

## **EXPERIMENTAL-POLITICAL THEATRE IN EUROPE AND AMERICA**

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### **Abstract**

This work explores the contributions of the pioneers of Experimental and Political Theatre in Europe and other parts of the world. It highlights the contributions of Richard Schechner, Jerzy Grotowski Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, Mary Overlie, and the likes of Robert Wilson, Lee Breuer, Judith Malina, and Julian Beck (The Living Theatre), the Wooster Group, French director Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Brook Heiner Müller, Einar Schleef. The impacts of these forerunners in the experimental-political theatre on the works of Eva Brenner and her Project Theatre Studio are articulated to stimulate further discussion on the practicality and functionality of Experimental-political theatre on the modern stage.

**Keywords:** Experimental theatre, Political theatre, Projekt Theatre Studio Vienna Austria, Environmental theatre

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### **Introduction**

I am here considering exclusively those masters of contemporary experimental and political theatre who have had a direct influence on my work – masters whom I have personally studied with, to the exclusion of Jerzy Grotowski whose work has come down to me through

younger US master-teachers. I've had the privilege to study with some of them at NYU (New York University) in the 1980s and they have had a lasting impact on my further development as an artist. Likewise, they have shaped some of the best political theatre artists of my generation worldwide. It can be contested that these visionaries have significantly influenced the development of avant-garde theatre and dance over the last 50 years, in theory and practice. To be sure, many other avantgardists of the theatre should be named but cannot be discussed further within the scope of this work. These include but are not limited to the likes of Robert Wilson, Lee Breuer, Judith Malina, and Julian Beck (The Living Theatre), the Wooster Group, French director Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Brook Heiner Müller, Einar Schleef. The short overview of modern political theatre outlines avant-garde theatrical developments up to recent post-dramatic tendencies which followed on the heel in the 1980s, with an overlap of modernist, post-modernist, and "classical" avantgardist positions overlapping. It is important to state that the so-called alternative or "other theatre" (a term coined by Eugenia Barba, premiere disciple of Jerzy Grotowski's) must be considered an experimental-political theatre movement of historical impact as it arose in Europe and the US after World War II. It has without doubt revolutionized our conceptions of theatre ever since.

1. ***Modern history of political theatre -  
beginning with Brecht  
Short Description of a New Technique of  
Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect***

*What follows represents an attempt to describe a technique of acting that was applied in certain theatres (i) to take the incidents portrayed and alienate them from the spectator. The aim of this technique, known as the alienation effect, was to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident. The means were artistic.*

*...  
The first condition for the A-effect's application to this end is that the stage and auditorium must be purged of everything 'magical' and that no 'hypnotic tensions' ... As will be seen presently, the audience's tendency to plunge into such illusions has to be checked by specific artistic means. (1)*

*An alienated image recognizes the object, but at the same time makes it appear alien. (2)*

**Bertolt Brecht** (1898-1956) – a seminal dramaturg, director, poet, and essayist, was one of the most important personalities of European culture of the 20th century, one of the most-produced playwrights worldwide, certainly on the German-speaking stage. However, during the last period of theatrical evolution, Brecht productions constituted a minority in programming, perhaps outside of classics such as *Mother Courage and Threepenny Opera* which afford broad entertaining aspects. Despite Brecht's decidedly political contents and forms, mainstream productions tend to deprive his work of its radical political and artistic edge. Nevertheless, contemporary theatre, be it conventional European state- and city theatre, avant-garde-, or

modern-day experimental theatre would be fundamentally unthinkable without Brecht. The political theatre-avantgarde, in turn, is particularly indebted to the most radical phase of Brecht's career, when he was evolving the so-called educational plays or „Lehrstücke“ during the early 1930s, the final years of the Weimar Republic, just before he had to escape Nazi-Germany in fear of persecution. The educational play thrives on being played and not on being seen – meaning that everyone can play – as well as on audience participation. This pursues the concept that by examining social attitudes through playing, by learning collectively while carrying out a (theatrical) action, by rehearsing/repeating, changing, observing, reflecting, and criticizing. (3).

Brecht's conception of separation of theatrical elements, of putting mechanisms of social and class relations clearly on display, and of creating a collective agency that, via script-based theatre, aimed at removing power from writers and directors into the hands of the acting ensemble, are part of contemporary experimental theatre's canon. Within this framework, a group or collective working and living together established the basic unit of creation, as can be best demonstrated with the legendary Living Theatre, a radical anarchist-pacifist theatre-collective founded in New York in 1947 by Judith Malina, a disciple of Brecht-contemporary Erwin Piscator, and Julian Beck. The Living Theatre spread out internationally and through its offspring continued production in American and European countries until recent years. It gave rise to new theatre groups and experiments by individual artists around the globe.

"Perhaps the essence of epic theatre is that it appeals not so much to the viewer's feelings but rather than his or her rationality. The viewer is not supposed to experience, but to engage with it". (4). Brecht belongs to a young and angry artistic generation shaped by the First World War and the period of poverty and unrest that followed; he experienced firsthand the end of the German Empire and the election of Hitler as Chancellor. Despite hardships and persecution – even in his US exile – his view is never pessimistic, he always pursues the human potential to give rise to new forms of social conditions, and of a theatre for the "scientific age" as he called it, where class-conscious dialogues or confrontation allow for the articulation of conflict and dissent. (5)

### **On Experimental Theatre (Bertolt Brecht, 1939)**

In his seminal essay, "On Experimental Theatre," Brecht delivers an in-depth history of theatrical experiments – formalistic and political experiments – undertaken during the early 20th century. He discusses the theatre of German director, Erwin Piscator (1893–1966), who fashioned a highly technical theatre form of political commentary with large-scale constructivist sets, documentary film projections, and direct political statements. He reviews the work of theatrical innovators Vsevolod Meyerhold, Max Reinhardt, and Konstantin Stanislavsky, tracing through modern theatre two dividing lines running from Naturalism and Expressionism to Epic Theatre. On the whole, experimental theatre helped to produce a fusion of styles as it challenged new transformative experiences for both actors and audiences. It provides a theatre as a "model of

men's life together such as could help the spectator to understand his social environment and to both rationally and emotionally master it" (6).

### **The Street Scene (1938)**

For practical experiments, I usually picked as my example of completely simple, "natural" epic theatre an incident such as can be seen at any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place. (7) In another paradigmatic essay, Brecht outlines a modern street scene as a prototype for theatre and specifically the type of „epic theatre“ he was keen to develop. The new technique relies on qualities of clear description and reporting based on the so-called **Alienation-effect (A-effect)** which detaches the actor from actions and emotions of his character, either by gestural work, use of choruses, commentaries, titles, and open display of technical means of theatrical construction (the legendary "Brecht-curtain" covering only parts of the proscenium) as well as projections. All these means are in the service of distancing, i.e. historicizing the actions from the plays' content. It is a narrative replacement of of en-acting approach whereby the spectator is led to look at the play's complex, contradictory situations, historical contexts, and play's characters from such an angle as to make them "unfamiliar", i.e. subject to criticism. In Brecht's view, this procedure stimulates the spectator to reconsider what is seen as "normal" (familiar) by pointing to humanity's capacity to change the world. This way, the theatre becomes a tool for raising social consciousness and propels the spectators to take action outside of the theatre. Accordingly, street theatre has

the practical-political significance of marking possibilities of change while people are watching a very simple demonstration of an accident.

### **On epic styles of acting**

In Brecht's theatre, plays become instructive rather than focused on entertainment and "great acting". "Epic theatre" argues that by applying the new acting style, political subject-matter/s – portraying chief incidents of the wars of classes – would be mastered more easily and social processes recognized in their causal relationships. It is assumed that the individual only exists in (social) relationships, as a socially formed subject; this also applies to roles on stage. Instead of adhering to individual psychologically dominated naturalistic styles of acting, Brecht's didactic work requires the epic style based on social gestures and attitudes.

**Brecht's A-effect** serves the purpose of prohibiting audiences from being enticed to share/feel with characters and situations onstage but to acquire an attitude of studying social conditions. Instead of proclaiming truths (or furnishing propaganda), it is about scrutinising social problems using carefully worked-out gestural performances. While the alienation effect has been originally referred to as the (Marxist term of) alienation of people from their means of production, the Brechtian approach demands that spectators become participants in the theatrical process in which the experience is not emotional but rational. Deliberative and thinking responses are the prerequisite for active agents of social change. "It is the purpose of the A-effect to alienate the social gesture underlying all processes.

Social gesture is the facial and gestural expression of the social relationships in which *people of a certain era relate to one another*. (8)

Brechtian theatre had a deep impact on the overall alternative theatre movement after World War II, taking as an example the "Theatre of the Oppressed" of Brazilian director and visionary, Augusto Boal which is discussed further below. Boal takes Brecht's experiments with audience participation one step further and conceives of his T.O. as a "rehearsal for the revolution" whereby the players become authors of their own educational experiences and simultaneously performers of them. (9)

## **2. General notes on political theatre**

"Political theatre" must be completely redefined today in the context of new social movements. I claim: There will no longer be any "political" theatre in the future in our part of the world, only an outdated director's theatre. (10) A clear distinction is necessary between political theatre in the broad sense, denoting theatre with general political content, and political, i.e. interventionist, theatre in the narrower sense. The target of political theatre is a critical examination of complex social structures and the support and demonstration of diverse struggles for liberation applicable to all cultural contexts. A uniform definition of "political theatre" accounting for all theatrical projects termed "political" seems nearly impossible, especially since the term itself after 1989 is – at least in Europe – no longer used with positive connotations.

It seems thus more appropriate to speak of the "political" aspect of theatre productions and movements under consideration – movements that can neither be assigned to a political ideology nor pure educational or consciousness-raising practices. Swiss avant-garde filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard put it succinctly: making political films means making films "politically" – and this dictum applies to theatre and performance as well. First and foremost one can speak of the political nature of theatre in the 20th century as seeing to establish laboratories – experimental spaces – for collective creations that would enable social confrontation and empowerment of groups and individual artists. These acts of freedom go along with a tendential elimination of oppressive structures such as the dualism of emotions and cognition, body and spirit, and male and female sensibilities. It denotes a theatre that addresses historical injustices and inequalities – concomitant with all forms of racism, sexism, and fascism – and advocates democracy on all levels of society. Decisive impulses for contemporary political theatre came from the Russian theatre-avantgarde which sprang up in the aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution, including the proletarian Proletkult, the technique of Biomechanics created by Vsevolod Meyerhold, and radical collages by filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. All these served the propagation of the revolution while conveying political (Marxist-inspired) content to educate the masses. In these movements, elements of political theatre and popular theatre merged, an interest that coincides with those of the early Brecht who emulated German popular art forms come down since the middle ages, and which he used in poems and songs interwoven in his plays. Although different in

style, the intentions of these revolutionary theatre practitioners were similar in the area of facilitating the active involvement of spectators in shared experiences while exposing them to political content in rational rather than empathetic ways.

These early aesthetic experiments of the Russian, French, and German avantgardes have informed the subsequent developments of political theatre practitioners around the world, particularly in Latin America, India, and Africa. In the 1960s, German authors Peter Weiss, Heiner Kipphardt, or Rolf Hochhuth experimented with forms of documentary theatre – according to Weiss a theatre of political reporting“ based on historical (News-) materials – transforming public space into places of politico-aesthetic discussions. A separate form of political theatre arose in the 1970s in the footsteps of the second women's movement throughout the US and Europe: radical feminist theatres sprang up and continued to grow through all levels of the theatre landscapes worldwide. Nowadays, no political theatre artist can seriously operate without knowledge and inclusion of feminist concerns; likewise, female participation in the theatre – on the traditional stage as within the alternative scene – has successively expanded in all areas of theatre practice and theory. With the advent of the international "Me-Too" campaign spreading from the Hollywood film business to all other cultural disciplines.

Feminist issues are once again moving to the fore on almost all continents. Renowned feminists of the theatre encompass French theatre director Ariane Mnouchkine,

German dancer-choreographer Pina Pausch, English and Austrian authors Elfriede Jelinek, Caryl Churchill, and Sarah Kane, or such groups as the anonymous political-satirical Guerilla Girls. Some features of feminist theatre extend to challenges of patriarchal structures towards a reframing of history into a "her-story" of women as subjects rather than objects, equality of gender, and the questioning of the male gaze as well as strategies of female empowerment. (11)

Political theatre since the 1990s continued to evolve with German director Frank Castorf at the popular-avantgarde Berlin Volksbühne, a leading post-Brechtian artist who had collaborated with East-German playwright and eminent disciple of Brecht, Heiner Müller (1929-1995), as a young generation was looking out for new scenic answers to the crises of our age. Cytorf became known for his multimedia use of video and film onstage as a media accessible to younger audiences while simultaneously taking recourse to styles of early avantgarde forms such as Dada nonsense-performances, Fluxus, Happenings, and scenic installations. These developments extend to new playwrights and performance artists who began structuring from ideas, musical scores of news items original dramatic scores, or fashion rewritings of classical plays to fit issues of contemporary political discourse (Christoph Schlingensief, René Pollesch, Christoph Marthaler).

Ever since the mid-90s, political positions and formats of alternative theatre have subsided in volume and tone of voice, most likely due to a lack of utopian visions of the younger generations as a result of neoliberal, neo-

conservative social processes and socio-economics restructuring programs affecting discourse, dialogue as well as funding procedures. Contemporary performance practices have to adjust to modern-day post-dramatic formats as hegemonic style of the day which runs against the logic of linear narratives, focusing on highly fragmented presentational formats and often revolving around pessimistic, sometimes apocalyptic visions of the future. Although post-dramatics has since long been declared dead, it still dominates central European venues while political theatre makers hope for the onset of new political theatre concepts of change shortly. Looking towards the Viennese context, the link between popular theatre and political theatre has been noticeable since the 1920s/30s, the time of "Red Vienna" which was dominated by the Social-Democratic Workers' Party: On the one hand, there were debates as to whether the working class should be introduced to bourgeois theatre traditions or new political, educational and agitational theatre forms were needed to convey visions of the "new man" in an Austro-Marxist manner. Important contributions came from such political Austrian playwrights as young dramatist, poet, and journalist-activist, Jura Soyfer (1912-1939), who is called the "Austrian Brecht". Soyfer wrote short cabaret-style plays with imaginative, fairy-tale-like structures using popular forms to fit the day, political articles, poems, songs, and slogans for left-wing demonstrations.

Other authors include Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Hans Zeisel who published hands-on field research on unemployment in their authoritative study, *The Unemployed of Marienthal* (1933). A very prominent

Austrian theatre scholar, Ulf Birbaumer, contests that "political theatre in its beginnings was based on very simple, popular theatre means: in forms of Commedia dell'arte, fairground theatre... on elements of the circus and revue theatre... The aim was to address the audience very directly, including various forms of participation. Also essential are the didactic and agitational elements (agitprop) and the spontaneous, often improvisational spectacle fun with situational comedy, lazzis, slapstick" (12).

### **3. Precursors and major influences: (Jerzy Grotowski, August Boal, Richard Schechner, Mary Overlie)**

After World War II, the revolutionary conceptions of earlier (pre-war-) avantgarde theatre movements were revised in Europe and the US by leading theatre visionaries such as the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, Brazilian's Augusto Boal and Richard Schechner in the USA. I am including, as an example of the growing number of female (feminist) contributors to the 1960's avantgarde – often, but not always, declared as "political" – the work of dancer-choreographer, Mary Overlie, whom I was privileged to work with in several contexts since 1980. Grotowski conceived of a "poor theatre" in his legendary laboratory of Wroclaw, Poland – a tiny space devoid of any extraneous theatrical means – which focused exclusively on the act of the actor. Simultaneously, Boal invented the revolutionary educational model of a "Theatre of the Oppressed" while Richard Schechner put forth his concept of "Environmental Theatre". Apart from his work as the

Theatre Director with the Performance Group at the Performing Garage in New York City's SoHo district (in 1980 passed on to his successors, the Wooster Group), Schechner also worked as a university teacher, a publicist of ground-breaking studies on performance, ritual, and theatre anthropology, and equally founded the new academic discipline "Performance Studies".

While Schechner's concept of "Environmental theatre" reconceptualised the meaning of stage design, audience participation, and theatrical reception, his collaboration with renowned anthropologists and ethnographers such as Victor Turner found expression in the new fields of Theatre Anthropology and Cultural Sciences thus reflecting the so-called "performative turn" which took root in areas of the humanities and social sciences in the late 1980s. (13)

In my context, the focus lies on Schechner's Environmental Theatre as a contemporary site-specific theatre whereby the entire spatial arrangement of any theatrical event – stage, auditorium, and surroundings – is made to partake of performances thereby greatly enlarging acting, directing possibilities and modes of perception.

### **Jerzy Grotowski's "Poor Theatre"**

#### **Personal observations**

I never met Grotowski in person, although I was present at an NYU class during probably one of his last visits to New York where he gave a lecture on his newest theatrical inventions in a seminar on Richard Schechner. The house was packed. I stood in a very far corner of the space watching a small elderly man with

disheveled hair and ferocious looks all but disappearing under the podium, hectically gesticulating while explaining his work with a fainting voice.

Not much later, having been exposed to his work already in Vienna in the early 1970s by some of his disciples, I studied Grotowskian training in a workshop in Berlin and picked it up again at ETW/NYU in the early 1980s as a student of Steve Wangh, one his master-teachers in the US. I quickly adopted Grotowski's approach, although, for a stage designer who's just beginning to act, the training was hard to take. At the same time, I always held some aspects of Grotowski's teachings as being too spiritual – I missed the fun and humor that I enjoyed so much with Brecht. In my view, Grotowski had imposed an ascetic Franciscan regime on his small group of initiated actors, a very male-oriented discipline thriving on routine, order, rigor, and physical as well as mental endurance. In any case, out of all experimental acting techniques, Grotowski's work became ever more fascinating as I discovered its physical qualities which counteract traditional psychological acting styles that still reign supreme in most mainstream theatres in all Western cultures, accounting for a very limited view on people and the world. My interest took shape when I watched my acting teacher, Steve Wangh, mix and match Grotowskian warm-up exercises (the Cat, Plastiques, and Corporals) with other experimental routines such as Mary Overlie's viewpoints work and his advanced improvisations. I learned how to take influences from different approaches and combine techniques to carve out one's work as a result.

Jerzy Grotowski revolutionized theatre and along with his apprentice, Italian-born director Eugenio Barba, founder of the Denmark-based Odin Teatret and the International School of Theatre Anthropology, has come to be appreciated as one of the fathers of contemporary experimental theatre. Barba was instrumental in revealing Grotowski to the world outside of Poland; he was also the editor of Grotowski's seminal book „Towards a Poor Theatre“ (1968) which he co-wrote with his dramaturg, Ludwik Flaszen. There, he declares that theatre should not, because it could not, compete against the overwhelming spectacle of film and should instead focus on the very root of the act of theatre: actors co-creating the event of theatre with its spectators. He also prescribed a „via negativa“ to wrest from the actor all extraneous habits, masks, and "tricks" of the trade to reach a pure expression of the moment – a moment which he also called "creating the truth". The main point then is that an actor should not try to acquire any kind of recipe or build up a "box of tricks". ... Instead, he should aim at a human Act, an act of creation in which the human is being created anew, in which process he comes into being. (14) As Grotowski's work gained wider recognition, he was invited to work in the United States and left Poland in 1982, a measure which probably served also as an escape from Communist Party control. Central to his work remained the „total act“ and the focus on physical relationships in space which the actor must acquire during his daily rigid training technique. Aiming at a complete exposure of self in the very moment of creation, the actor discards masks, reveals his real substance, and exposes a totality of physical and mental reactions in front of an audience.

Words (any kind of text) were secondary, Grotowski proclaims: "What matters to me is what we do with [words] – that what makes the dead words of a text come to life, what changes them into "a Word". (15) While opening himself up, the actor emerges as a "freed" man (or woman) which is meant as an invitation to the spectator to consider doing the same. In one statement, Grotowski compares this total act to the most deeply rooted, genuine feelings of love between two human beings – as an "emergence from oneself". As one early example of the poor theatre, achieving the utmost performative effect in his laboratory space was the internationally acclaimed production of *Acropolis* in 1964 which was based on a playtext by a Polish artist and writer Stanisław Wyspiański. For this production, the company of actors represented concentration camp prisoners and during the show built the structure of a crematorium by using the entire space with the audience as part of the setting, all the while acting out stories from the Bible and Greek mythology. Let's not forget that the largest Nazi concentration camp was not very far away, and the time of World War II was not all too long past; thus the performance had a profound impact on the audiences. How Grotowski's endeavor constitutes political theatre and which components of his work can be considered 'political' in the proper sense must be left for future discussions. One easy answer is that while following Brecht's about the writing practice of using whatever came his way or fitted his purpose/s, we can learn from Grotowski as much as from other experimentalists for our work, picking up those elements suitable for a theatre of our age, in a new context and time, and for a new audience. Leaving aside for a moment

the most reclusive, monastic, spiritualist tendencies of Grotowski's laboratory, plenty of inspiration may be derived from his extensive body of work with its liberating, purifying, and radical transitions. In the 1970s Grotowski embarked on a series of new experiments beyond the scope of theatre proper – the Paratheatrical phase. This was an attempt to completely dissolve the separation between performer and spectator through the organization of communal rites and interactive exchanges between chosen groups of people – often undertaken as day- or night-long events in open spaces –, the Theatre of Sources, a period of work when Grotowski traveled extensively through India, Mexico, Haiti in his quest to identify elements of technique in traditional practices of various indigenous cultures with precise effects on participants in performance rituals, followed by Objective Drama developed in the 1980s, a research focused on psycho-physiological responses to traditional songs link of Haitian and other African diaspora cultures, up to his last phase of work called Art as Vehicle.

During the last 20 years of his life, Grotowski left the US and moved to Italy (1986) where he established a new Work center in the small town of Pontedera. There he continued his theatrical experimentation, pursued further directing and training methods, and organized private theatrical events almost in secret. He died at his home in Pontedera in 1999. About the formative concept of the actor existing always in the „here and now“, Grotowski writes: "The experience of self and other people as something alive. Of what exists. Of what is here and now (**hic et nunc**). Honesty is not possible if we hide,

we hide behind clothes, ideas, characters, staging tricks, intellectual concepts, gymnastics, yelling, and chaos. If the method makes any sense, it is precisely a way of disarmament, not a technique. (16)

### **Augusto Boal's revolutionary Theatre of the Oppressed Personal Observations**

Augusto Boal keeps haunting me. I once took a workshop with him at NYU where he gave a master class upon invitation by Richard Schechner. The room was overcrowded with about 50 noisy students, mostly white middle-class kids, who were ostensibly far removed from working-class issues of oppression they were meant to subvert. A difficult task for Boal whose theatre targets poor and disadvantaged communities, i.e. it has little to offer in upscale social settings. However, he was surely used to this kind of teaching setting in the US and throughout Europe where he found himself confronted with similar predicaments. He possibly believed that he could teach even well-to-do young people his unique methodology – a feat which, in my view, was unsuccessful. While the Theatre of the Oppressed is a favorite topic for university students' theses and is widely practiced today by alternative theatres everywhere, it is to be questioned how much it has been able to contribute to treating the ills of the privileged societies. These observations are at the core of my discomfort with Boal's method when it comes to its application in Western cultures where artists enjoy more or less secure working conditions and funding opportunities. In those environments, the Marxist-infused methodology easily disintegrates into abstract

technical routines, i.e. a mechanical set of formalistic exercises.

In some sense, I have never succeeded in dissolving the glaring contradictions accompanying Boal's engaged work when it comes to its practice in the West. Nevertheless, I have at various times used his training exercises in my work, mostly in warm-ups, never in the actual performances. Boal's theatre technique is today one of the most accepted forms of contemporary political theatre, although in the German-speaking context, it is not considered professional and often relegated to 'social theatre', to therapeutic or educational realms with little chance to obtain artistic funding. This has hampered its development in this part of the world while the theatrical landscapes of Latin America, Asia, and Africa could draw great benefit from it, circumscribing the entire orbit of differences and coherences of the interconnections between performance and politics. The Theatre of the Oppressed is a form of popular community-based educational tool using theatre as a vehicle for transformation. Originally developed from Boal's work with peasant and worker populations against the backdrop of his country's dictatorship, it is now applied all over the world to inform and accompany social and political activism, address conflict resolution, advance community building, advise therapy, and help in government legislation. Boal's books have been translated into over 35 languages, and the work still radiates from his centers in Rio de Janeiro across the globe. It is practiced in community centres, schools, alternative theatres, in therapy offices, by social workers and activists as it stimulates critical observation,

consciousness, and social action. For Boal, theatre is a form of knowledge and a means of transforming society. He claims that "we are all actors: being a citizen is not living in society, it is changing it". (17)

Inspired by Paulo Freire's pioneering social-science study on education, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1967/68), *Theatre of the Oppressed* invites critical thinking, and puts analysis before acceptance of social ills, questions before answers. It transforms the audience from spectators into "spect-actors" and empowers them through games, exercises, and improvisational techniques for individual and collective liberation. Boal's work is based on his trust that "we are all actors in the theatre of life", and that "art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it". (18) While we cannot change the past, we can change the way we perceive it and the artist's role is to reawaken collective consciousness and call for concrete action: "The theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it". (19)

In his book, *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974), Boal provides a detailed analysis of the Poetics of Aristotle and the early history of Western theatre, moving on to delineate his own methodology. He contends that the Aristotelian ethic means oppressing the masses, the people, the workers, and the spectators in favour of stability and the dominance of a privileged political system and its continued existence. He then outlines his theories and practices which aim at reversing oppressive social paradigms. The primary formats of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* are **Newspaper Theatre** which uses news

items, a TV report, or political talk, to address local issues of the day. **Forum Theatre**, the most practiced form, lays out participatory theatre as calling for the intervention of the public to change the course of a dramatic event. Thereby a scene or a play must show a situation of oppression that the protagonist does not know how to fight against; „spect-actors“ amongst the audience are invited to replace him and act out on stage all possible solutions, ideas, and strategies to change the course of events. The **Invisible Theatre** is performed in public places to discuss problematic political realities of everyday life while random spectators watching are witnesses of the oppressive scene/s that propel transformative action. Finally, **Image Theatre** and the system called **Rainbow of Desires** help to visualize scenes of oppression while participants offer the protagonist/s „the mirror of the multiple regards of the others“. "The poetics of the oppressed is essentially the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action!"(20)

### **Richard Schechner's „Environmental Theatre“**

"Any behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied "as" performance. ... there is no historically or culturally fixable limit to what is or is not "performance". ...The underlying notion is that any action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance. ... any of the activities of human life can be studied "as" performance. ... Every action from the smallest to the most encompassing is made of twice-behaved behaviors. (21)

## **Personal observation**

Richard Schechner, master teacher, author, scholar, and theatre director, is a wizard of theatrical activity he is; all 'performance'. So much so that the overlap of theory and practice – at the university, on the road as a field researcher, at international conferences, as editor of the journal TDR (The Drama Review), be it while facilitating a workshop or directing a play – is hard to distinguish. I have always admired the man, his energy and resourcefulness, his dedication to students and colleagues, and his willingness to go out of the way to explore the limits of his discipline. He is a model of someone who is reinventing himself every step of the way – one day he's handing over the artistic directorship of the Performance Group, the next day he's establishing a new academic discipline at the university, the next he's going to India, Bali or Mexico to investigate traditional performances; all the while networking, collecting insights, writing. At his heart, he is an artist and researcher, a scholar and activist, and a living example that you can be both at the same time, even when you don't exercise both activities always at the same time. Assured of his mission, Richard Schechner never wavered in his beliefs, considering his undertaking "political" in the sense of unearthing performative behavior as the source of social life. He once gave me an account of the origin of Environmental Theatre, because after years at the Department of Performance Studies, I simply did not know. Well, he gave me a poignant and convincing answer: "I was one of the very few Whites, although Jewish, marching with the black activists in Alabama during the Civil Rights movement. There I discovered that the 'real theatre' is in the streets, not

inside theatre buildings. This was the initiating moment that sparked the concept of environmental theatre". (22)

At its core, environmental theatre is about re-imagining the very essence of what theatre can be by re-arranging spatial dynamics of performance, moving away from the confines of traditional proscenium stages. Instead, environmentalists embrace a multitude of spaces – whether they are urban warehouses, open streets, or natural landscapes – thereby expanding the possibilities of where and how theatre can occur. Schechner's conceptualization of Environmental Theatre reconsiders the role of the audience-spectators as interactive participants, a transformation that breaks down the conventional "fourth wall" and summons up direct involvement in the theatrical experience. It calls for collective creation processes of fluid boundaries between actors, directors, designers, and audience members and allows for a more organic, spontaneous evolution of performance as the unexpected becomes an integral part of the experience. Performance Studies focuses not primarily on theatre and performance as art forms but extends to play, ritual, dance, music, popular entertainment, sports, politics, and performance in everyday life. In his work on performance theory, Schechner combines innovative approaches to the broad spectrum of performance extending to all "embodied behavior", e.g. influenced by anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. The goal is to understand performative behavior and undertake intercultural studies based on extensive field research. Apart from a conscious reshaping of theatre space, Schechner's theatrical experiments owe much to the theatre of Grotowski – the use of psychophysical conditioning

exercises for actors, the “collaging” of texts, the rewriting of mythological themes, the sharing of theatrical space between actors and audiences.

In his book *Environmental Theatre* of 1974, Schechner outlines six axioms of environmental theatre:

Axiom 1: The theatrical event is a set of related transactions

Axiom 2: All the space is used for performance; all the space is used for audience

Axiom 3: The theatrical event can take place either in a transformed space or in “found space”

Axiom 4: Focus is flexible and variable

Axiom 5: All production elements speak in their language

Axiom 6: The text needs to be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. there maybe no text at all (23)

Schechner's designers are encouraged to create a new spatial arrangement for each play, constructing different audience frameworks assets were usually based on multilevel platforms, balconies, ramps, and scaffolds surrounding a stage that encroached on the audience's territory. This provided a wider range of space for the actors and a greater flexibility of interaction between the audience and performers. The minimum involvement in the early, group-devised production of *Comune* (1970) was the audience's removal of its shoes upon entering

the performance space. To enhance the immediacy of experience, the multiple-focus theatre had several effects on the directing – it replaced the traditional single focus, allowing more than one scene to be staged at the same time. This results in the fact that no one sees everything and no one experiences the same play. This approach was taken up by numerous experimental companies that defy traditional boundaries of audience-actor relationships, especially when it comes to performing in non-theatrical venues. Within the limits of this presentation, I have focused on Schechner's invention of Environmental Theatre. This means in no way diminishes his far-reaching achievements in other areas of performance characterising his work after the revolutionary 70s. Since the 1980s, he expanded Performance Theory by engaging – in collaboration with anthropologists and ethnographers – with ritual, play, interculturalism, and theatrical performer's pre-expressive scenic behaviour. With this research, he contributed a great deal to the fields of Cultural Studies, Theatre Anthropology, and Post-Colonial Studies which examine everything from ritualised behavior to the way people present themselves in everyday social contexts, and in diverging cultural contexts. (24)

In performances by Euro-Americans, Afro-Americans, Native Americans, and Asians, Schechner has observed, reflected upon, and described phenomena of traditional and everyday performative behavior and has developed models of the performance process. Books of this era include *Between Theatre Anthropology* (1985) and *The Future of Ritual* (1993) where he explores the nature of

ritualized behaviour and its relationship to performance and politics by scrutinizing cultural expression and communal action in a contemporary intercultural world. The way performances are created in performers' training, workshops, and rehearsals is thereby a key paradigm for social processes. (25)

... all behavior is restored behavior – all behavior consists of recombining bits of previously behaved behaviors.' ... Restored behavior can be “me” at another time or psychological state ... Restored behavior can bring into play non-ordinary reality ... Restored behavior can be actions marked off by aesthetic convention ... It can be actions reified into the “rules of the game,” ... Because it is marked, framed, and separate, restored behavior can be worked on, stored and recalled, played with, made into something else, transmitted, and transformed.' (26)

### **Excursus: The Impact of Postmodern Dance**

The significance of postmodern theory on contemporary dance since the 1960s, as I've come to study it with Mary Overlie in New York in the 1980s, has shaped the evolution of experimental theatre and performance. As a "post-modern" art form it took inspiration from the post-structuralist French philosophy and theory in the attempt to supersede outdated models of "modernism" considered too linear in structure, too narrational in form, and too hierarchical in process. Post-modernism

transpired rapidly into all artistic disciplines from architecture to music, from theatre to dance and performance art in the quest to give voice to a new multi-layered experience of life. Another indispensable feature of the postmodernist dance was the belief that everyday movement is performance and that every person – with or without training – could dance. While all human movement is a valid dance expression, anybody is beautiful and any dance style is destined to surpass the compositional and presentational constraints of preceding movements of pretentious modern dance.

Postmodern dance was thus preferably situated in unconventional, non-theatrical spaces – in garages, industrial halls, galleries, community centers, and the streets. Peak's popularity of the postmodern dance movement lasted a short time, from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s, but its mark on experimental performance continues to be felt to this day. While hailing the use of everyday movement as performative, post-modern dance advocated originality, authenticity, fragmentation, and collage in method and composition. While some post-modernists such as Mary Overlie thought of themselves as non-political, I contest that the movement as such indirectly transported momentous messages of liberation as it sets movements "free" of any constraints of individualistic modernist views of art with a focus on the role of the (mostly male) artistic genius while attempting to correct the failure of modernist movements to emancipate the disciplines of art, literature, music, architecture and drama from hierarchical structures (e.g. Expressionism, Dadaisms Abstraction, Cubism, Pop-art, Mimalism). (27)

Prominent precursors of postmodern dance were such world-renowned modernist dancers as Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, leading representatives of post-modernism in contemporary dance encompass American dancer-choreographer Merce Cunningham, collaborator and partner of minimalist musician John Cage, as well as post-modern dancers-choreographers Anna Halprin, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti – and Mary Overlie.

### **Mary Overlie's Six Viewpoints of Performance**

#### **Personal observations**

Mary Overlie was an extraordinary woman, artist, and teacher who certainly deserves more recognition than has so far been given to her. I've worked with her on several occasions, at first at ETW/NYU, later in Vienna when she directed a post-modernist performance at our theatre, and at last during sessions of ImPulsTanz Vienna International Dance Festival, the world's largest contemporary dance festival held every year which Mary Overlie helped to set up in 1984. Mary was inspired – by nature, by magic, by her collaborators – and inspiring for others. She was surrounded by an aura of a present-day, the demeanor of a true inventor with an air of wild imagination in love with her creations. She traversed a workspace like a whirlwind, she would take you by the hand, put you right center stage, ask you to move as you wished, and with absolute awareness. The way you never might have moved before, never considered space, architecture, rhythm, shape, emotion, or narrative before. Mary turned her back to the literary, emotion-driven, story-oriented, cliché model of Western drama, theatre, performance, and dance. Even if one would not

follow her ideas, he or she went along until one discovered a new order of things, of performative possibilities, of unhabitual movements in space. To many, the viewpoints work remained mysterious, and magical, a way into philosophy on your feet, ready to ponder over time, space, and movement in three dimensions.

Mary was often copied, some say "stolen from". Most times she was not given proper credit for her inventions of the Six Viewpoints system, many blurry deviations of her classical set of structures popped up at different corners of the post-modern performative universe and were sold in well-paying workshops. In the end, however, Mary stayed victorious, she endured the plagiarism, kept course, and justified her original set of six – and not more (!) – viewpoints by teaching, protesting, and writing. In her eyes, the system would suffer purity if watered down with seven, eight, or even nine viewpoints, as some have contested. Mary knew what she was doing, she held on to her original course and remained truthful to her invention. And finally, after twenty-something years, she published her textbook on the Viewpoints-work in 2016, shortly before her early death from cancer in 2020.

The Six-Viewpoints technique for theatre and dance is a philosophical and practical approach to performance and dance initiated and named in the 1960s by Mary Overlie (1946-2020). It was first introduced by herself into the core curriculum at ETW/NYU in 1978 and has since spread to many acting, dance- and performance settings, from universities to art academies, from individual artists to performance companies throughout the US and Europe. Reminiscent of modernist artistic

experiments of early German experimentalists for the 20th century such as Rudolf von Laban or Oskar Schlemmer of the 1930s Bauhaus school who experimented with the movements of the human figure in its spatial dimensions, the Six-Viewpoint(VP)-technique rests on deconstructing basic elements of performance into six fundamental components which are isolated, researched, and subsequently reconstructed in (abstract or thematic) training and improvisation. The six materials of composition are Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement, and Story. In the actual work, one, two, or more viewpoints are mixed, matched, and made to overlap, they can be performed without words or be accompanied by music, literary text, and other spoken-word materials to create intricate compositions based on kinesthetic awareness, association, and chance. The main focus is on movement in physical space, architecture, spatial relationships, and the creative design of human figures by ever-changing configurations in space. Six-Viewpoints-compositions are sometimes likened to abstract paintings (e.g. by Wassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee). The act of deconstructing performance into basic materials for intensive research in actual training invites performers, directors, and artists to engage with these individual materials in-depth, "allowing [them] to take the lead in a creative dialogue". (28) In Overlie's mind, this paradigmatic shift in attention re-defines art and the role of the artist from a "creator/originator" to that of an "observer/participant", acquiring an attitude that centers on "witnessing, and interacting, ... working under the supposition that structure could be discerned rather than imposed". (29)

While performative elements such as the six viewpoints have traditionally existed within a static hierarchy of dramatic form which emphasized narration, storyline, character, and emotion, Overlie's system releases these theatrical materials from their fixed constructs into an open and flowing environment of non-hierarchical relationships. Consequently, Overlie came to call herself a "post-modernist" and label her art "postmodern" because, arguably so, the six-viewpoint-system adheres to principal characteristics of post-modern art: deconstruction, non-linearity, flat hierarchies, chance operations, self-referentiality, irony, fragmentation, a combination of different artistic styles beyond historical and stylistic contexts – all of them following the overarching post-modern motif of "anything goes". During the last years of her life, Mary Overlie struggled to complete her theory and practice and organized it for publication of her self-published book, *Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory and Practice* (2016), into two major parts: *The Materials* and *The Bridge*. (30)

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## NOTES

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