ESSAYS: A CALL FOR THE FUTURE

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Laurence Senelick

ODYSSEUS IN ACADEME

The past sixty years of theatre studies recall the travels of Odysseus. It had a narrow escape from being devoured and digested by the Gallic Cyclops that dwelt in the Cave of Theory. It lingered in the Lotos-land of performance studies, gorging on a bottomless buffet of human activity. It hearkened to siren songs luring it to seductive but slippery shoals of anthropology, ethnography, sociology, and neuroscience. Some of its crew has suffered a Circean transformation into omnivorously rooting cultural critics. Its vocabulary has been inflated by Aeolus, king of winds. Meanwhile, back home there languishes its consort, History, knotting and unknotting a tapestry of documentary material and archival research while urged to bed by suitors from foreign realms.

Now it is navigating between Scylla and Charybdis. On one side looms the tsunami of global theatre, which overtops national boundaries to explore interrelationships and cross-cultural influences. On the other swirls the maelstrom of identity politics, which funnels its scrutiny toward self-styled aggregations.

This protracted metaphor is, of course, unfair, an essential quality for any satire. Both of these current approaches do make valuable contributions. They call to mind Sir Isaiah Berlin's famous contrast of the fox who knows a little bit about many things and the hedgehog who knows a great deal about one thing. Global theatre has the advantage of a multidimensional conspection, alert to the place of theatre in the "big picture." It has its roots in the Annales school and Fernand Braudel's exploration of the Mediterranean as the petri dish of early modern culture. Its best practitioners have been such veteran scholars as Erika Fischer-Lichte, Christopher Balme, and Joseph Roach, whose well-informed humanism keeps them afloat. Less buoyant scholars can sink like stones in the waters of Atlantic and Pacific studies. For the pitfall here is generalization, a bird's-eye view that may overlook linguistic, subcultural, or other specificities.

Like the macrocosmic approach, the microcosmic also originates in the Annales school, this time in Carlo Ginzburg's monograph about a worm-eaten cheese, a close focus on the exception that may prove the rule. Identity politics has value in directing attention to overlooked groups and issues. Its danger,

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Laurence Senelick is the Fletcher Professor of Drama and Oratory at Tufts University.

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however, is myopia, a purblind insistence that the special and the marginal are *in esse* not only as significant but more significant than more prominent phenomena; it may lead to a lockout of noninitiates.

As Macheath sings, "How happy could I be with either, were t'other dear charmer away." Can these two approaches be reconciled so their virtues might be better exploited? Ideas recently promoted by Christopher Balme and Willmar Sauter seem to combine the benefits of both. Take a particular theatrical instance, subject it to close scrutiny, then move to a point from which to see it in its widest context: physical performance space, topographic milieu, financial and professional conditions, publicity, status and attitudes of the public, residual effects on social memory—in short, a virtual cyclopedia of what is under examination. Current interest in material culture and a new respect for the commercial, as opposed to the avant-garde, theatre are abetting this approach.

To this end, I would also urge more interest in visual studies. Students of theatre need a quantum of instruction in art history, aesthetics, and iconography in order to interpret the graphic images that provide much of the bread and butter of documentary evidence. Both sight and insight have to be cultivated in order to develop an *optique* by which to evaluate this testimony. In this respect and others, scholars have to encounter and manipulate original material, not simply scrape up an acquaintance with its virtual replicas.

Nearly forty years ago, a professor at the University of California Davis, describing American doctoral programs in the discipline of theatre studies to a European readership, painted a very familiar picture. He began by saying, "Because enrolment in theatre departments is not increasing, faculty positions are becoming more difficult to find." He went on to point out the variations in curriculum from department to department, the lack of foreign-language requirements, the emphasis in dissertation subjects on the English-speaking world, the eclectic nature of "research methods and techniques," the paucity of funding for graduate students and particularly the underpayment of teaching assistants, the absence of a theatre-research background in professional dramaturgs, and the overall lack of rigor: "too many students receive the degree who are incapable of first rate research and writing."[1]

What has changed since 1979? The complaint that there is little research on the contemporary scene and on "the practical exploration into the aesthetic and social function and possibilities of theatre" no longer applies. If anything, the contemporary is studied to the exclusion of the past, and the context has all but shoved its "text" into the background. The Anglophone emphasis lingers, however. Check the annual list of dissertations in *Theatre Journal*. The observation that "avant-garde and innovative theatre" is neglected no longer rings true. Quite the contrary. Economic pressure, already worrisome four decades ago, is now shaping the field to meet market demands: train fewer scholars and more dramaturgs, publicists, and arts administrators. Sociopolitical pressure is narrowing critical attention to the reigning dyad of ethnicity and gender. Whatever the subject or the method, professional rigor is in short supply.

The residual question nags: Is theatre studies a discipline? Discipline implies first principles, widely accepted and exacting procedures, and a shared body of

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knowledge. Currently, theatre studies seems rather a concatenation of interests with little in common but a vague concern with "performance," however that may be interpreted. Until theatre studies decides what it is and what it does, it is destined to pursue an aimless Odyssey, periodically dropping anchor at the most alluring ports of call, more cruise ship than vessel of discovery.

ENDNOTE

1. Theodore Shank, "Theatre Research as an Academic Discipline in the U.S.A.," *Maske und Kothurn* 25.1–2 (1979): 117–25, at 121, 123.

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