

Richard schechner's performance theory



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Discuss ways in which Richard Schechner's 'Performance Theory' may be of use to contemporary practitioners. Illustrate your answer with reference to at least one dance or theatre performance which you have seen 'live'.

The influence of Richard Schechner (b. 1934) on both theatre production and academic theory has been profound and, in some ways, revolutionary.

Schechner has consistently challenged traditional practices and perspectives of theatre, performance and ritual for almost half a century. His principal contention is that drama is not merely a province of the stage, but of everyday life, and is a cross-cultural phenomenon. *'It is important to develop and articulate theories concerning how performances are regenerated, transmitted, received and evaluated in pursuit of these goals, performance studies is insistently intercultural, inter-generic and interdisciplinary'*. (Schechner, 1995)

As with all academic studies, performance theory is founded on certain key principles, which include such terms as 'presentation of self', 'restored behaviour' and 'expressive culture', and incorporates social drama and ritual. His concept of performance, which contrasts sharply with previous, principally modernist, approaches to the arts, asserts the importance of different 'systems of transformations', which vary enormously from culture to culture, and throughout historical periods and movements.

The radical nature of performance theory is demonstrated by its all-encompassing, even holistic, approach to theatre and performance, with popular culture, folklore, and ethnic diversity incorporated into the cross-disciplinary mix. In examining the ways in which the theory can be useful to

theatre practitioners, it is important to examine in more detail the main strategies it deploys, including the concept of 'performativity'.

The word 'performative' was originated by J. L. Austin, a linguistic philosopher, who coined the term for the first time during lectures at Harvard University in 1955. Expressions such as 'I take this man to be my lawfully wedded husband' are an example of an action in itself, rather than simply the description of an action. As Austin put it, '*to say something is to do something*'. (Austin, 1962)

'Performativity' as a concept is closely related to postmodernism. The postmodern view does not see the idea of 'performance' as intrinsically artistic or theatrical, but as something that pervades the fabric of the social, political and material world. It is an inalienable part of what constitutes power and knowledge. Teaching and lecturing, political speech-making and religious sermonising illustrates this characteristic of performativity.

The postmodern view of things posits a standpoint that culture has become a commodity in itself, rather than a critique of commodity. It is inseparable from the context of post-World War II Western society, where new goods and technology, and corresponding cultural developments, emerged from the rubble of post-war austerity. This shift from modernist to postmodernist thinking in the arts can be located in the 1950s, with movements such as abstract expressionism, modernist poetry and existentialism in literature and philosophy representing a high flowering of the modernist impulse. The postmodern world, originating in the 1960s, represented a blurring of

distinction between high art and popular, mass-communicated mediums, formerly derided as 'low art'.

'Recognising, analysing, and theorising the convergence and collapse of clearly demarcated realities, hierarchies, and categories is at the heart of postmodernism. Such a convergence or collapse is a profound departure from traditional Western performance theory'. (Schechner, 2002, P. 116)

In the Schechner universe, the previously solid foundation of modernism, with clearly defined borders of reality and representation in performance, has been wrenched away, and many of the assumptions in the western artistic tradition, from Plato and Aristotle on, such as the notion that theatre reflects, imitates or represents reality, in both individual and social life. *'Representational art of all kinds is based on the assumption that 'art' and 'life' are not only separate but of different orders of reality. Life is primary, art secondary'. (Schechner, 2002, P. 116)*

In Performance Studies, Schechner asserts that *'performing onstage, performing in special social situations (public ceremonies, for example), and performing in everyday life are a continuum'. (Schechner, 2002, P. 143)* His contention that each and every one of us is in some sense a 'performer' is difficult to dispute. Engaging in 'real life' is often indistinguishable from 'role play', and in today's 'surveillance societies' of Western culture, with CCTV cameras seemingly everywhere, the scope for performance as an extension of simply being has never been wider. The evident logical development of this is the ubiquitous 'reality TV' show, as well as the do-it-

yourself webcam and personal websites on the internet, both of which have contributed a new dimension to 'the style of being'. 2

Pop artist Andy Warhol would surely have embraced the new media's possibilities for exhibitionism, and reflected wryly on his own pioneering role in this phenomenon. His films of the 1960s and '70s were forerunners of reality TV, and his mantra of '15 minutes of fame' has never seemed more applicable.

At first glance, Schechner's hypotheses appears to fulfil both Warhol's philosophy and Shakespeare's oft-quoted 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players' as an approach to performance. The key concern of the drama ordinance practitioner is to place this into the context of performing a in a way beyond simply 'being in itself' to the portrayal of a self-contained 'thing in itself'- an abstract presentation of a text or idea, for the purposes of entertain mentor education. (E. g. Theatre-in-education)

The actor or 'player' is not alone in presenting self-contained performances, with a beginning, middle and end. As Schechner observes, various figures in the public arena adopt strategies of performance and role play, such as politicians, religious leaders, and businessmen and women, conducting presentations at meetings: '*Paid performers all seeking attention, adulation, re-election, and money*'. (Schechner, 2002, P. 146) They all have their own strategies and scenarios to achieve effects, towards a specific goal, and, like the theatre/performing arts practitioner, their performances are predicated on self-consciousness.

' Across this very wide spectrum of performing are varying degrees of self-consciousness and consciousness of the others with whom and for whom we play. The more self-conscious a person is the more one constructs behaviour for those watching and/or listening, the more such behaviour is performing.'

(Schechner, 2002, P. 146)

The application of role playing in many contexts, from psychotherapy sessions to teacher training exercises, follows similar approaches as drama improvisation classes, albeit with different objectives, but no less in addressing the self-conscious and unconscious impulses which lie at the basis of performance. It reflects the in-built routines, rituals and conventions of everyday life, instilled from birth, and through childhood experience. The Jungian theories of archetypes and the collective unconscious would suggest that the individual's mind is not a tabularasa (blank page) at the time of birth – the implications of which are potent with creative possibilities for the practitioner/performing artist.

The concept of ' performing in everyday life' is a central aspect of performativity, as envisaged by Schechner. *' Performativity is everywhere – in daily behaviour, in the professions, on the internet and media, in the arts and in the language'*. (Schechner, 2002, P. 110) It is a natural progenitor of role play and improvisation. The expression ' showing off' is heard frequently throughout childhood, but is equally applicable to adult behaviour. Certain jobs and professions have evolved traditional codes of conduct, some of which have emerged as specific character traits, behaviour patterns and tones of voice. These have in turn been stylised into stereotypical representations: the roles of dignified clergyman, ardent reporter, solemn

court judge, et al. They usually adhere to custom, but have evolved into modes of performance.

The implication is that many individuals, going about their 'everyday business' are not being themselves all of the time. They are acting out roles, predetermined to the point of being programmed in some cases. '

Performing in everyday life involves people in a wide range of activities from solo or intimate performances behind closed doors to small group activities to interacting as part of a crowd.' (Schechner, 2002, P. 175)

Schechner observes that the social codes of our daily lives are adapted to greater or lesser degrees by everyone. The unconventional or rebellious resist the rules, but only revolutionaries seek to break them to achieve permanent change - a principal equally applicable to artists. The arts, and particularly the theatre, have always made use of stereotypes and archetypes, often parodying or subverting them. Those practitioners who set out to achieve truthful performances, to 'get under the skin' of a character, can identify with these typical representations, as role play exercises reveal, but the underlying personality lies a layer or two deeper.

'In the theatre the actor and the audience both know that the actor is not who she is playing. But in real life a person is simultaneously performing herself and being herself. The matter is, of course, nicely complicated because in some methods of realistic acting, actors are taught how to use their own selves to construct theatrical roles.' (Schechner, 2002, P. 177)

In approaching the role of , for example, a science teacher, and avoid a one-dimensional portrayal, an actor must discover the character as not simply a

teacher, carrying out a teacher's role, but as an individual when 'off duty' during times, as Schechner puts it, when '*the performance aspect of ordinary behaviour is less obvious, but not absent*'. (Schechner, 2002, P. 177) 4

The actor can draw on his/her own experience, be it of a personal kind (i. e. they may have previously been a teacher) or from memories and observations based on an actual person, or persons. (E. g. a teacher who had taught them) Naturally, this approach places more demands on the actor, enabling him/her to enact a performance of a person who is also a science teacher, rather than simply a science teacher with no identity beyond his/her teaching duties.

A-Gender, produced in 2004 by Joey Hatley, artistic director of Transaction Theatre Company, was a postmodern theatre piece that adopted many of the elements of new theatre and performance theory very effectively. Ostensibly a presentation of gender politics portrayed as a personal case history, A-Gender presented the issue of transsexualism in a powerfully theatrical manner, deploying methods of performance outside the restrictions of conventional theatre.

The use of the 'one man (or one woman) show' format (a prototypical popular cultural form) and the 'stand up' routine, interwoven with visual media (video sequences) and other performance modes, enabled the artist/performer to convey the confusion, pain and anger of person whose gender identity causes them to believe that they have been born in the wrong body, the wrong gender.

A-Gender adopted a modus operandi of style and performativity that placed it squarely in the new theatre approach. Its subject matter determined this, and evident devices to unsettle, or even alienate, the audience were adopted by Hatley effectively. Some of these devices were not exclusively of postmodernist origin, having close links to the Theatre of the Absurd and Brechtian strategies of alienation, but the multi-media technique of juxtaposing live theatre with pre-filmed video sequences, was pure new theatre.

In fringe, community, and street theatre performances, the scope for applying Schechner's performance theory is virtually limitless. The roots of street theatre are varied and eclectic, having both a primitive, ritualistic dimension, with antecedents in ancient and tribal cultures, as well as avant garde origins of performance art at the start of the 20th century (e. g. surrealism, dada, etc), culminating in the pop art, post-modern dance and ' Happenings' of the 1960s, a movement from which Schechner's early work in the theatre emerged.

Street theatre performances contain some elements derived from Happenings, which Allan Kaprow outlined in *The seven qualities of Happenings*. (Kaprow, 1966)

There are essential differences. Street theatre is usually played out for the benefit of an audience, albeit one of a generally random nature, some of whom may become participants, but not in the same way as in Happenings - with everyone performing and no audience. One element they do share is the idea of the ' found space', which is crucial to ' environmental theatre'.

Kaprow stated, '*it doesn't make any difference how large the space is. It's still a stage*'. (Kaprow quoted in Schechner, 1977) Schechner elaborated on this principle with his axiom that '*the theatrical event can take place in a totally transformed space, or found space*'. (Schechner, 1977)

Whereas traditional theatre restricts the 'special place' to an area (the stage) marked clearly as the space for performance, new theatre creates a space that is 'organically defined by the action'. As in the Happening, and street theatre, space is transformed by the participants, who discover their own sets and scenery, using their surroundings, the various elements 'found in the environment of the space, including décor, textures and acoustics.

Outdoor stage performances have adopted this principle, with many touring theatre companies using castle ruins, woodland clearings and riversides to stage Shakespeare's Hamlet, A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Merchant of Venice. This use of transformed space is perhaps a more conservative application of Schechner's theory, as it retains many of the conventions of traditional theatre. The theatrical stage is simply substituted for its outdoor counterpart. Much of street theatre approaches adopt a radical use of space in the environment.

There are innumerable ways in which performance theory and new theatre are a useful alternative to traditional theatre. The application of other (visual) media has already been noted, as in the example of A-Gender.

Schechner proposes others:

'I suggest other tools, other approaches. Mathematical and transactional game analysis, model building, comparisons between theatre and related

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performance activities - all will prove fruitful.' (Schechner, 1988, P. 27-28)

This demands a high level of intense physical and mental rigour from the practitioner, as Schechner sees theatre as alive, experiential, organic, rather than something that merely replicates or reconstructs reality. His theory offers many practical methods for both student and practitioner to follow, in the form of both things to think about and things to do.

These are inter-disciplinary and encourage an expansionist outlook, which is cross-cultural, as well as making explorative use of the inner life of the performer. This dynamic and multi-faceted approach can be adopted by the full range of performing arts, which the theory so comprehensively reflects. For both actors and directors it creates new space and new possibilities, especially to the experimental and fringe theatre practitioner.