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Critical Futures Forum

Generational shifts

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Thirty-five years, the age of *TRI*, is roughly the length of time I have been involved in our discipline. I completed my Ph.D. in 1974 and entered the profession on the cusp of a generational shift. During my first decade in the academy, a number of new young scholars emerged and began to take the places of an older cohort who were primarily theatre historians and/or drama critics and interpreters. The theory explosion changed the way that both theatre history and dramatic criticism were carried out, and a whole new range of methods and objects of study began to appear in our journals and conferences. Post-structural and postmodernist ideas upset the reigning conventions of scholarship and also influenced creative artists who changed their practice to reflect these new ideas. Feminism transformed our field, as did new research on race, class and sexuality, while competing theories of the subject brought forward psychoanalysis and phenomenology as important tools for performance analysis. Cultural studies and the new historicism challenged positivist historiography and began to change the kind of theatre history (including subjects and documents) scholars researched and wrote about. Political critique was in the ascendency, after a battle to discredit what many of us perceived as a false objectivity in previous scholarship. This became, eventually, the new orthodoxy for many of us, and the senior scholars in our field today (for example Sue-Ellen Case, Elin Diamond, Josette Féral, Erika Fisher-Lichte, Freddie Rokem, Joseph Roach) all participated in making these major changes happen as young scholars – while not necessarily agreeing with each other: the new generation was thoroughly heterodox in its approach to methods and topics.

Now, I believe, we are seeing another generational change. As my generation ages, a new young cohort of scholars is rising to prominence. Although a strong legacy from the previous cohort is evident, there are also some truly substantial paradigm shifts. Performance studies (PS), having fought for legitimation and authority over the past several decades, is now integrated with theatre studies in many places. This is a positive outcome, a win–win, from my point of view – I always thought the ideological battles between theatre and performance were growing pains that needed to be overcome before a mature relationship could yield an integrated field. Taking an international perspective, this is not quite accomplished as yet; theatre scholars in some parts of the world are not yet familiar with or convinced by the 'broad-spectrum' approach to performance that

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underpins the current conceptualization of our objects of study, but the pages of *TRI* certainly show a diversity of methods and approaches to a range of topics that extend well beyond traditional theatre studies. Performance Studies international continues to grow, resembling Federation for Theatre Research/La Fédération internationale pour la recherche théâtrale (IFTR/FIRT) in terms of the size of its conferences and membership, demonstrating that performance studies is not only an anglophone phenomenon (the 2009 conference in Croatia demonstrated the spread of PS in Europe, for example), and many performance studies topics and methods show up at IFTR/FIRT conferences as well where 'theatre research' has for a long time signified well beyond theatre. While many of my generation were instrumental in promoting or developing performance studies, the new generation of theatre scholars will be able to take it for granted and develop it in their own directions. The emphasis on performance has also produced a scholarly practice, quite different from my early years in the discipline: performance analysis has almost completely displaced literary analysis of texts, and serious attention has been paid to acting, directing and devising processes.

Practice as research, creative practice, or simply 'practice' has become a recognized rubric of performance research, and these ideas are spreading beyond the anglophone world as dialogue and sharing beyond national traditions and cultures of performance increases. My generation was often hindered by old disciplinary tensions between scholarship and practice – academic struggles over territory and status often solved by excluding one of the terms (for example, practice was often absent from European and some Asian universities while scholarship often took second place in some practice-oriented institutions in North America). The current generation of young scholars has frequently been trained in both aspects, and recognizes less of a divide between scholarship and practice, creating new scholarship at the cutting edge of received traditions.

While my generation worked largely within its national theatrical traditions, or occasionally with one additional tradition (Greek tragedy, Noh drama, French neoclassicism and so on), it seems that younger scholars today have taken seriously the need to internationalize their scope of study, developing multiple areas of competency and also a global analysis of how performances contribute to and constitute culture and society. Today's students are less likely to develop a narrow nation-centred approach to performance in the midst of the multiplicity of perspectives and locations entering our field from many parts of the world.

Looking over the last decade in our discipline, it seems that the centrality of *TRI* has been reaffirmed not only by the quality of its editorial leadership but also because of its focus on international research, and global dimensions of performance. The journal (and indeed the Federation) led the way in redefining a new ever-widening inclusivity as the appropriate scope for the discipline.

If it appears I am painting all this positively, as if one generation is seamlessly preparing the ground and handing off to the next, it is not the entire picture. I feel some apprehension about what I fear as the rejection of the next generation of scholars of the political commitments that so marked my generation. The debate about the value and indeed the definition of 'political theatre' is becoming once again

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quite animated. I see scholars turning away from a discredited 'identity politics' to a preference for participatory, non-didactic postdramatic theatre. As Alan Read puts it, 'to politicize performance requires us to do away with the idea of political theatre, if not political theatre itself'.[1] Read's preference, as might be expected, is for elliptical, affective engagement through performances by such groups as Forced Entertainment, Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, or Rimini Protocol. And while I too appreciate some of this work, I worry that direct engagement with issues and representational strategies that analyse or argue are being too quickly disparaged. This is, perhaps, the cry of the dinosaur, and I recognize that the taste and style of the times may have passed me by; but on the other hand, the concern for how performance can and does affect the society that spawns it is still important to many of us across the generational divide, and I hope we will seriously debate these issues with attention to the international voices which make up the current global conjuncture.

NOTE

1 Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement: The Last Human Value* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2008), p. 27.

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