theories and methodologies

Theater, Philosophy, Pedagogy

MARTIN PUCHNER

ON MY FIRST DAY AS AN UNDERGRADUATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KONSTANZ, I ATTENDED A LECTURE I HAD BEEN PARTICULARLY LOOKING forward to: an introduction to philosophy. The professor, Jürgen Mittelstraß, began by declaring that he hoped very few of us would become professional philosophers—ideally, none. Philosophy was a kind of training that should be carried into other endeavors, not pursued as an end in itself. I got really mad. After the lecture I marched into his office and declared that I was going to be the exception. He smiled and kindly took me under his wing for the rest of my studies. But somehow, after majoring in analytic philosophy in college, I began to gravitate toward literature and theater, probably because I had been doing a lot of extracurricular theater along the way. When, twenty years later, I wrote to tell him what had become of me, he revealed that he had once contemplated a career in theater himself.

I have frequently had occasion to ponder this exchange as I have found myself returning to the relation between philosophy and theater. Recently my preoccupation has acquired a new, institutional dimension. My university, Harvard, is affiliated with the American Repertory Theater, which has its own MFA program in acting, dramaturgy, and voice, but if you graduate from this excellent program your degree says, "ART Institute / Moscow Arts Theater."[1] Harvard College has always had a thriving extracurricular theater scene—hundreds of students each year are involved with performance in one way or another—but no theater major, despite its long history of teaching theater. In 1905 the English professor George Pierce Baker offered a course in playwriting, one of the first in the United States, and some years later he added a course in which plays were staged; one of his most talented students was Eugene O'Neill. Since 1905 there have been several attempts to create a proper program, but they all failed.

Fortunately, this has just changed with the launch of an undergraduate program in theater, dance, and media. During the laborious process leading up to the birth of this program, I grappled

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with the question of how to teach theater at an institution that has such a long history of skepticism about theater as an academic discipline, a skepticism to which the history of philosophy, with its impressive list of theater skeptics, from Plato to Rousseau, has contributed as well.

Depending on how you look at it, the fact that I have had to deal with this kind of institutional history serves me right. I have, after all, argued vehemently for the importance and constructive power of antitheatricalism, basing my argument on the observation that some of the most important modern playwrights and theater makers have had little good to say about the theater (*Stage Fright*). Edward Gordon Craig, Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, and Samuel Beckett all dismissed theater and everything associated with it *tout court*, and it was out of their rejection of theater that their most important and innovative work arose.

Once antitheatricalism is given an important place in modern theater, an interesting possibility opens up: any number of antitheatrical theorists and philosophers, from Plato to Adorno, no longer need to be decried as mortal enemies of the theater. Instead, they can now be enlisted as allies for all kinds of theatrical enterprises. This, anyway, was my theory, which I elaborated on various occasions, cheerfully lecturing bewildered theater people on the salutary effects of embracing their supposed enemies as untapped intellectual resources.

But, as we all know, theory is one thing and practice is another, and so, for my sins, I have found myself confronted with an institution that was more than happy to cede theater studies to its archrival, Yale. Yes, perhaps it all served me right. Strangely, though, it also served me well; such is the cunning of history. There are many reasons why our efforts to start a theater program succeeded now,[2] and without doubt I was just the last straw that broke the antitheatrical camel's back, finding myself in the right place at the right time. But the fact that this last straw was so closely identified with antitheatricalism may have played a small role as well. If you are an antitheatrical institution, the safest way to inaugurate a theater program is to hand its reins to a card-carrying antitheatricalist. Put differently, antitheatricalism in theory (mine) and in practice (Harvard's) proved to be a good match and, one might say, produced a theater program in the best modernist tradition.

This institutional history also means that the new program has a strong philosophical strain, an emphasis on the kind of thinking that happens with, in, and against theater. Conventionally, reading lists in theater studies begin with Aristotle, the patron saint of the discipline. This is not a bad choice, but it brings with it a lot of assumptions about what an analysis of theater should look like. It means looking at the history of theater through the lens of Aristotelianism and various reactions to Aristotle, culminating, often too neatly, in Brecht's avowed anti-Aristotelian theater.

But there is an alternative starting point, and that is the first and most forceful antitheatrical philosopher of them all, Plato. Once we get over the old worry that Plato would commit us to the most rabid antitheatrical puritanism, leading to the closing of theaters, we can see that this philosopher actually had a good deal to say about theater, including mimesis, diegesis, and acting. Equally important, Plato's own choice of genre, the philosophical dialogue, brought him into direct competition with the theater. Indeed, both major dramatic genres, tragedy and comedy, appear in Plato's dialogues, which combine the two into a new, unheard-of third genre, noted even by Aristotle. In this context, the anecdote, reported by Diogenes Laertius, that the young Plato himself wrote tragedies, makes a lot of sense.

What happens when we take Plato, not Aristotle, as a point of departure? A different picture emerges, one that binds theater and

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philosophy more closely together. For me, thinking about theater and philosophy was a natural outgrowth of an interest in antitheatricalism, helping me broaden my earlier interest into a larger, interdisciplinary perspective. The "inter" between theater and philosophy has not been an easy one, and that's the point.

Claiming Plato as some kind of philosophical rogue dramatist opens up a whole field that one might call the theater of ideas (Puchner, *Drama*). When I arrived at this point in my thinking, I was worried that I was more or less the only person interested in this topic. The drama of ideas, after all, has been the most despised dramatic genre of all time. When you study theater, the first thing you learn is that theater is an art of the body, not of ideas. In philosophy, theater is usually not given much thought at all, with the exception perhaps of a tradition of philosophical commentary on tragedy that largely followed in Aristotle's footsteps.

As it happened, however, I was not alone. The last ten years have seen a flowering of interest in theater and philosophy to the extent that one might reasonably speak of a growing scholarly subfield. Let me sketch its contours. Freddie Rokem's *Philosophers and Thespians* (2010), like many studies of its kind, begins with Plato. The goal here is not a Platonist perspective, however, but a series of actual encounters—even friendships—between philosophers and thespians, such as those between Socrates and Aristophanes and between Walter Benjamin and Brecht. Another contribution to this conversation is by Paul Woodruff, who turned his attention to theater in 2008 with a book entitled *The Necessity of Theater*. He did so after a career spent on Socrates and Plato. These are but two of many examples, which also include recent work by Laura Cull (on Deleuze), Darren Gobert (on Descartes), David Kornhaber (on Nietzsche), and Tzachi Zamir (on acting), not to mention a continuing supply of French philosophers, like Alain Badiou, who likewise derives his approach to theater from Plato, and Jacques Rancière, for whom Plato is a constant reference point. A similar interest in theater and its relation to philosophy can be observed in Germany, where Christoph Menke, who occupies the chair in philosophy previously occupied by Adorno and Habermas at the Goethe University of Frankfurt, has written several works on theater.

That Plato would be a reference point for a subfield that includes philosophy is, on the face of it, not surprising. After all, Alfred North Whitehead was right to observe that the history of philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato. But, at least according to the standard histories of these fields, this is not the case with theater studies, which might be more accurately described as a series of footnotes to Aristotle—or, rather, not to Aristotle the philosopher but to Aristotle the author of the *Poetics*, which means Aristotle the theater critic. The fact that a number of thespians would be ready to embrace Plato, or at least move beyond an almost instinctive dismissal of him as an enemy, shows that something important is happening in this corner of theater studies. Dividing the world into Plato and Aristotle is certainly reductive, but when it comes to theater it may be somewhat justified. In any case, when seen through this Manichaean lens, Plato is clearly on the upswing.

The growing scholarly subfield called theater and philosophy—or philosophy and theater—is perhaps best reflected in two phenomena. The first is the recent publication of *Philosophy and Theatre: An Introduction* (2013), by the philosopher Tom Stern, who also takes Plato as his point of departure. The second, which harks back to my initial point about institutions, is the research network Performance Philosophy, founded by Laura Cull, which has over two thousand members and which sponsors or otherwise participates in various book series and conferences, most recently in Surrey, at the Sorbonne, and in Vienna. There is talk of a journal.

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Why this sudden interest in theater and philosophy? One reason has to do with the fate of capital-T Theory. During the theory explosion, which reached theater studies late, theory was a rather free-floating endeavor, unmoored from specific disciplines, if not intellectual traditions. It is difficult to pinpoint the moment when this type of theory ran out of steam. It might have been sometime in the nineteen nineties, or after 9/11. In any event, it was during the years following 9/11 that scholars working in this area started to reconnect theory to its disciplinary history and home—namely, philosophy. The grounding of theory in philosophy, or at least in the recognition that it will not do to practice theory without relating it to philosophy, broadly conceived, suddenly opened up this new area of inquiry and insight. It allowed us to think about the history of antitheatricalism in philosophy more productively. It illuminated the complex relations between individual philosophers—Descartes or Rousseau, Kierkegaard or Badiou—and the theater. And it gave us a new tool for investigating actual theatrical practice, now seen through the lens of this intellectual inquiry.

The grounding of theory in philosophy has also revealed more subtle and eerie connections between theater and philosophy, which have yet to be fully thought through. One has to do with the word *theory* itself. The classicist Andrea Nightingale (who worked on Plato and his relation to theater) was the first to offer a full-fledged account of the history of this term, which shares the root *thea*, for "seeing," with *theater*. What are we to make of the strange fact that *thea* is the root of both *theater*, the place of seeing, and *theory*, whose etymology includes a name for making a pilgrimage to a festival (Nightingale)?

To begin with, it means that thinking about theory (in its philosophical context) and theater is not an eccentric subfield composed of philosophers who are failed thespians and thespians who are failed philosophers (although there are plenty of those around, and it pains me to think that ill-wishers might have some justification for describing me as having failed at both). Rather, connecting theory and theater is an inevitable, necessary endeavor, based in the logic of the words' single root. Theater and theory, it turns out, have always been locked in a strange embrace—one that has included quite a bit of kicking and biting and that we have only recently had the wits to see.

The theater-theory embrace has consequences for teaching what we generally call practice. The new program at Harvard teaches both theory and practice. Needless to say, teaching practice can mean many things. It can mean that students will work alongside theater professionals, many of whom are based at the American Repertory Theater. But what is the purpose of this practice? It is not, or not only, a vocational training for a particular career track. Rather, it is supposed to be part of a liberal arts education. But what is, and what is the purpose of, a liberal arts education? It's difficult to get a precise answer to this question from anyone, and I myself have often been at a loss to provide one (most recently in China, where a student, on hearing me describe this American model of education, responded with a baffled "So, it's everything mixed together?" I found myself agreeing with that astute assessment). Perhaps the best response is that the lack of predefinition is part of the point, because a liberal arts education is not supposed to be a narrowly construed career path or skill set. Rather, it aims at a broader, more unpredictable idea of intellectual development, a kind of institutionalized bildungsroman.

This general approach has implications not just for theory but also for practice. Like theory, theater practice has a long tradition that points toward knowledge production. Most visibly located in the twentieth century, it goes by the names "experimental theater" and "laboratory theater." These phrases have become so familiar that it is sometimes dif-

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ficult to hear how the adjectives, which come from the world of science, modify the noun. Experimental, or laboratory, theater aims at knowledge and insight, not art (there is no experiment for experiment's sake or laboratory for laboratory's sake). Theatrical experiments differ from scientific experiments in many ways. They don't reduce reality to a single variable (although they do reduce reality in some form). They are not repeatable (although theatrical performance aims at being repeated night after night in some fashion). And they are not part of the scientific enterprise (although Brecht hoped to bring theater up to date with the scientific age).

Scientific and theatrical experiments do share one set of characteristics. An education in laboratory experimentation instills in students cognitive habits even as it gives them the physical dexterity and discipline needed to plan and carry out experiments in a laboratory. It forces them to connect a set of physical actions with a set of theoretical assumptions and hypotheses without which an experiment would be pointless.

Something similar happens with theatrical experiments. They train students in different forms of physical practice for cognitive purposes. A good example is a class in our program being taught by the performance artist David Levine called Acting and Authenticity. Levine began his theatrical career in New York, directing shows at such venues as the Soho Rep and Shakespeare in the Parking Lot. Then, like many American artists—I'm almost tempted to say, like all good American artists—he went to Berlin. There he found that his avant-garde sensibility was superfluous: it was the state-sanctioned norm, especially at the Volksbühne and, to a lesser extent, in the rest of the state theaters dotting the landscape. What could he contribute? Levine found himself looking back at his native theatrical tradition from a distance. What came into view was the aspect of American realism that the avant-garde, both in the United States and in Berlin, had made it its business to revile: method acting. Levine wasn't going to sell method-style realism as the new avant-garde. Rather, he noticed how weird method acting really was—an attempt to turn one human being into another, combining an odd set of psychological and philosophical underpinnings.

This core insight became a driver for several performance pieces aimed at investigating method acting by pushing it to its logical extreme. In Levine's class, students are first trained in method acting, as they would be in most actor-training institutions. But then Levine asks them to truly become another person. Each student "acquires" another student, studies and interviews that person, observing not just external ticks and habits but that person's whole outlook on life. Finally, the student goes out into the world as the other person and experiences life as and in some sense for that other person. The goal is for the students not only to become better actors (though that might well be a side effect) but also to gain insight into the underpinnings of method acting. This is practice (although the course includes reading and analysis as well), but practice with a cognitive purpose, practice infused with theory.

It may not come as a surprise that Levine's formation as a performance artist was in no small part shaped by Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood." There are few essays that have riled up thespians more reliably than this short piece, written by the twenty-three-year-old art historian. The essay is, famously, not about theater; it's about minimalism, which it attacks. But in the course of his attack, Fried pens sentences such as "theatre now is the negation of art" and "the success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre" (125, 135). It would be tempting, as many theater scholars have done, to dismiss this somewhat counterintuitive theory, according to which the work of Richard Serra is bad because it is theatrical, as yet another

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example of theater hatred of the rankest type. But for Levine this antitheatrical tract is a blueprint for his own practice, infusing a dose of skepticism at the core of his art making.

In the last few years, I've had the pleasure of seeing similar approaches flourish in many parts of the world. During a recent summer, I taught at the Stanislavsky Institute in São Paulo, founded by the enterprising filmmaking couple Tiaraju Aranovich and Amanda Maya to bring American-style method acting to Brazil. But method acting, in this context, meant something more along the lines of what Levine practices. Over the course of a week, my students and I brought Plato's *Symposium* to life in Portuguese and English, all the while grappling with the intertwined histories of theater and philosophy. In the fall of 2015, in Vienna, I was stunned to see five hundred students, mostly acting and art students, attend a weekend festival dedicated to exploring the relation between the stage and philosophy. While in Vienna, I met with a former student, Gloria Benedikt, a trained ballet dancer who studied philosophy and economics, and learned about her work at the European Forum Alpbach and at a Vienna-based think tank. *Growth*, a dance piece coming out of her interest in economic theory and philosophy, had recently been shown at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. The next stop on her busy itinerary was the headquarters of the European Union, in Brussels.

Something is happening here, and I'm not quite sure what it is. Is it that research in theater and philosophy is trickling down to teaching? Sometimes that might be the case. For the most part, however, it seems to me that scholars and artists are mysteriously moving in a similar direction. On the one hand, performing artists are using their most rigorous techniques and training (Stanislavsky, ballet) for new purposes. On the other hand, they have become interested in the techniques and training of philosophy. Perhaps this is what these two disciplines share: long traditions of training, the idea of discipline itself. But discipline and training have a way of developing their own dynamics, becoming ends in themselves. This is what I see being rejected in so many classrooms and careers, from São Paulo to Vienna to my own backyard. Use your training for new purposes, people are saying. Perhaps something similar is happening to the training in philosophy. If so, Jürgen Mittelstraß would be happy.

This is an unquiet moment in the performing arts, a process of soul-searching. No wonder philosophy is part of it.

Notes

I delivered an earlier version of this essay in 2015 at an event sponsored by Humanities Futures, an initiative of Duke University's Franklin Humanities Institute funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation ("Theater").

1. This has recently changed. The program is now affiliated with the Harvard Extension School.

2. In 2008, for example, a report issued by a task force headed by Stephen Greenblatt found that art making is vital to the university's cognitive life (*Report*). Harvard's president, Drew Faust, who commissioned the report, was especially supportive of the effort to establish a theater program.

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