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Disciplinary Narratives for Change: The Emergence of Performance Studies within ATHE and SCA

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The notion of interpretive communities . . . stands between an impossible ideal and fear that leads so many to maintain it . . . It is the fragile but real consolidation of interpretive communities that allows us to talk to one another, but with no hope or fear of ever being able to stop (Stanley Fish, 1990, p. 171).

THE past few years have witnessed the definitional shift from oral interpretation to performance studies within the Speech Communication Association (SCA) and the support for Richard Schechner's "Broad Spectrum Approach" to the study of theatre within the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). During the past few years, membership within both professional associations debated the wisdom and relevancy of any formal action to either support a name change of an existing division or to sanction the formation of a new division, respectively. To say the least, initially the proposal to accept performance studies within SCA and ATHE met with mixed reviews. However, recently both professional associations formally accepted performance studies units as part of their organizational structure. The published debates from within the membership of both the Interpretation Division of SCA and ATHE preceding this formal action provided a lively forum for disciplinary change, characterized by some writers as either an example of disciplinary renewal or disruption.

Be that as it may, other disciplinary channels, such as professional associations and journals, textbook writers, and departmental course offerings as well as entire departmental programs have embraced the term performance studies to best designate that they do. Specific

examples include course offerings in performance studies at New York University, Northwestern University, Louisiana State University, Southern Illinois University, Bowling Green State University, University of Pittsburgh, University of Texas, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and California Institute for the Arts. to name only a few of the major programs. In addition, the SCA accepted the journal *Literature in Performance* as an official journal. With the organizational sanction and financial support came a name change for the journal now called *Text and Performance Quarterly (TPQ)*. The sponsorship, along with the change in the journal's title, signaled disciplinary relevancy as well as acceptance of this emerging disciplinary paradigm. Recently, ATHE has also launched a new journal in performance studies called *Theatre Topics*. In short, both journals allow scholars in performance studies to share their work in this area—the study and practice of performance of both literary and non-literary texts from a wide range of theoretical and critical perspectives. Performance Studies has arrived. For university administrators concerned with issues of academic cohesiveness and relevance, a review and critique of representative disciplinary narratives debating the emergence of performance studies might help to clarify the placement of performance studies as part of our respective academic agendas. I will situate my critique of these narratives debating the emergence of performance studies within SCA and ATHE in light of those theoretical forces articulated by Stanley Fish quoted above. Fish's conceptualization of interpretive communities as a self-defining organizational force mirrors the transformative dynamics operative in academic circles, specifically those forces revealed through professional channels which give voice to questions of disciplinary definition and practice—those traditions and conventions, if you will, that create identity. I will limit my discussion to selected narratives readily available and perhaps familiar to readers of this journal as I trace how issues of academic cohesiveness and relevance surfaced during the debate, along with more pragmatic and human concerns.

PERFORMANCE STUDIES WITHIN ATHE

During the past year, the debate within ATHE concerning the creation of a performance studies interest group ranged from the theoretical to the practical. Articulate voices either advocated or feared the possible consequences of accepting performance studies as either a part of the academic study of theatre or as an appropriate paradigm for the entire field. Other voices, equally forceful, stressed the questionable financial and organizational viability for any change within the structure of ATHE at this time. Simply expressed, could ATHE support such diversity? Both questions, theoretical and practical, were also applied to those academic institutions from which ATHE draws membership. Would such disciplinary disruptions on the national level work to weaken certain academic programs across the country in times of financial cutbacks? Nevertheless, in August 1993, the leadership of ATHE accepted the proposal to support performance studies as a focus group within the organization. The stated purpose of the new group is to "promote and develop the study of performance in a number of intersecting areas, including education, entertainment, ritual, ceremony, play, sport, and media, and to facilitate the viability of performance studies in theatre and related departments across the country" (p. 1). In the same issue of the Newsletter announcing this action, Gary Maciag (1993), *FORUM* representative, declared that "one thing we need to do at this point is to determine 'who' we are. If you are interested in Performance Studies, check us off as one of your interest groups when you renew our membership" (p. 7). His call for shifting affiliations within the membership of ATHE echoed one of the strongest arguments presented against the establishment of a distinct interest group. In published debate preceding the vote, Tobin Nellhaus (1993) argued that "performance studies has not been excluded or ignored in conference programming; on the contrary, it appears fairly widespread through panels sponsored by a variety of focus groups" (p. 6). Responding to Richard Schechner's and

Jonathan Warman's call for performance studies within ATHE, Nellhaus stressed his pragmatic concern for the fiscal future of ATHE, while at the same time implicitly embracing the relevance of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of theatre, a theoretical position practiced by performance studies scholars. In short, he questioned the fiscal wisdom of spreading the membership beyond available resources and, in his view, the overall redundancy of the proposed action: "Not only should performance studies be in ATHE, it already is" (p. 6).

This debate within ATHE institutionalized the larger issue concerning the placement and relevance of performance studies within the study of theatre in academic settings. A glance at a series of narratives published in *TDR* and the *Performance Arts Journal* reveals something of the goals, substance, and tone of the larger debate. Schechner's call for a broad spectrum approach to the study of theatre, within the context of the discipline of performance studies, prompted Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta, boldly to reject Schechner's premise to "show how performance is a key paradigm" in the study of history, culture and the arts. Instead, they proposed a rationale for theatre study evocative of A.M. Nagler's (1976) purist's stance when he asserted "that styles of performance and their more or less plausible reconstructions" (p. xi) were the primary concern of the theatre historian. Marranca and Dasgupta (1988) declared that "like it or not, the main purpose of theatre is founded on the staging of texts, just as the main purpose of the music world is to acknowledge the playing and singing of musical texts. One cannot get around this by referring to theatre as a subgenre of 'performance' and elevating 'performance studies' to a discipline." They also pointedly denied Schechner's assertion that theatre as performance studies could salvage floundering theatre departments. Instead, they championed the historical autonomy of their disciplinary concerns with the defense that "theatre people" do not "have to be saved from oblivion by placing their field of study in other departments on campus." Denying the relevancy of the broad spectrum approach and supporting a strangely univocal and homogeneous interpretation of their disciplinary past, they positioned themselves against those who encourage interdisciplinary study of performance: "It is wrong to reconceive performance or theatre, or whatever one wants to call it, in the realm of the soft sciences (sociology, anthropology, speech communications)" (p. 5).

Schechner (1989) presented a forceful response to what he characterized as a "retreat" to the traditional study of theatre. He began by condemning what he read as an "elitist" and "ethnocentric" position and concluded by reviewing his own theoretical and artistic pedigree: his indebtedness to the work of Gregory Bateson, Erving Goffman, and Victor Turner, and his sympathetic understanding of the performative concerns of Grotowski and others. Denying the efficacy of their historical arguments for disciplinary purity, Schechner contended that theatre as performance studies could once again restore to theatrical scholarship what it had at one time possessed:

Steadily, over the past 25 years, theatre and dance departments obsessed with 'professional training,' have let the intellectual aspects of performance studies—historical, political, theoretical—pass into the hands of social scientists, literary scholars, and historians. The editors of *PAJ* are apparently unaware of this slippage. To correct these imbalances, the scholarly study of performance must not shrink further but expand to include an awareness of the full range of performative genres, an understanding of the various historical and cultural contexts (non-Western as well as Western) in which performance occurs, and a familiarity with several methods of performance analysis (p. 6).

It remains to be seen how the broad spectrum approach, performance studies, will play at future ATHE conventions. However, with the creation of a formal interest group, an

interpretive community has achieved identity and can continue the work for personal as well as disciplinary distinctions. No doubt in future years, essays published in *Theatre Topics* will provide an outlet for voices negotiating the placement of performance studies as part of theatre pedagogy, practice, and theory.

PERFORMANCE STUDIES WITHIN SCA

The performative turn in the study of communicative and cultural texts has found fertile ground both within and beyond the membership of the Performance Studies Division of SCA, a fact confirmed by the variety of articles published during the past four years in *Text and Performance Quarterly*. That is not to suggest that the move from oral interpretation to performance studies within SCA was immediate, a magical renaming, or unproblematic. In fact, similar issues of disciplinary cohesion and relevance emerged in those published narratives preceding the renaming of the Interpretation Division in 1990. At the fall SCA convention in 1990, the membership of the Interpretation Division voted overwhelmingly (only two votes were cast against the motion) to change the Division's name to Performance Studies. This vote came only after several years of debate at both the national and regional level. In preparation for the official vote, Wallace Bacon, as editor of TPQ, invited position papers on the complex issue to be published in the July volume. Ted Wendt (1990) provided a detailed narrative explicating his reluctant acceptance of the name change. He prefaced and characterized his narrative as "a collegial statement of concern" and the beginning of what he envisioned as "an extended and productive dialogue about the future nature of our discipline whatever we choose to call it" (p. 249).

Wendt's uneasy acceptance of the term performance studies as a replacement for oral interpretation centered around two basic arguments. He acknowledged that the performative turn in anthropology and other disciplines had already found application by certain interpretation scholars working in the areas of personal narratives and ethnographic performance. However, he questioned the willingness and preparation of most interpretation faculty and academic programs to join in this expanded disciplinary paradigm fully or competently. He argued that those scholars and teachers tooled in the traditional practice of literary analysis and performance practice would find their academic expertise "theoretically suspect, obsolete, or irrelevant" in any interdisciplinary notion of performance. This concern combined with the inability of most academic departments to hire qualified faculty to teach and research in all of the facets of the performance studies paradigm, literary as well as non-literary based performance, created an unattainable goal. In addition, he questioned whether the membership of the SCA Division should call themselves that which they are not: "Rather than unifying or collectivizing, the term performance studies symbolizes the continuous fragmentation which has characterized many of the modern developments in humanistic studies." Ultimately, his greatest fear was one of disciplinary disintegration and the loss of any "univocal discourse with which that community has heretofore defined itself" (10).

In response to Wendt's narrative, both Dwight Conquergood (1990) and Carol Simpson Stern (1990) characterized his position in unflattering terms. Echoing Schechner's dismissal of the critique of his broad spectrum approach, they interpreted Wendt's appeal to traditional oral interpretation theory and practice as politically suspect. Conquergood's *ad hominem* response suggested that Wendt's "arguments for disciplinary singularity are uncomfortably close to the cultural purity arguments used to exclude and control immigrants: diversity is linked causally to anarchy and the fragmentation and dissolution of shared norms" (p. 258). He continued by expanding his analogy in specific contemporary political terms:

I prefer cultures (and disciplines) that are friendly to immigrants. In our late twentieth-century intercultural world characterized by 'border-

crossings' and 'zones of difference,' isolationism becomes an increasingly slippery stance while diversity becomes even more difficult to suppress or contain (p. 258).

Stern responded in a similar vein. She interpreted Wendt's fear of disciplinary fragmentation and his desire for univocal discourse as sympathetic to "Allan Bloom and past-Secretary Bennett's conservative intellectual agenda" (p. 266). However, Conquergood concluded this section of his response in a brilliant note of reconciliation and renewal in language evocative of both traditional interpretation theory and his call for disciplinary diversity: "Moreover, diversity and the 'other' can be experienced as an enriching and enlightening engagement with ourselves" (1990).

Both of these respondents, along with Paul Gray in his essay, rejected Wendt's view of oral interpretation history as unproblematic and homogeneous. Gray specifically and tellingly recounted how various names have been coined and promoted throughout the past century to designate disciplinary boundaries—terms such as expression, oral reading, oral interpretation, interpretation, communicative reading, and the performance of literature to list only a representative few. For Conquergood, Stern, and Gray, Wendt's fear of the demise of an established academic community did not hold up in the light of historical fact. Instead, each writer conceptualized the name-change issue as an opportunity for disciplinary renewal, a pattern commonplace in our disciplinary past. Such disciplinary shifts in the past explored relevant new directions, as theory and practice responded to larger issues of theoretical sophistication and realignment.

All three writers stressed their sympathy for Wendt's reluctance to abandon the traditional oral interpretation pedagogical practice of using performance to study literature. In fact, Stern placed this traditional concern as part of what performance studies is at Northwestern University. However, Conquergood pointedly and forcefully argued for an engaged faculty, individuals committed to intellectual renewal, with the admonition: "I can think of no viable discipline in which one's graduate school training provides life-time security for intellectual currency" (p. 258). Such re-tooling is possible, Stern argued, within the "rank-and-file" members of the Interpretation Division. In fact, she suggested that in her opinion few "will be left behind" (p. 265). A glance at the contents of *TPQ* and the wide range of panels at regional and national conventions since 1990, supports her optimism. As Lynn Jacobson (1994) recently noted, performance studies currently attracts the "intellectually promiscuous," those individuals eager for inter-disciplinary study and the challenges of theoretical and disciplinary crossings. Wendt's other concern for disciplinary cohesion and institutional comprehensiveness was not ignored by Conquergood. Citing the influence of Wallace Bacon's writings concerning the emergence of performance studies, Conquergood praised Bacon's historical and theoretical scholarship as "exemplary and enduring" not because it reflected "universals, timeless dictums of practice (it does not)," but because it presented "the field as always in a process of becoming" (p. 257). What Bacon (1987) suggested does not require any one institution to attempt a comprehensive teaching of the discipline. Instead, he envisioned that the discipline would be best served when scholars at various institutions teach performance studies from the strengths and interests of their faculty in support of their departmental and institutional traditions. Consequently, the diversity of the discipline will be mirrored through the diversity of approaches to the subject throughout the country. Current scholars and teachers of performance studies can rejoice in the myriad approaches and critical frames open to their use: an interpretive community dedicated to exploring the nexus wherein performance and text converge from a variety of theoretical, artistic, and critical perspectives. Given the range of institutions currently offering instruction in performance studies, it appears as if Bacon's pragmatic vision reflects individual as well as disciplinary and institutional constraints and potentials.

CONCLUSION

During recent years, the debate surrounding the emergence of performance studies within the professional organizations, SCA and ATHE, has generated both heat and light. Both debates centered on pragmatic and seminal questions of disciplinary cohesiveness and relevancy; each side in both debates also argued their respective positions from particular interpretations of disciplinary history. Of course, each organization faced the issue from unique circumstances. In SCA, the issue involved a name change within a large and respected Division: in ATHE, the entire membership was challenged to consider the consequences of shifting membership resources from all units to support a new group within the larger body. Perhaps it is an indication of the maturity of these respective interpretive communities that such lively and pointed debate could lead to positive action. Certainly all disciplines define themselves through the questions they ask, the arguments encouraged, and the professional channels formed and supported to encourage debate. In this regard, performance studies has been well served in both interpretive communities. For those of us active as performance studies scholars, teachers, and artists, these are exciting times, indeed. For departmental administrators and curriculum committees, the excitement is as strong, but perhaps of a slightly different flavor. No doubt individuals on both sides of the debate will be challenged and or comforted by Paul Gray's (1990) wise admonition:

For the past 75 years, arguments about our scope, our methods, our objectives, and certainly our name have consistently come with the territory. As ever, the side that prevails will be the side that works the hardest and publishes the most, and the side that loses can take comfort in the certainty that this too shall pass (p. 263).

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