

Layers of Perception

James Frieze

Much of my writing, teaching and directing focuses on how identities are conceived, performed, and policed. Over the past year, I have, as I will explain, found myself coming and going between writing, teaching and directing more rapidly and choppily than ever before. The now often hourly back and forth from classroom to rehearsal to computer—an experience I am sure several of you have shared—has, not surprisingly, concentrated my mind on continuities between performing, spectating, teaching and writing. All aspects of my work seem to have been struck by the tremors of a concept that has radically affected how I see, and encourage my students to see, identity in theatre. It is a concept which can be summed up in the phrase: “residues of perception.”

By “residues of perception,” I mean the accumulated impressions that form in a person’s consciousness and, in doing so, mutate their consciousness; the mental decisions and judgements we make, often without realizing we have made them; the powerful and often unconscious identifications that people engage in, again often unconsciously. As a medium which, fundamentally, enacts the compression of time and space, theatre is well placed to peel away accreted layers of perception to reveal “choice-histories;” to unfreeze the individual’s past impressions, choices and identifications; to show how perception dovetails with enculturation. In short, theatre is well equipped to play the development of social mores against the forgotten fuel of that development.

I am in my second year as a lecturer at John Moores University in Liverpool, England, prior to which I spent seven years in the United States—as a high school teacher in New York state, a counselor on summer drama programs in Maryland and Michigan, and as a Ph.D. student and teaching assistant at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Having studied dramatic literature, theory and criticism at Madison, I have taught these things—but have spent about half my time helping to produce what John Moores is renowned for: “new work.” The term “new work” is often used at John Moores in opposition to the slicker productions

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of our neighbors, LIPA (The Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts, established by Sir Paul McCartney). As one of my colleagues put it, elucidating the difference between our productions and those of LIPA, theirs tend to cater to the theatre industry as it operates today, ours aim to provide a blueprint for a theatre of tomorrow. Having probed further into the realm of new work, I am able to inform you that a new work is, in fact, a noisy ensemble piece featuring various fluids. Having spent the last few years fretting that I have not read enough books about performance and about history, that I have not scrutinized the latest journals to see what the flavor of the month is in critical theory, and trying not to be found out, I am in a place where most people could not care less about what is currently sexy in performance studies, and are not bent on finding me out. This is a relief and a worry, refreshing and disconcerting. I increasingly feel my training as a scholar is, to coin a phrase spoken often in Liverpool, about as useful as a priest in a brothel. (Though I suspect that at this minute a John Moores student is doing some “new work” proving that a priest can in fact be very useful in a brothel.)

Because I have undergone two shifts in emphasis simultaneously—from the US to the UK, and from seminars and theoretical debates to rehearsals and workshops—the shifts have become merged in my mind, causing me to focus on the commonalities between, on the one hand, the differences between the United States and Britain, and, on the other, the differences between the classroom and rehearsal room.

I use the word “differences” out of habit, because it crops up so often in the wording of that perennial question: “what are the differences between the U.S. and the U.K.?” I have misgivings about the “differences” question. The relationship between the US and the UK is, to an ever-increasing degree, one of entailment. As Mary Karen Dahl puts it, from an American perspective: “your emigrants are our immigrants; your rule fostered our rebellion; your philosophy fueled our enlightenment; your post World War II retreat from colonial involvement prepared for our advance; our hegemony now provokes your reinvigorated drive for economic and cultural leadership in Europe.”¹ Though most of these examples evoke a slightly competitive, or love-hate, relationship, that is not always the case in recent times. Thatcher & Reagan, a mutual admiration society, seem like just good friends today, an era in which two would-be comic-book heroes with the all-too-human foibles vie for the tag, “International Man of Peace.” The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, emits whole chunks of discourse lifted from last week’s speech by President Bill Clinton. British and American political discourse seems to be conjoining rapidly.

Coming and going between the classroom and the rehearsal room, I noticed an analogous flow of *entailments* to that which operates between Britain and the States. In addition to the obvious relationship between study and production—that people in classrooms study what practitioners produce—there is another axis of flow which, on the face of it almost equally obvious, is often glossed over, or even ignored, by critics and by educators: people who put on plays, and people in plays, are didacts.

One thing that critics and educators in the U.S. and U.K. have in common is that they are trained to see themselves as conquerors of the virgin text, striving—and encouraging students to strive—for “original interpretations.” What is neglected is attention to the interpretations depicted *within* the text, to the role of characters as substitute teachers (no pun intended). “Characters” (I use the term broadly, to encompass the non-marked characterization of performance art) model spectatorship. Spectators find traces of their thoughts and impressions thrown back at them, sometimes before they even realized they were forming those impressions.

Paula Vogel’s *The Baltimore Waltz* opens with a character named Anna engaged in the challenge of translating from a foreign language. As the play ensues, Anna *becomes* the foreign language, whose daydream—which constitutes the bulk of the play—the spectator is challenged to decode. Like Anna Deavere Smith who, in *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, portrays the non-fluencies, hesitations and repetitions of her interviewees, Vogel charts the drives, anxieties and tensions behind expression. Both Smith and Vogel attempt to portray the movement from inner speech to social voice by peeking through the fence of identity and ideological position.

I believe in teaching students what I strive to remember as a critic: their own interpretations are not an Archimedean point. Archimedes declared that he could measure the world if only there was a point on which he could rest his instrument. The point of critical interpretation is not a fixed one; that is, the point is not to fix a point. The problem of flattening the world is as thorny today as it was for Archimedes. I am thinking of the metaphor of the playing field, one that is often used to describe social relations. Great efforts are made by some to declare that the playing field is level, while others discover for themselves that it is not. As a teaching assistant on the Introduction to Theatre course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I was inspired by the fact that a lot of students were eager to flatten the world. Some, however, seemed to think that wishfully thinking it flat, with the aid of “original interpretation,” would mean it was.

One group’s presentation on Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* was premised on the argument that racism “does not really exist today,” and that the

modern equivalent to racism is oppression of homosexuals. They transposed the Youngers into a contemporary soap opera of gay life. The over-readiness to declare the struggles of the Youngers universal was not unique to this group. Nor was the over-readiness to declare a particular struggle universal specific to this play. Several students in one section were obsessed with Pangaea, the (notional?) place where all humanity once lived as a single race: some even thought they had gone back there.² Raising examples of covertly racist laws operative today in the United States, did not seem to make the counter-impact on the 120 students that it should. Like Phillip Marlowe, I needed a way to make a difference and I needed it fast.

A play that I taught this year at John Moores alongside *A Raisin in the Sun* worked to disfigure the level playing field. In *Singue Mura: An Exploration of Woman's Life in Nine Movements*, Werewere Liking subjectively maps the cultural terrain of a Cameroonian village. In a non-linear, often anti-chronological, exploration of the consciousness of her heroine, Singue Mura, Liking takes the spectator to such places as "zero space" and "the space of all possibilities." Articulating the accumulated history of her variously ritualized and colonized land with the accumulating perceptions of the spectator, the playwright peels away at the image of what first appears to be a successful and self-possessed woman. The embodied legacy of Singue Mura's struggle and confusion becomes horrifically tangible as she is first caught between the sympathetic nurses and the patriarchal village sorcerers, and is later attacked by her aborted fetuses. Using native Bassa ritual with irony and a very focused ambivalence, Liking shows the struggle that Singue Mura has gone through, her complex relationship to the traditions of her village, to West African notions of womanhood, and Western notions of feminism.

While written texts *point* to the context of performance, and thus to spectatorship, the accretion of the residues of perception is, in some cases, only palpable in performance. In Ping Chong's work, the architecture of representation is always more than the means used to tell a story: it *is* a story. When Chong projects the titles from Murnau's *Nosferatu* within a stage piece that depicts a yuppie Manhattan apartment (1985's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Darkness*), Chong evokes the ever-changing power that a particular typeface has to affect perception. Chong's performative restoration of a story seems to bring to life both the remembered events and the instruments of remembrance. In the first section of *After Sorrow* (1997), "L'histoire Chinoise," a nineteenth-century "moderately well-to-do lady" recalls the day her father sold her for ninety dollars--ten dollars for each year of her life. Actress Muna Tseng's back is initially to the audience. When she spins around to face front, the drum stool on which she sits appears to

rotate of its own volition, as if organically connected both to the Woman's body and the stage floor. Tseng details the preparation for the sale with exquisite precision: the mother's braiding of the girl's hair, the serving of hot rice porridge embellished, on this occasion, with the girl's favorite delicacy: "flaky melon cakes studded with cubes of pork fat." Everything Tseng touches is miked, including a fan that she snaps, almost viciously, to accentuate moments in the text.

In Chong's work, objects and signs are reversibly chargeable: he reveals their history as sites of joy and of horror, of vivacity and morbidity. Chong sounds through the physical present, evoking a continuity between the depicted historical environment and the architecture of current representation. In a broadly similar—that is, formalist—vein, Paula Vogel describes how (she and) director Anne Bogart continually re-deployed a "ubiquitous beige lounge sofa" throughout *The Baltimore Waltz* as everything from a bed to the Eiffel Tower.³ Like Ping Chong's work, Bogart/Vogel's production of *The Baltimore Waltz* was about the transformative power of performance; it was about animation.

Grounding a curriculum in the residues of perception and construction dramatized by practitioners such as Bogart, Vogel and Chong is a way to navigate between the essentialist authenticity trap and its binary opposite—the effacement of histories and allegiances.

When texts are taught on a drama course, they are typically taught as examples of a particular genus—the Black feminist play, the postmodern multimedia performance piece, the AIDS play. Whether they are framed as representative examples, or as unrepresentative, unique, they are still categorized in these ways. Such labeling is hard to avoid, and in many cases is a desirable way to contextualize a text and to focus a curriculum. The down side of labeling is the authenticity trap. The authenticity trap is the one which posits, say, Suzan-Lori Parks as the voice that speaks for young Black women, or proceeds from the assumption that Paula Vogel set out to write the prototype for the AIDS drama against which other AIDS dramas can be measured.

Calling Suzan-Lori Parks a Black feminist playwright productively challenges teacher and student to engage with African-American history and with the relationship of Black to White feminists. The constant repetition of such categories as "Black," and "feminist," can, and should, be seen as enabling teachers and students to historicize and interrogate the assumptions behind labeling—and maybe even to talk about "White" drama, or "patriarchal" drama.

In *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, Parks draws on the African-American tradition of "repetition and difference" which Henry Louis Gates charts in *The Signifying Monkey*, to conjure the experience of meanings changing,

often barely perceptibly, over time. The third scene of the play begins with a conversation between, Mona, now called Molly, asking Chona, now called Charlene:

MOLLY: Once there was uh me named Mona who wondered what she'd be like if no-one was watchin. You got the Help Wanted?

CHARLENE: Wrapped thuh coffee grinds in em.⁴

Like the “coffee grinds,” Mona’s identity is a series of residues packaged as an urban convenience. Physically and ontologically, the used coffee conjures images of Black identity being ground down and wrapped in discourse. Parks goes on to uncover those effects, to peel away accreted discursive layers in search of the sense of “me-ness” that Mona feels has been stolen from her. As Mona’s mutability becomes perceptible, the spectator becomes a witness to the formation of consciousness.

Tracing the formation of consciousness of the character alongside that of the spectator, and articulating them both with the formation of the consciousness of the socialized subject, can enable students to see identity in motion. Seeing identity in motion means exploring the relatedness of history and psychology—and, helpfully for the teacher, obviates the need to choose between the two as a focus of attention.

Roland Barthes writes that the self becomes the self in the act of cutting across. I prefer the more Buddhist metaphor of dispersal. As you spread yourself through a social structure, you can both lose and find yourself. This image captures the experience of identity in motion, the experience—dramatized by the likes of Parks, Chong, Vogel, Smith and Liking—of encountering structures that have a life of their own. It also approximates the experience of the spectator lured by identifications that bolster but can also displace the sense of self. The process of decoding is not so much a means to an end for Vogel’s Anna, but is cathartic in and of itself. Decoding is a chase in which Anna loses herself; it is a loss which opens up the possibility for spiritual re-centering.

On a pedagogical level, focusing on the layers of perception that accrue as the individual disperses herself through culture usefully complicates the distinction, made in both the US and the UK, between so-called “teacher-centered” and “student-centered” learning. The distinction is useful but dangerous. The idea that teachers and students become “active” by getting up from reading a book to

lead a workshop does more harm than good—unless we read and listen with our bodies, and think on our feet. I am starting to tell students to write on the move, to visualize their essays not as a pile of books, and words neatly boxed within a page, but as one of those photographs in which you can trace movement, the kind of image in which ghosts of other images are visible as after-glow. Their grammar might not improve (!), but their writing often will, because the thinking that goes into it will be more dynamic.

Theatre students are exactly the people to challenge the connotations that the word “perception” has of passivity. If theatre studies has done anything in the last two decades, it has shown that reception is active; to say that the spectator is “just a receiver” is almost oxymoronic. My repetition of the word “perception” in this paper is partly a gesture—a gesture towards further radicalizing spectatorship, asserting that witnessing consciousness is a formative, and can be an activist, social process.

Notes

1. Quoted from an unpublished correspondence.

2. Lest it seem that I am picking on the students in the example unfairly, I should say that many critics have accused luminaries such as Peter Brook of an equally effacing approach to culture. Indeed, brilliant as she is, I cannot help but find French feminist Helen Cixious’s pronouncement about women—“I am Black, I am beautiful”—more than a little dodgy.

3. Paula Vogel in Anne Bogart: *Viewpoints*, ed. Michael Dixon and Joel A. Smith (New York: Smith and Kraus, 1995) 89-101.

4. In Suzan-Lori Parks, *The American Play and Other Works* (New York: TCG, 1985) 27.

