

John Gronbeck-Tedesco: A Look Back at Twenty Years of the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*

This interview with founding editor John Gronbeck-Tedesco was conducted by Henry Bial on Friday August 24, 2007.

Henry Bial: What inspired you to start a journal and the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* in particular?

John Gronbeck-Tedesco: My colleague Paul Campbell, who was then a senior faculty member here [at the University of Kansas], thought he saw a need for a journal that would deal with theory. He proposed that many of the articles and much of the thinking that might have something to do with theory were appearing at conferences, but there wasn't enough room in the journals that were field specific to do justice to the work that was being done. Instead, folks interested in theory had to go to other journals outside of the field. That meant that the essays and articles were hard for people in the field to find. Moreover, it was hard to create a sense of conversation within theatre studies with articles scattered all over. So Paul called on individuals who had an interest in theory in order to make the case that such a journal should be founded here at the University of Kansas, and he of course got a lot of very positive responses from many who were very prominent in the field. Four years later, the *Journal* was initiated, but Paul was leaving for the University of Minnesota and didn't want to take anything with him, and so, since I was his office mate and colleague with similar interests, he decided I should do the *Journal*. I considered it a great gift then, and I still do.

HB: So why the name *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*?

JGT: Well, the name came about before the days of performance studies. The word drama was derived from a number of different words, all Eastern European or Greek, which had something to do with *deeds*, or *doing*, or *to do*. For us, that seemed to broaden the notion of the kinds of material we could include. We wanted to encourage contributors to find dramatic elements in lots of different kinds of enterprises: not only those related to a script or theatre event, but even those that might be thought of as, in some sense, a particular kind of rhetoric that involved live or recorded presence. In other words we were thinking of the word *drama* in at least some of the ways *performance* is now used. I guess we weren't ingenious enough to think of the word "performance."

Henry Bial is Assistant Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in Theatre and Film at the University of Kansas. He is the author of *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* ("of Michigan 2005) and the editor of *The Performance Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2004, Second Edition 2007). Bial is also Vice President for Advocacy of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

HB: But theory was the primary term all along?

JGT: Yes, theory was the primary term. What we meant by theory in those days—and maybe it still works—was the explanation of a methodology. So we conceived of a methodology as a system of assumptions that were used in some way to produce any number of kinds of discourse including history, criticism, or related endeavors. We figured, if one wished to explain one's methodological assumptions, that would be theory. At the time there was something of a corner on the market, when it came to defining theory, exercised by the sciences. "An explanation of a methodology" wasn't quite what the sciences meant by theory, but it seemed to work for the folks that were doing theory or applying it in the humanities. Understand that at that time the sciences were still using some of Karl Popper's writings to define what they meant by theory, and that simply wasn't going to work well for the humanities.

HB: And criticism?

JGT: Criticism meant applied theory, basically. Typically, the range of application was meant to be wide. We intended to include discussions of traditional scripts, and also traditional performances. At the same time, we hoped that folks who were calling their field cultural rhetoric, in the wake of Kenneth Burke, for example, might come forward and contribute some essays about social interventions that were intended to persuade.

HB: And was the name assigned fairly early, or was the *Journal* in progress as an unnamed project for a long time before you settled on a name?

JGT: No, Paul settled on a name immediately. He wanted to be able to propose something concrete and something folks would understand, or at least that could be explained. He had to have a title that was the object of explanation in conversation, so he came up with that pretty early.

HB: And what was the next step in getting it off the ground once you took it on?

JGT: Well there was a four-year hiatus and during that time there were several trips up the stairs to administrative offices. As it turned out, KU had and still has a tradition of starting journals—some of them in the humanities—so we were not proposing something strange. *Modern Drama* started here, *Players Magazine* too; *Latin American Theatre Review* has been here for 40 years and has been edited by George Woodyard until just last year when Stuart Day became editor. In fact, George helped our *Journal* along, often showing us how to solve problems as they arose. There are numbers of scientific journals published here. So at one point in its history, the University decided the way to join in mainstream conversations was to create journals and make sure good scholars published in them.

HB: How did you go about constituting that first editorial board and soliciting articles?

JGT: The first editorial board was easy. All we tried to do was get the best people we could think of, and of course not all of them were willing to read (some of them were busy), but several volunteered. One “perk” of reading for the journal was that we would accept anything they recommended. In other words, we asked them not only to read articles but to seek articles they heard at conferences or knew their colleagues were writing. As it turned out, the referees were very cautious about soliciting or recommending articles. Although this opportunity was taken rarely, it was always very effective. We got some very fine submissions through the referees that we would not have received otherwise, I’m sure. Numbers of people who had established themselves in the upper echelons in our field ended up in our *Journal* because our referees urged them to move their work to our table, and they also recommended that we accept the work, which we did.

HB: How did you determine the format of the publishing schedule?

JGT: That was determined partly by how much money we had, which was all coming from the University of Kansas, and partly by what kind of staffing we had. Most of the original staff—and this continues to be the case—had a number of other jobs having nothing to do with journal publication. So folks from around the campus, who were doing other things, formed our infrastructure. That was part of it, being able to take on a project that was doable without taxing anyone to the point that the fallout would disadvantage the quality of the *Journal*. There was no real mystery there. So it was sort of by default that we chose to come out twice a year.

HB: Is there a prototypical *JDTC* article?

JGT: I think the earlier ones tended to be prototypical because they were, well, a little like the first apple that falls off the tree and thereby establishes the paradigm for gravity. The first wave of essays generally introduced a theory or methodology that was self consistent and derived from just one theorist or school of theorists. It might be Gadamer, Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, et. al. Then the particular methodological assumptions derived from the larger theory would be applied to a performance, a script, an author, etc. Several of these non-formalistic theories were actually capable of addressing performance. So instead of having history articles that talked about performance and then critical articles that talked chiefly about scripts and then reviews, which were neither of those two things, we ended up crossing all those former borders because the methodologies derived from the various theories seemed not only to allow it but to promote it. And that was a very refreshing and welcome ramification of the project. Kent Neely, the former editor of *JDTC*’s “Praxis” section, helped us sort out some of this.

HB: Aside from quality, how did you know that a submission was appropriate for the *Journal*?

JGT: An appropriate article usually set up a working approach which invoked theory and methodology. The invocation of theory or methodology promised to

open up certain sorts of questions and/or address ongoing problems in the field vis-à-vis particular kinds of scripts and/or performances. That would tip us off that this might be something we would want to publish. In those days, and throughout the existence of the *Journal*, there was almost no original theory making. In all but a few cases there was the explication of an existing theory and its application. Early on, application of a theory was done in the interest of illustrating or demonstrating its utility. As time went on the piece to be analyzed became more important. There were very few attempts to use a performance or script to poke holes in a theory or method. Once folks seemed to become more comfortable with theory, they started seeing it as enabling the interest of the writer to emerge through the object of analysis. I guess that's the best way to put it. And to complete that particular arc, there came to be a kind of consciousness that many theories used in the humanities were really social polemics—but in the good sense. I don't mean polemics in the sense of being overbearing social tracts. They came out of particular kinds of cultural issues. Specifically, post-structuralist theories and derivative methodologies really proposed a particular view of culture and authority in culture. About the time this methodological social consciousness formed, you started getting changes in organizations. For example, the Association for Theatre in Higher Education created a focus group, Theatre and Social Change, which acknowledged (through various kinds of conference presentations) the fact that a lot of contemporary theories were about culture and change around the theme of authority. When that awareness starts to seep into the writing, you get some changes in national and international organizations, but also in the way people are writing, using, or analyzing theory.

HB: A number of the contributors to this forum have commented particularly on your willingness to include ideas that were kind of out there, beyond the mainstream, within the pages of the *Journal*. Was that a conscious choice on your part?

JGT: I may not have known that they were beyond the mainstream. I probably just enjoyed the essays and sent them out to readers who had the perspicacity to understand that the articles were different in important ways. It occurred to me—eventually—that the action was in the difference between approaches. No article is an island unto itself. It's rather what emerges as you read several of the essays. It's sort of like montage. In a good issue you have a collision and collusion among approaches. It's not that the authors are consciously trying to use approaches that are dissimilar, because they haven't read the other essays before publication. Most often I wasn't worried about the subject matter to which theories were applied. Sometimes I tried to publish different essays on the same or a similar subject in order to highlight the differing assumptions. And so in trying to search for those differences among assumptions I may have ended up publishing some pieces that seemed a little unusual.

HB: Is there anything that you reflect back on and are most proud of publishing?

JGT: One thing I was happy about—but it is hard to take credit for this—was that early on, so many senior scholars who had become what you might call academic celebrities, not only in our field but in other fields within the humanities, responded to solicitations. To name any is to forget many. I take this opportunity to thank them, for they made the *Journal* necessary reading. I also continue to enjoy the supplement we published on historiography, edited by Rosemarie Bank and Michal Kobialka.

HB: Do you remember any instances of articles that got away and turned up somewhere else later?

JGT: The stories about the ones that got away are really about glitches in our infrastructure, where we weren't able to turn around an article fast enough to keep somebody in the queue. We tried turning things around quickly, and often that happened, but I have to tell you a lot of times it just didn't. And we lost a couple of good articles that way. Thankfully, the numbers that escaped were small, and it was entirely my fault for not keeping track.

HB: Was there ever a piece that came in that made you think, "I have to publish this because no one else is going to?"

JGT: Yeah. More than a couple of times. I published pieces on the grounds that the referees expressed certain reservations. But the reservations were so damned interesting that I went ahead and published the articles. For example, one individual tried to understand Derrida not only through his intellectual heritage but also through his national heritage. Derrida lived for a time in northern Africa, and some of the early influences on him have tended to go unmentioned. This author tried to understand him in terms of those geopolitical influences. Derrida didn't try to keep any of this a secret, but twenty years ago only a few were contextualizing Derrida.

HB: Certainly not in theatre studies.

JGT: No, not in theatre studies, that's for sure. But this author was perfectly willing to do that and to shed a lot of light on Derrida and what he was doing. And, Derrida's association with certain strands of Judeo-Christian theology hadn't come into focus as an interpretative crux. I thought the framework was useful. The author really made something of Derrida's exercising with the Bible, and the traditions that he had inherited vis-à-vis biblical interpretation and sacramental theology. And that really helped in making sense of what Derrida was doing with "presence," "trace," and "slippage."

HB: How would you say the field has changed since you started the *Journal*?

JGT: One major change would be in normative circumstances; namely, scholarly articles don't seem to have as much status as they once had in the professional lives of junior scholars. In several of the humanities, the book has become legal tender for both status in the profession and promotion and tenure.

So there is less focus on the production of article-length studies. The other is, of course, more by way of intellectual history. Methodology has become ebulliently, joyously eclectic. That I think was inevitable. Fewer scholars are worried about explaining a methodological source found in a theory or theorist. There is more interest in pulling together a variety of different assumptions which work together, not necessarily because of any inherently logical or historical connection between the actual methodological or theoretical discourses, but because the subject of the study (i.e., the target of application) is the occasion that allows these disparate ideas—perhaps cognitivism and Lacan à la Mark Pizzato—to come together. I see this kind of eclecticism as part of what theatre promotes. There’s a sense in which theatre (and some other kinds of performance) puts disparate together, not just in some formal or dialectical way, but in dynamic ways that may appear almost chaotic when analyzed. There is this perpetual splitting, combining, and/or suturing of disparate elements in theatre or complex performance pieces. It’s sort of the dialogic principle on crack, and it generates methodological combinations that might seem otherwise, well, nuts. Does this make any sense?

HB: Yes, it’s like the theory of the ad hoc committee.

(Laughter)

JGT: You’re right! Sometimes theories that look very disparate all of a sudden don’t seem so disparate when you are talking about, say Shakespeare or Suzan-Lori Parks, but it’s because you’re talking about *Hamlet* and the way *Hamlet* works, or about Parks’s *365 Days/365 Plays*.

HB: As you describe that process as inevitable, do you think there will eventually be a balancing at some point, that the pendulum will swing the other way?

JGT: I don’t know. The cognitive turn is really gaining momentum across the humanities. In some ways film preceded theatre into that particular terrain and has used it much more amply than we have, at least in the U.S. I don’t know where it will lead. Brain science and cognitive science have married each other, whereas not long ago they were almost at odds with one another, however strange that seems. The upshot of that marriage is that now you’ve got granting agencies pouring money into research that connects the brain to the rest of the nervous system. You end up with broad swaths of research being funded; so it seems commonsensical to assume that this kind of research is going to have an impact, not just in psychology or neuroscience; it’s going to have a much broader impact because in fact some of these folks are studying outcomes of neurocognitive activity that pertain to questions in other disciplines. That’s why psychology departments, medical schools, and computer science departments all have cognitivists, and now film departments have cognitivists. You get the picture.

HB: How has the *Journal* changed since it began?

JGT: I think one of the biggest challenges in front of the *Journal* parallels the challenges in front of many of the humanities: the attempt to mine the relationship between various kinds of research from different disciplines. A second challenge is that, once upon a time, the paradigmatic relationship between articles and books was that junior faculty were supposed to be producing highly intense, specific articles that examined the details of the world. Then, after you had done that and become a tenured professor, you were supposed to use those essays—written not just by you but also by others—to write books that made larger statements. This was not by any means a hard and fast rule, but it seemed to be a sensibility in classics, theatre, and early film studies—certainly one found it in English, especially Shakespeare studies. Now people new to a field are being urged and pressured to create much larger statements, much larger research projects. As long as that is the case, journals may switch positions with book length research. Journals may become the places that senior faculty go in order to change a field, so that articles become essays in a stricter sense of the word. And journals will then, in some fields, surrender the office they once had of providing very intense episodes of new research; instead, they will begin to publish commentary about research from a critical and progressive perspective. We'll see.

