

Pressing Issues in Theory and Theatre

It is clear to me that the reason I have been asked to speak to you is because of the success of a book of mine, *Theory/Theatre: an Introduction*, which I am told is available in two versions in Iran and with which some of you are familiar. The success of my book gives me the credibility and licence to speak on today's topic: Pressing Issues in Theatre and Theory. Let me make a few general statements about the approach to theatre and theory that guides my book. First, I am not particularly interested in theories that are specific to theatre, or even to literature or art: method acting, realism, formalism, cubism, and so forth. This may be because I am not primarily a theatre practitioner, but really more a jack of all trades, a generalist. What does interest me are theories that apply more broadly to human society, theatre being an aspect of human society, so that the theories I present assume that theatre should be understood in the same terms as everything else we take as important in our lives. What is pressing in the world at large must be pressing for theatre. I am painfully aware, from years of teaching theory, that not all students like it. And I am sure this is true for many of you. That is your prerogative. If theory is not for you then I am fine with that. All I have ever tried to offer is an accessible introduction to theory if, for whatever reason, you find yourself forced or wanting to study it. Secondly, the first edition of my book appeared in 1996, at a particular moment in the theoretical landscape and was grounded in the theories that were prominent at the time. There was a second edition a few years later, which I am told is the one that has been translated for you. This edition was largely an attempt to clean up the first edition and covered more or less the same material. You have probably not seen the third edition, which appeared in 2016, and which took account of newer developments. Let me tell you about three of those.

Most prominent in the third edition is an epilogue dedicated to cognitive theory, which looks at how our brains and nervous system are hardwired to take in the world, and so theatre performances, in certain ways. Most striking is that this theory arises not from humanities and social sciences, as does all the other theory I present, but rather from biological science. What does cognitive theory have to say about our theatrical experience? Let me note a few things.

There is something in us called mirror neurons, which allow us to feel big gestures we see others perform as if we were experiencing them ourselves: an action sequence or a passionate explosion hit us and move us in a way a mere thought or word cannot do, much like a powerful action in sports can do. This, I think, is a very interesting idea. It gives us an explanation as to why theatre can have the emotional and visceral power it has. On the other hand, it fails to explain the power of quieter, more thoughtful moments of theatre. Cognitive theory has much to contribute to our understanding of performing and watching theatre. And yet cognitive theory tends to think of us, because of the way our brains work, as very set in our ways. We don't like to have to think too hard about things, we like to be certain and we don't like to be challenged too much. Inasmuch as cognitive theorists have turned this into a prescription—theatre must appeal to our desire for easy certainty—it has turned away from theories and theatre that critique the way things are and make us think too hard or make us grapple with uncertainty. In fact, much cognitive theory has taken a highly dismissive stance toward all the other theories I present, many of which are dedicated to unsettling our attitudes and our world. Cognitive theory has presented no socio-political understanding of its own, except perhaps implicitly a quietist one, and has spurned any socio-political impetus it sees elsewhere.

Secondly, in the section on gender and feminism, I revisited three thinkers who had been instrumental in bringing feminism to the understanding of theatre: Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan,

and Elaine Astin. What I found at the time was very striking and surprising. All three had come to think that feminism had unfortunately failed and was no longer influential. In western theatre culture, radical and glamorous queerness had pushed feminism to the margins. I had not expected to find them saying this, but I reported their positions.

Thirdly, there is an expanded discussion of the technology used in theatre production. A key text in technology and theatre is Philip Auslander's *Liveness*, which argued many years ago that so-called live theatre is rarely ever completely live but rather mediated by technological reproduction, a tendency that has only grown since Auslander's book was published. This has meant the growth and acceptance of hybrid productions, partly live partly mediated, a movement away from theatre narrowly construed toward performance as a much more open practice. No work was as ubiquitously discussed in the last decade as was Punchdrunk Theatre's *Sleep No More*, an immersive, non-dramatic performance, one that demands the presence of the audience in the performance space. And yet there are plans, albeit slow to fruition, for even this production to be recreated in virtual reality, so that any vestige of its liveness would disappear. One may ask whether at that point what it means to call it theatre.

Recently, I have been asked to start thinking about a fourth edition of *Theory/Theatre*. So what issues have in the last few years become pressing as I think about this edition to come and what it must address? It is only six years since the 3rd edition, but we live in a time—I speak from a western perspective—in which theory and cultural understanding has shifted. What has happened is that theories and movements interested in social justice have arisen with renewed and striking force, along with renewed and striking opposition. This is true of feminism, in such developments as the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, and on the other hand the assault in the United States on reproductive rights, so that the dismissiveness expressed in 2016 seems now an

anomalous blip. Feminism has also reasserted itself in alliance with other social justice movements having to do with race, sexual identity and orientation, ableism and disability—in broad terms with human diversity, especially with forms of diversity that have been subjected to inequality and injustice. Western universities, for instance, have now routinely developed policies on equity, diversity, and inclusion, which have become central considerations in study and teaching. Therefore certain theoretical ideas, not new but certainly renewed, will have to be readdressed. One is Critical Race Theory which has received such a backlash from American conservatives. Critical Race Theory, which is hardly new, explores the historical and ongoing patterns of systemic racism in western culture and calls for acknowledgement of that racism and struggle against it. Even more prominent is the idea of intersectionality, which arose in law and sociology many years ago and is now somewhat ubiquitous in social discourse. No other theoretical idea so dominates the current landscape. Intersectionality addresses the way that different patterns of oppression can affect a single individual: a disabled Black woman suffers oppression as disabled, as Black, and as a woman. Each of us is positioned in the world in multiple ways: I am a white, heterosexual, older, Canadian man. But to think of myself as intersectional would be to equate all my sources of privilege with the aspects that serve to oppress others. A term like intersectionality is not symmetrical or applicable to all without undermining its point, which is to understand oppression in order to act against it. For theatre intersectionalism means a renewed interest in theatre made by and for the intersectional, those who are oppressed because of race and gender certainly but also for instance (this is only one of an open-ended series of possible examples) theatre made by and for the disabled: the visually or hearing impaired, those with limited mobility. I imagine some in the audience listening to this talk have some disability and understand how that affects their experience of theatre. A former

student of mine, Jessica Watkin, who is herself blind, is doing very interesting work on Theatre and Disability. There is a need not only to make theatre in general more accessible to persons with Disabilities but also, as Watkin writes, for more work “created by (and possibly for) Disabled artists.” Both are aspects of what Carrie Sandhal has called “an ethic of accommodation.”

The current imperative for theatre, like all other art, to be engaged in the struggle for social justice raises profound questions about the social purposes of theatre and its effectiveness at driving or serving a political agenda, and whether social change is theatre’s essential purpose. COVID has had at least a short term effect of the uses of art—I have heard of many people who spent more time playing piano, for instance, either taking it up for the first time or going back to it after an absence, and streaming services moved, if they weren’t already there, to the cultural centre, as a way, at the very least, to pass the time, and possibly as a lifeline that allowed community, empathy, and meaning into our solitudes. Art has taken on renewed and specific importance in the face of our isolation and the winters of our discontent. Whether art in this period was more necessarily revolutionary or comforting is worth contemplating.

COVID has had an obvious effect on theatre, with the closure of performance spaces for long periods of time. There has been a profound effect on how theatre is seen, with the rise of digital platforms making theatre other than an in-person experience. Even in the situation of theatre watched at a distance there have been rapid technological changes. There is a book published in 2018 called *Shakespeare and the ‘Live’ Broadcast Experience*, which deals with a development that was rather new at the time: the broadcast of filmed versions of live theatre, by The National Theatre in London, for instance, in movie theatres around the world. However, four years later, this practice appears to be, at least for now, dead in the water and has been replaced

by live theatre streamed to tablets and cell phones, which has become much more common and much more the theatre market's model for virtual distribution. This rapid change points out a few things: the quickness and unpredictability of technological change and how change will influence theatre viewing; the further attenuation of "liveness," so that live theatre is now something one watches alone in a room on a screen of a few square inches months or years after it was performed. Is this still theatre? One of my graduate students insists that it is not theatre unless an audience watches together. Another, who is an actor, says there must be a simultaneous interaction of performer and audience. Or maybe we just need to be open to theatre changing in radical and essential ways, even to the point that it evolves into something that is no longer theatre. My younger colleagues are much more comfortable seeing their work as performance studies rather than as theatre, although our students still tell them they are more interested in a program called theatre than one called performance studies. Certainly the engagement between what gets called theatre and what gets called performance is not new—I wrote of it in the first edition of *Theory/Theatre*—but the balance and battlefield have shifted and will continue to do so.

And what of cognitive theory in this era of renewed social justice concerns? As much as cognitive theory has to offer—and there is much—the ongoing failure, as far as I can tell, to make any rapprochement with social justice theories grounded in the humanities and social sciences has left it in its own solitude. The adherents of cognitive theory continue to produce new research, but it is largely sealed off from any fruitful engagement with the theories it has rejected. This highly limits its influence in the current situation and constitutes a great theoretical gap and failure. One day, I hope, cognitive theory and theories of social justice arising from the humanities and social sciences will find a constructive way to talk to each other. For example,

what can cognitive theory tell us specifically about Black theatre, its possibilities and power, or about theatre by the LGBTQ community, that isn't merely a repetition of universalist norms or a prescription for conventionality?

There are other areas I want to turn to in the fourth edition: I want to go deeper into phenomenology, a philosophy I personally find most compelling, but one that needs to address human differences and open possibilities in a way it hasn't always done. For example, I expect that if I were to sit down and talk with some of you about our experience of being in the world, we would find that we shared some common ground but that our cultural differences would also mean we experienced our lives in very different ways, as we would experience any particular work of theatre, from your culture or mine, somewhat differently. In this way, a more nuanced phenomenology would affect our theories of theatre reception. Moreover, a phenomenology of inclusion is of interest to me. Phenomenology is interested in the different facets of Being—Being-in-itself, Being-for-itself, especially human Being, Dasein, "Being-here," present to experience. Being disabled would be an important route for phenomenology to explore human diversity, what is it like to be blind, for instance, to experience Being Blind. From this perspective, phenomenology might need to rethink some of its most compelling insights: for example, Emmanuel Lévinas's idea of witnessing the Face of the other as how we are compelled to take responsibility for other people. The face, of course, the expression on the face of a great actor, is so central to the experience of empathy in the theatre. But what does it mean for the blind? Surely it doesn't mean that not seeing another's face means there is no connection or that there is no emotional meaning for the blind in theatre.. Rather, we must ask how connection can work differently. Jessica Watkin notes the special connection that exists between artists with disabilities: a quality, a texture, a softness, "a kind of interdependent magic." Theatre artists with

disabilities need to express this connection and those of us who do not live with disabilities have much to learn from them.

There is also in phenomenology the notion of “Being-for-beyond-one’s-death,” so vital a mode if the planetary environment is to be saved for future generations. What world do we want to leave our children, our grandchildren, and generations we will never know? Being-for-beyond-one’s-death resonates with the currently fashionable notion among the rich of leaving a legacy, in the world of theatre the way performance spaces are being named for wealthy patrons, so that their name can live on in stone or neon, hanging over those to come. But, it seems to me, this legacy for the wealthy is a hollow and hubristic form of Being-for-beyond-one’s-death. I can’t help but fear that the performances we do in such named spaces, even though unavoidable and necessary, are tainted by them. In its better form, as in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, we are to leave not a rack of our ego behind and let others come into their time of sovereignty.

I also want to explore what poststructuralist scepticism around the notion of truth can mean at a time when public discourse and media have become so shamelessly deceitful and deceptive. I am too trained in poststructuralist thought to reject its suspicion of truth claims, and much of the great and powerful American theatre of the 20th-century, for instance—O’Neill, Miller, Williams, Albee—was a long, relentless effort to expose the truisms of the American family as the falsehoods they are. But I don’t know that poststructuralism envisioned a world of all-encompassing state propaganda, outlandish and unsupported conspiracy theories, and the utter lack of any social consensus. Sir Philip Sidney centuries ago said of poetry, and by extension theatre, that it affirms nothing and therefore doesn’t lie. But in an age of pressing, planet-threatening disagreements, is this something of a copout? Do we need a theatre that

affirms, that stands for something, and how do you do that without making naïve and untenable truth claims?

If I ever do finish and publish a 4th edition of Theory/Theatre, it is still several years away, and much, no doubt, will happen between now and then, rendering some of my concerns moot or muted or augmented and bringing forth some I don't foresee. But as I begin the task of consideration that might bring me to write the next edition, what I see as pressing and necessary to discuss include the things I have mention here to you, this morning where I am, this evening where you are.