TDR Comment

Mainstream Theatre and Performance Studies

I’ve been comparing some ads in the January 2000 American Theatre with those in recent TDRs, Theatre Journal, and the Routledge performance studies catalog. Statistics tell a story. There are 120 ads in American Theatre, 62 from some of the best colleges in the land—ranging from Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, to branches of the University of California, Brandeis, Rutgers, Boston University, the Universities of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Texas, Iowa, Indiana, and others offering BA, BFA, MFA, and PhD degrees. Most of the rest of the ads offer non-degree professional training at places like the Actor’s Center, AMDA, LMDA, and the Actor’s Studio; or apprenticeships at theatres and festivals. Theatre training is so predominant that of the 120 ads, 117 invite prospective students to train in acting, directing, playwriting, design, and theatre management/producing. One of the three non-training ads is to get people to stage a play, another is for a writer’s conference, and the third for Mime Journal. There isn’t a single ad in AT for scholarly books, or any book about theatre or performance—or any book at all, for that matter, not one!

If a picture speaks a thousand words, then there are tomes shouting from the pages of AT. The training proffered is for a very particular kind of theatre—the production of European and European American dramas done in orthodox ways by overwhelmingly white casts. Of the literally hundreds of faces in the AT ads, 15 are recognizable as people of color. Looking at the ads one might almost forget the presence in the U.S. of millions and millions of African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. Nor do the ads’ pictures or texts give any indication that the theatre the students are training for deals with questions of ethnic and religious identity, sexual orientation, homophobia, racism, globalization, postcolonialism, and so on. Instead, the ads reflect the mainstream’s profound desire to settle the questions of society’s future in favor of the assimilation of everyone into performing the mainstream’s most orthodox values. Or, worse, no desire at all to recognize that problems exist. Taken together, what the text and pictures reveal is a thriving “business as usual” mainstream theatre in the U.S.A., a theatre dominated by white people, ideas, projects, histories, and futures. From the ads in AT it would appear that the only thing prospective theatre students ought to be interested in acquiring is virtuosity in orthodox theatre.

It goes without saying that also absent is an awareness of, no less any need for, theory—either performance theory or social theory, or any kind of theory. Theory is relegated to PhD programs, and there are only 11 of these mentioned. The PhD programs are always in small print, never the main feature, of an advertisement. Of the 11, only the University of California at...
Irvine includes performance studies—in a package with “dramatic literature and critical theory.”

In brief, the world represented by the ads in *American Theatre* is a far cry from the world of performance studies. The rejection is a two-way street. PS scholars mostly ignore the world represented by the ads in *AT*. What is PS about these days? Taking ads for PS books as the clearest indication, we see titles such as: *The Explicit Body in Performance; Kathakali Dance-Drama; Mourning Sex; The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance; José, Can You See—Latinos On and Off Broadway; Liveness; Virtual Gender; Dangerous Border Crossers; Dancing Histories: Heuristic Ethnography with the Ohafia Igbo; Embodied Memory: The Theatre of George Tabori; Legislative Theatre; The Radical in Performance; A Sourcebook on African-American Performance—and many more. The “broad spectrum approach” I called for in 1988 (*TDR* 4, 6 [T119]) is now the norm in PS. PS is an established field of its own—with its closest affinity to cultural studies (itself a vast panoply of subjects), not to mainstream theatre. As PS defined itself, an enormous gap opened between PS and mainstream theatre.

What we have are two very different performance cultures. True, some PS scholars have found niches inside of mainstream theatre departments, but performance studies as an approach is not important to most academic theatre departments—which focus is fixed on professional training. As for the “entertainment industry” or the regional theatre, the commercial theatre, and even most of what happens off-Broadway, performance studies is not a presence. Performance studies is a presence in performance art and on some websites.

So what? Why not let mainstream theatre go its way and performance studies its? All well and good, except that as a “performance subject” mainstream theatre is an incredibly fertile area that PS ought to explore. And at the practical level, many if not most of the jobs available to PS PhDs will be in theatre, dance, and communications departments. If performance studies is to flourish, or even survive, in the 21st century, PS will have to build bridges to mainstream theatre.

But can such bridges be built without sacrificing PS’s “broad spectrum approach”? Performance studies’ core assertion is that its subject is comprehensive. PS deals with all kinds of performances—in social, political, and economic life; in private life; in sports, popular entertainments, and media; in law, medicine, and other professions; in animal behavior; and in the arts (theatre, dance, music, visual arts, cinema, etc.). Furthermore, PS is intercultural, interdisciplinary, and historiographic: the past is as much a construction as is the present. Because of its very broad scope, PS is dynamically centrifugal, existing most comfortably at the edges and margins, in the creases and crannies. PS is a field constructed from converging aspects and fragments rather than from a single practice or subject. An underlying method of PS is to make connections, to seek out new unexpected relationships. PS finds a “little” of its subject in many different locations, rather than “all” of its subject in one or a few locations. To “find itself,” PS must fly out in all directions. PS is most at home in a theoretically decentered or uncentered space. Early on, PS marked out its territory as “away from,” and “different than,” and “in opposition to” the mainstream, the dominant, the hegemonic.

If these basic assertions are true, then what else can one expect except an enormous gap separating PS from mainstream theatre?

Furthermore, it is quite “natural” that the aesthetic genre that performance studies most focuses on is performance art—a practice that began outside of, if not in direct opposition to, mainstream theatre. Performance art’s roots are in action painting, environmental visual arts, collage, projective poetry, and Happenings; and before that, in dada, surrealism, and futurism. Happenings and performance art took place in galleries, storefronts, city streets, the out-
doors—anywhere but “orthodox theatres.” Siting Happenings and performance art in alternative spaces was a positive action by artists who renovated and transformed spaces and whole neighborhoods—New York’s SoHo for example—that were previously dead to art. Later, when venues such as The Kitchen, PS 122, and Franklin Furnace were dedicated to performance art, they were designed—both architecturally and conceptually—to not be orthodox theatres. My examples are from New York, but the experience is the same around the world.

Where to begin building bridges to mainstream theatre? First, and most important, mainstream theatre needs to become a major PS subject. The techniques of fieldwork, analysis, and theorizing that have been used with such strong effect on the broad spectrum of subjects reflected in PS publications needs now to include writing about mainstream theatre. This writing will come about more effectively if the Performance Studies International annual conferences actively seek to make mainstream theatre one of their core subjects. The questions to be addressed abound: What are the practices of mainstream theatre from a theoretical perspective? How does mainstream theatre relate to “cultures of whiteness”? What is the ethnography of a regional theatre? Why is there a “cult of playwriting”? Why do so many more students train for theatre than can ever hope to get jobs? How does training in the orthodox theatre compare to training for performance in other cultures? I am sure that PS scholars can come up with many more subjects. The point is that the weird blind spot, the blank in PS scholarship that is mainstream theatre, needs to be filled in.

Will mainstream theatre people respond to an interest from PS? Well, people like to read about themselves—whatever is written. And PS will have some extremely cogent things to say. Furthermore, there are areas where more direct interaction is possible. Dramaturgy in the European sense has not caught on in the U.S.A. But there is a possibility for a PS-type dramaturgy that has hardly been explored. This dramaturgy would not focus on the history of the text, or preparing scripts for production, but on the social-critical in-performance aspects of a production—more allied with directing than with playwriting. Also, it could address how to bring into clearer focus on mainstream stages questions of race, gender, globalization, and so on.

Brecht, an ironic optimist, was forever pressing theatre workers to make their art useful to society. We might demand of performance studies/performance theory the same—in relation to mainstream performing arts. We ought to respect theatre, dance, and music artists who wonder what the subjects and concerns of performance studies have to do with their work, with musical concerts, with choreography, and with the staging of plays in theatres before audiences mostly interested in “art” or “entertainment.” We need to be able to answer their questions—and show exactly how performance studies can be useful to theatre-as-practiced in/by the mainstream.

This is only the beginning of exploring a very big lack that invites a much closer look.

—Richard Schechner