

Keynote Provocations: a Report on 'Here Be Dragons,' the 5th PS Conference Held at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 9-12 April, 1999.

Glenn D'Cruz

The picturesque Welsh town of Aberystwyth lies at the end of a railway line. It is not an easy place to get to as many of the delegates to the 5th Performance Studies (PS5) conference will attest. The journey to Aberystwyth from almost every international airport in the U.K. is nothing short of arduous (my seven hour journey from Heathrow was particularly fatiguing thanks to a couple skinheads who kindly offered to put me on the first plane back 'to wherever the fuck I came from'). However, over four hundred delegates, a few from distant, exotic lands like Australia, made the pilgrimage to Wales, enduring the hazards posed by jet-lag and the United Kingdom's privatized railroad system, to pay homage to something called 'Performance Studies' (henceforth referred to as PS).

While not exactly far from the metropolitan center, Aberystwyth, to paraphrase the words of conference director Richard Gough, stands on the edge of Europe, looking west across the vast expanse of the cold Irish sea. For Gough, the town's geographical location 'on the edge' made it a particularly suitable venue for a conference that aimed to map the boundaries and unexplored hinterlands of PS. Jointly sponsored by the Centre for Performance Studies at the University of Wales and Performance Studies International, the conference was titled, "Here Be Dragons." This phrase was commonly used by medieval cartographers when they reached the limits of their knowledge concerning the territory they were mapping. So, PS5 was ostensibly about the limits of knowledge, transgression and innovation. Unfortunately, I found no dragons, metaphorical or literal, in Aberystwyth (although one of the barmen at the Arts Centre came pretty close). This is not to say that the current crop of PS cartographers are actually comfortable with the present maps of their territory. Indeed, many delegates expressed anxieties about the state of the discipline. Is PS a distinct academic discipline, and how does PS differ from other academic disciplines like cultural studies? Of course, a comprehensive survey of the disparate responses to these questions is an impossible task. A big international conference like PS5 necessarily contains several parallel sessions. It is, therefore, impossible for any individual delegate to provide a global account of the event. Indeed, given the size of the conference, it is highly probable that individual responses to PS5 will differ markedly. Bearing this in mind, what follows is a critical description of the plenary sessions I attended. According to the conference organizers, the keynote addresses were intended to set the agenda for the conference by issuing a series of stimulating provocations.

The first session foregrounded the united colors of PS. Speakers of various hues and nationalities problematized the discipline's 'international' pretensions in a bid to avoid the pitfalls of opening proceedings with a single, univocal keynote address. Guillermo Gómez-Pena, the 'world renowned' Chicano experimentalist, began with a witty diatribe against academic critics. Describing himself as, "the Mariachi with the big mouth," Gómez-Pena posed a series of provocative questions: what is the responsibility of the critic in relation to the artist? How can the artist respond to the critic? As a performer, Gómez-Pena felt particularly peeved by the fact that critics rarely interact or directly converse with the objects of their analyses. The PS analyst, according to the self-styled Mariachi motor-mouth, interprets performance from the position of a spectator, rarely making the effort to actually engage performers in conversation. "I feel a nostalgia for colonial anthropology," Gómez-Pena declared, "because at least the anthropologists sat around the campfire and drank with us."

Gómez-Pena also expressed concern about the paucity of serious academic criticism dealing with performance events that take place outside the theater world's major metropolitan centers (London, New York, Paris, Berlin). Why is this work ignored, he asks? What forums do marginalized, non-metropolitan artists have for 'writing back' to the center? Not content with rallying against the elitist, ethnocentric perspective of academic critics, Gómez-Pena also took a swipe at 'fashionable theory,' arguing that its criteria for establishing aesthetic excellence generally depends on the pronouncements of various 'in-vogue' Gallic theorists. "I suggest," he said, tongue planted firmly in cheek, "that artists form a review board to monitor the ethical behavior of theoreticians."

Having castigated academics and theoreticians, Gómez-Pena then berated anti-intellectual performers. "Can we bridge the gap between unintelligible theory and anti-intellectual art," he mused? Finally, the 'world renowned' Mariachi rallied against what he called 'Discovery Channel Multiculturalism' and posed a further question: "what does it mean to be radical when television has commodified radical action?"

Gómez-Pena's engaging address was a hard act to follow, a fact immediately acknowledged by the following speaker, Susan Melrose. Melrose, a highly respected academic in both the UK and Australia, was surprisingly sympathetic towards Gómez-Pena's critical assessment of academic criticism. As a lecturer in an actor training institution, Rose Bruford College, Melrose confessed she was troubled by her past as an advocate of theory. More specifically, she expressed a number of anxieties about the relationship between PS and theory. "PS," she argued, "draws on an eclectic set of discourses to produce more discourse, or performance practices that are prescribed in advance by the discourses they employ." In other words, scholastic PS produces theory, or 'theoretically correct' performance practices which are of little interest to those situated beyond the narrow

confines of the academy. Observing that the discursive norms of the university are not universal, Melrose assumes that theory does not circulate outside the university. The disturbing corollary of this position implies that performances staged within an academic context are qualitatively different from those enacted in the 'professional' world. I have seen many too many dismal 'professional' theater productions to fully accept Melrose's thesis. Further, I think it can be convincingly argued that theory has contaminated many different forms of cultural production. For example, references to postmodernism and academic stars like Michel Foucault can be found in contemporary American cinema (witness Lisa Cholodenko's *High Art* and Todd Haynes' paean to glam rock, *Velvet Goldmine*).

Melrose went on to accuse the academy of hypocrisy because it generally accepts more students than can ever make a living performing. While this is certainly true, her critique promotes a utilitarian pedagogy that measures 'success' in terms of a narrow set of quantifiable outcomes. Indeed, Melrose argued that PS in its current incarnation, and I assume that she was referring to her own institution's articulation of the discipline, is little more than a school for spectators. In short, PS possesses little use-value; while fascinated by the performer, PS cannot, Melrose believes, actually tell us *how* to produce a performer who possesses the requisite skills to succeed in the industry. Once again, I feel Melrose underestimates the intelligence of professional actors, many of whom comfortably straddle the worlds of theory and practice. One cannot assume that professional actors, particularly those with a university education, are ignorant of or indifferent towards theory. In short, Melrose's map of PS has rigid borders that do not reflect the diverse terrain of the discipline.

Melrose's recantation of theory was followed by an impromptu presentation by Abu Elgassin Gor from the Sudan Centre of Theatre Research. Unlike his predecessors, who were visibly armed with pages of written notes, Gor approached the podium with a small scrap of paper that he held up to the audience, who responded with enthusiastic applause. Gor began with an anecdote about disorientation and cross-cultural misunderstanding. Evidently, Gor's journey to Aberystwyth was hampered by immigration bureaucrats, who refused to grant him a visa to the U.K. As a result of this unhappy encounter with officialdom, he arrived at the conference feeling especially tired and disoriented, a feeling that was exacerbated when he could not find his room. This 'disorientating' experience was compounded by a subsequent dream he had about dragons. Gor confessed that he believed dragons to be real creatures until he was enlightened by a cook at breakfast the next morning. After indicating that he did not want to sample any dragon meat, the cook told Gor that dragons were mythological creatures. In its own way, this amusing story underscored the fact that Western discourses do not always translate across cultures. No one had bothered to tell Gor that dragons did not really exist because they assumed, quite incorrectly as it turned out, that he

knew about dragons. In summary, Gor problematized the word 'international' in 'Performance Studies International' by posing the following questions: What can I, as a theater studies worker, do for my people? To what extent are Western theater concepts relevant to African society?

These questions were also taken up by the following speaker, Anjum Katyal from the Seagull Foundation for the Arts in Calcutta. After noting that metaphors of journey and border crossings were central to the conference, Katyal asked how to avoid the dangers of cultural appropriation and colonization? She then went on to briefly outline two possible solutions. First, Western critics need to humbly acknowledge that non-Western terrain has always existed. It is not something that is waiting to be discovered. Second, Katyal advocated what she called a 'betweenness'. That is, an equal exchange of ideas between 'East and West' that is equally enriching for both parties. While these are fine sentiments, they are also pretty glib. Surely, establishing an ethical exchange of ideas and performance practices across cultures involves more than mouthing the rhetoric of mutual respect and good will?

The session concluded with an interrogation of PS as a specific 'knowledge formation' by one of the discipline's most respected scholars, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett of New York University. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett began in cheerleader mode, observing that the Centre for Performance Research (CPR) was, "like the little engine that could." I presume that she meant that CPR, a relatively small organisation, had managed to organize a large international conference with relatively few resources. Having given CPR a pat on its back, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argued that PS, as a scholarly enterprise, is unique because its objects of analyses are performative practices. Consequently, performance theory emerges from practice. In other words, PS does not trade in theoretical models which put the cart before the horse; its theory is generated by and through practice. But how exceptional is this relationship between object and field? Is there not a sense in which most academic disciplines generate theory from material, everyday practices? For example, one could convincingly argue, I think, that the buying and selling of goods, an everyday performance, and the organization of relationships between capital and labor generate theories of political economy.

Nonetheless, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett attributes the unusual theory/practice relationship in PS to its disciplinary genealogy, which has its roots in avant-garde theater practice. "Everything looks different after experimental performance art," she claims. This is because performance art supposedly carries its theoretical possibilities within itself. While I found this reification of the avant-garde difficult to accept without reservation, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is correct in pointing out that most incarnations of PS owe a considerable debt to the avant-garde. For example, PS at NYU is basically what she describes as a 'theater plus' model. That is, theatrical practices are studied alongside other modes of performance: sport, ritual

carnival and so on. However, avant-garde theater practice is a privileged form of performance because it attempts to break down the distinction between art and life, aesthetics and politics.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett made two further points about PS. The first concerned performance pedagogy. In case we had forgotten, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminded her audience that PS academics 'perform' in the classroom, and that the discipline needs to be more aware of this fact, and develop distinctive pedagogical strategies. Her second observation concerned PS as a 'knowledge tradition.' She argued that the discipline uses performance as an organizing concept to make sense of a variety of events *as* performance events. However, we need to constantly ask ourselves whether it is useful or interesting to use the idea of performance. Finally, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett brought proceedings to a conclusion by asking her audience to focus on their individual intellectual histories in order to more effectively chart the ways in which PS develops in different ways in different contexts.

Judging from the anxieties expressed by the various speakers whose presentations I have described above, PS is in a state of flux. The major issues raised by this first plenary session centered on the ethical and methodological problems posed by the following binary relationships: theory and practice, actor and audience, center and margin, East and West. So, how provocative were these provocations? Well, my experience at the rest of the conference was highly disappointing. Far from engaging with what I will call the ethics of alterity, most of the sessions I attended reinforced the hegemony of the American (read the NYU) model of PS. For the most part, the conference was dominated by North Atlantic academics, who, despite their pronouncements to the contrary, displayed little interest in the work of artists and academics located outside the major metropolitan centers. As my colleague Peter Eckersall privately remarked, a more apt title for the conference might have been 'Here Be Americans.' An even more appropriate title, in my view, might have been 'Here Be Richard Schechner,' for most of the papers I witnessed engaged, often critically, with Schechner's formulation of the field.

Indeed, Kate Hammer, in one of the numerous panel sessions, made the point that Schechner's name is synonymous with PS. Hammer actually described Schechner as a 'trans-discursive author' — that is, an author whose work provides the conditions of possibility for the generation of subsequent work within a specified discipline. It should come as no surprise to learn, then, that Schechner, or 'Professor PS,' as one delegate who shall remain nameless labeled him, was the only plenary speaker to be granted a solo platform. Schechner's address, which was titled, 'Fundamentals,' also articulated a series of anxieties about the current state of the discipline.

In general terms, Schechner attempted to identify the disciplinary 'fundamentals' of PS. But what are 'fundamentals'? In simple terms, they are, for Schechner, processes: ways of doing, thinking, writing, and speaking. And, this ensemble of processes defines the PS field. However, these processes are always in a state of flux, so the first 'fundamental' of PS is that there are no fundamentals — this lack of fixed disciplinary conventions apparently explains why many people are uncomfortable with PS. However, in a move that bears more than a passing resemblance to John Howard's distinction between 'core' and 'non-core' election promises, the doyen of PS concedes that within various moments there are fundamentals on which PS stands. These 'secondary fundamentals' present a variety of problems for the PS scholar, for they have been derived from adjacent disciplines such as anthropology, theater studies, linguistics, queer theory and post-structuralism to name a few of the most obvious sources of PS fundamentals. This begs an important, dare I say 'fundamental' question: Does PS need its very own set of 'Fundamentals' to avoid becoming a repository for verbose BS, and disappearing up its own fundament? More specifically, how can PS distinguish itself from that other maverick academic discipline Cultural Studies (CS)? Indeed, Schechner's desire to introduce a 'little more order' to the disheveled house of PS is largely motivated by the very real need to make PS distinctive. CS, he noted, has stolen 'our' thunder by coveting the 'performative.' Indeed, the parallels between PS and CS are worth examining in more detail.

CS, like PS, rode onto the academic scene like a righteous outlaw. It boldly crossed disciplinary borders, and jumped the walls separating high culture from popular culture with a speed and sense of purpose rarely witnessed in the rarefied world of Academe. Gunning for the guardians of class-biased aesthetic value, hunting down the keepers of traditional aesthetic canons, CS trailblazers became the champions of the dispossessed, the marginalized, the forgotten. Always wary of the totalitarian tendencies that characterized the critical practices of 'reactionary' disciplines such as literary studies (LS), CS supposedly resisted the impulse to formalize its scattered alliances and practices into a real gang. While I have applauded almost every time this righteous band of outlaws fired a shot in the name of class warfare, I remain skeptical about their claims concerning their lack of disciplinary identity. After all, as a pop icon once declared, "to live outside the law, you must be honest."¹ And there is, I think sufficient evidence to suggest that the practitioners of CS (along with their counterparts in PS and LS) are not totally honest, but that, as they say, is another story.²

Why is PS in danger of being redundant by CS? The answer to this question becomes apparent when we examine the discursive preconditions for being 'in the true' of CS. Tony Bennett, in an article published in *Southern Review* seven years ago, identified two such discursive preconditions. The first is, "the

rule of theoretical and methodological indeterminacy and the rule of wholeness via marginality.”³ In simple terms, Bennett is referring to the tendency for the advocates of CS to deny that their work belongs to any disciplinary framework, or possesses a clearly articulated series of methodological techniques or theoretical verities. Sound familiar? The second ‘truth-condition,’

offers an ethical-cum-political compensation for this theoretical and methodological indeterminacy in constructing social marginality as an experiential route which allows those who travel it to achieve an integrative kind of intellectual wholeness which stands in for theoretical and methodological criteria in furnishing cultural studies with its epistemological protocols.⁴

Bennett goes on to cite social class, gender, ethnicity and subalternity as popular categories of the marginal. His point is that CS authorizes those works which claim to be enunciated from a position of social or political marginality, so it is Raymond Williams’s *Welchness* that enables him to “acquire an understanding of British culture as a whole in view of his lived experience of the relations between the culture’s dominant and its resistant elements.”⁵

Schechner made similar claims for PS in his keynote address. PS, he somewhat disingenuously informed his large audience, has no “textbook or even an agreed upon set of canonical texts.” Moreover, PS is apparently sympathetic to ‘the radical, marginal, the twisted, the queer.’ This is not the place to interrogate the orientalism of Schechner’s ‘interculturalism,’ nor is it appropriate to conduct a comprehensive survey of those textbooks that do attempt to define the discipline, or collect its canonical texts. It is sufficient to note, I think, that Schechner comprehensively failed to articulate exactly how PS differs from CS. It is also important to observe that the academy and the publishing industry will establish PS ‘fundamentals’ without the consent of the discipline’s ‘founding father’ for reasons that are fundamentally pragmatic: PS students need to be taught something called PS, and clearly academic publishing houses such as Routledge and the University of Michigan Press, to name two obvious examples, believe that there is enough demand to make the production of PS textbooks and monographs profitable. But I digress. Let us return to Schechner’s discussion about PS fundamentals.

Having noted that it is not easy to distinguish the activities of PS scholars from their colleagues in other disciplines, Schechner provocatively asked what do PS graduates actually do? Traditionally, they have sought jobs in the academy, as PS specialists, or they have developed their work as practicing (performance?) artists. But is there such a thing as PS-specific employment (don’t laugh, Schechner posed this as a serious question)? Once again, Schechner failed to actually articulate what PS-specific employment might entail. He did subject the ‘I’ in PSI to critical

scrutiny. How international is PSI? Not very, was his short answer. 'If PS is going to be truly international,' he declared, 'we're going to have to colorize the motion picture which is still running basically in White.' No arguments there. Schechner was spot on, as any cursory head count of PS5 delegates would confirm. But how are we, the PS community, going to encourage genuine diversity. Once again, Schechner's rhetoric functioned as a substitute for a coherent program.

Schechner did, however, provide a more specific picture of PS fundamentals towards the end of his paper. PS, he argued, should be about 'actions, behaviors *as* performance; not writing, not theory.' Theory, for Schechner, is provisional and rare. In the best of cases, it functions as a kind of scaffolding that 'allows people to get to places they could not otherwise reach.' In summary, Schechner's speech painted a rather dour picture of PS. I left Aberystwyth with the impression the PS was a 'discipline' in deep crisis. A fact more or less acknowledged by most of the keynote speakers. Indeed, Schechner concluded his address observing that 'Performance Studies, instead of behaving young, rambunctious, delightful and rampant, seems to this sixty-four year-old, old, rule-bound, sour and defended.' Rule-bound? I don't think so. Sour and defended? I can't be sure. Elitist and arrogantly North American? Most definitely.

Notes

1. Bob Dylan is the pop icon in question, and the cited line is from the song 'John Wesley Harding,' for those of you interested.
2. See my article, for an account of how the institution confers a disciplinary identity upon 'maverick' knowledge formations like PS and CS.
3. Tony Bennett, 'Being "In The True" Of Cultural Studies,' *Southern Review* 26.2 (July, 1993): 218.
4. 218.
5. 218.