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978-0-521-01274-4 - A Short History of Western Performance Space

David Wiles

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

'I always nod off in a theatre'
(Peter Brook)¹

When I enter an empty theatre, I feel a surge of anticipation, sensing the potential for intense human contact. But like Brook, when I watch a play in that theatre I have a habit of nodding off. Watching actors in a workshop situation, I sense what the show *could* be, but in the transposition from workshop to theatre something all too often vanishes. When nervous incoming drama students arrive for their induction in my institution, they are asked to find a space somewhere on the campus, to make it their 'home', and let a play grow out of it.² The exercise produces work that is committed and creative. An intense bonding with place occurs. Ten days later, the students are asked to take their 'play', transpose it, and make it work in the studio theatre. The work dies. Invariably. The moral of the exercise is absorbed slowly and painfully, while work goes on being transposed and allowed to die. The questions resulting from the exercise are often framed in terms of finding the right play for the space, or the right space for the play, but the only satisfactory solution is to refuse altogether the dichotomy of 'play' and 'space', of 'content' and 'form'. The play-as-text can be performed *in* a space, but the play-as-event belongs to the space, and makes the space perform as much as it makes actors perform. To eliminate the dichotomy of play and space is no easy task, however. In professional theatre the show is a commodity subject to constant transposition: it moves from the designer's model box into the rehearsal room, into the theatre just before the tech; then perhaps it will move from the studio theatre to the main house, which may be empty or full, and then transfer to a London venue, or be taken to a festival – yet the show is deemed throughout to be an ontological constant. This history of western performance space grew out of my frustration with commodity theatre. The world was not always thus.

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A history of western performance space . . . of all these difficult terms, perhaps the most intractable is *history*. In a survey of theatre history that served a generation of American students, Oskar Brockett justifies his procedures on the basis of convention: 'It is usual to acknowledge a distinction between *the theatre as a form of art* and *the incidental use of theatrical elements in other activities*.' No answer is offered to the insistent twentieth-century question: *what is the difference between theatre-as-art and mere theatricality?* beyond the remark that this is *usual*. Brockett continues . . . 'This distinction is especially important here, for it would be impossible to construct a coherent history of all the theatrical devices found in humanity's diverse undertakings through the ages. Therefore, this book is primarily about the theatre as an institution – its origin and subsequent development.'³ The key word is *Therefore*. Brockett's history is not a function of what exists out there, but a function of its own rhetorical needs. Theatre-as-institution is a concept that serves the needs of the professional theatre historian, and Brockett adds his name to the distinguished list of those who have constructed such histories. The *institution* is thereby revalidated, with 'theatre' again cleanly separated from the theatrical. An 'origin' followed by a 'development' bolsters the status of the *institution*, and affirms that the word/concept *theatre* has a timeless meaning. The circularity is a convenient one. You write the thing's history to prove it has an essence; because it has an essence, you write its history . . . Which is all hunky-dory if you happen to like the 'institution' – but many do not:

I can no longer sit passively in the dark watching a hole in the wall, pretending that the auditorium is a neutral vessel of representation. It is a spatial machine that distances us from the spectacle and that allies subsidy, theatre orthodoxy and political conservatism, under the disguise of nobility of purpose, in a way that literally 'keeps us in our place'. I can no longer dutifully turn up to see the latest 'brilliant' product of such-and-such in this arts centre, where I saw the latest 'brilliant' product of others only yesterday, a field ploughed to exhaustion.

The author of this 1998 manifesto – Mike Pearson – is now a Professor of Performance Studies. Scarcely had 'theatre studies' (or 'drama') crystallized as an academic discipline in the 1960s and 70s around the Brockett view of things than 'performance studies' arose to split the subject apart, subjecting theatre studies to a withering anthropological gaze. Pearson's manifesto has new creative objectives in mind, relating to 'performance' outside the institution of theatre:

I want to get rid of the theatre 'object', the play, the 'well-made-show', the *raison d'être* of the critic . . .

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I want to problematize and renegotiate all three basic performance relationships: performer to performer, performer to spectator (and vice versa), and spectator to spectator . . .

I want to find different arenas for performance – places of work, play and worship – where the laws and bye-laws, the decorum and learned contracts of theatre can be suspended.

I want to make performances that fold together place, performance and public.⁴

Pearson's reference to 'performance relationships' is inspired by Richard Schechner, the guru of Performance Studies in New York. Schechner regards it as axiomatic that three primary transactions comprise the theatrical event: (1) between performers, (2) between audience members, (3) between performers and audience. The position of detached subject vanishes from this conception of theatre because no-one can stand outside these transactions. At stake here, fundamentally, is the subject–object relationship. Pearson rejects the common assumption of Theatre Studies that the detached subject, the critic, will examine the object out there called the play, framed both in space (the hole in the wall, the arts centre) and in time (the well-made show with beginning, middle and curtain call). Pierre Bourdieu has defined in the broadest terms the problem of the 'knowing subject', who unnoticed inflicts on practice a 'fundamental and pernicious alteration . . . in taking up a point of view on the action, withdrawing from it in order to observe it from above and from a distance, he constitutes practical activity as an *object of observation and analysis, a representation*.'⁵ To watch a performance practice as an external critic or observer is thus to change it, to turn it from an *event* into a *representation*. In physics, relativity theory confirms that objective viewing, once dubbed 'scientific', is a scientific impossibility.

In 1987, Schechner gave secondary status to the interaction 'between the total production and the space(s) where it takes place', but conceded that what seemed secondary might in time become primary.⁶ In his book *Environmental Theater* (1973), he never analysed the qualities of the Performance Garage where he created his environments. Pearson, however, aspires to 'fold together place, performance and public', and is no longer willing to subordinate the environmental to the interpersonal. While Schechner in the utopian 1960s performed in the enclosing privacy of a garage where he and his group felt they could write their own new rules for social interaction, Pearson in 1998 senses that the only way to escape the dead hand of the theatrical past is to work in found spaces that impose given rules. To separate self from space had become harder by 1998. In my final chapter I shall argue that twentieth-century theatre has been characterized by the rise and fall of the 'empty space'. 'I can take any empty space and call it a

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bare stage,' said Brook in the classic statement of this theory; and again: 'no fresh and new experience is possible if there isn't a pure, virgin space ready to receive it'.⁷ Brook's empty space is like the blank canvas of a modernist painter. By the end of the twentieth century it became clear that, just as virgins always have characters, so every canvas has a specific texture, colour and form, and an invisible label marked 'Art'. Pearson's dismissal of the latest brilliant product of an arts centre is not just the eternal disenchantment of the creative artist, but reflects a philosophical understanding that space is never empty, and can never be a 'neutral vessel of representation'.

I have much sympathy with Pearson's point of view – a passion for performance mixed with frustration once trapped in spatial machines that grind out predetermined theatrical meanings. This book is written from the conviction (1) that there are new ways forward; (2) that the best way to understand the present is to look backwards; and (3) that theatre worth experiencing (to say 'watching' would already imply a certain detachment, but 'experiencing' may still be too passive a term) necessarily folds together 'place, performance and public'.

The context for a history of performance space is a history of *space*. Classical and medieval space was finite and bounded, but the renaissance and the enlightenment introduced the new conception that space was infinitely extensible. Plate 1 depicts the classical cosmos, with the earth at the centre, seven planets attached to translucent spheres revolving clockwise around it, then the stars revolving anti-clockwise, and in the ninth sphere the Prime Mover of the universe, here interpreted as Queen Elizabeth. Looking at the universe from his tiny planet, so recently displaced from its seat of honour at the centre of the cosmos, Descartes (1596–1650) cultivated the detached scientific gaze: reality viewed from a non-place somewhere on the margins. While surveying his universe from the sidelines, Descartes drew conclusions about himself. Since his intellectual milieu had ousted human beings from the sacred centre, Descartes would repair the damage by locating his *ego* – a resident homunculus of some non-material kind – in the centre of his brain in the centre of his head (fig. 1). Miraculously, he restored the satisfying centripetal order of the classical cosmos. Visual sensation, Descartes considered, passed through the optic nerves to be mapped onto this gland in the middle of the brain, where the mysterious ego could study the image. What Descartes installed in the centre of the skull was effectively a miniature theatre where the self could contemplate reality and decide how to deal with it, before sending appropriate messages down the hydraulic system to the body.⁸ This miniature theatre was a secure home for the self or *ego* to reside in, safe from the Inquisition that nobbled Galileo, but

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Plate 1 The classical cosmos. Frontispiece to J. Case, *Sphaera Civitatis* (1588).

the price was a certain detachment, reality viewed for ever at one remove. When Pearson declares that inside a modern theatre the spatial machine distances him from the spectacle, what he seeks to escape is the Cartesian condition.

Descartes is a seminal figure in the history of western theatre. Mediated by the drawings of LeBrun, his theory of the Passions would inspire a

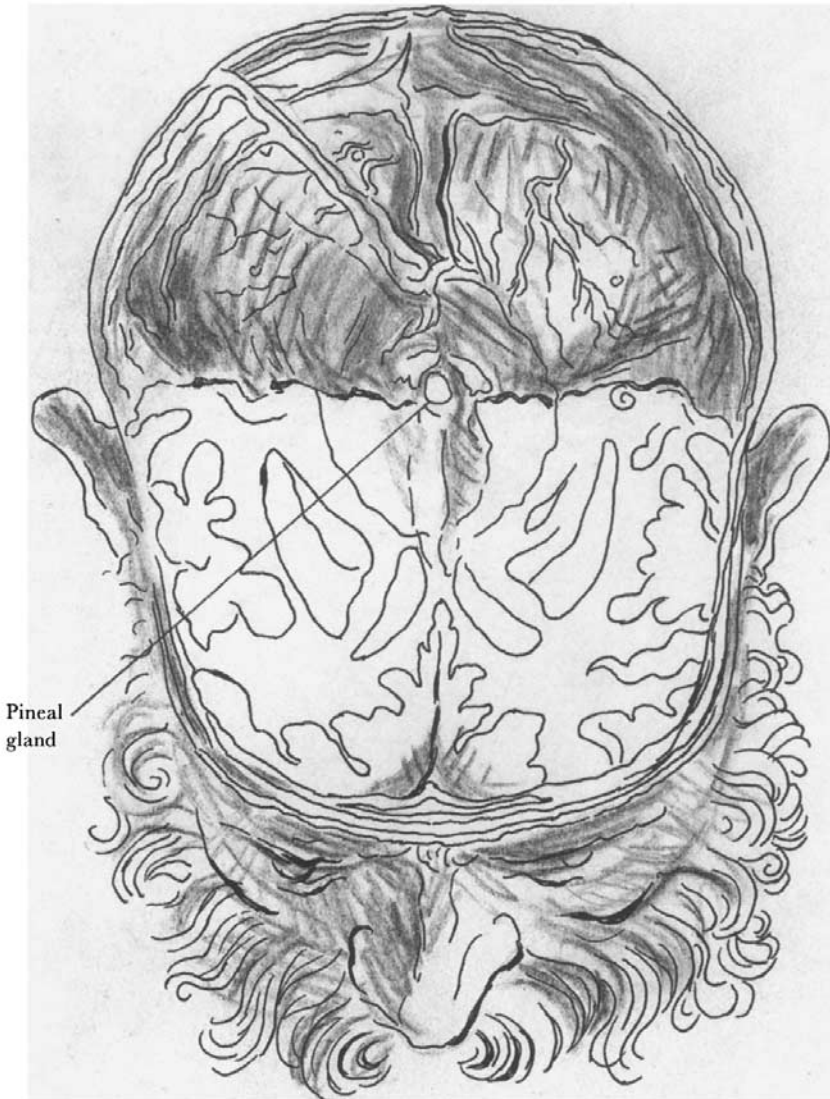


Figure 1 Descartes's diagram of the brain.

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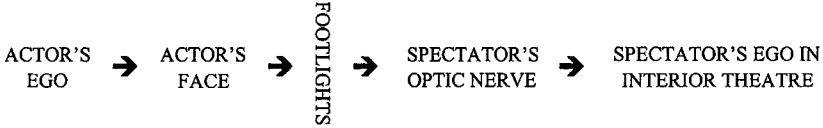
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system of acting.⁹ The face, being physically closest to the little theatre in the brain, was the piece of the body best equipped to present the different passions:



The corollary of Cartesian space was, eventually, the retreat of the actor into a frame. If the authentic homuncular *ego* is already peering out at the action through the cornea, then it makes sense to gaze in at the stage performance through another focalizing lens created by a proscenium arch. If the action shown on this stage has the distant quality of a dream, well and good because life itself has the quality of a dream, the only certainty being the cogitating *ego* of the dreamer, secure in its darkened seat in the stalls within the skull. Cartesian space is an ocular space. The invisible *ego* not only views the action but also quells the actors with the controlling power of its gaze. It does not submit to any embodied immersion in space – space as apprehended through kinetics, smell, sonic vibrations or an osmosis running through packed shoulders. The Brockett school of theatre historiography based itself on the naturalness of the divide between active actor and passive spectator – a phenomenon which we might term the Cartesian theatrical dichotomy. Since that dichotomy is historically contingent, a new kind of history needs to be written.

Many historians of space have found inspiration in Michel Foucault's invitation: 'A critique could be carried out of this devaluation of space that has prevailed for generations . . . Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic.'¹⁰ Most works of theatre history present theatre spaces as immobile lifeless containers within which unfold the rich and fecund careers of authors and actors. Foucault's emphasis on space related to his analysis of the present:

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever accumulating past . . . The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.¹¹

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Back in 1967, this was a prophetic vision of the network society held together by instant global communications, a world in which memory is obliterated and death hidden from view. The new importance given to space by postmodernism generated a new intellectual challenge:

A whole history remains to be written of *spaces* – which would at the same time be the history of *powers* (both these terms in the plural) – from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via political and economic installations.¹²

Though theatre escaped Foucault's attention, his words apply with equal force. The relationship between theatre(s) and power(s) is complex and ongoing.

In his 1967 lecture 'Of other spaces', Foucault outlined a tripartite history of space. He saw medieval space as the space of emplacement, of localization. Some places were inherently more important or sacred than others, and in the grand cosmological scheme, there were natural and unnatural places for different beings to inhabit. In the second historical phase, the new cosmology of Galileo led to the Cartesian perception that all matter was *res extensa*, an extension into an infinite space where everything was in flux. The space of 1967, finally, is seen by Foucault as the spatiality of a site defined only by its relationships – though in practice many residues of the two earlier spaces remain. Foucault develops the concept of the 'heterotopia' as a counter-site that speaks about other sites, and he cites the theatre as one example among many. To illustrate his thesis, let us imagine the monumental Opéra or Comédie that faces the Mairie in the central square of the French city. Once this was a *utopia* where coherent fables and discourses could be framed, but in 1967, inhabited by radical directors, it has become a *heterotopia* suitable only for undermining language and dismantling myths.¹³ The history of theatrical performance can be constructed in relation to Foucault's tripartite scheme. In the space of *emplacement*, performances took place in locations that had an inherent significance such as a shrine, a high street, so-and-so's ancestral home. In the space of *extension*, theatres could be built in any convenient place where people were able to gather. Their gaze was directed towards a stage, and via the perspectival décor towards a Euclidian infinity. In the modern space of the *site*, Foucault's invitation in 1967 was to link the theatre with heterotopias like the brothel or the oriental garden which represent, contest and invert other spaces in society. A generation later, Foucault's idealization of alternative (hetero-) spaces seems a little dated. To opt out of globalization

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and inhabit an 'alternative' culture seems more problematic than it did in the sixties.

For Foucault, a decisive historical rupture occurred with the birth of the 'classical order' at the start of the seventeenth century, the age of Descartes. Words ceased to be mystical signs, and language became transparent. In order to illustrate the new Cartesian space of extension, and demonstrate how realist art magically obliterates the viewer, Foucault described Velasquez's painting known as *Las Meninas* (1656). In this painting we discern the gaze of the royal couple in a tiny mirror at the centre, whilst the artist who paints their portrait is seen on the canvas, along with other figures in the studio. Velasquez's painting, Foucault maintains, gives the lie to a classical notion that art in some objective way reflects reality out there, because the reflected subject is tantalizingly hidden from view. Viewers of the canvas, he claims, unable to see themselves in the mirror, experience the 'essential void' implicit in classical representation.¹⁴ There is one difficulty with this analysis. Foucault would have seen the painting exhibited in the Prado, with a mirror placed on the opposite wall in order to give the modern viewer a thoroughly postmodern experience of multiplied gazes. The painting was actually commissioned for the private viewing of the King, allowing the King alone in his study to see himself in relation to a life-size image of his female heir.¹⁵ The painting created a space of illusion, but there was no void in the royal mirror. Foucault stripped the painting of its spatial context, and thus failed to grasp how the meaning he saw was a function of its modern staging. Foucault provides us with an object lesson rather different from the one he intended. What we see as a classical and enduring 'work of art' is made so by its context in a museum. Modern theatre buildings likewise transform scripts into classics, with meanings cut loose from spatial context.

Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, published in French in 1976, and in English translation in 1991, is a product of the same intellectual climate as Foucault's work, but is more materialist in its standpoint. It is a magisterial enterprise that draws together Marxist, phenomenological and feminist strands in modern French thought. Lefebvre was inspired by the utopian Marx of the 1844 Philosophical Manuscripts, a young Marx driven by a vision of the natural human being, rather than the late Marx who subordinated all aspects of life to the economic. Lefebvre's history of space, like that of Foucault, is rooted in a critique of Cartesian metaphysics:

By conceiving of the subject without an object (the pure thinking 'I' or *res cogitans*), and of an object without a subject (the body-as-machine or *res extensa*), philosophy created an irrevocable rift in what it was trying to define. After Descartes, the

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Western Logos sought vainly to stick the pieces together and make some sort of montage. But the unification of subject and object in such notions as ‘man’ or ‘consciousness’ succeeded only in adding another philosophical fiction to an already long list . . . Western philosophy has *betrayed* the body . . . The living body, being at once ‘subject’ and ‘object’, cannot tolerate such conceptual division . . . Today the body is establishing itself firmly, as base and foundation, beyond philosophy, beyond discourse . . . We are speaking, therefore, of the abolition of western metaphysics, of a tradition of thought running from Descartes to the present day . . .¹⁶

Where Foucault is frequently content to refer back to discourses – about sexuality or madness, for example – Lefebvre insists on the materiality of the body. His insistence that knowledge is rooted in the body rather than Logos or discourse has obvious implications for the study of theatrical performance.

The core thesis of Lefebvre’s book is the axiom: ‘(Social) space is a (social) product.’¹⁷ Space is *social*, for each society produces its own space, a space simultaneously mental and physical. Space is always *produced*, in the sense that it is always a set of relationships, never a given, never inert or transparent, never in a state of nature untouched by culture. There is no such thing as an empty space:

Vis-à-vis lived experience, space is neither a mere ‘frame’, after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it. Space is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism . . .¹⁸

Lefebvre defines three ways of relating to space: we can perceive the *spatial practices* of a society; we can conceptualize space in the form of certain coded *representations of space*; and we can live space within *representational spaces* that embody complex symbolisms.¹⁹ The final category includes theatre and other forms of art, and offers the possibility that established practices and conceptualizations may be contested.

Lefebvre criticizes idealist notions of space. He also offers a critique of traditional Marxism, with its abstract conception of ideology, and the explanatory power it gives to pure economics. He challenges structuralist and semiotic approaches to space which propose that a disembodied ego can read or decode space without being part of it, and argues, for example, that the early work of Barthes fails on the one hand to account for the body, on the other to account for power. Space, Lefebvre maintains, is not ‘read’ but experienced by means of the body which walks, smells, tastes and in short lives a space. Power, meanwhile, lies outside codes and is rooted in violence.²⁰ The Paris school of theatre semiotics, inspired by Anne Ubersfeld, has developed an influential account of performance space