

# The Fate of the Dramatic in Modern Society: Social Theory and the Theatrical Avant-Garde

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## Abstract

Avant-garde theatre is often invoked as the bellwether for a society that has become postdramatic – fragmented, alienated, and critical of efforts to create collectively shared meanings. A theatre whose sequenced actions have no narrative (so the story goes) mirrors a social world where the most conflictual situations no longer appear as drama but merely as spectacle: a society where audiences look on without any feeling or connection. Because only half right, these theses about postdramatic theatre and society are fundamentally wrong. As modern societies have expanded and differentiated, the elements that compose performances have become separated and often fragmented in both theatre and society. If they can be brought back together again, performances are viewed as authentic and meaningful. If (re)fusion cannot be achieved, performances fail to communicate meaning. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that a shared ambition to (re)fuse fragmented performative elements has defined the most important strain of avant-garde theatre over the last two centuries. Most radical theatrical innovation has sought to open live drama back up to the telos of myth and ritual. Neither in theatre nor social life can the world transcend dramaturgy; it is fundamental to the search for meaning in a world beyond cosmological religion.

## Keywords

avant-garde, cultural sociology, dramaturgy, narrative, performance, poetics, spectacle

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This was the joke. [You] got out a metro Boston phone book and tore a White Pages page out at random and thumbtacked it to the wall and . . . throw a dart at it from across the room . . . . And the name it hit becomes the subject of the Found Drama. And whatever happens to the protagonist with the name you hit with the dart for like the next hour and a half is the Drama . . . . You do whatever you want during the Drama. You're not there. Nobody knows what the name in the book's doing . . . . The joke's theory was there's no audience and no director and no stage or set because . . . in Reality there are none of these things. And the protagonist doesn't know he's the protagonist in a Found Drama because in Reality nobody thinks they're in any sort of Drama. (David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (2009: note 145: 1027–1028))

Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006 [1999]) has recently conceptualized a movement to the 'postdramatic' that eerily resembles the joke about Found Drama that David Foster Wallace spins in *Infinite Jest*. Examining a stream of contemporary avant-garde theatrical productions for evidence of dramatic practice and theory, Lehmann announces the end of theatre as we know it. The Aristotelian format of drama has been displaced, he declares, and theatre has moved on to the next evolutionary phase. We are now in the era of postdramatic happenings, staged projects with no discernible plots or written texts, peopled by characters devoid of internal emotional life. Drama now consists of simple projections of bodily movements; stages filled with isolated and opaque iconic objects; temporally sequenced actions without meaningful connection; and theatrical scenes that unfold simultaneously and cacophonously, whose presentation is shot through by such non-theatrical art forms as music, sculpture, or painting.

Rather than dramatic representations, written texts, theatrical lineage, and social languages that make staged performance intelligible, in contemporary theatre, Lehmann claims, 'the moment of speaking becomes everything' (2006: 76). Rather than a 'temporal, dynamic formation' generating suspense, theatre becomes simply serial 'occurrences' (2006: 133). Rather than audiences sharing interpretations and forging common feelings into emergent 'community', there is now mere 'heterogeneity' (2006: 132–3). Rather than a 'warming' contact between actor and audience, the interface has become 'cold'. Not only is contemporary theatre 'detached from all religious and cultic reference' – a separation that defined modern drama for centuries – but 'the whole spectrum of movements and processes that no referent' (2006: 69) at all. Instead of meaningfully organized mise-en-scene, the scenes of postdramatic theatre possess simply 'heightened precision' (2006: 69).

Lehmann sees convergence between the postdramatic in theatre and performance art. Performance art not only joins postwar aesthetics in challenging the equation of art with the beautiful or sublime; it rejects the very notion of a fixed, final, and material product. Presenting itself as an alternative to 'pictorial or object-like presentations of reality through the addition of the dimension of time', performance art, like postdramatic theatre, emphasizes 'duration, momentariness, simultaneity, and unrepeatability' (2006: 134). Rather than appealing to the restrained eye of the connoisseur, performance art seeks to mobilize a mass audience by drawing them, sometimes wittingly but more often not, into the performative process itself (2006: 134–5; cf. Muse, 2010).

On the basis of these putative developments in contemporary aesthetic practice, Lehmann believes he has discovered a new aesthetic foundation for critical social theory. The postdramatic in art, he claims, crystallizes a dangerous shift in real social life: there has been a 'dwindling of the dramatic space of imagination in the consciousness of society' (2006: 182). The 'form of experience' has become so degraded that 'drama and society cannot come together' (2006: 181). In contemporary society, 'the most conflictual situations will no longer appear as drama' (2006: 182). In the 'de-dramatized reality' of contemporary society, 'real issues are only decided as power blocs' (2006: 182). We are left with the society of the spectacle, the world Guy Debord and the Situationists described in the '60s and Jean Baudrillard elaborated as simulacra for decades after. 'All human experiences (life, eroticism, happiness, recognition) are tied to commodities' (2006: 183), Lehmann laments, and the 'citizen spectator' can 'only look on' (2006: 184) without any feeling of connection to the world around her. Sharing neither meaning, ethic, or experience with the powers who stage social performances, citizens of the spectacle society are impotent to affect them.<sup>1</sup>

In this *plaidoyer* I take issue with this idea of the postdramatic, not only as it applies to the theatre, but also to social life. My claim is neither that such Found Drama is nonexistent, nor that such social spectacles never appear. My contention is more systemic, more theoretical. I argue that instead of seeing dramatic declension, we must see dramatic variation. Instead of being viewed as the newest phase in aesthetic evolution, the postdramatic, in both aesthetic and social theory, should be conceptualized in terms of the variables that establish conditions for performative failure – and success. Postdramatic experience is powerful, sometimes dangerous, and occasionally liberating. It is not, however, endemic to contemporary theatrical and social life; we are not experiencing an infinite regress to the postdramatic. As societies have grown more institutionally differentiated, culturally reflexive, and fragmented, theatricality has changed, as have the performative processes that extend beyond the stage into real social life (Alexander, 2011). Lehmann is right to correlate the two, but he has connected them in exactly the

wrong way. Over the course of historical time, the elements that compose performance have gradually become separated and specialized, both in theatre and society. With this defusion, the possibility that dramatic efforts might fail to communicate meaning has increased. Postdrama describes a condition of deflation, one in which dramatic performance fails to make strong meaning for either a part of an audience or its entirety; sometimes this failure to make meaning even extends to those who are creating the drama. However, deflationary symbols can be dramatically reinflated; cultural differentiation causes severe strains, but it must not be conflated with devolution.

I develop this alternative perspective on drama and society by examining critical turning points in the emergence of Western theatre. My evidence is drawn from avant-garde playwrights, actors, directors, and designers who have shifted the shape of drama's currents, and the critics, philosophers, and contemporary theatre theorists who have commented upon this shape-shifting in turn. In this regard I take a particularly close look at recent developments in performance studies.

## I

In the course of the last three centuries, theatrical practice and theory have been defined by anxieties about performative defusion (Alexander, 2011). Lehmann's embrace of the postdramatic is one recent response to this anxiety, but hardly the first. In the early decades of the last century, Bertolt Brecht (2000 [1937]) conceptualized an 'alienation effect' (*Verfremdungseffekt*) as an antidote to Aristotelian drama, which he regarded not only as increasingly burdensome to sustain, but politically oppressive as well. It is too 'difficult and taxing', Brecht complained, for the actor 'to conjure up particular inner moods or emotions night after night' (2000: 457). As an alternative, the left-wing German playwright and director suggested that stage actors cultivate not naturalness but artificiality. If actors would merely 'exhibit the outer signs... which accompany emotions', rather than trying to project inner feelings themselves, then the 'automatic transfer of emotions to the spectator' (2000: 457) will be blocked and the audience 'hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play' (2000: 453). With Aristotelian catharsis thus prevented, the viewer's 'acceptance or rejection' of theatrical 'actions and utterances' could now 'take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious' (2000: 453). Even if such an experience of alienation failed in its aim of freeing workers from bourgeois ideology, Brecht believed, 'acting like this is healthier and... less unworthy of a thinking being' (2000: 457). Three decades later, the revolutionary Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal (2000 [1974]) responded to theatrical and social complexity in the same way. Boal attacked Aristotelian drama as a 'powerful system of intimidation', a

‘coercive system’ (2000: 470) that ‘functions to diminish, placate, satisfy [and] eliminate all that is not commonly acceptable’ (2000: 471).

Lehmann’s postdramatic manifesto, then, is actually nothing new. It differs from his predecessors’ programs only in its rejection of the possibility of socialist salvation. The call for moving beyond the dramatic constitutes one line of the modern theatrical avant-garde, but there is another stream that has continued to embrace an eschatological hope for drama’s revitalization. It is this other line that I intend to reconstruct, to place inside the *longue durée* of theatrical history and to connect with social theorizing about the modern condition.

The postdramatic pushes defusion to its limit condition, trying to get beyond meaning and telos by thoroughly shattering any linkage among the elements of performance. The other avant-garde response points away from this post condition to the (re)dramatic, confronting the conditions of defusion with never-before-conceived-of efforts to overcome them. The (re)dramatic seeks to reforge links among performative elements, conceptualizing and practicing theatre in a manner that opens it back up to the telos of myth and the seamlessness of ritual. ‘In the anguished, catastrophic period we live in’, Antonin Artaud (2000 [1938]) announced, ‘we feel an urgent need for a theatre which events do not exceed, whose resonance is deep within us, dominating the instability of our times’ (2000: 435). Rather than striving for alienation and spectacle, Artaud declares, ‘I cannot conceive of a work of art as distinct from life’ (2000: 433). He calls for ‘a theatre that wakes us up: nerves and heart’, a theatre that ‘inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its image and acts upon us like a spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten’ (2000: 435). Jacques Copeau NIR (1955 [1923]) may employ the term spectacle, but he meant it to suggest fullness and fusion, not emptiness and defusion; spectacle allows us to envision a theatrical ‘audience brought together by need, desire, aspiration, for experiencing together human emotions by means of spectacle more fully realized than life itself’ (in Auslander, 1997: 16).

The (re)dramatic and re-fusing avant-garde of the early 20th century limed Nietzsche’s call for restoring ritual to drama, a call that looked not only to Wagner’s project of opera as total art form but earlier still to the wellsprings of Romanticism itself. These (re)dramatic currents also pulse through the contemporary theatrical avant-garde in numerous permutations, including Jerzy Grotowski’s (2002 [1968]) widely reverberating call for the creation of a ‘sacred’, ‘pure’, and ‘holy’ theatre of ‘trance’ and ‘transillumination’, where ‘the body vanishes and burns’ and ‘the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses’ (2002: 15–34); in Peter Brook’s (1968) living theatre, where audiences ‘have seen the face of the invisible through an experience on the stage that transcended their experience in life’ (1968: 42); and in such other experimental theatre projects as Joseph Chaikin’s (1972) open theatre.

## II

Four decades ago, in the person of Wooster Group dramatist Richard Schechner, this (re)dramatic, re-fusing theatrical avant-garde connected with social theory in the person of cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (Schechner, 1988). The upshot was the new discipline that may be conceived as fundamentally challenging the idea of the postdramatic. Schechner aimed not to deflate theatricality but to reinflate and extend it. He demonstrated how theatrical homologues – ‘performances’ – also permeate non-theatrical, but dramatic, social life. Famously drawing the relationship between social ritual and theatrical drama as an intertwined figure eight, Schechner actually made use of avant-garde theatre theory to colonize social life (Schechner, 2002 [1982]: 68, *passim*). Generations of theatre scholars after Schechner have deepened his investigations of dramatic effect, creating a body of richly suggestive if also deeply contradictory studies. Peggy Phelan (1993) believes, for example, that only live performances are real and affecting, while Shalom Auslander (1997) attacks liveness as a false and misleading ideal. Diana Taylor (2003) separates written, formal ‘archives’ from acted out ‘repertoires’, highlighting the importance of ‘scenarios’ that may be cultural structures but are not texts. Joseph Roach (2007) extols the symbolic vitality of ‘it-ness’, breaking down the barrier between profane commodity and sacred symbol in performances stretching from fashion to cinema. Jill Dolan (2005) reinstates the division, insisting that ‘mesmerizing moments are what those of us addicted to performance live for’ (2005: 8). Her analytic interests focus on performances whereby ‘suddenly and unexpectedly we are lifted from our normal detached contemplation into another place, where time stops, and our breath catches’ (2005: 8).

As the new discipline of performance studies came into its own two decades ago, it came under harsh attack from William Worthen, a textually-minded theatre theorist. Worthen (1995) accused performance studies of a ‘romantic sentimentality’ that constructed false dichotomies, of ‘urgently’ contrasting the ‘supposedly liberating “textuality” of performance’ – ‘transgressive, multiform, [and] revisionist’ – with the ‘domain of the text’ conceived as ‘dominant, repressive, conventional, and canonical’ (1995: 14). Declaring this a false choice, Worthen suggested that the model of theatrical text as unified, intentional, and didactic had been thoroughly rejected by 20th-century literary theory from the New Criticism to Deconstruction.

The letter of Worthen’s attack on the romantic binarism of performance studies is largely correct (cf. Alexander and Mast, 2006). Performance studies scholars tend to confound the analytical and the normative, romantically championing the vigor of drama against a tired, thin, dried out theatrical text. Not only is their writing frequently moralistic, but their concepts are often metaphorical, more suggestive of

poetics than social theory. Coming to praise performance, not to bury it, scholars in this new discipline have resisted the variability of performance in the age of defusion; as a result, they have failed to theorize the conditions that explain it.

Yet, Worthen missed the forest for the trees.<sup>2</sup> The intellectual achievement of performance studies has been to ‘secularize’ the (re)dramatic avant-garde, to ‘think’ it rather than do it, and their decades of reflexivity has created a signal opening for social theory. If we bring this new discipline to bear on the earlier conceptual innovations of Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman, and Clifford Geertz, and synthesize them with contemporary cultural sociology, it becomes possible to develop a meaning-oriented but ‘culturally-pragmatic’ theory of social performances (Alexander, 2011). Stimulated by the analytics of performance theory, culturally-oriented social theory has found new ways to think about symbolic action, cultural structure and contingency, social conflict and solidarity, social criticism, and political responsibility. As a result, we have better understood how the relative autonomy of culture allows social actors not only to imagine but to dramatize hopes for a better life.

The dangers of modernity cannot be blamed on the instrumental reason of postdramatic and commodified spectacles (Alexander, 2013). To the contrary, social evils have been driven by cultural-cum-emotional movements of immense performative power. In modern, modernizing, and postmodern societies, for better and for worse, social dramas are here to stay. It is not only that social life cannot get beyond the dramatic, but that it should not try. Four decades ago, Raymond Williams insisted that societies still need the dramatization of consciousness:

We live in a society which is at once more mobile and more complex, and therefore, in some crucial respects, relatively more unknowable, relatively more opaque than most societies of the past, and yet which is also more insistently pressing [and] penetrating. . . . The clear public order of much traditional drama has not, for many generations, been available to us[,] [but] presentation, representation, signification have never been more important. Drama broke from fixed signs, established its permanent distance from myth and ritual and from the hierarchical figures and processions of state. . . . But drama, which separated, did not separate out altogether. . . . Beyond what many people can see as the theatricality of our image-conscious public world, there is a more serious, more effective, more deeply rooted drama: the dramatization of consciousness itself. (Williams, 1983 [1974]: 13–18)

Drama is fundamental to the search for meaning and solidarity in a post-ritual world. How else can meaning and mythos be sustained when

the metaphysics of cosmological religion has broken down and rituals are sporadic and incomplete? Drama displaces yet also encompasses shreds of the pre-modern religious order. Converting cosmos into text, drama projects powerful narratives in which protagonists and antagonists fight against one another's vision of the good and the right. Identifying with these characters, audiences connect with meanings outside themselves and reflectively work through their moral implications; they learn about heroes and enemies, make epiphanies out of historical events, and experience solidarity with others by sharing catharsis (Baker, 2010). Theatre crystallizes and concentrates these processes in a reflexively aesthetic idiom, but the dramatic form permeates the entirety of modern social life.<sup>3</sup> Without drama, collective and personal meanings could not be sustained, evil could not be identified, and justice would be impossible to obtain.

### III

Before theatre, when there was cosmos and ritual, the pragmatics of social performance were relatively simple. After the emergence of theatre, in the post-cosmological world of complexity and defusion, social performances become extraordinarily difficult. If social theory is to understand and conceptualize these difficulties, it must examine how dramatic techniques in theatre and society not only separate and shape the elements of performance, but seek to put them back together again.

#### *The Emergence of Text*

While Aristotle ostensibly addresses drama, he is actually explaining the construction of poetic text. 'Our subject being poetry, I propose to speak of the structure of plot required for a good poem', he explains, and 'of the number and nature of the constitutive parts of a poem' (2000: 45). With this intra-textual focus, Aristotle illuminates such narrative structures as tragedy and comedy, making use of them to predict dramatic effects.<sup>4</sup> The closest he comes to the pragmatics of performance, however, is advising poets to put themselves imaginatively into the place of the audience:

At the time when he is constructing his Plots, and engaged in the Diction in which they are worked out, the poet should remember (1) to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the vividness of an eyewitness as it were, he will devise what is appropriate, and be least likely to overlook incongruities . . . (2) As far as may be, too, the poet should even act his theory out with the very gestures of his personages. . . Distress

and anger, for instance, are portrayed most truthfully by one who is feeling them at the moment. (Aristotle, 2000: 59)

Two thousand years later, when theatre once again emerged from religious ritual, one finds the same intra-textual focus in Pierre Corneille's (2000 [1660]) introductions to his collected plays, undergirded by similar faith that theatrical success is guaranteed by the written coherence of a play. Stressing how drama unites action, time, and place, the classical French playwright insists that, properly constructed, the text of a play so subordinates the other elements of theatrical performance that any possible contingency in presentation or interpretation is suppressed. 'There must be only one complete action', Corneille advises, 'which leaves the mind of the spectator serene' (2000: 155). Acknowledging 'that action can be complete only through several others', and that these others may be 'less than perfect', he asserts, nonetheless, that if such peripheral actions can be made to appear 'as preparation' for the central one, then they will succeed in 'keep[ing] the spectator in a pleasant suspense' (2000: 155). Maintaining the appearance of smooth and flowing continuity is everything, the realities of character and the contingencies of action unimportant. 'It is not necessary that we know exactly what the actors are doing in the intervals which separate the acts', Corneille explains, only 'that they contribute to the action when they appear on stage' (2000: 155–6).

A poet is not required to show all the particular actions which bring about the particular one; he must choose to show those which are the most advantageous whether by the beauty of the spectacle or by the brilliance or violence of the passions they produce... and to hide the others behind the scene while informing the spectator of them by a narration or some other artistic device... He should involve himself as little as possible with things which have happened before the action he is presenting. Such narrations are annoying, usually because they are not expected, and they disturb the mind of the spectators. (Corneille, 2000: 156, 158)

### *The Independent Audience*

However, even as Corneille penned these intra-textual reassurances, private theatres began displacing both public and aristocratic performance spaces. With the decline of theatrical patronage, the rise of drama markets, and the explosion of revolutionary social conflict, the serene confidence of playwrights in the illocutionary effect of their rhetorical wiles faded. Fictional stage world and audience were becoming more clearly distinct (Bennett, 1997: 3ff.). Stalls replaced pits, and footlights – first

installed in private theatres in the 17th century – placed a newly material barrier between audience and stage. Theatrical texts now confronted audiences in a literal way, and it became ever more difficult to ensure that the newly-enfranchised masses, both working and middle class, were stimulated and pleased. In the early decades of the 19th century, audiences were raucous. By mid-century, they had become more staid. ‘Behavior improved’, Booth suggests, ‘and complaints were eventually made not of uproar in the pit and gallery, but of stolid indifference in the stalls’ (in Bennett, 1997: 3). Now less attentive, the audience came to be conceptualized as theatre’s ‘fourth wall’, not only concretely but metaphorically removed from the supposed-to-be meaningful and affecting text enacted upon the stage. Trying desperately to become a playwright, but failing, Henry James (1936 [1889]) laid the blame squarely on the shoulders of the audience, ignoring the awkwardness of his own dramatic technique. His voice dripping with sarcasm, the American novelist lambasted ‘the essentially brutal nature of the modern audience’ (1936: 66):

The omnium gatherum of the population of a big commercial city at the hour of the day when their taste is at its lowest, flocking out of hideous hotels and restaurants, gorged with food, stultified with buying and selling and with all the other sordid preoccupations of the age, squeezed together in a sweltering mass, disappointed in their sets, timing the author, wishing to get their money back on the spot – all before eleven o’clock! Fancy putting the exquisite before such a tribunal as that!... The dramatist... has to make the basest concessions. One of his principal canons is that he must enable his spectators to catch the suburban trains, which stop at 11:30. (James, 1936 [1889]: 66–7)<sup>5</sup>

As brilliantly as James mastered the novelistic text, he could not translate it into a script that could walk and talk upon the stage.

With the audience emerging as an independent, contingently responsive element of theatre, Brecht’s later political admonitions can be seen not only as normative but analytical, his aesthetic techniques thematizing the social withdrawal of identification and affect from the stage. But Derrida understood that ‘alienation only consecrates, with didactic insistence and systematic heaviness, the non-participation of spectators... in the creative act, in the irruptive [sic] forces fissuring the space of the stage’ (in States, 1985: 113). As Sinfield suggests, every ‘artistic form depends upon some readiness in the receiver to cooperate with its aims and conventions’ (in Bennett, 1997: 4). But if the audience was always already there, only relatively recently has it been conceptualized in such a way that it becomes orthogonal to the performance, an autonomous element. Still, even the most politically radical theatre depends on

the readiness of an audience to subscribe. ‘Even in Brecht’, Bert States (1985) points out, ‘everything seeks its own illusory level’ (1985: 94), his dramatic success relying on the audience’s ‘willingness to vibrate in tune with . . . whatever the work may be up to’ (1985: 104). Just as Boal (2000 [1974]) follows Brecht in the fight with Aristotle, so he, too, insists, in spite of himself, that the fourth wall, ‘built by the ruling classes’ (2000: 471), can and must be torn down. ‘Spectator is a bad word’, Boal complains, for it makes the viewer into ‘less than a man [sic]’ (2000: 473). Calling for a new theatre of the oppressed, this self-avowed critic of catharsis hoped drama would inspire hopes for political triumph and restore the proletariat’s ‘capacity as an actor’ (2000: 473).

In literary criticism, reader-response theory addressed the split between text and audience more analytically. Stanley Fish (1980) goes so far as to suggest that ‘interpretive communities’ – audiences, in theatrical terms – actually create their own texts in the act of reading (cf. Chaudhuri, 1984). Avant-garde dramatists devoted themselves to exploring ways of breaking through the fourth wall, creating the theory and practice of internally emotive acting, entraining scripts, iconic props, and magnetic directing. Sometimes they even try to overcome the audience by addressing it directly (Ridout, 2006: 70). If they shock and offend viewers (so the argument goes) perhaps they can fuse them with their own texts at the same time. This line of reasoning informs Peter Handke’s 1966 introductory diatribe in *Offending the Audience*:

Here you won’t receive your due. Your curiosity is not satisfied. No spark will leap across from us to you. You will not be electrified . . . . This world is no different from yours. You are no longer eavesdroppers. You are the subject matter [and] this is no mirage. You won’t see walls that tremble . . . . This stage represents nothing . . . . You don’t see a darkness that pretends to be another darkness. You don’t see a brightness that pretends to be another brightness . . . . You don’t hear any noise that pretends to be another noise. You don’t see a room that pretends to be another room. Here you are not experiencing a time that pretends to be another time . . . . The front of the stage is not a line of demarcation . . . . It is no demarcation line as long as we are speaking to you . . . . There is no radiation belt between you and us. (Handke, 1971: 15–16)

Dramatically inclined democratic theorists have turned to the independence of the audience to rescue rationality from theatrical artifice. In his paean to the ‘emancipated spectator’, Jacques Rancière (2009) praises the one who ‘observes, selects, compares, interprets’, who ‘links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place’, who ‘composes her own poem with the elements

of the poem before her' and 'participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way' (2009: 13). In such efforts to do away with the contingency of theatrical life, political philosophy echoes the aesthetic ambitions of the theatrical avant-garde.

From the dawning 19th-century revelation of the fateful gap between dramatic text and audience, everything else flowed. Between the hammer of text and the anvil of audience there emerged every subsequent theatrical and conceptual innovation, each conceived as a crucible for forging a new performative fusion.

### *The Actor Steps Out*

The transformation of acting presents the most widely reflected upon of the innovations I have in mind. In the late 18th century, Diderot (2000 [1773–8]) praised the actor as an 'unmoved and disinterested onlooker', all 'penetration and no sensibility', who had 'mastered the art of mimicking everything' (2000: 198). For the Enlightenment, in other words, text was still king. Asking 'What, then, is truth on stage?', Diderot answers: 'It is the conformity of action, diction, face, voice, movement, and gesture, to an ideal model imagined by the poet' (2000: 201). By the beginning of the 20th century, by contrast, the British wunderkind Gordon Craig (2000 [1907]) denounced the very idea of the actor as merely a 'photo-machine' (2000: 394), issuing a clarion call for the emancipation of actors as independent sources of creativity in their own right: 'Today they impersonate and interpret; tomorrow they must represent and interpret; and on the third day they must create' (2000: 394).

It was, indeed, only at the beginning of the last century that actor training became a self-conscious craft (Hodge, 2000). The point of this new discipline was to wake up the dead text, to make it stand tall, to walk and talk. David Krasner (2000) describes what happened in the 1920s when Constantin Stanislavski's ideas about actor training migrated to the United States. In the hands of such teachers as Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner, the so-called 'method' transformed acting on stage and screen. Acting moved from being 'outside in' – from text to actor – to being 'inside out', allowing the actor to have an independent effect on the understanding of the text. Instead of merely 'indicating' emotions, actors now tried actually to experience them. Instead of mannerism, actors were instructed to project an 'unassuming natural presence'. Instead of grand theatricality, performances should look like 'real behavior'. During rehearsals, actors were pushed to get away from texts entirely, to engage in improvisation, to speak gibberish, to paraphrase, and to engage in mindlessly repetitive expression, exercises designed to trigger actors' personal interpretations so that their emotions could become independent of the playwright's printed words. Strasberg encouraged the 'Personal Moment' in rehearsals. Recalling and acting out

excruciating or exhilarating moments from the actors' personal pasts, Strasberg suggests, is a technique that 'releases the actor from any obligations to a text or...to an audience'. Method acting was hardly designed to appear methodical. Theatre can become dramatic, according to Krasner, only if actors 'accomplish the experience of real feelings', working 'moment-to-moment on impulse, talking and listening as if the events on stage are actually happening in the immediate present' (Krasner, 2000: 146).

In the postwar period, Grotowski (2002 [1968]) carried forward the practical tradition of making acting the center of theatrical success. 'The personal and scenic techniques of the actor', he proclaimed, are 'at the core of theatre art' (2002: 15ff.). The text by itself is useless, Grotowski insists: 'In the development of theatrical art, the text was one of the last elements to be added'. Indeed, compared with the significance of acting, the other elements of performance are virtually useless as well. 'By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects.' What theatre 'cannot exist' without is 'the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion' (2002: 19). Schechner once asked the Polish director what he meant by the admonition, 'Don't play the text'. Grotowski responded:

If the actor wants to play the text, he is doing what's easiest. The text has been written [and] he frees himself from the obligation of doing anything himself. But if...he un.masks this lack of personal action and reaction, [t]hen the actor is obliged to refer to himself within his own context and to find his own line of impulses... The problem is always the same: stop the cheating, find the authentic impulses. The goal is to find a meeting between the text and the actor. (Schechner, 2002 [1982]: 249–50)

As States (1985: 132, 125) explains, there is no 'privileged voice' in theatre. In contrast with the opportunities for authorial intervention in prose and poetry, in theatre there can be only the 'objective presence of an illusion', and such an 'aura' can be created only by 'an actor's awareness of his own self-sufficiency'. Chaikin's 'Living Theatre' famously organized an ensemble that created theatrical texts through their own collaborative performance. He wrote *The Presence of the Actor* to explain its success: 'All the history of theatre refers to actors who possess this presence' (Chaikin, 1972: 20). Roach (2007) explores it-ness to examine the same thing – 'the quality that makes you feel as though you're standing right next to the actor, no matter where you're sitting in the theatre' (Chaikin, 1972: 20).

### *Producers, Directors, and Props Emerge*

It was in response to the same kinds of performative challenges that producing and directing emerged as specialized roles. Creators of theatre needed to focus on seducing the audience. When powerful playwrights became producers, they hired actors, organized complex productions and promotional campaigns, and gauged the affective power of performances through trial runs and later by means of surveys and focus groups. Armed with this information, they demanded that playwrights rewrite again and again, hoping to narrow the gap between text and audience by opening night. Preparing for the opening of *Fool for Love*, Sam Shepard had the theatre's walls wired for reverberation and speakers placed under the theatre's seats (Bennet, 1997: 142).

The same challenges triggered the emergence of directing, which allowed a new focus on what came to be called *mise-en-scene*. Until the late 19th century, the tasks of acting, producing, and staging had been bundled together in the role of theatrical entrepreneur, a figure typically of large personality who sometimes actually wrote the text, as well. Directing became an independent theatrical role in the course of bitter struggles against producers, money men, and actors. Bernard Dort's (1982) historical reconstruction describes how the stage manager accepted elements of performance as set in stone, seeking to maintain the pre-existing theatrical order. When the director emerged, his conception could not have been more different. The director 'doesn't accept these elements as they are [but] sets to work before the elements of production have been determined'. Seeing himself as the real 'author of the performance', the director 'wants to be recognized as its creator' (1982: 63–4). It was a long struggle. As late as the 1930s, Artaud (2000 [1938]) was bemoaning that directors played 'second fiddle to the author', proclaiming 'it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theatre to the text' (2000: 442). Artaud felt compelled to dispute the idea of the director as 'slave', as 'merely an artisan, adaptor, a kind of translator eternally devoted to making a dramatic work pass from one language to another' (2000: 442). If 'the language of literature' is to be revived, the director must be allowed to 'create in complete autonomy', for his 'domain is closer to life than the author's' (2000: 442).

By mid-century, the director's controlling authority was more firmly in place. 'What makes movies a great popular art form', Pauline Kael (1968: 196) wrote in her homage to Orson Welles, 'is that certain artists can, at moments in their lives, reach out and unify the audience – educated and uneducated – in a shared response'. The distinctive intellectual contribution of French New Wave *auteur* theory placed directors, not star actors, at the core of cinematic power. It was to protest this newly preeminent element of performance that, in the early 1980s, the German theatre theorist Dort (1982) turned Artaud on his head. He accused

directors of being 'dictators', of making the other elements of performance 'helpless and impotent', of having 'reduced them almost to slavery'. Like other avant-garde manifestos for other kinds of theatrical freedom, Dort called for 'the progressive emancipation of the elements of theatrical performance' (1982: 63-4).

Having examined the emancipation of audience, actor, producer, and director from written text, I now turn to an element of theatrical performance that seems among the least dramatic. Every performance depends on material 'means of symbolic production', and in performances of a contemporary theatrical kind this means not only a stage but the props and lighting that help create more dramatic scenes. Earlier I mentioned the performative effect of footlights, how their introduction underscored the growing sense of a chasm between audience and drama. What the footlights illuminated was, in fact, an only recently darkened stage. It was the producer André Antoine who first thought to extinguish overhanging houselights in his 1888 production of *La Mort du Duc d'Enghien*. Jean Chothia calls Antoine's 'darkening of the house lights' a 'significant gesture in the creation of illusionist theatre' (in Ridout, 2006: 49). What lighting illuminates, by creating the illusion of reality, is not just actors but props, an element of great interest in recent theatre scholarship. A decade ago, Marvin Carlson (1989: 8) wrote an influential essay about 'the thing-ness of the theatre'. Andrew Sofer (2003) devoted an entire book to 'transformational props' that 'appear to signify independently of the actor who handles them' (2003: 24). Scenic objects seem to exemplify icons in the Peircean sense, material objects that literally resemble the things they are intended to represent. It is this purportedly iconic quality of drama that interests States (1985) who, drawing attention to 'the theatre's special openness to the world of objects', asserts that theatre is 'a language whose words consist . . . of things that are what they seem to be' (1985: 20). Asking, 'What semiotic competence is really necessary in theatre?', Jean Alter (1990) answers: 'There is only one', the 'competence in the use of an iconic code whereby all signs on the stage refer to their mirror image in the imaginary story space outside [the] stage' (1990: 97).

But these new appreciations for the independence of materiality are too literal. It is actually the not-like-the-referent quality of material things that makes them ideal stage props. Icons have seductively familiar material surfaces, but their sensual shapes are anchored in invisible meanings derived as much from discursive cultural structures as from plastic form (Alexander, 2008). Props are not only material but symbolic, not so much reflections of ordinary things as translations of dramatic meanings into material forms. Sofer is careful to explain that it is because transformational props can 'absorb dramatic meaning and become complex symbols' that they are able to 'motivate the stage action' (2003: 24). When Peter Handke writes about 'a brightness that pretends to be

another brightness', a 'light that pretends to be another light' (in States, 1985: 20), he is getting at just such intertwining of material surface and textual depth.

### *The Independence of Scenario-Script*

If the elements of performance have become liberated, then the text performed on stage is not the one printed on the page. Contemporary theatre has moved far away from intra-textuality. The audience has been sharply separated, and actor, director, producer, and means of symbolic production have emerged as efforts to more effectively organize the mise-en-scene on stage. In this context of differentiation, the written play provides a set of background collective representations, the specific meanings of which are worked out on the stage. What is foregrounded on stage are scripts. Goffman was the first social theorist to speak of scripts, but failing to differentiate them from background meanings, he conceived scripts as rigid, non-contingent texts. Influenced by the contexts of defusion that define modern performance studies, Robin Bernstein (2009: 89) has approached the concept more flexibly: 'The word script captures the moment when the dramatic narrative and movement through space are in the act of becoming each other.' Bernstein references Taylor's influential distinction between repertoire and archive (see above), but it is the latter's concept of 'scenario' that actually fits best with script. Scenarios are not written, but they are by no means entirely invented, either. Taylor (2003) sees them as 'meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes' (2003: 28). Relatively, not absolutely, independent of written archives, scenarios conjure physical location, cultural codes, and embodiment all at the same time. They allow actors to be culturally pragmatic.

### *The Playwright Responds*

These powerful movements of dramaturgical innovation were, as I have reconstructed them, first and foremost uprisings against textual power, even as they also aimed at becoming separated from each other. However, as the era of defusion deepened, writers of theatrical texts did not simply stand pat. They, too, were mightily anxious about the growing gap between audience and stage. In response, they created new forms of theatrical writing, radically revisionist styles that revived dramatic impact and addressed directly fears about fragmentation, isolation, and meaninglessness in the modern age. The late 19th-century Scandinavian playwrights Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg, no matter how melodramatic their realism and how antipathetic their personal relations, were the first self-consciously 'modern' stage writers to embark on this quest. In his introduction to the publication of *Miss Julie*, Strindberg (2000 [1888]) decried 'the serious theatre crisis now prevailing throughout

Europe, especially in those bastions of culture that produced the greatest thinkers of the age, England and Germany', and he announced that 'the art of drama, like most of the other fine arts, is dead' (2000: 371). Criticizing the efforts of his contemporaries as merely filling 'old forms with new contents', Strindberg announces he has 'modernized' the theatrical form 'in accordance with [the] demands I think contemporary audiences make upon this art' (2000: 371). Social realism in 1930s theatre – for example the work of Clifford Odets – elaborated this modernizing response on a more politically engaged, working-class oriented form.

Samuel Beckett's transformation of theatrical style challenged such efforts at dramatic realism, reinvigorating textual engagement with the postwar, post-mass-murder world. Doing away with plot and even character, the starkness of Beckett's scenes and the bleak poetry of his dialogue powerfully articulated the spirit of the audiences of his time. 'I can't go on!' Vladimir exclaims in *Waiting for Godot*, but he immediately reconsiders. 'What have I said?' he asks, and at play's end he has decided to continue to wait. Yet, while extraordinarily innovative with text, Beckett displayed marked rigidity vis-à-vis the other elements of performance, trying to re-fuse roles that had become emancipated, putting the writer back into control. Beckett rarely assented to requests for licensed performance of his plays. When he did so, he exercised total authority over the staffing and mise-en-scene, frequently from on-site (Bair, 1978). Here is another demonstration of a paradox we have continually encountered: even as the distinctive elements of performance have sought independence for themselves, they have often tried to subordinate the others.

#### IV

There are several related themes I have not taken up here. One is filmic drama, whether in cinema, TV, or online, and its powerful contribution to the (re)dramatic movement it has been the point of this essay to describe. The French film theorist and *Cahiers du Cinéma* founder André Bazin (1967) rightly insists that, as compared with writing and theatre, the ontology of film is realism. Virtually every cinematic innovation – from montage to animation and 3D, from close-ups to long shots and panning, from hand-held video cameras to cinema vérité, from short to long form TV – has sought to deepen audience conviction that what they are seeing and feeling is vivid and true, if obviously dramatically different from actual social life.

Another theme moves beyond the theatrical to the fate of the modern dramatic in other arts. Over roughly the same period I have considered here, painting and sculpture moved from narrative representation to abstraction as their dominant modality, with music shifting from harmony to atonality. Did the transition from concreteness and realism push

these arts to postdrama? Such a case has often been made, but it seems a poor one to me. Pre-and-post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Constructivism, Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Pop art, conceptual art – all these radical innovations of the painterly avant-garde may be seen not as efforts to create alienation from contemporary art but as techniques for recreating its aura and mystery, for providing more intensive engagements with the aesthetic (cf. Lash, 2010).

There are social, not only theoretical issues at stake in this argument about postdrama. If avant-garde theatre may be conceptualized as post-dramatic, then contemporary society may be theorized merely as spectacle, and the story David Foster Wallace tells about Found Drama would not be a joke at all, but something true. My argument suggests, to the contrary, that Wallace was exactly right to frame his Found Drama story in an ironic tone. Examining recent performance studies, we have discovered the (re)dramatic to be a powerful theme. These writings demonstrate how the elements that compose theatrical performance have become separated over the course of the last three centuries. The rationale for each aesthetic liberation has been to reclaim dramatic power. For each theatrical innovation the argument has been that, by liberating this particular and distinctive form of dramatic power, it will become possible to re-use the elements of performance.

As I hope to have demonstrated in this essay, if theories about theatrical and social dramas are mutually reflective, they are also substantively intertwined. The techniques and tools of aesthetic artifice enter deeply into the institutions and lifeworlds of contemporary society, into struggles for power and its vertical operation (Alexander, 2010) and into efforts to cut power down to size (Mast, 2012; Tognato, 2012). Democratic movements to control power cannot afford to be postdramatic. Not empty spectacle but the invigorating experience of myth and value is the goal for which both aesthetic and social performances strive.

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### **Notes**

1. For an elaboration of this postdramatic-spectacle perspective in contemporary aesthetic theory, see Kennedy (2009); for its elaboration in contemporary social theory, see Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998).
2. In what became a contentiously public and disciplinary-defining dispute, leading performance-study scholars responded with umbrage to Worthen's critique (Dolan, 1995; Roach, 1995; Schechner, 1995). Worthen (1998) subsequently revised and softened his claims.

3. For empirical cultural-sociological studies demonstrating the social dramatic in modern contexts, see Wagner-Pacifici (1986), Berezin (1997), Edles (1998), Cottle (2004), Reed (2007), Smith (2008), McCormick (2009), Goodman (2010), Eyerman (2011), Norton (2011), Gao (2011), Mast (2012), Tognato (2012), and Ringmar (2013).
4. In commenting upon Sophocles' Oedipus trilogy, Freud articulated the same fusion of textual figuration with audience in psychological terms: 'The poet is at the same time compelling us to recognize our inner minds, in which these same impulses though suppressed are to be found' (in Bennett, 1997: 36).
5. David Lodge (2004) and Colm Tóibín (2004) provide barely fictionalized reconstructions of the hopes and failures of this illustrative stage of James's writing career.

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