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CRITICAL STAGES
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COUNTERBALANCING THE PENDULUM EFFECT: POLITICS AND THE DISCOURSE OF POST-9/11 THEATRE

If a model haunts my inauguration of "Critical Stages," then it is the "Forum on Theatre and Tragedy in the Wake of September 11, 2001" that David Román commissioned for the March 2002 issue of *Theatre Journal.* Yet there would be little room in that important historical document for what I have to say here. Though I greatly admire Román for commissioning that forum and am still profoundly moved by the thoughts of its twenty-seven contributors, I must ask how much more significant that forum would have been had the original commission focused on "Theatre and Politics" rather than "Theatre and Tragedy." Would Diana Taylor's suggestion that the events of 9/11 have given us "a different kind of tragedy"[1] have been a suggestion that 9/11 has given us a different kind of political theatre? What is that theatre? Is it even progressive? At the very least, a more direct focus on theatre and politics in the forum might have constituted a reply to the debate among theatre practitioners (particularly those in the United States) about the role of theatre in the politics of a post-9/11 world. As Marvin Carlson has pointed out, those debates initially centered on whether, in

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one fell swoop, historical forces had cowed political theatre into voluntary silence if not obsolescence. Five years later, what he describes as a retreat "from any consideration of an engaged theatre"—a retreat that ran the gamut from the "commercial theatre of Broadway" to "New York's most experimental and uncommercial ventures"—casts a shadow out of which we have yet to emerge.[2]

The path out of that shadow necessitates asking more than what kind of tragedy or what kind of political theatre 9/11 has given us. It necessitates asking what kind of discourse 9/11 has left us with which to talk about that theatre. Granted, these questions are the product of my own work on modern and contemporary political theatre and performance, and they are informed by studies like Baz Kershaw's *The Radical in Performance* and Mike Sell's *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*, both of which advocate a sustained critical examination of the terms of our own criticism.[3] I am particularly interested in the way that 9/11 has effected a de facto retreat from the central assertion of Kershaw's book: that "'radical performance' might usefully replace 'political theatre'" because at a conceptual level it opens rather than narrows the potential for "creative radicalism" (17–18). I would suggest that 9/11 has pushed the discourse of our discipline back toward a conventional, indeed reactionary, understanding of the interrelation of politics, theatre, and performance.

The framing of the initial scholarly responses to 9/11 within the aesthetics of tragedy rather than of politics—a frame that Román has preserved in his more recent characterization of 9/11 as "tragic history"—is indicative of this retreat. On one hand, there is the privileged position that Román's book *Performance in America* gives to the immediate responses to 9/11: an oddly conservative gesture that discourages critical retrospection by encouraging us to "valorize what is already in the world rather than what will some day be introduced."[4] On the other hand, there is the discomfort that Elin Diamond expresses about Román's forum when she argues "that the 'tragic' stories recycled again and again from September 11, no less than tragedy itself, dull our critical receptors and prevent historical complexity—and our complexity in it—from emerging."[5] Echoing Marx and Brecht, Diamond looks for a critical perspective with which she can encourage a world not yet introduced, and she does so by illuminating the ideological underpinnings of what we think we know and how we know it.

Diamond recognizes that "tragedy" is an ideological concept that always already carries the baggage of uncritical, positivistic notions of fate and fact. I see in that recognition an admirable, forward-looking political sensibility that she shares with Jill Dolan, who more recently opened *Utopia in Performance* with an acknowledgment that, although the book was "written in what has become the long moment after September 11," she still finds reason to look to theatre for an articulation of her "own hopes for an otherwise intangible future."[6] Yet the issue here has less to do with a future world that "will some day be introduced" than it does with a present (or even a past) world still not introduced because its ideological entanglements have yet to be inspected. In this respect, while I certainly agree with Román that "a stronger engagement with the present moment can only enhance the futures that the contemporary will produce,"[7] future critical retrospection may very well spot what those in the present moment cannot see.

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That is, in fact, what theatre historians do, and those who do it well tend to pinpoint the ideological imperatives governing the models with which we construct and understand what ultimately passes for present and past historical fact.

There is nothing particularly profound or lofty in this observation. A cultivated attentiveness to the ideological in our constructions of history is as much a cornerstone of political theatre as it is of theatre historiography more generally. Indeed, the idea that history is an ideological construction is so established among historians that there is little need to rehearse the arguments. A far more interesting issue for the work that we as theatre historians do centers around the chasm separating, on one hand, an abstract acknowledgment of the inseparability of ideology and historiography and, on the other, a practical explication of that inseparability for our students and for each other.

Without losing sight of the "critical stages" of political theatre in the shadow of 9/11, I want to focus on the arduous task that we as scholars face in negotiating our way beyond an abstract acknowledgment of the ideological into significant, site-specific excavations of its currency in the public sphere and in our own institutional discourses. Seething just below my opposition between the abstract and the excavated is a foundational distrust of the abstract and of the smug complacency that it facilitates (that peculiar self-congratulatory sense of always already being on the progressive side of an issue or situation in advance of its arrival).[8] My distrust of the abstract is a distrust of the "convert" theory of progressive politics: a distrust of the assumption that one need not constantly renegotiate the terms with which to excavate the ideological in the theatres we study, in the modes of performances we champion, and in the histories we write. If nothing else, I would advocate an attitude of permanent negotiation and renegotiation of the terms with which we ferret out the ideologies that harbor the oppressive specters of racism, sexism, homophobia, and cultural chauvinism that continue to haunt our personal interactions, our institutional structures, and our government's national and foreign policies.

That (re)negotiation is an arduous task because it is provisional and ephemeral in its effects and in its ability to push against the gravitational pull of mainstream assumptions about history, culture, society, and politics. It is for this reason that attention to the emergent field of post-9/11 theatre and drama is all the more vital. As teachers, scholars, and intellectuals, we work against "the pendulum effect," by which I mean that we labor against processes of normative socialization and recuperation that never stop working against us because they work from within us. Not only does the social pendulum pull all of us back to unexpected reaffirmations of conventional political and social mores, but it also pulls progressive political and cultural expressions toward the center, absorbing and transforming them into empty slogans or, worse, into the languages of their opposite. Unfortunately, that pull is strongest in times of crisis when, ironically, the need for a counterbalance to the pendulum effect is greatest.

In this long moment after September 11, I find evidence of that pendulum swing even in acclaimed works of political theatre like David Hare's *Stuff Happens*, which reconstructs the Bush administration's path to war with Iraq. In this respect, I would recommend that we go a bit beyond Janelle Reinelt's

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question of whether "Hare's play manages to portray anything really new."[9] We should question what Hare's play accomplishes by framing its subject matter in decidedly conventional and conservative theatrical terms. It is worth asking, moreover, what the state of radical performance or of "creative radicalism" is when scholars talk more about Hare's piece of docudrama than of the events of 15 February 2003, which the play mentions in passing. Of all the things that 9/11 has given us—the subsequent wars, the secret prisons, the legacy of torture, the erosion of civil rights—the chain of events set loose that day also gave us the single largest instance of radical performance in the history of modern civilization: the coordinated, worldwide antiwar protests of 15 February 2003. This event included approximately ten million participants in roughly eight hundred cities. Ironically, though this event eclipses any of those cataloged in Jan Cohen-Cruz's *Radical Street Performance* (Routledge, 1998), the protest came and went and now amounts to little more than a forgotten event elided by the carnage it did not stop. What is the state of radical performance when modern history's single largest instance of theatre in the streets passes into obscurity with hardly so much as a whimper? Arguably, the contrast between this obscured event and the more traditional theatrical forms governing *Stuff Happens* is indicative of a profound retreat from the radical into the conventional, from a theatre that would change the streets (and the world) into a theatre that is resigned to preach to the converted what, for Reinelt, "is already available through . . . months of news analysis and television coverage" (305).

It is not a matter of coincidence that I raise these concerns in a discussion of post-9/11 theatre and drama, for much of what I have to say about negotiating the chasm separating an abstract acknowledgment of ideology and a critical excavation of it is directly related to one of the central documents on politics and theatre generated since 9/11: Harold Pinter's 2005 Nobel Lecture. Pinter's lecture looms large over my thoughts about scholarship and the arts. For some time now, I have been contemplating whether there are feasible parallels to be found for us as scholars in the operative distinction that Pinter draws in his lecture between his responsibilities as an artist/writer and his responsibilities as a citizen.

As the occasion of the Nobel Lecture demands, Pinter opens his address with a moment of self-reflection. Pinter recalls that in 1958 he had argued, "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false." He maintains that these comments "still apply to the exploration of reality through art." Yet though he says that *as a writer* he still stands by these comments, he also states that *as a citizen* today he cannot. The short of his comments is that "Truth in drama is forever elusive." In drama, Pinter argues, we "stumble upon the truth in the dark," only then to discover that there are many truths that, while existing simultaneously, are not necessarily reconcilable. Most important, in drama, he argues, "Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost."[10] I want to return shortly to this image of truth in hand that slips through and is lost, since my own comments about absorption and recuperation are closely connected

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with it. Yet understanding Pinter's image and its relevance first necessitates some exploration of the binary opposition with which he frames it.

Pinter draws a clear line between his understanding of truth as an artist and his understanding of truth as a citizen. If Pinter understands his role as an artist to be that of illuminating the elusiveness of truth vis-à-vis an artistic search for it, he sees his role as a citizen, by contrast, as that of "speaking truth to power"[11] and of expecting clear answers to the questions, "What is true? What is false?" The immediate point of reference for such expectations in Pinter's lecture is unmistakably the United States. Indeed, historians will remember this dichotomy if only because it provided Pinter with a rhetorical strategy for using his Nobel Lecture to proclaim before the world,

> The invasion of Iraq was a bandit act, an act of blatant state terrorism, demonstrating absolute contempt for the concept of international law. The invasion was an arbitrary military action inspired by a series of lies upon lies and gross manipulation of the media and therefore of the public.

One can debate whether these comments constitute an assertion of truth or an accusation issued from one ideological camp against another. But I am not really certain that the two are mutually exclusive, and in large part that is why, despite my basic agreement with Pinter's assertion, I am troubled by his clean distinction between the artist and the citizen.

As a scholar, teacher, and intellectual, I cannot quite find my place in that distinction. In part, this may be because of Pinter's categories. By his own description, he is an artist/writer and he is a citizen. Not being an artist myself, I am left with a question: What is the role of the critic, theorist, and historian in the opposition that Pinter builds between the artist and the citizen? While it may be tempting to echo Pinter by saying that I am a scholar and a citizen, my role as a citizen is at the very least informed by, if not inseparable from, my being a scholar, teacher, and intellectual. As a citizen who is not "also" but who is simultaneously an activist scholar, I am less interested in the "exploration of reality through art" or in an aesthetic illumination of the elusiveness of "truth" as ends in themselves than I am in a vigilant scrutiny of the sociopolitical and ideological implications that artistic explorations have for my understanding of the public sphere. As a citizen-scholar, I am interested in the political ramifications of artworks that illuminate where there are "no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false." My own sense is that the public sphere today is plagued by hard distinctions between true and false. Much of my work as a teacher involves encouraging my students to look beyond such ready distinctions, and my interest in post-9/11 theatre and drama is deeply linked with that work. My sense as a citizen is that political shifts are possible only when the waters feeding those clear distinctions are muddied. I look for art that stirs up the dirt—even though the pull of the mainstream tends to clear those waters.

This search is motivated by an understanding that political performance, theatre, and drama reveal unobserved ideological undercurrents in what

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circulates as received truth—a lesson I learned in part by reading Pinter's plays. This puts me at odds with the Pinter of the Nobel Lecture, and in particular with any distinction between the artist and the citizen that reduces the "exploration of reality through art" to an abstract, academic, and philosophical exercise that must be abandoned in order to address power. Although such distinctions would speak truth to power in a language that power understands, the partition of the artist from the citizen into separate categories is a Faustian bargain. To speak to power on its own terms is to enter into, indeed is to perpetuate, the very discourse and ideology that sustains power in the first place. It is to move toward containment under the guise of dissent. Indeed, I would suggest that Pinter pays a heavy enough price for his reliance on this distinction between the writer/artist and the citizen that the gains quickly slip through his fingers and are lost.

Notwithstanding Pinter's courageous use of his lecture as a platform, the price of his bitter indictment of American foreign policy is a pendulum swing back into a conventional distinction between art and politics—a distinction that by his own characterization only allows for political theatre in which "Sermonising has to be avoided at all cost" and "Objectivity is essential," and an author's political tendentiousness is taboo. Perhaps it suffices to note that these criteria erase at least a century's worth of political theatre and ignore the fact that the separation of art and politics has consistently served the most reactionary elements of Western society. But what are we to make of this peculiar mix of progressive political rhetoric and a conventional and conservative notions of art and politics?

My long-standing interest in experimental theatre and performance is largely tied to a more general articulation of this same question. It is not so much that I am interested in being challenged by post-9/11 theatres to think in new and unconventional ways; rather, I look to them and others as a potential source of insight into the ways that my current thinking may have slipped into an affirmation of what I thought it opposed. I see the practice of criticism, theory, and theatre history to be nothing less than the search for these insights.

ENDNOTES

1. Taylor, in David Román, ed., "A Forum on Theatre and Tragedy in the Wake of September 11, 2001," *Theatre Journal* 54.1 (2002): 95–138, at 96.

2. Carlson, "9/11, Afghanistan, and Iraq: The Response of the New York Theatre," *Theatre Survey* 45.1 (2004): 3–17, at 5.

3. Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999); and Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005). In his book, Kershaw is more concerned with revitalizing the concept of the radical by shifting the contexts in which it is applied, whereas Sell is advocating a full-scale reconsideration of the inherent recuperative tendencies in critical discourses about radical vanguard performance.

4. Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 258.

5. Diamond, in "Forum on Theatre and Tragedy," at 137.

6. Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 3.

7. Román, *Performance in America*, 259.

8. In no way is this distrust of the abstract a coded distrust of critical theory, the rigorous application of which I would argue is still largely indispensable to a significant excavation of the ideological cast in the historiographies that we practice and the histories that we receive.

9. Reinelt, Review of *Stuff Happens* by David Hare, dir. Nick Hytner. Royal National Theatre (Olivier), 1 September 2004. *Theatre Journal* 57.2 (2005): 303–6, at 305.

10. Harold Pinter, "Art, Truth, & Politics," 7 December 2005. Available online at [*nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html*] (accessed 23 October 2006). (PDF versions in four languages are also available there for download.)

11. The phrase "speak truth to power" dates back to the 1950s and was used as part of a discourse of opposition to the assumptions of cold-war politics. My use of the phrase in this context is inspired by Mohamed ElBaradei's Nobel Lecture upon receiving the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize. In using the expression in his lecture [available online at [*nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2005/elbaradei-lecture-en.html*] (accessed 16 January 2007)], ElBaradei was highlighting the International Atomic Energy Agency's criticism of the Bush administration's justifications for going to war with Iraq.