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acting performance

essays in modernism and postmodernism

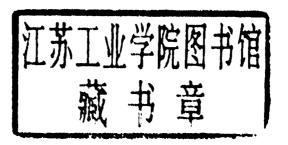
Philip Auslander

ROUTLEDGE

From Acting to Performance

Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism

Philip Auslander





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This book is dedicated partly to the memory of Bonzo (The Dog) Sirlin, a lively companion throughout the writing of these essays. She is sorely missed.

All of the essays collected here have existed in many forms: as conference papers, journal articles, and book chapters. What follows is a brief, selective history of each chapter.

"'Holy theatre' and catharsis" (Chapter 2) appeared originally in *Theatre Research International*, 9, 1 (1984). It has been revised for inclusion here.

"'Just be your self': logocentrism and différance in performance theory" (Chapter 3) was my contribution to the New Poetics panel at the annual conference of the American Theatre Association in

x Acknowledgments

San Francisco, 1984. It was subsequently published in Art and Cinema (New Series), 1, 1 (1986), and in Acting (Re)Considered, edited by Phillip Zarrilli (1995). It has been revised for inclusion here.

"Task and vision: Willem Dafoe in LSD" (Chapter 4) was commissioned for a special issue of TDR on the subject of performance personae. That issue never came off, but the essay appeared (severely edited) in another special issue on the Wooster Group (TDR, 29, 2), reprinted here by permission of MIT Press, © 1985. The unedited version was published in Acting (Re)Considered, edited by Phillip Zarrilli (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). That version has been revised for inclusion here.

"Presence and theatricality in the discourse of performance and the visual arts" (Chapter 5) was my contribution to the State of the Profession panel at the annual conference of the American Society for Theatre Research in Providence, Rhode Island, 1992.

"Toward a concept of the political in postmodern theatre" (Chapter 6) is reprinted from *Theatre Journal*, 39, 1 by permission of the Johns Hopkins University Press, © 1987.

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"Vito Acconci and the politics of the body in postmodern performance" (Chapter 8) is reprinted from *After the Future: Postmodern Times and Places*, edited by Gary Shapiro, by permission of the State University of New York Press, © 1990.

"Boal, Blau, Brecht: the body" (Chapter 9) appeared originally in *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*, edited by Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). It has been revised for inclusion here.

"'Brought to you by Fem-Rage': stand-up comedy and the politics of gender" (Chapter 10) is reprinted from Acting Out: Feminist Performances, edited by Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, by permission of the University of Michigan Press, © 1993.

Part of "The surgical self: body alteration and identity" (Chapter 11) was published as "Orlan's Theatre of Operations," TheatreForum, 7 (1995). I presented an earlier draft of the current essay to the Gender/Technology Conference organized by E. Ann Kaplan at the Humanities Institute at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1996.

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The title of this collection, for which I have my editor, Talia Rodgers, to thank, is evocative for me on several levels. On a personal level, From Acting to Performance suggests the course the development of my own interests has followed, from an original commitment to theatre toward a broader conception of performance and its genres. (I hope it is not presumptuous to suggest that many theatre scholars of my generation share this intellectual history with me.) The same phrase suggests the direction of developments in my original area of interest, experimental theatre, over the last twenty-five years or so. Whereas the modernist and avantgardist theatres of the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries conceived of their work in terms of innovations in acting, subsequent postmodernist innovations have resulted from a reconsideration of the very nature of the activity that takes place on the stage, and the development of performance art, in which artists from non-theatrical backgrounds have brought divergent sensibilities to bear on the act of performance. Finally, the title phrase evokes developments and debates within the American academy surrounding the evolution of Peformance Studies as a discipline apart from Theatre Studies. It is with these debates that I shall begin my discussion here. Despite the antagonisms expressed on both sides, the title of this book expresses my perception of the relationship between Theatre Studies and Performance Studies as one of continuity rather than rupture.

Detecting within me a histrionic impulse, my mother sent me off to acting classes beginning around age nine. Thus began my lifelong involvement with an art form and an academic field in which I eventually earned two graduate degrees. Throughout high school, I worked intensively in the theatre, primarily as an actor, taking a relatively uncritical view of the enterprise. It was only as an

undergraduate that I began to think about the social, cultural, and political significance of theatre. That I attended college during the immediate post-Viet Nam, post-Watergate period had much to do with this growing emphasis. I left college briefly to study acting at professional schools in New York, but was so disenchanted with the lack of intellectual curiosity among my fellow students that I returned to a conventional undergraduate education at a university without a theatre department. It was during this time that my own investigations of theatrical avant-gardism and reading in performance theory brought home to me that theatre is a much larger category than I had originally conceived it to be, and that it is, in turn, a subset of a still larger category reasonably called performance.

To me, then and now, this insight seems wholly unproblematic. I have never felt that my (admittedly often strained) allegiance to theatre is somehow compromised by the notion that it is part of a larger picture. My academic career has been reflective of the peaceful coexistence of the concepts of theatre and performance: I frequently teach dramatic literature but, as this collection will attest, I almost never write about plays, preferring to focus on performance texts and theories of performance. Early in my scholarly career, this meant examining theories of acting rather than more conventional theatre historical or critical issues. Even as I have moved away from theatre as my primary object of study, I have always felt that my work has remained rooted in the same fundamental concerns.¹

One of the flashpoints for recent debates over the relationship of Theatre Studies to Performance Studies was Richard Schechner's 1992 editorial "A New Paradigm for Theatre in the Academy." Always interested in stirring up controversy, Schechner declared that "The new paradigm is 'performance,' not theatre. Theatre departments should become 'performance departments" (1992: 9). Predictably and appropriately, this aggressive gesture provoked a number of responses, some quite virulent.²

My own response was to wonder how carefully Schechner had considered his use of Thomas Kuhn's vocabulary of scientific revolution to describe this potential revolution in the study of theatre and performance. Kuhn (1970) stipulates that, in science, a new paradigm not only replaces the existing one, but *invalidates* it (indeed, this is the only way scientific paradigms can be invalidated). Competing scientific paradigms are incommensurable and mutually exclusive: if you accept the new paradigm, you must

reject the previous one. So different are the premises on which competing paradigms are based that scientists who accept different paradigms cannot even speak meaningfully with one another. In Kuhnian terms, Theatre Studies would not be a subset of postrevolutionary Performance Studies – it would be the repudiated paradigm. Theatre would be as phlogiston to performance's oxygen: theatre scholars and performance scholars would be unable to engage in meaningful exchange; those who insisted on the validity of the Theatre Studies paradigm would be regarded as quacks akin to those who would defend the scientific integrity of astrology against that of astronomy.

As the thumbnail biographical sketch I have offered here should imply, my own practical and scholarly experience of theatre and performance suggests that the relationship between Theatre Studies and Performance Studies is not best described as a paradigm shift. The concept of performance enabled me to extend my original inquiry into the nature of theatre to other forms (e.g., performance art and stand-up comedy) and to look at those other forms in much the same way that I had previously considered theatre. The evolution of Performance Studies out of Theatre Studies, Speech Communication, and Anthropology has the character of what Kuhn calls the *articulation* of a paradigm. By articulation, Kuhn means the application and extension of a paradigm to new areas of research. Elin Diamond has identified some of the basic questions emerging from the study of theatre that are also fundamental to the study of performance more broadly construed:

[P]owerful questions posed by theater representation – questions of subjectivity (who is speaking/acting?), location (in what sites/spaces?), audience (who is watching?), commodification (who is in control?), conventionality (how are meanings produced?), politics (what ideological or social positions are being reinforced or contested?) – are embedded in the bodies and acts of performers.

(Diamond 1996: 4)

That these questions are being directed to an expanded range of texts, performance genres, and theories within American theatre departments (see J. Dolan 1995: 30-1) exemplifies the process of articulation. From this perspective, Performance Studies appears to be an articulation of the Theatre Studies paradigm, not a revolutionary new paradigm. Indeed, it may not even be possible, within Western culture, to think "performance" without thinking

"theatre," so deeply engrained is the idea of theatre in both performance and discourse about performance. "[I]t is theater which haunts all performance whether or not it occurs in the theater" (Blau 1987: 164–5). "[T]heater is the repressed of performance" (Diamond 1996: 4) even, perhaps especially, when it is a kind of performance that is overtly antitheatrical. 3

The selection and organization of the essays here is meant to reflect this perspective on the relationship of theatre and performance as well as the development of my own work. Although the essays are not presented in strict chronological order, they are arranged to give a sense of that development. Although I have edited and revised the essays, in some cases substantially, I have endeavored not to alter them in ways that would efface their original arguments, even where I might think differently today. The essays are very much products of the times in which they were written, and I did not want them to lose that time-bound quality.

The first section, "From Acting to Performance," provides an overview of the developments I have been discussing here. I feel that I am taking something of a risk in reprinting as early a piece as "'Holy theatre' and catharsis," the first essay in that section. In the course of working on this volume, however, I became more and more convinced that it was important to include this piece, in part because I realized how many times I return in later work to the figures and ideas mentioned there as objects of comparison, usually to take issue with them. The figures and conceptions of theatre discussed there become emblematic in my later work of a theatrical modernism against which I see postmodernist performance reacting. The idea that theatre could serve radical spiritual and, therefore, political purposes (although the political dimension is not explored in this essay) was absolutely central to my aesthetics and politics when I first started thinking seriously about theatre, as it undoubtedly was for many others who came of age in the Viet Nam era. My enthusiasm for conceptions of "holy" theatre, especially in its communitarian varieties, came out of my acquaintance with the work of the Living Theatre and, through them, the writings of Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski. Part of my intellectual project at the time I wrote this essay was to provide a history for this conceptualization of theatre, tracing the communitarian impulse that animates Peter Brook's theatre work back to the too little-discussed Jacques Copeau (in another essay here, I posit Adolphe Appia as the originator of this stream of thought). I offer this essay as a starting point because it represents the terms under which I entered theoretical discourse on performance: enthusiasm for talking about acting, interest in the avant-garde, commitment to a communitarian view of theatre informed by the ecstatic political theatres of the 1960s. It is important to note that my approach to all these things was defined in terms of a very traditional analytical concept: catharsis, a concept little used in cutting-edge theatre scholarship since the 1970s.⁴

The difference between the first essay and the second, both of which are about modernist theories of acting and address the work of Grotowski, among others, can be summed up in one word: Theory. Between 1979 and 1983, I received degrees from two graduate programs in theatre, both of which were Theory-Free Zones at the time. The Theory and Criticism I studied in these programs was limited to traditional dramatic theory; I emerged from graduate school completely unacquainted with the current trends in literary and cultural theory (e.g., semiotics, deconstruction, reader-response theory, feminist theory, etc.). I suspect that my experience was fairly typical, in that the application of Theory to Theatre Studies in the North American academy only began in the early 1980s. (I date its advent to 1982, with the publication of Herbert Blau's Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point and the two essays in Modern Drama that I discuss in Chapter 5. Other important developments, such as Elinor Fuchs's engagement with deconstruction and postmodernism around 1983, and Sue-Ellen Case's Feminism and Theatre [1988], followed in the next few years.) The watershed event for American scholars was the presence of two competitive panels on the program of the 1984 conference of the American Theatre Association. Collectively entitled "Toward a New Poetics," these panels were designed to examine the implications for theatre of the new critical methodologies we were beginning to acknowledge. My paper, "'Just be your self': logocentrism and différance in performance theory" (Chapter 3), analyzed modernist acting theory in light of Derridean deconstruction.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of the New Poetics panels.⁵ Those sessions, and the considerations of how new ideas might infuse theatre practice and scholarship arising from them, galvanized the field in a way that few concepts or events have since (I felt a similar energy at the First Annual Performance Studies Conference in 1995, but I'm not sure it will prove to have the same generative power; see Auslander 1995b). The New Poetics was the point of entry into American Theatre Studies for all varieties of structuralist, poststructuralist, and identity-based critical theories,

the success of which can be measured by the scholarly production of the last decade, especially in the area of feminist theatre studies. For myself, deconstruction provided a way of gaining a critical perspective on the acting theories I had examined analytically, but uncritically, up to that point. This perspective enabled me to see both the theories and acting itself in terms of an expanded notion of textuality, and to understand how they might be subject to the same critiques other kinds of texts were undergoing. Because the panel was organized around the idea of a New Poetics, I was particularly interested in what deconstruction might mean for future theatre practice. Since my focus at the time was on the Derridean concept of différance, I concluded that one could not base a method of acting or a style of theatre directly on deconstruction. Later, when I started exploring the question of postmodernist political theatre, deconstruction provided the basis for conceptualizing a necessary strategy.

The third essay in this first section, "Task and vision: Willem Dafoe in LSD," is an analysis of a particular performer's work. I placed this essay here because it continues the discussion of deconstructive theatre practices begun in Chapter 3, and also because the Wooster Group's performance style is based in recognizable tropes of acting, yet, by deconstructing those very tropes, becomes something other than acting. With the inclusion of this essay, this section maps in small the transitions I want to chart in this book. It suggests the development of my own work from traditionally based analysis of acting toward a more theoretically informed performance criticism, which occurred at a moment of major change in the discipline generally. It also indicates historical transitions in theatre itself: from an aspiration to universal levels of communication toward much more localized discourses; from the modernist avant-garde and the ecstatic theatres of the 1960s toward postmodernism; and a progressive redefinition of theatrical mimesis away from "character" toward "performance persona," with consequent redefinitions of the function of the performer's self in relation to performance.

Although I embraced the skepticism implicit in deconstruction, I was frustrated by its seeming inappropriateness as a framework for discussing political theatre, in which I have a longstanding interest. Theories of postmodernism seemed to me to offer both a convincing description of contemporary culture and a context in which that discussion might take place, and became the theoretical commitment of my work from the mid-1980s on. The three essays

grouped in the second section of the book under the title of "Postmodernism and Performance" address two fundamental issues: the role played by the concept of postmodernism in defining the relationship of performance to theatre, and the question of what postmodernist political performance might look like. The first essay in the section, "Presence and theatricality in the discourse of performance and the visual arts," was written for an American Society for Theatre Research conference on the relationship of theatre and the visual arts in 1992. It occurred to me that 1992 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Michael Fried's notorious essay "Art and Objecthood" (1968 [1967]), a central text for critical work on postmodernism in both the visual arts and performance, and, therefore, a suitable object of discussion at the conference. I wanted to show that the relation of opposition between theatre and performance that informs many discussions of postmodernist performance was generated out of Fried's opposition of color field abstraction and minimalism in visual art, and explore the irony of the use of Fried's implicitly anti-postmodern polemic by critics championing the postmodern in performance.

The next two chapters assert my thesis that the models we still have for political art and theatre, which descend from the modernist avant-garde and the 1960s, are no longer viable and that the project of political art must be reconceptualized in postmod-ernist terms. Both essays deal directly, though in different contexts, with the question of what that means for theatre and performance. Even though the material in my essay "Toward a concept of the political in postmodern theatre" appears scattered through my book Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance (1992a), I have included it here (as Chapter 6) for two reasons. The first is simply that it has never been reprinted in its original form. The second, more substantial, reason is that, together with Chapters 7 and 8, which also have never been reprinted, it forms a sequence of essays, all written around the same time, that touch on theories and practices in theatre, dance, and performance art in the context of a particular view of political art under postmodernism. That view, which repudiates the transgressive stance of the modernist avant-garde in favor of a concept of resistant political art, is adumbrated and justified in Chapter 6, where I also discuss its implications for theatre. The same concept then serves as the basis for my critique of Susan Foster's Reading Dancing (1986) in Chapter 7 and, indeed, as the

ground of the analyses of performance practices that make up the final section of the book.

The theoretical questions that surround the performing body have long intrigued and perplexed me. As some notes and passing references in several chapters here suggest, I have wondered particularly whether the body in performance can be accounted for semiotically, for the body seems in some ways to defeat signification. On the other hand, to posit the body as an absolute, originary presence beyond signification is neither accurate nor theoretically defensible. The problematic of the performing body lies in the tension between the body's inevitably serving as a signifier while simultaneously exceeding, without transcending, that function: "when the intention is to present the body itself as flesh . . . it remains a sign nonetheless When the intention is to present the performer's body as primarily a sign . . . , corporeality always intervenes . . . " (Erickson 1995: 66-7). The essays in the third section, entitled "Postmodern body politics," continue the discussion of the signifying body begun in Chapter 8 and attempt in various ways to arrive at a non-essentialist view of the body that nevertheless acknowledges its corporeality.6

The first essay in this section, "Vito Acconci and the politics of the body in postmodern performance," opens with a restatement of the question concerning postmodern political art explored in the previous two chapters, and a cultural critique of the status of the body in modernist theories of acting that complements the deconstructive critique in Chapter 3. Thereafter, I analyze Vito Acconci's "body art" of the early 1970s as a postmodern political art practice focusing on the body and its cultural significations. The next chapter, "Boal, Blau, Brecht: the body," situates Augusto Boal's work in relation to modernist performance theory and argues that Boal's formulation of the "spect-actor," an entity which combines the functions of theatrical spectator and actor in a single body, provides a way of reconceptualizing postmodern subjectivity without denying its fracturing, so as to recover a space for critical distance and, hence, politics in postmodern performance.

The third essay in this section, "'Brought to you by Fem-Rage': stand-up comedy and the politics of gender," may seem anomalous in that it is the only essay in this collection to look at a popular cultural performance genre. I have argued elsewhere (Auslander 1992b) that the stand-up comedy produced during the comedy boom of the 1980s must be understood as a specifically postmodern phenomenon, qualitatively different from the cultural positioning

of earlier stand-up comedy. Although I do not wish to rehearse yet again the oft-stated claim that postmodernism is characterized by a breakdown of the distinction between high art and mass culture, I would suggest that such a breakdown has indeed occurred in the distinction between avant-gardistic and popular performance (see Auslander 1989). One consequence of this breakdown is that one can no longer assume that positive political work can be done only by vanguard art; as my analysis of The Roseanne Barr Show demonstrates, popular cultural texts, too, can be understood as resistant political art. In addition to that analysis, this chapter presents the work of women stand-up comedians as a discourse in which the body is the locus of a critical analysis of gender in culture. Women comics also engage in a discourse of bodily transformation that relates both to Acconci's manipulations of, and attempts to alter, his own body and to the work of Orlan and Kate Bornstein, the two performance artists discussed in the final chapter. Whereas the women comics discussed in Chapter 10 subject the body to purely verbal, discursive transformations, Acconci goes beyond the verbal in his actions on his own body. These actions produce only partial and temporary transformations; in the high-stakes body performances undertaken by Orlan and Bornstein, the transformations are surgical and permanent. My discussion of their work in "The surgical self: body transformation and identity" (Chapter 11) continues my analysis of bodily gender performance and resistant political art, while simultaneously carrying that analysis into the realm of techno-medical interventions on the body that foreshadow the issues to be addressed in the cyborg culture of the very near future.

The body, then, is a central problematic of theatre and performance, and of the essays in this book, from the first discussion of Grotowski's view of the actor's physicality in Chapter 2 through the analyses of postmodern performance practices that make up the third section. Other specific problematics that recur throughout the essays gathered here, cutting across the categories of theatre and performance, include: character, self, representation, presence, communality, political art, avant-gardism, and resistance. I hope the reader will enjoy tracing the development of these themes as they weave through the essays collected in this volume.