Performance Studies in an Age of Terror

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I remember in 1992 at a conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), Richard Schechner arguing in a keynote speech that the whole concept of theatre as a separate, self-contained discipline was no longer relevant. Schechner predicted that theatre or drama departments themselves would eventually face extinction, to be superseded (of course) by more broadly focused concepts (and departments?) of performance studies. The advantage of this, it seemed to me at the time, would be that we would no longer have to pursue the charade that live, text-based realistic performance (reverently known as "The Drama") was as central a modern cultural form as it had appeared to have been from the 19th century until, say, 1928, when Broadway theatre production reached its numerical highpoint; or certainly until 1940, by which time Thornton Wilder had written to Gertrude Stein that Hollywood had finally surpassed Broadway (Stein 1996:254).

However, a decade has gone by and I think Schechner underestimated the conservative nature of academic thought processes and academic change, because the academic study of The Drama is still central, and performance studies is still considered by many to be a fringe discipline seeking to dilute time-honored boundaries among performance forms and their concomitant standards of artistic greatness. The curious monster of performance studies, of course, *wants* to cross boundaries and consider the Western dramatic tradition not simply in solipsistic terms, but in the context of world culture, popular performance, mass-media spectacle, and the performative rituals of contemporary life.

What does this have to do with our post-9/11 world?

Five days after the destruction of the World Trade Center, the celebrated modernist composer Karlheinz Stockhausen landed in a heap of trouble by allowing his analysis of art-making to be applied to the recent events in Manhattan. In a Hamburg press conference about a new 28-hour-long performance cycle entitled *Licht*, Stockhausen explained how the piece incorporated such traditional characters from the Western cultural pantheon as Saint Michael, Eve ("the mother of life"), and Lucifer ("the prince of light") (Zander 2002). Stockhausen's inspired artistic sense saw these figures not simply as outdated metaphors of "cultural history," as a reporter put it, but as persistent, contemporary forces. Stockhausen offered as an example that Lucifer "is very present [...] in New York at the moment," and then went on to make a colossal public relations blunder by referring to the destruction of the World Trade Center as Lucifer's handiwork: "das größte

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Kunstwerk, das es je gegeben hat"—"the greatest work of art there has ever been" (in Hilferty 2002). Of course, all hell broke loose as a result of Stockhausen's analogy, and the 73-year-old composer was termed, among other things, a lunatic. Stockhausen claimed he had been quoted out of context, and that his reference to Lucifer as "the cosmic spirit of rebellion, of anarchy," who "uses his high degree of intelligence to destroy creation" had been misunderstood (Stockhausen in Deutsch 2001).

My point here is not to defend Stockhausen, but to point out a big problem concerning the concept of "art," because it is specifically the word "art" that made the composer's comments so obscene, so clueless. (They would have been just as obscene if he had termed the events of 9/11 "theatre" or "drama.") This is because by 2001 modernist and postmodernist notions of what art is, what artists do, and what functions art serves in Western culture were overwhelmingly dominated by the image of the artist as an isolated romantic genius who creates objects, sounds, or events that by definition can only connect to our lives as high-end cultural products.

Would it have been considered any less obscene for Stockhausen to call the destruction of the World Trade Center "performance"? Not "performance *art*," because that postmodern formal tradition is also often lovingly restricted to isolated and impenetrable cultural products, but "performance" in, say, Schechner's terms, as "twice-behaved behavior." I'm not sure if by doing so Stockhausen would have avoided media outrage, but I want to argue that the term "performance" is invaluable for understanding not only what the 9/11 terrorists did, but also for understanding much of what has happened before and after 9/11, and what will happen in the years to come as our country develops its worldwide "war on terrorism."

Using the tools of performance studies to analyze how calculated violence is employed in media-saturated society is not an insult to the memories of those who died, but an essential means of understanding the undeniably symbolic level at which global conflict is now being played out. It is clear that such vivid terms as "Axis of Evil," "Homeland Security," and "Weapons of Mass Destruction" have been put into play with full cognizance of their semiotic value, and we will only understand the actual implications of these concepts and the actions connected to them—performatives all—if we are able to comprehend them on an equally sophisticated level of analysis.

The concept of performance, and our studies of performance, can help us understand and respond to these new exigencies. From the temporary public shrines that sprouted up all over Manhattan immediately after 9/11 (so wonderfully documented and chronicled by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [2003]); to the public protests, marches, and rallies all over the world that have followed 9/11 in almost weekly regularity; to the conscious manipulation of the threat of terror by the United States government both at home and abroad in highly professional propaganda campaigns; and finally to the onset of a global war without end on the part of our "world's largest army," the idea of performance offers concepts, means of analysis, and methods of action which can help us figure out where we are and what we ought to do—certainly better than concepts of "art" or "drama" and "theatre," which seem to be, consciously or unconsciously, now scrupulously estranged from the things of import that happen around us.

In other words, at the onset of the 21st century, the idea of performance and the young tradition of performance studies are critical to any understanding of our present situation. We can use and develop the tools of performance studies to explain to ourselves and to others what is going on around us. The analytic frameworks of "theatre," "drama," and "art" analysis clearly don't allow us this opportunity, as Stockhausen's experience shows. But performance studies does.

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