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Becoming Entrepreneurial: Performance Studies and Applied Theatre

This paper addresses the viability of PS at Deakin University, Australia, with reference to recent curriculum developments in the area of applied theatre, an area that promises to make a significant contribution to the futurity of Performance (PS) at my institution. Its concerns are, therefore, primarily local; however, my account of the problems and potential strengths of the field in this particular institution will hopefully resonate with the experiences of PS teachers and scholars in other institutional locations in other parts of the world.

However, before outlining my concerns about the discipline's future at Deakin University, I think it's necessary to say something about my relationship to PS over the last fifteen years. Like many of you, I suspect, I was an enthusiastic advocate for Richard Schechner's 'Broad Spectrum' approach to the discipline. In an oft-cited passage from *TDR*, Schechner argued that

Most theatre departments should get out of the professional training business and rejoin — and reform — the humanities in a big way. A new paradigm for the field needs to be developed and deployed. Professional training for the orthodox theatre — a very small slice of the performance pie — is neither economically enough nor academically acceptable. The new paradigm is 'performance,' not theatre.¹

Taking Schechner's call to heart, I wrote a MA thesis at the University of Melbourne, where I was also employed as a lecturer, about the formation of PS as an academic discipline in Australia.² I argued, after Schechner, that theatre studies was a tired, moribund discipline, obsessed with an out-dated art form that occupied a relatively low position in the academy's value hierarchy. Moreover, I suggested that theatre plays an increasingly marginal role in the cultural life of the nation, and survives

¹ Richard Schechner, 'A New Paradigm for Theatre in the Academy' *The Drama Review* 36.4 (1992): 9.

² Glenn D'Cruz, 'Performance studies as a discipline? A Foucauldian approach to theory and practice' Unpublished MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1993. The thesis is available on-line at the following URL <<http://eprints.infodiv.unimelb.edu.au/archive/00003598/>>

mainly through the grace of government subsidies. The time seemed ripe to offer a change of direction.

Attracted by Schechner's rhetoric, and PS's theoretical and methodological eclecticism as an 'interdiscipline'³, I managed to introduce a number of new PS courses, most notably 'Performance in Contemporary Culture' to the University of Melbourne between 1994 and 1998. Performance in Contemporary Culture involved the study of performance events across a wide range of institutional sites, which include theatre, film, carnival, television, sport, dance and performance art. It provided an introduction to the discipline of performance studies, and created a framework for reading performances in terms of their impact on the formation of identity. This course attracted enough students to make them viable for a few years, but towards the end of 1999 my department decided that my PS courses were surplus to their needs, and my contract was terminated on the 31 December 1999. I entered the new millennium without a job, and with little idea of how my PS background might help me find gainful employment.

It took three years for me to find my current academic position at Deakin University, an institution with a very different culture to the University of Melbourne, which is arguably Australia's most prestigious university. Ironically, at Deakin University I teach theatre history, applied drama and direct two to three student productions each year. While my courses are infused with performance theory, and while I constantly make reference to both the NYU and Northwestern models of PS in my teaching, I'm no longer very optimistic about the future of PS in Australia. Theatre and Drama studies, while not impervious to regular threats, appears to be far more economically and academically acceptable in Australia today. Why is this so?

Despite the ubiquity of PS texts in Australian universities, only a few institutions are willing to completely embrace PS as a discipline. One possible reason is that students are not familiar with the term PS, and are unclear what PS has to offer in terms of specific skills. On the other hand, they have a very clear idea about what traditional theatre, film and dance courses offer practically and theoretically. Moreover,

³ Joseph Roach uses the term 'interdiscipline' in the introduction to Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach, ed., *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992) p. 10.

universities demand that their courses are utilitarian and respond dynamically to the needs of industry and commerce. While theatre may constitute a small slice of the ‘performance pie’ it is a clearly identifiable industry. PS also means quite different things in different institutional settings. For example, the Centre for performance Studies at the University of Sydney, which appears to privilege the documentation and analysis of various performance events, and the performance Studies program at Victoria University, Melbourne, which is primarily about making non-traditional performances, offer very different courses. In short, despite the relative popularity of performance theory, PS in Australia is a marginal academic discipline, which continues to be haunted by the spectre of theatre and drama studies. Of course, the relationship between PS and theatre is regularly rehearsed in other national contexts. For example, Erin Striff’s introduction to the Palgrave anthology, *Performance Studies*, cites Jill Dolan, Philip Auslander and Dwight Conquergood’s observations on the PS/Theatre relationship.⁴ Striff notes

It is clear that, in Performance Studies, we are never far from the theatre, whether or not we are considering traditional theatrical productions. We must not, of course, assume that theatre is any less complex than performance, but that it is a particular style of performance, which should not be discouraged.⁵

Personally, my roots are in theatre. I entered the field because I wanted to become an actor, discovered, fairly quickly that my talents and opportunities in this area were limited, and moved on to writing and directing performances. During the nineties I was seduced by the theory revolution and culture wars, and wrote a PhD in the area of Postcolonial Cultural Studies. This degree proved to be even more impractical than my PS degree, and despite my interest in CS and PS, theatre always seems to provide me with an income — to paraphrase Michael Corleone, ‘every time I think I’m out [theatre] pulls me back in’.

Theatre as an art form and theatre studies as an academic discipline appear to be far more durable than I thought. This is not to say that the discipline is not threatened — a number of Australian universities have recently closed their theatre departments In the

⁴ Erin Striff, *Performance Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) pp. 1-7.

⁵ Striff, p. 5.

end, PS's lack of what Schechner calls 'fundamentals' — that is, its obsession with liminality and transgression — may be its undoing, at least in the Australian context. Theatre, not Performance Studies, appears to have a future in the Australian academy because of its status as an industry, which has the potential to generate income.

In recent years, the Creative Industries paradigm has become influential in certain Australian universities, most notably at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and Deakin University. The term 'Creative Industries' was coined in Britain, and that country's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) define the Creative Industries as 'those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property.'⁶ The Australian higher education system has been starved of government funds during John Howard's tenure as Prime Minister. The government has forced universities to find new ways of raising revenue to fund their activities. Disciplines that do not have the means to generate income are vulnerable in this climate. Creativity is a valuable commodity, and creativity is increasingly recognised as an important aspect of successful business practice. Indeed, Hilary Glow points out that while business often describes its practices as creative, government cultural policy demands that artists and academics think of themselves as businesses.⁷ Apparently, it makes sense to embrace the business of creativity. I will return to this issue in a moment, but for now it is worth noting that the point of this rather long introduction is to situate my 'Applied Theatre' in a specific national and institutional context.

Moreover, I think it's important to declare that I have not been especially enthusiastic about applied theatre, theatre-in-education, or drama in education during my career. Applied theatre seemed to lack the aesthetic and theoretical sophistication I have associated with PS and theatre studies.

⁶ DCMS Creative Industries Mapping Document, 2001, p. 04 <
http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Publications/archive_2001/ci_mapping_doc_2001.htm>

⁷ See Peter Gahan, Stella Minahan and Hilary Glow, A creative twist: Management theory, creativity and the Arts, *Journal of Management & Organization* 13: 1 (January 2007): 41-50.

However, in order to survive as a viable member of the academy, Performance Studies scholars in Australia must demonstrate how their research and teaching activities generate capital in the form of research income; they must also demonstrate that they produce employable graduates with a range of transferable skills that enable them to find employment beyond the narrow performing arts sector.

At Deakin University in Australia, my rhetoric about the interdisciplinary, ‘broad spectrum’ approach to the discipline of performance studies has failed to convince my colleagues and senior administrators that PS have a secure future. Moreover, my students do not appear to be overly enthused about the PS components of the courses I teach. Faced with a bureaucracy that measures value in terms of income and utility, it seems that Deakin University is more interested in how the performance skills of our students might be of interest to people working in the areas of education, medicine, health science, nursing and policing.

This year we ran an Applied Theatre course for the first time. Titled, ‘Out of the Box: Theatre in Alternative Contexts’ the course produced a variety of Applied Theatre Outcomes — Forum theatre for teachers, a drama and disability project, an emergency room simulation for the school of nursing.

A colleague from the Faculty of Education, Dr. Richard Johnson, asked me to devise a performance event that addressed some of the common difficulties student teachers encounter in the classroom. After meeting Richard’s students, my class identified four issues that were of concern to our ‘clients’: classroom discipline, dealing with ostracised students, dealing with argumentative parents, and coping with sexual advances from students. Using Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre technique we devised four short scenes that dramatised the aforementioned problems over a period of eight weeks (the class met for two hours per week, so we had a total of sixteen hours to devise the performance). For those of you who may not be familiar with Boal, Forum Theatre is ‘a theatrical game in which a problem is shown in an unresolved form, to which the audience, again spect-actors, is invited to suggest and enact solutions.’⁸

⁸ Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (London: Routledge, 1992) p. xxi.

I was also directing Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* simultaneously, and found myself constantly comparing the two classes and the two very different approaches to making a performance work. In terms of production values, the applied theatre project was very primitive, an exemplar of poor theatre. To their credit, my students, most of whom want to be actors, directors or performance makers approached the task professionally and thoughtfully.

Given my lack of experience with any form of Applied Theatre, and the relatively short period of time in which we had to devise the work, I was anxious about the quality of the work itself, and about its ability to engage our audience. As it turned out, the project far exceeded my expectations. The audience was not only engaged by the work, but also actively participated in discussion, and in the scenes themselves. United by an interest in the subject matter of the scenes, the student teachers engaged in a passionate debate with each other and revelled in the opportunity to give voice to their opinions in a non-threatening context.

In evaluating the project, my students were generally positive, and took pride in the fact that the audience participated freely. One student noted 'the audience was very receptive — they were engaged and entertained like a 'real' theatre audience.' Another wrote 'I believe the project showed us how we can work outside a traditional stage or screen context — I feel it is a great way of preparing students for the real world.' The University gave me a small grant to document the project, and develop it as a fee-paying professional development unit for professional teachers next year.

My most measure the project was a success. However, I feel uneasy about the 'success' of my first foray into the field of applied theatre. The Deakin University drama programme is essentially about making performance work, and there is no reason why applied theatre should not be part of programme. Indeed, it appears to offer something that the university values and wants to develop further. This can only help my department become stronger, yet I can't help feeling that I receive institutional support for my applied theatre for the wrong reasons. Applied theatre and PS originally shared an interest in liminality, transgression and efficacy. Forum

theatre, in particular, developed as an overtly political tool to deal with the problems of oppressed people. However, applied theatre at Deakin University is valued as a business opportunity. In her book, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, Helen Nicholson notes the resonance between applied theatre and performance management in the corporate sector. She writes:

Both performance management and applied drama are allied to performative pedagogies, as in each case learning is embodied and understanding is shown in practical situations. Both have an expectation that skills and insights learnt in rehearsals or workshops will be transferable into other situations and contexts.⁹

Nicholson's point is that Applied Theatre is not inherently about socially progressive pedagogy—it is transformed into a narrowly utilitarian practice in settings that pay scant regard to ethical, social and political considerations. Unfortunately it appears that the politically progressive agenda associated with the broad spectrum approach to PS has a limited future in the Australian academy. I've seen the future of PS and it looks a lot like applied theatre.

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⁹ Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p. 50.