



A New Paradigm for Theatre in the Academy

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TDR Comment

A New Paradigm for Theatre in the Academy

Note: The following Comment was spoken by Richard Schechner at the keynote panel of the August 1992 Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) national conference in Atlanta. Schechner's remarks were enthusiastically received and at follow-up meetings work began on developing a Performance Studies "focus group" within ATHE. The organizers of the focus group invite people from the performing arts, the social sciences, history, and other areas to join; both ATHE members and nonmembers are welcome. For more information contact Sally Harrison-Pepper, School of Interdisciplinary Studies, Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056; tel: (513) 529-5643; email: in%harrison-pepper_sally@msmail.muohio.edu.

Multicultural

First, let me dispel an illusion. A multicultural American society is as difficult and perhaps as unfulfillable an ideal as "the melting pot" was. Multiculturalism as currently celebrated is the identical opposite of the melting pot. Multicultural America is a kind of great civic parade during which each group publicly displays, and takes pride in, its own distinct qualities, its quintessential self: African American, Irish, Navaho, Hispanic, Hasidic, Korean, Jamaican, . . . and so on. Groups are accorded respect while individuals are offered "equal opportunity." The 1990 Los Angeles Festival was multicultural. The world, or at least the Pacific Rim, was on display, one people at a time. But who in the Festival was calling the shots? The corporations and government agencies bankrolling the Festival? Participating artists? Ethnographers, critics, and other culture professionals on hand or imported to observe, advise, and opine? Spectators? Do the folks who decide America's spending priorities, who run its biggest corporations, who decide its foreign policies really want Chicanos or Korean Americans or Native Americans or African Americans or gays or feminists to have as much credence and power as they themselves have? Even in 1992 we have had but one Catholic president of the United States, no Jew, no black, no Native American, no Hispanic, no Asian American. How many Americans can imagine as their president a black lesbian? And if not, why not? Even as a diversity of cultural styles is encouraged in the arts, fashion, dining, and popular entertainment, questions of power, politics, and values go begging.

Intercultural

The intercultural is different than the multicultural. The intercultural subject is the difficulties brought up by multiculturalism, the misunderstandings, broken languages, and failed transactions occurring when and where cultures collide, overlap, or pull away from each other. These are seen mostly not as obstacles to be overcome but as fertile rifts or eruptions

full of creative energy. Interculturalism is neither a settled issue nor a panacea. Think of it rather as the focus of problems, an arena of struggle.

Intercultural conflicts are everywhere in today's America and include the arguments over what should constitute a college education. Before outlining what I am proposing, a little history. At first, theatre in the academy was an adjunct of literature, or an extracurricular activity. The focus was on drama, on play texts. Then in the late 1950s, with the emergence of the professional regional theatre, colleges and universities shifted their focus toward "professional" and "preprofessional" training. For some time, practical work in theatre crafts with the implicit promise of employment "in the profession" has been the main work of theatre departments. Dozens of programs offer professional training as their main allure. Just look at the advertisements in *Theatre Journal*.

But how many "professional training programs" are as good as their ads claim? Schools cram into an undergraduate major or an MFA an impossible-to-accomplish mix of practical training, dramatic lit, and theatre history producing graduates who are neither professionally trained nor academically educated. But the quality of the training is beside the point when measured against what awaits most graduates. What percentage of graduates find their life's work in the regional theatre, on Broadway, in television or film? How many teach at colleges? If young surgeons were theatre BFAs or MFAs, they'd be saying things like "Hey, after getting my MD, I only waited tables for six months before landing a temp as a nurse's aide. And last year I got a shot at a tonsillectomy." Who doesn't know talented actors who think themselves successful if a year or two out of school, they've landed a few commercials, some regular work on a soap opera, and two roles in the regional theatre? And we all know embittered actors or ex-actors, well into their forties, scraping the bottom of the barrel. How well do playwrights and directors fare? Technicians and designers do somewhat better, but even their futures are not all roses.

Is this art? Is this a profession?

Is this what entering freshmen or first year graduate students are promised in those enticing advertisements?

The fact is that theatre as we have known and practiced it—the staging of written dramas—will be the string quartet of the 21st century: a beloved but extremely limited genre, a subdivision of performance.

Students in too many so-called professional programs are triply cheated: there aren't enough jobs, many students are not trained well enough to compete for the jobs there are, and very few receive a sound, basic academic education.

At the same time, "performance"—so powerful and useful a paradigm for understanding human social action both on the personal and cultural levels—was not and is not being taught either to specialists who might become college teachers, to would-be theatre artists, or to ordinary students.

If most theatre departments really don't train professional artists; if those who are trained can't find jobs because the market is flooded; if most departments don't produce either working professional artists, innovative scholars, or relevant scholarship; if elite live performance such as the so-called "legitimate theatre" is shrinking relative to film and TV (even as popular entertainments are growing)—then why do we need so many theatre departments? Too many theatre departments for too long have been frozen in place, changing details but avoiding examining what might be their full potential role in the university and in American society. It was not money alone that brought the Stanford drama department to the brink of elimination. How many of today's theatre departments will be around 10 years from now?

Here is where my two themes join.

The cultural crisis signaled by multiculturalism and interculturalism can be creatively met by radically changing theatre departments' goals and curricula. Most theatre departments should get out of the professional training business and rejoin—and reform—the humanities in a big way. A new paradigm for the field needs to be developed and deployed. Professional training for the orthodox theatre—a very small slice of the performance pie—is neither economically enough nor academically acceptable. The new paradigm is “performance,” not theatre. Theatre departments should become “performance departments.” Performance is about more than the enactment of Eurocentric drama. Performance engages intellectual, social, cultural, historical, and artistic life in a broad sense. Performance combines theory and practice. Performance studied and practiced interculturally can be at the core of a “well-rounded education.” That is because performed acts, whether actual or virtual, more than the written word, connect and negotiate the many cultural, personal, group, regional, and world systems comprising today's realities. Performance, of course, includes “the arts” but goes beyond them. Performance is a broad spectrum of entertainments, arts, rituals, politics, economics, and person-to-person interactions. This broad spectrum enacted multiculturally and interculturally can do much to enhance human life.

It is not only a question of studying different cultures from a scholarly perspective, but of seeing and doing rituals, dramas, celebrations, and festivals from Africa, Asia, Europe, Native America, and Latin America. Some of the experimental work along these lines going on at the new Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull and at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver might serve as examples of how to begin to research and mount such productions. Courses should address how performances are used in politics, medicine, sports, religion, and everyday life. Popular culture needs to be given serious attention. Theories need to be developed exploring the four great realms of performance: entertainment, education, ritual, and healing and how these interact with each other. The complex and varying relationships among the performance quadrilogue—authors, performers, directors, and spectators—ought to be investigated using tools increasingly available from performance and literary theorists, social scientists, historiographers, feminists, and semioticians. The whole range of performance activity—training, preparations, warmups, performing, cooldown, and aftermath—must be studied in detail. All this work needs to be accomplished by combining practical experience with research and fieldwork.

Obviously, experts from and of the genres and cultures being studied must teach. Students need to practice various kinds of social customs, dress, religious observances, and aesthetics. Cultural performance practices ought to be compared as well as studied for themselves. The samurai-warrior codes of kabuki theatre could be compared to the values of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*. Dance styles could be traced from West Africa to Brazil, the Caribbean, and the U.S. where they have been dominant in choreography as different as Fred Astaire's and break dancing. The Easter cycle play of the Yaquis of Mexico and Arizona could be compared to Europe's Oberammergau Passion Play—including a discussion of the impact of colonialism on the Yaquis and the strategies they have developed to deal with it. Scenes from Sanskrit dramas can be staged as students study portions of the *Natyasastra* comparing this Sanskrit treatise on dramaturgy with Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Two very serious questions arise. What's going to happen to the Western canon? And who will develop and teach this new curriculum? Really, the two questions—or are they objections?—are one. The challenge is to

deal with the Western canon in ways that make it relevant to today's, and tomorrow's world. Where does the canon end? How does one enter it? How can one speak of the American canon without including in it the experimental theatres of the past 40 years? And how can these theatres be included without teaching their methods of production, their deconstruction of texts, their ways of workshoping and training? How many theatre departments deal effectively with performance art? How many teach Chekhov both in relation to Peter Stein's orthodox and masterful *Cherry Orchard* and the Wooster Group's *Three Sisters* (aka *Brace Up!*)? Or compare in practice as well as through books and videotapes the techniques of Richard Foreman with those of Brecht? As far as I can tell, at most colleges and universities the shift from drama to theatre has hardly happened in terms of either scholarship or performance practice. Practice is still dominated by various derivations of Stanislavskianism. Hardly any attention is paid to training people in the techniques of performance art or other non-naturalistic practices.

It is even worse when it comes to popular entertainment—which is the true Elizabethan theatre of our day. American society is a riot of performances—rock concerts, discos, electioneering, wrestling, con games and stings, college and professional sports, voguing, street theatre, parades, demonstrations, and a panoply of religious rituals ranging from staid old church services to hot gospel sings, to the rituals of Asian and African religions, to the practices of New Age Shamanism. Hardly any of this rich performance culture gets noticed in theatre departments. These worlds of performance ought to be the subject of theorizing, fieldwork, and live classroom presentations.

Of course today's theatre departments do not have the faculties to teach performance as I am defining it. We can begin to train such a faculty by urging our brightest young professors to research intercultural performance, non-Western performance, experimental performance, and popular entertainments with a view to developing curriculums as well as staging, documenting, and writing about works and events. Certainly, we at NYU's Department of Performance Studies would welcome "visiting scholars" to participate in what we are exploring, doing, and thinking.

But to develop new curriculums we need not only retrained faculty but new faculty. We must with urgency seek many more people of color, and women, to join our faculties. At the same time, of course, we need to actively recruit a diverse student body. Again, the problem here is more than just money, though money is very important. The Reagan and Bush administrations have wounded and abused education just as they've hurt all kinds of social and artistic programs. But beyond money, a really diverse student body will demand different kinds of courses which a young and eager-to-make-something-new faculty will offer. So the coloring of the professorate, the coloring of the student body, and the coloring of the curriculum go hand-in-hand.

I am optimistic about accomplishing all this. I agree with Joseph Chaikin who wrote in *The Presence of the Actor*: "On the stage you do not have to regard situations with the same degree of finality as in life. There it is possible to create and repudiate circumstances of your life" (Chaikin 1972:68). We gather today possibly in a moment of creative repudiation, that is, a moment to make a new beginning.

—Richard Schechner

Reference

- Chaikin, Joseph
1972 *The Presence of the Actor*. New York: Atheneum.