Phenomenology and the Dramaturgy of Space and Place

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A bell rings, eyes open and a head lifts to gaze at the zenith. A mouth opens and words are spoken: "Another heavenly day."[1] An actor, apparently wearing only a camisole, is buried to her waist in a gently sloping mound of earth, in front of a barren horizon with a shopping bag on her left and an umbrella on her right. For the spectator unfamiliar with Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, questions arise. Where are we? What place is this? Is it a beach? There seems to be a road nearby. Gradually, during the course of the play, it becomes clear that we are not dealing with a place, but a figure in space. We have left realism and entered an abstract space lacking the cardinal points that provide a sense of place.

In another play, an actor looks up, but where she looks is not certain. She, too, speaks: " Father died just a year ago today, on the fifth of May..."[2] She is not alone, however, but is with her two sisters. She has been correcting papers and is standing or walking in the living room of the Prozorov house. We may be subliminally aware of the spatial relationship between Olga and her sisters, but we are most cognizant of where she is. Her location defines her place, how she is embedded in and the degree to which her identity is formed by the world of the play.

It is these two terms—space and place—that I explore in this paper. The words are similar in that they are both concerned with location, with distances and volumes, with one's position vis-a-vis something else. However, I focus on the difference between them as they are discussed in different philosophical contexts, believing that the distinctiveness of each can give us purchase on a variety of questions relevant to dramaturgy and its practice. Clarifying the relation between these words can help us to understand the unstable relationship between performance and performativity; the differing perspectives of directors, designers and actors; and finally, tell us something about the dramaturgical process, perhaps providing a key to better communication. I will be using the work of two philosophers whose exploration of space and place gives us a basis for differentiating the two concepts: Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* and Edward Casey's *The Fate of Place*.

For Henri Lefebvre space is not something that exists, but which is produced and therefore has a history. In true materialist fashion, Lefebvre sees history as the

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history of relations of production and the ways in which those relations are represented in a particular culture. The difference between relational space and its representations are defined by the terms absolute and abstract space. For Lefebvre, absolute space, for instance the Great Plains, is "made up of fragments of nature" whose "consecration" strips "them of their natural characteristics and uniqueness."[3] "Thus natural space was soon populated by political forces."[4] For this philosopher, space comes into being when nature is territorialized, divided and parceled out according to particular relations of production, and certain social relations. It is important to note, in ways that will become clear later, that Lefebvre acknowledges a natural world, albeit a fragmentary one, that exists prior to the intervention of human beings, but it is only revealed (and concealed) in the process of its inhabitation. Close on the heels of, if not synonymous with, this intervention is the representation of this space, both in discursive form and in "works, images and memories." For Lefebvre, the combination of representations and representational forms defines abstract space, for instance photographs or writings about the Great Plains. Abstract space is, therefore, a means of conceiving absolute space "positively vis-à-vis its own implications: technology, applied sciences, and knowledge bound to power. Abstract space may even be described as at once, and inseparably, the locus, medium and tool of this 'positivity.'"[5] He recognizes that this process of abstraction is reductive—indeed that is one of its virtues—because it selects those aspects of the relationship between production and the natural world that encourage the reproduction of those relations that serve the continuation of the culture. This is not a value-laden claim as the same holds true for progressive and desirable forms of production as for exploitative and oppressive forms. This is the optimism of Lefebvre's politics of space. There is always the possibility of reconfiguring the ways in which we interact within a particular space.

While Lefebvre is concerned about space as defined by a society interested in stabilizing and maintaining itself, there are equivalencies that are useful in understanding the production of space in the theatre. The scenographer engages with the director in the conceptualization of the design and then enters into relations with the technical director and various crews in the realization of the concept in material form. What is paramount is the finished product, the "works, images and memories" revealed in "real" space for an audience, a product that also conceals the labor and artistry, and the collaborative process that led to the final representational form. This is equally true of the rehearsal space, a produced space in which relations of power and authority come into play in the development of the production, but which disappear in the finished product. What is important is the show, not how it gets there. At least that is true in public. We recognize that the quality of the process determines, to a large extent, the quality of the performance.

Produced space is not, however, a fixed form. The emphasis on relations as a means of defining a space indicates that the organization of space is subject to

transformation and permutation. Lefebvre writes, "The pre-existence of space conditions the subject's presence, action and discourse, its competence and performance; yet the subject's presence, action and discourse, at the same time as they presuppose this space, also negate it."[6] Variations in the relations that exist in the rehearsal space, or between the director and scenographer, have the potential—whether consciously done so or not—to alter the way work takes place, thus redefining the signification of the space, what the space means in the process of production.

Space for Lefebvre is a product of the interrelation of forces that comes into being only through its production. In this sense space is a performative, the effect of a performance. To use Judith Butler's terminology, it is the result of sedimented acts that, through repetition, become rigid and "naturalized." Butler's conception of the performative is, however, based on reception and fails to take into account adequately the activities and actions undertaken by agents in the performance that gives rise to the performative. As Sue-Ellen Case points out in T*he Domain Matrix* and elsewhere, the current discourse on the performative privileges the reading of signs, negating other forms of discourse. One of the discourses overlooked in discussions of space is that of place.

To differentiate between space and place may seem nonsensical and, indeed, the difference between them is largely one of perspective. But the shift from one to the other is as crucial as the shift from performance to the performative, a shift, in other words, from the act to what is accomplished through the act. While there is no way of separating the doing from the done, to refuse to try or to conflate them is dangerous. It would be the same as saying that there is no difference between the process of rehearsal and the public production. The production, the performative, is that which is to be read, to be consumed. The process, the performance, is the means by which the commodity is made available for consumption. It is similar with place and space. Space is that which is produced and is therefore "readable." It is an analytical and theoretical concept that requires a certain distancing to be understood. Space is not something that is lived in the way that a rehearsal is lived in readying a performance. The equivalent of rehearsal in this analogy is place. To think of place as I am here requires a shift of perspective, from the analytical to the phenomenological, from the observance of experience to the living of experience. To raise the question of phenomenology is to raise the question of the body.

Lefebvre tends to negate the body in his work, which he sees as an ancillary concern: "it might help to consider the body."[7] The body is something that is used in social practice, consisting of hands, members and sensory organs. As for lived experience, it "maybe highly complex and quite peculiar, because 'culture' intervenes here, with its illusory immediacy, via symbolisms..."[8] From his perspective, the body is an object that occupies space and exists in relation to other objects. He

presents the body as fragmentary, whose primary interest is as an instrument in social practice. What is missing in his treatment of the body is the recognition that the subject is animate. The body, in Lefebvre, becomes an object in motion rather than a moving being. This negation of the body can be traced back at least to Descartes, the cogito and the mind body split. It also is associated with what Lacan calls the entry into the symbolic. For Lefebvre, a child is separated "from its body because language in constituting consciousness breaks down the unmediated unity of the body."[9] There are two interesting assumptions here. First, Lefebvre assumes there is a time in the child's life when there is an unmediated unity of the body and, second, that language has the power to break down this unity. It is not clear what he means by an "unmediated unity." Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, in *The Primacy of Movement*, argues convincingly that in infancy we are apprenticed to our bodies, and that it is through this apprenticeship and the tactile-kinesthetic knowledge gained that we are able to learn to speak. She insists that from the beginning we are attuned to others as we explore the world as animate beings, but this does not assume an unmediated unity, in fact quite the opposite. Our interactions with others from the moment of birth involve an early and continuous process of mediation. Nor is it clear, if there is an unmediated unity, that language can break it down. Certainly language denies us conscious access to the immediacy of the body, but are we not able to perform a myriad of actions without the intercession of conscious thought, such as walking, keeping balance, picking up objects of different weights? And is it not our ability to use our jaws, lips and tongue that we are able to speak? Has consciousness through language disrupted the "unity" of the body, or is it our ability to move that gives us access to language?

I raise these questions because they are central to our understanding of our experience of place. To be in the world is to be in place. Edward Casey writes: "We are always with a body, so, being bodily, we are always within a place as well. Thanks to our body, we are in that place and part of it."[10] From Heidegger onward, being in the world is to be in place. Indeed it is our being in place in the world that allows us to apprehend space. Our body provides us with an orientation through its bilateral qualities, such as front and back, right and left, up and down. But this orientation becomes meaningful only because we are animate beings, because we come into the world moving. For Casey, this animation defines a corporeal intention that is not to be confused with conscious intention. It is the former, the corporeal, that allows for the perception of space. "The origin [of space] is found straightforwardly in the body of the individual subject. Or, more exactly, it is found in the *movement* of that body. For space to arise, our body as geared into it cannot remain static; it must be in motion."[11] In this regard Casey agrees with Lefebvre: space is produced and does not exist prior to human intervention. Casey argues, however, that space is first experienced through movement. The ability to

conceptualize space is made possible by the actions and interactions of the tactile-kinesthetic body, that is through being in place. The body in motion allows for the territorializing that gives rise to the produced space of Lefebvre. The relationship again parallels the equation of performance and performativity, of production and representation, or, to put it in more theatrical terms, of rehearsal and performance. Our interaction as animate beings in the place-world provides the data that allows us to conceptualize space as a product of relations between ourselves and with other objects, animate or not.

For Casey, as for Merleau-Ponty, place is not experienced simply through our actions, but through the actions of the world on our bodies. Whether it be wind, rain or the actions of other animate beings, our perceptions of the world, therefore our knowledge of the world, arises through interaction: we are always already engaged in the world and are acted upon, even as we act.

It is more difficult to talk about place because it is present for us at every moment of our existence. So pervasive is the experience of place that it is impossible for us to imagine ourselves without being some place, even if that "place" is a non-corporeal existence in the fantasies of cyber-fiction. The fact that it is inescapable also defines its seeming invisibility. We do not, indeed should not, constantly be aware of place. To be so would require a consciousness of virtually everything we do: standing, sitting, talking. Instead place recedes into the background becoming what Merleau-Ponty calls "the matrix of habitual action." Because it is a matrix, rather than a singular or unified locus, it is impossible for us to be fully aware of the place we inhabit or our connections to it. In part this is because of the complexity of place, but also because we become aware of place only through the intervention of consciousness. When we become consciously aware of place it is through the privileging of a particular set of perceptions that are exclusionary in principle. When we become aware of being in the world, it is through a limited or reductive understanding of the place we inhabit.

Being in place in the world is necessary for our constructions of space and it defines a foundation of which we can never be completely aware. Instead, we can only know place in fragments, fragments that change as we interact with the world and are interacted upon by the world. A parallel can be drawn between being in place and our understanding of our personal ideology. Ideology, as conceptualized by Louis Althusser, is extremely complex and determines our relations to the institutions we encounter and how we relate to others. We can only be aware of certain aspects of what we believe at any one time, and we can never know the full range of our ideological beliefs. What we can grasp of our ideology is fragmentary and depends on the particular perspective we are occupying at any one time. Similarly, we can only know how we are connected to place from the point of view we are occupying.

By way of example, Gay McAuley in her fine book, *Space in Performance:*

Making Meaning in the Theatre, discusses physical space, and in so doing cites a work by Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of Place World.* A phenomenologist, Casey writes:

> it is by my body—my lived body—that I am here. My lived body is the vehicle of the here, its carrier or bearer . . . as Husserl called it . . . the fate of the here is tied entirely and exclusively to that of the body . If there are experiences in which my body does not figure, then these experiences will lack a here, or will possess only a quasi or pseudo here.[13]

McAuley's ensuing discussion of Casey's insight focuses on the concept of "here" and the "pseudo here," with particular reference to the audience and actor interaction. She is interested in the intersection of these two entities, but what is lost is what Casey seems to be emphasizing most explicitly: "my lived body." In four sentences there are five references to the body, but in McAuley's use of the material, the body is replaced by an emphasis on "here" as a spatial concept. This is not to undervalue the qualities of McAuley's work or her insights, but to exemplify the distinctions that I want to foreground in differentiating place and space. Space is an objectification, a distancing and a standing outside of place; while place is the inhabitation of space, a being-in-space.

To think about space, then, is to think abstractly, to assume an objective position and to frame our experience in terms of the relationship between objects, whether stationary or in motion. To think about our place in the world is to describe our subjective experiences. While space is framed in the third person, the experience of place is always in the first person. While descriptions of our relations in space can be done through the use of analytical categories such as distance and direction, height, width and depth; describing the experience of place is done through qualities such as open, constricted, open, imposing, liberating, humbling.

To differentiate between space and place is not merely a theoretical distinction, but has practical implications, especially in the theatre where it touches on key issues. I began this paper with an example in part to suggest how the two terms can be used in textual analysis. The emphasis that Beckett puts on space over place, or Chekhov puts on place over space can provide insights into the possible meanings of the play. This, however, is not its only or perhaps primary value. The director, scenographer and the dramaturg are most often concerned about the actor in space, paying close attention to the spatial relationship between characters, the compositions that they create, the meanings attending these pictures and the way meaning changes through movement. They are anticipating the spectators' experience of the production and the contents that the event provides. Thus when McAuley describes the actors and the energized space they inhabit it is in terms of

entrances and exits; movement, position and orientation; gesture; energy and presence, she is using the categories of reception, of what the audience experiences. What is missing from her discussion of space in performance is the perspective of the actor.

For actors, it is not a question of spatial relationships, except in terms of blocking, of where they are supposed to be at a certain moment. Theirs is the experience of place. Where am I now? What do I do with the objects around me? When they enter the stage, they are not entering the Prozorov living room, but a set that allows them to create the illusion of entering a particular room required by the text. Similarly the character playing Winnie is not interested in whether or not she is occupying an abstract space or a particular place on the road or on a beach. She is concerned with the set, the location of the properties and how to convince the audience that she is buried to her waist or to her neck in earth. Actors don't need to know why they are in a particular place, they need to know how they are there: the quality of the movement they need to make, their intention at a particular moment. It is common place that when the director leaves, the blocking over time will change. This is not, or at least not always, because the actors disagree with the director's blocking, but because that is how they begin to see themselves occupying the place of performance.

This is not to say that actors should not be interested in the reasons behind choices or unaware of the effect of their actions on the audience. But actors, in the moment of performance, need to focus on being in place, engaging subjectively with the environment in which they find themselves. To return to that other distinction, they are concerned with the performance, the doing, and not the performative, how their actions are interpreted by the audience. As dramaturgs, actors and designers, we need to be cognizant of this distinction and to find a way of behaving that helps the actors be in place.

There is yet a further dimension. As dramaturgs and directors, we are also in place, and as situated beings are complicit in the space that is produced. Our performance in the rehearsal space contributes to the relations that exist between the participants, to the production of space and all that that entails. We are not and cannot be objective observers, despite our best intentions. As subjective beings, we create and monitor our interactions in a transformable set of relations. While we cannot know all the ways in which our actions influence the politics of rehearsal, we can pay attention to the kind of space that is being produced, the performative aspects of the rehearsal, and we can perform differently. It is at this point that the question of ethics enters the discussion, as it always must in any discussion of performance and performative. Theatre is about interrelations between people, and the way in which we engage each other is going to influence what is produced. Actors bridle at being given line readings, or told to imitate specific gestures, because they are being treated as objects in space. They become the tools of materializing

someone else's vision, rather than as animate beings who, through their interactions in the place-world, are striving to construct an experience that will have an effect on an audience. Nor are actors free from the ethical implications of this process. The actions of one actor apply a certain pressure on the other members of the company, and the relations that result can have a positive or negative effect on the overall process. According to Maxine Sheets Johnstone we are born physically attuned to others; and as creative artists, it is our responsibility to be attuned to the intensities of others, to seek a relationship that is reciprocal.

This is not an easy charge. The doing of theatre is infinitely difficult— that is what makes it an art. When it works there is a synchronicity between our being in place together and the space that is produced through the relations that define the production. Theatre requires the ability to translate between the subjective and the objective and in that translation to create a relationship between animate beings that will allow the actors to be in place in a way that creates an eloquent and dynamic space of performance.

Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, H*appy Days (*New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961) 8.

2. Anton Chekhov, *Chekhov: The Major Plays*, trans. Ann Dunnigan (New York and Toronto: New American Library, 1964) 235.

3. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1991) 48.

4. Lefebvre 48.

5. 50.

6. 57.

7. 40.

8. 40.

9. 35.

10. Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997) 214.

11. 229.

12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1981) 104.

13. Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999) 51.

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