Introduction

Alas! That first matinée was to prove a bitter disappointment.[1]

The boy Marcel, narrator of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, goes to the theatre for the first time. He is to see a performance of Racine's *Phèdre*, given by Berma, the greatest actress of the day.[2] He is attending the theatre against the advice of his doctor, who predicts that his illness will be exacerbated, and therefore that he will 'in the long run derive more pain than pleasure from the experience'.[3] His parents, who had previously forbidden him to attend, have relented, his mother saying '"Very well, we don't want to make you unhappy – if you think you will enjoy it so very much, you must go"'.[4] This situation causes him great anxiety: he does not wish to distress his mother by going to the theatre when she would rather he didn't. Even as it becomes clear that he is to go, and that his mother genuinely wants him to enjoy himself, his anxiety barely abates, since 'this sort of obligation to find pleasure in the performance seemed to me very burdensome'.[5]

But as the day of the performance dawns his joyful excitement at the prospect ahead of him overwhelms his anxiety, and he is full of pleasurable sensations. His pleasure increases once he has taken his seat. The theatre itself, the fact that he enjoys an unobscured view, the sounds of last minute preparations behind the lowered curtains all contribute to this pleasure. Even once the curtain has risen to reveal 'a writing desk and a fireplace' he continues to enjoy the experience. But what happens next induces a feeling of 'momentary uneasiness'. Two men appear on stage and start arguing loudly, and only gradually does Marcel realise that 'these insolent fellows were the actors'.[6] After what turns out to have been the curtain-raiser, there is an interval,

during which the audience displays impatience and people start to stamp their feet, provoking in Marcel the terrible fear that this bad behaviour will be rewarded by a bad performance by the actress Berma, in whom he has placed great hopes of a transcendent artistic experience, beyond pleasure, of truth. As the performance of *Phèdre* begins, Marcel enjoys 'the last moments of my pleasure'. The opening scenes of the play do not involve Phèdre herself, so the entrance of the great Berma will be delayed a while. Yet, the first woman to step on stage bears a remarkable resemblance to Berma, as, indeed, does the second. While dealing with his confusion, Marcel appreciates their performances, until the entry of a third woman. This really is Berma. Attuned to hang on her every word, breath and gesture, Marcel is confounded by the reality of her performance. Her famous declaration of her love for Hippolyte – the speech for which he has mentally prepared himself – is delivered in a 'uniform chant', the great actress failing to find in the speech the contrasts which 'even the pupils of an academy'[7] would not have failed to discover and communicate. As he becomes aware of the 'deliberate monotony' with which she has delivered the speech, he is suddenly caught up in the audience's 'frenzied applause' and starts to understand what seems to be a rule of the actor-audience relationship: 'the more I applauded, the better, it seemed to me, did Berma act'.[8] But all the applause cannot dispel his sense of disappointment:

> Nevertheless, when the curtain had fallen for the last time, I was disappointed that the pleasure for which I had so longed had not been greater, but at the same time I felt the need to prolong it, not to relinquish for ever, by leaving the auditorium, this strange life of the theatre which for a few hours had been mine, and from which I would have torn myself away as though I were being dragged into exile by going straight home, had I not hoped there to learn a great deal more about Berma from her admirer M. de Norpois, to whom I was indebted already for having been permitted to go to *Phèdre*.[9]

The experience of this theatre-goer, then, is one in which anticipation gives way to disappointment, in which pleasure is bound up with anxiety and even perhaps pain and illness, in which acting is confused with a vulgar interruption, in which the transcendent possibilities of the world's greatest dramatic poetry appear to pass by almost unnoticed in a 'deliberate monotone',

and success appears as dependent upon the audience as it is upon the artistic capability of the actor. Yet for all this, for all the confusion, anxiety and disappointment, it is an experience which he cannot bear to bring to an end, and to which he will repeatedly seek to return.

It is this confusion – of attraction and repulsion, compulsion and disappointment – experienced in the modern theatre, that is the principal subject of this book. I offer Marcel's experience of the modern theatre as emblematic of a more general and familiar experience of theatre in modernity. By modernity here I am referring to the phase in our history inaugurated by the industrial revolution in Europe, characterised by technological progress at the service of capitalist growth, in which the city is the centre of economic and political power. It is a modernity in which the theatre is shaped by new patterns of economic production, and, in particular, by the organised and pervasive division between work and leisure. As a place where work and leisure meet – in the forms of the actor and the audience – the theatre is perhaps inevitably going to be a place where there is a little doubt as to what is supposed to happen when producers and consumers come face to face.

Marcel's experience of this encounter is one of pleasure attended by pain, of uncertain satisfactions and contradictory impulses: an experience, in short, of what Jonas Barish calls – in a book dedicated to the theory and practice of theatre-hating – an 'ontological queasiness'[10] associated with the theatre. In the modern theatre, as exemplified by Marcel's experience, this 'ontological queasiness' seems to be at the heart of the matter: he doesn't know whether he wants to 'be' there or not, and he is not sure who anyone else is 'being' there. Of course, as Barish frequently shows, much 'theatre-hating' turns out to be a conflicted kind of love.

This ambivalence certainly characterises my own relationship with the theatre. Theatre, being queasy, makes me queasy. That such queasiness is widespread, that we find theatre uncomfortable, compromised, boring, conventional, bourgeois, overpriced and unsatisfactory most of the time, is I think not only generally accepted as true, but also generally accepted as part and parcel of the whole business. Theatre's failure, when theatre fails, is not anomalous, but somehow, perhaps constitutive. What

I want to argue here is that it is precisely in theatre's failure, our discomfort with it, its embeddedness in capitalist leisure, its status as a bourgeois pastime that its political value is to be found.

Theatre is a privileged place for the actual experience of a failure to evade or transcend capital. A performance of Racine's *Phèdre*, for example, fails to transport the spectator from the reality of his modern life, because it is, of course, part of modern life, part of capital. It is for this reason, above all, that the theoretical and artistic practices that have developed in a critical relationship to the theatre, often linked to the profession of performance, while of enormous value to an artistic and critical thinking that seeks to oppose or resist capital, neither can nor should leave behind altogether the practice and the institutions of theatre. If the promise of performance is to have redemptive force in this context, it has it only in so far as it remains in dialectical tension with the theatre that it constantly seeks to transcend. If performance and performance studies are committed – to varying degrees – to acts of ideological critique within capitalism, their claim as regards theatre is largely that they are more effective, that the challenge they offer to prevailing codes, values and oppressions is fiercer, more immediate and ultimately, more of a challenge.

What theatre perhaps does, within the formulation I am sketching out here, is to hide and to reveal both the oppressions and the challenges. It is in the imperfections (several of which are the key topics of this study) of its miming of the ideological structures of a given social organisation that theatre, perhaps, almost inadvertently, or with a coy slyness, discloses the weaknesses and blind spots in its own structures. Theatre is guilty, and knows it, while performance still makes some claim to innocence. In the decrepit, marginal, artificial and commodified institution that is the modern theatre you perhaps have to look much harder and with greater ingenuity for your resistance or your challenge, than you do in the more explicitly oppositional, self-consciously antibourgeois terrain of performance. Part of the thesis of this book is that such hard looking and ingenuity may be rewarding, and that the disclosure of guilty secrets in the theatre is an important complement to the invention of new public truths in performance. I therefore hope to show, in the section that follows, how a theoretical approach to theatre might

be reconstituted from the heart of a discourse – the discourse of performance – that appears to promise that it might be possible to move beyond it.

From the promise of performance to the return of theatre

This promise of performance appears to have had three almost simultaneous foundational moments. If performance has developed its own historiography it almost certainly rests upon the theoretical assumption that these three moments may be understood as part of the same project. The first moment might be broadly defined as the emergence of theatrical or other practices that explicitly reject, oppose, expose or move beyond the framework of theatre – the term 'performance art' is often used to name these practices. The second would then be the moment at which these and other practices (from snake rituals to park ranger presentations, via the Brooklyn Academy of Music) start to be addressed from the interdisciplinary perspectives of performance studies, and no longer from within categories developed for appreciation of autonomous aesthetic production such as painting or drama. The term 'performance studies' is often used to describe these critical approaches. A third moment may be located in the emergence of 'theatricality' as a key (and negative) term in the understanding of certain post-modern art practices.

If this third moment has become inextricably (and perhaps accidentally) linked to the name Michael Fried,[11] the second is equally, if not more strongly bound, to the name Richard Schechner.[12] For the 'Fried' moment, theatre is not art enough, while for the 'Schechner' moment, art itself is not enough.[13] The relationship of many of the makers of 'performance art' to the idea of theatre might be summarised as, 'I can't name my practice, but I know it is not theatre', an expression of the fear that they can not be untheatrical enough (a sort of flipside of the 'Fried' moment). In fact, the antitheatricality of much performance art, with its conventional insistence on the presentation of 'realness' rather than the representation of the real (or anything else),[14] finds a strong and contemporaneous echo in the seemingly antitheatrical theatre practices of Peter Handke, Richard

Foreman or even the later work of Samuel Beckett. The fact that all three of these antitheatrical practices are so unavoidably theatrical in their engagement with the question of theatre may suggest that the strongest inflections of the antitheatrical prejudice are to be found within theatre itself.

If we are seeking to explain what is wrong with theatre, some avenues offer more fruitful exploration than others, and the focus of the present study reflects this. As I have suggested above, the disciplinary formation of performance studies, the 'Schechner' moment, makes no claim to address this problem at all directly, mainly because in its inclusion of theatre within the (arguably) broader category of performance, it seeks to address, in its own disciplinary interests, those things which link the various practices and institutions that constitute its field. Any investigation that looked too closely at what might be specific to theatre itself would risk undermining the viability of the field's self-definition, which depends upon knowing what theatre is like rather than what it might be in itself, in what its 'ontological queasiness' might consist. That is not to say that the consideration of theatre as such in the anthropological terms proposed by performance studies, especially in its inaugural 'Schechner' moment, does not yield considerable understanding. However, in seeking to establish what is wrong with theatre, a more historically and culturally specific approach is required, one which speaks of theatre at a particular moment and as a cultural institution in a particular historical and geographical location.

The present study concerns itself primarily with what we routinely understand theatre to be, in Western industrial or post-industrial modernity: a modernity in which Proust's Paris, 'the capital of the nineteenth century',[15] figures as the first great location. It is a theatre in which one group of people spend leisure time sitting in the dark to watch others spend their working time under lights pretending to be other people. It is a theatre that knows its own history, claims its place in the discourses of the arts, while acknowledging, with more or less good grace, its position in the economies of capitalist leisure.

Part of the argument advanced here is to suggest that what is wrong with theatre is most intensely and obviously wrong with *this* theatre and its sense of its own history; that aspects of theatre that have enjoyed, at least in their historiography, continued

service from Athens in the fifth century B.C. to the present day, may have always been wrong, but certainly appear more wrong now. Indeed, this suggestion is in effect the condition of the present work's possibility, in that the wrongness of theatre is currently taking shape in a form that can be understood in terms of a specific relationship with the present historical moment. While it is hard to determine, for example, whatever one's suspicions, whether the meta-theatricality of Shakespeare, Corneille or Calderon might be a symptom of this wrongness or, rather, a signal that the theatre is (becoming) aware of something wrong with itself, it is possible to argue with some credibility that modern work articulating anxiety about its own form as its central subject matter (from Handke's *Offending the Audience* to Forced Entertainment's *First Night*) puts the question of theatrical undoing squarely on the table. Martin Puchner has done enormously valuable work on the aesthetic history of this tendency within modern theatre, showing convincingly that modernist theatre (from Wagner, through Joyce, Yeats and Stein, to Brecht and Beckett) offers a sustained 'resistance' to theatre and to theatricality as a value, and that in doing so, it performs acts of reform and rehabilitation in which theatre's 'wrongness' becomes the motive for experimental theatrical production.[16]

It is therefore to two significant texts that both make use of the term 'theatricality', but which are frequently used in support of the discourse of performance, that I now turn. Firstly, there are aspects of Michael Fried's arguments over literalist art that require elaboration. A second line of argument, Josette Féral's, more clearly associated with the emergence of performance as such, will complement and enlarge upon the opening made by Fried. What I am seeking to do in relation to both Fried's text and my subsequent discussion of Féral's essay, is to locate, somewhat against the apparent grain of these texts, an identification of theatre with a certain kind of unease, and, in that unease, a possible 'ontology' of theatre that might permit its reinstatement as a fruitful area of theoretical and political inquiry in spite of, if not because of, the cases made against it or the alternatives to it offered by the discourses of performance.

As generally understood, Fried's concerns over the work of artists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris centre upon the

fact that the work in question is not self-sufficient. It does not, as Fried claims the modernist painting he espouses does, absorb the viewer, permit her a moment of self-transcendence in contemplation of the work. Instead it forces the spectator to acknowledge what Robert Morris calls 'the entire situation',[17] 'including, it seems', as Fried notes, 'the beholder's *body*'.[18] In Fried's characterisation, then, the modernist work that he champions offers the possibility of a spectator who is all consciousness, who has vanished, as it were, from the scene of her own spectatorship, receded into the complete darkness of a non-existent auditorium the better to contemplate the wholly unsituated picture that is suddenly almost both subject and object of this act of contemplation or absorption. The work of the literalists against whom his critique is levelled, by contrast, insists upon the facts of co-presence in the act of spectatorship, either refusing or unable to evade them. The nature of this co-presence is what leads Fried to describe the experience of literalist art as possessing 'a theatrical effect or quality – a kind of *stage* presence'.[19] It is not possible to identify Fried's use of italics for emphasis in this essay with any programmatic intention, although the predominant effect is to call to mind or simulate the effects of spoken emphasis, to impart a certain intensity to the articulation of certain terms. It is interesting, nonetheless to note the emphasis given to the words 'stage' and 'body' in the development of this argument, as though the body were the last thing we might expect to find engaged in the aesthetic encounter, and as though the stage were a degraded place where presence is standing in for something far more serious (in this case, literally, absence, of course). Fried's rhetorical strategies aside (persuasive though they are), it is the awareness of one's body as a presence in a situation that seems to constitute the condition of theatricality in this argument. Theatricality functions here as a disturbance, almost uncanny, of the proper relations of the spectator to the art. Fried suggests that the encounter with the literalist art object is like an encounter with another human being, and one that appears to be intensely theatrical in its circumstances:

> In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person;

the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly – for example, in somewhat darkened rooms – can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way.[20]

The proxemics are inducing discomfort. Someone is too close or too far away, in a 'darkened' space, too. Where first Fried suggests that it is the awareness of oneself, of one's own body or *body* as part of 'the entire situation' that disrupts one's encounter with the work, it is now hinted that it is the intimation of an encounter with a 'silent' other that is 'disquieting'. This seems, wonderfully, to go right to the heart of the theatrical setup, where, one is tempted now to suggest, the encounter with another person, in the dark, in the absence of communication, is also an encounter with the self, and thus the occasion for all sorts of anxieties, anxieties that one might begin to discuss under headings such as narcissism, embarrassment or shame (as Chapters One and Two will do). What Fried objects to in the objects of Judd and Morris seems to be the way in which they subjectivise the spectator, turn the spectator into an audience that thinks too much of itself, that exposes itself somehow to its own gaze, that puts itself, improperly, upon the stage, in place of the work that was supposed to have engineered the transcendence of such categories altogether. The objects turn themselves into you, and you into them, and instead of a plenitude in oneness experienced in the moment of absorption, comes a constant to and fro, an unbecoming becoming, in which the action takes place in a kind of in-between, neither onstage nor off, accompanied by the rattle and clatter of unseemly machinery in the wings. In modernist abstraction, there are, of course, no wings.

Although this account of theatricality might seem, at first sight, to be the very antithesis of the theatrical set-up, in which the distinction between onstage and offstage, the work and its audience is supposed to be clear cut, in reality, because the people who are co-present to each other in the theatrical set-up are always alive, this kind of interchange, however embarrassing, however much we seek to avoid it, is always already there, built into the structure of 'the entire situation'. In this sense, then, Fried offers an account of theatricality that stresses distantiation and interaction over illusion and absorption, suggesting, I think very helpfully (and in almost complete

accordance with the thinking of Bertolt Brecht), that the prevalent notion that theatricality can subsist under conditions of illusionism is an historical misunderstanding of the form. One implication of Fried's account of theatricality that does not seem to have been followed through in this context is the possibility that the absorption he sees in modernist painting is the partner (rather than some kind of paradigmatic replacement) of theatrical realism. By this account, both modernist projects (realism and American abstract painting) seek to eliminate the spectator from the set-up, to hide the full extent of 'the entire situation', in both the phenomenological sense intended by Fried and a further political sense (that economic and other power relations in the relationship between artist and audience are hidden by both realism and abstraction). It is in the tension between the pictorial values of illusionism (sustained by conditions of spectatorship in which the darkened auditorium becomes the norm) and the co-presence that had previously underpinned theatricality, that many of the present day symptoms of theatre's 'wrongness' manifest themselves. This is especially true in the case of stage fright, a modern phenomenon that will be examined in detail in Chapter One, but also has significant implications for the consideration of embarrassment and shame in Chapter Two. In seeking to avoid 'stage presence' Fried is sparing himself the fear and blushing that it invariably brings with it. At the same time he starts to offer a model of theatricality that begins to sound like plausible grounds for 'ontological queasiness'.

In apparently seeking to suggest some justification for Fried's position, Josette Féral offers what has become an influential description of performance as a practice that rejects its dependence upon the theatre. Féral's essay, 'Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified'[21] is not only an early statement of what Jon McKenzie describes as the second phase of performance studies (after the so-called 'theory explosion'),[22] it is also the point at which European discourses around theatricality (especially those of late twentieth century French philosophy) intersect with the discourses of performance. It is in Féral's theorisation that performance is generally thought to emerge most suggestively as a redemption, or at least an escape from the fallen and degraded condition of theatre's theatricality. Féral