, have mobilised in favour of a better reception of exiled persons. Within a few years, the term 'hospitality' began to take hold as a slogan in committed circles. This is the case with the so-called expression 'hospitality crisis' – as opposed to the 'refugee crisis' – which refers to the policies of EU member states as the main problem rather than migration itself. My first attempt to contextualise my case study was related to my own perspective on it. As a theatre-goer, studying migratory narratives and committed to a better reception of exiled people I have spontaneously approached my case study through the prism of the mobilisations of the cultural sector (and in particular of theatrical institutions) in favour of the reception of exiled people. This orientation was also justified by my observations in the field, as I identified discourses and practices relating to hospitality.

In order to position my case study within this broader context I tried to answer the following interrogations: what does hospitality consist of at *La Commune* theatre? What are its characteristics? In keeping with my ethnographic approach, I conceptualise hospitality as a set of practices and discourses which I present in this paper. The analysis of the latter highlights that hospitality as stated and enacted at *La Commune* theatre works as a rallying point. As such, it is linked and coherent with the broader mobilisation of the civil society under the seal of hospitality. Nonetheless some of the specificities of these discourses and practices reveal a gap, if not a tension, between the project implemented in Aubervilliers and this wider movement.



La Commune as a public space and the “hospitality” towards the people of the city

National Dramatic Centers (NDC) are publicly-funded artistic institutions intended to both production and dissemination. They were created within the framework of the so-called "theatrical decentralisation" policy, with a strong involvement of local authorities in an effort to provide access to theatre for the local population. Therefore, territorial anchoring and the relationship with the local population are key elements of NDCs' missions. When they took over in January 2014, respectively as director and deputy director, Marie-José Malis and Frédéric Sacard had already conducted a joint reflection on theatre venues, especially NDCs, and what they should be. The issue of hospitality stems directly from this consideration and the ideas that underpinned the creation of these institutions: a “theatre for all”, a “public service theatre” or, in the words of Gabriel Garran, the founder of *La Commune* theatre, a theatre that “belongs to those who do not go there”.

The first mention of “hospitality” that I could find comes from the brochure of the very first season (2014-2015) which begins with a letter of the newly appointed director. It directly appears as linked to the idea of public space and is aimed at “the people of the city”. Its first concrete expression was the reorganisation of the restaurant's space and opening hours. On its arrival, the new management cleared the large bay windows of the opaque covering that made the restaurant intimate and out of sight. Thus overlooking Stalingrad Square, one of the few green spaces in Aubervilliers, the restaurant became open for lunch rather than only on show nights. The idea behind these changes is that the restaurant, and more broadly the theatre, should not only be a place for theatre spectators.

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Espace public constituant. Puisqu’il n’y en a plus, des lieux où la capacité des individus est convoquée à penser le pour tous, des lieux qui constituent, c’est à dire qui nous donnent des outils pour nous former, nous orienter, que le théâtre soit celui qu’il nous reste. Conférences, séminaires d’Alain Badiou, colloques, ateliers, brigades et surtout cadres, formes, formules où nous réapprenons à penser ensemble. Se donner une méthode. Se donner de l’espérance.”ⁱ (La Commune centre dramatique national Aubervilliers 2014)

In 2014, Marie-José Malis’ ambition is to make the theatre a “constitutive public space” which she defines as “places where the capacity of individuals is called upon to think for all”. By



"think for all", she means "think in the interest of all" and follows the tradition of a "theatre for all" and a "public service theatre" as conceived and developed by Jean Vilar, the founder of the *Festival d'Avignon*. She also refers to the myth of the theatre as an *agora*, as an assembly, i.e. a place where individuals think together and become a political collective. It is worth nothing that, as Vilar with the *Festival d'Avignon*, she considers that this is only possible if the theatre space is open to everyone and open to other forms of artsⁱⁱ and other forms of thinking.

At first, this hospitality did not specifically concern immigrants, to whom no reference is made in the brochure of the first season. Later on, the restaurant, as well as the hall of the theatre, became constituent and constitutive spaces of the theatre's hospitality towards migrants. Some of them, work in the restaurant occasionally, others linger there to recharge their phones, benefit from a free internet connection or spend some time with the manager who willingly offers them a coffee.

Thus the question of hospitality appears in Marie-José Malis' project as soon as she took office. It stems from a reflection on theatres as public spaces, as places accessible to the inhabitants, which welcome and serve them. It was only gradually that the issue of immigration became central to *La Commune's* project, and articulated with the concern for hospitality. This was first done through artistic creation, and particularly through the *Pièces d'Actualité*.

Hospitality to exceed the law

Since they took over in 2014, respectively as director and deputy director, Marie-José Malis and Frédéric Sacard have implemented Topical Plays (*Pièces d'Actualité*), a specific and constraining production framework which provides an artistic response to the issue of local grounding and has become, over the years, the trademark of *La Commune* theatre. With Topical Plays (TP), artists are invited to create from Aubervilliers, i.e. to explore the territory and meet its inhabitants in order to develop a play inspired by the local reality with the participation of local amateurs. Topical Plays are usually entirely produced by *La Commune* theatre which makes the creations completely independent and allows the artists great freedom. The theatre's direction guarantees a dozen performance dates and encourages artists to adopt a genuine research approach. Contrary to the logic of profitability that is generally imposed, the plays created in this way are not necessarily intended to tour. Topical Plays are produced under a limited budget including only three weeks of rehearsals and a maximum of three professional participantsⁱⁱⁱ. Other participants must be amateurs from the city of Aubervilliers or the department of Seine-Saint-Denis whose remuneration is lower than that of professionals.



The first performance involving the participation of immigrants at *La Commune* was also the first very successful play produced within this framework. The Topical Play n°3 was created in May 2015 by Olivier Coulon-Jablonka. It featured eight members of a collective of undocumented migrants occupying a disused *Pôle Emploi* agency and subject to eviction proceedings. The squat was located one kilometre from *La Commune* theatre and its address, 81 avenue Victor Hugo, served as the title of the play. These amateur actors performed fragments of migratory journeys as well as their daily waiting and difficulties with “the relentless French administrative machine”^{iv}(Festival d’Automne à Paris 2016). The press kit produced by *La Commune* clearly places this play under the seal of hospitality and denunciation of the policies of European governments:

“La question de l’hospitalité commence avec ce droit absolu à l’accueil qui excède la loi, tandis que sont mis en place en France et en Europe une série de législations et de dispositifs visant à contrôler et contenir l’afflux des migrants.”^v

In addition, the dossier presents two extracts from Jacques Derrida's texts on hospitality. As a result, the play appears to be part of a wider trend of civil society initiatives which, in the continuity of Derrida and his support for the undocumented migrants' movement in the 1990s, make use of hospitality mobilised as a philosophical notion, an ethical justification and a political claim.

Finally, the press kit presents a transcript of a discussion between the play's co-authors and one of the actors, entitled “A theatre next to the court: the creative process”^{vi}. In this exchange dating from October 2014, i.e. the first moments of the meeting between the artistic team and the migrants of the collective, one of the authors presents *La Commune* theatre starting from the location of the court which, a few weeks earlier, issued a decision to evict the squat:

“Camille : Oui, en deux mots, c’est le théâtre de La Commune. Tu vois. C’est dans le jardin où il y a le tribunal, là où il y avait le 30 septembre 2014 le jugement d’expulsion au tribunal, à Aubervilliers.

Bamba : Oui. Oui.

Barbara : Y a un théâtre juste à côté.

Camille : C’est dans un grand jardin.

Bamba : Oui. Oui.

Camille : Et tu vois si tu regardes le tribunal, là y a un grand bâtiment.

Bamba : Oui. Oui. J’ai vu.

Camille : C’est le théâtre ! Et du coup c’est là où on... L’idée c’est vraiment de faire un spectacle qui se passera là-bas, avec vous. Et c’est-à-dire l’idée, c’est de raconter l’histoire de cette lutte, de cette occupation, mais de raconter aussi votre histoire de manière plus générale.”^{vii}



This geographical description provokes an opposition between the two public institutions and echoes the above-mentioned quote. The court embodies inhospitality, expulsion and the authority of a law that opposes and imposes itself on migrants. The theatre appears, in negative, as the place of hospitality "that exceeds the law", the institution that welcomes and embraces the experiences and struggles of these foreigners.

Militant theatre and socio-political conjuncture

The eight migrants who went on stage, did so on behalf of their collective and despite the risks involved. This strategic choice was part of their struggle to avoid being expelled and accessing residence permits. Olivier Coulon-Jablonka and Marie-José Malis provided the inhabitants of the squat with legal support while at the same time making a major effort to publicise the play so that it would go on tour and give more weight to their demands.

In his book *Théâtres en lutte : le théâtre militant en France des années 1960 à aujourd'hui*, Olivier Neveux proposes a definition of 'militant theatre' that seems to correspond perfectly to the play *81, Avenue Victor Hugo*:

“Ce « théâtre qui milite » est, quoi qu'il en soit, *organiquement* lié aux luttes. Il en émerge, tributaire des conjonctures historiques. Il est l'un des auxiliaires, l'un des instruments ou l'un des moments du combat.”^{viii}

In this case, the historical conjuncture is notably the momentum that emerged in the summer of 2015. This was characterised, on the one hand, by the influx of numerous exiles crossing the Mediterranean at the risk of their lives and the significant media coverage of this migratory situation labelled the 'refugee crisis'; and on the other hand, by the sensitivity, interest and mobilisation of the theatrical sector and its audience for greater hospitality towards foreigners. Malis seemed perfectly aware of this specific context when she tried and succeeded in having the play programmed in the 2015 edition of the Avignon Festival only a few weeks before its opening.

“L'année suivante, il y a eu la Pièce d'actualité, *81 Avenue Victor Hugo*. Et je me suis foutu dans la tête... ça m'arrive des fois... je me suis dit : « Ça va aller au Festival d'Avignon, *in* et cette année! » Or, le spectacle a été créé en mai, c'était le Festival été, la programmation était bouclée. C'était un défi que je m'étais donné, je me suis dit je vais faire plier la programmation. Donc, j'ai écrit à Olivier Py. J'ai été très cynique. Je lui ai dit [...] : « C'est un spectacle qui met en jeu la question des papiers des gens. Et s'ils sont programmés à Avignon, ils auront leurs papiers, j'en suis sûre. » J'ai dit : « On n'est pas amis, mais on peut être allié. » [...] Déjà, le spectacle était précédé d'une réputation. La presse s'était mise en marche, tout ça. [...] Il a répondu dans les vingt-quatre heures et ils ont ouvert la programmation, ils ont rajouté ce spectacle à la



programmation. [...] J'ai agité cette fibre humaniste. Et puis il a compris tout de suite que c'était une bombe ce truc, et que donc il allait en tirer aussi un grand bénéfice puisqu'en effet ça a été un spectacle très très... très commenté... On a dit : « grâce à Olivier Py... ». Et moi, je me foutais qu'on dise que c'était grâce à lui plutôt que grâce à moi. Je m'en foutais complètement en fait.”^{ix}

As expected, the play was well received by the public and benefited from significant media coverage at the time when the arrival of migrants on the European shores of the Mediterranean was making headlines. The *Festival d'Avignon* served as a sounding board and marked a turning point in the collective's struggle. It gave political visibility and artistic legitimacy to the play, which then toured France (and even performed abroad).

This tour and the support of cultural institutions, especially publicly-funded ones, was an additional argument for their regularisation. Like all amateur actors who participate in TPs, the actors of *81, Avenue Victor Hugo* were paid for their work. Since 2015, *La Commune* theatre has adopted a strong and rare position on the issue of the legal status of foreigners. Indeed, the mobilisation of civil society in favour of a dignified reception of exiled people has relied heavily on the rhetoric and legitimacy (ethical and legal) of the figure of the refugee. Thus, many associations, particularly those operating with public funding, only work with refugees or asylum seekers. By exploiting a legal loophole in French legislation, *La Commune* theatre regularly hires people who do not have a residence permit authorising them to work. In the case of this mobilisation in support of the undocumented migrants' collective, the theatre has claimed this practice, which nevertheless entails risks for the institution's managers. According to an employee of the theatre, the political position of the management *vis-à-vis* the competent authorities during this period can be summarised as follows:

“On a une pièce qui s'est vendue dans toute la France, qui va commencer une tournée. Tous les gens qui travaillent ici, qu'on va salarier, sont tous sans-papiers, alors que ça va tourner dans tous les théâtres de France. Qu'est-ce que vous faites?”

“Le refrain, c'est bien de dire oui, on embauche des sans-papiers. Si ça vous pose un problème, régularisez-les!”^x

A few months later, the collective and their supporters obtained from the prefecture the implementation of a collective regularisation procedure for the inhabitants of the squat. This victory was also the work of Didier Leschi, the *Préfet* for equal opportunities of the Seine-Saint-Denis department. A few months later, however, this senior French civil servant who used to be an activist in the radical left during the 1970s before joining the French Socialist Party



left office. The one who succeeded him then interrupted the procedure, leaving twenty-one migrants without papers.

“C'est [81 avenue Victor Hugo] qui a fait le plus connaître les Pièce d'Actualité [...]. Cette pièce a donné lieu à un combat politique auquel on [ne] croyait pas, mais qui a abouti puisqu'il y a eu soixante personnes des quatre-vingts du squat qui ont été régularisées suite au mouvement qu'il y a eu par rapport à cette pièce. C'est une pièce qui a eu beaucoup de retentissement, qui a été reprise au Festival d'Avignon au dernier moment, alors que la programmation était sortie, mais qui a été malgré tout programmée dans le *in*, qui a été reprise au Festival d'Automne qui a été tournée à l'étranger, etc. Donc, par exemple cette pièce a participé à la notoriété de ces Pièce d'Actualité.”^{xi}

By contributing to the reputation of the *Pièces d'Actualité*, which became the theatre's trademark, *81, Avenue Victor Hugo* also contributed to the visibility and reputation of the artistic and political project carried out by *La Commune*. This project is clearly characterised by and known for its commitment to migrant people.

In the autumn of 2016, the question of hospitality raised by this play took on a new dimension. On October 27th, the squat was evacuated with no rehousing solutions provided to the people living there^{xii}. Malis then decided, with the agreement of the municipality, to take them in and hosted forty of them inside the theatre. At that time, the play was being performed as part of the *Festival d'Automne*, a prestigious event hosted by some sixty cultural venues in Paris and the Ile-de-France region. It was in this context that several of these theatres rallied to Marie-José Malis' call to welcome and house members of the collective (especially the actors). This mobilisation lasted a few weeks in the case of *La Commune* and a few days in the case of the other theatres. It did not succeed in obtaining a permanent rehousing solution from the authorities, but it did make the situation of the evicted visible and create a wave of solidarity. From the theatre's point of view, this episode reinforced the activist and reality-based nature of the play.

The story of the play *81, Avenue Victor Hugo* demonstrates the federative capacity within the cultural sector of a mobilisation in the name of hospitality as well as the responsiveness and limitations of public-funded theatre institutions to embody hospitality as a political act beyond the artistic framework.

Behind the consensus, disagreements and tensions



As mentioned in the first section of this paper, in her letter introducing the booklet of the 2014-2015 season, Marie-José Malis associates “hospitality” with the notion of public space. The second part of the above mentioned quotation is not very explicit about the concrete project she intended to carry out. Yet, or perhaps precisely for this reason, a closer look at this extract allows us to identify some of the characteristics of this project.

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The theatre director states that there are no such “constitutive public space” anymore. By doing so, she positions her project under the signs of reinvention (recreating what has existed) and uniqueness (creating what does not exist elsewhere). This twofold movement consists, on the one hand, of claiming a historical affiliation and, on the other hand, of distancing oneself from all existing initiatives and, in particular, from those which could claim this same affiliation. The mandate of Marie-José Malis has been marked by several historical commemorations. These have been an opportunity to affirm political legacies and sometimes to distinguish from other artistic or political stakeholders sharing these claims. The commemorations were: the 50th anniversary of the theater of La Commune, the 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution in 2017, the 50th anniversary of May 1968 and the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune in 2021 to which the name of the theater refers. This double rhetoric runs through many of the discourses produced by the theatre since 2014 and by the individuals who support this project. Moreover, it seems to have participated in the progressive isolation of the theatre on the Ile-de-France theatre scene and to have been reinforced by it.

Marie-José Malis then lists a series of non-theatrical activities to be hosted by the theatre venue. Two of them reveal the political orientation of the director and consequently of the theatre under her term of office. Although what she meant by brigade at that time remains unclear, it is a term that clearly refers to the international brigades, the units of foreign volunteers who went to fight against Franco's regime on the side of the Republicans during the Spanish war of 1936-1939. Thus it illustrates the precedent point on referring to historical events. More importantly, and more precisely, she mentions the “seminar of Alain Badiou”.



Born in 1937, Alain Badiou is a French philosopher and professor emeritus at the *École normale supérieure*. He is a prolific writer whose books have been translated into many languages and some have sold tens of thousands of copies. He has also written several novels and plays, some of which have been performed at the *Festival d'Avignon*. A Maoist activist in the late 1960s, he is one of the few of his generation to have never renounced his militant commitments and remains a fervent defender of communist ideology. In addition, he has regularly taken a stand in favour of illegal immigrants. Since 2007 and the publication of his pamphlet *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*^{xiv}, Alain Badiou has been relatively present in the media and intellectual space and represents one of the new figures of intellectual and political radicalism.

In this same letter from the first season booklet, Alain Badiou's name is cited three times: in the precedent quote, as one of the associated artists/author to the theatre and in a paragraphe where Marie-José Malis express her "joy" of welcoming her "peers" whom she "admires".

"J'aime Alain Badiou. Il m'aide à vivre. Et ma force, si elle se nourrit de quelques aides, vient de lui, d'entre les vivants."^{xv}

Marie-José Malis' proximity with the philosopher and his ideas is also reflected in certain actions implemented by the theatre in favour of migrant people such as the creation of the Acts School, an association of which Alain Badiou is the president that provides immigrants with French classes, legal support and most importantly organises assemblies.

If we focus on the issue of hospitality within the theatre institution itself, we can point to one situations in which this ideological and/or interpersonal proximity seems at stake. In 2018, the theatre produced a set of tote bags on which is written : "Every minute spent with an undocumented migrant is worth more than going to vote"^{xvi}. This position was very surprising to me. On the one hand, the issue of voting is placed in competition with the issue of support for undocumented migrants without this link being explained. On the other hand, this sentence seems to encourage abstention from voting which is rather unusual for a public institution such as a National Dramatic Center. It does, however, echo Alain Badiou's position against voting and representative democracy. More importantly this bag shows that some discourses and practices in favour of migrants are articulated around minority and controversial political causes within the profession and among theatre staff.

ⁱ "I finally decided that the idea of public space should be taken literally.

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that remains. Conferences, seminars by Alain Badiou, colloquia, workshops, brigades and above all frameworks, forms, formulas where we learn to think together again. To give ourselves a method. To give ourselves hope." La Commune centre dramatique national Aubervilliers. 2014. "La Commune Saison 2014-2015".

ⁱⁱ Jérôme Bel, a choreographer is one of the associated artists at La Commune theatre since 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ This does not include the technical team of the theatre.

^{iv} "L'implacable machine administrative française" Festival d'Automne à Paris. 2016. "Dossier de presse Olivier Coulon-Jablonka - Festival d'Automne à Paris 2016". https://www.festival-automne.com/uploads/spectacle/DP_Olivier_Coulon-Jablonka.pdf.

^v "The question of hospitality begins with this absolute right to reception that exceeds the law, while in France and in Europe a series of legislations and measures are put in place to control and contain the influx of migrants."

^{vi} "Un théâtre à côté du tribunal: le processus de création."

^{vii} "Camille: Yes, in two words, it's the theatre of La Commune. You see. It's in the garden where there's the court, where there was on 30 September 2014 the eviction judgment in the court, in Aubervilliers.

Bamba: Yes. Yes.

Barbara: There's a theatre right next door.

Camille: It's in a big garden.

Bamba: Yes. Yes.

Camille: And you see if you look at the court, there's a big building.

Bamba: Yes. Yes. I saw it.

Camille: That's the theatre! And so that's where we... The idea is really to do a show that will take place there, with you. The idea is to tell the story of this struggle, this occupation, but also to tell your story in a more general way."

^{viii} "This "militant theatre" is, in any case, organically linked to struggles. It emerges from them, dependent on the historical conjunctures. It is one of the auxiliaries, one of the instruments or one of the moments of the struggle." Neveux, Olivier. 2007. *Théâtres en lutte : Le théâtre militant en France des années 1960 à aujourd'hui*. Paris: Editions La Découverte.

^{ix} "The following year, there was the Topical Play, *81 Avenue Victor Hugo*. And I had decided... I said to myself: "It's going to go to the *Festival d'Avignon*, to the 'in' and this year!" But the show was created in May, it festival was in July, the programme was complete. It was a challenge that I had set myself. I said to myself that I was going to have the programme bent. So I wrote to Olivier Py. I was very cynical. I said to him [...]: "This is a show that brings into play the question of people's documentation. And if they are programmed in Avignon, they will have their papers, I'm sure of that." I said: « We are not friends, but we can be allies. [...] "The show already had a reputation. The press had already started to get involved. [...] He replied within twenty-four hours and they opened the programme, they added this show to the programme. [...] I stirred up this humanist fibre. And then he understood immediately that this thing was a bomb, and that he was going to benefit from it because it was a very, very commented show... People said: "thanks to Olivier Py..." And I didn't care if they said it was thanks to him rather than to me. I didn't care at all in fact." Malis, Marie-José. Interviewed on 2021/01/20.

^x "We have a play that has sold out all over France, which is going to start touring. All the people who work here, who we're going to pay, are all undocumented, whereas it's going to tour all the theatres in France. What are you doing?" "The refrain is to say yes, we hire undocumented workers. If you have a problem with that, then you should regularise them." Anonymous. Interviewed on 2021/07/14.

^{xi} "It's thanks to [*81, avenue Victor Hugo*] that Topical Plays became known [...]. This play gave rise to a political struggle that we didn't believe in, but which succeeded. Sixty people out of the eighty living in the squat were regularised following the movement that took place in relation to the play. It's a play that had a lot of impact, that was performed at the *Festival d'Avignon* at the last moment, when the programme was already out, but which was nevertheless programmed in the 'in', which was performed at the *Festival d'Automne* and toured abroad, etc. So, for example, this play has contributed to the reputation of the *Pièce d'Actualité*." Sacard, Frédéric. Interviewed on 2021/05/06.

^{xii} With the exception of 5 families. Ni, F. 2016. « Aubervilliers : les « 81, Victor-Hugo » hébergés au Théâtre de la Commune ». *leparisien.fr*, 27 octobre 2016. <https://www.leparisien.fr/seine-saint-denis-93/aubervilliers-93300/aubervilliers-les-81-victor-hugo-heberges-au-theatre-de-la-commune-27-10-2016-6259953.php>.

^{xiii} "I finally decided that the idea of public space should be taken literally.

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^{xiv} Badiou, Alain. 2007. *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?* Lignes. Circonstances 4. Paris: Lignes.



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^{xv} "I love Alain Badiou. He helps me to live. And my strength, if it feeds on a few aids, comes from him, from among the living." La Commune centre dramatique national Aubervilliers. 2014. "La Commune Saison 2014-2015".

^{xvi} "Chaque minute passée avec un sans-papier vaut mieux que d'aller voter"

