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CASE STUDY

Performance Pedagogy: Theatrical Judgment and Global Citizenship

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Abstract

This essay makes a case for the crucial role of performance in higher education as a way to help students become more responsible world citizens. It asserts that a culture of problem-solving rooted purely in metrics is not sufficient to tackle the complex global challenges that we face moving forward. Instead, we need methods for collaboratively assigning value and making decisions that are not beholden to ones and zeros or the market logic of capitalism. Theater—the applied craft of making a world (big or small), an experience (long or short) that's livable and sharable—offers one place where we can develop these aptitudes.

Keywords: education; global citizenship; performance; public life

No doubt, one of the most fulfilling things about working in higher education is the occasional email we receive from a grateful student who took one of our classes. A few years ago, one such message landed in my inbox, and it had a particularly strong impact on me. Not because it was more sincere than others, but because it came from a student who had long since graduated and gone on to work in educational development in the Global South, with particular experience in Sri Lanka. The student remarked, without much elaboration, that the performance activities we had done in a class called "Shakespeare and Marlowe" had been especially formative. I was delighted, of course. But the message also got me wondering: How is it that performance might prepare someone for a life of global service? Does theater make us better world citizens?

Up to that point, I had regularly integrated performance activities or projects into classes, based on the premise that such work brings dramatic texts to life and fosters different kinds of critical insight. I also had a vague idea that in some way or other, theater was good for you. I continue to think all of this is true, but I've also become pedagogically more mindful, more focused, and more ambitious. Since receiving that email, I've developed an expanded sense of the ethical and practical utility of theater for people living in an increasingly complicated world. Performance has something special, maybe even indispensable, to offer students. That something is *judgment*, a virtue that comes across nowadays as rather old-fashioned and elitist, but only because it's been oversimplified and misunderstood, its longstanding social, collaborative, and creative features eclipsed by more recent associations with

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personal bias and regulation. My aim in what follows is to recover this now-needed sense of judgment, to explain why it's vital for meeting the mounting ethical demands of global citizenship, and to make a case for performance as a powerful site for cultivating it in our students.

First things first, though: What does performance in the classroom actually look like? Having a shared image in mind, even if it's very general, will help anchor the bigger-picture claims that will form the majority of this discussion. Versions of classroom-performance activities are legion, and creative colleagues are coming up with new ones all the time, but I think we can all imagine asking students to, say, perform a short scene from a play by Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Suzan-Lori Parks at the end of the semester. This could be a full-class event or a series of distinct performances presented by small groups. It may have a written component, which can also take many forms. A common version might involve a performance dossier of some sort in which students must describe their production in analytic terms and ground their theatrical decisions in a critical reading of the scene at hand. I know some colleagues who prefer to make this critical, analytical, and self-reflective part of the project a post-performance oral presentation followed by questions from their peers; kind of like an academic version of the post-play roundtable sessions with the director and actors, which audiences can enjoy from time to time at actual theaters.

This is as deep as we need to go into the *what* and the *how* of teaching and performance, the specifics of which will inevitably depend on your goals, your tastes, your course, and your institutional context. My main concern is with the *why*. The *why* of teaching and performance is both an ethical and pedagogical question. It has to do with learning, but also with living, and more precisely with living interdependently, that is, with others, in a world facing numerous challenges on social, political, and even existential planes. The *why* of teaching and performance, in other words, speaks urgently to the public dimension of the humanities, and it does so at both local and global scales.

This is worth pausing over, as we have a fairly vexed relationship in academia to the idea of having a public role. While, on one hand, anyone who works in education knows on some level that they are public servants, it can still be difficult to articulate the connection, precisely and meaningfully, between the restricted institutional locales in which we teach and the world beyond. In higher education, literature scholars will often respond to questions or challenges about the "real life" relevance of their field with rapid-fire elevator speeches about critical-reading skills, and/or immediate recourse to the terminology and tools of a different field (history, computer and data science, communications, and so on)—anything but an invocation of the literary or the dramatic as powerful realms of experience in and of themselves.

I do not write this sneeringly. Critical reading skills really are an invaluable bestowal of literary studies, and one of the strengths of our field really is its interdisciplinarity (and some of the fields I've referred to above parenthetically are themselves interdisciplinary). Nevertheless, the tendency toward some combination of discomfort with, resistance to, and an underdeveloped vocabulary for addressing the forms of meaning-making distinct to our discipline's objects of analysis is unique to literary studies. Why that is so, whether we might want to push back against it, and if so, how, are big questions for a different context.[1] But in making a case for the ethical and practical utility of integrating performance into the

[1] A good place to start such ruminations is Guillory 2022.

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classroom, I'm offering one object lesson in what makes literary studies uniquely important, and indeed *relevant*, in a public and global context.

So, what is the case exactly? On what grounds should classroom performance be defended and lauded, even encouraged, in the twenty-first century? I've already acknowledged that this thing I'm calling "classroom performance" can take a wide variety of forms, but I believe that the differences between them are less important than one thing they all have in common. They all foster the capacity for judgment. I'm not talking about judgment in the disciplinary and punitive sense. That version of judgment finds its most canonical academic source in the work of Michel Foucault, who made it one of the bogeymen of modernity. For Foucault, judgment sets "the external frontier of the abnormal"; it "differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes.*"[2] Foucault's judgment—regulatory, normative, and morally hegemonic—has seeped deep into everyday usage, and has even bestowed upon us the uniquely twentieth-century coinage *judgmental.*[3] By contrast, the kind of judgment I'm talking about—theatrical judgment—belongs to a different, much longer intellectual genealogy. Theorized most rigorously by Aristotle and Hannah Arendt, this version of judgment, like its twin *prudence* within the virtue tradition, is social, participatory, and creative. It involves collective processes of selection and discernment, leveraged toward the end of making something new: a civic policy, a speech, or indeed a play. Concretely, theatrical judgment consists of six elements: collaboration, empathy, listening, critical thinking, responsibility, and stakeholding. Each merits some further reflection.

Let us start with collaboration, empathy, and listening. They function as an ensemble, creating the transactional framework essential for judgment to flourish. As Arendt observed in a 1967 essay published in *The New Yorker*, judgment, when exercised properly, is "one, if not the most, important activity in which … sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass." To judge—morally or aesthetically, oneself or another—is, in Arendt's words, to "remain in this world of universal interdependence."[4] Arendt is developing Immanuel Kant's famous notion of *sensus communis*, or "enlarged mentality," from the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). This seminal philosophical work, along with writings by eighteenth-century sentimentalists like David Hume and Adam Smith, made interaction, emotional awareness, and mutual recognition essential to the work of judgment.[5] It's part of a line of thought rooted in Aristotelian ethics and extending through Arendt onward to more recent work by literary scholars like Michael W. Clune and Jonathan Kramnick.[6]

My use of the word "theatrical" alongside "judgment" evokes metaphorically the collective, interdependent, and affective nature of judgment within this account. But it's not just a metaphor. Theater iterates, quite literally, judgment in action, providing both a forum and a training ground for ascribing value and making actionable decisions as a group. After all, theater, like most other performance arts, is a fundamentally collaborative enterprise. You're not alone in a room with a pen, a paintbrush, or a block of marble. You're in a space with others. I understand, of course, that visual arts can involve workshops with teams of creators, but theater—in all but very rare cases—systematically does, regardless of whether it's amateur or professional, regardless of the budget. Collectivity is one of the baseline conditions that make theater. A group of people get together and actually make

[2] Foucault 1977, 83.
[3] *Oxford English Dictionary Online* 2025, "judgemental/judgmental, *adj.*," 2.
[4] Arendt 1993, "Truth and Politics," 227–64, 221, 242.
[5] Hume 1978; Kant 1987; Smith 1982.
[6] Clune 2021; Kramnick 2023.

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something: something material and dimensional; an artifact; an event that unfolds in time and space through the transactions of multiple human and nonhuman (props, scenery) things.

All collaboration, if it's to be successful, requires empathy: the ability to think, and perhaps more precisely to feel, from the position of the other, or others, with whom you are making something. How do we empathize? It starts, I would suggest, with listening. If speaking is a form of self-manifestation, of voicing presence either individually or on behalf of a group, listening constitutes an active acknowledgment of those outside the self, the other who, through such acknowledgment, becomes an equal shareholder—intellectually and emotionally—in the common space of creation. Theater requires collaboration, collaboration requires consensus, and consensus—real consensus, the sort that forms the conditions of success for any collective creative or intellectual endeavor—requires empathy, not just a market-based exchange of quantifiable gains.

Collaboration is hard. This is because, for most of us, empathy is hard, and so is listening. These are unpopular things to admit, especially in the context of the modern university, where "collaboration"—along with "interdisciplinarity" and, increasingly, "outreach"—is somewhat sanctimoniously taken as a given of the professional practice of all good academic citizens. I cannot imagine someone saying in an academic interview, "I find collaboration really difficult." This is a shame because part of the value of the enterprise lies precisely in its difficulty. It's hard—to build community, to make compromises, to get only some of the things you want, and to establish trust—but it's worth it.

Students train for this sort of agonistic cooperation when they do performance projects with their peers. I recall two students who came to my office with complaints about the other members of their performance group. The others, they explained, were not putting enough work into the project. They asked if there was a way they could be graded separately. I said no, but more importantly, it occasioned a good conversation about how crucial it is that everyone in the group has a shared destiny. As in all realms of human endeavor—political, cultural, and so forth—theater-making requires a commitment to the notion that *we are all in this together.* In this particular course, called "The Shakespeare Workshop," I now put a few words about collaboration, empathy, and listening on the syllabus, and we talk about it in class too. In a recent iteration of the discussion, the scenario of the interview question on collaboration came up. The students decided that the best answer would be, "I find collaboration really difficult, but I do it anyways."

While collaboration and empathy work in tandem with listening, critical thinking works in tandem with responsibility. In institutional contexts, critical and creative modes of thinking are usually cordoned off from each other, nurtured in separate colleges or faculties, or even at different kinds of higher education establishments, and leveraged toward the ends of very different career paths. In North American universities, even within English departments, literary-critical studies and creative writing are often programmatically distinct. In my field, meanwhile, actors and directors are not infrequently viewed by scholars as lacking sufficient historical knowledge of the texts they are bringing to life, while theater professionals, in turn, sometimes view scholars as fussy antiquarians who fundamentally misunderstand the purpose of dramatic texts.

There are exceptions to all of these scenarios, of course, but as generalizations, they are accurate. Few professional scholars of drama really understand the craft of theater, and I do not think any theater professional would feel that someone wishing to be an actor or

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director would receive the training they need in a university literature department. But institutional conventions aside, critical and creative thought are, in fact, deeply intertwined, something we do well to acknowledge explicitly. I've started emphasizing the point on course syllabi when there's a performance assignment:

> The purpose of the performance project is two-fold: (1) to instill a sense of the crucial relationship between critical and creative engagement with the world, two modes of thought which are often kept separate, but which in fact benefit from, and even depend on, each other in important ways; (2) to learn about theatrical form and experience by *doing* and *making*, not by just thinking and reflecting from a distance. Both forms of engagement are valuable, but in the modern university there tends to be much less of the former, much more of the latter.[7]

This particular passage is for an MA seminar called "Experiments in Theater, 1950 to the Present," in which students are asked to create either a docudrama, using the methodology of American playwright Anna Deavere Smith, or an "object play," using the methodology of English playwright Howard Barker. However, the basic insight here about the relationship between thought-based and craft-based knowledge is relevant to any academic course that integrates performance. In order to create theater—in order, that is, to translate a script into a material and embodied world that exists fully and coherently in time and space—you have to make concrete decisions about what that text means. Or at least what you want to focus on out of any number of possible meanings. One way or another, each individual performance decision—like the total *mise-en-scène*—is necessarily grounded in acts of analysis, reflection, and interpretation, often carried out collectively through discussion and debate, and through trial and error.

What I am describing here is a *practical* form of criticism. It involves the most familiar part of judgment—value-based selection—being communally leveraged toward the creation of something new. To paraphrase Aristotle in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, judgment (what he would call *phronesis*, or prudence) is always a functional virtue. It is to be found in social, material, or otherwise transactional environments, not in solitude. Judgment has less to do with thinking (in our conventional understanding of that term) than it does with making and doing (1140a–b). As this suggests, judgment only truly obtains when acts of discernment are acknowledged and shared by a larger collective of stakeholders (1142a).[8] What Aristotle describes is alive and well in artisanal settings ranging from carpentry and cuisine to choreography and theater, but it's rarely encountered in the modern humanities classroom, where, on the contrary, *resisting* judgment is a prerequisite to developing the most prized skill of all: recognizing the multiplicity of meaning. The one thing that the two most powerful, albeit typically opposed, forces in modern literary studies—New Criticism and Deconstruction—have in common is their commitment to interpretive plurality, to living comfortably in what Jacques Derrida called the aporia of undecidability.[9]

Appreciating performance as a unique laboratory for critical thinking, then, requires first that we distinguish between two different versions of judgment. Modern judgment—biased, elitist, and, well, judgmental—is not the same as the practical, collective, and creative

[7] Course syllabus for "Experiments in Theater, 1950 to the Present," Kevin Curran, autumn 2023, University of Lausanne.

[8] Aristotle 2000.

[9] Derrida 1992. For a representative example of the New Critical version of this sensibility, see Brooks 1947.

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judgment native to Aristotelian philosophy and the practice of theater. Recovering the latter is important because what has arisen in its stead is a cynically market-driven idea that we can somehow ensure equality by withholding human judgment. After all, within a "free market," nothing has intrinsic value and therefore there are no grounds for judgment. Everything, and everyone, is "equal" in its value-free status. Value is ascribed by the supposedly neutral force of the marketplace itself, not by inherently biased human beings. Marketplace equality says that if people will pay $200 for something, it's worth $200; if people will pay $6,000 for it, it's worth $6,000. If it has 20,000 likes, it's "good," whether it's a film or a commercial. According to this logic, to ascribe value and form judgments that are not market-driven is to somehow undermine equality.[10]

But this is faux equality; a capitalist distortion of a sacred concept that eschews the hard and fundamentally *human* work of arriving at value-based decisions through consensus-building. Computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum asserted as early as 1976 that machines can calculate, but they cannot judge.[11] One of the great powers of neoliberalism has been its ability to present the marketplace equality of numbers as equivalent to the real human equality of inclusion, toleration, and open-mindedness, when in fact they are very different things, the former mobilizing the rhetoric of fairness to serve the interests of the few, the latter creating the conditions for the social betterment of the many. Performance demands a kind of judgment that resists the faux equality of the marketplace precisely so as to foster the difficult, agonistic, and hard-earned equality of human community-making. It requires a form of decision-making that cannot be carried out through the value-free determinations of algorithms and data analysis any more than it can through the safely non-committal plurality of New Criticism and Deconstruction.

Don't get me wrong. The ability to embrace plurality and complexity is crucial to social life, and the humanities classroom is a great place to teach that skill. But there's also something to be said for making a decision and taking responsibility for it, especially if that decision is made in a group context and arrived at through a process of consensus-building. One of the first times I taught "The Shakespeare Workshop," a group of students presented a short adaptation of *King Lear* that centered on the famous scene in which two of Lear's daughters cut out Gloucester's eyes, throw them on the ground, and stomp on them for good measure. During the discussion that followed, the group revealed that they struggled with the question of how much to show. After much agonizing, they had decided to show everything. No stylization, no suggestiveness, no symbolism, just a full-on presentation of the extremes of cruelty and physical suffering. They were nervous about this and remained ambivalent until the end. On one hand, the students worried about traumatizing their peers (they issued a trigger warning), not to mention looking silly, flailing around on the ground. On the other hand—and this is their own words, which I wrote down and still have in my notes—they thought it would be interesting to make people feel "ashamed to be watching." There *was* something cartoonish about all the screaming and writhing, the marzipan eyes smashed on the floor. But when the lights went up, there was also a palpable unease among the students who had been seated in a circle around the action.

There's much to say here about the power of theater, even in amateur settings, to create collective experiences of witnessing and accountability. Much to say, as well, about theater's ability to re-sensitize us to things we thought we had been de-sensitized to, like the violence

[10] See further Clune 2021.
[11] Weizenbaum 1976.

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and suffering that forms a thematic through-line on the global "stage." For the purpose of this discussion, however, I merely want to underline that this is an excellent example of students working together to make a concrete decision, commit to that decision, and take responsibility, as a group, for its effects. There was a sense among the students in the group that, despite their reservations, trying to make an audience feel something, especially ethical discomfort, was a worthy endeavor. Indeed, the performance gave rise to a memorable discussion about what kinds of social and moral duties are attendant upon seeing something bad, and why it is that so many of us can watch scenes of global conflict, genocide, and mass migration day after day on our social media feeds and somehow return to the business-as-usual of our everyday lives.

In the literary critical realm, there are many readings of the blinding of Gloucester. Allowing those readings to hang in orbit and speak in unison helps us recognize the scene as a junction for various characterological, historical, and philosophical impulses, a case study in the intricate ways in which dramatic literature makes meaning. But the students who staged the blinding of Gloucester did something different. They debated and interpreted the scene; they built consensus around an actionable decision rooted in that interpretation; and they took responsibility for what happened next. This is judgment in the fullest ethical sense, and it too should be one of the aptitudes fostered by the humanities. Performance offers a particularly compelling arena in which to do so. Theatrical decisions have to be clear and intelligible. When successful, they are grounded in critical thinking that is as rigorous as it is courageous. A passage of text can't mean four things at the same time if you're going to stage it. You have to decide. What does it mean in *this* staging? What do you want it to mean for your audience? And on what grounds do you defend the path you have chosen?

Theatrical judgment, in other words, is about having a stake in something. To judge is to participate, with all the potential risks and rewards that always attend participation. The students who had trouble collaborating and those who staged the blinding of Gloucester opened themselves to the risks of participation when they undertook their performance projects. Once the work began, they engaged in the difficult labor of collaboration. Why? Because they all had something riding on it. This "something" could be as pedestrian as a grade or as righteous as a moral commitment, and anything in between. It doesn't matter. The point is, in all cases, performance and the special kind of critical thinking it requires creates a space where the freedom and determining power of the individual meets the obligation to something larger than the individual: the group and the artistic creation that they together make live and breathe for a moment in time. This sort of balancing act, between freedom and responsibility, lies at the heart of all democratic public life, in all forms and at all scales.

Here, we start to hit on the most important pay-off of performance-based work in the classroom: the way it develops basic competencies essential to world citizenship. For indeed, the key components of judgment—collaboration, empathy, listening, critical thinking, responsibility, and stakeholding—form the cognitive, affective, and ethical bedrock of shared governance and participatory politics, whether in smaller forms, like a family, an academic department, or a dance company; or in larger forms, like a city, a nation, or an international humanitarian alliance. Performance teaches us how to create and maintain worlds in which feeling together is just as important as reasoning alone. Doing theater might not make you a better person, but it affords an opportunity to cultivate your capacity for judgment in the active and social sense.

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Gathering together with others to bear witness, to evaluate, and to collaborate in the process of generating meaning constitutes a training ground for world-making, world-tending, and world-mending. This is crucial because a culture of problem-solving rooted purely in metrics is not sufficient to tackle the complex ethical problems that we face moving forward. We need methods for collaboratively assigning value that are not beholden to ones and zeros or the market logic of capitalist equality. Performance—the applied craft of making a world (big or small), an experience (long or short) that's livable and sharable—offers one place where we can develop these aptitudes.

So, why integrate performance into our teaching? Before receiving that email from the student who now works in global education policy, my answer to this question would have been different. My answer now: because performance serves the deepest, most vocation-oriented function of our jobs: to cultivate more responsible world citizens. If this sounds like a roundabout way of saying that performance can save the world, well, it is. Not directly, not immediately, and not on its own; but in its own small yet important way, performance provides us with the resources necessary for crafting a more optimistic future.

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