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The theater is always dying

Summary

The Theater Is always Dying traces the resilience of live theatrical performance in the face of competing performative forms like cinema, television and contemporary streaming services on personal, hand-held devices and focuses on theater's ability to continue as a significant cultural, community and intellectual force in the face of such competition. To echo Beckett, we might suggest, then, that theater may be at its best at its dying since its extended demise seems self-regenerating. Whether or not you "go out of the theatre more human than when you went in", as Ariane Mnouchkin suggests, or whether you've had a sense that you've been part of, participated in a community ritual, a Dionysia, or whether or not you've felt that you've been affected by a performative, an embodied intellectual and emotional human experience may determine how you judge the state of contemporary theater. You may not always know the answer to those questions immediately after the theatrical encounter, or ever deliberately or consciously, but something, nonetheless, may have been taking its course. You may emerge "more human than when you went in".

Keywords: Communitas, Victor Turner, David Mamet, Marshall McLuhan, Ariane Mnouchkin, Dionysia, Jerzy Grotowski, Laboratory Theatre, Peter Brook, Charles Marowitz, Richard Schechner, Antonin Artaud, Herbert Blau, Samuel Beckett

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Commodity and community

In his 2011 collection of essays called simply *Theatre*, American playwright, director and theatrical provocateur, David Mamet, reminds us that “the theatre is always dying”. The comment echoes Peter Hall in a 2007 interview, “One of the interesting things about theater is that from time immemorial it’s been dying. It’s always dying. It’s always going through some awful convulsion.”¹ A theater in continual death throes may seem a tough sell in the era of *The Book of Mormon* in 2011 and *Hamilton* in 2015, with their exorbitant ticket prices and lucrative touring companies, but Mamet is not necessarily, or perhaps not exclusively talking about commerce or theater as a commercial enterprise, although commerce and commercialism are never far from the theater. Writing in the *Vulture* section of “New York” magazine in March of 2016, on the other hand, Jesse Green proclaims that “Theater is a force in New York” again; my students, however, admittedly not in New York, don’t routinely go to plays, or go as a class assignment when they’re required to do so, even at a school with a large and dynamic theater department, but they are interested in and do attend performances of various kinds. Theater, as an entertainment vehicle, as a literary experience, or as a mode, a channel of serious political or ethical discourse, is already dead to them. Forecasts of theatre’s demise, furthermore, have tended to dominate twentieth century critical discourse, as drama has become the neglected genre of literary study; theatrical texts, plays, have been relegated, along with their performances, to theater departments – outside of Shakespeare, of course, who is treated in departments of literature almost exclusively as a poet – and as technological changes to performance emerged and proliferated. Except for Artaud, perhaps, theater is simply a tangential part of modernist literary study, the other exception, perhaps, the work of Samuel Beckett. *The Bastard Art* Susan Harris Smith calls it in her 1997 monograph, *American Drama* published in the prestigious Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama series. Mamet’s emphasis on theater’s protracted demise is, then, as useful as it is misplaced, since the continuous process Mamet describes is always and simultaneously regenerative. But are we talking about commodity, economic success, the principle measure of creative products these days, or something like what Green calls, “the intellectual traditions of the stage”, that is, theater as an art form, as a mode of cultural discourse, and as a reflection and builder of community, what cultural anthropologist Victor Turner called “communitas” – something like what the Greeks apparently had in the *Dionysia* during the age of Pericles, the so called “first citizen” of democratic Athens? The focus on this essay will be less (although some) on death throes than on theater’s periodic revitalizations.

¹ Interview and transcript at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TN6CbJ_MSXY (access 3.11.2020).

Theatrical death throes

Cinema, then, would be the death of theatre, we were told, but even early cinema mimicked the theatrical experience with group attendance at specific venues, usually a theater, often a converted music hall, so that the community function of performance, a recasting of theatre's origins in the fifth century B. C. where it was a major religious, ceremonial, aesthetic, political and social experience, at once ex-coriating and pleasurable, remained. Moreover, through the first half of the twentieth century at least, Hollywood functioned as Broadway west: witness the film versions of Tennessee Williams, especially the Brando-dominated *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1951. Broadway was Hollywood's farm team as the real national exposure to American theatre came through film, such opinion reflected by one D.V. Whyte writing from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma to "Theatre Arts Magazine" (XL.8) in August 1956: "I believe that motion-picture art is every bit as important as the theatre art... even more so. So won't you put movie reviews back in »Theatre Arts«?" (p. 3). But cinema now is looking moribund in these days of personal video access to just about anything.

Much of Mamet's wrath in 2011 was directed toward the theatrical hierarchy, particularly toward the power of directors and the institutionalization of acting into "methods", into acting theory and acting schools. Mamet's early, roustabout years and contrarian views were not dissimilar to those of acting icon Robert Mitchum with whom Mamet shares contrarian opinions. While Mitchum approved of or accepted a role for directors, up to a point, at least for the purposes of a 1957 interview, "In the theater, yes, but not pictures", but like Mamet he believed that acting could not be taught, that studying acting was, in Mitchum's famous quip, like taking lessons to become taller. The issue of "Theatre Arts Magazine" cited above, for instance, carries five pages of listings for "Schools of the Theater and Community Theatres" interspersed with paid advertising for a wide variety of theater training programs: "Professional Training" from American Theatre Wing (founded in 1917 by Antoinette Perry, one of the "seven suffragettes" who created the program and after whom the nation's principal theater awards are named, with Helen Hays, as President in 1956) (p. 14); Actors' "Studio 29", "Professional Training for the Stage"; "Elizabeth Holloway School of Theatre"; "Goodman Memorial Theatre School of Drama" (pp. 6-7); "Herbert Berghof Evening Acting Classes" (p. 8). Berghof had just directed the Broadway premiere of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a curiously jumbled text for which is featured in this issue of "Theatre Arts Magazine". And by the 1950s American universities began degree granting programs for performance: Emerson College advertised its Bachelors and Masters degrees for "Drama-Speech-Radio-Television" in the issue under discussion (pp. 6-7), and Boston University School of Fine and Applied Arts advertised its Division of Theatre Arts with an impressive list of "Participating Directors",

which included Alan Schneider (p. 9), the director who premiered the disastrous try out of *Waiting for Godot* at the Coconut Grove Theatre in Coral Gables, Florida, before being replaced by Berghof for the Broadway premiere. Impressive as such institutionalizing of performance or theater arts is, it remains a constant target for Mamet as a contributor to theatre's continual dying.

The received wisdom was that television would be theater's (and film's) next apparent replacement, yet even that more personal medium, which, according to Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media* (1964), was more medium than message, the technological form embedded in and as the content. Television generated and signaled a change in our religious, political, ceremonial environment. For McLuhan television was a cool medium that functioned, in his famous if disputed metaphor, more like a light bulb than, say, a book, or live theatre, for that matter. It creates a space almost content free and thus requires more participation than a hot medium since the former is low definition. Yet even for television, in those pre-video-streaming days, families gathered in that illuminated space at prescribed times, at least until the proliferation of cheap appliances put the machine in every room of the house save the toilet, and recording devices freed audiences of time constraints. Time and space no longer needed to be shared, and images in "cool" media were not prescribed as they were in "hot" media like cinema where participation was low. Television required creative rather than passive viewing, McLuhan tried to tell us. By century's end, however, the vestiges of that community function of performance had all but vanished as we were offered films and streaming video and television on demand and on (almost un-sharable) miniaturized, hand held, personal devices. We became each our own community, and the medium got perhaps even cooler, in McLuhan's terms.

So what remains for theatre as community becomes virtual and the medium itself becomes the message. For one, theatre or the theatrical has expanded, now seen as segment of a larger entity called performance, and it has evolved, hybridized over the course of the twentieth century, just as McLuhan's categories of "hot" and "cool" have hybridized with the advent of movies on TV, say. Moreover, rather than another cultural vehicle for conveying and critiquing master narratives, the glue of cultural cohesion, theatre too became a medium for the presentation of images, often non-narrative and non-metaphorical, non-representational, and so in many respects "cool". That is, neither a metaphor nor a representation of the recognizable world but an image, an entity of its own, and so it eluded the metaphorical, equation, definition, but was, in the phrase of Henri Bergson, a bridge between matter and memory, simultaneously material and immaterial, external and internal, a thing and an idea. Beginning with the Futurists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists theatre or performance, that is, acts outside of theatrical confines, got cooler and so more participatory. A theatre of images might itself be something of a hybrid medium, both "hot" and "cool". As McLuhan explains it, "Any hot medium allows

of less participation than a cool one, as a lecture makes for less participation than a seminar, and a book for less than a dialogue.”² Much of conceptual art of the mid 1970, in galleries and theaters, following Duchamp, and then perhaps John Cage and Merce Cunningham, broke with narration and representation, broke with a sense of artistic unity. Robert Wilson, for instance, would ignore contemporary artistic dicta of psychology and meaning in his efforts “to break up unity and displace the center, using a visual language that was more architectural than theatrical”, according to Sylvère Lotringer, who began the journal “Semiotext(e)” and its book series after organizing the revolutionary Schizo-Culture conference at Columbia University in 1975.³ Lotringer quotes from his interview with Wilson: “I didn’t have to bother about plot or meaning [...] I could just look at designs and patterns – that seemed enough. There was a dancer here, another dancer there, another four on this side... [It was] visual poetry.”⁴ Such artists opened a space where “Theater could do without language, concepts without referents.”⁵ As John Cage puts it in essay/visual experiment/book, “Empty Words”, a work in “IV parts (or lectures)”, “What can be done with the English Language? Use it as material. Material of five kinds: letters, syllables, words, phrases, sentences”. What Cage was doing was “Making music by reading aloud.”⁶ In 1976 almost immediately after the Schizo-Culture conference, Wilson would collaborate with Philip Glass and dancer, Lucinda Childs, for the plotless opera, *Einstein on the Beach*. By 1979 Glass would reunite with Childs and filmmaker/visual artist Sol LeWitt for the collaborative piece, *Dance*, a work that critics cite as a “seminal [...] iconic performance” (“ArtDaily”), “legendary” (Rockwell) and as a performance that fundamentally changed theater (Dwyer). Such art, with its assault on story and linearity, often on language itself, was finally deeply political in that it dealt a blow against ruling syntax, order itself.

By the twenty-first Century theater had absorbed a pattern of performative hybrids, film in live performance, say, used brilliantly and seductively in the works from *Dance* to *Disappearing Number* from the innovative Complicité (2008). Headed by its one man, rather one person trans-Atlantic theatrical revival, Simon McBurney, *Disappearing Number* weaves two love affairs on two continents in two centuries, live and filmed. It went on to win the Olivier Award for Best Play in

2 M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw Hill [Reissued MIT Press, 1994, with introduction by L.H. Lapham; reissued again by Gingko Press, 2003], New York 1964, p. 25.

3 S. Lotringer, *Notes on the Schizo-Culture Issue*, “Semiotext(e)” 1978, vol. III, no. 2, p. xiii [2013 reprint “Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series”, MIT University Press, Cambridge, pp. v-xxiv].

4 Ibidem, pp. xiii.

5 Ibidem.

6 Ibidem, p. 165.

2008.⁷ Mark Rylance, another British trained dynamo, was the first artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe in London between 1995 and 2005 and had lead not just a revitalization of Shakespeare, a playwright who never needed one, but a reconceptualization of Shakespeare in a renewed age of gender flexibility as he re-emphasized Shakespeare as a performance artist.

But theater, as we generally know it, requires space, a place, a theater, most traditionally. In an essay for the British newspaper "The Guardian" on December 30, 2017, playwright David Hare outlined what he called *My Ideal Theatre*, meaning not any particular space, although that does play into Hare's ideal, but the idea of theatre:

A theatre is partly memory, the residue of the greatness that's passed through. If you are my age [Hare was 70 at the time], then whenever you go to the Aldwych theatre, you will be moved to remember Paul Scofield playing King Lear, or Peggy Ashcroft playing Queen Margaret. At the Royal Court, you are in a space where Caryl Churchill, John Osborne, Andrea Dunbar and Athol Fugard offered their most original work. ... Ariane Mnouchkine, the director of the *Théâtre du Soleil*, was often found tearing tickets as the audience came in to the *Cartoucherie* in Paris. [...] Clearly the Brooklyn Academy [of Music] aspired, in its Majestic auditorium, to transport the magic of Peter Brook's *Bouffes du Nord* in Paris for the transatlantic premiere of *The Mahabharata* in New York in 1987. But however assiduously they scraped the paint off the proscenium, and however rakishly they degraded the naked brickwork, the chi-chi effect was, and remains, disastrous. Nothing is worse than fake authenticity.⁸

Despite Hare's evocation of what is now the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, America, despite its rich theatrical tradition, especially in the 20th century, has little of the theatrical memory that Hare evokes. There had been attempts at such but they tended to run up against American discomfort with if not distaste for public funding for the arts. Attempts had been made during America's progressive periods to create a theatre that would reflect and consolidate an American ethos.

But theater with memory became theater as memory, and the stage was its bank: As Gilles Deleuze struck out on his own after *A Thousand Plateaus*, he turned from desire and desiring machines to aesthetics and cinema. Along the way he

picked up a number of his ideas on the arts from friends like Pierre Boulez and the painter Gérard Fromanger. From Fromanger, for example, he learned that the blank

⁷ <http://www.complicite.org/productions/ADisappearingNumber> (access 3.11.2020).

⁸ D. Hare, *David Hare: My Ideal Theatre*, "The Guardian" 30.12.2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/dec/30/david-hare-my-ideal-theatre> (access 3.11.2020).

canvas is not white, but rather “black with everything every painter has painted before me” – an idea he would explore in his book on Francis Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation*.⁹

The blank canvas like the “empty” stage, or page for that matter, was, nonetheless, filled, with history, the past, memory. Deleuze was, of course, not unusual in such emphasis on the cross pollination of the arts, at least since the early twentieth century where hybridized art forms, and emphasis on performance were central to the Dada and Surrealist ethos. Painting had always been “theatrical” but the Surrealists foregrounded theater and theatricality. Painting, like theater, was, traditionally, framed, but then frames could be framed even as memory, self-consciousness could be conscious of itself being conscious.

More traditionally, Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty* was staged by The Group Theater, founded by Harold Clurman, Lee Stasberg and Cheryl Crawford, in January of 1935. The play was in the “Living Newspaper” tradition developed by the Federal Theater Project (disbanded in 1939). It was first published in “New Theatre Magazine” with the subtitle “A Play in Six Scenes, Based on the New York City Taxi Strike of February 1934”. Real-life striker, Samuel Orner, noted that Odets based the meeting scene on a real meeting in the Bronx where Orner addressed his fellow cabbies: “He must have taken notes because so many lines in *Waiting For Lefty* were the same as in the meeting, almost word for word.”¹⁰ As such it was close to the work being done by Elmer Rice, one of the forces in the short-lived “Living Newspaper” theatrical experiments, his own *The Adding Machine* of 1923 and *Street Scene*, which began as fifteen scenes of life in New York and which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1929, paving the way. Its revival in 1952 directed by Clurman was part of the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA), the attempt to establish an American national theater as an alternative to Broadway (that is, as a theater for the whole nation in conjunction with the Federal Theater Project).¹¹ By 1982 in the “Forward” to his collection of essays, *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theater*, Stanislavski well behind him, Herbert Blau outlined the failures of traditional theater and the ideology which sustains it:

9 A. Shatz, *Desire Was Everywhere*, “London Review of Books” 16.12.2010, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 9–12, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n24/adam-shatz/desire-was-everywhere> (access 3.11.2020).

10 M. Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets: American Playwright: the Years from 1906–1940*, Applause, New York 2002, p. 283.

11 See “National Theatre Is Authorized by Congress to Advance the Drama; Distinguished Patrons of the Stage Are Named as Incorporators-Art of the Theatre to Be Developed by School and Productions Throughout the Country”, <https://www.nytimes.com/1935/06/30/archives/national-theatre-is-authorized-by-congress-to-advance-the-drama.html?sq=%2522American%2520National%2520Theatre%2520and%2520Academy%2522&scp=2&st=cse> (access 3.11.2020).

I will not have much to say of the old social occasions of theater when people gathered (so we are told) as a community to remember, through the enactment of a dramatic narrative, the maybe half-forgotten signals of a common set of values and the venerable features of a collective fate.¹²

Blooded Thought was a book that signaled overtly Blau's shift to the performing self on the *mise en scène* of the page. The shift of playing space from the boards to what Blau calls "the chamber drama of the *mise en scène* of the unconscious"¹³ was driven by his assessment "that there is no contemporary theater of any consequence which is conceived for the gathering of an audience with such expectations", that is, "of a common set of values and... of a collective fate". Blau had arrived at such skepticism through a distinguished – if tempestuous – thirty-year theatrical career which included his co-founding and co-directing with Jules Irving, from 1952–1964, the theatrical collective they called the San Francisco Actor's Workshop, which introduced at least west coast audiences, and often American audiences, to much of what has since become canonical modernism: Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, Boris Vian and Bertolt Brecht. The Actor's Workshop, along with Blau's manifesto for the decentralization of American theater, *The Impossible Theater*, published in 1964, led to a brief stint as co-director (again with Jules Irving) of the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center in 1965, where he tried, among other futile tasks, to bring an anti-war consciousness to New York bankers (that is, Chairman of the Repertory Theater Board was Robert L. Hogue, Jr., vice-president of the First National City Bank of New York.); as Blau cites in *The Impossible Theater*, "I would say that the purpose of the Workshop was to save the world", and that was the sensibility he brought to New York in the early years of establishing an American national theater, Lincoln Center Repertory Theater, as heir to director Elia Kazan and producer Robert Whitehead's initial version at ANTA Washington Square, "the only subsidized theater in America", as Blau noted in "Saturday Review."¹⁴

By 1967, after the abrupt cancellation of Blau's multi-media production of Wilford Leach's *In Three Zones*, a production designed to inaugurate the new, smaller Forum Theater at the Vivian Beaumont for the theater's second season, the bankers appeared to have won, the issue as much economics as ideology; Blau had apparently spent the entire year's budget on that one production, and so he resigned to begin teaching at the City College of New York before his return to Los Angeles as Dean of the Cali-

¹² H. Blau, *Blooded Thought: Occasions of the Theater*, Performing Arts Journal Publications, New York 1982, p. xi.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 180.

¹⁴ H. Blau, *I Don't Wanna Play, The American Theatre '64: Its Problems and Promise*, "The Saturday Review" 22.02.1964, vol. XLVII, no. 8, p. 88.

fornia Institute of the Arts, that Disney-funded institution now popularly called Cal Arts. Blau's transcontinental move may have been fore-doomed, anticipated by Theodore Hoffman's piece on American regional theater for *Show: The Magazine of the Arts*, in April of 1965, provocatively entitled *Who The Hell Is Herbert Blau?: The road may be dead, but regional theater is a lively business*, in which Hoffman noted

they'll [that is, Irving and Blau, rather now Blau and Irving] attract plenty of violent partisans, make lots of provocative copy for the Sunday drama sections and probably drive the board of directors to as many secret discussions as the last regime [Elia Kazan among them].¹⁵

Blau would launch his next theatrical phase with the touring theater group, KRAKEN in 1971, the group named after the mythical and tentacled sea monster. The 1970s was a period when he was still concerned with the training of actors and whose protracted periods of rehearsals seemed to grow out of Blau's work on *Endgame*, which opens with the lines, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished", and which, according to Blau, "became the methodological grounding of the KRAKEN group, where the work was not finished until it was finished, or we'd exhausted everything we could think about it – which usually took more than a year."¹⁶ The details of this work with KRAKEN make up much of the text of his second book, *Take up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point*. With KRAKEN, text became a performative pretext, but Blau's emphasis was still on psychological acting, even as the grounding of that method, a coherent, stable, knowable ego, was disintegrating in post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory. What Blau finally objected to in his repudiation of psychological acting was "the disguise of performance... which pretends that it is not performing."¹⁷

The resurgence of communitas

But something continues, "Something is taking its course," as Beckett reminds us in *Endgame*, if only the theatre's continual dying, like *Endgame's* collection of moribunds, some already relegated to trash bins. On the one hand, theatre has hybridized and reached beyond its circumscribed spaces, a shift evident in the global digital broadcast of musical theatrical performances. In 2009–2010, for in-

¹⁵ T. Hoffmann. *Who The Hell Is Herbert Blau?: The road may be dead, but regional theatre is a lively business*, "Show: The Magazine of the Arts" 04.1965. p. 39.

¹⁶ H. Blau, *As If: An Autobiography*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012, p. 249.

¹⁷ H. Blau. *Take up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982, p. 181.

stance, London's Royal National Theatre began to broadcast its hit plays "live" to movie theatres worldwide, including Complicité's *Disappearing Number* and Dion Bouccicault's nineteenth century farce, *London Assurance*, among others. Glyn-debourne Festival and New York's Metropolitan Opera performances are regularly so broadcast as well. Much is being produced by a group called Highbrow.tv, which in the summer of 2010 also offered *Traverse Live*, short, new, 30-minute plays or performance pieces from Edinburgh's famed Traverse Theatre, works thereafter archived and available on-demand. But the broadcasts have also become part and expanded the reach of the most famous contemporary theater festival in the world, the month-long Edinburgh Theatre Festival, which dominates the theatre world for the entire month of August. With such broadcasts audiences for the Edinburgh Festival became virtual as well as actual. Whether or not Highbrow remains or develops into a major player in such "live" or real-time broadcasts is less at issue than the fact that it has opened the door to another kind of performance, or perhaps has just stepped further through a door already opened by YouTube.¹⁸

Moreover, something of a de-centered, barely controlled pandemonium, a Dionysian spirit, characterizes the Edinburgh Theatre Festival, or more particularly the open access Edinburgh Fringe Festival, which blurs the distinction among traditional theatres, makeshift spaces, and the street as many groups and individuals perform ad hoc, *en plein air*, music, mimes, puppet shows, magic shows, circus acts, performances scripted and unscripted in all their diversity and perversity, thousands of performances over the month of August documented and scheduled in the Festival's huge catalogue – and thousands more unscheduled, uncatalogued, impromptu acts, hundreds daily as Edinburgh itself becomes the stage or circus tent.¹⁹

Such summer festivals proliferate in Avignon, Spoleto (U.S. and Italy), and in urban centers like the *Festival d'Automne* in Paris and the Dublin Theatre Festival (now sadly scarred with corporate branding, the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival), among others. And more specialized theater festivals are as prolific, drawing the like-minded to particular locals, rural and urban, ranging from Shakespeare festivals world-wide to the likes of the New York International Fringe Festival, which boasts of having nurtured *Debbie Does Dallas* and *Urinetown*, or the International Cringe Festival, which touts "Bad Plays, Bad Musicals, Bad Films."²⁰ Such summer or autumn festivals may be as close as our contemporary culture comes to the semi-annual Dionysian Theatre Festivals of Athens on hillsides that produced a natural *theatron*.

¹⁸ See for example director Richard Eyre's promotion of the Traverse project on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHATTYDSQts> (access 3.11.2020).

¹⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc6VTzqb21I> (access 3.11.2020).

²⁰ See <http://nyartists.org/festivals.html> (access 3.11.2020).

Furthermore, performance has been a regular part of political action and street protests, most evident since the 1960 anti-war movement when theater led something of a cultural revolution, a transvaluation of values. American theater groups like Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre, Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre, and Ronnie Davis's San Francisco Mime Troupe (the latter two still very active, although Bread and Puppet Theatre now seems on something like permanent retreat in Vermont and Ronnie Davis left the Mime Troupe after its first decade) were central to that cultural revolution we call, all too loosely, the 60s. Dormant on occasion, such theatre remains, lying low, awaiting its moment, as it had in the streets of France not only in May of 1968 but in 2010 as the anti-Sarkozy manifestations not only took on the characteristics of Dionysian street festivals, complete with unions offering wine, beer, mojitos to the marchers, but featured theatre troupes as well, like Ariane Mnouchkine's famed international group, *Théâtre du Soleil*.

For Mnouchkine the street remains an extension of the theatre space, and while she strongly advocates a fully collaborative theatrical process where neither playwright nor director dominates, she herself is a strong director, and on the streets of Paris on 19 October 2010, at the staging area just outside the Manufacture des Gobelins, just below the *Place d'Italie*, amid posters and placards, quotations from famous authors, her troupe gathered in preparation for the march, and the then 72 year old Mnouchkine was very much in charge, rehearsing her percussion group and choreographing the movements for the 15 foot high star of the show, a puppet version of the image of freedom, *La Liberté*, from Delacroix's contemporary masterwork depicting the popular insurrection of 1830, *La Liberté guidant le peuple*, a painting that evoked the revolution of 1798 as well and in many ways anticipated Picasso's *Guernica*.

La Liberté would come under attack every 200 or so meters by a swarm of rooks, ravens, crows, and almost succumb. *La Liberté* would twist, flail her arms, and falter under the attack of the ravens only to recover and march on proudly, held aloft and manipulated by six equally proud puppeteers. Each resurrection was greeted by cheers from marchers and sideline spectators as well. If we measure the success of such performance in wholly practical terms, we might consider it a failure since the Sarkozy government did not relent, but as an exercise in political awareness, as a lesson in history, a builder and reinforcer of communities, as an aesthetic experience, it was the most exhilarating theatre I have seen since last I saw Mnouchkine's work at the *La Cartoucherie*.²¹ Mnouchkine, like Peter Brook, is still at it. As she told interviewer Andrew Dickson in August of 2012, "I hate the word »production«. It's [that is, theatre is] a ceremony, a ritual – you should go out of the theatre more human than when you went in."²²

²¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lueuCTAkA1M> (access 3.11.2020).

²² A. Dickson, *Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil: a life in theatre*, "The Guardian" 10.08.2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/aug/10/ariane-mnouchkine-life-in-theatre> (access 3.11.2020).

Like *La Liberté* herself, theatre is always under attack and somehow, even bloodied, resilient enough to keep reviving. One measure of its successful and periodic resuscitation is whether or not artists in the field can not only find work but make a living at their craft. The American theatrical director Alan Schneider was fond of saying that theatrical directors can't make a living on Broadway. They can make a killing, but not a living. That is, if they stage a smash hit they are rewarded substantially, but of course such a system fosters the culture of smash hits. Values here are economic rather than aesthetic. On the other hand, in cultures where the arts are deemed central to the fabric of a culture, where they reflect and shape its identity, and contribute to its unity, where they enhance not so much the local economy (as often they do) but the quality of life, they are often supported by public funds, and in European cultures theater remains central to such an idea of community, not only within individual nations but in the loose collection of nations called the European Community, no accident that final noun. In Europe, and in Italy in particular, theater and theatres play a major role in defining a common culture through the post-war *Teatro Stabile Pubblico Regionale*, the *Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione* (a consortium of some 13 theaters) among the most powerful and stable of such institutions. Those regional theatrical *Fondazioni* are themselves often parts of wider pan-European consortia like the 2007 Prospero project, “*un projet, le théâtre en commun*”, that include six theaters, *Le Théâtre National de Bretagne*, *Théâtre de la Plabe* (Belgique), *Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz* (Berlin), *Fundação Centro Cultural de Blemén* (Lisboa), *Tutkivan Teatterityön Keskus* (Tampere, Finland), as well as the *Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione*. Prospero's four goals are:

1. To develop the mobility of performances and artists;
2. To contribute to the development of the concept of “European citizenship”;
3. To exploit a common space and a common cultural heritage;
4. To strengthen the intercultural dialogue and to promote the diversity of cultures. [From ERT publicity]

Another kind of theater: Laboratory theater

In the United States the arts, theatre in particular, have had to be self-sufficient, to exist in a free market system, and so the taxpayer supported network of the Italian *Teatro Stabile* and their associated *Fondazioni*, which allows artists like Pippo Delbono, among many others, to maintain his acting troupe and tour Italy (and abroad) constantly, is non-existent in the United States, despite some very fine regional theatres like The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis and The Goodman in Chicago, but somehow, even in the United States, without national, public support, or rather where the public is generally hostile to taxpayer support for the arts, the-

atre survives, actors work, playwrights emerge, theater festivals proliferate. David Mamet may spend the bulk his essays in *Theatre* attacking that institution, but he continues to write new plays, *Bitter Wheat* most recently, to direct them, and to understand, to work, and to maintain faith in the powers of this living, changing, cultural institution we call theater.

A short history of laboratory theater

The purpose then of laboratory performance is as much discovery as public performance, although the latter is often the driving force of the rehearsals. In a special performance issue of the “Journal of Beckett Studies” (XXIII.1 [2014]), editors Jonathan Heron and Nicholas Johnson outline their aims in laboratory/workshop exercises and performance, to counter “the distinction, if not the false opposition, [that is, the division] between the archive and the theatre [which opposition they aim to break down or erase] by defining the laboratory as a »liminal space in which discourses and ways of knowing combine. It is [performance] defined by process, uncertainty, and failure, and yet it produces a form of truth«” (p. 8), or at least understanding, we might add. That desideratum comes close to characterizing the work we were trying to do in Sopot, their focus on their own production of a Beckett manuscript fragment, the “bare room”, as part of the Samuel Beckett Laboratory in Trinity College Dublin: “performance in this experimental space of labs and workshops turns into research by expanding the textual and the performative possibilities of encountering Beckett’s pieces in the theatre”, as Arka Chattopadhyay suggests in a review of my *Ohio Impromptu* laboratory production for the “Journal of Beckett Studies”. He goes on to note that “Gontarski’s *Ohio Impromptu*, as we shall see, uses bilingualism and technology to subject Beckett’s play to a dynamic ‘process’ of performance that generates new meanings from the text.”²³

While Herron and Johnson introduction outlines short-term history of laboratory performance, of, what Chattopadhyay calls “a dynamic »process« of performance”, my own view of theater as research or laboratory theatre reaches back to or is informed by Peter Brook’s experiments in the 1960s as he and collaborator Charles Marowitz established something of a laboratory approach to British theatre as they worked through the Royal Shakespeare Experimental Group to develop in 1964 a “Theatre of Cruelty” season at the Lamda Theatre Club.²⁴ Under the auspices of the RSC, the “Theatre of Cruelty” season was something of an enquiry

23 A. Chattopadhyay, *Beckett’s Ohio Impromptu*, “Journal of Beckett Studies” 2017, vol. XXVI, no. 2, p. 291.

24 C. Marowitz, *Peter Brook at Eighty*, “Swans” 6.06.2005, <http://www.swans.com/library/art11/cmarow19.html> (access 3.11.2020).

based, experimental theatre project. The most famous result from such collaborations with Marowitz and Artaud were the legendary, experimental, collaborative, politicized productions of the Jan Kott-inspired *King Lear* (with Peter Scoffield), Genet's *The Screens*, *Marat/Sade* and *US*, the play over which the bond between Brook and Marowitz was tested: "In our case, that bond was frayed, if not actually broken, when as a critic in the late 1960s, I expressed a dim view of his anti-Vietnam farrago »US.«" The Peter Weiss *Marat/Sade* (more fully, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*) would feature newcomer Glenda Jackson as Charlotte Corday but also with Patrick Magee as the Marquis de Sade. The 1967 film version retains much of what was so stunningly original in this ensemble production with an audience in the film rising up finally to destroy the theater.²⁵ Magee had by then already established himself as a major Beckett actor first in *From An Abandoned Work*, called a "meditation for radio", broadcast on BBC's Third Programme on 14 December 1957,²⁶ a performance which led Beckett to write a play specifically for him. Its working title was "Magee Monologue" but would develop into the landmark production of *Krapp's Last Tape* with Magee at the Royal Court Theatre in 1958 under the direction of Donald McWhinnie, but with Beckett's close oversight. The production was reprised for BBC television in 1972.²⁷ Brook would finally break from the Royal Shakespeare Company and move toward fuller anthropological research, after Howard Turner, leaving behind the legacy he established with such productions as his acrobatic *A Midsummer Night's Dream* of 1970, soon after which he left for France to establish the International Centre for Theatre Research (with occasional returns to the RSC), where Brook could more fully explore the textual body in performance developed through the gymnastic exercises and rehearsals for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In his tribute to Brook on his eightieth Birthday, Marowitz puts his emphasis on the diminished level of language in such productions, even of Shakespeare:

At one rehearsal [of *King Lear*], there was a set of drums in the studio and Peter sat down behind them and started beating out different tattoos and cymbal clashes. »Wouldn't it be marvelous«, he said, »if we could use rhythms like this as directions to actors, instead of words«. It was a period when »the word« had fallen into disrepute and rooting out subterranean »sub-text« had an appeal that no linguistic construction, no matter how eloquent, could possibly equal. That was the way Peter's mind worked. It was constantly searching for alternative means of expressing ideas. It was that instinct which probably led him to Antonin Artaud's *Theatre and Its*

²⁵ Available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJc4l6pivqg> (access 3.11.2020).

²⁶ Available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8sbILeDA8E> (access 3.11.2020).

²⁷ Available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otpEwEVFKLc> (access 3.11.2020).

Double and to our next collaboration which was the creation of a “Theatre of Cruelty Season” in a small theatrical adjunct to the Royal Shakespeare Company off Sloane Square where many of Artaud’s more tantalizing ideas could be researched and tested. [...] while preparing the Theatre of Cruelty Season (a term created by Artaud himself) [...] Peter and I delved deeply into the poet’s writing to see how ideas he himself never managed to realize could be fleshed out using a hand-picked group of actors under the aegis of the Royal Shakespeare Company.²⁸

Brook, with Marowitz, essentially created fringe theatre in the UK with the “Theater of Cruelty Season”, and, Marowitz with Thelma Holt went on to found, develop and run the experimental Open Space Theatre in London in 1968.²⁹ In 1976 having difficulties renewing the lease on his theatre, Marowitz left London for Los Angeles and founded the Malibu Stage Company, which he ran for a decade. In 1981 the Los Angeles Actors’ Theater produced Marowitz’s recut, reshuffled *Hamlet*, and that production began his long association with LAAT, where our paths crossed when I directed Alan Mandell at LAAT in my adaptation of Samuel Beckett’s novella *Company*, which, gratefully, the generally acerbic Marowitz reviewed favorably.³⁰

Brook and Marowitz’s commitment to a research focus to performance and to theatre as an experimental laboratory had parallels in the United States as Richard Scheckner, teaching at Tulane University, shaped the “Tulane Drama Review”, which he inherited from Robert W. Corrigan in 1962, into a research based performance journal before he went off to New York (NYU) in 1967, taking what was now “TDR” with him, to form The Performance Group and direct its most landmark, environmental³¹ adaptation of Euripides *The Bacchae* in 1968, complete with substantial audience participation, *Dionysis in ’69*. On the west coast of the United States, Herbert Blau, Professor of English at San Francisco State created, with Jules Irving, the San Francisco Actors’ Workshop to produce a psychologically focused theatre, and its most famous production was the 1956 *Waiting for Godot* that the group famously brought into the confines of the San Quentin prison and played before 1,500 hardened criminals, who somehow, felt the power of a play about waiting. Once Blau left San Francisco for New York to run the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater where his experimentalism and political edge did not sit well with the theater’s Board of

²⁸ C. Marowitz, *op. cit.*

²⁹ J. Schiele, *Off-Centre Stages: Fringe Theatre at the Open Space and the Round House, 1968–1983*, Hertfordshire 2006, UK: University of Hertfordshire Press [published in conjunction with STR, Society for Theatre Research].

³⁰ An excerpt is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v11Ki2bfmHY> (access 3.11.2020).

³¹ R. Schechner, *Six Axioms for Environmental Theater*, “The Drama Review: TDR” 1968, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 41–64 (access 5.11.2020).

Directors. Fired after his first season, Blau went on to become founding dean and provost of the School of Theater Arts at Cal Arts after which he returned to theater forming a group called Kraken, which, like much of Grotowski's work was a research venture or theater laboratory without care for public performance. Much of the work of that period is detailed in two of Blau's books, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (University of Illinois Press, 1982) and *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theater* (Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

Such an abbreviated history of laboratory theater and the experimental tradition in English language performance as research is meant to suggest the "tradition" in which I still see Beckett, even as he has been co-opted by mainstream theaters and actors chosen for their marquee appeal. As Marowitz concluded of Brook, "Peter took many of Artaud's ideas and gave them a form they never had before; he worked closely with Jerzy Grotowski [*sic*] and that minimalist approach to theatre unquestionably influenced his own scaled-down work on the classics."³² I would like to think that the two production I developed, or at least began in Sopot, Poland in 2016 and 2017 were not intended to be imitative, even of Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre, although they were conceived in Poland so some comparison seems inevitable, but to continue a line of theatrical research aimed less at entertainment value or even public performance than on textual archeology, to understanding more fully the theater as a mode of discourse and to dig further into particular works written for performance the potential of which, intellectual, aesthetic, psychological, has been under excavated. The issue for me, then, is not so much how much information and background one brings to rehearsals since for a scholar it is difficult not to be fully immersed in the critical discourse, but what sorts of preconceptions one has to the performance, how much authority one brings. Central to an effective process is the avoidance of standard hierarchies of theater, and such hierarchies are often embedded in the names of theatre groups, actors' theatres, directors' theatres, playwrights' theatres, since the key to laboratory theatre is not anticipating results and allowing the process to work, or allowing participants through the process to discover what will work and what will not, and not to stop when one discovers what might work but to dig for what else might work. Such an approach is different, I think, from directors who want nothing to do with the critical discourse of a work before they take it on in rehearsals – or ever, for that matter. That is simply an argument from ignorance. But that critical discourse should not be imposed as something of a preconceived framework.

To echo Beckett, we might suggest, then, that theater may be at its best at its dying since its extended demise seems self-regenerating. Whether or not you "go out of the theatre more human than when you went in", as Ariane Mnouchkin suggests, or whether you've had a sense that you've been part of, participated in a com-

³² C. Marowitz, *op. cit.*

munity ritual, a Dionysia, or whether or not you've felt that you've been affected by a performative, an embodied intellectual and emotional human experience may determine how you judge the state of contemporary theater. You may not always know the answer to those questions immediately after the theatrical encounter, or ever deliberately or consciously, but something, nonetheless, may have been taking its course. You may emerge "more human than when you went in".

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Stanley Gontarski

Teatr zawsze umiera

Streszczenie

Teatr zawsze umiera [*The Theater Is always Dying*] śledzi odporność spektakli teatralnych na żywo w obliczu konkurencyjnych form performatywnych, takich jak kino, telewizja i współczesne usługi przesyłania strumieniowego na osobistych, przenośnych urządzeniach, i koncentruje się na zdolności teatru do kontynuowania roli znaczącej siły kulturowej, społecznej i intelektualnej w obliczu takiej konkurencji. Przypominając Becketta, moglibyśmy zatem zasugerować, że teatr może być na najlepszej drodze umierania, ponieważ jego przedłużający się upadek wydaje się samoregenerować. Niezależnie od tego, czy „wychodzisz z teatru bardziej ludzko niż wtedy, gdy wchodzisz”, jak sugeruje Ariane Mnouchkin, czy też miałeś poczucie, że byłeś częścią, uczestniczyłeś w rytuale społeczności, Dionizja, czy niezależnie od tego, czy czułeś się dotknięty performatywem, ucieleśnione intelektualne i emocjonalne ludzkie doświadczenie może wpłynąć na to, jak ocenisz stan współczesnego teatru. Być może nie zawsze znasz odpowiedź na te pytania natychmiast po spotkaniu teatralnym, a może nawet celowo lub świadomie, ale mimo wszystko coś mogło się toczyć. Możesz okazać się „bardziej ludzki niż wtedy, gdy wszedłeś”.

Słowa kluczowe: Communitas, Victor Turner, David Mamet, Marshall McLuhan, Ariane Mnouchkin, Dionizja, Jerzy Grotowski, Teatr laboratorium, Peter Brook, Charles Marowitz, Richard Schechner, Antonin Artaud, Herbert Blau, Samuel Beckett

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