

English 634

Katy Ryan, ENGL 634, Fall 2005

ENG 634: Radical Theatre: The Roots of Social Action

Fall 2005

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Together we organize the world for ourselves, or at least we organize our understanding of it; we reflect it, refract it, criticize it, grieve over its savagery; and we help each other to discern, amidst the gathering dark, paths of resistance, pockets of peace, and places from whence hope may be plausibly expected. Marx was right: The smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction. From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs. And also plays.

--Tony Kushner, afterword to *Angels in America: Perestroika*

In a recent *New Republic Online* review (7.13.05), theatre critic Lee Siegel wrote, "In truth, there's little that theatre can do, even in the most extreme times, to achieve that golden chimera of the activist's imagination." And in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial (6.6.05), Terry Teachout, after observing that conservatives just don't write plays, commented, "Any work of art that seeks to persuade an audience to take some specific form of external action, political or otherwise, tends to be bad. But the line is not a bright one, and it is possible to make good, even great art that is intended to serve as the persuasive instrument of an exterior purpose."

This semester we will pursue a specific question: How successful have twentieth-century performances been at achieving desired political effects on local or national levels? Obviously, this is a difficult question to answer empirically. As Baz Kershaw notes in the introduction to *The Politics of Performance* (1992), "Any attempt to *prove* that this kind of performance efficacy is possible, let alone probable, is plagued by analytical difficulties and dangers." Yet, we will see

what kinds of measure are available as we read, discuss, and perform twentieth-century radical performances. With the word “radical,” I aim to describe performances that attempt to get at the “roots” of social practices and ideologies in order to effect progressive social change.

We will begin with a brief introduction to performance studies, a complex, emerging field that incorporates the methods and insights of many disciplines, including anthropology, history, visual art, textual studies, philosophy, and drama. At a time when, in certain academic circles, the possibility of meaningful action is questioned and notions of subjectivity have been deeply troubled, performance has proven an enabling device for theorizing some kind of needed agency. Next, we will consider Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre (predicated on not only the possibility but the necessity of action) and the impact of his theories on twentieth-century theatre, primarily but not exclusively American performances focused on liberation struggles—for people living under foreign occupation, workers, women, Chicano/as, and African Americans. We will study a range of international theatre collectives, concentrating on the developments of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, as well as expressionistic theatre, documentary theatre, and performance art.

In other words, we will be reading *a lot* of plays and encountering a wide-range of theatre practices—diverse in form, content, philosophy—that will allow us to think broadly about space and silence, experience and aesthetics, play and politics.

Classroom Atmosphere

The English classroom can be a site of engagement with the world—in all its complexity, beauty, pain. It is a place where words and our interaction with words compel us to rethink what we think we know. It should not be easy, nor should it always be comfortable. Because I am interested in how literature can *change*, not simply reflect, realities, my classes move back and forth between texts and worlds, theories and practices. I try to select literature that is formally sophisticated, socially meaningful, and politically charged. My hope is that our discussions will not be narrowly focused or limited in any way, that we will pursue vibrant, respectful, and sincere questions about, to speak in the old style, the human condition.

Requirements

Listserve

On our listserve, everyone will post at least six responses (approximately 500 words each, approximately every other week) to our readings in a particular week. In any given response, you obviously do not need to touch on everything you have read. Choose one idea or question to

focus on. Pace your responses throughout the semester and try to post by at least 4PM on Tuesday, so we all have a chance to read the responses before we meet. Please bring me a hardcopy of your response. Our listserve can also serve for follow-up discussions and announcements.

Essays

There will be two 10-page essays. One will be a critical or theoretical argument of the traditional sort. The other can be the same or any of the following: an original performance, a performative essay, or participation in a staged production (if there is enough communal interest). I will collect brief proposals for each essay/performance about two weeks before the due date.

Performances

Everyone will be in two performance groups. Each group will collaborate on a ten-minute performance that engages with our week's reading. Performances are ungraded, informal, and great fun. Feel free to rearrange the classroom, incorporate the audience, bring in props, costumes, music, etc. You do not need to memorize anything (though we'll all be impressed if you do). Most importantly, your performance should provide us with a certain take on a play, performance, or theory. I encourage groups to think of a critical question that you want to pose *through* the performance. Usually groups meet at least once outside of class to prepare.

Discussion

This class will strengthen your ability *to think*—to question, analyze, reflect, dispute, and reason. Dialogue is essential to this process. There will be a variety of ways to participate: providing feedback to performers, asking questions of one another, reading from your written responses, and responding to our texts. It will not be possible to receive an A in this class if you never speak in class. If you truly have difficulty doing this, please make an appointment early in the semester to speak with me, and we will come up with an alternate arrangement.

Grade Breakdown

Two Essays 60%

Participation/Performances 20%

Six Responses 20%

Required Texts (available at WVU Bookstore and online bookstores)

Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*

Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman* and *The Slave Ship*

Tony Kushner, *Homebody / Kabul*

Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage*

Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty*

Adam P. Kennedy and Adrienne Kennedy, *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*

Tim Miller, *Body Blows*

August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit and Other Plays*

Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal*

Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, *The Exonerated*

Maria Irene Fornes, *Fefu and Her Friends*

Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*

Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus*

Recommended Plays and Performances:

Karen Finley, *Shock Treatment*

Philip Kan Gotanda, *Yankee Dawg You Die*

Moses Kaufman, *The Laramie Project*

Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play; TopDog/Underdog; Imperceptible*

Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom

Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror*

Guillermo Verdecchia and Daniel Brooks, *The Noam Chomsky Lectures*

Howard Zinn, *Emma* (available at the WVU bookstore)

Available on E-Reserve (<http://ereserves.lib.wvu.edu>; username: ryan2; password

580) Note: Articles are listed alphabetically online by author's or editor's

last name

Baz Kershaw, introduction to *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*. London: Routledge, 1992

Selections from *Brecht on Theatre*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.

Tony Kushner. Interview with David Savran, *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*. Ed. Philip Kolin. 291-313.

Maria Irene Fornes. Interview with Una Chauduri. *Speaking On Stage*. 98-114.

Selections from *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, and Activism*. Eds. Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz. London: Routledge, 1994. Introduction 1-7

Selections from *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theatre*. Eds. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny Spencer. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998.

Richard Schechner, "Invasions Friendly and Unfriendly: The Dramaturgy of Direct

Theatre." *Critical Theory and Performance*. Eds. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992: 88-106

Douglas McDermott, "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre: Archetype and Example."

Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1930.

Eds. Bruce McConachie and Daniel Friedman. Wesport, CN: Greenwood P,

1985. 121-142.

Henry J. Elam, Jr., chapter from *Taking It to the Streets: the Social Protest Theatre of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka* . Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997.

Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, Introduction and chapter from *Teatro Campesino: Theatre in the Chicano Movement* . Austin: U of Texas P, 1994.

Peggy Phelan, chapter from *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London:

Routledge, 1993. ("The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction")

Recommended Theory and Criticism:

J.L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962.

Herbert Blau. *Take Up the Bodies: Theatre at the Vanishing Point*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982.

Herbert Blau. "Universals of Performance; or amortizing play" in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* . Eds. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. Cambridge UP, 1990. 250-272.

Elaine Brousseau. "Personalizing the Political in *The Noam Chomsky Lectures*" in *Staging Resistance*.

Marvin Carlson. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1996

[Review by Shannon Jackson in *Theatre Journal* 49.3 (1997), available on Project Muse]

Sue-Ellen Case. *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.

Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Randall. Berkely: U of

California P, 1984.

Kate Davy, "From *Lady Dick* to Ladylike: The Work of Holly Hughes." *Acting Out:*

Feminist Performances. Eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993.
55-84.

Elin Diamond. "The Violence of "We": Politicizing Identification." *Critical*

Theory and Performance . Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992.

Jill Dolan. *Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1988/91.

Guerrilla Girls. *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of*

Western Art . New York: Penguin 1998.

Michael Hatt. "Race, Ritual, and Responsibility: Performativity and the Southern

lynching" *Performing the Body / Performing the Text*. Eds. Amelia Jones and Andrew
Stephenson. London: Routledge, 1999.

Jose Esteban Muñoz. "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts."

Women and Performance 8.2 (1996) 5-16.

Alan Reed. *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance*. London:

Routledge, 1993.

Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, eds. *Critical Theory and Performance*.

Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992.

Joseph Roach. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia

UP, 1996.

Richard Schechner. *Performance Theory*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Recommended Websites and Links

PBS on Political Theatre: <http://www.pbs.org/now/arts/politicaltheater.html>

Lydia Sargeant, "Humor, Theatre, and Social Change,"

<http://zmagsite.zmag.org/Feb2005/sargent0205.html>

Political art and critical commentary, including reviews of recent plays:

<http://www.politicalnovel.org/>

Guerilla Girls: www.guerrillagirlsontour.com

Junebug Productions: <http://www.gnofn.org/~junebug/>

Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School: <http://authors.aalbc.com/blackartsmovement.htm>

Association for Theatre in Higher Education: <http://athe.org>

7.84 Theatre Company: <http://www.784theatre.com>

Optional Video Viewings at the Downtown Library Media Center: 7PM

Mon., Sept. 19: *Zoot Suit*

Mon., Oct. 3: *The Dutchman*

Mon., Oct 24: Samuel Beckett Documentary

Schedule

*** Texts available on e-reserve

August 24

Introductions

Lee Siegel, *The New Republic*

Terry Teachout, *The Wall Street Journal*

Introduction to Performance Studies

August 31

Sign Up for Performance Groups

W.B. Worthen, "Disciplines of the Text: Sites of Performance." *Performance Studies*

Reader. Ed. Henry Bial. London: Routledge, 2004. 10-24. [handout]

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Performance Studies." *Performance Studies Reader*.

43-55. [handout]

Dwight Conquergood. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research."

Performance Studies Reader. 311-322. [handout]

***Baz Kershaw, introduction to *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as*

Cultural Intervention

Rec : Peter Brooks, "On Difficulty, the Avante-Garde, and Critical Moribundity." *Just*

Being Difficult: Academic Writing in the Public Arena. Eds. Jonathan Culler and

Kevin Lamb. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. 129-138.

Epic Theatre

September 7

Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage*

***Selections from *Brecht on Theatre*. ("The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre";

"Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting"; "Interview with an Exile," "Theatre for Pleasure, or Theatre for Instruction"; "The Street Scene"; "From the Mother Courage Model)

Chapter from Joseph Chaikin, *Presence of the Actor*. New York: Atheneum Press, 1972.

[handout]

Rec Video : *From Brecht to Beckett*

September 14

Tony Kushner, *Homebody / Kabul*

***Kushner, Interview with David Savran, *Speaking On Stage*

Available on Project Muse

Julia A. Walker, "Why Performance? Why Now? Textuality and the

Reararticulation of Human Presence." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 16.1 (2003): 149-175.

Kushner Interview at *Salon*, "Coming Out as a Socialist"

<http://www.salon.com/weekly/interview960610.html>

Video Option at the Downtown Library: Mon., Sept. 19 at 7PM: Zoot Suit

September 21

Valdez , *Zoot Suit*

Available on EBSCO Host

Mark Pizzato, "Brechtian and Aztec Violence in Valdez's Zoot Suit ." *Journal of Popular*

Film & Television 26.2 (1998).

***Henry J. Elam, Jr., chapter from *Taking It to the Streets*

***Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, introduction and chapter from *Teatro Campesino*

September 28

Proposal for First Essay/Performance Due

Maria Irene Fornes, *Fefu and Her Friends*

Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty*

***Douglas McDermott, "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre: Archetype and Example."

***Josephine Lee, "Pity and Terror as Public Acts: Reading Feminist Politics in the Plays

of Maria Irene Fornes.”

***Fornes, Interview with Una Chauduri. *Speaking On Stage*.

Elin Diamond, “Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism.” *Drama Review* 32.1 (1988): 82-94. [handout]

Rec: Daniel Friedman, “A Brief Description of the Workers’ Theatre Movement of the Thirties.” *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1930*.

Eds. McConachie and Friedman. Westport, CN: Greenwood P, 1985. 111-120.

Theatre Collectives and Direct Action: Rehearsal for Revolution

Video Option at the Downtown Library: Mon., Oct 3 at 7PM: Dutchman

October 5

August Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*

Amiri Baraka, *The Dutchman*

Baraka, “Revolutionary Theatre” [handout]

Available on Project Muse:

Wilson, “The Ground On Which I Stand.” *Callaloo* 20.3 (1998): 493-503.

Available on EBSCO Host

Lloyd Richards, “Lloyd Richards: Reflections from the Playwrights’ Champion.”

Interview with Caroline R. Raymond. *The Drama Review* 47.2 (2003).

October 12

First Essay Due

Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Foreword, Introduction, 83-190. Look at page

38 and handout on Aristotle

****Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, and Activism*. Introduction 1-7

***Michael Taussig and Richard Schechner, "Boal in Brazil, France, the USA: An Interview with Augusto Boal." *Playing Boal*. 17-32

***Jan Cohen-Cruz, "Mainstream or Margin?: US Activist Performance and the Theatre of the Oppressed." *Playing Boal*. 110-123.

***Philip Auslander. "Boal, Blau, and Brecht: The Body." *Playing Boal*. 124-133.

October 19

***John Bell, "Beyond the Cold War: Bread and Puppet Theatre and the New World Order." *Staging Resistance*. 31-53.

Maria de Cenzo and Susan Bennett. "Women, Popular Theatre, and Social

Action: Interviews with Cynthia Grant and the Sistren Theatre Collective." *Melus* 23.1 (1992): 72-94. [handout]

Max Stafford-Clark, "Against Pessimism." *Theatre in Crisis?Performance*

Manifestos for a New Century. Eds. Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002. 82-88. [handout]

Michael Rohd, selections from *Theatre for Community, Conflict and Dialogue: The Hope is Vital Training Manuel*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. [Preface xv-xiv; 97-111; 138-140] [handout]

***Richard Schechner, "Invasions Friendly and Unfriendly: The Dramaturgy of Direct Theatre."

Expressionistic / Imagistic / Experimental / or, Pragmatic Theatre

Video Option at the Downtown Library: Mon., Oct. 24 at 7PM: Beckett Documentary

October 26

Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal*

Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*

Carey Perloff, "Three Women and a Mound: directing *Happy Days*." *Directing Beckett*. Ed. Lois Oppenheim. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994. 161-169.

Ilan Ronen, "Waiting for Godot as Political Theatre." *Directing Beckett*. 239-249.

[handouts]

November 2

Adam Kennedy and Adrienne Kennedy, *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*

Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus*

Available on EBSCO Host

Jean Young, "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in

Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*. *African American Review* 31.4 (1997): 699-708.

Available on EBSCO Host

Kushner, "The Art of the Difficult." *Civilization* 4.4 1997

Rec: Greg Miller, "The Bottom of Desire in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*." *Modern Drama* 45.1 (2002): 125-137.

Documentary Theatre

November 9

Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, *The Exonerated*

Available on Project Muse

Dwight Conquergood, "Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty." *Theatre Journal* 54.3 (2002): 339-367.

Performance Art

November 16

Second Proposal Due

Gomez-Peña, *New World Border*: Introduction i-iii and Biographical Note;

"Freefalling" 1-3; *New World Border*, 20-48; Chronicle 80-107. (handout)

Tim Miller, *Body Blows* [Foreword, Introduction, *Golden States*, *My Queer Body*, *Glory Box*]

***Janelle Reinelt, "Notes for a Radical Democratic Theatre: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminacy" *Staging Resistance*: 283-300.

"Canon and Curriculum: An Interview with Paul Lauter." *Critics at Work*:

Interviews 1993-2003 . Ed. Jeffrey J. Williams. New York: New York UP, 2004. [handout]

Thanksgiving Break

November 30

Hughes, Introduction to *Clit Notes* and "Clit Notes" [handout]

***Peggy Phelan, chapter from *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*.

Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Performance Studies Reader*. 154-165.

[handout]

Concluding Thoughts and Performances

December 7: Second Essay due December 9 by noon