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# An Intellectual History of *Performance* in Our Time

John G. Blair

My purpose is to sketch briefly my understanding of the process by which the concept of *performance* has reached its present status of influence within intellectual and academic circles in the English-speaking world. I write not as an insider from within the world of Performance Studies but as an onlooker, curious, even intrigued, a chronicler of trends and a projector of potential futures.

The status of performance concepts seems to be lower in Switzerland than in Britain or the USA, not to speak of Australia or other foyers of active interest in Performance Studies. Nonetheless it behooves us as professional students of the English-speaking world to give attention to one of its newest intellectual trends, whatever promises it may keep or break in the long run. The logical place to begin is with theatre.

*Performance*, of course, is native to the world of theatre but not, until rather recently, to the academic study of drama. The reigning conception, as of the late 19th-century creation of chairs in Literature, was that the three classical modes of epic, lyric and tragic should, in modern contexts, be re-encoded as contemporary genres: novel, poetry, and drama. Drama in such a frame seemed obligatorily to be taken as referring to a printed text to be read by readers, a parallel dictated by novels and poems as the more prestigious genres. Under such conditions, drama as a literary genre was thoroughly walled off from drama in performance, otherwise known as theatre. Theatrical expertise might be pursued as professional training in a variety of “drama schools,” outside and later inside universities.

This separation of “training” from “education” resulted in impoverishment on both sides, though it was easier for a theatre person to learn from academic commentators than vice versa. Few academics took seriously the basic literary ontology of this genre: that plays are written not to be read but

to be experienced as a spectator. Put another way, the readers for whom a play script is designed are members of a production company, just as surely as the score of a symphony is destined for performers, not listeners. For music this is not a problem, thanks to medium-specific notation which only those trained as performers can decipher. For plays any reader has access to the text, perhaps encouraged by the independent publication and marketing of play scripts, more in this century than last.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, however, teachers of literature have started integrating performance values into their study of drama. In this context a play text becomes a matrix of performative possibilities, hence differing interpretations, any of which may differ from one production to another. Because the study of English as a foreign literature takes place where professional-quality theatre productions in English are rare, the availability of VHS videotapes is particularly relevant. Recent academic attention to media studies authorizes taking seriously video records of performances on stage, on film or on television.<sup>2</sup>

Attending to performance values not only galvanizes the literary study of drama as a genre, but it also opens culture-studies perspectives that are unique to this genre. At the last SAUTE conference on Family, I claimed that modern American Drama provided a uniquely useful indicator of cultural concerns of the time a play was first produced.<sup>3</sup> The same applies for as many times and circumstances as a play may be re-produced later. As a historical fact, any play which is not performed soon after it is written is unlikely ever to find an audience in the theatre. As students of drama in cultural context, we can attend to the kind of audience that was attracted to the initial production(s) and then track later productions to follow how such concerns evolved over time. I believe that these cultural factors are particularly rele-

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<sup>1</sup> In the USA 19th-century playwrights before the Civil War tended not to publish their works or sold copyrights to producers who refused publication in order to control production rights at their textual source.

<sup>2</sup> The number of plays available in productions recorded on video is remarkable. In the case of American drama, I have published a list of nearly 200 plays (works originally written for the stage, not adaptations from fiction or other media) which have video versions listed in the catalogues. See "American Drama: Text and Video," *American Studies International* 34 (1996): 1-17. It is true that any serious study of film and television versions requires a willingness to devote time and energy to isolating the media factors affecting such productions, but I personally believe that a critical media awareness, including basic observational acuity, now at the end of the century needs to be part of our Departmental curricula. In this spirit, a media module has been one option within the introductory literary course at Geneva for the last several years.

<sup>3</sup> "Representations of the Family in Modern American Drama," in *Families*, ed. Werner Senn, SPELL 9 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1996), 117-28.

vant to our work here in Switzerland, though they obviously carry wider implications as well. In any case I hope it is clear that the present concern for *performance* claims to be relevant and potentially productive for both research and teaching.

Whether in the theatre or in the universities, recent developments depend ultimately on the notion that *performance* is a mode of representation. Because it normally is articulated through human beings, including their bodies, it can be seen as providing alternatives to purely verbal discourse. Indeed, intensive attention to the training of actors, in particular their bodies, has been central to the experimental theatre groups prominent in the *performance* movement. The body, then, can be cultivated as an alternative to the excessively intellectual, whether coded "masculine," as by some feminists, or "repressed," as by Freudians or others with a psychological orientation who seek to liberate the creative potential of human beings. Some roots of these movements reach back to Dada if not beyond; Blake and other Romantics have been called on as sponsors of periodic revival movements, in theatre circles and beyond, seeking to turn back to pre-literate, even pre-conscious sources of creativity and potency in action.

Performance Studies in their recent development reach far beyond the theatre. Anthropological interest in shamanistic healing techniques runs parallel to theatrical attempts to free the body to find its own expressiveness. But to begin to catalogue such ramifications would be self-defeating. They have become so multifarious as to defy enumeration. It is also not enough to say that all performance involves three obvious components which might merit attention separately or in combination: performers, performances themselves, and spectators. A moment's reflection reminds us that these three entities may be collapsed into simpler groupings, ultimately into a single entity as when an individual seeks self-definition through performative action.

In order to make sense of such diverse possibilities in summary fashion, I want to isolate three distinguishable but related strands of development which are primarily associated with the academic flowering of *performance* concepts.

First: globalization as a conceptual phenomenon, most pertinently the collapsing of the Us-Them binaries that ruled conceptions of the "Western World" during the recent half century when the Cold War dominated conceptualization in so many intellectual domains. This binary opposition between the Western and Eastern blocs was, of course, far from original. In longer term perspective, the "Free World" and the "Communist World" often



functioned as a replay of the older Civilization versus Savagery frame. As the Cold War aged, from outside that master trope came non-Western input from sources that could not readily be contained in East-West dichotomies, most influentially from Victor Turner's anthropological concern for liminal states, particularly among the African peoples on whom his field work concentrated.<sup>4</sup> This anthropological openness produced memorable theatrical applications carried out or sponsored by such figures as Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook, but the figure I concentrate on here is Richard Schechner of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, partly because his mutually stimulating interactions with Victor Turner resulted in his theorizing Performance Studies in the widest possible frame.

My second developmental strand I'll call postmodernism, which became explicitly linked to *performance* at least as of 1977 when Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello edited a collection of papers entitled *Performance in Postmodern Culture*. This volume announced a penchant for performance perspectives in an astonishing range of contexts. Though it included an essay by Victor Turner on liminality and the carnivalesque, the concerns of the Derrideans and others associated with this movement were less anthropological than philosophical. They sought, as in Jerome Rothenberg's lead article in this collection, to extrapolate recent "performance art" trends into a fundamental rejection of the premises at the basis of "Western Civilization" from the Renaissance on through "Modernity."

My third strand is related but distinguishable. It concentrates on intellectuals with ties to postmodern lines of reflection but whose primary loyalties were to promote social change in sensitive areas like "identity" or gender or sexual preference. These writers turned to *performance* as a complex of concepts that promised an alternative to essentialist conceptions of sexuality, identity and even health. Since this group had often clashed with the more philosophically inclined postmodernists, their move to adopt performance perspectives promises a possible *rapprochement* between the two, both of whom share hostility to traditional Western conceptions.

At the end of my remarks, I will return to a fourth strand involving the History of Science, which I interpret as a self-promotional move by certain adherents of Performance Studies. The effect of applying terminology to science such as "theatre of proof" (Bruno Latour) has the effect of demystifying the credibility of science as a source of cultural authority in favor of

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<sup>4</sup>Another thrust of Turner's work can be found in cultural studies, as studied in *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism: Between Literature & Anthropology*, ed. Kathleen M. Ashley (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990).

performance factors. I interpret this move as an attempt to supplant the cultural authority of "science" with that of "performance studies," a calculated contribution to the ongoing *agon* we sometimes call culture.

First I need to remind you that there is nothing new in calling on *performance* concepts as metaphors for wider human concerns. Shakespeare's eloquent disquisition on all the world a stage is often identified with the motif of *theatrum mundi*, but even earlier a genre of books emerged as of the mid 16th century identified by historians under the label of *theatrum naturae*. These texts, several hundred of them by the time the genre ran out of steam in the 18th century, situate the reader as a spectator contemplating a stage on which are displayed the richness and variety of the Creator's handiwork. The *theatrum naturae*, in short, provides an adaptable frame within which any number of marvels can be displayed as if performed for human benefit and curiosity.<sup>5</sup>

To clarify the flowering of performance studies over recent decades, I must proceed in summary fashion, but I want to start with literary criticism as I first knew it at the time of my induction into its world in the 1950s at Brown University. I say "induction" because the military associations of the word seem, in retrospect, particularly appropriate to the functioning of orthodox New Criticism which was then completing its hegemonic triumph over traditional biographical and literary-historical scholarship. The strategic assumption was that we were analyzing texts considered on "their own terms" – no more biographical fallacy, no more tendentious historicism, above all no political ideologies, but a celebration of literature as art form – marvels of unity accomplished amidst riches of complexity and irony within each text by each author who proved "worthy of study." The ruling notion of the canonical was still heavily larded with inspiration from as far back as Matthew Arnold and "the best that has been thought and said."

The strong boundary assumed to wall off each text from historical and/or political contexts served, I believe in retrospect, to support – in unacknowledged fashion of course – the American, if not the Western, war effort, that is, Cold War effort. The Soviet Union and everything it spawned were uniformly tainted, in the rhetoric of the time, with "ideology" (read "Communism") whereas the Great American Way of Life was free of such ulterior motivations. Celebrating literature as Art, of course, also served the Professors of Literature as professional self-promotion by defining the specificity and high cultural status of their area of expertise.

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Blair, "Theatrical Metaphors" in *The Theater of Nature: Jean Bodin and Renaissance Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 153-79.

The notion that in retrospect proved central to that enterprise and those that later rebelled against its constraints was that of *boundary*. Kenneth Burke, who was generally considered as a maverick at the time, turned out to be a prophetic figure. His emphasis on “dramatism” applied much more widely than to literature alone, but with this notion he broke the established boundaries by insisting that “texts” could not reliably be understood without concern for macro-contexts, particularly the complex of factors loosely evoked by the notion of “motives.” Burke identified five key terms of “dramatism”: “what was done (Act), when or where it was done (Scene), who did it (Agent), how he did it (Agency), and why (Purpose).”<sup>6</sup> In such a perspective the Act itself, analogous to the literary text, could no longer make sense as autonomous, and indeed this tendency to break out of tight framing repeated itself in several related academic domains as Cold War intensity waned.

Semiotics, for instance, initially seemed to advance by tight boundary definitions on the messages being communicated, but then blurring enriched and complicated the notion of signification because so many factors of production and reception could be shown as modifying if not ultimately constituting the “message.” Marvin Carlson in his recent overview of the development of performance studies identifies Erving Goffman as pivotal in applying such performative semiotics concepts to social behavior, as in his *Frame Analysis* (1975).

I am tempted to claim that parallel changes affected the discipline of Linguistics over recent decades. Chomsky’s frame of language functioning purely as a system unto itself is later broadened by “Pragmatics,” associated most visibly with Dell Hymes of the University of Virginia. Similarly, in some philosophical circles at least, the pure but self-undermining philosophy of language of a Derrida elicits revived interest in Pragmatism as the only American philosophical school, most visibly associated with Richard Rorty, also of the University of Virginia.

The tendency to explode the constraining frames of 1950s thinking was, of course, going on simultaneously in more and more diverse domains than can possibly be tracked here, but I need to explore at least three of particular relevance.

The first of these is another Cold War frame that identified the “Western World” as worthy of defense compared to the “Eastern bloc.” This binary framing seemed for decades to constitute geo-political reality, but its arbi-

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<sup>6</sup> Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) as cited in Marvin Carlson, 36-7.

trariness and artificiality were revealed in the rapidity with which that frame dissolved between the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the formal dismantling of the Soviet Union a few years later.

The leading influences in breaking out of the Western World frame in what became Performance Studies came from anthropology, notably from Victor Turner's work on diverse African groups. Extending Arnold Van Gennep's work of early in this century on rites of passage, Turner developed a cluster of concepts around liminality, a key concept for describing special types of rituals. Though the liminal started out to characterize a step beyond the ordinary into special states activated by out-of-ordinary events such as puberty rites or social conflicts, these in time came to seem to Turner a crucial part of all social and cultural functioning, for which his overall term was "social drama."<sup>7</sup> Degrees of boundary maintenance and permeability were constantly being affirmed and sometimes changed as cultures attempted to cope with changing circumstances, both internally and externally. Ritual, then, no longer implied a rigid repetitiveness from one occasion or one generation to the next, but a state of "in-betweenness" in which conservative tendencies vie with impulses to innovation.

Drawing inspiration from collaboration with Turner and extending it into a commanding position in the new field of Performance Studies is Richard Schechner, now Professor of Performance Studies at New York University, an active theatre innovator himself and visibly central to the field through his editorship of *TDR*, formerly *Tulane Drama Review*, now simply *The Drama Review*. Schechner has broken the Western World frame in ways explicitly involved with theatre by actively studying performance traditions in such varied cultures as India, Japan and Indonesia. The goal of these researches is less to borrow practices from relatively exotic others than to bring to consciousness the unspoken premises which constitute a *Western* theater and hence a *Western* World. Such self-awareness of where we have long resided but could never conceptualize clearly before is a primary goal of the still wider field I would identify as comparative culture studies, but in Schechner's hands the focus remained for a long time theatre-oriented.

In recent years, however, Richard Schechner has gone on to theorize performance in ways which extend the applicability of such concepts very broadly, perhaps even infinitely. "Performance," he says in his 1985 book *Between Theater and Anthropology*, "means: never for the first time. It means: from the second to the *n*th time. Performance is 'twice-behaved be-

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<sup>7</sup> The most indicative work here is Turner's *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982).

havior' (36)." From there he derives inclusive notions of performance as beginning the first time a piece of behavior is reenacted and ending only when performers and/or spectators lose interest in reflecting further on what went on. This startling conception opens the door very wide indeed, and partly under Schechner's sponsorship a series of annual Performance Studies conferences, starting at NYU in 1995, have brought together papers on a startling range of subjects. These annual conferences do a disservice to *performance* to the extent that they glibly imply that it supercedes every other concept of interest in any of the human or social sciences disciplines. Perhaps I can summarize the breadth of current aspirations by citing a solicitation of candidacies for a post at Northwestern University as visiting professor of Performance Studies for the year 1997-98. Candidates are invited to present research and teaching strength in at least two of the following areas:

performance theory;  
 postcolonial performance, literature and criticism;  
 feminist theory, gender studies and performance;  
 performance and technology;  
 critical and cultural theory;  
 performance of literature and adaptation.<sup>8</sup>

One is tempted to ask what the hiring department might NOT want to be included.

In order not to imply that such breadth of application of performance concepts is limited to the USA, here is a list of some of the conferences sponsored in recent years by the Centre for Performance Research in Aberystwyth, headed in recent years by Richard Gough (note the progression).

1988 Theatre, Anthropology and Theatre Anthropology  
 1989 Performance, Nature and Culture  
 1990 Performance, Politics and Ideology  
 1993 Performance, Ritual and Shamanism  
 1994 Performance, Food and Cookery  
 1996 Performance, Tourism and Identity

Since my point is not to mock the expansionist tendencies to which this or any other trend-setting concept is subject, I stop here. Instead I offer as an appendix a more constructive and focused example of where Schechner's broadening has led: a manifesto from late 1996 for a new Australian periodical.

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<sup>8</sup> Citing e-mail discussion list PERFORM-L, 19 November 1996 (see Appendix).



cal entitled, with an echo of Victor Turner, *Limen* (literally, "threshold"). Note from the outset that this information is reprinted from the Performance Studies e-mail discussion list, which is housed at Richard Schechner's home institution. Similarly this "interactive journal" basically functions out of its web site at Murdoch University in Australia. A truly up-to-date concept-complex requires such cyber-credentials to confirm its contemporaneity.

The Manifesto makes explicit the aspiration to treat *performance* concepts as epistemology, as enabling cross-cultural comparisons, and a fresh rethinking of standard Western concepts such as body, time, space, person, event, process, experience, etc.

Note that the editors of *Limen* fret about the possibility that *performance* might slip back into a primarily theatrical turn. In fact, I see quite an opposite danger: that increasing breadth of performance concept may finally grow, by a kind of disciplinary elephantiasis, to englobe *all* other possibilities. In reference to Schechner's broad definition, for example, one is entitled to ask what would be an example of human behavior which is NOT already behaved, and thus *performed* in one sense or another? Any action is *always already* conditioned by prior actions, by personality, by "identity," by culture. Even going as far back as the womb would not allow us to discover something spontaneous and unconditioned because from the moment of conception a certain genetic inheritance is always already at work. Prior to that moment in time, certain Darwinian factors have affected just which males and females will have a chance to come together, and soon after that moment of conception the outcome will be affected by what the mother-to-be eats.

By calling on the postmodernist code phrase "always already," I do not want to commit my whole discourse to this perspective but only to point up how Schechner's formulation functions imperialistically to reach out inclusively toward all human action. Whether he intends it or not, *performance* as he conceives it becomes a contender in the larger *agon* of human attempts to understand humanity and its world(s), an aspect of the subject I reserve for my conclusion.

Having introduced postmodern philosophical notions leads me further into their relation to *performance* concepts that have even less to do with theatre than Schechner's concerns. As Jacques Derrida and others undermined the notion of reality encoded in language as locatable anywhere in the physical or cultural world around us, a considerable number of traditional philosophical concerns began to lose their interest. *Performance* then seems to refer to a realm which has a certain kind of reality in the sense that it can be observed and analyzed even if it can be said to represent nothing perma-



nent or reliably “true.” Therefore a scholar can still perform credible work by describing the reality affirmations evident in various performances, say Schechner’s assessments of theatre in Japanese *No* and *Kabuki* or Indonesian shadow puppetry or India’s days-long city-wide religious drama festivals. The move is roughly analogous to the development of psychological realism by late 19th-century novelists like Henry James or Stephen Crane or Joseph Conrad or indeed many others: if the writer loses confidence in the ability to convince the reader that “reality” is being depicted in direct narration, a shift to a second-level focus affirms that the text at least credibly records a certain character’s perceptions of “reality.”

Either within or without literature, comparing and contrasting differing reality affirmations serves at the very least to call to consciousness previously invisible presumptions of one’s home world of representation, a primary function of performance studies as culture studies. Once consciousnesses have been raised a bit, however, the arbitrariness of one’s home culture is likely to seem inescapable, affirming anti-essentialist or anti-foundationalist understandings of the world. Here is where two groups of thinkers influenced by postmodern thinking diverge and sometimes openly conflict. The lurking split is between those whose primary interests are properly philosophical, such as Jacques Derrida, and others whose primary loyalties are to social and political activism, a desire to make the world a “better” place.

The Derrideans are primarily concerned to free their hearers from traditional beliefs about the world. Basically the claim is that what starts out in a world of words, let’s call it discourse, can never get outside words to affirm unambiguously any other kind of “reality.” Hence words do not *mean* but only *play*, as in Derrida’s famous pun in French between *je* (“I”) and *jeu* (“game”) that had such an impact on the English-speaking world as of the John Hopkins conference of 1966 on the languages of criticism and the sciences of man. If “reality” dissolves into word games for a Derridean, that deconstructive process can carry its own pleasures and indulgences.<sup>9</sup>

The social activists can be represented here by Judith Butler of the University of California at Berkeley. For her gender is not an essential concept but a performative one. For example, speaking in 1996 in Switzerland, she identified five gender identifications as possible in the USA today: hetero-, homo- bi-, trans- and post-. Another of those American growth industries. In such a world sexuality need be neither a fatality nor a stability. Certain sex-

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<sup>9</sup> There are more ominous versions, as in Stanley Fish’s emphasis on power games.

ual acts may be chosen at one time or another without determining any fixed "identity" because identity is performed one action at a time rather than inscribed in some fixed ontology. Even if every fresh act is always already conditioned by what came before, there is a saving margin of possible innovation or negotiation between each individual and a sexual identity which is constantly emerging. Not only are women (and men) not defined by the sexual equipment they happen to be born with, they are not bound to perpetuate the kind of sexual acts that have characterized them in the past.

In recent years this kind of conceptual search for liberation from dominant cultural patterns has been associated primarily with feminist and homosexual activists, but obviously it can apply to any aspect of "identity," which as a concept becomes exploded into multiple and ongoing possibilities.<sup>10</sup> Identity as performance, then, accomplishes a freeing of individuals from the hegemonic control of "the society" or dominant elements within it.

By extension, once we have opened this line of reflection, performance clarifies many other human domains as well. Health emerges as a performance. This concern goes far beyond a revived anthropological interest in shamans as health performers. Within Western medical discourse it has proved difficult to explain why is it that dangerous but continuously present microbes suddenly seem able to 'infect' a body. Disturbances in the immune system sometimes explain the moment of falling ill, but a more promising line of development follows from redefining health as a performance. In this case, as in the cases of sexual identity or gender identity, the subjective participation of the individual concerned is thereby acknowledged as an indispensable factor in the equation. Medicine in this way loses some of its scientific rigor and exactitude but at the same time gains in recognition of human factors that seem "real" even if unpredictable.

The introduction of *performance* concepts into the History of Science seems to me to merit particular attention. I am thinking here primarily of Bruno Latour, who divides his academic time between France (L'Ecole des Mines) and San Diego, and his book *The Pasteurization of France*. His key term is the "theater of proof" which Pasteur orchestrated in order to gain

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<sup>10</sup> Here yet another Cold War postulate falls by the wayside. Erik Erikson was the chief theorist of identity and its crises as of the late 1940s. He focused on adolescence as a crisis period, postulating that once an individual found his or her identity, a productive adult life became possible. One should expect to have one identity and to try to discover it as quickly as possible. From a 1990s perspective it seems preposterous to suggest that any human being might have only one identity: that is what happens under extreme and unacceptable human conditions as in Bosnia where human beings tended to be reduced to a single monovalent identity as "Muslims" or "Serbs" or "Croats."

credence for his microbe theory of disease. Pasteur chose a certain farm at Pouilly-le-Fort near Melun for a demonstration to which all sorts of government experts and journalists had been invited. Two groups of sheep, one vaccinated (identified by a hole in the ear) and the other not, were exposed to anthrax. The unvaccinated sheep all died, performing precisely in accordance with Pasteur's well publicized predictions. His credibility soared, resulting in massive government funding for a new Pasteur Institute and immense prestige for this new theory of disease. Of course we in the 20th century are increasingly conscious of all that Pasteur's microbe theory *cannot* explain about ill-health, but Latour's primary concern is to demystify Pasteur's procedures for securing cultural credibility, thereby dethroning *science* as a source of knowledge or cultural authority. Pasteur was self-consciously introducing a new social agent (invisible microbes) and their representatives (those who study microbes) into the competitive complex of "social agents" influential in French life of the time. This deconstruction of science differs in kind from the examples given so far in that it promotes a *performance* concept, the "theater of proof," as a factor in explaining the evolution of reigning attitudes and definitions of reality in a culture. I take Latour's analysis as an act of bearding the lion in his den: science, despite its decline in authority since the high point of 19th-century confidence that it would in the long run solve all problems, still carries immense cultural prestige. Despite Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and other self-limiting concepts from within modern physics, despite the Club of Rome and its pessimistic forecasts about the effects of technological "advance" on the viability of our earth, science still carries the best hope most humans can see for improving future conditions for humanity. Latour's move is to refigure science as yet another mode of performance, thereby denying it any superior claims to credibility. The point is made explicitly not by Latour, but by a young performance theorist associated with the New York University center: "Scientific theory is every bit as speculative as performance theory."<sup>11</sup>

This move is not innocent, as I read it, but a self-conscious promotion of *performance* to new heights of credibility on its own. In the world of disciplinary imperialism in which we still live, there does seem to remain one metanarrative alive and well (*pace* Derrideans), that is what the Greeks called *agon*; Adam Smith, the "invisible hand," others, the "marketplace of ideas": the ongoing competition between rival philosophies, schools, persuasions, all seeking to solicit that scarce resource which I would call human

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<sup>11</sup>Gary Maciag on PERFORM-L, 15 April 1996.

credence. Human beings do have a certain margin of choice about what they are going to take seriously, what they are going to believe in, at least for now. Education is a process which is designed at least in passing to enlarge the range of choice for those who take it seriously. But skepticism is always available as an option and noisy rivalry fills the air (and the pages) all the time. The goal of this process is not altogether clear, but for us as heirs of the Greeks, it seems to be a way of affirming that we are still alive, able to argue and to disagree, while the latest persuasion displays its wares by claiming that all rivals offer mere epiphenomena compared with its "realities."

One final question: will *performance* be able to sustain indefinitely its appeal as an explanatory key to matters of contemporary concern? Not indefinitely, of course, in the logic of *agons* past and present. If not, what are the limitations which are likely to generate challenges to this concept-complex in the future? Like most contemporary orientations, this approach undermines most possibilities for credible generalizations, whereas all the evidence we have is that human beings will continue to crave, to transmit and to live by stereotypes and other forms of general assertions. When there seems to be no basis for improving the quality of generalizations, as in some form of "reality check," to that extent transmissions from authorities to subordinates will remain undisturbed and unimproved. Education will have only limited effects and attempts at communication across lines of difference, cultural and personal, will continue to be difficult at best.

As a quick example from within the theatrical world, consider for a moment Peter Brook's valiant effort to create a simulacrum of Indian theatre within a Western frame, the nine-hour *Mahabharata*. From India itself comes a theatrical critic, Rustom Bharucha, with a denunciation of the whole project as neo-colonialist in the venerable Western tradition of borrowing self-indulgently from the colonized in the name of a universal to which the West claims privileged access (pp. 68-87). Granting the centuries of imperialistic exploitation of such universalizing concepts as "civilization" and, more recently, "science," I nonetheless deplore the reflex refusal to approve even the motivation behind attempts to transcend differences. Over past years, even centuries, it may have proved all too easy to overlook differences in an unself-critical search for generalities, but to the extent we see ourselves as inhabiting a world where only differences seem legitimate, it will be hard to get any act together which is more than local in range or significance.

The neo-nominalist tendencies of our time, then, tend to swing the Western pendulum far towards particularities as they discredit general perspectives. The balance will have to be redressed one of these days, but it is hard

to predict when. In the interim which we call the present, *performance* serves as a diffuse yet suggestive focus for attention aimed at escaping some of the binds that have traditionally constrained "Western" thinking about the world.

Even if I resist imagining the unlimited extension of performance concepts, I want to close by underlining what they have already contributed positively to contemporary intellectual life. As a complex of concepts *performance* is obviously attuned to the contemporary world with its extraordinarily mediatized self-consciousness. Such concepts help us to analyze the functioning of diverse conventions of representation as they construct and enact our world. But these same concepts invite us to become aware of how many cultural phenomena function as performances (all?), even when they did not use to seem so. In short, *performance* concepts call attention to artifice, to constructs, to the workings of culture, even where the long-standing Western tradition has tended to perceive "Nature" at work rather than culture. Whatever seems sanctified as "natural" appears beyond artifice, beyond reproach and beyond changing. For centuries now, "nature" has seemed to a majority of humans enculturated into the Western world as the fundament of the "real." As long as such premises prevail, it is not possible to identify how very much of our heritage is in fact cultural, including our idea of "nature." After all, not all cultures around the world share these premises, though all have been subject to intrusions through the last centuries of Western expansion and its subtenant world system. Performance studies, in short, perform palpable deconstructive work in undermining essentialist views of "nature," thereby encouraging broad-minded perspectives on the "human" in all its astonishing diversity.

### *Appendix*

#### INTERNET PROSPECTUS FOR A NEW PERFORMANCE STUDIES JOURNAL

From: IN%"perform-l@lists.nyu.edu" 19-NOV-1996 "Discussions in Performance Studies" ANNOUNCING> LIMEN: The interactive performance journal

by Kaos Theatre Australia <pmorle@central.murdoch.edu.au>



KAOS THEATRE (AUSTRALIA) AND MURDOCH UNIVERSITY  
are proud to announce the launch of LIMEN: the interactive performance  
journal.

URL - <http://kali.murdoch.edu.au/limen/>

Readers of LIMEN are also – quite tangibly – writers. LIMEN is constructed around the philosophy that scholarship and thought should be dialogical endeavours and not monological statements.

LIMEN is probably one of the more fully “peer-assessed” journals in the field as it passes through two filters of assessment. Firstly it passes through the LIMEN Editorial Review Board and then it passes through the reader/writership of the users.

The journal is intended for practitioners and scholars alike in an attempt to bring into contact the two worlds of activity. In LIMEN extreme theory and extreme practice can co-habit within the domain of thought, bridged by the threads of the user.

#### A MANIFESTO FOR LIMEN

“Performance” as a major challenge and alternative to Modernist Logocentric thinking and a focus of interdisciplinary research no longer needs legitimizing as such. We are all familiar now with attacks on the primacy of “text” in Western thinking, and on the way that performance has expanded from its old sense of simply the theatrical realisation of a text to its new status as a spectrum of events, of which theatre is only one. Already, contributions to the investigation and definition of “performance” have been made by psychologists, physicists, cognitive scientists as well as sociologists, anthropologists . . . the list can be extended almost indefinitely.

But certain dangers and misconceptions still undermine this enterprise:

- slippage back into “theatre”;
- a reductionist methodology trapped in a “hermeneutic circle”;
- residual cultural arrogance unaware of the contributions which have already been made not to mention those still latent in non-European cultures;
- a continuing resistance by “the profession” to “theory,” let alone philosophy;



- a continuing ignorance from “the theorists” to the philosophical achievements of “the profession”;
- the continuing division between the “sciences” and the “soft” disciplines;
- a lack of precision in terminology;

LIMEN is dedicated to:

- a philosophical investigation of Performance as an epistemological system;
- research into the precise meaning of key terms such as “event,” “process,” “experience” (not to mention “liminality” . . .);
- research into the nature and significance of performance time, space, person, object, etc;
- cross-cultural research to identify the nature of “performance cultures,” “performance psychology,” “the performing body,” “archaeology,” “anthropology”. . . ;cognitive, “chaotic” and other overlapping paradigms;
- hypermedia as a new frontier for performative thought;
- debate between “theorist” and “practitioner.”

In other words, a “Performocentric” alternative to the old Logocentric paradigm. . .

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