

Why Performance Theory Needs Philosophy

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A confession: since the beginning of my professional career as a scholar, I have led a double life. My PhD and academic appointments have been in theatre. I regularly participate in conferences for organizations such as ATHE, ASTR, and Performance Studies International, and I publish much of my work in books and journals directed primarily toward theatre and performance scholars, such as JDTC. Yet I have also presented a number of papers at meetings of the American Society for Aesthetics and published a series of essays in that organization's journal, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. The ASA and the readership of JAAC consist almost entirely of people who work in American philosophy departments. Moreover, most, though not all, of these philosophers fall squarely within the Anglo-American "analytic" tradition—one of the few major theoretical paradigms almost entirely absent from the discourse of contemporary theatre and performance theory and criticism.

In announcing my affinity toward analytic philosophy to an audience consisting mostly of theatre and performance scholars, I feel a bit like I am outing myself. I get a similar feeling when, after I deliver a talk at an aesthetics conference, someone expresses surprise upon discovering that I am from a theatre department; I am always a bit embarrassed and, at the same time, proud that I have "passed."

Norms and Expectations

Over the years, I have become accustomed to adopting quite different ways of speaking and writing depending on whether my audience consists of theatre scholars or philosophers. I have internalized the standards of my two worlds of discourse. Still, whichever community I am addressing, I always regard myself primarily as a "theorist," as opposed, say, to being a critic or historian. Indeed, I think of my work for theatre scholars and for philosophers as two aspects of a single project. The duality of my identity as a theorist ultimately serves me very well. Each community compels me to be rigorous in very different ways.

The papers I produce for theatre conferences and journals typically lavish much more attention on specific dramatic texts or performances than papers I produce for philosophers. Interestingly, these papers also tend to contain many more allusions to, and quotes from, other theorists. By contrast, the papers I write for philosophical audiences focus in much greater depth on the original argument that I am developing. In fact, quite often a hypothetical example—what philosophers

call a "thought experiment"—will serve my purposes just as effectively as an example from an actual play or performance.

In a nutshell, my papers for theatre scholars use theory to elucidate specific cases. The emphasis is on the critical, cultural and historical applications and implications of a theoretical position. My papers for philosophers, on the other hand, focus on the theoretical position itself. I devote the bulk of my energy to building the strongest possible case for the position that I am advocating and against alternate positions. One of the most crucial and difficult parts of this task is simply articulating all the positions involved as clearly and unambiguously as possible, and identifying the philosophical presuppositions that underlie those positions. The examples I adduce from particular plays and performance serve as case studies, not as ends unto themselves.

From my own perspective, these different emphases complement each other very well. I find myself fleshing out the introduction and conclusion of my arguments for theatre scholars, but rushing through the arguments themselves in a sentence or two. For philosophers I do exactly the opposite. If I were to present an ASTR paper at the American Society for Aesthetics, I suspect that the paper would strike most philosophers in the audience as lacking in substance. But the same, I suspect, would be true if I presented an ASA paper at ASTR. The response of many philosophers to the ASTR paper would be: "You've made some intriguing claims, but why should I *believe* you, or, for that matter, the various other theorists you quote with approval? *Prove it!*" On the other hand, the response of many theatre scholars to an ASA paper would be: "Why should I *care* about any of this hair-splitting analysis? Get to the *point* already!"

A Bum Rap

The "theory" practiced by most American philosophers is worlds apart from the "theory" practiced by most scholars in American theatre and performance studies departments. That is to say, the two groups of theorists occupy two distinct universes of discourse. There is very little overlap between the theoretical texts upon which these theorists draw and to which they respond. Of course, there are a few cross-over figures, such as J.L. Austin and, to a lesser extent, Wittgenstein. Virtually never, however, will theatre or performance theory refer to seminal philosophers such as Willard Quine, Hilary Putman, Donald Davidson or Winifred Sellars.

Even more surprising, theatre and performance scholars remain almost entirely oblivious to luminaries in the analytic tradition of philosophical aesthetics, many of whom have put forth theories with clear application to theatre, such as Richard Wollheim, Nelson Goodman, Jerrold Levinson, Joseph Margolis, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Kendall Walton, and even Noel Carroll. (A partial exception is Arthur Danto, who since he has started slumming as an art critic has gained substantial recognition outside of the world of philosophy, though primarily among visual art

theorists rather than performance theorists.)

American theatre and performance theorists are not simply unaware of the work being done by Anglo-American philosophers. They tend to react to the very idea of analytic philosophy with distaste. For some time, it has been very uncool to admit that one is working in the analytic tradition. Scholars in American theatre and performance studies departments are far more comfortable looking to the continent for philosophical insight and inspiration than to work being done by philosophers on their very own campuses.

Why? No doubt, a large part of the answer derives from the institutional politics of the American university, and to the alliances that have formed between disciplines such as theatre and, for example, comparative literature. This cultural history of American theatre scholarship is a ripe area for investigation, but I will not pursue that issue here.

The divide goes deeper than institutional politics. Many performance theorists have legitimate qualms about the nature of the work analytic philosophers undertake. They think of the style of analytic philosophy as overly technical, dry and boring, and the arguments themselves as overly "positivistic" and ahistorical. These concerns are not entirely unfounded, but they are based on partial and mostly outdated impressions.

The variety of the work being conducted today under the general rubric of analytic philosophy is truly remarkable, much greater even than the tremendous diversity of style and approach one finds in theatre and performance theory. A lot of that work really is boring (as, for that matter, is much performance theory). But no theorist is more engaging than, for example, the respected philosopher Ted Cohen, whose recent book on the philosophy of jokes is a riot. Some analytic philosophers still do reduce complex ideas to the technical language of symbolic logic. But that approach is much less common in the philosophy of art than some other areas, and the philosophers who have a particularly strong penchant for dry and technical jargon often get a hard time from those who do not.

Stanley Cavell is a philosopher with a dense, literate style akin to Herbert Blau's. Today, the accusation of "positivism" is almost as damning within the world of Anglo-American philosophy as it is in performance theory. The Anglo-American tradition underwent a "linguistic turn," and more recently a "cultural turn," much as the continental tradition did, and the critique of ahistoricism entered the philosophical discourse even earlier than the discourse of theatre theory. Philosophers tend not to flock toward any kind of unified party line, but most American philosophers today share an instinctual aversion to essentialism and ahistoricism. An analytic philosopher such as Joseph Margolis stakes out positions on issues such as the ontology of cultural entities and the relativism of interpretation that even many performance theorists would reject as too radical.

Misconceptions are especially abundant concerning the field of philosophical

aesthetics. Many performance theorists imagine that philosophers of art preoccupy themselves with defining abstract notions such as beauty and the sublime, and only take into account a classical canon of Western, white, male artists. To a large extent, that used to be the case (though there have always been important exceptions)—at a time when theatre theory was characterized by similar biases and limitations, that is, through approximately the late 1960s. But changing cultural tides break on the shores of American philosophy departments much as they do in the rest of the academy. To be sure, articles in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* still refer to Beethoven, but also to jazz and rock; to Vermeer, but also to Jeff Koons and Martha Stewart.

Philosophy as Dialogue

What, then, *is* analytic philosophy? Naturally, analytic philosophers themselves have reflected on that question and proposed a range of different answers. The question is, after all, a fundamentally philosophical one. Qualities that philosophers themselves often emphasize are clarity and rigor of argument, and deep and patient probing of concepts and presuppositions. Most generally, however, the quality that makes the discipline particularly attractive to me is its peculiarly dialogic, one might even say *dramatic*, methodology.

Analytic philosophy began as rejection of an Hegelian approach to theory, an approach that still dominates continental philosophy. One of the basic impulses underlying the analytic tradition is a healthy suspicion of grand unifying theories and sweeping metaphysical statements. This impulse has much in common with what would only much later be termed postmodernism, at least in Lyotard's sense of the postmodern: it is predicated on a profound skepticism toward meta narratives.

Analytic philosophers tend to argue in short, highly focused spurts. One philosopher will advance a proposition. Another will pick that proposition apart and either revise and refine it, or propose a radically different proposition in its stead. The first philosopher may then rebut the analysis of the second, or may accept the counter-arguments and go further in the new direction, or accept the counter-arguments but reject the conclusions the second philosopher drew from those counter arguments and propose yet another solution. A third philosopher might then join in and argue that the entire debate rests on faulty premises, and propose an entirely new approach to the topic.

Theorists in performance and theatre tend to regard criticisms as attacks. By contrast, analytic philosophers tend to welcome trenchant, detailed criticisms of their positions. The philosophers with whom you disagree are often much more useful to you than those with whom you agree, and the more powerful and cogent an argument is in opposition to your view, the more helpful that argument is in helping you to clarify and refine your own position. If other philosophers immediately and unconditionally accept a philosophical argument, that argument

is probably trivial and makes no significant contribution to the discourse. The most valuable works of philosophy are those that challenge other philosophers to respond—even if the response is diametrically opposed to the argument that provoked it.

Individual works of analytic philosophy typically assume a dramatic form internally as well. A typical approach is for a philosopher to begin by formulating a position and then to respond with counter-arguments to that proposal. The best philosophy does not rush to conclusions—which can be very frustrating for non-philosophers who are not acclimated to the game. Moreover, after all of the twists and turns of argument, the conclusion that emerges may not seem very impressive in and of itself. It might seem intuitive and obvious. The significance of many philosophical positions only becomes clear when you put that position in context of the discourse. Often the position ultimately espoused matters less than the ones rejected along the way. Philosophical arguments often reveal propositions with a deep intuitive appeal to be deeply flawed or incoherent, or to have unexpected and unwelcome implications.

Theory as practiced in theatre and performance scholarship, by contrast, tends to put great stock in the apparent profundity of conclusions, and much less stock in the quality of the arguments advanced in support of those conclusions. Consequently, counter-intuitive conclusions are highly seductive. Paradox, in particular, is a positive virtue in much performance theory. An argument that results in a paradox is not rejected as incoherent but celebrated as profound. “X both is and is not Y” is a deeply satisfying formulation. For example, Richard Schechner's description of the actor's identity in performance as combining the “not I” and the “not not I” has become a favorite formula among performance theorists for *explaining* the status of acting. While I agree that Schechner's formulation is important and useful, I would suggest that its value lies precisely in the way it identifies a conceptual roadblock in our current thinking about the actor's identity, and points to a fundamental issue in performance theory that cries out for rigorous philosophical interrogation. Analytic philosophers seek out paradoxes in order to reveal a logical flaw in an argument, or, even more usefully, to identify a knotty conceptual problem in need of intensive philosophical scrutiny; for example, a landmark moment in the early history of analytic philosophy was Russell's revelation of a paradox in Frege's foundation of mathematics.

“Using” Theory versus “Doing” Theory

The difference between the theory produced by philosophers and by performance theorists runs much deeper than the question of which other theorists one reads and cites. It extends beyond the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, a distinction that in any case is far less decisive than it is often supposed to be. (An analytic philosopher will often have more in common

with certain continental philosophers than certain other analytic philosophers.) On a very general level, philosophers and performance theorists tend to conceive of the theoretical enterprise in very different ways. Performance theorists typically *apply* theories developed by scholars in other disciplines, such as philosophy. In the halls between sessions of an ASTR or ATHE conference one might hear theorists asking one another (as a prominent performance scholar recently asked me): “who are you *using* these days?” “Judith Butler,” might come the reply; “I’m looking at the performativity of ethnicity in reality television. And you? Are you still working with Baudrillard?” “No, I’ve moved beyond him. Lately I’ve started using Bourdieu.”

All too often in performance and theatre theory, we argue by citation. Theories are collages constructed from quotes and ideas extracted from other texts. If someone we respect has published a theoretical assertion that sounds good and supports our own position, we uncritically adopt and apply the assertion. Too many arguments in theatre and performance theory stake their validity on phrases such as: “as so-and-so has demonstrated/taught us/revealed. . . .” Because performance theory very rarely advances original arguments in support of the philosophical principles it adopts — indeed, it too rarely even rehearses the arguments offered by the theorists who originally advanced those positions — we are often merely theoretical parasites: the flow of theoretical discourse goes almost exclusively *into* performance theory, and very rarely does it come out again to influence other disciplines.

It is time for performance and theatre theorists to emerge from the shadows and become full fledged players in the interdisciplinary drama of theoretical discourse. To do so, however, we must finally take full responsibility for the positions we stake out and the theoretical assumptions upon which those positions are constructed.