

**Richard Schechner**

## **QUO VADIS, PERFORMANCE HISTORY?**

Frankly, I'm not much of a historian. That is, the past interests me mostly as grist for my theoretical mill. I am not nostalgic. I don't often trek through ruins—whether of stone, paintings, videotape, paper, library stacks, or my own many notebooks. Of course, I've done the right thing when it comes to this kind of activity. I have climbed the pyramids at Teotihuacan and in Mayan country, sat on stone benches of the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens and in Epidauros (where I was tormented by some really awful productions of ancient Greek dramas), and visited the theatre museums of four continents. On the art-history front, I've gazed at more paintings and sculptures than I can readily organize in memory. But my strongest meetings with "history" have been at the cusp of the past and present—living events always already changing as they are (re)performed. This has been the core of my "anthropology-meets-theatre" work whether among the Yaquis of Arizona, at the Ramlila of Ramnagar in India, in the highlands of Papua–New Guinea, at Off-Off Broadway in New York, in the interior of China, and at very many other events in a wide variety of places.

But, with the exception of Ramlila, where I have done "real historical research," my activities take the form of working with many artists, students, scholars, and spectators. I offer workshops, give lectures, teach courses, direct plays, and exchange ideas with artists and scholars. Why do I consider this historical research? Because each individual and every location is the leading edge of a complexly evolving process. There is a loop: you can't understand what's happening "now" unless you have a historical perspective; and you can't get the history unless you run it up to the present. The assumption here is that there are no "dead cultures" or "really past events." (If there were such, like the tree falling on the desert island, no human mind would perceive them: everything "known" is also impinging on the present moment.) This historical process—like the individual genome—carries within it not only the present but its own past. Again like the genome, not every possible cultural trait is "expressed" in every individual or performed event. But close and sensitive

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participant observation can help one discern what is going on, where the action comes from, what of the past is being engaged, and where the whole packet-of-action may be headed.

That is not to say that I accept an invitation to teach, lecture, lead a performance workshop, or direct a play in order to learn about cultures other than my own and, by reflection, refraction, and divergence also learn about myself and my own cultures (in the plural because no one is singular, culturally). But such learning has been the outcome nevertheless. What I have found out is that, through a steady accretion of information by means of reading, museuming, and attending events added to the thinking on my feet I must do when I direct, teach, or lead workshops, I am able to compare performances/cultures both horizontally across space and vertically in time. This activity of “comparative performance studies” is, at its heart, historical. And it has been the core of my life’s scholarly and theoretical work.

But there are plenty of problems, not only with my own practice but with “performance history” both as a genre of knowledge and as an instrument of instruction.

#### THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEM

If history is “about” this or that specific culture and/or period and its relation to other cultures and periods, then there is no way any individual can really know very much about the whole complex. Nor can any “discipline” taken as a genre of knowledge do much better. There is no possible textbook, course, or even series of courses that can claim to be comprehensive. And each individual is situated within one, two, or even three or more cultures. To this individual, most “other” histories and cultures are not carefully studied; and when they are attended to, it is through the lens of one’s home culture(s) and period(s). Because of the techniques of historiography—immersion in documents, archives, data, behaviors, and so on—all historical accounts are deliciously partial and specific. In fact, the finer the historiography, the more culturally specific in terms not only of object of study but of methodology. Paradoxically, then, all great historical accounts are profoundly parochial.

So where does that leave someone like me—a scholar/artist interested in the “inter,” the processes of mixing, overlapping, hybridizing, multiplying. Well, as I stated earlier, it has meant that my focus is on the present, on the interactions that occur in the studio, rehearsal hall, stage, and classroom. Of course, in the practice of what I do, I learn and “apply” history—of what from and of the past impinges and is operative in the particular present that I am engaged in. But I also recognize, and I try to convey both while at home at New York University or out wherever I travel to, that no present moment is just itself. As Clifford Geertz noted years ago, humans live suspended in webs of significance that we ourselves have spun—and continue to spin. Appropriately, current jargon has it that trying to control the effects of actions is “spin control,” though I expect the metaphor derives more from managing a careening body or vehicle than from delimiting a spider’s patient enterprise. Knowing what “we” are doing—as individuals, as participants in this or that particular society-

culture, or as overarching theoretical constructs—means also trying to learn what we have done, and why. And also learning to understand the metalanguages that we use to construct this understanding (historiography's ongoing dialogue with history).

#### THE ARCHIVE PROBLEM

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, first photography, then film and video, and now digital memory has profoundly affected performance historiography. Before the advent of photography, performance forensics consisted of the analysis of written texts, architectural survivals and ruins, and the visual arts. From plays, letters, eyewitness accounts, archaeological evidence, and so on, scholars were able to form both a physical and a conceptual sense of a past time and its events. There was a lot of room for speculation and creative thought. The interplay between the past and the present was extremely active because so much of the past, in terms of hard evidence, was so partial. But with the advent of increasingly detailed firsthand archiving—I mean film, video, and digital memory—the whole archival enterprise has changed.

Instead of too little, there is too much. Instead of an open net, there is now the record of the event itself. And the weight of these archived performances and other documents is only increasing over time. Digitization means that most probably even a great fire (such as destroyed the library of ancient Alexandria) would not have a great effect. What exists in one place as a “record,” most probably exists in many places. I know that many welcome such a flood of data. But I have mixed feelings about it. I know there is a big jump between data and information and an even larger leap from information to theory. I also shiver a little when I think of all the required hours of viewing replacing hours of actually “going to” performances. I also fear the appeal to “this is what really happened—take a look!” over some wild-eyed theory that can hardly be supported by the evidence. What I am saying is of course “irresponsible” at one level. I am arguing that scholarly creativity needs a tension between what is known/available and what is “sheer speculation”—and that this kind of speculation has often been built on flimsy material evidence. I fear that as the archive grows, and the ways of sorting it and accessing it become more sophisticated, scholarship will become increasingly stale and conservative, a kind of neofeudalism. (I am also aware that, given the wild changes the human species has caused and experienced over the past few centuries, and consequent oncoming social and ecological crises, stasis is not something our children will have to worry about.)

#### THE WHO CAN TEACH “IT” PROBLEM

Let's back up. Let us assume that performance historians agree that the best approach is to teach some broad-based intercultural courses at the introductory level and then to specialize in specific cultures or genres at the more advanced level. Let's assume further that these broad-based introductory courses would give genuine attention to African, Asian, Latin American, Micronesian, and Western performance traditions. These traditions would

include the arts as such but also various kinds of rituals, sports, and popular entertainments. And let's assume that to understand these "high-level" performances, students would also have to know something about the performances in/of everyday life in a variety of cultures.

The problems of such a utopian proposition are several. First, to do justice to this broad range of performances would take at least four terms, and even then the result would be a survey. The danger would be that these courses would amount to a kind of performance cultural tourism; or a repeat in a twenty-first-century mode of the kind of *Golden Bough* approach of Sir James Frazer of the nineteenth century—with all the implications of imperialism intact. Second, even assuming that a curriculum could be imagined that would be appropriate, who could teach such a range of courses? Probably a team of area and period experts with only the students achieving comprehensivity. Third, even if such a team could be assembled, would this kind of comparative world-performance set of courses be popular? What purpose would such a set of courses serve?

I favor something more pointed. Certainly we need more courses in the general curriculum dealing with specific genres and periods. We need to see Western theatre and performance in a much more global perspective. I have offered several comparative courses such as "Performances of Great Magnitude" or "Praxis, Rasa, Chi, Hana" that aggressively cross genre, historical, and cultural lines. In "Performances of Great Magnitude" we compared several large-scale performances, such as the Yaqui six-week Easter drama, the Ramlila of Ramnagar, Christo's drapings, the Olympics, and so on. In "Praxis, . . .," Greek, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese performance theories were compared to each other. Thus, I feel, we need many more courses in specific performance genres from a wide variety of cultures; and we need courses comparing the performances and performance theories of several cultures.

#### ONWARDS TO . . . WHERE?

Of the future, very little can be known—except that it will take place; that every present once was a future and that all futures will, someday, be past. In other words, one must assume a linear, diachronic process in order even to propose that there is such a thing as a future. A strictly Buddhist perspective would deny this process, arguing that past and future are illusory distractions—and that dwelling within these illusions is destructive of happiness. My Buddhist part agrees with that, while my Jewish part insists that the past always operates on the present. My "restored behavior" part counters that the future determines the past—that in rehearsing today I need to construct a yesterday that makes the tomorrow I desire appear inevitable. How do I reconcile these three Schechners? Life and experience are not checkbooks in need of monthly reconciling. And with that, abruptly, I stop because I do not know how to end.