

What is Performance? An Introduction to Performance Theory

EN765.01 Fall 2010

Wednesday 2:00-4:25

Carney 307

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Course description

Performance theorist Jon McKenzie writes: “Perhaps one of the most striking cultural paradoxes of the late twentieth century was that while many critics, practitioners, and scholars sadly observed theatre’s precipitous decline as an art form, it nonetheless continued to provide vibrant and supple models for studying and producing events *outside* the theatre.”¹

Performance—as trope, as practice, and now as interdisciplinary field of study—is everywhere in critical discourse today. Yet whether manifest as Richard Schechner’s notion of “twice-behaved behavior,” Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, anthropologist Victor Turner’s model of social drama, or what Rebecca Schneider has termed “explicit female body performance art,” just what constitutes performance today remains unclear. Is it drama, theatre, theory, performance art, or all of the above?

This is more than a question of semantics. Schechner has proposed the dismantling of theatre arts programs so as to fold them into departments of performance studies; such departments already exist at Northwestern University and New York University, as well as in Europe. *The Drama Review*, edited by Schechner, is now subtitled “a Journal of Performance Studies”; other publications dedicated to the field include *Performing Arts Journal* and *Performance Research*. Performance Studies international (PSi) stages international conferences and festival events. Meanwhile, scholar-activists like Jill Dolan have defended the centrality of theatre (and theatre departments) as a site for examining cultural resistance to social norms.

This course has two aims. First, we will provisionally map the still-emerging field of **performance studies**, which fuses theater studies, anthropology, ethnography, and feminist and post-structuralist theory (and thus provides a useful window on these broader discourses). To this end we will read some work by founders of the field—Richard Schechner and Victor Turner—on the relationship between performance and ritual, together with a classic example of applied performance ethnography: Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” of Balinese cock-fighting. We will then move on to read

¹ Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

some other major figures in readings organized according to thematic clusters, so as to introduce performance studies' major concerns.

Second, we will test the utility of the field's primary concepts for the analysis of specific **cultural performances**. These will include popular music (1970s glam rock); plays from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century; feminist performance art; and the documentary performances of Anna Deavere Smith.

Course Requirements and Grading

Work will include brief web-ct postings every other week; a class presentation that links the week's critical reading(s) to its performance text(s); a 5-7 page short paper ("thick description" of a social activity); and a final longer essay (15-20 pages) in which you analyze a theater production or cultural performance of your own choosing—excluding film—integrating at least some of the theory we have read.

Your final grade will be "holistic," with the final paper weighted most heavily (roughly 75%). Do let me know in advance if you have to miss class for any reason. Please take advantage of office hours to try out ideas, seek research advice, and thrash out paper topics. If you find yourself bored, confused, or overwhelmed at any point in the semester, please come and see me.

Required Texts (available at the B.C. Bookstore)

Marvin Carlson, *Performance: An Introduction*
David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly*
Edward Albee, *The Goat*
Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play*
Tony Kushner, *Angels in America (Millennium Approaches and Perestroika)*
Caryl Churchill, *A Number*
Aphra Behn, *The Rover*

I will ask you to go to the O'Neill media center to watch two videos before the date we discuss them in class: *M. Butterfly* and *Fires in the Mirror*.

Some Performance Studies Journals (*not available in O'Neill Periodicals)

Since performance studies is an emerging field, the best way to see what's current is to browse in the journals. I recommend:

The Drama Review
*Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism**
Modern Drama (has occasional articles on performance)
*Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts**
Performing Arts Journal (PAJ)
Theater (Yale)

Theatre Journal
Theatre Research International
Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory

There are also a number of websites devoted to performance art and performance studies, including the Performance Studies International (Psi) website at <http://psi-web.org/>.
Happy hunting!

Tentative Syllabus: “What is Performance?” (Fall 2010)

This syllabus is liable to change at short notice. If you miss a class, please check with a classmate about the assigned readings for the next week.

All of these readings are or will be available on our Blackboard Vista course site, unless otherwise noted. Sign in at cms.bc.edu. (If readings are missing from the site, I can email them to you.)

I have placed our PERFORMANCE TEXTS in **bold**; if the text is a video text, please make arrangements to view it in Media Services *before* class. Please complete all of the readings by the date on which they are due; these are demanding, so mark them up with questions, comments, ideas. Circle key passages you wish to discuss in class.

Postings to web-ct (aim for 1-2 short paragraphs) should be made no later than 10am on each class day; feel free to use my questions as a jumping-off point. Posting groups A and B will alternate weeks.

Introduction to Performance Studies

Sep 8 Introduction to Course

Performance and Anthropology I: From Ritual to Theatre

Sep 15 Readings:

Victor Turner, “Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural studies of theatre and ritual*, ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (8-19).

Richard Schechner, “Restoration of Behavior,” in *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (35-116).

Marvin Carlson, “The performance of culture: anthropological and ethnographic approaches,” in *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (11-30)

Discussion questions: What connections do Turner and Schechner see between ritual and performance? How useful is the idea of performance “universals”?

Performance and Anthropology II: Ethnographies of Performance

Sep 22 Readings:

Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” *Daedalus* 101 (1972): 1-38.

Joseph Roach, “Mardi Gras Indians and Others: Genealogies of American Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 44 (1992): 461-83.

Discussion questions: How effective is Geertz’s reading of the Balinese cockfight as a cultural “text”? What assumptions do these cultural ethnographers make about their subjects? If you were to do an “ethnography of performance,” what topic would you choose, and why?

Performance, Authenticity, and Popular Culture: The Case of Glam Rock

Sep 29 **Glam Rock Performance (in-class video)**

Readings:

Philip Auslander, “Inauthentic Voices: Gender Bending and Genre Blending with Bryan Ferry and Roy Wood,” *Performing Glam Rock* (150-92)

Performance and Sociology: Goffman, Pinter, and the Semiotics of Everyday Life

Oct 6 Readings:

Harold Pinter, *Party Time* (in-class showing)

Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: “Self-Presentation,” “Social Life as Drama.”

Erving Goffman, “Keys and Keying” in *Frame Analysis* (40-82)

Carlson, “Performance in society: sociological and psychological approaches,” in *Performance: a Critical Introduction* (31-55)

Discussion questions: How does Goffman distinguish theatrical performance from “the performance of everyday life”? How useful is Goffman’s terminology (framing, bracketing, keying, etc.) for the analysis of cultural performances? For Pinter’s drama?

Performing Identities I: Performing Race/Performing Gender: Playwright David Henry Hwang

Oct 13 Readings:

David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (Please view film AFTER reading play but BEFORE class)

Critical essay TBA

Discussion questions: What is Hwang's analysis of the relationship between racial, gender, and national "misidentifications" in the play? How does his rejection of stage realism echo or complicate his themes?

Feminist Performances I: Female Body Performance Art

Oct 20 **Paper 1 ("Thick Description") due**

In-class screening: *Sphinxes Without Secrets: Women Performance Artists Speak Out* (video)

Readings:

Jeanie Forte, "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism" in *Performing Feminisms* (251-67)

Carlson, "Performance and Identity," in *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (157-78)

Discussion questions: How does Forte theorize female performance art? Do you find her approach convincing?

Judith Butler, Caryl Churchill, and Performative Identity

October 27 Readings:

Caryl Churchill, *A Number*

J. L. Austin, Lecture I, in *How To Do Things With Words*, in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 1 (91-96)

Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms* (270-82)

Discussion questions: What does Austin mean by “the performative?”
How does Butler apply this concept to gender constitution? Is her
argument convincing? How much room does Butler’s theory leave for the
subversion of gender norms?

Feminist Performances II: Theorizing the Politics of Representation in Seventeenth-Century England

Nov 3 Readings:

Aphra Behn, *The Rover*

Elin Diamond, “*Gestus* and Signature in Aphra Behn’s *The Rover*,” *ELH* 56 (1989): 519-41.

Discussion questions: To what extent does performance theory illuminate the politics of sexual representation in Restoration drama?

Performing America: Tony Kushner

Nov 10 Readings:

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (both parts)

David Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation,” *Theatre Journal* 47 (1995): 207-27.

Queering Performance: Edward Albee

Nov 17 **Abstract and Preliminary Bibliography due**

Readings:

Edward Albee, *The Goat*

Edward Albee, “About this Goat,” *Stretching My Mind* (259-63)

J. Ellen Gainer, “Albee’s *The Goat*: Rethinking Tragedy for the 21st Century,” *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee* (202-16).

Annamarie Jagose, “Queer Theory,” *Australian Humanities Review* Online, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-Dec-1996/jagose.html>

Discussion questions: In what senses is *The Goat* a “queer” play? Does it succeed as tragedy?

Nov 24 NO CLASS—THANKSGIVING BREAK

Performing Identities II: Anna Deavere Smith

Dec 1 Readings:

Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (VIDEO—watch in O’Neill before class)

Carol Martin, “Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You,” *TDR* 37 (1992): 45-62.

Richard Schechner, “Anna Deavere Smith: Acting as Incorporation,” *TDR* 37 (1992); 63-64.

Discussion questions: How would you describe what Smith does: acting, performance, mimicry, parody? How effective are her techniques? To what extent does she wish us to sympathize with her subjects?

Writing Performance

**Dec 10 Student Presentations
Final Paper due**

Readings:

Carlson, “What is performance?” in *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (205-16)

SOME KEY TERMS (AND SOME THINKERS ASSOCIATED WITH THEM) IN PERFORMANCE STUDIES

appropriation

framing

Erving Goffman

liminal and liminoid

Victor Turner

“not me / not not me”

Richard Schechner

ostension (semiotization)

Umberto Eco (borrowing from Prague structuralists)

performance art

performance ethnography

Dwight Conquergood, Clifford Geertz, Joseph Roach, Victor Turner

performativity, performative

Judith Butler (borrowing from J. L. Austin)

performative writing

Peggy Phelan

queer/queering

representation vs. reproduction

Peggy Phelan

restored behavior

Richard Schechner

rites of passage

Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner

social drama

Victor Turner

surrogation

Joseph Roach

thick description

Clifford Geertz

transgression vs. resistance

Philip Auslander

twice-behaved behavior

Richard Schechner

A FEW DEFINITIONS OF PERFORMANCE

[Cultural performances are] occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others.

John J. MacAloon, *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (1984)

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Performance is a specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, almost invariably clearly separated from the rest of life, presented by performers and attended by audiences both of whom regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in—emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically. This particular sense of occasion and focus as well as the overarching social envelope combine with the physicality of theatrical performance to make it one of the most powerful and efficacious procedures that human society has developed for the endlessly fascinating process of cultural and personal self-reflexion and experimentation.

Marvin Carlson, “Conclusion: What is Performance?” (1996)

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An expanded view of performance requires more than simply adding to the inventory of what has historically been considered theatre (or oral interpretation). It requires a reconceptualization of performance in light of each and every inclusion. In other words, performance is a responsive concept, rather than a procrustean bed. It is not simply a big tent under which all may gather, but an organizing concept under revision in light of the many activities to which it is addressed.

Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, “Performance Studies” (2002)

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Performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge.

Performance is a mode of power, one that underwrites the reading machines [interrelated discursive paradigms] of Performance Studies, Performance Management, and Techno-Performance and, beyond them, challenges forth the world to perform—or else. . . . Performance, I argue, is the stratum of power/knowledge that emerged in the US in the late twentieth century. Discursive performatives and embodied performatives are the knowledge-forms of this power.

Jon McKenzie, *Perform Or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001).