

Theory and Philosophy Roundtable: Boundaries, Definitions, Provocations

Sara Freeman

The genesis of this roundtable was a panel discussion convened at the annual ATHE conference in Washington D.C. during the first week of August, 2000. I organized the panel as part of my service to the Theory and Criticism Focus Group. The questions that propelled the panel burned in my mind because of the final performance theory seminar I attended during my doctoral coursework, led by one of the roundtable contributors, Mike Vanden Heuvel. Entitled "Was Plato a Theorist or a Philosopher? Philosophy and Theory and What They Mean for Theatre Studies," the ATHE panel brought together Professors Alice Rayner from Stanford University, JDTC Editor John Gronbeck-Tedesco from University of Kansas-Lawrence, David Saltz from the University of Georgia, and Jon Erickson from the Ohio State University. Each panelist presented a short talk addressing the following set of questions I had proposed:

Do we mean something different when we talk about "theory" instead of "philosophy"? If so, what? How does this difference matter in the teaching and study of theatre? How do we "do" theory in theatre studies? How is that different from "doing" philosophy? How is this different from "doing" criticism? And what are we "doing"? Are there different habits of mind that constitute thinking philosophically as opposed to theoretically? Is one or the other more suited to the study and practice of theatre?

These questions mattered to me, as I finished my coursework, because I often felt provoked by the boundaries of our discipline. Why, for instance, do we teach classes in theatre or performance theory, but not in theatre philosophy? If I made a list of the authors read in performance theory classes, from Plato to Nietzsche to Derrida to Butler, would we call them philosophers or theorists? How do we clearly and productively frame our intellectual projects if we cannot initially define our terms? Early in her presentation, Alice Rayner noted that it was her first impulse, when preparing her talk, to find out who was asking the questions and why they wanted to know. Once she arrived, she said, she realized that it was "Sara who was asking these questions. She wanted to know." Indeed I did, and I think my desire reflects the desire of many graduate students and "emerging scholars."

At ATHE, I prefaced our panel discussion with some definitions, because, as Vanden Heuvel often said in class, "the dictionary is one of the greatest works of theory." Herewith:

Theory:

1. A coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena: Darwin's theory of evolution. 2. A proposed explanation whose status is still conjectural. 3. a body of mathematical principles, theorems, or the like, belonging to one subject: number theory. 4. The branch of a science or art that deals with its principles or methods, as distinguished from its practice: music theory. 5. A particular conception or view of something to be done or the method of doing it. 6. Guess or conjecture. 7. Contemplation or speculation. Syn. Hypothesis

Philosophy:

1. The rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, or conduct. 2. A system of philosophical doctrine: the philosophy of Spinoza. 3. The critical study of the basic principles or concepts of a particular branch of knowledge: the philosophy of science. 4. A system of principles for guidance in practical affairs: a philosophy of life. 5. Calm and philosophical attitude.

Philosopher:

1. A person who offers views or theories on profound questions in ethics, metaphysics, logic, and other related fields. 2. A person who is deeply versed in philosophy. 3. A person who establishes the central ideas of some movement, cult, etc. 4. A person who regulates his or her life by the light of philosophy or reason. 5. A person who is sensibly calm or rational, esp. under trying circumstances.

Theorist:

1. A person who theorizes. 2. A person who deals mainly with the theory of a subject.

The presentations which followed these definitions and the ensuing group discussion snapped lively. Rayner parsed the words theory and philosophy in terms of their Greek roots ("viewing, contemplation, speculation" and "the love of wisdom" respectively). Gronbeck Tedesco delivered a "history of ideas" overview of the shift in currency between philosophy and theory and the advent of scientific terminology. Jon Erickson offered what he called a "provocation" that attacked fashionable assumptions about the efficacy of theory. David Saltz revealed his

“double life” as a scholar who writes for academic publications both theatrical and philosophical. The extended panel length allowed for a full hour of discussion, with Sally Bane’s interjections about “capital T” theory and “small t” theory and a surprise question from David Krasner about Heidegger that attracted lively remarks.

This roundtable records and extends much of the content from the ATHE panel, replacing Gronbeck-Tedesco’s overview with Vanden Heuvel’s “GrayLine tour” of ideas. Saltz’s fascinating insight into the different norms and expectations of Anglo-American analytic philosophers and performance theorists also yields a distinct challenge to theatre scholars to learn to speak to other disciplines. Erickson’s devilish depiction of the habit of using theory as an appeal to established authority turns on the betrayal of theory as the tool of philosophical belief. And most valuable is an additional text by Sally Banes and Noël Carroll that is an excellent statement of methodology for projects of philosophy, projects of theory, and projects of criticism, as well as a powerful call to begin articulating a “philosophy of theatre.” As they set and challenge boundaries and definitions, all four articles help advance the theoretical and philosophical development of theatre studies as a discipline.

