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CRITICAL STAGES
EDITED BY PATRICK ANDERSON

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THE GREATER GOOD

Editor's Note: For this edition of "Critical Stages," I asked Stanford postdoctoral fellow M. G. Renu Cappelli and Princeton professor Jill Dolan to reflect upon the following three sets of questions:

1. What is the "greater good" that occupies the imagination of higher education? How has that "good" been defined historically, and what are its contemporary valences? Does that "good" have any contemporary specificity? If so, how might it map onto or deviate from the "good" to which other social services and public works aspire? If not, how might a lack of specificity contribute to the perceived inefficiency, irrelevance, and/or structures of distanced privilege that characterize contemporary public sentiments about higher education?

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2. How might performance—broadly or specifically conceived—articulate the notion of "greater good"? How might performance measure—or refuse to measure—its success in promoting that good?

3. In a social context characterized by steady divestment from higher education, what hope do theater/performance programs have in striving to define and promote the "good" to which they aspire? Are there strategies specific and unique to such programs that might be sacrificed if the public continues to lose faith in the value of liberal/arts education? What possibilities for collaboration, partnership, cross-institutional connections, etc., might performance model?

M. G. RENU CAPPELLI: We could have a veritable compendium of all the articles recently published—everywhere from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to the *New York Times* to *Radical Teacher*—that explore the question of the "good" of the humanities. The prominence of a defensive position within this ubiquitous topic suggests the persistence of age-old attachments to thinking of ourselves as being in need of justification (and recognition and concrete material support), possibly in perpetuity. If these debates are now mostly framed in terms of economic gambles, gains, and losses, they've been at other times about the cultural, sexual, and/or political "agenda" of the university's faculty. In thinking about my own position—relatively new to the waters but teaching in a program whose ambition is nothing less than to "make better citizens"—at once I thought of a performance my students and I participated in recently with Ann Carlson, a site-specific work that many students subsequently wrote about very intelligently, satisfying my own desire for participation/performance to play well with the scholarly project. Before I get to that experience, however, I would like to pause for a moment to consider the word "good" as distinct from the word "great," as in "great books" versus "good books."

I teach at a private university (Stanford) that feels and looks like a country club, whose very nickname is "The Farm." The "good" of the student body is here happily disciplined in concert with particular class interests. It was perhaps easier when I was affiliated with a public institution (UC Berkeley) to feel an ethic of "justice" about my own aims as part of the institution, but here I contemplate, instead, "goodness." As I write, for instance, I am sitting in a reading room on the top floor of the library. As my eye falls to the bookshelves, I'm surprised to see Ovid's *Metamorphoses* flanked by Benjamin's *Illuminations*, both of which are kitty-corner to this lot: *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Things Fall Apart*, and *The Satanic Verses*, then suddenly *The Feminization of American Culture*, flanked by *Teaching Ethnic Literatures*, itself in the good company of *Playing in the Dark* and *The Signifying Monkey*. Across the aisle are Ezra Pound next to Bakhtin next to Eagleton, who's shelved near to Derrida followed by the title *How to Read a Book*, only five spines away from *The Apparitional Lesbian*. Agog, I search for information on the logic of this room's collection, and find it in the plaque on the wall: "good books for reading."

The taxonomy regulating the room's contents seems not merely to run against the grain of any particular disciplinary logic, but also, in claiming the quality of being "good," the room's collection circumvents and—with either humility or disregard—undoes the hierarchies set up by the discourse of "great

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books" that provoked lively contestations during my undergraduate days. Here, volumes that would have taken their place among various lists of greats—those sources of knowledge presumed to provide students with a necessary cultural literacy—sit alongside books that have had a part in dismantling the notion of a singular literary culture. Great books were then delineated as necessities; good books seem here less prescriptive. The protection of a rarefied room possibly lowers alarms: the plaque on the wall names this the collection of a "gentleperson," someone already versed in the necessities imagined for the "proper" flaneur in this space.

So coming now, roundabout, to the Ann Carlson piece produced with Stanford students: I teach first-year undergraduate students who are obliged by the university to enroll in our Introduction to the Humanities courses, a requirement that purports to make the students better citizens and better humans. Many colleges and universities have these kinds of programs, of course. In our version, students can choose from courses offered within a broad range of disciplines, and I am attached to the Drama & Dance option. Of the available choices, we tend to appeal the most to the incoming athletes, perhaps because the course has a reputation for being "easy" or—the reason I personally imagine—because we are the one course that openly claims to be about moving bodies.

In spring 2010, while choreographer Ann Carlson was in residence at Stanford, she created a piece called *Still Life with Decoy.* Carlson worked with dance students on what I'll call "movement choreography"; for the performance itself, she planned for the audience to watch some of this movement in the dance studio and then travel to the Drama Department's Memorial Auditorium to see the second half. Carlson thus built into her performance a fifteen-minute walk across campus that mimicked travel between two disciplinary homes, a journey that itself comments on the real–unreal divisions of dance and drama, body and text, scholarship and practice. To find their way between the venues, audience members were instructed to follow a trail of "breadcrumbs" in the form of immobile bodies, or at least *approximations* of immobility that cued and framed the movements of the audience as well as those of other passersby on campus. This is where our students made their debut: they became the "breadcrumbs" by striking poses and holding them—completely still—for the duration of the audience's transit (this took about thirty-five minutes). Reproducing a bike accident, a backpack spilling open, a cramming session in the shade of a tree, and daring steps into the cold water of ornamental fountains, the students chose poses that recalled their daily experiences on campus, frozen in midaction; and the audience members found their way from studio to auditorium by spotting each successive "still" body in turn.

After the performance, many of the students who participated wrote eloquently about the new perspectives this relative immobility gave them on their own bodies (this was particularly true for students on athletic scholarships, whose tuition depends on the swiftness of their bodies) and on the campus itself. "We were no longer students; it felt like we were *humans*, and this was *a place*, not Stanford" was a frequent refrain in their writing. I was stunned by these revelations: I'm not sure I yet have a comprehensive sense of the many

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dorm-related, team-related, class-year, and other institutional identities and affiliations and identifications that matrix each student. I was similarly astonished to imagine the considerable achievement of turning "Stanford" into "a place." But more to the point, it strikes me as profoundly significant that a performance—one that by design did not forge "community" through dialogue, did not privilege urgency through action, did not even signal emergence or prescribe any sort of movement out of oneself, all aspects of performance that I would cite as being "for the greater good"—had the effect of at once making its participants feel singular and as members of a larger whole. Pausing to pose (as themselves) seems to have revealed to many students their identities as both entirely their own and as "human," all done, remarkably, within the comfort of a familiar setting and familiar (in)actions. Pausing is not passive. But in this case, pausing also invites associations of irrelevance that adhere to performance in general: it ushers in doubt about its own "greater good." While it may have been "good" for the participating students to stand still as themselves on their campus, where does the "greater" come in? There is no promise herein of success; a once-only meditation practice hardly guarantees good grades, better leaders, more compassionate readers, or the formation of more complex questions. When the performance was complete, we drank hot chocolate and returned (in mobility) to ourselves.

I am thinking about Carlson's performance in relation to our question about the greater good *because* of the performance's refusal to align itself along the usual trajectories of "goodness" (thinking now in terms of aesthetic merit, virtuosity, as well as politics and social justice). It had grace, in its happenstance way, not unlike the reading room with which I began: its nongreatness made the experience good.

JILL DOLAN: I'm quite taken with Renu's lovely thinking, as it resonates with me about the coincidental nature of what it means to try to teach young students something new, different, more graceful, about what it means to be in the world together and how an education-based encounter with performance might heighten their critical faculties not just of the thing itself but of a wide swath of their own experience, individually and in whatever (temporary) collectives our classrooms seem to make of them. Ann Carlson also visited the University of Texas (UT) while I was teaching there, and in a more formal theatre space, I witnessed a similar transformation evoked by her interstitial work in performance. Through Carlson's own generosity and insistent breaking of the presumptive fourth wall that's still so imperative in undergraduate college and university theatre programs, her solo *Blanket*—in which an older woman calls history into the present, and tracks an emblematic trajectory of birth to death by responding to sound cues and by moving, without speaking—told us something of how *else* we might be together. Her acuity as a performer, her direct (though nonverbal, highly emotional) address to spectators, and her moving storytelling created moments of communitas at the performance I saw that felt palpable and transformative.

Inspired by Carlson's residency at UT, one of our Ph.D. students, Jaclyn Pryor, created the performance installation *floodlines*, her own movable feast of performance and grace. Pryor devised a communal journey from the theatre and

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dance building on UT's campus to the surrounding Hyde Park neighborhood of Austin, where spectators, grouped arbitrarily as passengers in Volvo sedans, no more than twenty or so at a time divided into four different cars, moved across a landscape populated with performers wearing white, performing and repeating actions that crystallized something of human relationships redolent with loss, yearning, and an uncertain future (inspired by the events of September 11). The site-specific mobile performance was repeated annually for the next seven years and became an experiment in building and rebuilding community around a set of places and carefully crafted images and actions that quoted or created a minute sense of a simple human exchange. In this case, the demands of the collaborative performance required a continual flow of ever-new bodies (students and community actors) to build the tableaux, coordinate the complex logistics, and inhabit the meaning that Pryor located so specifically in time and space.

What was the good here and why is "good" even a term worth bringing to performance? When the lights come up and we leave the theatre, we often say, "That was *so good*," our faces lit up by an experience that lifted us above the ordinary for its short duration; or more sadly, we might confess, "That wasn't very good," our faces twisted in grimaces of displeasure and irritation at having lost time to something that just mired us in the discomfort of the present instead of transporting us out of it. People often think of theatre as something that's "good for you": a medicinal prescription of culture-as-unpleasant-necessity. This mode of educating our students about the importance of the arts inevitably leaves a bad taste, as high-art elitism is delivered to them without even a spoonful of sweetness to help them digest its too-often pedantic intents. "Good" in this case isn't an aesthetic category so much as a bodily one, much as Deirdre English and Barbara Ehrenreich, in their groundbreaking 1978 book *For Her Own Good*, described medicine's approach to women's anatomy, biology, and everyday lives.

Carlson's performance at UT and Pryor's site-specific performance through a neighborhood adjacent to the campus might not have contributed to the "greater good" as conventionally defined. But what these performances did do was use the stuff of performance—presence; framing; movement through space and time; narrative, however fractured, nonlinear, and nonverbal—to tell us something about how we do and might live our lives individually and together. *Blanket* was a remounting of a solo performance Carlson had presented before; *floodlines* became an annual, community-based event that assembled theatre workers to satisfy the demands of its production. But both were grounded in the pedagogy of a theatre and dance department intent on offering students performance as a methodology not simply to create their own stagings—to "become" artists—but also to become spectator-citizens as a rehearsal for being in the world. Both were occasions for public feelings that heightened students' understanding of themselves as more than just themselves, as audience communities brought together by a sense of wonder and grace.

In a more recent example, Stacy Wolf and I decided to take our Introduction to Performance Studies students at Princeton to see a performance at the McCarter Theatre Center on campus during the second week of the fall

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semester. We barely knew the fifteen students' names, and they knew virtually nothing about performance as the field defines it. We selected almost arbitrarily the first show in McCarter's season, a performance called *Aurelia's Oratorio*, about which both of us knew very little. The McCarter Web site described the production like this: "Behind the red velvet curtain lies a topsy-turvy world of surreal surprises, tricks, and transformations, where dreams come to life and the impossible happens before your very eyes. Aurélia Thierrée has charmed audiences around the world with this dazzling display of stage illusion." The show sounded unconventional enough, despite its presentation in a traditional proscenium theatre, that Stacy and I thought we might get some mileage out of it in our subsequent discussions. So we bought tickets for the students, and most of them, on little more than the spur of the moment, decided to come along. At that point, we'd read only Susan Foster on contagious kinesthetics, Richard Schechner's "Six Axioms for an Environmental Theatre," and Schechner's introductory chapter to his performance studies textbook. The day after we saw the performance, we read Erving Goffman on performance in everyday life and Victor Turner on the liminal and liminoid and on *communitas*—spontaneous, ideological, and normative.

Aurelia's Oratorio turned out to be great good fun. Thierrée is Charlie Chaplin's granddaughter and has inherited his gift for physical comedy and a sweet, humanist embodiment of the triumphs and tragedies of being alive. In a mostly wordless performance structured like a magic show or music revue, Thierrée and her several collaborators created visual illusions and beautiful feats of theatricality. The show began with Thierrée encased in a dresser, reaching around drawers that she pulled in and out for various objects, anthropomorphizing her limbs as they searched things out and performed a kind of mingled frustration and wonder at their challenging situation of confinement. Her contortions seemed impossible, as four limbs configured themselves in unlikely positions that led all of us to think she had another person (or a fake arm or leg) in the dresser with her. The opening moment established something of a clowning vocabulary for the production, which went on to exhibit other flights of physical derring-do and narrative enchantment.

One of the show's constitutive elements was its metaengagement with theatricality. The theatre's curtains, to name only one example, became characters in the show, brought to life by actors who made them appear to move across the stage of their own volition and be motivated by emotions that made them seem willfully, painfully alive. The stuff of theatricality became the stuff of character and plot and action, not just the backdrop against which the actors embodied their own characterological destinies (which were, in any case, hard to discern in a production more episodic, more a series of only visually related vignettes than a conventional beginning-middle-end narrative). The delight we mutually took in the performance was palpable across the several rows we filled in the back of the house. At the performance's end, we all moved closer to the stage to hear the performers' talk-back, the students (and we) hanging on their words, scrutinizing them under the working lights onstage to see how these people who now seemed so mortal had created something soaring and eternal, fleeting and searing at once.

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Was this performance about social justice? No. Did it take as its themes eternal verities useful to communicate to young minds, ideas that would "do them good"? Well, maybe, but not quite in the pedantic sense that that "do them good" evokes. But what we all experienced, going to the theatre together, was something "good" if not "great": we witnessed something that made us feel things, that let us delight in a moment both out of and deeply entrenched in time and space. It made us all distinct as teachers and students; even without knowing one another's names, we began to see each other against the backdrop of play, in the liminal world of theatre as communal ritual, and in the liminoid world of individuals lightened by entertainment.

Could we articulate this into a justification for maintaining a theatre program in the face of economic retrenchment that threatens anything extraneous to its "core" mission, which is too often articulated as a rigid, catholic notion of "the greater good"? Perhaps, if we had to. Perhaps we might say that it is precisely within these moments that seem inefficient, irrelevant, and elitist (words regularly flung as accusations at theatre and performance) that we create experiences and memories that model something important for the students who value higher education on its own terms (and not just for its credentials and their spoils) and for those who use the laboratory of the classroom (and the theatre) to consider what it means to have a life—to use it, indeed, "for the greater good," on however a quotidian level that might be expressed and enacted.

We don't have a theatre major at Princeton. Those of us who teach in the program (not even a department) feel committed to our status as a certificate option, a supplementary course of study that gilds, in a sometimes even more profound sense, students' chosen path through their educational menu. They take our classes out of curiosity; out of experiences of theatre and performance they bring from high school; out of aspirations to continue performing, directing, designing, stage managing, or dramaturging themselves; or even just out of a love for theatre and performance and their desire to maintain a place for it in their lives. They take our courses because theatre provides a useful framework through which to see their religion (or physics or chemistry or history) majors and because they find in their work with us a place to apply the rest of what they learn and to engage the community dynamic that is less socially (and perhaps sexually) rigorous or exclusive than what they confront in their dorms and their eating clubs. They do theatre at Princeton because they want to make worlds together, to keep close to hand the option of transformation for themselves and for their ever-changing communities. Intangibles though these might be, they're the stuff, it seems to me, of what higher education for "the greater good" should be about.

RENU CAPPELLI: Your words prompt me to think about long duration—the processual aspect of performance—as well as the related dynamic of place. In your example of Carlson's residency at UT, the momentary power that I was describing in our experience with her at Stanford branched out into a longer instant, taken up as a methodology. In remembering what made her work with us compelling, I would suggest that at least some of its potency emerged from the way her project *arrived at* the participants: where we already were. The piece involved immanent gestures, habits, and bodies, a kind of corporeal readymade.

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In our case, the bracketing of the event as connected to, but apart from, daily life was important to its profundity and to its ability to render the campus into a newly known *place*. But in your case, this alchemy was not only of an instant or of an evening: it branched into a longer project, involving spaces and people beyond the campus. That potentiality, it seems to me, is what makes some experiences into "greater" performances: when performance, starting out as a contained event—how we know we are seeing a performance is in part through the before and after—multiplies into more and different actions and becomes more than itself in its aftereffects.

Perhaps it can be more challenging to see that greater potential with the sorts of theatrical—or metatheatrical—productions that you also reference in your examples. Our students had a much more varied reaction to a metatheatrical performance than was the case with your students, or so it sounds. We also took our students to see a circusy, metatheatrical production during the spring that Carlson was in residence. Unlike her playful experiment of immobile choreography, this other exposure took them away from their daily lives and in some senses perhaps away from themselves. There was a long bus ride, then a long walk down a hallway, then a traditional proscenium stage. The feeling of being somehow distant permeated the night, and for the duration of the piece, no words were uttered to bring any of us closer to a sense of knowing. The show was its own particular blend of commedia and *butoh:* it had a clearly intelligible narrative structure and, it seemed, a clear narrative communicated through mime, dance, costumes, and puppets. However, when we discussed what we had seen it became apparent that we had each seen a different narrative played out. Most of the group agreed that it was well made, well executed, impressive, and captivating (I think it matters here that it was exquisitely staged and performed). Yet somehow there was a sense of individuation, as if the experience had made us each feel singular—and not in the triumphant sense of being unique. Perhaps it seemed simply too far away from the known to be called "good." For me, this is yet another important aspect of performance's *greater* good: its difficulty. Books and poems can prolong the process of coming-to-know just as well, of course; they can be recalcitrant, they can demand time, they can and do reveal the limits of our rational approaches to grasping what they offer. Indeed, that difficulty is often what makes for good books or good poetry, whereas performances that offer those same effects sometimes occasion outrage. It takes a bit of time for the value of these types of experience to emerge; I would even suggest, with optimism, that it takes a bit of time for us to return to ourselves after being so put out. In the context of education, the longer the interval, the better.

DOLAN: Since we've had this dialogue over time, I, too, can now reflect from the perspective of the "now" back to the "then" of seeing *Aurelia's Oratorio* with our class last September. For us, too, going to the McCarter Theatre Center required a journey. The theatre sits at the edge of Princeton's campus, and often students see it as separate from the architecture of the rest of their lives. And despite Artistic Director Emily Mann's express commitment to multiracial performance (she produced a revival of *Having Our Say* last year and is known for originating *Anna in the Tropics*, *Eclipsed*, and many other plays by and about

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people of color), the audience can be startlingly white and on average much older than our students.

Our Performance Studies class this year is multiracial, and the students cover each class rank (from first years to seniors) and a range of disciplines and majors. Now that our course is nearly complete instead of just beginning, returning to our earlier project of theatregoing together reminds me in retrospect how important it was to get *out* of our classroom so early in the semester, to follow (metaphorically) Carlson's "breadcrumb" trail of student bodies across the Princeton campus to McCarter's liminal space, to move our individual bodies outside our classroom, to let the theatre dictate for us a differently embodied relationship to one another.

I am a teacher who loves and uses "student-centered pedagogy," but I also find myself most secure behind the table in the seminar room, which lends a boundary to my body and showcases my words and my thinking. In the lobby of the McCarter, greeting students whose names I still barely knew, wondering how our three African American students and our four Asian American students might feel in this sea of elderly whiteness, I also felt my own middle-aged white lesbian body more vulnerable and exposed. In what relation to theirs do I arrange my limbs? Where do I put myself in relation to a coteacher who's also a life partner, a relationship that our students may or may not have been aware of so early in the semester, although they all know it now? How do we signal through our own embodied, curiously authoritative vulnerability that we've brought them to the theatre because it will be "good" (we hope) for our common learning and (we hope) "good" as an experience of performance, all the while knowing how little we know about any of it, how we've taken on faith that it's *good* to leave the constraints of class, to see one another move through other worlds, to feel ourselves as a temporary subcommunity set within the audience community for this evening of performance at McCarter.

The performance was in some ways difficult in the way Renu here suggests is also good; and we, too, had our own inevitably individuated responses. But going to the theatre that night created a precondition for what transpired over the next six weeks in class: an embodied willingness to experiment with the miniperformances we regularly ask them to do, from Boalian statues to the performance of theory, to addressing one another, instead of just us, as the locus of conversation and meaning, to being open to engaging a wide range of different scholarship, to working with numerous guests (to whom we regularly boast that the students in our class are really *good*).

It's a really good group, and that's the key to what's *good* about performance for the arts and humanities: not just the good or great books but the good and great communities of learning we cocreate, through performance, together.

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