

Between Reality and Fiction: A transcribed conversation

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Abstract

This PARSE Dialogue took place on August 20, 2018, as part of the Gothenburg Dance and Theatre Festival, in response to Christiane Jatahy's production, Julia (performed at GDTF on August 19 and 20, 2018). The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

For more information about Christiane Jatahy's work, visit <http://christianejatahy.com.br/en/>.

Kristina Hagström-Ståhl: Welcome, everybody, to this Dialogue with Christiane Jatahy, Patricia Lorenzoni, and myself. The Dialogue is a collaboration between the Gothenburg Dance and Theatre Festival and PARSE. We will be speaking initially and primarily about the *Julia* performance that is taking place here at the Gothenburg Dance and Theatre Festival, but also branching out to ask more questions about Christiane's work in theatre and film.

I think many of us were quite knocked out, quite...taken with the performance last night, so I envy those of you who have not yet had this experience.

Christiane Jatahy is an award-winning director of theatre and film, and especially the combination of the two as you said yesterday after the performance, you perhaps prefer to be called an artist who works in different media to tell a story, but quite often it happens through the intersection of theatre and film. And you have been producing works for many years, across Brazil and Europe; *Julia* had its premiere seven years ago, in 2011, and has been touring since then, in Brazil, Europe, and North America. And you also have several other productions that are currently performing and touring in different parts of the world. We will maybe get to ask you a bit about some of them, as well. Additionally, you frame your work as research, which you are doing into theatre, film, and the relationship between art and the social.

I also want to introduce Patricia Lorenzoni, who is a researcher, author, and translator, and who works at the Center for Multidisciplinary Studies on Racism at Uppsala University. Patricia is also Swedish-Brazilian, I should mention, with a working interest in the contemporary context in Brazil. Patricia has agreed to translate from the Portuguese, should we need it.

[to **Christiane Jatahy**] We called this talk "Between Reality and Fiction", because you describe your work in that way, you place it in that movement. That is often how it gets referred to in reviews, as well. Can you talk a little bit about the impetus behind wanting to engage with that cross-section? Because with some works you say

that you wanted to bring fiction to a given reality, to fictionalize, but in the case of *Julia* there is an existing fiction, and you wanted to insert reality into it.

Christiane Jatahy: First of all, thank you. I will do my best to speak in English, but it is not easy for me. I am really happy to show the work here, it is my first time in Sweden. When we started work with *Julia* seven years ago, we had this dream to show it here. So it was great yesterday for us. As I told you, I'm a bit afraid because I know I'm putting my hand into something that doesn't come from me, it's from you, and so it was really great to have this kind of reaction yesterday.

I started to direct around fifteen years ago. My training is that I am a journalist, and I am also a filmmaker and a theatre-maker, and that's the philosophy for me it's really interesting what happens outside of me. The reality, the world this is always my first movement toward creating something. And what I consider the beginning of my research started in 2003, when I did a trilogy I really like trilogies, to think about "three times", to keep the material, to keep the "dispositif" to develop is really the word. And this first trilogy, with this work I made a documentary; I did a lot of interviews with people to create these works. So the material is from reality, and became a fiction afterward. These are fictional texts, but the material is based in reality.

After that, when I finished the first trilogy and this took around five or six years I decided to do it the opposite way, and started to work with classical texts. Not only because it is my formation, my history, but also because it interests me to use and have the memory of the audience. It's something that I know that you know. So it's fictional texts, but the idea is to use material from the memories and perception of the audience. And I try to put into these texts material from reality. *Julia* is the first one after the trilogy, and so I think that *Julia* is more fictional in its material, than real. It's real in the interpretation, in the language, but it's not about putting in material from outside the text. But the second and third ones are really about this mix, in the opposite way.

KHS: And just for context, this trilogy that you're mentioning now, the first part is working with August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*; the second one, called *What if they went to Moscow?* is Chekhov's *Three Sisters*; and the third part, *The Walking Forest*, is *Macbeth*. And can I ask, relating back to what you were saying just now, about working with memory is that the pull toward working with "classical" text, that it will mean something that the audience maybe has a relationship to already? Or what is it that draws you toward working with these theatre classics?

CJ: So first of all it's about the concrete material, the fictional material, and how it's possible to see this material nowadays, in the moment. And I talk about the memories because I know that most of the audience will change their perception. But even when I work with the documentaries, for example, like with *What if they went to Moscow?* I made a documentary with a lot of people who were moving and the memories that are theirs, they are theirs first of all, but they are also ours. When you talk with human beings, I believe it's not just part of the person, but part of us.

So the idea is to connect, because finally my work I work with a lot of dispositifs I really like to think about borders between things, between territories. And one border is the territory between the stage and the audience. When I think about the border, it's not a line, it's a lot of levels, also between the actor and the character. What kind of mix can I do with this? And it's also about reality and fiction, about cinema and theatre, it's dispositifs that interest me to provoke the creation. I think that's the border, it's a free space to create.

KHS: Next I want to ask more specifically about the *Julia* production and how you came to this material. What

interested you and how did you get started?

CJ: *Miss Julie* is a text that we studied in theatre school. When I discovered the text, I was very young, and I thought I would be an actress at the time. I really connected with this text. In that moment it was not so much about the subject but more about the characters and the relationship between the characters. I kept it in mind, and in 2010 I realized that it was a good text with which to start this new part of my work, because I see a lot of connections with Brazil. The dispute, I don't know if I can say that in English, the dispute between the classes is still something that is a part of us, of our history. It has remained the same, the slave history of Brazil has not changed so much. A lot of people work in the houses of the middle class, and the rich classes, and what happens in *Julie* is so much about that. It is a microcosmos of this impossible relationship between two classes, where one is subjugated to the other.

That is the first thing. And that is why I invited Rodrigo [who performs the role as Jean], he is a black actor, and this is also part of the work. So it's a white girl and a black guy, and it is also about the relationship between woman and man. This provokes something that is about attraction, but it's also violent, and this was something for me to accept the difference, and to show the prejudice that is inside of us. The text became a kind of magnifying glass to see the reality of Brazil. But when I talk about Brazil, it's not only about Brazil.

KHS: And I would like to come back to this how the contextualization in the local is still speaking to things we see happening in the world at large. I just wanted to say a tiny thing, that for those of us who are Strindberg nerds [laughter] it is very interesting to hear you talking about doing this play and thinking about it in this way, because that is what Strindberg wanted to do with the introduction of naturalism into the theatre. In his very famous "Foreword" to *Miss Julie* he talks about doing theatre in a new way, that will speak to reality in a way that he doesn't see the bourgeois theatre as doing. And part of it is, specifically, putting a magnifying glass to culture and thinking about it in a sort of scientific way. And seeing what happens when you close in on a conflict, and begin to dissect it. Thus, your work seems to be in his spirit...! Anna Pettersson, who held an artist talk with you yesterday, began by saying that the kind of emotions that your performance stirs up in the audience is something that people who stage Strindberg, and especially *Miss Julie*, are always hoping for. We want it to be as shocking and as visceral as it must have been to the first audiences, in 1888 in Copenhagen and in Stockholm, but it doesn't often achieve that in a Swedish context. So it's nice that maybe unknowingly you are working in the tradition of Strindberg [laughter], but also revitalizing it.

Can I now ask Patricia, as you were there yesterday and saw *Julia* can I ask you to offer a response to what you saw?

Patricia Lorenzoni: I just first want to say that I am really glad to be here, thank you for that. I'm really glad to have had the opportunity to see this play yesterday, see the wonderful performance. And I have tried to think about and digest since yesterday what I saw, and I promise I won't give away any spoilers here, but I will say something from my specific position and then try to talk about it in a more general way.

There is for me a double familiarity of worlds that otherwise haven't seemed to have very much to do with one another other, or that even have been contradictory. It's a familiarity of *Miss Julie* being one of these school book texts that all of us who grew up in Sweden and went to school in Sweden, all of us who did that, I believe, have read at least the summary, the school book summary of *Miss Julie*, even if we haven't read the text itself. So in that sense, the story, the plot is so familiar, and the characters are so familiar. One is tricked to believe that. And on the other hand there is another familiarity, which is a familiarity of Brazilian gender, class, and race

relations and also my own memories of painful insights into how these tricky relations work, and what is my role and my position in them as a visitor to Brazil during my whole upbringing white, from Europe, from a privileged upper middle-class family. All of this it's a kind of unfamiliarizing familiarity of the experience.

And then I also think, in talking about Strindberg and how we know these texts, or even if we don't know the text we know the story, there is something about the gaze that is slightly from outside, at such a canonized text, that is so valuable and so important in order to make the text come alive, but in another way as alive as it was once when it was written. There is a tendency to see and to use this text as an illustration of class relations as they were in Sweden and in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. But this performance brings the text alive in the present, in a way that I believe and would argue is relevant not only for Brazil, even if I feel very familiar with some of these very Brazilian aspects of it. There is something there about class, and there is something there in the intersections between class and race and gender that has a high relevance here as well. It looks different, but I think this is a performance that can help us see that it is also part of us how strong it is.

KHS: Do you want to respond to that?

CJ: It's really...great to hear you say this, because for me theatre is always political, it is impossible to separate. And when I think about why I do theatre, it's not because I want to do plays, it's more a question of how it's possible, through art, to change things. I'm not so optimistic [laughter]. But it's to think about that...if even one person now thinks about these things differently, that's like, "wow". Today, and with this work now, in this moment, it's really a responsibility, I think, to put something like this on stage.

And when I talk about the political it's not about conflict theory or ideology or what is the right thing, it's not about that it's to provoke questions, it provokes questions for me every time, it's about risk. We are there not to do something that is closed, that is finished or good, but it's to really have a connection with this material, the artistic material. And when I spoke about the dispositifs before, it's not a formal thing, these dispositifs are there to change the point of view my own, that of my team, and maybe also that of the audience.

When you spoke about Strindberg and the intimate theatre, and then to talk about dispositifs: when I decided to use cinema in this project, it was to use the tension between theatre and the cinema. The work is completely about the tension between these things. It wasn't only to do a film, it was about seeing how the cinema and theatre can work together. But it's also to see the intimacy of the characters, of the actors, where the camera is a kind of eye, in the way that I can bring film to something as a "cover". That's why one important scene takes place *behind* the film screen [in the space]. So you can see it, but maybe at the same time you can't see. And also how it's possible to reveal intimacy in the theatre. The cinema is the past; when you see a film you know that this film is the past of the material, it's about another time. And theatre is about the present time. For me, it's also to work in the in-between of time. The past of the text, the past of the film is part of the film's life, it's part of cinema.

KHS: Something that also really struck me as I was watching the performance yesterday is the way that you make possible, or allow for several perspectives or points of view at once. It is, as you're saying, both a live theatrical performance and the making of a film, but the performance is also interspersed with sequences that are pre-filmed. Moreover, the audience oftentimes also sees how the scene is constructed, how it's cut, how the transpositions are made. We are asked or almost forced into looking in more than one way, all at the same time. So at times we can have the full perspective, which is the classical theatrical gaze we see the whole room, we see the full bodies. And at the same time, we are watching the intimacy of a film scene. And what we see, in

terms of what the camera frame allows us to see, makes that fiction appear in one way; at the same time, we are watching it from the outside and seeing the ways in which that fiction is really not real, it's an illusion. And other times you block the gaze, so that we can't see what is going on except through the camera.

CJ: Exactly, yes.

KHS: What we are used to in the theatre people might not think consciously about it, but there is a mastery of the gaze: we are always looking at the whole space, seeing people's whole bodies. We have the framework. And we are often also seated in front of the stage, looking in one direction. And so, very effectively, without moving the audience, you still create another sense of vision. And I think we are forced to recognize that we can never get the whole picture; we can see things from several angles at once, and yet, we are being excluded from the full picture.

CJ: And it depends on where you are sitting, you get a different view.

KHS: Exactly. So it's not just the movement-between, but there is a multiplicity of positions that take place at the same time as well.

CJ: And to make the film affects the actors. It's another level of the fiction in the work. There are three levels to the relation between the actors and the characters: one is the characters, Julie and Jean, who are doing the fiction; the other is Julia and Rodrigo, who are the actors doing the film, but they are inside of this fiction; and in finally the third one there are no "characters", but it is still a fictional relation. And I have also worked on the set together with the set designers. My first idea was about the space well, for sure, it was about the text but then also about the space. And when I created this space and I talk a lot about levels here, because one there is one level, and on another there is this kind of abyss between the audience and the screen, and then the other level, and more levels, like that it's a kind of onion, where you can take one layer, and then another, and another to try to find something that is not visible.

KHS: But also, in terms of these layers of reality and fiction: as you mention, there is the within the world of the play that becomes a reality because we buy into the illusion as an audience, and then there's the level of the fiction in which the film is being made, which cuts with the first fiction but still is another level of fiction. And then there's the third level of fiction as well, where the actors presumably speak as themselves but are still within a fictional world. Something that also struck me as I was watching is that the closer you get to the idea of approaching reality after all we are in the here and now of this theatre together still that moment also becomes fictionalized.

CJ: Yes.

KHS: And to me there is a stark juxtaposition between being an audience member in that kind of fictionalized reality, and being at the talk afterward, where Rodrigo said that every time he performs this play, he feels the history of colonialism and capitalism on his body. To me that was striking because of course, the parts where he is subjected to the most horrible racist behavior, the most debasing, demeaning invectives, are within the fictional world of the play but that is also when the reality of history becomes the strongest. So there is that cross-movement as well.

CJ: Yes, completely.

KHS: Is that something you have also talked about during the work, how those layers operate? Is that something you and the actors discuss and decide together?

CJ: Yes, for sure. This is part of the beauty of the work. They have to be part of this. They weren't part in collaborating around the text in this case I do also work with actors in that kind of collaboration, but not in this case but every time it's about creating a dramaturgy. And when I speak about dramaturgy it isn't only the dramaturgy of Strindberg, but the dramaturgy of the work. I have to work in a very careful and deep way with the actors, because they have to have confidence, they are very vulnerable in this work. It's about the past of Rodrigo, but it's also about the past of Julia, and the past of us, because colonialism is our history. When I talk about the memory of the text, I talk also about our memories. And as for Rodrigo when you are black in Brazil you really have less opportunity. And the darker skinned you are, the more difficult it is to find your space in the society, because of colorism. To speak about Brazil now, we're in a moment where everything moves toward fascism; for the first time I'm afraid about the fascism in Brazil. People have no shame in showing their dark sides, that is what is happening now.

KHS: Can we stay with this issue for a bit

CJ: And it is strange to use the word "dark" to say that.

PL: And to come back to the relevance [of the play] it's really strong to sit beside you and hear you say that it's the first time that you are afraid of fascism. There is an election in Brazil in October, and we have an election in Sweden in three weeks, in September, and I believe many of us feel the same. I definitely feel the same. And there is something about this there are so many questions and thoughts, and things that this play has started to move in me. I am thinking of this multilayered way of working that you have, with ambiguity between fiction and reality, and with ambiguity between theatre and cinema, and with the different techniques and different angles, and what it does with our perception in the political moment that we are living now. In a political moment where there are so many things going on, and it is so difficult at least I feel it is really difficult to orientate oneself, to orientate how one should act and how one should try to be... While we see this tendency that you mention, which I think is very valid for Sweden as well, that the shame is...let go of, the shame. Things that could not be uttered only a couple of years ago are now uttered much more freely. Aggressions that would have been kept inside a few years ago are now shown in public. And there is also a very strong demand for simple answers, simple narratives yeah, I find it interesting to think about this.

CJ: I agree. Of course.

KHS: Another thing is that in a Swedish context, as you said earlier, Strindberg, and especially *Miss Julie* is so widely canonized and taught in acting schools, and such a big part of the literary canon, the cultural canon, the acting canon in Sweden, that I think somehow it is very difficult with the kind of Swedish language that the play is written in... Even though we are constantly struggling to stage it in a contemporary context, and we *feel* that it is so relevant for class society still today, it's very hard to find a theatrical form that actually conveys that immediacy. I have directed the play myself and struggled with how to make the text... I mean, you understand that the text is alive, but to bring it onto the stage and communicate with the audience is a challenge.

On the one hand there is something about allowing an outside eye to look at this text and find new situations in it, but there is also something about how, potentially, we think that we have left that kind of class society behind in Sweden. That we think of it, as Patricia said before, as a representation of the late nineteenth century and the

modern breakthrough, and the radical changes in society that took place then, which were class and gender oriented. But it seems that now we also have to... or, this production forces a recognition that things haven't changed so much. We may not have the exact same class relations, but racism and racial inequality are things that until very recently were hardly discussed in Swedish cultural life at all. It has been present as a social issue, but it really hasn't been part of the theatre conversation until now. I am thinking about these layers of reality and fiction and the way that forcing a new gaze on a classic can really make us recognize something about our current social context here as well. But also, the conditions for making art.

And I wanted to turn back to that a little, not just in regard to this performance but also other works of yours that have a long development phase, of research, interviewing, figuring things out together with the actors. What does that process look like? Does it tie into not only for you but for them as well doing social research, looking at political context of where you are working and so on... How does the process happen?

CJ: The process depends a bit on the work, on which play I am doing at the moment. I never stop working, I only stop when the work doesn't present anything more. I am still working on this play. The opening was in 2011, and I am with the actors still to rethink. Because my work with the actors is more about reaction than about action, it's about the response this is the work I did with the Strindberg text. To show that it is not important to *know*, but it is important to *listen*. And to really respond or answer every time. And for sure, it is still theatre and you know your text by heart, but it's really that you need to be in the present moment, and look at the other, and find this balance, this between... really for me, the theatre is about the between. It's not about me or you, it's between us, and between you and the audience.

To find this I need to keep the process alive. That is why I am still working. It's not about the repetition; we still talk about it, we still change small things, we still think about changes in them, in me, in the work. And maybe if you had seen the performance from seven years ago, you would have said, ok, *this* and *that* has changed. But for us it changes a lot.

As for the other processes... with this play, when I started to work I had the script, the text, the adaptation finished, and I showed it and we started to work. First we made the film, and afterward the play. And this is what is a bit strange there are scenes in the film that come after the play, and it was a bit of a challenge to do the film first and then to develop the play with the actors. But this is part of the process. And in my next play, if I can talk about the other works *Three Sisters/What if they went to Moscow?* I started with a documentary called *Utopia.doc*, we did this documentary during residencies in Paris, Frankfurt, and Sao Paulo, we asked questions of people who move, who change their lives, about the past and about their wish to come back.

The three sisters of Chekhov wish to go to Moscow; what happens to people who really do that? And we talk about utopia, about dreams, about the situation of the world. For this documentary the actors, the three sisters, came with me to every place we did this in the houses of the people. I asked some questions, and then the people who participated answered these questions in a letter, and then we started to answer these letters as a performance or writers' conversation, we wrote texts. And then we started a *ronde*, a circle, and went to the houses of the people a lot of people from a lot of countries. Within this documentary, the three sisters went as an invisible performance. They went as the three sisters to listen to the answers. So there is a fiction inside of this documentary with the presence of them.

And after that we started to do the work. When we had this material inside of us, we started to do the work. The rehearsal period for this work was four months, because it is both a film and a play. Differently from *Julia*, in

which the film and the theatre is in the same space, with *What if they went to Moscow?* we had two plays, in a cinema, inside a theatre, in the same moment. And they also make a film in the theatre piece, they film inside the theatre, but I show the result in a cinema space. A while into the performance the audience changes their point of view, so you first see the theatre and after you see the film, you have the point of view of the cinema, and the theatre. And the script is different, so you have new formations depending on the way you look.

I did this because for me it is to put the audience in the same place as the three sisters; you imagine a place, you desire this place, leave this place, it is kind of a utopia for you, where you know that this place is close to you and yet it is distant. We used the film and the theatre in this kind of way. And this changes the relationship to the camera, to the apparatus. As a parenthesis, I never use the cinema or the video as *décor*, as a set, or as an illustration. For me the cinema is inside the dramaturgy, it is really to create with the cinema, and that's why I change the way I work with film... I never repeat, not because I want to do something "new" but because it really depends on what the work needs, what the relationship will be between cinema and theatre.

And to finish: the third part of the trilogy, *The Walking Forest*... If in *Julie* you can see the camera man, and in *What if they went to Moscow?* and this is important the adaptation is about the three sisters, only the three sisters appear in the play, the other characters are the technicians and the camera man, the male characters don't appear in this play... If in *Julia* you can see the camera and the camera is in front of you, in *What if they went to Moscow?* the camera becomes part of the audience the audience in the theatre is part of the film in some way in *The Walking Forest*... It's a big installation, and in it one can see four documentaries, and the camera is behind a mural and you are doing the film during the performance. So the cinema speaks to how you are part of the scene, how the audience is part of the system that is Macbeth, in the case of this play. This is just to explain that that idea is really to research the possibilities of the relationship between two completely different languages, which for me are in fact part of each other.

KHS: So finally, one more question. The thing about *Miss Julie* is also how it ends, with one of many famous female suicides, I would say, within classical theatre. There is even a line within the play that Jean has, where he says presumably to Miss Julie, but in my mind it is really directed at the theatre at large "It's horrible, but there is no other way for it to end". As the play has been performed for over a hundred years at this point, this line almost turns into a question: Is there no other way for it to end? And not to say too much about what you do with the ending, but this came up in yesterday's conversation as well what are your thoughts on this almost coercive or forced ending, and what can one do with that?

CJ: I didn't want to change the text of Strindberg. When I talk about adaptation it's not in order to do something different than what he did, it's about how I can fit what he did into the present. So is it possible to change? Yes, the possibility is there, I believe, but it's Strindberg's text.

KHS: The Swedish writer P.O. Enquist wrote about the end and I don't have the exact wording here that it is also one of the worst endings to a play, and many people do question it. If you psychologize the play, or even if you subject it to a socio-economic analysis, do all these things that happen really warrant the suicide, the ending of her life? But interestingly, Strindberg never actually writes in the play that the suicide takes place. He suggests that she exits, razor in hand, but we don't know...

CJ: Yes, exactly, it's not...

KHS: He opens the door in a way.

CJ: Yes.

KHS: But still you do have some time to think and to discuss, and in your version...

CJ: It is one possible end. It is not the only one, but I wanted to keep the possibility...

[laughter]

KHS: It's hard to speak about the ending without saying too much here and now. But it's something that I was thinking about, and that other people seem to have been thinking about too: is this a genre in and of itself, the female onstage suicide?

PL: Just as a comment I do want to say something about this, without it being a spoiler... One thing that I really appreciated with the play, I must say, is the closeness to the original text. I think that is part of the power, its ability to show how the text stays alive and stays relevant. That there are a lot of things added, of course, but there is also a closeness to the text where one can see or at least I experienced it this way a struggle with this text. It becomes very fruitful to not just put away the thoughts that don't seem immediately relevant, but to actually work with what is there. I really appreciated that.

CJ: Thank you. And maybe it's not only about the ending.

KHS: Another thing, which I can't really phrase as a question, but which has stayed with me and is somehow connected to this: there are some moments in which you let the actors comment on what is happening, in relation to the audience, and they say things like: "It is very difficult to say these things. It is very difficult to hear these things." There is thus a commentary on what it does to you to utter these words, to repeat the dramatic language of Strindberg in this case. Connected to that, there is also one moment where the cinematic scene cuts, and one of the actors seems to let go of character, while the other one doesn't want to, but is still angry, still upset, and holds on to the scene. Can you say something about those choices?

CJ: This is the second level of the dramaturgy. Because one level is the story of the two, but the second level and it's not there to distance the text, for me it's about going into the text but yes. One of the actors did want to stop and the other wanted to finish, and this for me is completely about what happens between the two characters in the play. It's also part of the three levels, like I said: one is to tell the story of Julie and Jean; the other is what happens between the two actors during the moment that they are doing the film but these actors are Julia and Jean also, in some way; and the third one is when the actors appear in the camera.

And also who is the camera? The camera man is part of this fiction. The relationship between Julia and the camera man is really important in creating this fiction. And surely for Rodrigo also. So that is why, when I talk about these invisible layers of the dramaturgy, it means jumping into Strindberg's text. But in order to enter I have to and this is a word I really like to use... It's what children use, with a stone. You do like this... [does a gesture]

KHS: A slingshot.

CJ: And then you do that in order to enter, that is the way to create more than one layer of dramaturgy. You push.

KHS: I am thinking also of how the actors greet each other, at the beginning, and how the technical crew is involved and also how they greet each other when it ends. It's as if they've done a round, like there is a boxing match either that they are in a team together, or that they are actually going to fight each other. There is a sense of sportsmanship around jumping in and just doing it.

CJ: Yes, yes.

KHS: And the performance really is an athletic endeavor, I would say.

CJ: It is.

KHS: At this point I would like to open up to questions from the audience. Many thanks.

Audience questions have not been included in this transcription.