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The Polemics and Potential of Theatre Studies and Performance¹

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Chapter 28: The Polemics and Potential of Theatre Studies and Performance¹

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This essay offers a brief history of the relationship between theatre studies and performance studies, and describes the trajectory of the theory/practice debate within both fields. My aim is pedagogical, in that I want to help students and practitioners of the field recall its theoretical past, and pragmatic, in that I'm concerned with how we use theatre and performance studies to teach students and ourselves productive ways to be what I like to call "citizen/scholar/artists" (Becker, 2000). Since my commitment is to the politics of performance and its scholarship, I'm most concerned with how we can think about teaching, creating, and theorizing performance as a public intellectual practice with the potential to intervene in restrictive or oppressive representations of human capabilities. In making this argument, I will trace the ways in which identity politics, the first theoretically inflected project to reject the more empiricist bent of the field, began to transform theatre studies from a more conventional academic pursuit to one with radical possibilities. I'll go on to describe the burgeoning of theatre and performance studies as interdisciplinary gold mines for scholars interested in the workings of culture; launch an argument about "teaching the conflicts" through performance; and then end with an exhortation for theatre and performance scholars and practitioners to return to a capaciously humanist, utopian performative approach to our mutual work.

Identity Politics and its Influence on Theatre Studies

In the last 20 or so years, the objectivity and empiricism of traditional theatre departments have been challenged mostly on the basis of identity politics, an approach

to the social in which categories like gender, race and ethnicity, class, sexuality, and ability offered primary lenses through which to view its workings. Identity politics as methodological tools rooted themselves in the critical and theoretical [p. 509 ↓] traditions of feminism, queer studies, critical race studies, and most recently disability studies, all of which prompted ideological adjustments with enormous impact on the field. In particular, feminism's application to theatre has insured that universal "man" can no longer be presumed as the objective or "real" subject of any performance, contemporary or historical. Along with feminism, critical race studies has had perhaps the largest, most visible influence, so that racial and ethnic categories, as well as gender, can no longer be elided responsibly, or located purely in instances of cultural impersonation like minstrelsy and black-face that absented people of color as subjects even while they derided them as objects of an imperialist white gaze. Margaret Wilkerson (1991), in an article that stresses the changing demography of American theatre, reminds theatre scholars that they will have to continue to rethink the Eurocentric history of their theory and practice if theatre programs are to succeed further into the twenty-first century. Wilkerson says, "Theatre provides an opportunity for a community to come together and reflect on itself ... It is not only the mirror through which a society can reflect upon itself—it also helps to shape the perceptions of that culture through the power of its imaging" (p. 239; see also Elam & Alexander, 2002; Hatch & Hill, 2003; Hatch & Shine, 1996; Uno & Burns, 2002). Wilkerson's aspiration for theatre requires that the discipline, and the scholars who teach it, look elsewhere than the Eurocentric canon for knowledge.

James Hatch (1989) offers a similar reminder of the continuing importance of criticizing racial and cultural exclusions in the contents and methods of theatre studies. Hatch excoriates theatre programs for continuing to overlook African influences in theatre history and African-American work in contemporary theatre. He suggests, "The roots of the problem are woven inextricably into America's social history and perpetuated by graduate programs in theatre departments. This continuing apartheid in an era when our scholars show increasing sophistication in national and multiethnic theatre history is unfair to students—and dishonest" (p. 149). Hatch and Wilkerson propose using knowledge gained from identity politics to infuse theatre studies' practices and methods with difference. Wilkerson says, "We can no longer teach or even study theatre as we have in the past. Those of us in theatre production programs will find ourselves

increasingly marginalized or isolated in our institutions if we do not include in very fundamental ways the new population (students of color and others) constituting our student bodies... The path-breaking scholarship in [other] fields is revolutionizing the ways in which we see ourselves and the places where we look for knowledge" (1991, p. 240).

Despite their location in academic institutions that sometimes militate against such thinking, university theatres, for example, could respond to Wilkerson's and Hatch's admonishments by offering a forum for embodying and enacting new communities of performers and spectators and by using their laboratories to enact the possibilities of difference. By doing so, they could become sites for more radical interventionist work. University theatres are spaces that might productively be given over to theories and practices of identity in all its complex intersectional variety, and studies of performance in all its aspects, rather than protected as museums to house imitations of the canonical white masterpieces of dramatic literature. Yet such moves remain surprisingly difficult. Panels at many professional conferences continue to address the unequal or misaligned representations of race and gender in the industry, in the profession, and in theatre departments, and panelists and participants continue to bemoan the lack of opportunities on their campuses for [p. 510 ↓] production work that includes attention to minoritarian experience. Even when the curriculum has improved attention to new ways of thinking about social identity in performance—through the addition of courses on women in theatre, gays and lesbians in theatre, people of color in theatre—and to critical approaches to the experience reified in canonical drama, production programs tend to lag far behind. Sometimes, these imbalances stem from the separation between theory and practice in many theatre and performance studies departments; sometimes, the excessively conventional seasons our departments offer come from an unimaginative notion of what audiences want to see and the kinds of theatre they're willing to attend. These shopworn ideas about spectatorship need to be overhauled to reinvigorate how our production seasons speak to our students' needs and those of the communities in which we work.

As Joseph Roach (1992) reiterates, after Raymond Williams, "The convergence of material productions with signifying systems inheres in the fundamental nature of theatrical performance" (p. 11). Because of such a productive convergence, theatrical performance offers a temporary and usefully ephemeral site at which to think through

various important questions about the representation not only of individual identities but of social relations within, across and among identity categories, and across communities and cultures. For instance, questions of the signifying body that determine how we read what bodies mean, by considering them as “signs” of meaning, are readily available by looking at actors' gestures and their relationships to each other in the physical space of the stage. Questions of how bodies in space exemplify social relations can be studied in the embodiment of texts as performance, and in a director's choices to position actors around a set or within an empty space. Because performance demonstrates the ways in which any reading is always multiple, and illustrates the undecidability of visual as well as written meanings, it provides a way of seeing identity as complex, as crossed with difference, and never as the static, innate, unchangeable thing it's described to be in other venues of social life. Performance allows an investigation of the materiality of the corporeal, since the presence of bodies requires direct and present engagement. Such questions can be brought to bear in the temporary communities that theatre-producing and theatre-going construct. Theatre scholars might productively borrow the language of science to explain their goals and methods. As Wilkerson has remarked, research universities understand the workings of “laboratories.”² Theatre studies might use the analogy, even while it discards its positivist trappings.

Performativity, Performance Studies, and Theatre Studies: A Personal Genealogy

The importation of identity politics to the academy, and their inflection with postmodern understandings of culture that privilege undecidability rather than truth, gave rise to theories that described identity as malleable and social, superficial and constructed, rather than innate and fixed. Theorists like Judith Butler described identity as performed, which gave rise to new notions of “performativity” as a way to talk about gender and sexuality, especially, as functions of surface rather than depth (Butler, 1990; see also Austin, 1962). The new language of performativity propelled performance to new visibility in academic discourse and participated in the project of unsettling white hegemony in the academy and in theatre studies. But the theorists who used the

metaphor of performance to talk about identity itself were mostly interested in the performance of identity constructions in everyday life, rather than in performance *qua* performance. As a result, feminist, queer, and critical race theorists seem to borrow the language of theatre without giving serious consideration to [p. 511 ↓] the artifacts that we prize in our study—the richness of performance itself.

The general introduction to Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach's edited volume, *Critical Theory and Performance* (1992), is insightful about the peculiar status of theatre studies as a discipline; performance scholarship, the editors note, has always crossed institutional disciplinary lines. Yet theatre scholarship belongs to a particular tradition,³ one that Reinelt and Roach recall has had a long history of theoretical speculation, now bolstered by the interest in critical theory across the academy. “Ironically,” Reinelt and Roach write,

the history of the discipline of theatre studies is one of fighting for autonomy from English and Speech departments, insisting on a kind of separation from other areas of study. It was necessary, politically necessary, to claim this distinctiveness, even at the expense of becoming somewhat insular and hermetic—a result that unfortunately became true of many departments of theatre. Now, however, it is even more necessary to recognize and insist on the interdependency of a related series of disciplines and also on the role of performance in the production of culture in its widest sense. (Reinelt & Roach, p. 5; see also Bottoms, 2003; Jackson, 2004)

The field of performance studies has come to encompass this broader approach to cultural production.

While theatre studies traces its genealogy through speech departments that once focused on the oral interpretation of literature, as well as English departments that focus on dramatic literature, performance studies has also branched off from several different genres of academic study. One prevalent form of performance studies incurs an equal debt to the transformation of texts from page to stage in speech departments, while another grounds itself in methods and theory borrowed from literary criticism, folklore, social science, and the study of popular culture and performance in everyday

life. The Department of Performance Studies at New York University has perhaps been the primary proponent of this latter, interdisciplinary, social sciences-based branch of the field, and Richard Schechner, an experimental theatre director working actively since the 60s, and a long-standing faculty member in NYU's performance studies department, historically has been one of its preeminent spokes-people. At a conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) in the mid-1990s, and in a "Comment" in *The Drama Review* (TDR) he published shortly after, Schechner argued that professional theatre training programs sell "snake oil" to students, and that they should be dismantled so that theatre can return to the humanities (and social sciences) through performance studies, in all its cultural variety (see Schechner, 1992, 1995).⁴ Essentially, he was arguing that so-called "professional theatre training programs," or any program that purports to prepare young students for a theatre industry in which they can hardly make a living, is offering a corrupt sense of possibility, and training undergraduates for a future that doesn't exist.

Schechner's comments, and a slowly building consensus among some scholars in the professional organizations that theatre studies could well be amplified by a broader attention to performance, led to various public debates about the relationship between the two fields. That debate saw the establishment of a performance studies focus group in ATHE, which eventually led to the formation of Performance Studies international (PSi) as a freestanding professional organization. In addition, performance studies divisions or subgroups have been established in the National Communications Association and in the American Studies Association, and the field has come to influence more and more the direction of work presented in the relatively august Drama Division of the Modern Languages Association. This infiltration of the professional organizations, [p. 512 ↓] which provide important venues for visionary work and its distribution, has had a large impact on the visibility of performance studies in theatre departments around the country, and has changed the status of "drama" as a genre study in English departments.

I was a graduate student at New York University just after it had converted its graduate drama department into the Department of Performance Studies in 1981. I originally returned to grad school because I wanted a supportive intellectual context in which to think about feminist theatre criticism. I had an activist artistic agenda that the feminist

political community in which I then lived in Boston wouldn't support, so I decided to see how the academy might facilitate and nourish my thinking. As I learned more about performance studies, it appeared that although I hardly knew what I was getting into, I'd made the right choice. In performance studies, I'd landed in a program that was proud of its resistance to traditional modes of knowledge, and that wanted to give students the tools to produce knowledge differently, through popular culture studies, interculturalism, and folklore. Performance Studies was nonconventional enough to enable feminism to carve out a niche there, which was important to my own nascent interest in feminist criticism and theory.⁵ The notion of performance could accommodate the marginalized productions of women's theatre. It offered methods through which to account for women creating texts of their bodies and their lives, whether as mimes in front of Greek theatres, or in upper-middle-class salons. A performance paradigm helped analyze these women's rejection of public architecture, which was in any case out of their reach, to create new meanings in private spaces in which they wielded some power.

As Dwight Conquergood (1991) notes, "Particularly for poor and marginalized people denied access to middle-class 'public' forums, cultural performance becomes the venue for 'public discussion' of vital issues central to their communities, as well as an arena for gaining visibility and staging their identity" (p. 187). Performance not only broadened what I could study, but it helped me understand how feminism could profit from thinking through performance as an embodied relationship to history and to power. The notion of performance could let me find Dick Hebdige's book *Subculture: The Meanings of Style* (1979), and use it to theorize about lesbian erotics and style as a performance of resistance. I charted my own itinerary through my own desires and, through performance studies, helped establish for myself an embodied relationship to poststructuralist theory, which was just beginning to be applied in feminism.

Through poststructuralism, I escaped from the essentialisms of some forms of feminism that promoted strict and rather conservative understandings of gender, race, and sexuality as innate; I moved outside the hegemony of authorship into an understanding of performance and theatre as "readerly" texts open to multiple interpretations, which I found very helpful politically in making my arguments; and I freed myself from searching for "true" politics to assert against the dominant, hegemonic "truths" from which I

thought theatre and performance could dissent. Although I later came to reassert some of the values that poststructuralist criticism and theory taught me to suspect (such as the usefulness of metaphysics and notions of truth), when I first applied poststructuralist ideas to my research on feminist performance, I found that they revolutionized my thinking in performance studies.

When I confronted a class of students as a first-time teacher in the School of Drama at the University of Washington in 1987, I had to explain my training in performance studies, and entice students to go with me as we revised the frame of reference through which to look at theatre. My performance studies education let me persuade them that the plays [p. 513 ↓] we read extended well outside the classroom, that they were artifacts of culture (what James Clifford calls “survivals”) that needed to be engaged, studied, and contested to figure out what they might tell us about how we live, but more importantly, how we might live (Clifford, 1993, p. 68). I encouraged students to stage cross-gendered versions of scenes from the canon in my play analysis class. We delighted in the fact that gender was a performative practice (although we didn't have that language then) that was part of our performances. Feminism brought me to an embodied approach to learning for which performance offered a strategy. Using performance in the classroom became a different epistemology, a way of knowing not just our selves, but also the world. Performance studies refused to privilege the text, and connected theatre and performance as what Schechner calls “restored behavior” (Schechner, 1985; see also Carlson, 1996; Schechner, 1988). These ideas invigorated my interventions into a more traditional theatre studies curriculum, and the classroom became a new site of my feminist activism around gender and representation.

Using Performance Studies to Reinvigorate Theatre Studies and Production Programs

I needed a politicized performance paradigm to generate ways of looking at theatre that aren't gilded with the rhetoric of highbrow culture, and with what Lawrence Levine (1998) calls its missionary attitude toward saving or guarding itself against an “uncivilized” public. I wanted to help find rationales for theatre studies and performance

in the academy and in culture that aren't about how they rescue people from degeneracy, but that clearly and forcefully articulate tools for cultural intervention, ways of engaging and thinking about social relations as we know them and as they could be. This remains a continuing struggle for several reasons: The ways in which theatre is viewed in the academy too often restrict it to something precious, or expensive, or irrelevant; the divide between theory and practice in our departments tends to work against a more broad-based commitment to performance as a public cultural practice; and American culture still predominantly views theatre as "entertainment," rather than as an important site of social understanding and political coalition-building.

For example, when I chaired the Department of Theatre and Drama at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the mid-1990s, bemused administrators tolerated my impassioned explanations of our work in theatre studies, but never appeared to take our department seriously. Our productions seemed pale imitations of work they hoped to see in New York, the real center of what they understood as theatre production.⁶ Our scholarship seemed odd in its interdisciplinarity; I recall the Dean of Graduate Studies, as I was trying to impress upon him the connections theatre studies has made with a number of different fields, asking why we needed to work in a theatre department. As Marvin Carlson (1992) has written, we have to be able to "say clearly what distinguishes theatre history from [other histories]," or the "university administrators, legislators, or funding agencies... may ... begin to wonder why our activity cannot be as easily taken care of by one or several of these other disciplines" (p. 92). The very interdisciplinarity that's invigorating the field could endanger it within universities and colleges always looking to streamline their administrative and academic structures.

At the City University of New York Graduate Center, where I chaired the PhD program in the late 1990s, I was impressed that, this being New York, people presumed they knew what it was we did in the Theatre Program. They still couldn't quite grasp that ours was a solely academic study of theatre, and turned to us occasionally for cheap entertainments. One year Carlson, my colleague at [p. 514 ↓] CUNY, was irate during the student demonstrations against the budget cuts when he was asked if the Program could put together some sketches, or something dramatic that might be effective on the streets. I had mixed responses to this request. On the one hand, I agreed with Carlson that we have to educate our institutional colleagues against the notion that our

labor is simply available to throw together skits. On the other hand, following more of a performance studies itinerary through this anecdote, I do think it would have been interesting to encourage our students and faculty to work with the protesters to integrate performance into their activist strategies. For the Theatre Program to be perceived in this new way would require a different kind of institutional educating.⁷ How can we offer what we know to student demonstrators and striking workers, to people without large public forums to share what they know, through performance? How can we offer performance as a tool that can be embraced and harnessed toward exactly that kind of public educational process, a process of difficult social change? Implicit here is a rationale for theatre and performance that extends well beyond the academy.

Theatre studies is in a unique position to experiment with the construction of knowledge and new ways of learning, precisely because many of its departments include production components that can embody the questions of content, context, theory, and history raised by its scholars. Through a performance studies model, we can think of performance as research, as part and parcel of the ideas we have to offer to the store of knowledge. Yet there remains something fundamentally divisive in how theatre departments are structured, carefully mixing and matching and sometimes blending practice and intellectual work rather than premising both on the other. The conventions of theatre training too often jealously guard the theory/practice split that hobbles our field. Caught up in still romantic notions of artistry as unthought, as unmediated by choice and work and modes of production, academic theatre practice often aspires to imitate “real theatre” that happens elsewhere and strives to replicate the high-art, elite centers of production that progressive cultural critics, often in their own departments, are simultaneously challenging. Preprofessional BFA and MFA programs often virulently insist on unexamined discourses of high-art elitism, as they prepare students to enter what is described monolithically as “the profession.” And as Roach (1999) has suggested, even the architecture of theatre buildings tends to separate our departments from the rest of the campus, removing theatre to sometimes isolated locations with ample parking and room to build shops, fly lofts, and large auditoriums (pp. 3–10).

Some departments, working through the challenges of identity politics, have built curriculum and created production projects to challenge traditional understandings of theatre as an art, and have immersed their students in performance as an art practice

with multiple articulations in the sociopolitical world.⁸ But the theory/practice split that rends the field has allowed many production programs to continue to describe the actor, especially, as outside of history, as objective, empirical, inspired not by context but by genius and canonical knowledge. As a result, these departments are often considered naive or irrelevant to the larger intellectual project of the university or college. Theatre departments generally haven't done very well at teaching new models for how to be artists.⁹

Theatre scholar Sandra Richards (1995) says that “given the evanescence of theatre, and its insistence upon subjectivity as part of its methodological approach, academics from other disciplines all too often view the scholarly validity of drama departments with varying degrees of skepticism; that ambiguity,” she goes on, “reproduces itself within departments as a contentious divide between practitioners and scholars, such that each group jostles to privilege its mode of activity, and the insights [p. 515 ↓] of one often do not inform those of the other” (p. 67). To counter this unproductive standoff, Richards considers herself as a “critic working in theatre ... whose directing constitutes a critical praxis addressed to a non-professional audience, and whose subsequent writing to an academic audience is partially shaped by those experiences” (p. 69). Such a dialectical movement keeps Richards from foundering in an unproductive debate.

Production could come to mean something much more vital in theatre departments and the communities in which they're located. Rather than succumb to the marketplace pressures of theatre, film, and television for which they're grooming some students, university theatres could take more risks, producing texts that might share with the academic and public communities something new about theatre, and about people's contemporary situation in culture. Too often, university theatres fail to use their resources to introduce their faculty and students and others to a new writer, a new performance style, a new issue or identity in the space of their stages. Rather than employing a pedagogical model of theatre production and practice, they adopt the market strategies of the industry they seek to emulate. The Broadway productions they replicate are more and more driven by market research, by audience surveys that determine the structure, shape, and narratives of mainstream product (Kakutani, 1998, p. 26). The cultural capital of seeing a Broadway show and reproducing it in a university theatre builds intellectual capital in theatre departments. But shouldn't

university theatres reach higher than that, and try to create performances that reach deeper, intellectually, artistically, and even spiritually?

Theatre departments, of course, are hardly free from the market pressures that influence their students. The circulation of academic, cultural, and financial capital drives their teaching and their research and the productions they select for their seasons in one way or another (Bourdieu, 1984). Departments need majors to survive in academic institutions that are now economically motivated, and they must be responsible for training their students toward some sort of financially viable future. But how can faculty more responsibly train theatre majors to think of their skills as critical tools, rather than encouraging their students' fantasies about their future stardom, inspired by an excessive American culture of celebrity? How can faculty persuade students that theatre degrees might make them employable later, or that a thoughtful use of their degrees can mean more, personally and politically, especially when they're young, than secure employment prospects? It sounds excessively privileged to suggest that an arts education is more important than a livelihood. But faculty committed to the arts know that they can offer important ways of structuring identity, of seeing the world critically, of thinking about and experimenting with social relations and their potential. Such critical and social thinking should be a vital part of any student's education.

Staging the Arguments in Theatre Studies

In addition to focusing the ways we teach theory and practice on their potential use in a wider social world, theatre and performance studies are ideal places to engage public debate through the methods of performance. Theatre studies might use performance and the built environment in which our departments are housed to engage students with the larger world, encouraging them to be not only scholar/artists but *citizen/scholar/artists*, not to participate in unselfreflexive nationalism but to use art and research, aesthetics and intellect to participate in a civic conversation about what "America" is and what it does. Such a vision of the university, in which various constituencies might cooperate to find a common social voice or political vision, has long made conservatives fearful, perhaps partly because such an activist intellectual [p. 516 ↓] environment would clearly contribute to shaping public life. Carol Stabile (1995), in fact, argues that the "culture wars" and the debates about political correctness that have long divided

college campuses were engineered by the first Bush administration during the Gulf War as a way to contain campus protests against this conflict and to manufacture consent (pp. 108–125).¹⁰ Whether or not one agrees with Stabile, the culture wars have succeeded, to a certain extent, in isolating progressive academics by making them appear doctrinaire and ridiculous (Gitlin, 1995; see also Rorty, 1998). Conservative rhetoric about political correctness has made progressives seem against a democratic notion of human community and for the “special interests” that have been disparaged in public culture in recent legislative initiatives against gays and lesbians, against affirmative action, and against welfare. The very identity politics that have opened up our field remain threatening to a government that retains a vested interest in supporting a powerful, “unmarked” elite (Phelan, 1993).

The terms of scholars' work need to change to connect more directly to a diverse public. Henry Giroux, for example, argues that literacy has to be reconceptualized as a critical cultural practice in which students become agents of their own lives by learning to understand the representational practices through which they're often excluded. “This is not merely about who speaks and under what conditions,” he writes. “It is about seeing the university as an important site of struggle over regimes of representation and over ownership of the very conditions of knowledge production” (Giroux, 1995, p. 249). Gregory Jay and Gerald Graff (1995) suggest that rather than trying to resolve them, we should “teach the conflicts.... The ‘politicized’ university ... would look to turn the campus into ... a community where empowered citizens argue together about the future of their society, and in so doing help students become active participants in that argument rather than passive spectators” (pp. 210, 212).

Actually staging arguments in theatre studies would make faculty and students more self-conscious of the public, progressive possibilities of theatre and performance. A good example of such a staging occurred in fall 1996, when white, Harvard/American Repertory Theatre-based *New Republic* critic Robert Brustein and the noted, often-produced African-American playwright August Wilson waged their own battle over universal versus particular knowledge, identity politics, and ways that theatre might engage with deeply contentious cultural issues. In the pages of the trade magazine *American Theatre*, Wilson argued that African-American plays should not be produced by white theatres, and spoke against color-blind and cross-race casting. Wilson's

argument, though persuasive in some respects, was an essentialist and modernist vision of identity politics. But Brustein's universalist, blindly humanist response suggested that art conquers difference, which makes attention to the specifics of identity irrelevant. In a later issue of *American Theatre*, Patti Hartigan, a cultural reporter from Boston, suggested that Brustein and Wilson should give their debate over to African-American performer/playwright Anna Deavere Smith to stage as a polemical performance in the style of her *On the Road* pieces. Smith, Hartigan suggested, could perform it for Brustein and Wilson and the theatre community, investigating its ideologies and its implications much as she did for Crown Heights and East LA. (Smith, 1994; see also Smith, 1997; Smith, 2004). Through performance, this debate about the meaning of theatre, and how it structures representations of our culture, might enter the lives and imaginations of a much larger community. Theatre people, Hartigan implied, should assume responsibility as public intellectuals and make our work accessible and relevant to a broad public audience.

[p. 517 ↓]

In fact, in January 1997, Smith moderated a public debate between Brustein and Wilson at Town Hall in New York City. Sponsored and organized by Theatre Communications Group, the sold-out event was one of the high points of the season, attracting a more ethnically and generationally diverse audience than typically appears for theatre productions in midtown Manhattan (Grimes, 1997, p. C9). The theatre buzzed with interest and excitement; people felt each other's presence as a necessary anchor. The liveness of the moment, and the investment in a very material commitment to a theatre community our presence represented, buoyed the spirits of the people in the large, cold hall. The evening was contentious and the power dynamics disconcerting, as Brustein and Wilson refused to cede ground to each other's arguments. Despite Smith's mediating presence, the debate framed poles of power in contemporary theatre, and still managed to leave out a wide spectrum of work and invested viewpoints. Many of the people attending were theatre-makers in their own right, who were discouraged from speaking publicly into the forum, making the evening two separate monologues instead of a true public forum about race and theatre in America. Smith read questions solicited from the audience in the second half of the evening, but Brustein and Wilson's responses only demonstrated the multiple layers of issues involved, rather than profitably untangling them to clarify, and the audience often

groaned in frustration when either of the two men would drastically miss the point. And although the evening focused on race, both men displayed blind spots when confronted with gender or sexuality issues. Still, the event was invigorating and moving, a heartening demonstration of how much people care about theatre. Why don't theatre departments and performance studies departments open their theatres to just this sort of debate, about racial issues, gender issues, sexuality issues, about affirmative action, gay/lesbian civil rights, immigration and welfare, or even about the ways in which academic courses and productions create knowledge in theatre and performance studies?

Another productive example of such public debate was staged at the ATHE conference in 1998, when the organization's Advocacy Committee programmed a plenary session on arts funding called "Showdown on the Arts in San Antonio." The debate was prompted by the city council's decision to cut the local arts budget by 15 percent, and to deny funding completely to the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, one of the city's most progressive producing organizations for the Latino and gay and lesbian communities. The city's defunding of Esperanza was widely seen as political—in fact, one of the city council members, who attended the ATHE panel, stood up in the audience to identify himself and to wave a flyer for Esperanza's gay and lesbian film festival as "evidence" of the organization's depravity. Although he was in the minority in the mostly liberal crowd, the panel framed various sides in the contentious local struggle and extended the questions raised into the national arena. The panelists disagreed vocally, and the audience lined up at microphones in the house to participate in the debate. The event proved one of the most stimulating hours at the conference and inspired much heated discussion that continued through the meetings. The plenary was an example of a more effective town hall meeting than the one that was actually held at Town Hall between Brustein and Wilson in New York. That is, the ATHE event allowed everyone who came to line up at the microphones strategically placed in the house so that they, too, could have a turn to speak into the public forum. The variety of comments, and the vehemence and urgency with which they were delivered, were themselves highly performative; the whole event was a wonderful example of performance in the public sphere.¹¹ Why shouldn't theatre faculty teach these and other conflicts, so that faculty and students can [p. 518 ↓] assume the moral accountability that publicly engaging difficult debate requires? Wouldn't it be exciting, relevant, and

educationally stimulating to regularly program town hall meetings in our departments for our students and for our community? Shouldn't there be contentious talkbacks after every performance that raise important issues about the production and how it relates to our lives? For example, theatre faculty might make their decisions about season selection open to faculty, students, and a wide public, who would discuss the kinds of plays that might be produced and why, taking into consideration the new knowledge and aesthetic values they might share and with whom. They might sponsor debates about curriculum with students, faculty, and staff from theatre and other departments, which could address how to balance new knowledge with canonical knowledge. They might explain the decisions they make as teachers and administrators about why they teach what and how they do, so that their choices are historicized and contextual.

In a graduate seminar I teach at the University of Texas at Austin, under the auspices of the MA/PhD program's emphasis in performance as public practice, we investigate what it means to be a public intellectual in the arts, trying to find ways to make our intellectual and artistic practices relevant to a wider public constituency that might follow or extend the town hall format. Students in this seminar have practiced these skills by producing speculative dramaturgical and critical and creative work that allows them to practice methods for centering performance in public debate and discourse. One student, for example, wrote an article for the UT student newspaper that contextualized an upcoming production of Wendy Kesselman's play *My Sister in This House* in the complex history of the real events on which it's based, arguing that the UT Department of Theatre and Dance productions could be made more vital for the wider UT student population. Another pair of students offered ways to situate the very complicated politics of Rebecca Gilman's play, *Boy Gets Girl*, thinking of a university theatre department as the site of its production and anticipating that its very complicated sexual politics would need some interrogation to escape the incipient sexism of the piece.

Another student staged a reading of a cut from Naomi Wallace's play *In the Heart of America* for the occasion of a conference on human rights at the UT law school, and another described a performance of *A Song of Greenwood*, which premiered in 1998 and was remounted in 2001 in honor of the anniversary of the Tulsa race riots in Oklahoma, describing, in the process, the movement of history across these two public events. Another student wrote to Austin's local weekly newspaper, suggesting a new mode of arts reviewing in which "critic colleagues" would engage each other's

work without the presumption of objectivity that too often limits the local dialogue about what the arts are and how they function in our community. Another student practiced for her colleagues portions of a site-specific, traveling performance that eventually took us all out into the streets of a local Austin neighborhood where we watched, as spectators moving and moved, an elegiac public performance that referred to losses we all incurred on 9/11. All of these projects and more exemplified the possibility for widening the public discussion of local arts practices, and for embedding those practices in larger discussions about pressing social issues.¹²

Radical Humanism and Situated Utopia as the Potential of Performance

After nearly twenty years of progressive scholars using identity politics to open up the sphere of discovery in the field, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we seem poised to reembrace a more radical humanism, [p. 519 ↓] one infused with the lessons about difference so useful to questioning the historically white, male canon. That is, the way we are subjects, or people in the world, is more complex now than ever. Our identities are less coherent; we see ourselves not just through one identity category (immigrant, African-American, lesbian, Jew), but through several simultaneously. As a result, how we identify within communities is also more and more complex. Theatre producing organizations often try to appeal through identity categories to spectators who are actually linked by geography or by desires that transcend the specifics of identity—they might live near the theatre, or they might share a common desire to attend the theatre, to see how it might speak to them, inspire them, and teach them something about their lives. Who they *are* can't be captured in simple categories, and what they *do* with performance—how they engage it and use it in their lives—is much more complex (Wolf, 1998, pp. 7–23). As a result, the idea of doing an “African-American play,” or an “Asian-American play,” simply to appeal to those presumptively clear identities, even in a theatre with a mixed-race population, is rather ludicrous, as the category is much too simplistic and too narrowly identity-based to be meaningful. Likewise, it's become more and more difficult to teach courses about only one area of identity, like “gender” or “race,” and much more important to find ways to teach all the

vectors of identity as mutually influencing our theatre and performance practice and reception. I find that when I combine all the terms of identity into a course syllabus, other themes sometimes become more pressing and apparent. Considerations of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and the other categories of identity are urgent in the work my students and I study, but often, our materials are organized around issues like contemporary production practice more generally, or around a question like what it means to be a public intellectual in the arts. More and more, I'm interested in pedagogy that looks at performance as a public practice, and concentrates on what it can *do* in the larger world.

As I've demonstrated throughout this essay, one of my primary goals is to train my students to use performance as a tool for making the world better, to use performance to incite people to profound responses that shake their consciousness of themselves in the world. Perhaps this is a utopian belief, the idea that theatre can do any of those things. Yet that's the depth of reaction for which I long when I go to the theatre—I don't think we should expect anything less. Theatre remains, for me, a space of desire, of longing, of loss, in which I'm moved by a gesture, a word, a glance, in which I'm startled by a confrontation with mortality (my own and others'). I go to theatre and performance to hear stories that order, for a moment, my incoherent longings, that engage the complexity of personal and cultural relationships, and that critique the assumptions of a social system I find sorely lacking. I want a lot from theatre and performance.

I've argued here for the ways in which theatre studies in the academy might be engaged as a site of progressive social and cultural practice. I urge students to be advocates for the arts, to be theatre-makers committed to creating performances of insight and compassion, and to become spectators who go to see performance because they want to learn something about their culture that extends beyond themselves and the present circumstances of our common humanity (Dolan, 2001a). I've argued that theatre and performance create citizens and engage democracy as a participatory forum in which ideas and possibilities for social equity and justice are shared, and I've suggested how we might reimagine theatre studies programs to meet these goals. The final thought of this essay takes the same beliefs, the same faith in theatre's transformative impact on how we imagine ourselves in culture, and applies it more closely to performance itself. While I'm still addressing the ways in which [p. 520 ↓] theatre and performance studies promote citizenship and subjectivity, I'd like to end by imagining how a commitment to

theatre and performance as transformational cultural practices might offer us, in fact, glimpses of utopia. As theatre and performance scholars and practitioners, we might revel in what Peggy Phelan (1993) calls the nonreproductive capacity of performance, while arguing that its ephemerality is partly what helps it build community. And as performance scholar Diana Taylor (2003) argues, despite its ephemerality, performance also offers an archive of human experience, and a repertoire of cultural practices on which we can rely to ground our histories and build our futures. How can performance, in itself, be a utopian gesture? Why do people come together to watch other people labor on stage, when contemporary culture solicits their attention with myriad other forms of representation and opportunities for social gathering? Why do people continue to seek the liveness, the present-tenseness that performance and theatre offer? Is the desire to be there, in the moment, an expression of a utopian impulse? I believe that people are often drawn to attend live theatre and performance for emotional, spiritual, or communitarian reasons. Desire, perhaps, compels us there, whether to the stark, ascetic “spaces” that house performance art, or to the aging opulence of Broadway houses, or to the serviceable aesthetics of regional theatres.¹³ Audiences are compelled to gather with others, to see people perform live, hoping, perhaps, for moments of transformation that might let them reconsider and change the world outside the theatre, from its macro to its micro arrangements. Perhaps part of the desire to attend theatre and performance is to reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other. I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture. Such desire to be part of the intense present of performance offers us if not expressly political, then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like.

Seen through the lens of performance, the possibility for utopia doesn't only happen when the lights go down and the “play” begins. I've argued in this essay for the importance of considering production, and the “backstage” work of performance, as equally important sites of inquiry into how identities are constructed, rewarded, made visible, and understood. Extending this investigation into the possibility for utopia, for instance, might let us see rehearsals as a place to practice not only the performance at hand. Director Anne Bogart, in fact, says, “I often see my rehearsal situation as utopian. Rehearsal is a possibility for the values I believe in, the politics I believe in, to exist

in a set universe which is within the room” (Bogart, 1995, p. 182). She suggests that rehearsals are the moment of utopian expression in theatre, when a group of people repeat and revise incremental moments, trying to get them right, to get them to “work.” Anyone who considers herself a theatre person knows when something “works”—it’s when the magic of theatre appears, when the pace, the expression, the gesture, the emotion, the light, the sound, the relationship between actor and actor, and actors and spectators, all meld into something alchemical, something nearly perfect in how it communicates in that instance. We all rehearse for the moments that work, and critics look out for them, when they’re still idealistic enough to believe in them. Through an itinerary of performance, we can enlarge the potential territory in which something might “work” to the social frame of performance and look more widely for a glimpse of utopia (see Schechner, 1988).

I’ve been moved by the palpable energy that performances that “work” generate; I’ve felt the magic of theatre; and I’ve witnessed the potential of the temporary communities [p. 521 ↓] formed when groups of people gather to see other people labor in present, continuous time, time in which something can always go wrong.¹⁴ Surely any gathering can promote community. But Herb Blau (1982) once said that watching live performance is watching the actor dying onstage; I think sharing that liveness promotes a necessary and moving confrontation with mortality.¹⁵ The actor’s willing vulnerability perhaps enables our own and prompts us toward compassion and greater understanding. Such sentiments can spur emotion, and being moved emotionally is a necessary precursor to political movement (see Cohen, 1991, pp. 84–85). Anna Deavere Smith (1995) says, “The utopian theatre would long for flesh, blood, and breathing. It would be hopelessly old-fashioned in a technical world, hopelessly interested in presence, hopelessly interested in modes of communication requiring human beings to be in the same room at the same time” (pp. 50–51). By clinging to the fleshy seductions of old-fashioned primal emotion and presence, Smith’s work spurs political action by reminding us, perhaps, that however differently we live, our common, flesh-full cause is that in performance, we’re dying together.

Theatre can move us toward understanding the possibility of something better, can train our imaginations, inspire our dreams, and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change.¹⁶ My concern here is not with the content of performance

—not necessarily with plots or narratives that *address* utopia, but with how utopia can be imagined or experienced affectively, through feelings, in small, incremental moments that performance can provide. As Richard Dyer (1992) says, “Entertainment does not ... present models of utopian worlds... Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents ... what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production” (p. 18).¹⁷ These feelings and sensibilities, in performance, give rise to what I'm calling the “utopian performative.” In many ways, utopian performatives gesture toward my own desire to knit together performativity and performance, bringing real performance to the site of so much invigorating theoretical discourse. Borrowing from J. L. Austin (1962), utopian performatives describe moments which, through their *doing*, allow audiences to experience, for a moment, a sense of what utopia would feel like were the claims of social justice movements realized.

A utopian performative is like a Brechtian *gestus*; it represents, in a crystalline moment of performance, an understanding of social relationships full of potential, full of warmth, desire, caring, and love. Utopian performatives sometimes derive from a kind of performed romanticism found, for example, in solo performances by Peggy Shaw or Deb Margolin (see Dolan, 2001b, 2003). Romanticism is an affective address that, like love, has been perhaps banished too long from our discussions of performance or research (see Domínguez, 2000).¹⁸ Dyer notes, “Romanticism is a particularly paradoxical quality of art to come to terms with. Its passion and intensity embody or create an experience that negates the dreariness of the mundane and everyday. It gives us a glimpse of what it means to live at the height of our emotional and our experiential capacities—not dragged down by the banality of organized routine life” (Dyer, 1995, p. 413). This intense, utopian romanticism is what creates those moments of magic and communion in performance that I'm calling utopian performatives; they lift us from our more prosaic lives, into an almost exalted sense of what life *could* be like, if we lived the “what if” instead of the “as is.”¹⁹

Anthropologist Victor Turner's (1982) notion of “*communitas*” in social drama very much describes what I'm calling utopian performativity in performance. He says, [p. 522 ↓] “Spontaneous *communitas* is ‘a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human

identities,' a deep rather than intense style of personal interaction. 'It has something "magical" about it. Subjectively there is in it a feeling of endless power.'" Turner asks, "Is there any of us who has not known this moment when compatible people—friends, congeners—obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as 'essentially us' could sustain its intersubjective illumination?" (Turner, 1982, pp. 47–48). These moments of *communitas* offer springboards to utopia.

I've also argued, earlier in this essay, the importance of teaching students to be critical, engaged citizen/scholar/artists, people who can bring their passion to spectatorship just as easily as they can to their artistry. I was struck recently, teaching a class of graduating senior theatre majors, how rarely some of them even go to see theatre or performance, and realized how important it was for me, as one of their last instructors, to instill a sense of commitment to our mutual artistic pursuits. As performance scholars and students, one of our primary goals should be creating a new generation of passionate spectators, who'll become the new arts advocates and intellectuals, as well as the artists. The passion of the audience explains why live performance continues; the desire to see it, to participate in its world-makings persists. People in my generation must instill such desire in people in the next. I want to perpetuate experiences of utopia in the flesh of performance that might performatively hint at how a different world could feel.

I know that at the end of a more sober essay about the possibilities for institutional change around the production of theatre and performance knowledge, I'm suddenly risking sentiment; I know that community and theatre, like utopia, can be coercive, that nothing is outside of ideology, and that nothing is ever, truly, perfect. But I believe in the politically progressive possibilities of romanticism in performance, what Dyer (1992) calls "the intensity of fleeting emotional contacts ... and the exquisite pain of [their] passing" (p. 413). I believe that in performance, we can achieve moments of spontaneous *communitas*, which Turner (1982) says "is sometimes a matter of 'grace'" (p. 58). "Communitas," he says, "tends to be inclusive—some might call it generous" (p. 51). This, for me, is the beginning (and perhaps the substance) of the utopian performative: in the performer's grace, in the audience's generosity, in the lucid power of intersubjective understanding, however fleeting. These are the moments

when we can believe in utopia. These are the moments theatre and performance make possible.²⁰

Notes

1. This essay was adapted and rewritten from the author's book *Geographies of Learning* (2001a) and her article in *Theatre Journal* (2001b).
2. She made this remark as an audience member at an ATHE conference panel in 1998 on emerging scholarship and institutional issues in the field. This panel took place on 14 August 1998. Panelists included Shannon Jackson, Jay Plum, and Stacy Wolf, and I moderated.
3. See some of the essays in Postlewait and McConachie, particularly Vince, for narratives of theatre scholarship's "tradition."
4. Schechner (1992) is quoted as saying, "Get out of the phony training business and into the culture business." A performance studies focus group is now well established in ATHE, and has been instrumental in the formation of a new association called Performance Studies international. PSi intends to remake the practices of professional associations, attempting to resist the typically conservative impulses of institutionalization while it charts new territory in this still growing field.
5. Bottoms (2003) raises important questions about what he sees as the implicit homophobia of performance studies as Schechner espoused it early in its development. Although a certain amount of misogyny was also present in the NYU training in the early 1980s, the department as a whole [p. 523 ↓] still provided a context in which nascent radical critiques could flourish.
6. For further explanation of the centrality of New York as the scale by which all theatre is measured, university and otherwise, see Wolf, 1994 and 1998.
7. These misreadings of our program as only about entertainment or theatre practice persisted. In preparation for the opening of the Graduate Center's new building at

Thirty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue in fall 2000, I was asked to serve on the “Arc of Celebration” committee. People couldn't fathom why I wasn't interested in encouraging students to do some performances to honor this event. My explanation that our program is strictly academic, rather than one in which students act and direct, was completely opaque to my colleagues on the committee. This seems to me a misunderstanding of the intellectual, as well as the practical, value of theatre studies. And while, had students been interested in performing for the event, that would have been just fine, the administrators' presumption was about “entertainment,” not about performance as research or social intervention.

8. For instance, the undergraduate program in theatre at San Francisco State University has a curriculum that encourages the theory and practice of performance to be applied to activism. And the Performance as Public Practice emphasis in the MA/PhD Program at the University of Texas at Austin, which I head, is committed to investigating through scholarship and performance research the ways in which people engage performance as a social act with larger political and cultural ramifications. These two examples offer just a glimpse of the kind of more culturally inflected curricula now beginning to appear in theatre and performance studies departments in the United States.

9. See Becker, 1996b, for a creative, politicized, and pragmatic approach to training artists in a postmodern era. See also Becker, 1996a, and Becker, 1994.

10. The “culture wars” generally refer to a public discourse of the late 1980s through the 1990s in the United States in which conservative commentators accused leftist academics of dogmatism and “political correctness,” which they defined as a doctrinaire attitude towards social identity (see Gitlin, 1995, for example, and Dolan 2001a, for a counterargument). The culture wars also tend to refer to the public funding debates of this era, in which, for instance, artists Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, and queer performance artists Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Karen Finley were denied funding by the National Endowment for the Arts for reasons that were egregiously political. For a discussion of and bibliography on this aspect of the culture wars, see Dolan 2001a.

11. Jaclyn Pryor has kindly pointed out that Esperanza has regular events called *platicas*, which are similar to town hall meetings in that they allow Esperanza to practice civic engagements in large public forums. I'd like to thank her for this insight.

12. These presentations/performances were by Abigail Self, Elia Nichols and Kim Dilts, Shannon Baley, Kevin Hodges, Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, and Jaclyn Pryor. Baley and Hodges went on to create Living Newspaper performances based on international workers' rights for the "Working Borders" Human Rights Conference at the University of Texas at Austin in February 2005. Bonin-Rodriguez, Jaclyn Pryor, and I are now collaborating on a project of revisionary writing about performance that we call, inspired by Bonin-Rodriguez, "colleague criticism." And Pryor's piece became *floodlines* [sic], her MA thesis at the University of Texas, which was performed in April 2004 and remounted in April 2005 as part of the Refraction Arts Fusebox Festival in Austin.

13. As Holly Hughes says ironically, "Theater tends to happen in theaters, whereas performance art tends to happen in spaces. A theater will be defined... as somewhere with a stage, some lights, a box office, a dressing room, head shots, and people who know how to run these things. A theater is a place that has been designed for theater, whereas a space has been designed for some other purpose: it's a gas station, an art gallery, somebody's living room, a church basement, and it's always better suited for pancake suppers and giving oil changes than for performing" (Hughes 1996, p. 15).

14. Playwright Sarah Schulman quotes performance artist Jeff Weiss, who said to her in reference to the AIDS crisis, "We have a moral and ethical obligation to persist in the living of real (as opposed to 'reel') time. That is the power of theater. We're all in this together, at the *same* time. We're totally engaged in being human together, sharing the identical instants as our time advances, parallel, in unison" (Schulman, 1998, p. 61).

15. Blau's comment is actually, "When we speak of what Stanislavski called Presence in acting, we must also speak of its Absence, the dimensionality of time through the actor, the fact that he who is performing can die there in front of your eyes; is in fact doing so. Of all the performing arts, the theater stinks most of mortality" (Blau, 1982, [p. 524 ↓] p. 83). I'd like to thank Amy Steiger, who reminded me of the exact quotation by citing it in her MA thesis in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin, spring 2001.

16. These ideas, of course, resonate with the important work of Brazilian radical theatre theorist and practitioner Augusto Boal, who sees theatre as a “rehearsal for revolution” (Boal 1979).

17. See also Jameson, in which he suggests, “The hypothesis is that the works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated” (1979, p. 146).

18. Domínguez argues that love and affection have a place in cultural (even in scholarly) discourse. Domínguez is writing specifically to scholars in anthropology, but her comments on the necessity for love and affection in our discourse resonate usefully here. See also Sandoval (2000). See also Dolan (2005) for a discussion of German philosopher Ernst Bloch, whose theories of utopia were quite influenced by romanticism. Bloch's philosophies undergird my ideas here.

19. For a useful discussion of the utopian implications of exploring the “what if” instead of the “as is,” see Wickstrom and the other essays in the special issue of *Modern Drama* devoted to utopian performatives (Dolan, 2004).

20. I'd like to thank my research assistant Jaclyn Pryor for her perceptive editorial advice and her patience with the mechanics of citation in preparing this essay for publication.

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