Theatre Symposium 24 Closing Remarks: Sunday, April 12, 2015

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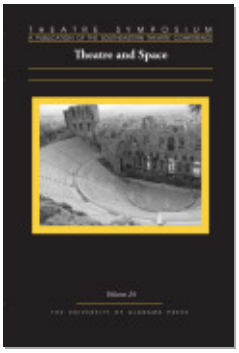

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As far as summing up the conference, this is of course a formidable task, because so much ground has been covered. Let me remind you that historically we have gone from classic Greek, not just to the present productions that are running right now, like *Then She Fell* and Blue Man Group, but also things that go on into the future. We have heard about positive things like the Ottawa Arts Center, or, more negatively, surveillance, which is going to be even more part of our world in the future. We've hit the Renaissance, the nineteenth century, and so on. The historical range has been great; so, of course, has been the geographical range. We have had papers all the way from the West—California, to New York, and so on, to India, to the Chinese theatre, to the wonderful survey of cultural shows, to Southeast Asia and the theatre in Vietnam. It's been a real world tour. And obviously it's ranged very, very broadly in topics and approaches. Many of the major theorists and theoretical structures have been nicely illuminated during the discussions. We've had papers that had to do with a particular analysis of a particular text, and then going on out from the text into productions and production analysis, and on out from productions into places of theatre within the community—the social implications and political implications of theatre. That's my introduction.

[Laughter from the symposium participants]

As I say, it's a major task to put all this together. But let me go back through a person who's been quoted as recently as about an hour ago: Peter Brook's *Empty Space*. As many of you know, I have taken strong issue with it. But I want again to repeat the quotation from this morning that Peter Brook has famously said: "I can take an empty space and

call it a stage." And people have often picked up and built upon, reasonably, that idea of the theatre being called into existence—what you might call the appellation of theatre. But the citation this morning also noted that Peter Brook goes on to say that in the process of taking that empty space and calling it a theatre, you need to bring somebody in to accept that and look at it. And that really takes us back through Peter Brook to an earlier period of theatrical theory—the early 1960s—when we were all in the grip, or coming into the grip, of high modernism. And one of the great questions for all the arts in high modernism was: What is the essence of this art? What is the essence of drama? What is the essence of music? What is the essence of —? And of course that then leads us in art to various kinds of minimalist art.

There were a number of statements in the sixties about [theatre]—strip everything else away, what is theatre? What is essential to theatre? And there were two quite famous statements about that, which overlap to a certain extent. Particularly, I want to talk about Eric Bentley's idea in *The Life of the Drama*, where he said, if you really want to take theatre down to its essence—and people have quoted this with a lot of different variations—what Bentley actually said was: "A imitates B while C watches." That's the essence of theatre. A person almost equally well known then, who has faded some, although Bentley has also faded as time has passed, is Richard Southern and his book *The Seven Ages of Theatre*, which came out in '61; Bentley was '64. Southern said, if we start taking things away—and the seven ages, each age another thing has been added to the theatre—costumes, scenery, and so on. When he gets back to the very beginnings of theatre, he says what we have is the performer and the observer. You split those apart, and theatre doesn't exist anymore.

Now, those two statements, of course, are rather similar. Neither one of them, notice, unlike Peter Brook, directly addresses space. Southern describes an action or a relationship—and indeed, to some extent, so does Bentley. It's a functional matter: A does something and imitates B, and C does something, watches. Now, looking back to these statements we realize they are both very heavily spatial. You really can't watch unless you're in a different space, but the space has to be contiguous to the first space or you can't watch. Now, I realize saying that, today with the media you can watch without being there, and that has implications also. But, as long as you're talking about the traditional, physical theatre, the assumption is that you have two spaces: one is the space of the watchers and one is the space of the watched. And we've come back to that again and again in different papers.

I'm going to focus, really, on the Bentley configuration because he gives us all three of these parts, and particularly from a spatial angle. That

is to say, A imitates B while C watches. The first thing I have to say about this is that straightforward as this is, there are problems with it, especially in terms of contemporary performance. And the biggest problem today is major scholars have attacked mimesis—it's as simple as that. Probably Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic Theatre* is the most famous example of that, but there are a lot people around who have said, "No, no, you really don't have to have mimesis." And although I don't know that Lehmann has been cited in the conference, certainly many of the papers have had to do with, as it were, non-mimetic theatre: theatre that is created not because somebody imitates something, but because somebody is going to see, while C watches.

I think we can thank performance studies for that, which really began the erosion of mimesis by saying it isn't so much a matter of creating a character as performing an action, performing a meaningful action. And then you go back to Austin and people like that. So that what it is called in performance is "A consciously decides to do something to be observed and interpreted, which C watches." Mimesis has disappeared; you're really talking about the creation of a meaningful, or hoped-for meaningful action, which may be mimetic, but it may not be mimetic. I'll come back to this in a moment because there's another problematic about mimetics, but let me go back now again to each part of this.

A imitates B. Let's just think about A for a moment; A is whoever or whatever group, organization, structure decides to produce something which they call theatre, or theatrical activity. A number of the papers have quite reasonably focused on A, and A's control and one of the major questions in contemporary theatre is who's in control here? Who's doing it? Who's deciding what's to be done? And of course when we get into the immersive theatre, which has been addressed in several papers, this becomes a really critical question. A then becomes a kind of producing organization that sets up a kind of open-ended situation and C no longer merely watches, but C participates and, at least in theory, is a co-creator with A of the experience that happens. But traditionally, A has been pretty much in control of the game; C has been considered as a passive consumer of what A produces to be consumed, and many of the papers have dealt with that dynamic, that sort of concern. Whether it's the priming of the audience by Blue Man Group or the California theatre with its control of the audience, or even T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, by and large the group in charge pretty well makes up the rules and decides what's going on. And so, we've had a number of papers that have talked about space from the aspect of A's creation of and control of a particular space.

If we go over the middle part of this: A imitates B—or, some people say, A pretends to be B—put aside for a moment the challenge to mimesis

and just go directly to the process of mimesis. For most of theatre history mimesis has been a doubling, an assumption of another character, another persona that you are not. And you may say, well, this is a psychological or a relational operation, not a spatial one. Yes, the actor and the character inhabit the same space, but if you think of space, as a number of the papers have done, not as a physical but as a psychic matter, then of course what makes a character different from an actor is the psychic space between them. I am both this and I am that, but I put a psychic space between me and my creation. And a number of papers have talked about that psychic space, and indeed a couple of papers have gone perhaps a step further and talked about a particular kind of psychic space, and that is the psychic space of parody. That is to say, just as I can separate myself from a character, a play or a performance can separate itself from something else that the audience can see as psychically different from them. Whether it is the psychic difference in, let's say, Ira Aldridge and Matthews, the psychic difference of the black and white interpretation. Or whether it is, to take a more common example, the psychic difference that is involved when you're doing Opera on Tap or country music that is both real country music and a kind of parody or takeoff of country music. Whether you're doing real opera or a kind of parody or takeoff. Now, that is not to say, and neither of these papers tried to say, that the parody cheapens the work; on the contrary, it provides a richer perspective of the work, a different kind of space. And it does go back again to mimesis because with parody, since you are making a conscious spatial distance between the already known original and the takeoff on the original, you are calling the audience's attention to the fact that you as a performer are not being mimetic, but you're standing outside and commenting on something, or, if you like, you're being mimetic of something else. When you're doing Opera on Tap it may be that you're singing a Mozart aria, but you are also "singing" a Mozart aria—that is, you are both conscious of the character and the fact that a performer is doing it. That's sort of built into parody because of what you're doing. And the same thing of course is also true of the country music show. They are at one and the same time doing the real thing, and also, as it were, winking at you and saying, "We're performers, notice what we're doing with this." That's what parody always involves—that kind of spatial distance between—not only between the original material and what you're seeing, but also between the original performance style and assumptions about what a character is and the performer who is in fact doing it. It's for that reason that it has often been remarked that parody goes much beyond simple making fun of something; it is making fun of and celebrating something at the same time. There's always a kind

of doubleness in that, so that the question of mimesis and the space in mimesis has come in [to the symposium] in a number of different ways.

I mentioned earlier the decline or the questioning of mimesis in contemporary culture. When you try to get rid of mimesis, then what if anything do you put in its place? And I would point, again, to the model that we see in performance studies, or the anti-mimetic side of performance studies where you're sort of talking about the Austinian performative: something that is consciously produced in order to have a particular kind of effect or produce another kind of action to create a performance. Then, it shifts away from performance toward observation. The difference between—if there is a difference—between brushing your teeth in front of your bathroom mirror and my pulling out a toothbrush now and brushing my teeth—is that you're there watching. That's what makes it into a performance, in the simplest sense. Performance is something done for somebody. It's not just done. Now, you may say, "Ah, but am I not my own performer in the bathroom mirror?" [Laughter.] That's another question; it's a different aspect of the problem, which I might as well go into right now [more laughter], which is the last part of this: "Who is the C anyway?" And what are they doing? And what is their responsibility?

Of course, in many of the papers the emphasis has been on C: the people who used to just watch but now in immersive theatre are drawn in and do other kinds of things. And we've looked at C in many different ways—in the way that C is controlled by spaces, or sought to be controlled, like the upstairs and downstairs racial entrances in the nineteenth-century American theatre, or the segregation of people in the California theatre, or indeed any of the theatres about which we have talked that explore how space is used within the theatre. Looking back over the history of theatre, it is of course a spatial art at the very beginning, not only because actors move through space, which actually not many of the papers have talked about—what we might call blocking, which is a very critical part of what we do in the theatre. But much more, the conference has focused, quite properly, in reflecting upon the concern that we have about theatre now, and that is the theatre as embedded in culture and in a society. Fifty years ago when you studied theatre, by and large you read plays and read about the theatres they were performed in and that was it. You didn't really think about what are the economics, what are the social, what are the ethnic implications, what are the class implications of this. Now we have a much more, I would say, sophisticated—I hate to be an evolutionist about this—but let's at least say a much broader interest in how theatre is operating not as a particular art form but as a product of human culture. And that not only allows us to

ask, I think, richer and more interesting and more provocative questions, but also allows us to ask more global questions about theatre. We're not restricted to a particular model. It also—and I think this is critical—challenges us to ask more social and political questions about theatre. What is it doing? Who's in control? Who's profiting? And so on. And all those come out of that kind of consideration. So obviously, C and the relationship between C and A now takes on a different kind of relationship and it, in part, involves power. Who is in control? What kind of control does A exercise over C—or should they exercise over C? The particular sort of space traditionally that C occupies has been a space established and controlled by A—and that still is essentially true. I noticed even in the Algonquin Group there was a rope around A so that C was excluded.

Now, that rope around the Algonquin Group actually raises a number of interesting questions. The most obvious thing, of course, as with most traditional theatre, is not only who's in but also who's out. Who is allowed to—and this is where [Jacques] Rancière comes in—is there any emancipation given to C or is C totally outside the rope and not in any way involved with this? But also, the various spatial configurations we've talked about and I mentioned already—the Cs that are outside the rope—how are they differentiated? Or indeed, even who is allowed to be outside the rope? Not everybody can go to the Algonquin. And here we get into this very important question about access to theatre. We discussed the term "invisibility." How you can pass into a theatre without being challenged, which has of course not only the obvious racial implications, but also class implications, and that's always been an important part of theatre. Sometimes [it has been] legislated very specifically and other times just if you're a certain kind of person you don't go to the Bowery Theatre. If you're a certain kind of person you don't go to the African Grove Theatre or the Park Theatre, or whatever. So, there's always been some of that sort of thing.

But to go back to the Algonquin—there is a rope around these people. And when I call your attention to that it means I am making a model in which [Alexander] Woollcott and Dorothy Parker and that gang are performers. Did they think of themselves as performers? I would say yes. And what does mimesis have to do with this? Is Alexander Woollcott playing Alexander Woollcott? I would say, absolutely. No question. No question. All of these people were performing. Dorothy Parker? Obviously. Bentley—I mean, part of what they did was that they performed for each other. And I doubt, frankly, if any one of them would have denied it, because these are very sophisticated people and very self-aware people. Certainly Oscar Wilde, whom they all loved, was well aware that

he was playing a part. He did that very consciously and reveled in it, and I can't believe that Dorothy Parker was not equally conscious. But then this raises another question, that is—how porous is the question of mimesis? In a certain sense is any consciously produced behavior mimetic? Am I not playing Marvin Carlson right now? Of course I am. [Laughter.] Of course I am. I'm in full costume. [More laughter.] The beard and everything. And very calculatedly doing this. And everybody, I think, in theatre is to some extent aware of this. And if we weren't we certainly were when Performance Studies came along and we started reading Erving Goffman and his like and said, "Look, it's all performative; it's all framing, it's all staging." The props [gestures to his water bottle], everything is here.

So that then introduces space, which is related to the space between actor and character. But [it] has to be looked at in a somewhat different way, and that is the space between whoever the real person is and the person who is being consciously performed. And of course if we go out into Judith Butler-land we may be talking about performance that is not even conscious but is still performing, is still the creation of a particular kind of character. So, a number of the papers have talked about those kinds of spaces. The spaces that C creates or C is involved in.

Having gone through A imitates B while C watches, let me go back and put them together again. What we're really talking about ultimately then is the most important space—the space that allows this to happen, encourages this to happen, or is found to make this happen. Very often in theatre history, of course, the space has been created or found or devised particularly with this in mind, from the Greek theatre onward. Although theatre has always both had to find spaces as the Bengali theatre does today, or maybe very consciously went to find spaces like *Murder in the Cathedral*, and utilized them in that way.

One item of space that hasn't been a great deal talked about, although several people, as for example with the Ottawa National Theatre, have talked about this, is the urban space. Where is a theatre located within the city and what does that mean? But it's always there. That is, you'll notice with the Bengali theatre one of the first things said is there's the North, the Central, and the South. Any theatre city has its areas and its locations. If it's in Decatur it's different than being in Atlanta. If it's uptown in New York it's very different from being downtown, and so on. If it's in the black neighborhood or in Harlem in New York it's obviously very different from being in the Upper East Side, or wherever it happens to be. So that's always been a consideration and a number of the papers touched on that. More touched upon internal arrangements, but even more touched on something that's kind of in between these, which

is, I think, very important and, again, very indicative of our modern idea of theatre.

We used to think theatre was a space. Now we much more think theatre is a concept; it's a way that a certain space is used, as Peter Brook suggests. But I'm particularly thinking that within theatre history, the theatres that have had the closest connection to their society and the most support from their society have been theatres with a really solid permanent space like the Comédie Française or the Theatre Dionysus. However, in the nineteenth century, especially toward the end of the nineteenth century, many people began to say, "Yes, but those theatres are monuments to high culture and a particular social class. What about the people out there who never go to those theatres, that find that space wrong or intimidating?" There are several answers to that—the most obvious is, of course, go out where they are. And so you get ambulatory theatres. You get El Teatro Campesino, which has been mentioned. Firmin Gémier with his rolling theatre in the 1890s; Joe Papp with his mobile theatre, which still runs regularly out to disadvantaged New York neighborhoods and takes theatre to the people. All these are based upon, not only an idea of space, but also of taking the space around to other places. In a way, I wouldn't even say colonizing, which is an unfortunate word, but opening up spaces for theatre elsewhere. Converting spaces into a different kind of consciousness and a different kind of use. And I think that's another way that theatre spaces are imported around. I do not advise or support the Bengali solution—which is not a solution, but a necessity—of running around and performing in a variety of different spaces. That's very difficult, and I offer my greatest praise to people who work under those conditions. On the other hand, there is something very positive about theatre that goes all over everywhere and plays in a lot of different neighborhoods and many modern theatres, as some of the papers have mentioned, have taken advantage of that.

The theatre is perhaps today, even though it's a challenged art, an art that can be found in a greater variety of spaces all around the world than at any time in the past. Partly it's an economic matter. But partly it is a conscious choice of taking theatre into communities, into social classes, into all kinds of areas that have not had it or known it or been aware of how that sort of space can be created or what it might mean. Now that's the positive side. Here's the negative side—and here I go to James Fisher's paper on surveillance. If we now say that theatre and theatrical space are as much created by C as by A, then we get into the very interesting question of "What happens when C takes charge?" What happens when the observer takes charge? And I think James illustrated this very clearly by taking the same event, a street performance, not necessarily by Brecht,

but indeed by any kind of political street performance. Just go back to the sixties and throw a rock. There were plenty of people doing this. The idea, of course, behind those performances (whether mimesis was involved or not, and it usually was) was, of course, that the A that was imitating B was doing this for the C that was gathered around them in the public park or whatever, to be energized, influenced, inspired by that activity. Now that can still happen and does still happen, but as James says, at the same time up in a tree nearby is an observance camera. There is another C. And who is that C, and what do they do, and how does it affect these operations? It's an updating of the panopticon concern. And really gives rise not only to political concerns, but also to theoretical concerns. Certainly in demonstrations today, you are demonstrating largely not for the people around you but for the cameras. You know you're being observed. That's part of the game. So when A is imitating B for C, the C can be a variety of things for a variety of reasons now.

So when we talk about space what does space mean here? Already when we moved into digital performance these questions became much more complicated. If you're in Second Life as we [considered] in some of the discussion, then what you are is you are A creating a C which pretends to be B. Or I'll put it another way—you're everything. But you're not everything. You're controlling a character who is also sort of your actor, but that's also yourself. You're watching yourself doing these things—as actors of course always have done, in a sense. They're always their own C as well. But as also was pointed out in the paper, we're still not talking Rancière here. That is, you're still playing by the rules that are set up by that particular game. But already in the digital world, space becomes much more flexible and much more negotiable than it was before, and of course the surveillance world just extends that out further. We now can truly say that an action that is performed by A—the C is infinite. The C can be anywhere and anybody. And in a way that also makes the A and the imitation of B also able, potentially, to take any space, because it can be watched and reproduced everywhere. The theatre has become then truly—or performance, mimetic or not—has become truly a global operation. This is potentially a very Orwellian, depressing idea. But it's also, it seems to me, potentially a utopian idea. It really depends on how the spatial negotiations and the power relationships that are always embedded in spatial relationships are going to be negotiated in the future.