Julian Meyrick

The Limits of Theory: Academic versus Professional Understanding of Theatre Problems

The exponential growth of 'theoretical' approaches to theatre in the last twenty years has given rise to a vast body of literature and a swag of highly influential 'command metaphors'. In this article, Julian Meyrick describes and analyzes the rise of such theories, contrasting academic understanding of theatre with the more experiential problem-solving of the profession. He argues that sophisticated 'theoretical' approaches to the theatre too often preclude or traduce the thinking of artists themselves, presenting practical concerns as epiphenomenal or untutored. This, in turn, points to important short-circuits in some academic takes on theatre which need modifying if 'theory' and 'practice' are once again to feed into each other in a meaningful way. Julian Meyrick Is currently an Associate Director and Literary Adviser at Melbourne Theatre Company, and an Honorary Associate with the Drama Program, La Trobe University. His production for the Melbourne Workers' Theatre, *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?* attracted numerous awards, and toured widely in Australia. He has published in the areas of arts policy, the theory/practice nexus, and post-1945 Australian theatre. His book on Sydney's Nimrod Theatre, *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave* was published by Currency Press in 2002.

IN *Sociology Theory: What Went Wrong?* Nicos Mouzelis examines the problems subdisciplinary de-differentiation has wrought on the post-Marxist/post-functionalist sociological landscape, citing Louis Althusser's distinction between two kinds of statements, 'Generalities Type II' and 'Generalities Type III'.[1] His aim is to show that Althusser is correct in differentiating between

theory as a set of interrelated substantive statements trying to tell us something new . . . about the world, which statements can be tentatively disproved by empirical investigation [Gen. II]; and . . . theory as a set of tools that simply facilitate, or prepare the ground for, the construction of substantive theory [Gen. III].

Mouzelis criticizes approaches which fight shy of the distinction (ethnomethodology and rational choice) or fail to adhere to it altogether (certain post-structuralists) and makes a case for reintegrating theory and empirical research in an appropriately structured, meta-sociological framework. Althusser's categories are useful, too, for those wanting to assess the recent 'theoretical turn' in theatre studies,

especially those, such as Susan Melrose in NTQ57, concerned with the resulting 'theory-practice fit'.[2]

In the context of postgraduate performance studies, Melrose notes that

the extent that a given critical discourse may be experienced as either *im*-pertinent or hostile to certain practical and aesthetic aspirations in the student-practitioner her or himself, the attempt to overlay practical aspirations and evaluative mechanisms with critical discourses may have a disempowering effect.

In Althusserian terms, the danger is that Gen. III statements will subsume Gen. II ones. Mouzelis argues for their complementarity, even equivalence.[3] But are there features of Gen. III thinking which promote rhetorical grandstanding, with the result that the theory stands out as decontextualized or attenuated while the substantive problem – the point of the approach to begin with – recedes beneath the horizon of intellectual visibility?

In this paper I shall be discussing the impact of contemporary theatre theory on the general understanding of theatre as a cultural

form and an industrial practice. I shall sketch the 'theoretical turn' the study of theatre has taken in recent years, and contrast this with the approach taken by those producing the work the academics scrutinize: theatre practitioners themselves.

The Rise and Rise of Theatre Theory

In so doing, I shall be questioning a number of assumptions behind its recent deployment. The concern here is less with individual theorists than with the consequences of what Sue-Ellen Case calls 'the radical move to theory in the two decades of the 1970s and 1980s'[4] – a move which, despite concerns for ethnographic rectitude, often fails to allow for the 'thick' nature of theatre practice.

Of course there are problems in referring to a homogenized 'theory' to facilitate the outline of a general argument. There is no approach so theoretical that it is not historically or critically contextualized to some extent. The issue remains whether such contextualization is aided by the theoretical approach adopted – is it pertinent to the *question* being asked? While we may concur with Melrose that 'theory' is not itself 'the problem', it is nevertheless important to locate this discursive explosion within its own material context – the academy – and to recognize that this brings with it unique gravitational pressures.[5]

There is nothing natural about academic theorizing. It is entirely composed, and behind its composition lie rules of discursive engagement which are binding and authoritative. To situate oneself outside the rules is to court not revolution but incoherence. Transgressions of a suitably congruent kind provide new ways of speaking for marginalized voices. Yet the more complicated the rules become, the more the issue of intelligibility comes under pressure. When does transgression taper into eccentricity? When does a set of rules become so involuted that it squashes the very dialogue it is formulated to promote?

The impressionistic nature of this paper is predicated upon its concern with just these aspects of theatre theory – ones in which impressions count. For there is now a danger that the continued production of theoretical discourse in its current mode will give rise to a disillusionment with what it has to offer, a post-theory exhaustion. By this is meant a scholastic environment which has reached a point of conceptual saturation: the foundational claims of grand-narrative schemata have for some time now been discredited; the more qualified truth-claims of local approaches succeed each other at an increasing rate; humanities scholarship is awash with new terminologies, hybrid disciplines, and formal systems.

However, this multiplicity leads not to an opening up of critical energies but to thermal inversion, to the collapse of core values by the accreted weight of fragmented and minor discourses. Unless theatre theorists take it upon themselves to limit their claims to a supra-empirical knowledge they risk retreat into what Australian cultural policy analyst Stuart Cunningham calls an 'abstrusely formulated critical idealism' (p. 9), and further estrangement from actual practice.[6]

The term 'theatre theory' covers four types of statement. First, there are published comments on the practical craft of theatre itself. These are usually presented in a schematic fashion and are normative and axiomatic. They tell the reader what he or she *ought* to do in any given situation, an approach typical of most theatre manuals. Second, there are articles and books by theatre practitioners, most particularly by acknowledged leading artists in the field. Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*[7] is the model for this sort of publication in its mix of know-how, personal anecdote, and cultural analysis. The tone is again geared to practice, the terms, examples, and arguments conforming to the profession's understanding of what theatre is.

Not so the third kind of theory, which comprises statements about theatre by those who are not involved in it as practitioners, or who do not cite their practical experience as a key to their understanding – i.e., university scholars. These publications draw heavily, if not exclusively, from the norms of academic discourses which are a mix of critical and pedagogical approaches to discrete theatre

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areas. Finally, there is what the academy solemnly calls 'theory', that vast body of interdisciplinary scholarship which regularly fashions new analytical strategies referred to under generic rubrics (structuralism, post-structuralism, cultural materialism, post-colonialism, and so on).

The four categories are not exclusive; in fact, they blend into each other.[8] But the last twenty years have seen a shift in the balance of power from the first and second categories towards the third and fourth – from the theory of practice to the practice of theory. Prior to the late 1970s, theatre theory meant theories *of* theatre and the leaders of the field were its 'star' practitioners. Since then theatre theory has largely come to mean theories *about* theatre, those publishing in this area being mainly academics or practitioners with recognized academic personae.

The Quest for a Causal Model

The shift in the approach of the academy to theatre theory corresponds to, but does not reflect, the shift in theatre production from modernism to post-modernism. As such it is the subject of many books and articles whose arguments are beyond my present scope. However, most contemporary theoretical approaches deploy a 'broad spectrum' notion of culture which reflects the influence of the behavioural and social sciences. It is these disciplines – most particularly sociology and social theory – which in the early twentieth century reconfigured the term culture to include not (only) the pursuit of cultural forms by practising artists but an array of disparate social activities all of which can be seen as having a symbolic rather than strictly instrumental value (and there are few activities which cannot be construed as 'cultural' in this sense).[9]

The sociologizing of high culture provided twentieth-century theatre with its most enduring trope: the quest for a causal dramatic model. The switch from a concern with 'the rules' of drama to a search for its originary structure marks a transition from a Renaissance understanding of theatre to a modern one, and a new intensity in theatre theory's

locomotive power. For writers like Wagner, Appia, Craig, Stanislavsky, and Artaud the history of theatre was an *arche,* a search for a time when the stage and the society around it were perfectly united in form and content. The historical timing of this union may have been hotly disputed but it was agreed that the immediate task was one of recovery and restoration.

The journey began with a search for on-stage truth which took the pilgrim through a maze of forms which succeeded each other like European monarchs: 'naturalism', 'dadaism', 'expressionism', 'epic theatre', etc. Each style was first heralded as a way forward – which was also a way back – and then condemned as a dead end. Raymond Williams was right to identify the passion for truth which imbricates all these aesthetics in a shared 'structure of feeling'.[10] But he overlooked the way the notion of 'truth' was constructed prior to its stage expression – as something ever-beckoning, always elusive. Modernist theatre searches but never finds.

Finally, at the edge of the ocean of its own self-discovery, it sheds its styles, its forms, entirely and steps forward into its own dissolution: into a dimension mystically referred to as 'beyond theatre'. This indeed is where theatre theory ends up by the 1970s – looking blankly into a space which is essentially uncharacterized but for which it continues to make idealized claims. An end that is also a beginning that is also an end: stasis; paralysis; silence.[11]

Into this silence – the silence of theories *of* theatre – academic discourse has poured its torrent of words – words of theories *about* theatre – a torrent that is at once a compensation, a critique, and a revenge. In doing so, it has been quick to ferret out the assumptions of modernist theorists and show the biases motivating their search for universal dramatic truth. Modernist theatre theory took its force and singularity from broader social theory.[12] The interpretation of artistic activities in light of deeper, structural goals overcame a division between art and the world which the rapid economic development of the nineteenth century seemed to entrench. Art was no longer the hankering

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after something 'higher', distant, and removed, but the pursuit of something central, organic, and immediate: a way to resuscitate the values of *Gemeinschaft* that modern life was alienating.

The construction of a 'broad spectrum' notion of culture was thus not a neutral scholastic act. Nor did the resulting socio-aesthetic theory contribute a set of content-less analytical categories. At the heart of modernist theatre's self-identity lay a crypto-morphic link with the world which boosted the significance of its own activities and painted them in shades of great moral seriousness. This in turn opened a gateway to new academic understandings of culture. What had been given to theatre by the social sciences could be given back by artists offering up their work as evidence of a broader *mentalité.*

The sociologizing of culture became, after the Second World War, the enculturation of social analysis. Which brings us rapidly up to the present, where theatre practitioners, to their surprise and irritation, have found many of their metaphors and approaches taken over by academic scholars, looking at a world through a frame that claims to be new but is in fact a familiar set of spectacles with the lenses reversed.

An Example of 'Practical Theorizing'

who's afraid of the working class?
by Andrew Bovell, Patricia Cornelius,
Melissa Reeves, and Christos Tsiolkas

Granted that this historical sketch is at best an outline, at worst a caricature, nevertheless one may agree that the expansion of academic theory cannot be regarded simply as a spontaneous growth in the general understanding of theatre. When the academy scrutinizes theatre, one industry instructs another. This isn't meant in a naive sense. Theatre practice has its own forms of power with which to deflect the instruments of critique (largely by not reading them, I'm inclined to think). But the rules of discursive engagement establish a power claim, not just an orbit of knowledge. The theory of practice and the practice of theory are radically dissimilar grids of force. When they lock together it is in the form of a struggle that is institutional as much as epistemological. Knowledge is not for knowing, Foucault observed, it is for *cutting*.[13] The question then is: who is being sliced and who is wielding the knife?

I will now give an example of what might be called 'practical theorizing' drawn from my own experience as a theatre director.[14] The account is both a story and a problem, which is typical of theatre practice where cultural issues cannot be studied in isolation or in the abstract. Instead, they are inextricably enmeshed in wider, on-going ethical, political, and professional concerns.

In 1997 I was hired by the Melbourne Workers' Theatre to oversee a commission for the company's ten-year anniversary – one which involved four writers collaborating on four separate but interlinked play texts. For those unfamiliar with the company, it is, as its name suggests, explicitly left politically, addressing its work to minority, non-middle class audiences in shows which are frequently issue-based and employ a broad range of cultural workers whose commitment to their craft matches their enthusiasm for the company's social brief.[15]

I was interviewed and chosen by the writers themselves, and by the time I was integrated into the creative team the project's key values had been established. These included an emphasis on creative collaboration, the employment of artists from non-English speaking backgrounds, and a certain kind of emotional truth in the on-stage performances. The last of these reflected the downbeat, darkly realistic nature of the writing. The final production, titled *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*, comprised eighteen scenes involving nineteen characters in a range of socially extreme situations.[16]

The turning away from the upbeat and affirmative was a significant break for the company, much of whose past work reflects the 'celebrational' mood dominant in community theatre in Australia during the 1980s. As such, it was not a decision taken lightly by the creative team, three of whom were founder-members of the company.

Why take the risk? The reason is that for a company trying to address the dilemmas of the society around it, an affirmative aesthetic in the late 1990s would have been entirely inappropriate. The depredations of successive conservative governments had brought the costly side-effects typical of economic rationalist policies: high unemployment, corporate excess, a widening gap between rich and poor, and a niggardly, compassionless attitude to welfare and social services.

The writers decided, despite a brief to the contrary, that they would reflect the facts of social disintegration rather than any putative 'resistance' for which little evidence was presenting itself. As the year-long workshop period got under way, the question raised itself of how far it was legitimate to go in the representation of threshold situations. This matter was discussed by the creative team in a consciously theoretical way. Were we right to be doing what we were doing? What were the grounds to which we could appeal to guide and judge our efforts?

Issues of Cultural Representation

One scene in particular was provoking continual debate. The writer Christos Tsiolkas[17] chose as the central figure for his play, *Suit*, the character of Jamie Parker, an Indigenous Australian business executive. In the final production, which interwove the four writers' plays together, Jamie appears in three widely interspersed scenes. In the first he verbally abuses a prostitute. In the second he is himself verbally abused by a country farmer. In the third he has a conversation about God with a Greek woman grieving for her missing son. By the end of the third scene we know a lot more about Jamie and are becoming sympathetic towards him. At the start we know nothing save what he appears to be immediately doing – intimidating and humiliating a white woman in an explicitly racial way. Consequently he comes across as aggressive, angry, and cruel. It was with this scene, *Suit I*, that the other writers and myself were most concerned.

The process of 'practical theorizing' began with a reading of the scene by the creative team and a discussion about cultural representation and racial stereotyping. The main argument examined was that theatre deals in general types and that Jamie could be read as a racial slur or else lend support to a widely held societal prejudice that all Indigenous Australian men were violent and sexist. One writer raised the example of the Aboriginal Film Development Unit, which in the mid-1990s advocated a ban on the representation of Indigenous characters by any writer not themselves Indigenous. In view of this, I contacted Christos to ask if he was willing to consider a substitute scene. He was happy to do so. But as the substitute scene, typically for Christos, was even more confrontational than the original, the creative team went back to agonizing about *Suit I*.

At this point the discussion stalled. Many of the arguments regarding cultural representation had been raised, but it wasn't clear who had the authority to take the next step or indeed what the next step was. By coincidence, I had started teaching a theatre theory course for the Drama Department at La Trobe University, and the students and myself were plugging away at the usual theoretical paradigms and approaches. On a day when I felt more than usually at a loss about Jamie, I came into class and said, 'Well, we have been studying different theatre theories for half a semester; here is a theoretical problem; can we solve it?'

The response from the students was instructive. First, they asked questions relating to the commissioning and development of the plays themselves. Next, they wanted to know about the specific nature of its future production. Film, television, and theatre all deal in cultural representations, but the processes of audience involvement are different in each. Theatre spectators, provided they don't walk out, give their undivided attention to the events in front of them, unlike the typical television viewer. Then again, the students wanted to know, what *kind* of audience would see the play? Would they be likely to hold the prejudices we were afraid *Suit I* might inflame?

All these were specific questions, and though they were couched in a theoretical

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way the contextual issues could not be separated from the substantive problem without losing the sense of urgency and focus the nature of the decision to be taken demanded. Finally, the students offered this advice: ask the actor we hoped to cast for his opinion. Unless an Indigenous actor agreed to portray Jamie Parker, then the issue of whether or not to do *Suit I* was, they said non-ironically, largely academic. If an actor *did* agree to do the part, then this would involve myself, Christos, and the writers in another discussion about racial stereotyping which would be qualitatively different from the previous one because the actor would be putting himself on the line directly. Nor would the personal cost of portraying Jamie be a one-off payment either, as in film, but would have to be repeated night after night, with the feedback from successive performances thenceforward becoming part of the price paid.

Notice that not only is the theoretical thinking here problem-centred but it is also procedural. No one individual in the creative process has a monopoly say in the outcome of a particular artistic decision. Productions have an experiential, holistic impact on the audiences who watch them; but they are created in a partial, collaborative, step-by-step way. Every problem which crops up has to be referred to all the artists involved in its solution at every stage. There is no position from which to deliver an absolute critical assessment of a show's potential meaning.

In the event, *Suit I* had the opposite effect from the one the creative team feared. Far from being seen as a stereotype, Jamie Parker was 'read' as a realistic portrayal of deeply felt political contradictions in contemporary Australian society. The four scenes of *Suit* were published in *Black Cockatoo*, and though some members of our audience may have had private doubts about the intent of its central character, on the whole Indigenous spectators went out of their way to show their support for the writing and the values behind it.

But while *Suit I* played an important role in the narrative, its enactment was always fraught. The two actors who portrayed Jamie – Glenn Shea and later Tony Briggs – and the one playing Claire the prostitute, Eugenia Fragos, were all articulate, capable professionals who asked much the same questions as the La Trobe students. Still, given the writing's insistence on direct, emotional truth, the scene was hard to stage. We found ways to defuse its psychic violence, but in the end *Suit I* had a marked physical effect on all those involved.

No theoretical problem is solved without penalty. Broadly speaking we thought it was 'worth it'. But this assessment was always and only provisional. What for academic theorists is doubt and ambiguity, for practising artists is dilemma and anguish. Looking back on the decision to include *Suit I,* I would not defend it absolutely. A risk we took paid off. Different circumstances might see different results. As audience expectations change, so does the meaning attributable to successive stage performances. Jamie's presence on stage was partly justified, to my mind, because his behaviour was so shocking. Should the character ever provoke less than deep concern, then the whole question of what culturally he represented would have to be re-engaged.

Six Aspects of Current Theatre Theory

Six characteristics of contemporary theatre theory which threaten to promulgate root confusions are listed below. They are couched in general terms and should be familiar to anyone teaching or publishing in the area. Naturally I am not suggesting that all theatre theory evinces these traits. Nor am I saying that scholars can get by with no theoretical approach at all. As Gerald Rabkin stated in a key article for *Performing Arts Journal* back in 1983, 'to reject theory is to accept the theory you have been handed'.[18]

However, the de-differentiation which has in recent years invigorated (or infected) contemporary scholarship in the humanities has led to a polyglot theorizing without avowed basic paradigms or ideological loyalties. Given this, it is vital to identify trends in the newly deregulated theory climate which might promote, albeit unconsciously, important lacunae.[19] Theatre theory is not a tool but a machine; the inclination of its mechan-

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ism is crucial to how the empirical referent – i.e., theatre practice – is to be constructed and criticized.

i. *The use of 'technical terms', Latinate or scientific, often taken out of the context of their original application.*

At its worst this distorts the substantive ground being addressed, proliferating neologisms and pseudo-categories. Accusations of both are made in reference to Lyotard, Derrida, Irigaray, Kristeva, Lacan, and Bourdieu by John Weightman in his overview of the notorious 'Sokal Controversy'.[20] The criticisms of Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont on the misuse of scientific terms charge contemporary theorists with obscurantism. It isn't necessary to agree with Weightman's conclusion that such writers belong to an anti-rational tradition to concur that the problem 'is not simply that [those] incriminated play fast and loose with mathematics and scientific theory', but that they have 'a complacently narcissistic use of language, which . . . doesn't recognize the constraints of the external world and of the general linguistic community on this kind of subjective theorizing'.[21]

ii. *The elision of metaphor and concept.*

This affects the deployment of 'technical terms', confusing their precise use and promoting what Umberto Eco calls 'illusory transitivity', or the finding of metaphoric resemblances between things which are conceptually quite different. Bert States examines in close detail this problem of associative drift.[22] Sampling definitions of performance deployed by theorists Erving Goffman, Victor Turner, Peggy Phelan, and Richard Schechner, States argues that the 'difficulty with metaphorical analogy is that since the vehicle never specifies the intended meaning or application, one is free to call the similarities as one sees them':

This leads to increasing instability in one's working definition and it is particularly acute in performance theory because quite often something is called a performance for one reason (it is inten-

tional behaviour or it draws a crowd) and something else for another (the unintentional playing of a role, as on *Candid Camera*). . . . One can . . . identify all sorts of performances and performative modes, but one has lost the common denominator that binds them together into what we might call Performance, with a Platonic capital P.[23]

iii. *The use of word play, particularly alliteration and paradox.*

This promotes a discursive strategy of suggestion rather than statement, self-conscious playfulness rather than straightforward comprehension, resulting in a form of 'reasoning' more apparent than real. Reviewing *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Jill Davis makes several comments of this nature in regard to Rebecca Schneider's book in particular, and feminist performance theory in general.[24] She notes 'the small set of theatrical objects' that many performance analysts theorize over (in this case, female American performance artists), observing that

the canon of performance texts is . . . chosen for the extent to which they embody current theoretical issues. What worries me in this is the way in which feminist theatre practice comes to be defined by writing/naming, by inclusions and by exclusions/occlusions of work which does not conform to the given theoretical positions.[25]

iv. *The eclectic use of a broad range of cross-disciplinary interpretive schemata.*

This suggests that an analysis may not be applying its criteria consistently, or insufficiently grounding its conceptual approach. Mouzelis examines how de-differentiation between sociological subdisciplines has inflamed the theoretical eclecticism of post-structural accounts. He admonishes that

discourse terminology should not be used as a pretext for avoiding painstaking empirical research and opting for 'lazy' solutions, such as pontificating about extremely complex macro-historical transformations on the basis of a casual analysis of a few texts.[26]

v. *The autonomic escalation of claims.*

The problem here is not the making of broad claims *per se* but the adoption of discursive

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rules whereby broad claims are effectively valorized. This results from a drive for theoretical originality. To get attention and approval academics must make statements which are marginally more 'productive' than previous ones, i.e., broader in their explanatory scope. The result is an economy of tendentious declarations which are part of the 'look' rather than the intent of a line of thinking brought on by what Patrice Pavis calls 'the extension of the field. A field without any limits, which gets bigger and bigger with the increase of play activity and with metaphorization.'[27]

vi. *The reification of academic discourse, the conflation of research method with social object.*

The language of scholarly analysis is mistaken for the real-world processes being examined, and changes in that language are assumed to have effects within the real world. This downgrades the real world and inflates the value of academic discourse and its structural features. The point is tellingly illustrated by the revelations following the death of the high priest of deconstruction, Paul de Man. De Man's career as a wartime journalist on a Nazi-controlled Belgian newspaper, together with Derrida's defence of his colleague when his anti-Semitic writings finally came to light, lend force to the criticism that deconstruction

implies not only that *word* and *world* are reversible terms but that the relation of one to the other is . . . upside down. The word doesn't reflect or represent the world; the word contains the world. . . . There is no such thing as the real world; it is a text, subject to misreading, a 'problematized' text that invariably resolves itself into an *aporia*.[28]

'Prose by the Yard'

Such traits as these stem from two underlying trends in post-1945 humanities scholarship. The first is the ubiquity of linguistic analysis. Despite the fact that different theoretical approaches appeal to different epistemological foundations to legitimate their claims, the methods and values of structuralism continue to provide analytical paradigms (albeit of a demotic or partial kind), claiming cross-disciplinary application. These work

synchronically, by observing the traits of a given text or behaviour and looking for structural tie-ins in adjacent activities.

The result is numerous 'readings' of immanent meaning, hermeneutic strategies of breadth (rather than depth) and an overriding concern with the processes of symbolic representation. It is a flexible approach, and it is easy to understand why it has proved popular. The *langue de bois* (literally, wooden tongue) which French intellectuals accused their Communist colleagues of sporting highlights the fact that teleological theories are a limited means of analyzing aesthetic production. Once theorists felt they could say only certain things; these things had to be 'scientific' or at least 'systematic'. Now they feel they can say more, although they may still worry about 'loss of critical edge' or 'speculative thinking'.

Yet it is easy to move from a world involved in systems of symbolic representation to an entirely symbolic world. Linguistic analysis, where dominant, reduces social processes to the status of textual strategies. The world takes on the colour, rhythm, and inventiveness of language, and this has consequences for the scholarship which tries to capture its movements. It is no longer important that theory be truthful in a scientific sense so long as it hangs together in a theatrical one.

The principle of scientificity promoted by Marxism and functionalism is replaced by one self-consciously performative. By definition this lends itself to almost limitless cross-disciplinary expansion. And where scientific approaches tend to narrow down, insisting on procedural and stylistic conformity, performative ones sprout out, cultivating procedural and stylistic originality. A wooden tongue is replaced by a wagging one and, given the academy's preference for what Aristotle calls 'barbarous sounding words',[29] compounds into a dense, hierophantic terminology that can violate important academic goals such as accessibility, clarity, and veracity.

The second underlying trend is industrial. The production of humanities scholarship in recent years has been stimulated, and quite possibly distorted, by the more rigorous

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enforcement of publication minimums in universities and the fostering of a greater sense of competition between faculties. Despite attempts to regulate the quality of discourse by research guidelines or indexes of refereed journals, the effect of such demands is to encourage a quantitative expansion in the number of academic articles and books claiming critical authority over ever-broader areas of research.

This production of 'prose by the yard', in J. M. Coetzee's telling phrase, is an expression not of an internal process of scholarly investigation but of external administrative pressure on academics to reach commercially related targets. As in a newspaper, the amount of comment is fixed ahead of time regardless of the truth content that may later substantiate the claims of these texts to scholarly existence (or not).[30]

While many academics are conscious of implicit cultural biases, they often seem less so about explicit professional ones. Yet they too are caught up in processes of economic exchange and face problems of production, quality assurance, marketing, and so on. Academic discourse is the product academics sell to the world and to each other. This does not invalidate its truth content, but it does mean that industrial pressures protrude into scholarly values. There is a difference between reading twenty books and reading essentially the same book in twenty differently packaged volumes. When a publishing house such as Routledge is taken over by a US multi-national corporation and massively increases the number of its titles in the theatre theory area in a comparatively brief period, then, as Engels says, 'quantity changes quality'. The amount of theoretical comment by academics outweighs, pound for pound, anything practitioners might be saying about it themselves. In this respect, theatre theory is a zero-sum game. When the academy speaks, others must shut up.

A Caveat, a Hint . . .

I'll conclude by mapping the contours of practical theorizing as outlined here onto the rules of discursive engagement and high-lighting areas where they abrade. Given that academic theory has for some time now claimed the high ground of general truth over the messy paddock of professional practice, is there anything to be learnt by reversing the conversational flow – i.e., by applying the values of practical theorizing to the world of academic discourse? I think there is. The result is a caveat, a hint, and a specific suggestion.

First the caveat. This has to do with the balance between particular and general statements in any one piece of theorizing, and with the use of examples, particularly in the abbreviated form of the journal article. Too many with a theoretical orientation reverse the relationship between specific description and explanatory statement, with the result that the examples of creative production they cite end up illustrating, rather than illuminating, the paradigm applied. Typically these articles begin with a formal definition or statement from a contemporary theorist. During the analysis there is recourse to the statement as a boundary-marker, with the emphasis on ways in which the examples conform to, rather than conflict with, its core assumptions. In the concluding arguments the examples are used as a means to expand the theoretical statement up to its widest explanatory scope.

It is just this deployment of theory – so easy to caricature because it is so common – which represents its academic misuse. Too often critical judgement can be offered on theatre productions only cursorily examined or, worse still, ones at which the academic theorist was not present in the flesh. This last is particularly important, given the emphasis that theatre places on its live-ness, its phenomenal enplacement. Clearly it is impossible to expect every academic to see all the productions they might want to discuss in their work. Equally clearly there is a qualitative difference between the judgements they can offer on those they have seen compared to those they have only read about.[31]

The hint is that academic theorists might attend more directly to what artists themselves say about their own work – i.e., to statements of creative intention. One of the

major debates in social theory at present relates to the 'structure' *v.* 'agency' divide: that is, the extent to which complex patterns of social interaction are determined by the intentions of their participants as opposed to wider frames and structures. A number of important social theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, and Norbert Elias have attempted to 'transcend' the often acrimonious split between macro- and micro-oriented sociological approaches, and so to present models which definitively solve the controversial problem. That their efforts have not been judged entirely successful should be a warning to theatre theorists piggybacking their own work on similar analyses that the issue of whether individual behaviour is produced by or instantiates social structure is far from settled.[32]

This is worth stressing because the tendency of current theatre theory is towards the 'externalist' end of the debate. The influence of linguistic analysis encourages many theorists to seek hidden systemic codes determining artistic behaviour at its root structural cause. When combined with a heavily metaphoric use of the Freudian or Lacanian 'unconscious', a type of critique is generated which effectively treats artists' notions about their work as social symptoms rather than independent statements.

Again and again in academic theorizing, a questionable downgrading takes place. A broad system of cultural meaning is established, usually in the form of a speculative theorem; next an analysis of the artistic activity at hand is promulgated where the theory utilized is both method, system of value, and rhetorical trope. When there is awareness of specific practice, it is an Olympian one. The conflation of research method with social object encourages the over-determining point of view. Theatre theorizing becomes a matter of sensibility rather than of experience, a sensibility cultivated not by studying cultural processes and their products but by familiarizing oneself with other theories.

Academics become privileged readers of contemporary culture, well located (in their own minds) to place 'the arrow of mean-

ing'[33] on different forms of artistic expression, to have the last word on a given subject. At any rate, they act as if their academic judgements can only be displaced by other academic judgements. As one theorist has expressed this: 'A theory cannot be rejected because of disconfirming facts. It can only be supplanted by a superior theory.'[34]

And a Suggestion . . .

My specific suggestion would be to encourage theorists both to choose their examples with care and listen to practitioners with more attention while at the same time leaving them free to theorize about the wider social meaning of theatrical creation. It would entail distinguishing between the 'cultural' and the 'professional' aspects of theatre production, and recognizing the second as a semi-autonomous mode of engagement – one which must be analyzed in specific terms and not explained away *via* universal critical assumptions: a 'meso' level. As this tag suggests, many processes operating at this level lie beyond the scope of individual behaviour but beneath that of broad social structure.

In theatre this includes issues which have a decidedly cognitive feel to them: the evolution of company production processes; relations between different tiers of practitioners; training and safety procedures; casting and recruitment matters; approaches to repertoire, marketing, and audience development. We may bracket these kinds of interactions and call them 'professional', ones produced by a body of self-reflexive agents who define themselves in terms of explicit codes of operation and a series of industry-specific outcomes.

We shouldn't fixate over the term 'professional' and confine it to the one kind of practice which in the past was deemed 'truly' professional – paid employment with a commercial or state-subsidized company. Rather we should recognize that despite important disagreements and divergences, this level of interaction has its own conceptual coherence and should be pulled from underneath the wheels of broad cultural theorizing, whose global rotations threaten to downgrade it to

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the status of epiphenomena. Cultures do not produce theatre; theatre practitioners do. And what theatre they choose to produce, and the ways in which they produce it, has an important impact on a social level.

Rules of Discursive Engagement

By way of example, let me turn back to *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?* Glenn Shea and Tony Briggs, the actors engaged to portray the character of Jamie Parker, were also required to represent a character from a different play written by Patricia Cornelius. This person was older than Jamie, a married man and father, a businessman too, but one recently made redundant. He was not explicitly an Indigenous character. Then again he wasn't explicitly non-Indigenous either.

He was a character played by an actor who was an Indigenous Australian; and whether he was read as Indigenous in and of himself depended, in large part, on the cultural coding of the audience watching him. Over fifty-odd performances I noticed that the reception of this character was far from consistent. Some specators couldn't – or perhaps wouldn't – see the difference between him and Jamie. Being Indigenous seemed to cut across all characterizations to produce a single slab of racially-determined cultural meaning, locking the actors into a projection of a reified and eternal 'other'.

Changes in industry formation reinforce, and are reinforced by, changes in on-stage micro-behaviour. Tony and Glenn worked hard to reverse this situation and instil the difference between the two *Who's Afraid . . . ?* characters in the minds of their audience. By the application of their professional skills – voice, movement, use of props, etc. – they directly challenged an ingrained cultural perception which reduced the meaning of their theatrical presence to the colour of their skin.

In 1997 Glenn Shea became the first Indigenous actor to graduate from Australia's National Institute of Dramatic Art. As more Indigenous men and women enrol at leading Australian actor-training institutes they enter a zone of potential employment which will have profound consequences for Australian

theatre. Like second-generation Italian and Greek actors before them, they will move from a position of being culturally emblematic to being professionally differentiated; or from being Indigenous actors to being actors who happen to be Indigenous.

The division suggested between cultural and professional identities is not another theoretical nicety. Without the necessary idea of an autonomous (cognitive) level of professional interaction, different theatre practices and the attendant theorizing going on around them look like simplistic outcroppings of general social trends. It also allows for more sophisticated assessment of individual behaviour. Cultural values and professional ones do not always coincide. A theatre practitioner can disagree strongly with everything another practitioner stands for culturally and nevertheless co-operate with him or her in good faith on a professional level. An Indigenous actor should be able to accept a part with a mainstream company without being accused of deserting an assumed social or political agenda.

To be clear: despite these concerns I am not arguing against theatre's 'theory turn' *per se.* Rather I am seeking to highlight the dangers of intellectual pollution latent in the current rules of discursive engagement. There is a difference between a theoretical view of theatre, however elaborate, and a view which sees in the art form only the rehearsal of tensions primarily located elsewhere. The first treats theatre as a problem, the second as a surface. And because there is no theatre without practitioners, it wipes artists' lives out of the cultural formula. Another way of saying this is that the academy must focus on theatre as a professional whole, not just a bundle of culturally specific aesthetics. This isn't a trade-off – more 'whole' doesn't mean less 'part', but a relationship of figure and ground: no whole means nothing to be part *of.*

Notes and References

1. Mouzelis, Nicos, *Sociological Theory: What Went Wrong? Diagnosis and Remedies* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999).

2. Melrose, Susan, 'Restaging "Theory" in the Postgraduate Performance Studies Workshop', *New Theatre Quarterly*, No. 57 (February 1999), p. 39–44.

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3. In defence of their equivalence, Mouzelis argues that Gen. III statements strive to be 'useful' as compared to Gen. II ones which seek to be 'truthful', and so should be treated as having subdisciplinary integrity. However, the only way to determine whether a concept is useful or not is to apply it and see whether it produces truthful insights. 'Useful' is here another word for 'productive of truth'. As such Gen. II statements should thus be regarded as subsuming Gen. III ones, not the other way round.

4. Case, Sue-Ellen, 'Theory/ History/ Revolution', *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 418.

5. The use of a homogenized 'theory' is not uncommon in academic discourse about performance. It is, for example, deployed as a starting point for the cycloramic *Critical Theory and Performance* just cited, whose editors, Reinelt and Roach, observe that 'theory has . . . inspired new ways of creating texts and performance events, or, at least, inspired a new climate for their inception' (p. 3), and call for a taxonomy of the resulting theoretical proliferation.

6. Cunningham, Stuart, *Framing Culture: Criticism and Policy in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992). Cunningham examines the nexus between policy and theory, concerned that the academy has distanced itself by its habitually oppositional critique. 'When cultural theorists do turn to questions of policy, our command metaphors of resistance and opposition predispose us to view the policy-making process as inevitably compromised, incomplete, and inadequate, peopled with those inexpert and ungrounded in theory and history or those wielding gross forms of political power for short-term ends' (p. 9). His remarks warn against seeing practitioners as 'theory illiterate' just because they lack familiarity with the discursive norms of academic discourse.

7. Brook, Peter, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 1968).

8. Grotowski's writings – e.g., *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1969) – are part manual, part cultural analysis; Richard Schechner writes – e.g., in *Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) – both as an experienced theatre director and a trained social analyst; use of terms like 'performance', 'spectacle', and 'role' in social theory advertises its kinship with dramatic analysi,s e.g., in Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1959); and hybrid genres such as books of edited interviews mix direct quotation from practitioners with academic asides, e.g., *In Contact with the Gods: Directors Talk Theatre*, ed Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1996).

9. The best known call for the social sciences and related disciplines to inform theatre theory remains Richard Schechner's appeal for a broad-spectrum approach to performance studies in two *TDR* editorials: *TDR*, XXXII, No. 3 (1988), p. 4–6; and XXXIII, No. 2 (1989), p. 4–9. I have modelled my broad spectrum understanding of culture on his phrase. Clearly the two are related. There can be no broad-spectrum approach to performance without a corresponding broad-spectrum approach to culture (and vice-versa).

10. Williams, Raymond, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968).

11. Patrice Pavis notes the 'ultracultural' tendency in contemporary theatre which 'involves an often mythic quest for the origins and the supposed lost purity of the theatre. . . . [It] assumes the existence of a common human stratum, whatever cultural elements have been imposed upon it. Human experience is supposed to reveal itself in sounds and gestures which "make an identical chord vibrate in any observer, whatever their cultural conditioning may have been".' See Patrice Pavis, ed., *The Intercultural Performance Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 6.

12. Different theatre theorists utilized social theories of it, of course. Stanislavsky's System drew heavily on the insights of cognitive psychology. Brecht's epic dramaturgy reflects a political-economic approach derived from his reading of 'classic' Marxist texts. And Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* relies on notions of the unconscious and abreaction drawn from Sigmund Freud, the dominant influence on French surrealism.

13. Rabinow, Paul, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Peregrine, 1984).

14. My notion of 'practical theorizing' is modelled on Raymond Williams's 'practical consciousness' as deployed, for example, by David Hornbrook in his attempt to construct a 'practical aesthetics' for the drama-in-education movement where 'practical consciousness [provides], within the context of our ordinary lives, deeply felt appeals to the moral imagination [to] form a continuing dialectic between received understandings and contemporary experience'. See David Hornbrook, *Education and Dramatic Art* (Oxford: Blackwell Education, 1989), p. 101.

15. For further background on the company see Alan Filewod and David Watt's *Workers' Playtime: Theatre and the Labour Movement since 1970* (Sydney: Currency, 2001).

16. The play texts of this production, together with a short introduction outlining the process of their development is available in published form in Julian Meyrick, ed., *Melbourne Stories* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2000).

17. Christos is possibly better known as the author of the award-winning novel *Loaded* (Milsons Point, NSW: Vintage, 1995), a 'grunge' account of Melbourne's gay Greek scene.

18. Rabkin, Gerald, 'The Play of Misreading: Text/ Theatre/Deconstruction', *Performing Arts Journal*, IX (1983), p. 47.

19. One of the most frequently used metaphors for theatre theory is a 'box' or 'set' of 'tools'. Different theories present as blandly reflective, as if it were not understood that their application changes, sometimes radically, the meaning of the activity under scrutiny.

20. Weightman, John, 'The Lure of Unreason', *Hudson Review*, LI, No. 3 (1998), p. 475–89.

21. Ibid., p. 448.

22. States, Bert O., 'Performance as Metaphor', *Theatre Journal*, XLVIII, No. 1 (1996), p. 1–26.

23. Ibid., p. 3.

24. Davis, Jill, 'Good Night Ladies . . . On the Explicit Body in Performance', *New Theatre Quarterly*, No. 58 (May 1999), p. 183–7.

25. Ibid., p. 185.

26. Mouzelis, op. cit., p. 57.

27. This point was taken up in an oblique way by Patrice Pavis in a keynote address to the Australasian Drama Studies Association conference in 1997, where he went on delicately to renegotiate the theory/practice divide, arguing that a theoretically sophisticated yet practice-sensitive approach to performance is achiev-

able. See Patrice Pavis, 'Theory and Practice in Theatre Studies in the University', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, XX, No. 2 (2000), p. 68–86.

28. Lehman, David, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (London: André Deutsch, 1991), p. 41–2.

29. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard McKeon (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 22, 25.

30. Some idea of the increase in academic commentary in the area can be gauged from the listings in *Ulrich's International Periodicals* (New Jersey: Bowker). In the 18th Edition (1979–80), 282 journals were listed; in 28th Edition (1989–90), 483; and in the 37th Edition (1998–99), 563.

31. A paper which exemplifies this and almost every other problem with academic theorizing is Richard Knowles, 'From Dream to Machine', *Theatre Journal*, L, No. 2 (1998), p. 189–206. This is ostensibly an examination of three theatre productions: Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970), and Robert LePage's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1997), and *Elsinore* (1998). These quite different historical objects – only one of which, judging from the descriptions provided, the author has actually seen – are entrained to the vast claim that modernism and post-modernisms are complicit in the repressive processes of industrial capitalism through an abiding concern with aesthetic formalism. As Knowles employs terminology from a number of different social theories, some of which stand in stark contrast to each other, his overall approach is impossible to pin down. Statements of intention by artists are treated with scepticism, even contempt (Knowles is free with one-line summaries of complex works, use of inverted commas, and terms of critical derision, particularly the phrase 'so-called'). His view of modernism is crude and unitary, while the identification of modernist theatre with the r ise of the 'auteur' director is historically questionable. Only 15 per cent of the article is taken up discussing actual examples. Nor are the shows 'read' in a detailed way. Rather, their features are redistributed over a critical curve whose shape is determined by a form of neo-Hegelian historicizing. Knowles situates himself at the end of this curve, to judge – from a position of epistemological stability – which theatre is and isn't politically 'resistive' (undefined). Knowles's article is not badly written; nor is its argument necessarily ill-conceived. Rather, the rules of discursive engagement for this brand of critical theory lead him to untenable elaboration. How can Knowles get away with such a loose and unthought-through approach? The answer is, because the article is not supposed to be taken seriously. Knowles does not expect – could not possibly expect – that Brook or Lepage will modify their approach on the basis of his flimsy theorizing. In fact, Knowles probably assumes that these directors won't even hear about his paper, let alone read it. It is hard to argue with his reasoning, anyway, because it is more pattern than statement – a quote here, a metaphor there, a totalizing argument to round things off. As such, the article is structured like a performance. You don't agree or disagree with it. You admire or deplore it. And its potential readers form a very material audience: tertiary academics in other institutions around the world who are competent to decode its intellectual signals and position themselves accordingly. They will take it seriously, of course, but in an entirely different way to the one Knowles ostensibly aspires to.

32. Mouzelis examines the approach of these three social theorists from just this perspective. Obviously the work of Giddens, Bourdieu, and Elias is extensive and complex. Nevertheless, the onus of proof lies on them to show that the micro/macro split has indeed been 'transcended' and it is in respect to this that we may agree with Mouzelis when he states that 'the agency/institutional structure or the subjectivist/objectivist distinction . . . cannot be dismissed as easily as Giddens and Bourdieu (as well as Elias for that matter) try to do: i.e., by simply caricaturing theories which use the distinction and by rhetorically declaring its transcendence while reintroducing into their conceptualizations logically equivalent distinctions' (Mouzelis, p. 125).

33. In an article focusing on the intersection between industry practice, academic theorizing, and policy formation I develop the term 'arrow of meaning' to describe the mechanics by which particular people get to pronounce on the 'real' meaning of specific cultural exchanges. See 'Accounting for the Arts in the Nineties: the Growth of Arts Administration', *Journal of Arts Law, Management and Society*, XXVI, No. 4 (1997), p. 285–307.

34. Cohn, Jonathon, 'Theory *vs.* Politics', *Higher Education Supplement, Australian*, 27 October 1999, p. 32. Cohn's attack on the simplifying assumptions behind rational choice theory is based on the lack of empirical research guiding and informing its assumptive world. As such, Cohn makes criticisms which could be applied to any theoretical approach which fixates on itself as its own object.

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