THEATRE RESEARCH INTERNATIONAL · VOL. 35 | NO. 3 | PP222–231
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# *TRI*'s Cambridge Years: A Retrospective

## Part One: 2001–3

BRIAN SINGLETON

As first senior editor of *Theatre Research International* when it moved to Cambridge Journals in 2001, I had the privilege of being involved from the outset in the reconfiguration of its aims and objectives, moving the subject from essentialist notions of theatre towards a much broader conception of what constitutes performance in differing world contexts. It was a move that mirrored the shift in the discipline since the beginning of the 1990s that saw the rise of performance studies and the influence of the concept of performativity on our reading strategies of all types of performance, but particularly of performance with intended social agency.

While then-vice-president for publications (of IFTR) Janelle Reinelt was overseeing the transition from Oxford University Press, I was working as assistant editor, having previously served as book reviews editor, and it is difficult to talk about my tenure without referring first to what *TRI* was publishing prior to my taking over as senior editor. What is clear, in retrospect, is that the scholarship published in *TRI* before the transition to Cambridge was reflective by and large of the particular interests of its long-serving editor (for twenty-five years), Claude Schumacher, rather than of trends in the discipline. In the last decade of Claude's tenure there was a distinct drive to incorporate more fully the work of the Federation, particularly from its working groups, and special issues were devoted to some of them. The work of the Performance Analysis Working Group, in particular, had a significant presence and the value of analysing live performance as part of the discipline was embryonically established when I assumed the editorship. Nevertheless, the primary concern amongst scholars analysing live performance was the issue of methodology, and as time passed analysis situated between a semiotic and a phenomenological approach gained currency. It would emerge later that the discipline on either side of the theatre/performance studies line would not necessarily consolidate on but would pay less attention to issues of methodology as regards the subjects of study. Instead, the disciplines would focus more on their boundaries, range and extent. In Volume 26, 2 (2001), Sue-Ellen Case would situate our field as 'post-disciplinary', and argue for the 'conditional conjunctions of social and intellectual forces' (p. 145). The shift clearly away from theatre to performance was an ideological and political one in its contestation of the hegemonic social and cultural practices such as theatre.

Destabilizing the boundaries of the discipline, though, had already been debated extensively before I took over as editor, as evidenced in Maria Shevtsova's keynote address

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to the 1998 IFTR World Congress at the University of Kent, England that would later be published (24 January 1999). In it, she queried the boundlessness of the interdisciplinary drives of performance studies while making a case for the primacy of the object of study over theoretical concerns. That article clearly problematized the ongoing debate, and, some would say, articulated the difference between theoretically inflected scholarship focusing on the politics of culture on the one hand and essentialist historicism on the other, but it was a position outside performance studies. It was not so much an argument against the inexorable slide of the discipline into theory, but more a critique of the notion of performativity as opposed to performance. In IFTR, thankfully, the battle between the two disciplines was not waged to any great extent, unlike in some sister American organizations and societies, since in many other national scholarly traditions the boundaries of the discipline of theatre studies were much more fluid. However, it was a real source of concern for some scholars at the time that, instead of endeavouring to uncover something new about history from archival evidence, a younger generation of scholars was more concerned with making interventions that refracted the object of study theoretically.

The concept of performativity that referred back to the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin, and met with resistance in the 1990s among traditionalists, was celebrated in subsequent years and was probably at its apogee in our discipline while I was editor of *TRI*. Under the huge influence of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990), performativity had an enormous influence on the study of the discipline as it affirmed gender not as a pre-ordained given but as a citational practice. It was also useful to the increasing drives to destabilizing fixed or essentialist notions of gender in the scholarship of queer studies, and supplemented by the contemporaneous publication of Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990). This particular use of theory conjoined with and, one could argue, enabled political action, or at least agency within feminism and queer campaigns, such as Act-Up (to highlight and contest the effects, injustices and stigma of HIV/AIDs). It pains me to say it, but it was only in the Feminist Theatre Working Group of IFTR (founded in 1994 and currently co-convened by Elaine Aston and Sue-Ellen Case) that any sustained body of research into politically inflected work in this area was realized and published in *TRI*. To this day, there is no Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) working group within IFTR, although a very small number of members are beginning to form a protean caucus. Case warned against a slide into 'pure' post-structuralist theory and against an abandonment of materialist discourses and practices in *The Domain-Matrix* (Indiana University Press, 1996). Nevertheless, the subsequent rapid shift from print to electronic culture and its new reading and consumption strategies saw the emergence of a new breed of scholar, unhinged from political activism, let alone motivation, surfing across disciplines (but mostly into political philosophy). Their own reconfiguration as self-styled neopolitical subjects used the very drives of de-essentialization prevalent in, say, gender studies to argue for a dematerialization of the subject. In consequence, the subject re-emerged far removed from any notion of cultural materialism, and, one could argue, far removed from any concept of social agency or from a sense of identity. Identitarianism would eventually be configured by

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some scholars as moribund, if not extinct, and while some scholars nodded to activism, others abandoned the very idea of a coalition between performance and social agency. Case's early articulation of the location of the body, and the lesbian body in particular, in relation to print and hypertext, was a prescient warning against employing new reading strategies countering or undermining the notion of a politics of identity.

A further prevalent set of discourses that gained currency during my tenure was the notion of what we termed 'the intercultural' for performances that displayed or performed notions of otherness. Interculturalism as a concept had been circulating since Richard Schechner's foray into ritual and the eventual establishment of the discipline of performance studies, first at Northwestern and subsequently at New York University. In the 1980s performances such as Ariane Mnouchkine's versions of Shakespeare's plays and Peter Brook's controversial reimagining of *The Mahabharata* were hailed as fashionable performances of the intercultural. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, there was nothing intercultural about them. They were purely European, though inspired either conceptually or materially by the texts and practices of civilizations far removed from Europe temporally, culturally and geographically. In many senses, these European productions were postmodern refashionings of the long-standing European tradition of Orientalism in the arts. Orientalism in performance had been erroneously conjoined with both imperialism and colonialism, and thus the Brook–Mnouchkine axis of European performance was deemed to have nothing to do with such a historical legacy. Once Rustom Bharucha intervened with his excoriating attack on Brook's project, the historical legacy of the practice reared its ugly head again and forced scholars to reconfigure such practice in a decolonizing world but also in a world of rapid globalization. While once the champion of the term 'intercultural', Erika Fischer-Lichte would eventually move away from its sullied legacy and adopt the term 'interweaving' to reshape the long-standing practice of performance at the convergence of cultural encounters. Globalization theories would eventually aid in the reconfiguration of performance of cultural encounter; but during my tenure as editor, the performative paradigm of cultural encounter was perhaps the most prevalent aspect of the then editorial policy given the internationalizing drives of the performance in question and the policy of the journal. In sum, the notion of the intercultural in performance, as well as its inherent discourses on self and other, enabled a new set of genders and geographies, subjects and subjectivities to be included and published.

Most vibrant disciplines endure fissures and cracks, and some even rifts. Theatre studies' perpetual morphing into performance studies even enabled some memorable though not always appealing performative encounters between agents of the two disciplines at conferences such as those of the American Society for Theatre Research. Performance studies had emerged on the international scene in 1990 through some protean panels at the annual conferences of the American Theatre in Higher Education organization. When it emerged, it did so with a lower-case 'i'-for-international reflective of its American origin but its international ambition. Eventually in 1995 there was deemed to be sufficient interest in the field to hold the first conference (at NYU). The impact on theatre studies, though, may not have been direct, but it was enormous. Most younger and some senior scholars successfully wove careers in both camps. But to what extent was it and is it an American phenomenon? And to what extent can it enable scholarship

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on and about performance in the rest of the world, and in parts of the world where many practices in everyday life have always been considered performance? During my tenure as editor I was always careful not to let the discipline as configured in the USA come to represent or substitute the discipline in global terms. The particularity of individual performance practices, as well as the particularity of the configuration of the generic disciplines of theatre and/or performance studies had to be maintained, in my opinion, if we were not to fall into the trap of neoliberal globalizing drives to represent the local as global. This issue came into sharp focus during my tenure in the aftermath of the catastrophic events of 9/11. At the time I did not see the need for the journal to engineer a set of responses (though I fully understand why *Theater Journal* did), and I am particularly glad I did not in light of what happened in the world politically and militarily in subsequent years. It was obvious from the outset that 9/11 was not being constructed and re-performed in social media as the print and televisual media of the West was constructing it. Very soon, though, scholars would be reading that event as performance, unfettered by any early emotional response, I thought. And further, the issues of censorship, civil liberties, and the so-called 'states of exception' to international laws that followed in the wake of 9/11 were to have a much more troubling effect on what we could perform, teach, and publish, more troubling than 9/11 as an event.

Returning to the subject of a one-world approach to the discipline, perhaps the greatest challenge I faced and one that continues to dog subsequent editors is that of the inequity of scholarly training throughout the world. The other problem is of the use of English as the medium of communication and publishing and its suitability for the expression and communication of subjects alien to the rational, teleological anglophone medium. While my successors have really engaged with the challenge of increasing representation in the journal from outside the Euro-American and anglophone axis, much work addressing the inequities of training remains to be done. Just what constitutes a scholarly article for *TRI* is not obvious in many international contexts, and identifying a local performance practice and its analysis for international consumption on the scholarly market is also not always self-evident. While 'theatre' in the title of the journal now comes to represent all types of performance and performativity, the challenge in the future will be to interrogate and contest what for a Federation (constituted in Switzerland and its journal published in the UK) it means to be 'international'.

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## Part Two: 2004–6

### CHRISTOPHER BALME

I assumed my editorial role hard on the heels of Brian Singleton, who took on the job of transforming a loss-making, somewhat moribund journal into a leading periodical in our field. The new alliance with Cambridge was of course crucial in this transition,

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so I was in the enviable position of being able to take the pass on the run and head for the editorial try-line. Within three years, the journal had indeed been 'turned around', as the economists say. *TRI*'s 'performance' (another business metaphor) during my editorship was thus the second stage in this new development. Financial performance was encouraging and overall subscription figures increased steadily, which reflected not just the efforts of the editors but also CUP's effective marketing policies. During my editorship the number of consortial agreements increased significantly, which had the greatest effect on the profitablility of the journal as a whole.

I begin with statistics. Over the three years of my editorship *TRI* published nine issues comprising a total of fifty-eight articles with an average of six articles per issue. Three focus issues were published: 29 January 2004 on postdramatic theatre; 30 March 2005 on theatre festivals, guest-edited by Willmar Sauter; and 31 March 2006 on dramaturgy, guest-edited by Gad Kaynor and Freddie Rokem. *TRI* published an average of fifteen reviews per issue, covering the whole range of theatre and performance studies and several languages. Since 2005 the journal has comprised 128 pages instead of the previous arrangement of two issues of 96 and one of 128. This proved to be a considerable improvement because it provided much more freedom for the individual issue.

Over the three years a total of eighty-nine submissions and commissioned articles were received. Based on a total of fifty-eight articles being published, this corresponds to an acceptance rate of around 65 per cent, which is relatively high for an academic journal. If we take out the commissions for the focus issues and the occasional appropriated keynote address, the journal received sixty blind submissions over the three-year period, or a total of twenty per year. Of the blind submissions received, a large number did not pass peer review; in fact the rejection rate was as high as 70 per cent in one year. This meant that without explicit editorial intervention in terms of focus issues or active acquisition and commissioning of articles, it was difficult to fill the journal's three issues per year with articles of a consistently high standard. Nevertheless, the outside perception of the journal suggested that it continued to be seen as or to have become a leading academic journal in our field.

Over the three years the range of topics published and the geographical location of the authors spanned an exceptionally wide spectrum. Articles ranged from theatre in the Arab world to applied theatre in Norway. I received submissions on medieval and Byzantine drama as well as on contemporary performance art. Articles were published from a total of eighteen countries (counted on the basis of insitutional affiliation). I think it is safe to say that *TRI* is perceived as a journal with an exceptionally wide remit ranging from the Greeks to contemporary performance theory and covering most geographical areas. Unfortunately, good submissions from Africa continued to be a problem; the few submissions I received did not pass review. The IFTR congress in Stellenbosch in 2007 revealed, however, a vigorous research community in a number of African countries, so that I am sure that this will begin to change.

Looking back, I see two main issues dominating my period of editorship: defining the role of focus issues and positioning the journal in a highly competitive field of very strong players competing for what sometimes seemed to be a somewhat finite reservoir of high-quality articles.

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Focus issues seek to explore a particular topic from a number of different perspectives. In keeping with the journal's international readership this invariably translates into articles from scholars working in different countries and scholarly traditions. A focus issue does not usually mean, however, that an entire issue will be given over to the topic. With the exception of my first focus issue on 'postdramatic theatre' (29 January 2004) I never assigned an issue exclusively to a particular topic and its guest editor, although the latter usually had a more than full supply of potential articles. I was always adamant about the necessity to put curated issues through the usual peer-review process. This not only ensured the necessary quality control, it also prevented the focus issue becoming a mini version of a collected volume or conference proceedings, two of the bugbears of our increasingly hyperactive academic publishing industry.

When I began planning the issue in 2002/2003 the term was by no means as well known as it is now. Hans-Thies Lehmann coined the term in 1999 with his book *Postdramatisches Theater*, but an English translation was still not on the horizon, although the phenomenon Lehmann analyses most certainly was. The issue was an attempt to map some of the problems by scholars who were familiar with Lehmann's book. It was particularly gratifying that I could recruit colleagues from the USA, Poland, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Germany who were willing at quite short notice to contribute to the issue. As I noted in my first editorial, although most of the contributors made at least passing reference to Lehmann's study, they seldom attempted to merely annotate or gloss it. Instead, they explored questions that this paradigm shift in theatre aesthetics raises. This attempt to put the term and the phenomenon 'on the map' proved to be successful, judging by the quantitative data provided by the CUP website for the journal. Although the issue is now six years old, the two most-cited articles of the previous two years are Martin Puchner's article on Guy Debord and the theatre of the Situationists and my editorial for the issue. I note this not to blow my own trumpet, but rather to suggest that focus issues in journals can make significant contributions to our scholarly agendas.

The other question that preoccupied me and which I see reflected in the choice of articles published concerns the need to find a profile for the journal. While *TRI* is published by a leading academic press and possesses thereby a certain professional standing, it remains in competition with a number of other English-language journals in theatre and performance studies on both sides of the Atlantic. They compete both for subscribers and for articles. Although journals such as *TRI* fortunately do not need to bid financially for material they want to publish, its symbolic capital or reputation is linked indissolubly to the quality of articles published. As theatre and performance studies journals are not yet (and probably never will be) ranked hierarchically, their positioning must be reflected by other criteria. As I noted in one of my editorials, *TRI*'s remit is formulated by its policy statement that, while broad in its coverage – 'articles on theatre practices in their social, cultural, and historical contexts' – can be specified more precisely by a desire to reflect 'the evolving diversity of critical idioms prevalent in the scholarship of differing world contexts'. The last three words are perhaps the most important with respect to the journal's specific focus. *TRI* is dedicated to reflecting

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theatre and performance internationally; it gives special preference to articles outside the usual Euro-American mainstream. In this sense, the journal aims to reflect the diversity of the membership of the International Federation for Theatre Research/La Fédération internationale pour la recherche théâtrale, while not being simply a mouthpiece of the organization or of any of its constituent bodies. Reviewing the articles published between 2004 and 2006, it is clear that this 'international' remit was met, and this holds equally true for the journal as a whole.

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## Part Three: 2007–9

FREDDIE ROKEM

In the summer of 2006, at the time when I was taking over the full editorial responsibilities of *TRI*, the annual PSi conference met in London, at Queen Mary University. The organizers of this conference, which had the theme Performing Rights, had put together a panel of theatre/performance journal editors to honour the fiftieth anniversary issue of *TDR: The Drama Review* (50, 1, Spring 2006),[1] which according to their website was defined as

> a conversation among journal editors about editorial views, content, the submission process, and the role of the academic journal in the artistic and academic community. The panel will address issues confronting academic journals and invite writers and artists to ask questions and speak with editors.[2]

At this panel, Richard Schechner, the long-time editor of *TDR*, quite forcefully declared that the existing theory formations in the field had played out their role; that we had entered a period of interregnum, in search of a new, alternative theoretical paradigm; and that only after finding or constructing such a paradigm could we make any significant progress in our field.

I could sum up my three-year term as editor of *TRI* (2007–9) by saying that I aspired to show that Schechner's assessment of our research situation was both right and wrong, though primarily the latter. On the one hand, as Schechner argued, there are in fact numerous theory formations in the field, some of which interfere with or are unaware of each other, providing us with new data, but without giving us any significant new insights about what we are actually doing and how to theorize the field. While it is no doubt the case that even when we 'stand on the shoulders of giants' we do not always see very far, I primarily wanted to enable *TRI* contributions to make their specific theory formations work more directly in tandem with each other. At the same time, I hoped that this might also introduce new points of departure for our research, even offer innovative theoretical insights.

I also made an explicit commitment to promote research and articles by young scholars whose first language is not necessarily English. A quick glance at the major

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journals in the field shows that even if there is a broad geographical distribution of the materials dealt with, a vast majority of the contributors come from or are working in English-speaking countries, and in this respect the US clearly dominates. I wanted to test this hegemony and change it as much as possible. Ultimately, achieving such a direction of course depends on the kinds of article submitted. However, I do believe that because I announced these intentions in my first issue as senior editor, many researchers who might not have come forward were encouraged to submit to *TRI*. Although this involved a lot of editorial (language) work, having these submissions began to broaden the content base of the journal.

However, this did not change the theoretical basis of the articles that began to arrive even while this eroded some of the Western or US hegemony of the discipline we call 'performance studies', to which, for better or worse, Schechner himself has been a major contributor. This hegemony of performance studies in particular (which is probably true of theatre studies as well) was severely criticized at the PSi conference in Singapore in 2004. But this was just one of the blind spots in the field of performance studies. Another, and I believe an even more serious one, was the expansion of its disciplinary borders to such an extent that they became almost indistinguishable in relation to anthropology, ethnography, psychoanalysis, film studies, new media, video art, Internet practices and what remains of cultural studies. This occurred at the same time as the rejection of certain core fields of what had traditionally been an integral aspect of 'theatre studies', such as the study of dramatic texts and the institutionally more established forms of theatre and its practices. This development of performance studies reflected the spirit of the early 1970s, but created a disciplinary divide, the consequences of which we have only been able to confront in recent years.

By consciously using the disciplinary formation 'theatre and performance studies' in several of my editorials I wanted to draw attention to the possibility of limiting the notion of 'performance' to artistic practices with some form of preset script (including classical plays), excluding behavioural practices with little or no aesthetic intent. At the same time I wanted to enhance the scope of 'theatre' to include a wide range of intercultural phenomena transposing classical or 'foreign' texts to a broad, international range of contexts, but always focusing on the direct and live encounter between performers and spectator–participants. In particular, I was interested in the possibility of strengthening our awareness of the complex interactions between the script and the aesthetic dimensions of the embodiment of this script for a specific audience. I was fortunate that many of the articles submitted, which made it possible at least partly to realize this editorial policy, were of a high scholarly quality.

Trying to explain the theoretical underpinnings for this approach, I returned to Roman Jakobson's structuralist model of communication presented most clearly in his 1960 article 'Linguistics and Poetics'. What has always fascinated me in Jakobson's model was the brilliant move from a general outline of the components constituting every communicative event to his discussion of the dominance of a feature through which a specific communicative event is assigned a certain function. There are six components or features; by drawing attention to one of these specific features in a particular situation,

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the whole system becomes organized according to the function of that specific feature. By drawing attention to the sender of a message (the speaker), the communicative event received an emotional function, and so on; and, most importantly, when the message itself becomes the central feature and focus of attention, the poetic function becomes dominant. In addition to setting up a dynamic scheme, Jakobson supplied the empirical criteria through which it is possible to distinguish the poetic function from all other functions, or, in Jakobson's own words, 'The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination'. What this cryptic sentence no doubt means is that the aesthetic/poetic function of a certain communicative event is determined by a repetition (equivalence) within the temporal sequence itself.

Coincidentally, many years ago, during a conversation with Roman Jakobson in Jerusalem, I asked him if he thought his model could be applied to a theatrical or a performative communication. Today, trying to remember the details of our conversation, I can no longer be sure about Jakobson's reply as distinct from the ways in which I have later developed his work for my own purposes. The gist of the discussion was that in the theatre and in performance two communicative systems are activated and are actually taking place simultaneously: the first is between the characters on the stage, supposedly communicating with each other within some form of fictional world of the performance; in the second the actors (but also through the characters they represent) are at the same time engaged in a communication with the spectators who have come to see this particular performance. Often the communication of the actors with the audience serves as some kind of comment on what the characters are communicating to each other within the fictional context. The tensions between these two communicative acts, and the fact that their basic messages do not in most cases overlap, can give rise to numerous possibilities of the theatrical/performative communication to draw attention to itself.

Thirty years later, and looking back in retrospect at these initial questions arising from my discussion with Jakobson, it is with regard to this double system of communication, the partial overlaps and the potential tensions between them that the most radical changes within the practices of theatre and performance have occurred. During these decades we have had the chance (both as privilege and as duty) to confront many forms of ambiguity with regard to who is addressing the audience of which we are a part: the characters speaking within the fictional context or the performers/actors addressing us directly on the basis of some form of authority or conviction related to the performative context itself. This double (or multilevelled) contextualization process is the central theoretical issue that I believe theatre and performance research is confronting (and probably will engage with for a long time to come) and for which the structuralist model still serves as a basis. It enables us to examine the relations between text (in the broader sense of theatre and performance studies) and context. And looking back, this was no doubt – at least implicitly – a guiding principle for organizing the materials in the issues of *TRI* that I edited. It was basically an eclectic puzzle, trying to illuminate the field from multiple geographical and theoretical perspectives, but always keeping the dialectical interactions between text and context in sight.

In my final issue (34, 3, 2009) I wanted to take a step back in order to present a more distanced view of the field, and all the articles brought together there were in their

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different ways devoted to the encounter and interaction between the discursive practices of performance/theatre and philosophy and the complex dialogue between these two fields. This was an area of research that I also became directly involved in at this time (and have since published a book-length study: *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance*, Stanford University Press, 2010).

The sites of thinking and research where performance/theatre and philosophy 'meet' and interact, sometimes in cooperation and sometimes in direct confrontation with each other, have a long and complex history. In the editorial for that last issue I wrote,

> Even if the issues raised by these as well as many other philosophers/thinkers have always been of importance for the work we do as researchers of theatre and performance, during the recent years we have seen a more direct interest in the discursive formations of philosophy and theatre/performance and the interactions between them both among scholars and practitioners involved with different expressions of theatre and performance as well as among philosophers. This is not only an awareness of theory for the sake of understanding the phenomena researched by theatre and performance studies. We have rather, I believe, entered a phase where the philosophical foundations of theatre and performance, the forms of knowledge about ourselves and the world we live in which these cultural practices enhance and develop, their ethical consequences as well as the epistemological assumptions they are based on are being critically re-examined. To what extent these developments signal new directions for theatre and performance studies is still too early to tell, but they certainly force us to re-examine some of the basic assumptions of the field. (Editorial, *TRI*, 34, 3, 2009)

And it is important to add that many contemporary philosophers have also become engaged in examining the performative practices of their own field.

Finally, one of the reasons for this development is the need to take a step back and look at the relations between our own field and neighbouring ones. However, instead of trying to incorporate the discursive practices of another field within theatre and performance studies, it is necessary to examine the borders between them, not in order to make them impregnable or hostile, but rather in order to make the crossings safer, without the threat of losing that which is distinctive about theatre and performance studies.

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NOTES

1 See http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_drama_review/toc/tdr50.1.html (last accessed 19 April 2010).

2 See http://www.psi12.qmul.ac.uk/archive/conference/friday.html (last accessed 19 April 2010).

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