

Martin Welton

Against Inclusivity: a Happy Heresy about Theory and Practice

Should we suffer boredom in the theatre so long as it can be properly theorized? Dare performance stand alone, without hermeneutical crutches? What are the practicalities of practice-based research? And should we be scared of scare quotes? These are some of the questions asked by Martin Welton, tongue not so much in cheek as brazenly challenging some of the new orthodoxies of theatre studies. Martin Welton is a lecturer in Performance in the School of English and Drama at Queen Mary, University of London. His research interests include perception and performance, theatre and performance theory, actor training systems, and the South Indian martial art *kalarippayattu*. He also works as a performer, most recently with Sound and Fury Theatre Company, Emilyn Claid, and with his own company Darwin's Beard.

To be (BORING),
Or not to be (BORING);
That is the question
(Or at least it should be).

BORING: *dull; repetitious; uninteresting.*

SOUNDS LIKE a conference you attended recently, doesn't it?

Unnecessarily cynical perhaps, but I intend to indulge myself and embrace a little negativity. It not only appeals to my sense of humour to do so, but it also has a serious edge. I am often bored in the theatre. Really, excruciatingly bored. Boredom is the result of a lack of challenge. It is not the sole preserve of the theatre, and nor is it the preserve of academics. Both, however, have given me frequent occasion to be bored.

(Hey, great! Academia and theatre do have something in common!)

As I suggest, boredom is the result of a lack of challenge. Challenges require limits, no matter how outrageous or mundane. So far, so cantankerous. There's a cliché taught to every first year theatre studies student (after the one about drama being about conflict), that the only true freedom is within form – the tighter the better. Like all good clichés this one has a habit of always pop-

ping up when you wish you had something better to say. Unfortunately I don't.

Rules are always made to be broken, but without rules all the thrill goes out of vandalism.

Boredom is a lack of purpose, a disconnection between oneself and one's situation. Nothing is more boring than a lack of rules. At the end of the day we all need our lines in the sand, even if all we really want to do is to kick them over in a petulant fit. Lines in the sand separate here from there, that from this. Without them, this is . . . well . . . it's, um. . .

'I only know that I know nothing,' said Socrates, but at least he knew what nothing was. Ignorance is not itself uncertain (it's bliss, after all), but knowledge apparently is. This is nowhere so well illustrated as in the thousands of inverted commas which litter academic papers (my own included). Heaven forbid we might have to make a definitive statement. Is this a 'thing' or a *thing*? Do I 'do' something, or do I *do* it? How can you 'be' something, unless, somewhere along the line, you actually have to *be* it?

Roland Barthes said something about them (the scare quotes), apparently, of which I'm blissfully ignorant.

The trouble with inverted commas (when they're not attributing speech to someone as quotation marks) is that whilst aesthetically

they frame words, epistemically they don't. They blur the edges of a word's meaning, allowing it not quite to be what it originally set out. If this is a 'thing' and not a definitive thing, then hey, look! It can be loads of other stuff as well, and I don't have to draw my definitive explanatory line in the sand after all. Inverted commas make a word inclusive beyond its initial meaning.

'Well,' you might ask, 'what's wrong with being inclusive? What's wrong with offering resistance to dominant modes of discourse or hegemony? Haven't I heard of deconstruction?! Come on, start at the very beginning, what's wrong with inclusivity?'

'Well,' I might reply. 'Nothing, and everything.'

What's right with it is that, in spite of what conservatives might like to tell us, other people are interesting, and can be interested in what we do; there are possibilities beyond the tiny ones we practise now. Indeed, if this is not the case, then I'm practising a fairly revolting form of nihilism addressing you now. Inclusivity means not being narrow-minded.

Part of being inclusive means also actually making an effort to be so. Inclusivity, like all magnanimous gestures, is just that: a gesture. As good theoreticians of performance, we are all hopefully aware that gestures are bounded events in time and space, are performed by individuals, and have no existence outside of the moment in which they are performed. They are, we are often told, theatrical, which sometimes suggests that they are superfluous, but more often implies that they have a grand sweep about them. Why is this?

Well, theatre can do funny things with time and space. At the beginning of *Henry V* the Chorus asks:

May we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?

The answer is, of course, that no, we may not. Something rather different happens. Stanislavsky's 'magic if' comes into play, hand in hand with the cliché about freedom

in form. The more the obvious is stated – that this is theatre, not the real – the more the imagination can take flight.

Now, when we put a word in inverted commas are we in effect placing it within a proscenium, theatricalizing it? Well, doubtless some would like us to think so, but the paradox is that in so doing we are in effect *de-restricting* the word. It's no longer performance, it's 'performance'. When theatre points to its theatricality, it does so by being *exclusive* of the real, the increase of form giving the all-too-real actors something to fight against. Linguistically speaking, placing a word in inverted commas has the opposite effect; it becomes more *inclusive*. When a word or phrase is placed in inverted commas, it allows us a provisional use of it.

So, what does all this have to do with theory and practice, which is what I originally set out to discuss?

Practice goes on quite happily in theatres up and down the country without troubling itself over theory, which, on the other hand, is a dead duck without practice. Theory, if we are not to make the Platonic assumption that it floats around on a cloud in a lovely realm of perfect reason, cannot exist without something to make it *about*. As theoreticians of performance then, we may choose to do directly the practice of performance in order to theorize about it. We may even be tempted to suggest that our practice proves our theory.

The bottom line of performance is that it shouldn't be boring. If this is only provisional, however, if it can be absolved from this bottom line on account of serving theory, then we are left with the practice of 'performance'. Someone at a recent conference suggested that this could mean a whole new artistic genre of 'theoretical performance', or something. However, whilst I may find the fluff about my navel very interesting, I wouldn't ask anyone else to sit through two hours of it.

Performances, I have alleged, are ultimately either boring or not boring. This is not the sole criterion for their existence, but rather dictates whether they are worthwhile or not, since they necessarily take place within an

economy of value. Ultimately, if they are boring, no one will be interested. Who honestly says, 'Lets go out, I want to be bored shitless tonight'? Whether I am bored by a performance is something I can only know at the point of performance. And this is where the difficulty for 'performance' comes in.

If I am to know whether I am bored or not in this instance, I also have to have the additional knowledge that I am attending a performance. It's currently fashionable to see performance everywhere, in schools, in shopping centres, on motorways, in torture chambers – and this is 'performance' studies. I don't particularly want to critique this here, but when flicking through copies of *TDR* or *Performance Research*, I'm reminded of something Bert States has to say about the use of keywords:

One danger is that of reading metaphor as if it were a two-way street, instead of the one-way street it usually is, in which case the vehicle and the tenor can easily become confused. To take an example from John Searle: the metaphor 'Richard is a gorilla' does not work the other way around, where gorilla becomes the tenor (or subject) and Richard the vehicle for telling us what the gorilla is *like*. The metaphor, as Searle says, 'is just about Richard; it is not literally about gorillas at all', only about the 'truth conditions' (Searle's term) under which we perceive gorillas.¹

Now what if we were to say 'Richard is a performance'? Or 'Shopping is a performance'? 'Performance' in this instance is a word which tells us what something is *like* but not what it is. An additional danger is that we forget that the attribution of performance or performativity to people or events is almost always top-down.

This is a slightly bitchy dig at performance studies for its pomposity, but it is meant also to have a serious edge, as it relates to my discussion of theory and practice, boredom and performance. If performance is always to exist within this provisional state of only being 'like' something, and not ever actually *being* something, then we need an additional system to explain its 'like' relationships. This is great news for academics. The posh word for it is hermeneutics: to 'translate, interpret, make intelligible'. Ah, interpretation! I have a

great deal to say on this subject. As it usually leaves me foaming at the mouth and raving I refer you instead to chapters one and four of my recent thesis,² and leave the best word to Susan Sontag:

In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more, it is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings'. It is to turn *the* world into *this* world. ('This world'! As if there were any other.) The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.³

If practice becomes about theory, if performance is unable to stand alone without hermeneutical crutches, we are, I suggest, in danger of becoming very boring indeed, and this danger is particularly acute given the current academic vogue for theory and practice. A performance will be bad research if it is boring, no matter how much theoretical gloss is poured over it in an attempt to make it look pretty. Performances *are* real – isn't this the point of doing them rather than just thinking about them? Once they are recognized as such, as being real, they must also be recognized as taking place within an economy of value, and so literally cannot *afford* to be boring. A crucial question for performance research – perhaps *the* question – may be 'why is a performance boring' or not.

I don't pretend to have any answers for this, and I suspect that, if there are any, they will be far from definitive. And thank goodness for that. If we are to ask why a performance may or may not be boring, however, we are beholden to explore and examine the processes going on within it. This means that we must turn our attentions to the bodily, the sensual, the experiential. All rather messy, but this is perhaps why Sontag goes on to write that: 'in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art'.⁴ An erotics would see no divorce between a thinking brain and a sensual body; it would recognize that experience may well lead to understanding, but that it is an understanding arrived at

through rather than an understanding of experience that we should be interested in. And anyway, isn't a boring erotics an oxymoron?

Writing my PhD, it took me nearly five months to produce the beginnings of a chapter discussing my own practice. This surprised me; not simply because I'm usually pretty good at talking about myself, but because of the tremendous problems the exercise threw up concerning the relation of practice to theory. Theory is (as so many of my friends tell me) simply boring, whereas theatre practice literally cannot *afford* to be boring; and so attempting to yoke it to theory, as I did, is a decidedly risky business.

Let me expand a little about it.

In October 2000, following twenty months of training in *kalaripayattu*, *yoga*, and *t'ai chi ch'uan*, I carried out a research project which sought to use some of the principles inherent in such techniques within a performance context, and which culminated in a performance of Pinter's short play *Monologue*.

The stage directions for *Monologue* are as follows:

*Man alone in a chair.
He refers to another chair, which is empty.*⁵

I have no idea of 'who' this character 'is'. There is an inference to be gained from the script that he is an older man – there are references to 'steam', anachronistic remembrances of the Balls Pond Road, custard, Beethoven, and Notting Hill Gate, or phrases, like 'motorbikist', which stick in the contemporary craw; and all serve to conjure up images of a bygone Britain. First performed by Pinter's friend Henry Woolf in 1973 for BBC Television, *Monologue* suggests memories of the 1950s or early 1960s. The indefinite placing of this period is echoed by the very ambiguity of the character himself. Aside from stereotypes culled from kitchen sink dramas and *Carry On* films (of which the language has an echo), and photographs of my parents from this era, setting the passages of memory within this period offers little help in approaching how to act the part.

Pinter's intent seems to be to absolve the actor of the responsibility of interpretation,

and to place meaning with the spectator. 'She hovered in that light, your slightly sullen, non-committal, deadly dangerous light,' the Man suggests to the empty chair.⁶ What light? Why dangerous? Why sullen? Is it important for the actor to know?

My intent in the project was not to make a value judgement concerning quality of interpretation, but to question the place and role of that interpretation within the actor's process. Subsequently, I was concerned with empirically exploring the epistemological condition of acting performance, and especially what the condition of that knowledge is when the actor's attention is drawn more towards task than character.

Throughout the performance of *Monologue* I remained seated in a chair, my hands on my knees. Paradoxically, this meant that whilst I made very little ostensive movement, it was also very demanding physically. What movement I did make was quite rigorously structured, and largely involved me moving my gaze between seven 'points' around the space, both within and beyond the area occupied by the audience, and within the stage area itself. There were also smaller movements, largely invisible to an observer, involving transfers of weight and pressure between my hands, knees, and feet, and small corresponding movements forwards and backwards by my torso. I also had to breathe and speak. All of my concentration, in the rehearsal, the performance, and in subsequent reflection, was directed towards these physical efforts.

The resultant chapter of my thesis not only describes this process and the reasoning behind it, but also suggests how such a shift in attention may prevent performance from being boring by making acting be about the condition of living – breathing, moving, looking – and so be enlivened.

I'm not the first or only person to have introduced a practical element to their PhD; indeed theory and practice, in the guise of the practice-as-research debate, is big news right now. Conferences are held on it, the Arts and Humanities Research Board promotes (and now actually funds) practice-based research, the Standing Council of University

Drama Departments publishes protocols about it, everyone wants to be doing it.

I've said what I think is potentially very bad about it, but let me also say what I think is potentially good about it. The really great thing about practice-based research is that, if it is compelled not to be boring, if, as performance, it must be publicly accountable, this means it must operate within a public economy which hasn't yet had a sense of value leached from it. Subsequently, the theory which goes along with it will also need to enter itself into a similarly public economy. Perhaps our theses may do something more

than just gather dust or become quotes in other theses.

Notes and References

1. Bert O. States, 'Performance as Metaphor', *Theatre Journal*, XLVIII, No.1 (1996), p. 2.
2. Martin Welton, *Sense and Self: Towards an Embodied Epistemology of Acting*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Surrey, 2002.
3. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967), p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
5. Harold Pinter, *Monologue* (London: Covent Garden Press, 1973), p. 1.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 11.