

Theatre: Philosophy, Theory, and Criticism

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In theatre departments today, a pragmatic distinction is sometimes drawn between theory and practice, between page and stage, between scholarly theatre research and production—with the historians, critics, theorists, and other sorts of commentators on one side, and the actors, directors, designers, and so on, on the other side. This is an important distinction, especially given the power struggles in contemporary theatre departments. However, it is not this set of distinctions that interests us here. Instead, we are concerned with three types of inquiry on the theatre research, or “page” side of the divide.

There are many different activities that engage the energies of theatre researchers. Among these are philosophizing, theorizing, and criticizing theatre. A single essay may call for all three of these activities. Yet the activities can nevertheless be broadly distinguished. And, of course, a single essay may be devoted to just one of these activities. But what differentiates these activities? How can one tell whether one is engaged in one of them, rather than another?

Perhaps the philosophy of theatre is the most obscure of the three. So let's begin there. A central focus of Western philosophy since Socrates has been on concepts; Socratic questions such as “what is justice?” “what is knowledge?” “what is the difference between philosophy and rhetoric?” revolved around interrogating concepts, such as, in these examples: justice, knowledge, philosophy, and rhetoric. The aim of the philosopher with respect to such concepts is to attempt to clarify and, if possible, to define the conditions or criteria or method in accordance with which we apply these concepts. That is, what criteria or methods do we employ in order, for example, to categorize a proposition as knowledge, rather than, say, opinion. As a first approximation, then, we might say that what philosophers do is to clarify concepts, notably the deep concepts that we use to organize our practices, that is, the deep concepts that make our practices possible.

Though this may sound somewhat trivial, it is not. Our ethical practices would not be possible without the concept of the person; the notion of a person organizes the world in an ethically significant way. Likewise, there could be no practice of ethics without concepts of goodness. What philosophers do is to attempt to clarify concepts such as personhood and goodness. Utilitarian philosophers, for instance, claim that goodness can be defined in terms of maximizing the general welfare. Of course, not every philosopher will agree with the utilitarian account of goodness.

They may argue that it encompasses too much or too little, and they may advance rival conceptions of goodness. Philosophical debate of this sort is notorious. What philosophers are generally arguing about concerns the characterization of some concept central to the organization of human practices.

In many cases, the concept is ready to hand, in use in our common language. Personhood and goodness are like that. However, sometimes the concept, though governing our practices, remains recessive and must be brought to light and unpacked, as in the case of Marx's putative discovery of the concept of surplus value. Moreover, philosophers may not simply attempt to clarify concepts. They also probe those concepts with an eye to determining what they entail. What follows from a conception of goodness as the maximization of general welfare or from the concept of a person as a rational being?

Often what follows from or is entailed by our leading philosophical conjectures about our central concepts appears paradoxical or at least unsettling. Does it follow from the utilitarian characterization of goodness that it would be morally acceptable to execute an innocent person so long as that maximized general welfare? And if not, why not? So philosophers not only attempt to clarify or define concepts, they also study entailment relations between concepts. And where these suggest paradoxical or problematic results, philosophers negotiate these (in the best of cases) by explaining away the anomalous consequences or revising the problematic concepts to avoid said consequences, though they sometimes bite the bullet and argue that we must learn to live with them.

Among our concepts is the concept of concepts. Philosophers interrogate that one as well, conjecturing that they are best understood in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, or in terms of family resemblances, or prototypes, or genealogies, or in terms of dialectical contrasts. Or they may, like deconstructionists, maintain that our concepts are necessarily unstable. The feature that appears to identify all these activities as philosophical is their preoccupation with concepts.

Phenomenologists may appear to be an exception to this generalization, inasmuch as they prefer the idiom of experience over that of concepts. However, in attempting to identify the essential features of categorically different experiences, often in virtue of necessary and sufficient conditions, they frequently are engaged in the same analytic activities we have been adumbrating. For they are interested in isolating what differentiating categories underwrite our practices. Roman Ingarden's distinctions between theatre and film or Mikel Dufrenne's characterization of aesthetic experience, that is, can be readily translated into the language of concepts.

Supposing that this characterization of philosophy—a philosophy of philosophy by our account—is roughly persuasive, then what might it tell us about the philosophy of theatre? Philosophy, *ex hypothesi*, concerns scrutiny of critical concepts and their relations of entailment, especially where those provoke

counterintuitive paradoxes and problems that may call for further conceptual adjustment and revising. Does this give us a handle on what comprises the philosophy of theatre?

Theatre is a complex practice involving both making and reception. It is a practice that depends upon a panoply of concepts that make it possible. The most obvious one is *theatre* itself. Perhaps because it is just about the deepest concept in this neighborhood, the most obvious question that a philosopher of theatre is likely to ask is: “what is theatre?” “What, if anything, differentiates theatre categorically from dance and film, on the one hand, and from everyday life, including everyday role-playing, on the other hand?” Of course, one might conclude that nothing does, but that, too, would be a philosophical conclusion about the concept of theatre, albeit a skeptical one.

The concept of theatre is not the only one that organizes the practice. There are many others, such as: acting, performance, the audience, the director, interpretation, character, text, spectacle, tragedy, comedy, melodrama, plot, and so on. Clarifying or defining each of these concepts in turn—asking what conditions must be met in order for a candidate to count as a member of the relevant category—is *prima facie* philosophical activity. These clarifications, however, can be of two sorts: merely classificatory or descriptive; or normative (that is, in terms of what counts as an instance of the *best* functioning members of the class in question; Aristotle’s definition of tragedy counts as this sort of clarification).

Proponents of classificatory accounts are apt to criticize the defenders of normative accounts on the grounds that the latter are too exclusionary, whereas the normativists are likely to complain that the classificationists often define concepts like theatre in a way that obscures an explanation of why theatre is important to us. But whichever approach one favors, it is useful to observe the way in which the debate is conducted.

Philosophers do not conduct polls about how people use the relevant concept and then award the definition to the majority. Philosophy is not empirical in this sense. Rather, as competent language/concept users in a certain domain of practice, they test for correctness the clarifications and definitions that their colleagues propose against their intuitions—intuitions that they have formed in the course of acquiring and applying the relevant concept over a generally successful career as a concept user. Philosophers test these definitions by recalling examples that support or undermine the philosophical conjectures in question and by imagining counterexamples. In this regard, philosophical research is very much an affair of the armchair; it does not involve the systematic gathering of data, and this difference, in large measure, provides a way of distinguishing between philosophy and theory (a distinction we shall address shortly).¹

The account that the philosopher offers of a theatrically pertinent concept may appear to entail consequences that command further comment. Plato defines

theatre, or, at least, tragedy, as a subspecies of illusion. This, then, entails that it is not a possible source of knowledge and, for Plato, that it is an impetus to the arousal of the unruly emotions. For these reasons, he recommends that it should be banned from the good city.

Aristotle responds implicitly by questioning the entailments that Plato alleges obtain. Aristotle denies that tragedy is an illusion, asserting instead that it is an imitation whose very status as such affords the possibility of knowledge, whereas his notion of the *catharsis* of the emotions of pity and fear has been thought to undercut Plato's anxieties about the arousal of the unruly emotions. Although Aristotle does not explicitly address the issue of censoring dramatic poets, it would appear that by challenging Plato's conceptual analysis of tragedy, he has neutralized it, in effect arguing against censorship. That is, Aristotle's philosophy of tragedy confronts Plato's not in terms of statistical research, but by an interrogation of Plato's concepts and their supposed entailments. Aristotle questions the adequacy of Plato's characterization of the relevant concepts and also shows that an alternative set of more accurately crafted concepts do not entail the untoward consequences that animate Plato.

Many of our intuitively held concepts about theatre sit together uneasily or paradoxically. They imply contradictions or paradoxes. And it is the task of philosophical research to identify these tensions and, in the happiest of events, to relieve them. For an example from Hume: if tragedies represent disturbing events, and if witnessing such events are typically not pleasurable, then we should not derive pleasure from tragedy. But we do. How can the pleasure of tragedy be explained in a way that avoids this contradiction? Likewise, it appears that we can only be moved if we believe that the objects of our emotions exist. But audiences know that the events before them are fictional representations; thus they should not be moved by them, but they are. How is that possible? Is it only because we are irrational? Or is there a rational account of our behavior? Have the right concepts been employed in setting up the paradox? Are beliefs really required for emotional responses? Or is some other concept more apposite, and will a recognition of that other concept dissolve the apparent paradox?

Theatre philosophy, then, involves at least: 1) clarifying and/or defining the central concepts that organize the practice of theatre and that make it possible; 2) scrutinizing what those concepts entail, especially in relation to other relevant concepts; 3) including, identifying, and addressing the disjunctions, anomalies, contradictions, and paradoxes that combining concepts sometimes entails. In this regard, the primary preoccupation of the philosophy of theatre may be said to be the conceptual architecture of the practice of theatre in terms of its hierarchical organization—what subsumes what—and its implications—what entails what. One might say that fundamentally the philosophy of theatre concerns the logic of theatrical concepts. Its methods of analysis are predominantly conceptual, including

a tendency toward deductive argument over inductive argument; toward conjectural thought experimentation over systematic data gathering and actual experimentation; toward what must necessarily be the case, given our conceptual architecture, versus what is probably generally the case, given the way the world is.

We might try to sum this up by saying that the knowledge of theatre afforded by philosophy is primarily conceptual. Moreover, if that is convincing, then perhaps we can suggest a way to begin to draw a distinction between the philosophy and theory of theatre. Where the philosophy thereof concerns conceptual matters, its theory is more empirical. How might we think of the difference between “conceptual” and “theoretical” here?

Consider the question “how many comedies are there on Broadway?” In order to answer that question, you need a concept of comedy before you can start looking and counting. Though most people would probably proceed intuitively, were you rigorous, you would try to forge the relevant concept precisely. That would be a philosophical activity, insofar as it concerns concepts. With such a concept in hand, you could start looking and counting—gathering data. These latter activities are empirical. As an initial approximation, theatre theory is more empirical than the philosophy of theatre.

But, you’ll say, surely counting the number of comedies on Broadway is not theatre theory. That’s right. For theatre theory is primarily involved with making generalizations, with explaining regularities empirically discovered in actually existing theatre. The Marxist theatre theorist explains the recurrence of certain patterns of imagery in the plays of a certain period as a causal consequence or reflection of the values of the relevant ruling classes. Data are gathered in order to establish the existence of a regularity, and then that regularity is explained by hypothesizing a general causal principle that accounts for its existence. Most psychoanalytic theories, feminist theories, post colonial theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and so on in theatre studies today aspire to this pattern, while also being augmented by various political and moral commitments.²

Another aspect of theory involves isolating the component parts of theatre and explaining how they operate. A semiotician of costume, for example, will chart how different variations in attire will, in a regularly recurring fashion, communicate certain impressions about the relevant characters—how, for instance, the wide shoulders and nipped waistlines of Elizabethan garments for both sexes suggest power. In charting how recurring articulatory strategies work, of course, the theorist may be concerned to subvert the way in which they work, and with finding alternative strategies, underwritten by different general principles, that secure different, perhaps ethically preferred results. Brecht’s research on the *Verfremdungseffekt* might be thought of in this light. But it is important to note that in this way, Brecht was not only a theatre reformer but also a theatre psychologist, and, for that reason, a theatre theorist.

Academic theatre theorists are at pains to explain empirically ascertainable regularly recurring patterns in theatre by reference to general principles or tendencies. But theatre practitioners are also concerned with theorizing—with the discovery of general principles or techniques that promise to bring about certain results in a regular and reliable manner. Stanislavsky's System is an example of this, as may be the theory of Viewpoints developed by Mary Overlie and Anne Bogart. Whereas the scholarly theatre theorist engages in reverse engineering in order to determine how, following general empirical principles, the phenomenon in question came to be as it is, the practical theatre theorist engages in forward engineering, searching for general empirical principles or methods that will bring about coveted results on a regularly recurring basis.³

Criticism, like theory, is more empirically based than philosophy. However, it appears to be less concerned with generality than theory is. Whereas theory typically focuses on regularly recurring phenomena—recurring patterns of imagery or technique or audience response—the scope of criticism is more narrow. What gets criticized is usually a work or a handful of works, or a single author's oeuvre. The broader the scope of the inquiry, the less inclined we are to call it criticism rather than theory. Moreover, there is another sense in which criticism is less concerned with generality. The theorist aims at establishing the operation of some general principle across a body of recurring phenomena. The theorist aims at proving that there is a general law or generalizable pattern in play. The theorist wants to identify that pattern and to explain how it works in accordance with other general empirical principles. The direction of the theorist's research is from the body of data to the underlying general principles or patterns. If critics, as many feminist critics do, advert to general principles and patterns, they do so for the sake of illuminating the particular work or group of works at hand. The theorist, on the other hand, calls attention to the particularities of the data in order to discover the general principles or tendencies that undergird them. Thus we might say that the focus of the critic is idiosyncratic or idiothetic—seeking to explain the particular case or cases at hand—whereas the ambition of the theorist is nomothetic—seeking to find some generalization for which the particular datum serves as an example. Thus, the difference between the theorist and the critic can be located in the ultimate aim of their inquiries: the discovery of general explanatory principles or patterns, for the theorist, versus the illumination of the particular, for the critic.

The critic and the theorist are more empirical than the philosopher of theatre, in that they are more concerned with the actually existing data than the philosopher is. However, they appear to differ from each other insofar as the theorist cares about the body of data in terms of the empirical generalizations that it may give rise to and support, whereas the critic is preoccupied with saying what is special about the work or works in question. For the critic, the play's the thing; for the theorist, the general pattern or principles exemplified by the play is the thing. That

is, theoretical inquiry is nomothetic, whereas critical inquiry is idiothetic. Let us call this a difference in their target or direction of illumination.

One perplexity that this last distinction is likely to provoke is this: a great deal of contemporary criticism adopts frameworks associated with well-known theories. The psychoanalytic critic may use a premise about sibling rivalry in interpreting a play. Is this to count as theory or criticism? Our proposal is that it is criticism, albeit theoretically informed, if the point of the reference is to illuminate the play. It is not theory, insofar as a single case or even a handful of cases from theatre could not substantiate a claim about the nature of sibling rivalry. At best, it would appear that the case the theorist sketches could be said to illustrate some general theoretical premise. But that is not what theorists do; rather, they strive to discover and to establish generalizations. The critic has a different interest in her particular data than the theorist does. The scientist, in the pursuit of a generalization, is not overly concerned with the particularities of this or that fruitfly, whereas the critic is always focused on the particularities of her body of data. The theorist cares about the generalizations she can tease out of her body of data. If the critic resorts to theoretical generalizations, it is still for the sake of illuminating the particular, whereas the theorist consults the particulars for the sake of generalizations.

Undoubtedly there is some confusion about the distinction between theory and criticism in theatre studies today. We think that the reason for this is that increasingly academic theatre critics have helped themselves to premises derived from broader theoretical frameworks, often ones native to the social sciences, but also from more narrow ones, such as theatre semiotics. Insofar as they advert to theoretical premises, they are prone to call themselves theorists. However, to the extent that they avail themselves of these premises in order to explain and to explicate individual texts or designated families of texts, it seems more appropriate to us to categorize their activities under the concept of criticism.

Similarly, critics often discern theoretical or philosophical propositions suggested or implied by theatrical works. *Hamlet* is associated with the Oedipal complex, or a spectacle by Richard Foreman is thought to deconstruct the boundary between theatre and reality. Is either the production or criticism of work in these terms either theoretical or philosophical? In the standard case, we suspect neither. To illustrate—rather than to discover and argue for—generalizations, as some may claim that Shakespeare and Foreman have done, is no more theory or philosophy than the illustration of Christian doctrine in a stained glass window is theology. Likewise, just as the art historian who alludes to Christian doctrine in order to make sense of the cathedral window is not doing theology, neither is the theatre critic who invokes Kristeva's theory of abjection with reference to a feminist production of *Frankenstein* undertaking poststructuralist psychoanalysis. Criticism, theory, and philosophy of theatre are different activities. Each can be done well or badly. Neither is necessarily more important than the others. But they do tend to

have different aims, objects, and methods.

Theatre researchers are more likely to call themselves critics and theorists than philosophers. We think that there is a reason for this, viz., that theatre researchers are more often than not preoccupied by theatre as it actually is. Their interests are more naturally empirical. This is not said in order to suggest that they are never embroiled in conceptual matters. At times, they will have to confront deep questions, such as “what is theatre?,” “what is an interpretation?,” “what counts as a performance of the same work?” And when they negotiate these issues committed to ascertaining the correct application of these concepts, they are philosophers of theatre. Of course, the same person can sometimes play the role of philosopher, sometimes that of theorist, and sometimes that of critic. That theatre researchers more frequently find themselves engaged in the empirical as either theorists or critics is the reason we think we rarely hear the term philosophy bandied about in theatre studies; it is not because theatre studies has no need for philosophy.

That theatre studies might benefit from philosophy is a thesis that we hope we have encouraged in this brief comment. For in distinguishing among philosophy, theory, and criticism, we have been involved in analyzing three of the concepts or categories that are typically used to organize the practice of theatre research. If you are moved by the arguments herein, then the notion of philosophy should not seem alien to you. For in following this essay, you have been engaging philosophy. If you and others find this discussion useful, perhaps we will be seeing more philosophy of theatre in the future.

Notes

1. It is important to acknowledge here that although philosophy primarily scrutinizes concepts, it is also the case that sometimes philosophers deal in very abstract, substantive generalizations. Thus, though the distinction drawn between philosophy and theory proposed in this statement is usually serviceable, it is not perfect. More words than we have at our disposal would be required to get the distinction as sharp as we would like. But the above should suffice for a manifesto like this to get across the gist of our idea.

2. In this essay, our examples of philosophical analyses and theater theories are not chosen because the authors believe them all to be true, or, in some cases, to be even scarcely adequate. The examples are selected because they represent what most people in theater research would accept as fair samples of philosophy, on the one hand, and theory, on the other. Even if these examples are false (which we suspect some of them are), they may illustrate the points we have in mind, since a false theory may still be a theory, just as a false philosophical analysis may still be philosophy.

3. One theoretical direction that is unfortunately underexplored by contemporary theater theorists involves taking advantage of the resources of cognitive and perceptual psychology. We do not, of

course, regard theater theory as narrowly restricted to this project. For us, theater theory is any sort of empirically based inquiry in search of generalizations. But this would include the psychology of theater as well as more sociological approaches.

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