NOTES ON THE NET

Rick Jones

Veteran attendees at academic conferences are well aware that the "real" work of such gatherings often occurs in the hallways and lobbies, where colleagues new and old have the opportunity to discuss ideas in a more unhurried and informal manner than is possible in the often rigid climate of papers and business meetings. It is this relatively relaxed but nonetheless professional environment that characterizes theatre-related LISTSERVs and USENET groups at their best. Obviously, such mailing lists, especially the unmoderated ones, are not always free from triviata, excessive chattiness, or "flaming", but in my three years of subscribing to such services, I have never doubted that the benefits far outweighed any potential disadvantages (I did, however, unsubscribe from two lists when I had to pay directly for Internet gateway access, and when what I perceived as mere silliness began to dominate those particular lists; I have subsequently re-subscribed to both lists).

The number of lists available to people interested in theatre is extensive indeed: some, such as ASTR-L (a theatre history list sponsored by the American Society for Theatre Research), THEATRE, THEATRE-THEORY, STAGECRAFT, SHAKSPER, and the several USENET lists under the general heading rec.arts.theatre, concentrate largely if not exclusively on theatre (and/or drama) issues. Others, such as PERFORM-L, consider theatre alongside other disciplines, taking a particular methodological stance (in this case performance studies). Still others, such as MODBRITS (20th century British and Irish literature), IRISH-STUDIES and CLASSICS, consider drama and theatre within the context of specific geographical regions and/or historical eras. I mention these lists in particular because they match with my own interests, and I personally subscribe to, or have subscribed to, all of the lists just mentioned. Other scholars will find ARTMGT-L (Arts Management), ASIANTHEA-L (Asian theatre) or COMEDIA (Hispanic theatre) better meet their needs and interests. Ron Willis included in his Fall 1994 column information on how to access the *Guide to Theatre Resources on the Internet*, which is continuously being revised

Rick Jones is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Theatre and Film at the University of Kansas. He has studied at Dartmouth College, the University of Birmingham (England) and Cornell University, and taught at Union College (KY), Cornell College, and Colby-Sawyer College. He has published reviews and articles on a range of scholarly and pedagogical issues in both theatre and classics journals.

and updated. Rather than repeat all of the information he provides, I will simply note that an e-mail message to Deborah Ann Torres <dtorres@umich.edu> will be sufficient to obtain a copy. It is only fair to mention, however, that this is a very long document indeed, and will occupy a sizable chunk of one's storage capacity.

In this column I hope to demonstrate, by quoting from four actual conversations on four different LISTSERV groups, the scope of material covered in these discussions, and, later, to discuss some of the specific uses to which the Internet can be employed. (I should note here that the discussions quoted are not intended to be exemplary of the respective LISTSERVs on which they appeared, but rather to give something of the flavor of the LISTSERV system in general.)

Let us begin with a discussion begun on the ASTR-L list on November 1, 1994 by Anne Berkeley <berkeley@wam.umd.edu>, who asks: "If we were to imagine a redefined undergraduate theatrical curriculum of the future—one that did not emphasize practical training—what would it include?"

First to respond was Rodger Smith <C596660.Mizzou1.bitnet>, who wrote the next morning from Missouri: "Perhaps theatrical training should become even more practical, which is to suggest training theatre students in how to locate theatre: (1) within the community, (2) within a larger cultural event, (3) within a financial plan, (4) within a construct which emphasizes the survivability of a theatre/program/department is dependent on its ability to understand its individual mission and utilize all practical resources to the accomplishment of that mission, and, finally, (5) within and without other kinds of performance (business, science, management, etc.). My thought here is rather than discarding courses or departments, theatre curriculums might adopt a broader scope and organize the teaching of these individual courses to attempt a practical understanding of theatre which connects pictures and resumes to marketing, connects modes of thought to society, and connects the execution of creativity to an articulation of culture."

Later the same morning, Ron Shields <rshield@BGNET.BGSU.EDU> wrote from Bowling Green, Ohio, "In my opinion the theatre undergraduate curriculum of the future will focus on performance and culture, with a heavy dose of performance studies (the interdisciplinary study of performance—literary as well as nonliterary texts). Classroom practice/pedagogy will finally embrace/place the use of performance as methodology rather than product. This is not to say that undergraduate students should not be involved in a production program or performance 'training'—rather, these theatrical products/techniques will be embedded within an overall curricular thrust dedicated to using performance and viewing performance and making performance as a means of cultural study. In addition, I also would argue that this emphasis would place the theatre curriculum in a central position within any college/university as a whole—as part of the

liberal/general education core (an answer to the odious but very real concerns of 'relevancy' and fiscal reallocations)."

Other discussants responded along similar lines until Alan Woods <awoods@magnus.acs@ohio-state.edu> questioned the terms of the original question: "Well, that really depends on how you define 'theatrical curriculum.' Do you include all live performance, or limit it to 'theatre' as presently understood? How about film, video, and other forms of theatre delivered by electronic or recorded media? I've my own perceptions of what should be included, which would involve a much broader definition than I find in most curricula (including the one I've helped developed here at Ohio State). . . ."

Woods's remarks prompted Paul Kosidowski <pkosidow@alpha2.csd. uwm.edu> to write from Milwaukee: "I think Alan's interest in extending theater studies to film and electronic media would certainly draw the undergrads (just as film studies programs in English departments are [doing]). But how do you get around the sticky question of film/television as 'theater delivered through electronic media.' I work with a lot of film/tv scholars who would shudder at the way such a discipline ignores the generic barriers between the two. And I certainly know a lot of theater scholars who would do the same. I'm most interested I guess in how people deal with this in classrooms, where filmed plays are often valuable for teaching theater and drama. Do people teach these texts *as* film or as 'records of production'? Or as ????".

Several respondents then supported the idea of including media other than those which meet a narrow definition of "theatre" in the theatre curriculum of the future. Not the least of these was Anne Berkeley, whose question started the thread. Three days after the thread began, she wrote: "There is an extremely important connection between film/video/theater that is surprisingly overlooked in much of the curricular discourse I read and hear. The connection is -drama-. Until recently spectators received dramas through theatrical media. With the development of technology, the media has changed, but for the most part, not the drama. At least not in popular forms. Our students receive 90% of their drama on film and tv. Let's face it. Aristotle, Horace, Aristophanes, Seneca, Plautus, Terence—all our old friends—they're all alive and well every moment of every week in the western world (probably more) through electronic texts. Perhaps in our pride over distinguishing 'theatre' from 'drama' over the years, we've got ourselves in an awful mess! Let's lighten up about our distinctions!".

A new thread discussing the value of screenplays as literature quickly developed, and lasted for several days, with many different contributors. Another new thread spun off from the comments of Dan Mufson <mufson@MINERVA. CIS.YALE.EDU>. He wrote from Connecticut on November 4, "What disturbs me about this thread is that people are so eager to move on to new media and co-

opt other disciplines when they really have not figured out—still—how to talk about plays in a way that is both literary and practical. Nor is there, in the universities to which I have had exposure, much breadth of selection for students interested in reading dramatic literature or learning about various performance traditions. And—as a lot of these listservs seem to testify—an alarming number of people are coming out of theater departments thinking that David Mamet is a cutting edge dramatist. On one of the listservs, there was a thread where everyone was writing in this season's shows for his or her school. Was anyone trying to stage a Richard Foreman play? Was there anything by Suzan-Lori Parks, or Adrienne Kennedy, or Gertrude Stein? Heiner Mueller? Kroetz? With few exceptions (I actually can't remember any) the seasons were completely impoverished in terms of challenging material. I think many of the people writing in are leaping to embrace things that sound experimental—oh yes, let's use other media, let's do cultural bricolage—and, in the bargain, a large group of exciting and incredibly important theater artists has been, *for the most part*, skipped over. Or at best, skimmed over. None of our ideas on this thread are mutually exclusive. But I think part of why drama strikes so many students as backwards is because modernist and postmodern texts and performance are horribly neglected."

What is striking about this discussion is not simply that over a dozen people from across the country participated in the exchange, or that hundreds more from all around the world eavesdropped on the conversation. Rather, the free-wheeling nature of the discussion not only allowed participants to discuss the curriculum of the future, it also generated lengthy corollary conversations on screenplays as literature and the types of seasons being produced at (mostly American) colleges and universities.

Of a similar tone, although centering on a more limited subject, was the discussion of a "virtual reality" production of *The Adding Machine* at the University of Kansas. On January 22, 1995, Ron Willis <RWILLIS@KUHUB. CC.UKANS.EDU> cross-posted an announcement of the project to several LISTSERVs. His posting read in part as follows: "[Designer/technologist Mark] Reaney will create 'virtual worlds' corresponding to settings on a computer. Stereoscopic images of those worlds, as appropriate, will be projected on a screen behind the live actors. Audiences, wearing polarized glasses, will confront those 3-D computer-generated images—manipulated in real time—along with live actors and Elmer Rice's well-known play in an otherwise conventional theatre event. We think there are some 'firsts' here, but they are less important than the issues we are interested in exploring. Among those issues are: the power of virtual reality environments (and occasional characters) in a live theatre context, the interpretive possibilities of computer-generated scenery, the impact of

"cyberized" thinking on the temporal and spatial dimensions of "legitimate theatre,"—the list goes on. Having the chance to talk about this via the net with people who can probe the issues, test our assumptions, challenge my thinking, and trip out on the implications of the whole event seems like a luxury I can't afford to pass by. I'd like to participate in a thread that explores these and related issues. I also promise periodic progress reports if they seem desirable. Is this a topic of interest?"

Within a few days, Willis's post had generated response on four different lists: THEATRE, ASTR-L. PERFORM-L, and (perhaps most of all) ars.digit-l, a list dedicated to discussing issues of technology and the arts. Not surprisingly, the discussions on the various lists reflected the particular interests of those lists' subscribers; I concentrate here on the responses on ars.digit-l.

Four hours after Willis first posted his message, Mark J. Jones <73121.74@compuserve.com> responded. Expressing considerable interest in the project, Jones wrote: "My first question would be how will you deal with the trap that so many directors/designers have fallen into when undertaking projects of this kind, that being allowing the technology to dominate the show to such an extent that the audience loses interested in the content. . . . I guess that your choice of play is an important element in exploring this problem, that using a strong, well-respected script will help carry the audience through. In such a case, I wonder if the application of VR will look out of place."

Willis responded the same night: "Frankly, I have to admit that given the evident novelty associated with VR and the inevitable hype that it is getting everywhere I am not at all sure anyone can entirely avoid the trap. On the other hand, theatre is lots of things, and spectacle is one of them. . . . [W]e feel committed to making the technology an interpretive device and not a gimmick. As plans are progressing we keep asking the question, 'Is this a technological possibility enhancing or supporting anything else in the show?' If we seriously believe it is, we go forward. If it seems to smack of being something that is being done just because it can be, we rethink it. We feel that obligation very keenly. . . . The point of the VR for us is to see what dimensions of the play—and the theatre event generally—can be seen afresh. The hope is that the VR will help the play seem 'in place' in a provocative way, a way that might be lost if it were business as usual and the event were simply taken for granted. But VR is not a panacea in our minds. It is simply a technology that exists and is part of the public consciousness in ways that suggest it might be a fruitful pathway to consciousness. Here, too, the basic dilemma seems an age-old theatre issue to me and we are simply using a slightly different theatre language to explore the structures of perception and the evocative powers of a performance text."

On January 23, still only a few hours after the original posting, Mark Reaney <MREANEY@KUHUB.CC.UKANS.EDU> also responded to Jones's comments: "You are right about the possible pitfalls to high tech production. I hope that we can keep a weather eye out for such problems. At the same time, I view this production as a scientific experiment. I am just as interested in what we will learn from doing it as I am in producing a well formed piece of work, and, as in any experiment, one can often learn more from the mistakes than from the successes. . . . That's what I find exciting about doing a project that has few precedents. Perhaps the real VR production won't be THE ADDING MACHINE, but the one after, that we learn to do by doing THE ADDING MACHINE, or perhaps the one after that. . . . I have often thought that expressionism in the theatre is hampered by centuries old stage conventions, practices, and equipment. VR should give us a means by which things can change before our eyes, float without wires, etc. . . ."

Jones, Reaney and Willis continued their conversation on ars.digit-1 (and Willis and Reaney both responded to comments on other lists as well). Then on January 25, the Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre in Los Angeles <GertStein@aol.com> wrote to say that they had done "a workshop of Stein's 'Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights' last April with live actors, projected 3D animated sets, videoconferenced actors from L.A., animated characters using Life Forms, and characters typing in their dialogue remotely in a chat window. Was it successful? As one audience member said, 'you are opening up a Pandora's Box of aesthetic questions . . .' and isn't that the point. Stein wrote her play while watching Gounod's Faust at the Paris Opera, apparently one of the first performances at the Opera to use electric lighting. Has electric light completely disappeared into the art of theater, so that it makes no separate impression? Not yet. Perhaps in another thousand years, VR technology will disappear into the art, but not soon . . . the point, perhaps, is to use it to make interesting statements about Real Reality."

The next day, Reaney responded to these comments: "As we go into our own exploration of VR in theatre, it has occurred to us not so much that we don't have all the answers yet, but we don't even know what the questions are. Some of the main concerns seem obvious. What will the impact of the technology be? Will it distract? Will it enhance? But we are running into all kinds of other fundamental aesthetic and practical concerns that we hadn't counted on. How do you describe the effects you want to collaborators who have never done anything like this before? How do you get past the hype to tell the public what you are up to? WHERE DO THE ACTORS STAND IN A VIRTUAL SETTING??? Truth is, it is rather exhilarating to be working on such unsteady ground. . . . Actually I think that electric lighting has disappeared except for those instances

where we want it to make a separate impression. And that's fine, too. The advantage of having new technology is not that it can disappear, but that it can appear when we want it, and be used to make statements that would not have been possible without it."

And so it went. Willis and Reaney were thus able to find out what was not necessarily as "new" about their production as they might previously have believed, to be reminded of potential pitfalls, and to advertise their work specifically to those pursuing (or interested in pursuing) similar projects as well as to a general audience of people interested in theatre.

Not all discussions involve new material, of course. But even the most ostensibly prosaic threads occasionally develop into fascinating discussions. For example, on January 18, 1995, John Gruber-Miller <GRUBERMILLER@cornell-iowa.edu> wrote to the CLASSICS list for advice on a textbook: "I am planning a course for this March on Greek and Roman tragedy and comedy and need to submit my book orders very soon. Could the members of the list help me out by suggesting which translation of the Oresteia they like and why? I am currently thinking of Fagles, Lattimore and Lloyd-Jones, but am open to other suggestions. In addition, what do you think about Penguin translations versus the Chicago series of translations for other tragedies?".

By the next day, Gruber-Miller had received several responses, some on the list, some privately. He shared his findings with the list: "Thanks to all who offered suggestions on translations of the Oresteia. If anyone is interested, there were 3 in favor of Lattimore, 4 for Fagles, and 2 who found them both good, 1 for MacNeice, and 1+ for Tony Harrison. What I found most interesting is the general lack of enthusiasm for either the Penguin or Chicago series. Is it simply that as classicists we aren't satisfied with anything less than the 'original' text (constructed by textual critics based on mss that date hundreds of years after the first performance of the play) or because these translations really need improvement in order to be performed or read. I was also curious that only one person has tried Lloyd-Jones' translation. Since it was published in '93, I thought that a few more people would have tried it out by now."

A number of responses continued to roll in for several days: a number of respondents mentioned the Tony Harrison translation of the *Oresteia* and the video of the National Theatre production, others favored Fagles for various reasons, and John Porter <porterj@herald.usask.ca.> wrote from Saskatchewan to explain that the reason, at least in Canada, that Lloyd-Jones's translation isn't used more is that it is "horrendously overpriced". A 1989 translation by David Grene and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty was mentioned with approbation by several correspondents. Still, the thread seemed to be dying out as an active issue of discussion until, on January 26, Steven J. Willett <steven@u-shizuoka-

ken.ac.jp> wrote from Japan: "I'm surprised that anyone would ever recommend Tony Harrison's 'translation' of the Oresteia for any purpose—acting, reading or teaching. It is a melange of styles, inept versification and inappropriate tone that succeeds in doing what few others have been able to do: entirely obliterate Aeschylus' poetry. For that, he substitutes a doggerel so inane one wishes Pope were still here to include it in 'The Dunciad'."

Shortly thereafter, Elizabeth Vandiver <VANDIVER@MUSIC.LOYNO. EDU> wrote from New Orleans that she had considered parts of the Harrison translation as "an example of translation gone mad—so bad it's almost funny," and added "I think this discussion and its offshoot on translations of Homer both hint at a much wider question: what exactly do we want translations to do, anyway?" Such a discussion did in fact ensue, involving considerations of the nature of translation vs. adaptation and the legitimacy of both approaches. Most interesting here is the fact that a seemingly non-controversial question such as the one Gruber-Miller originally proposed should spawn an extensive and heated discussion of the nature of translation: obviously an issue of great concern to classicists, but also to theatre scholars in general, especially given the concept of theatrical production as a form of translation.

Finally, let us turn to a discussion of a specific scholarly concern: the significance of a single speech in *The Merchant of Venice*. Aaron Tornberg <yku02829@cawc.yorku.ca>, a student at York University in Toronto, wrote to the SHAKSPER list on January 4, 1995, about "Shakespeare's seemingly anti-Semitic portrayal of Shylock. . . . Should we simply forgive Shakespeare because he was writing at a time when it was popular to hate Jews and [he] hated them less than Marlowe? Should we further forgive Shakespeare's misquotation through Shylock of the story of Uncle Laban's sheep? Jacob cheated Laban only AFTER Jacob was himself cheated BY Laban. Shakespeare fails to mention this fact within the play." SHAKSPER list editor Hardy M. Cook <HMCook@boe00.minc.umd.edu> referred Tornberg to the SHAKSPER archives for earlier discussions of "[a]nti-Semitism in Shakespeare in general and Shylock and *The Merchant of Venice* in particular", also outlining the means of accessing the archives.

Tornberg received several replies to general questions of anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*, but, even after reading through the archives, did not get an answer to his specific query, which he re-posed on January 18. By this time, the discussion had branched off in several directions: considerations of Jessica's integration or lack of integration into Christian society at the end of the play, the possibility of a homoerotic relationship between Antonio and Bassanio, reviews of specific performances of the play, and considerations of other passages in the play which underscore or undercut particular readings. After the re-posting of the

question, Tornberg received at least three specific responses: two on-list and one off-list. On-list, Matthew Westcott Smith <mwsmith@tigris.klte.hu> wrote from Hungary to note "Shakespeare—indeed any poet—is not a theologian nor a historian when writing poetry. This does not mean that omissions, restatements, and/or misrepresentations are not important and significant for understanding the Shakespearean corpus; of course they are. Indeed, it is precisely through the selection of certain necessarily limited aspects of human life and experience that the poet distinguishes himself from other thinkers. . . . I am not prepared to comment on Jacob and Laban matter at any length, but I would suggest that the way the dramatist distorts the relevant OT passages is just as significant as its presence in the first place."

Also on-list Ben Schneider <Ben.R.Schneider@lawrence.edu> wrote: "Shylock says, regarding Laban's device, 'this was a way to thrive, and he was blest.' The rest of the story only confirms that 'he was blest.' However, Antonio disagrees about why he was blest. Joan Holmer, whose essay on MV and Elizabethan arguments against usury appeared in Shakespeare Studies 1993, has a lot to say about 16th century thought on the Laban story."

Dan Foster seems to have responded directed to Tornberg, as Tornberg thanks him in a January 25 post for his comments on the passage. The discussion of the Jacob and Laban passage can be taken as exemplary in three ways: first, it was in some respects a repeat of earlier list conversations, and Tornberg and others were reminded of the availability of readily-accessible archives; second, Tornberg did not apparently receive a direct answer to his question as first posed, but received several replies to his follow-up: this is a fairly common phenomenon, and 'Net-users often repeat questions to which they did not receive answers; third, at least one response, and perhaps others, occurred off-list, *i.e.* a respondent sent a message directly to the individual rather than to the list: this, too, is fairly common; my own completely unscientific guess is that somewhere between 40-50% of responses are sent to an individual who poses a question rather than to the discussion list.

These four discussions range from the philosophical to the specific, and cover a wide range of subject matter. Some people will be interested in all four; virtually anyone in theatre, especially academic theatre, will be interested in at least one, all the more so if we construe the subjects broadly to be: the future of the profession, questions of production, textbook selection, and textual criticism. All four discussions seem to have both fulfilled the specific objectives of the person starting the thread *and* devolved in directions that person is unlikely to have anticipated. All four topics had a relatively short shelf-life; even the longest such discussions seldom last more than two or three weeks, although occasional exceptions do exist, and some topics (*e.g.* the "politics" of the American College

Theatre Festival) re-occur every year. The fact that most lists maintain archives of past postings becomes significant in this regard. Some, like PERFORM-L and SHAKSPER, even include scholarly essays, accessible through ftp and/or gopher, which had not been posted on-line. Scholarly organizations, too, set up files of papers: ASTR, for example, urges its panelists to submit copies of their papers to an ftp site, making the papers available, at least for a limited time, to scholars who were unable to attend the annual conference. Papers are often on-line before the conference, as well, so conference attendees can read particularly interesting papers in advance, enabling a greater depth of scholarly discussion at the conference itself.

Of course, not all lists are active at all times: some, like THEATRE-THEORY and PERFORM, have been known to go for weeks with no traffic at all. So new users should not be led to believe that using the 'Net will change their lives in a matter of minutes. Still, with the widespread and growing use of Internet resources, the use of electronic mail, at the very least, is quickly becoming something of a *sine qua non.* To give but a few anecdotal examples from my own personal experience: at least some committees of both the Performance Studies and Theatre and Social Change Forums of ATHE communicate exclusively by e-mail; literally dozens of conference panels are arranged over the 'Net, and I read on one of the various LISTSERVs roughly one call for papers per week which I see nowhere else (or which I see elsewhere several weeks later); I currently subscribe to two on-line journals, *TPI* and *Didaskalia,* and I strongly suspect that number will have increased by the time this column actually appears in print . . . which, of course, leads to another point. Since on-line journals needn't worry about printers or postage, distribution is all but instantaneous: review articles in particular can be much more timely: when the book has only just reached the stores, the production is still on the stage—indeed there are currently at least three journals (*Scholia* and the Bryn Mawr Classical and Medieval Reviews) which send subscribers e-mail versions of book reviews as soon as they are submitted, *i.e.* long before paper copies are available.

Even traditional publishing increasingly makes use of electronic technology: for example, when I served as guest editor of Books in Review for the *New England Theatre Journal* in 1994, I not only contacted a number of prospective reviewers by e-mail, but actually received copy electronically, saving time, money, and the hassle of converting reviewers' various word processing programs into something compatible with my own. My successor in the position, Assunta Kent, went a step further, actually advertising over the THEATRE and PERFORM-L LISTSERVs a list of books available for review: the response was apparently overwhelming.

An ancillary benefit to using the 'Net are "Netpals": most veteran LISTSERV users have a handful of close "friends" whom they have never actually met face-to-face. This ground-breaking is especially valuable to young scholars who find that they really do "know" someone at those first, awkward, professional conferences. (I myself was surprised when no fewer than six people at the 1994 ATHE conference in Chicago identified me not by my name, but as "Strophius", the America On-Line screen-name through which I was subscribing, and contributing, to various LISTSERVs at the time.) Of course, "lurking", *i.e.* subscribing to a LISTSERV but not sending in any messages, is very possible, and most LISTSERVs even have a means of suppressing your name from their accessible records, so that literally no one knows that you're "listening in".

The Internet is not a panacea, and it will no doubt cause nearly as many problems as it solves. But it will certainly make certain kinds of tasks easier and faster, and certain opportunities more generally available. More to the point, the Internet is not going to go away. For better or worse, in a matter of but a few years, only "stars" will be able to profess ignorance of the 'Net and still survive professionally. The good news is that the 'Net is nowhere near as complex or as daunting as some beginners might believe.

Comments or questions may be directed to rjones@falcon.cc.ukans.edu.

Book Reviews