

INTERCULTURALIST THEATRE PRACTICE AND THE POSTMODERN DEBATE

Brian Singleton

Theatre practice, (the manifestations of theatre as a cultural process), is in a constant state of flux and change, where the dialectic between production and reception (ie. meaning) is unfixed, transient and nascent. The transience and impermanence of the theatre process makes it the most postmodern of all cultural forms. Theatre is modern (it has been): theatre practice is postmodern (it has yet to be). By differentiating between the essentially modernist "avant-garde" and the reappropriation of the classics, this paper examines specific examples of the postmodernity of "mises en scène," particularly the intercultural. The eclecticism of interculturalism has helped theatre expend itself. Theatre practice is thus an act of "erasure." Its temporally transient nature turns the reality of its production into a fiction. Interculturalist theatre is the simulation of a reality, the representation of a myth, and an act of implosion. It merits, therefore, a greater place in the postmodern debate.



In June 1992 at a round table conference entitled "Is there Cultural Life After the Death of Modernism?", Declan McGonagle, director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Dublin), formerly and still popularly known as the Royal Hospital (a suitably postmodern collision of heavily coded name tags and identities), opened the debate with a statement relevant most of all to the practice of theatre:

Artists are engaged in a cultural process not in the creation of a product.
Non-artists are participants in that process. ¹

Here McGonagle empowers the audience with an essential function within an act of artistic exchange while artist and spectator share the same social contextual frame.

The essential point McGonagle makes is that theatre, more than any other cultural form, is a process in transience. Television, video, cinema, painting, sculpture all exist discretely and are reproducible, the former by means of technological recording. Theatre's manifestation is only through performance and a performance is a SNAPSHOT of that cultural form in process, the current snapshot being, interculturalist. Since theatre is thus a constantly changing snapshot with no suitable means of recording it without resorting to the

technology of another cultural form, it is not a reproducible product. Its performativity level, in capitalist terms, is low – even though its exchange value is high in that it accords itself a high price tag.

Theatre practice, that is the manifestations of theatre as a cultural process, is in a constant state of flux and change, where the dialectic between production and reception (ie. meaning) is unfixed and transient, indeed constantly nascent. In “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?”, Jean-Francois Lyotard says:

A work can only become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant. ²

According to Lyotard’s definition, therefore, the transience and impermanence of theatre practice (or theatre process) makes it the most postmodern of all cultural forms. Theatre is modern (it has been): theatre practice is postmodern (it has yet to be).

There is at this point a very important distinction to be made between postmodern theatre (otherwise known as avant-garde theatre) and theatre practice. The avant-garde could be regarded as a twentieth-century moveable feast from Dada, Surrealism, Artaud, etc., to all of which theorists have turned to historicize theatre and postmodernism without taking into account modernity and postmodernity. Others look back to the theatre of the absurd of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, etc., or in other words the *reductio ad absurdum* of pre-Second World War existentialist theories. The theatre of the absurd, more often than not, functions on a spectator’s internal dialectic of expectation and frustration. In “The Detective and the Boundary” in 1972 William Spanos saw:

The postmodern absurdists interpret this obsession with the rigidly causal plot of the well-made work of the humanistic tradition, as catering to and thus further hardening the expectation of – and aggravating the need for – the rational solution generated by the scientific analysis of man-in-the-world. ³

Both types of theatre (the pre- and post-Surrealist Artaudian theatre, and the frustration/expectation dialectic of the postmodern absurd) in their own historical periods displace the narrative, the prescription of postmodern theories. Yet these theatres have their own in-built sense: they make sense of themselves, of their own non-sense. They operate a form of narrative closure in that their spectators rapidly acquire cognitive knowledge of non-expectation of closure and solution. This makes them not postmodern at all, but actually modern. “All that has been received, if only yesterday [...] must be suspected.” ⁴

In her book *Voice in Modern Theatre*, Jacqueline Martin sees postmodern theatre as a distinct, identifiable commodity which, in her opinion,

is largely americanocentric. The divergent practices of Joseph Chaikin, Richard Schechner, Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson are cited as examples:

The leading characteristics of postmodern theatre are as follows; form dominates over content; fragmentation seems to be the aim; there is no linear narrative; there is an 'irrational' attitude to the series of events; it is a polyphonic theatre ...⁵

There can be no argument that Lyotard's prescription for the absence of a grand narrative in this type of theatre is true here. If we take Martin's commodified interpretation of the notion of postmodern theatre and apply it to European theatre in this particular form, we come across the work of the German Tanztheater choreographers such as Kurt Joos, Reinhild Hoffmann, Pina Bausch and Johann Kresnik, all of whom have located the site of meaning in the body and the body-in-image; and companies such as the Welsh Brith Gof and Scottish Test Department, who employ an image and image-disruption technique in site-specific arenas. Butoh, the Japanese post-shingeki theatre form which borders on performance art, takes choreographic performance to the point where the body becomes totally architecturalised. The focus of all these practices is shifted away from the text, from readerly performances (in the Barthes sense) to writerly performances. But this leads to spectators losing sight of the need or even desire to produce meaning.

Jean Baudrillard claims that this kind of cultural process in the media destroys the possibility of a cultural critique of the social:

Instead of causing communication, *it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication*; instead of producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning.⁶

Applied to theatre it suffers from an implosion, where the reality and the referent are one and the same. It is a theatre of self-referentiality and meta-theatrical self-consciousness. Thus it is ultimately a "grand-narrative" and, therefore, not postmodern at all. Furthermore, implosion implies absence. In contemporary performance theory there appears to be an overwhelming desire to locate theatre practices in the domains of the modern and the postmodern, and in the theories of postmodernism there is no more than a token (and often a notable absence) of theatre. To attempt to do this is a futile effort to record and locate, as the process of theatre is unseen and the practice of theatre unfixed. This has led to practitioner/critics to the conclusion that the unstable temporal nature of theatre forces it to "disappear." In the postmodern world theatre disposes of itself.

If meta-theatrical avant-garde theatre, then, is a modernist concept, where do we place the reinterpretation of the classics in the postmodern debate? In his article "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre," Patrice Pavis outlines the rejection of dramatic heritage by postmodern theatre:

Postmodern theatre seems unwilling to listen or to talk about textual or theatrical heritage, which it treats as no more than memory in the technical sense of that word, as an immediately available and reusable memory bank.⁷

There is an argument that the “dusting off” of the classics is both a bourgeois and modernist concept. This is refutable in that there must be a distinction made between the classical “text” and the *mise en scène*. The latter is not the domain for the historicist or for the director who wishes to point out the contemporary relevance of the modernist text. Post-structuralist theorists have long since dismissed this notion. Any *mise en scène*, whether it be non-verbal, dance, or even text-based is created on the stage, it has not yet happened. In the case of text-based theatre, *mise en scène* of classical texts, therefore, is not, of course, postmodern theatre since its textual base has not originated in the postmodern era. *Mise en scène* of classical texts can be viewed as postmodernism in theatre practice, or theatre practice in process.

In the case of the *mise en scène* of classical texts, theory can and does overflow into practice. The French director, Daniel Mesguich, who cites amongst others, Lacan, Cixous and Blanchot as his influences, has been engaged for the last twenty years with theory in practice. In 1987, after a ten-year gap and a move to the Theatre Gerard Philipe de Saint-Denis, he returned to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and introduced his new Parisian audience to his first interpretation in a programme-manifesto:

When an actor comes on stage he does not tread the boards but, and this is true of non-text based theatre, he treads the arduous path between the Written and the Spoken Word.

This manifesto was interestingly named *The Book to Come is A Theatre*. His intention in directing the first *Hamlet* was to engage with Jacques Derrida’s notion of deconstruction and find a suitable praxis for the theory. Thus the performance was entitled not simply *Hamlet* but *Shakespeare’s Hamlet*. This title was not just to question the authorship of performance but to bring to bear on the stage the notion that *Hamlet* is not a discrete unit “dusted off.” When performed, it brings with it a host of intertextual references which cannot be dusted off. In practice this meant that behind a curtain there was a second *Hamlet* in progress, a few steps ahead of the main stage version. This corresponds to Lee Breuer’s notion of “layering” and Herbert Blau’s conception of “ghosting.” In his 1989 *Titus Andronicus* the stage became the Shakespeare library. Everything that has been written and said about Shakespeare was on the shelves. This does not so much correspond to Derrida’s deconstruction but more to Baudrillard’s “implosion” where the myth and the reality are indistinguishable. In his analysis of the latter performance Georges Baal moves Mesguich’s work away from the deconstructionism of Derrida (whom Mesguich so often quoted in the past) to the Lacanian school of psychoanalysis, where the

theatrical language of the stage is structured like a language.⁸ In both productions Pavis would argue that this is not postmodern theatre, that Mesguich can only “inherit the faculty of replaying the past.”⁹ But here we must pose the question of historiographical layering as part of *mise en scène* being postmodern and the question of authority of narrative. The text (narrative) and the performance text (*mise en scène*) must be separated, or at least we must include the narrative text as an element of the *mise en scène*. Lyotard could be used to back up this belief:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unattainable.¹⁰

Mise en scène, therefore, is not the manifestation of nostalgia. It is the recognition that theatre practice must be unhinged from its textual referent, and that it is never fixed.

Another recent example of *mise en scène* being mistaken for a manifestation of nostalgia is the 1991 production of Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin by feminist director Garry Hynds. On the level of the director’s micro-politics, Hynds’ *mise en scène* challenged, from the outset, the hegemony of a century’s practice. This production caused a furore in the Irish press, due largely to the decentering of the dominant ideology inscribed in the politics of the Irish Revolution of 1916. This was the political challenge. But there was also a theatrical challenge in that a received “naturalistic” text was being represented by a pseudo-expressionistic *mise en scène* which theatrically mirrored the shift in ideology and ultimately led, therefore, to a conflict of dominant and deviant discourses. It was not a collage, but a collision on a social, political and theatrical level. The audience was expecting a reaffirmation of the dominant discourse as has been inscribed in, and subsequently layered on the text, and instead received a deviant feminist discourse on a theatrical level. This kind of *mise en scène* cannot be described as a manifestation of nostalgia. Its practice unhinged itself from its textual ideological referent, and by so doing disempowered the dominant discourse. This, I believe, challenges those critics who decry postmodernism as depoliticized, not on a purely political level, but on the micro-political/cultural interface of feminist praxis.

In both text-based and non-verbal theatre practice it has been the theatrical form which has discredited the grand narrative. Discredited or not, displaced or not, the narrative continues to be the focus of attention. What has happened in theatre practice in the postmodern “age” is the shift of emphasis from producer to consumer, from practitioner to spectator. In the 1970s Peter

Stein's Theater am Halleschen Ufer (Schaubühne) in Berlin and Ariane Mnouchkine's Theatre du Soleil (Cartoucherie) in Paris have decentered theatre activity by creating performances in a) a disused film studio and b) a disused munitions factory. The change of venue did not simply mark a shift in location, it also meant a change in audience ethnography. Stein's *Shakespeare's Memory* (1975) was an attempt to rehistoricise Shakespeare in Germany by taking his work away from the Romantic period when he was first translated by Schlegel and Tieck and presenting the popular theatre forms of the Elizabethan era in a loose unstructured form. Ariane Mnouchkine's *1789* and *1793*¹¹ used popular theatre forms to present in multi-focused spectacles a rehistoricised version of the French revolution from the point of view of strolling players and participants in the historical events of 1789. In both productions it was the spectators who were being asked to assemble meaning from a collage of images and scenes, often simultaneous, which forced them to make choices which, because of the nature of the material, were often political choices. This reintegration of popular theatre forms in avant-garde European theatre in the 1970s not only changed the genre of performance it also changed the social allegiance of the audiences. This type of theatre practice became an empowering agent at a time when in reality practitioners and spectators alike were suffering from post-1968 feelings of depression and impotence.

The Americano- and Eurocentric theatres of the eighties and onwards have been marked by the latest avant-garde: interculturalism, which from the outset has been savaged by postmodernist critics as a western cultural appropriation in the modernist sense, which has set up a dialectic between a source culture and a target culture, the target culture being dominant, imperialist, colonial, orientalist¹² and exploitative. Patrice Pavis in *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*¹³ specifically targets the work of Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine for using Indian culture as their source material. Their work, with the exception of Brook's *Mahabharata* (1988), could be summarized simply as using the codified forms of Eastern cultures for the presentation of European classical texts, such as Goethe, Aeschylus and Shakespeare. These are often seen as the declaration of a dominant and eurocentric ego; a sign of connoisseurship.

Daryl Chin in "Interculturalism, Postmodernism, Pluralism" is representative of many:

Hidden in the agenda of postmodernism is, I think, a rebuke, an insult, a devaluation. Instead of recognizing the status of the "other" as an equal, there is the undermining of "the other" by a declared indifference to distinction, while attempting to maintain the same balance of power.¹⁴

There could be said to be an element of truth in this as regards Brook's *Mahabharata* in that the culture was textually removed from its source, but not all European interculturalist theatre exploits or imports. It can also emulate and

learn from certain manifestations of “the other” culture for itself. Take Ariane Mnouchkine’s *Les Shakespeare* (1981-4), for example, which was a *mise en scène* distinctly European, French translation of seventeenth-century texts, and the codified rereadings of several Eastern theatre forms. Surely this kind of theatre implies a weakness, a lack, an absence in our European/Western culture? And so this notion of a dichotomy between source and target cultures (and cultural capital) crumbles.

It is “the other,” the Non-Western culture, in its ability to survive colonialism, in its robustness, and, most important of all, in its present desirability by Western cultures that makes it dominant. It is not a product (like sugar cane or labour force) that Euroculture is plundering, as the non-western cultures remain intact, unharmed. Euro-and americanocentric theatre has lost its force as a political process, not on an actual level alone, but according to Lyotard, on an ethical level as well. As David George says: “To be modern today is thus to have been; to be postmodern is yet to be.”¹⁵ The nascence of interculturalism is the current snapshot in the cultural process that is theatre. It is theatre at its most postmodern. Mnouchkine’s latest production *Les Atrides* is a mixture of Greek theatre texts in translation, Thai dancing, Noh masks. This calls to mind Stephen Connor’s quip in *Postmodernist Culture*: “Post-Modern Theory is like the Toyota of thought; produced and assembled in different places and sold everywhere.”¹⁶ If Mnouchkine’s theatre is thus the Toyota of postmodern theatre, the avant garde modernist theatre must then be the Trabant of thought.

Both Erika Fischer-Lichte and Patrice Pavis identify a parallel rivalry between the two, concluding what I would call modernist avant-garde theatre as a postmodern supracultural product “a quest for foreign sensuality and for coded abstraction”¹⁷ Pavis goes on to distinguish the internationalist abstraction of such theatres as those of Robert Wilson:

Culture thus conveyed no longer bears any resemblance to reality; it bypasses any reference to nature or humanity; it has become a coded, abstract language, whose value resides in its syntax and programming, but which says literally nothing about the phenomenal world. This is a phenomenon of normalization and internationalization (rather than interculturalism) that facilitates the exchange of theatrical products, once they have been frozen in a visual phantasmagoria so powerful that it dispenses with the text or cultural allusions, as with an anxiety of origins or any concern for ideological determination.¹⁸

Thus there is a distinction to be made between what is considered to be the international or multinational postmodern theatre and intercultural theatre in that the former is internationalist, but not intercultural. The interculturalists are accused of not taking responsibility for our/their own history, of escapism, but I would argue that interculturalism uses the other culture in order to find ways of coming to terms with our own colonial past (cf. Mnouchkine’s *Sihanouk*, and

L'Indiade). It implies a certain degree of self-denial and also of resorting and sampling.

Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta's collection of *Performing Arts Journal* articles in their book *Interculturalism and Performance* have taken the lead in developing the debate on interculturalist theatre and postmodernism. In her article "Thinking about Interculturalism,"¹⁹ Bonnie Marranca sees the interculturalists' search for the real, "authentic" experience in non-Western cultures is a sign of anti-modernism. Frantisek Deak, in an article on the Yaqui Easter dance,²⁰ tentatively suggests that the new-wave traditionalism, neo-conservatism, in its internationalism of culture, might be postmodern since he considers it to be a liberating force from the constraints of tradition, nationality, class and culture.

But what is the result? Is there, as Pavis argues, a submersion, and appropriation of a source culture? Carl Weber disagrees:

Often the foreign text is deconstructed, the resultant findings then rearranged according to codes inscribed in the native culture, and an original performance text constructed. Eventually the model "disappears" in a new text or technique, which gains its own identity of form and content.²¹

The eclectic aesthetics of interculturalist theatre forces the source and target texts to give way to a new supra-cultural product. Richard Schechner justifies this:

No culture is 'pure' – that is, no culture is 'itself'. Overlays, borrowings and mutual influencings have always made every culture a conglomerate, a hybrid, a palimpsest. So much so that we should probably not speak of 'culture' but of 'cultures'.²²

Interculturalist theatre, like theatre translation, is not the simple act of appropriation, but of making the manifestations of two cultures "dis-appear." The hybrid cultural product that results from a possible act of appropriation is not at the interface of source and target cultures, at all. This is a modernist concept of binary opposites in theatre which, when performed, is suspended – and ultimately vanishes.

As for the accusation of depoliticization and neo-conservatism, interculturalist theatre, with its quest for the "other" is a challenge to national dominant ideologies, which, on an ethical level, becomes a politically empowering agent. To seek a grand narrative in a range of Oriental sign systems with a textual touchstone in translation on top of all this, that is the challenge the spectator meets in interculturalist performance: to seek to reconcile the irreconcilable. This is Lyotard's nostalgia for the unattainable in theatre practice. Intercultural theatre can thus be considered as postmodern. It is not depoliticized. In fact those same interculturalist directors with their politics of

the Left in 1968 denied themselves interculturalism as a self-renewing agent at the time. In the 1980s and onwards they have to varying degrees of success micropoliticized theatre by turning to intercultural practices.

It would be wrong to label all interculturalist theatre practice postmodern, but it must be recognized that it also defies labels such as anti-modernist and neo-conservative. Interculturalism has helped theatre practice free itself from its popular image as a spent political force: its eclecticism has made it expend itself. Thus it is through interculturalism that we come to the conclusion that theatre practice (*mise en scène*) is an act of "erasure."²³ Its temporally transient nature turns the reality of its production into a fiction. Interculturalist theatre is the simulation of a reality and the representation of a myth. In Baudrillard's terms its performance is an act of implosion. Interculturalist theatre practice (in all its guises) merits, therefore, a greater place in the postmodern debate.

Trinity College, Dublin

NOTES

1. IMMA (the Dublin equivalent of London's ICA) hosts concerts, exhibitions, workshops and performances of all cultural forms prepared to experiment with its spaces. The conference cited was a supplementary activity to an exhibition of Terry Atkinson's post-1987 work entitled "Mute 3." The governing idea in Atkinson's art is the relationship between language and picture, and between action and language.
2. Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism," in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press, 1984): 79.
3. William Spanos, "The Detective and Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination," in Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, (Edward Arnold, 1992): 80.
4. Lyotard (1984): 79.
5. Jacqueline Martin, *Voice in Modern Theatre*, (Routledge, 1991): 119.
6. Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or, the End of the Social* (Semiotext(e), 1983): 97-8.
7. Patrice Pavis, "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre," *Modern Drama*, XXIX, 1 (March 1986): 1.
8. See Georges Baal, "Titus Andronicus directed by Daniel Mesguich: The Other Stage Beyond Misery," *Theatre Research International*, 16, 2 (Summer 1991): 109-128.
9. Pavis (1986): 20.
10. Lyotard (1984): 81.

11. *1789 (La Revolution doit s'arreter a la perfection du bonheur)*, 1970;
1793 (La cite revolutionnaire est de ce monde), 1972.
12. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (Penguin, 1985).
13. Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, (Routledge, 1992), chapters 7 and 8.
14. See Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta (eds.), *Interculturalism and Performance*, (Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1991): 85.
15. David George, "On Ambiguity: Towards a Post-Modern Performance Theory," *Theatre Research International*, 14, 1 (Spring 1989): 82.
16. First cited in Stephen Connor, "Postmodernism in a Nominalist Frame: The Emergence and Diffusion of a Cultural Category," *Flash Art*, 137 (1987): 51.
17. Pavis (1992): 211.
18. *Ibid.*: 211.
19. Marranca and Dasgupta (1991): 15.
20. Frantisek Deak, "Yaqui Easter: A Reflection on Cross-Cultural Experience," in Marranca and Dasgupta (1991): 143.
21. Carl Weber, "AC/TC: Currents of Theatrical Exchange," in Marranca and Dasgupta (1991): 34.
22. Richard Schechner, "Intercultural Themes," in Marranca and Dasgupta (1991): 308.
23. See Johannes Birringer, *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism*, (Indiana University Press, 1991): 15.

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Η θεατρική πρακτική (οι εκδηλώσεις του θεάτρου ως πολιτισμικής διαδικασίας), αλλάζει συνεχώς, ενώ ταυτόχρονα η διαλεκτική μεταξύ παραγωγής και πρόσληψης (δηλαδή, του νοήματος) είναι με τη σειρά της ασταθής, μεταβλητή και αναγεννώμενη. Η μεταβλητότητα και αστάθεια της θεατρικής διαδικασίας την καθιστά την πλέον μετανεωτερική όλων των πολιτισμικών μορφών. Το θέατρο είναι (ήταν) νεωτερικό: η θεατρική πρακτική είναι (θα γίνει) μετανεωτερική. Διακρίνοντας μεταξύ της ουσιαστικά νεωτερικής «πρωτοπορίας» και της επανοικειοποίησης των κλασικών, η εργασία εξετάζει συγκεκριμένα παραδείγματα της μετανεωτερικής σκηνοθεσίας, ειδικά της διαπολιτισμικής. Ο διαπολιτιστικός εκλεκτισμός συνετέλεσε στην ανάλωση του θεάτρου. Η θεατρική πρακτική είναι συνεπώς μια πράξη «διαγραφής». Η εφήμερη φύση της μετατρέπει την πραγματικότητα της παραγωγής της σε μυθολογία. Το διαπολιτισμικό θέατρο είναι ένα ομοίωμα της πραγματικότητας, η αναπαράσταση ενός μύθου και μια πράξη ενδόρησης. Του αξίζει λοιπόν μια καλύτερη θέση μέσα στη συζήτηση για το μετανεωτερισμό.