

CHAPTER I

Industry

SELDON: What's he saying?

FLAVIA: He's saying, he's saying – just get through it for doors and sardines! Yes?
 That's what it's all about! Doors and sardines! (*To Lloyd.*) Yes?

LLOYD (*helplessly*): Doors and sardines!

OTHERS: Doors and sardines!

They all try to put this into practice. Philip picks up the sardines and runs around trying to find some application for them. The others open various doors, fetch further plates of sardines, and run helplessly around with them. Lloyd stands helplessly watching the chaos he has created swirl around him.

Michael Frayn, *Noises Off*, Act 3¹

In Michael Frayn's oft-revived three-act comedy *Noises Off*, a troupe of actors attempts to mount a provincial English touring production of a fictional farce, ironically titled *Nothing On*. In Act 1, during a dress rehearsal in the southwestern seaside town of Weston-Super-Mare, the unprepared company struggles to get ready for opening night. Act 2 takes place one month later, in Ashton-Under-Lyne, near Manchester in the northwest. With relationships between them fraying, the actors deliver a shambolic matinee performance, which the audience views from the perspective of backstage. Finally, in Act 3, the company arrives in Stockton-on-Tees, in northeast England, after a ten-week run. By this point, the show is in crisis: there is open warfare among members of the cast, the toll of touring has proven too great, and it is unclear that a performance will even be possible that night. After the opening curtain fails to rise, Tim, the Stage Manager, steps forward to address the audience, with the costume of the Burglar he is supposed to play later in the performance clearly visible under his dinner jacket. 'Good evening ladies and gentlemen', he begins wearily. 'Welcome to the Old Fishmarket Theatre, Lowestoft, or rather the Municipal Theatre, Stockton-on-Tees,

for this evening's performance of *Nothing On*. We apologise for the slight delay in starting tonight, which is due to circumstances . . .'.² What follows is the complete disintegration of the ensuing performance, which culminates in the final curtain jamming and, with the actors trying to drag it down, detaching completely and falling 'on top of them all, leaving a floundering mass of bodies on the stage'.³ The end.

Noises Off is about theatrical failure, of course, and many of its pleasures derive from the inability of its characters to fulfil the basic conventions of an effective performance. They stumble through their lines, they fall over the furniture, and they mistime entrances and mislay props with comical regularity. These failures would be bad enough in any theatrical performance but are even worse in a farce, which, perhaps more than any genre, depends on actors completing precisely choreographed stage actions with metronomic consistency, show after show. When the actors of *Nothing On* run 'helplessly' around the stage, plates of sardines in hand, trying desperately to 'find an application for them', or 'open various doors' in the vain hope that at least one will be correct, it signals not only a comically terrible performance but the complete breakdown of theatrical production itself (Figure 1.1). In the end, *Noises Off* suggests, theatre comes down to sardines



Figure 1.1 Celia Imrie with a plate of sardines, *Noises Off*, Novello Theatre, London, 2012 (Getty Images)

and doors – knowing what to do with them and doing so correctly, repeatedly, in different times and places.

An obvious irony of *Noises Off*, of course, is that its representation of theatrical failure demands enormous skill and discipline from those who stage it – the successful representation of failure depends on a smoothly operating mode of theatrical production. When the actors in *Nothing On* are reduced to shouting, ‘Doors and sardines!’, they also highlight not only the centrality of scenery and props to theatre but, more importantly, the spatial management that underpins their use and how debilitating, when taken to an extreme, the inability to execute it can be. When an actor does not enter on time, cross the stage to the right spot, or put a prop in the correct place, theatrical production can break down entirely. But theatrical failure in this sense is so vicariously appealing because it is relatively uncommon. In showing the failure of theatrical production, *Noises Off* draws attention to how often theatrical production succeeds.

This chapter is not really about *Noises Off*. Or, rather, it is only partly about *Noises Off*, in that it was seeing a performance of the play in London in 2012 that prompted me to think about a fundamental problem of making theatre: how to produce a performance – in the general sense of manufacturing a product rather than in the specialist sense of financing a show – and then reproduce it over time and space. There are any number of ways to think about this problem. But it is undoubtedly one of economic geography and one of management, in that theatre, whether undertaken for profit or not, has developed highly effective ways of spatially mobilising resources in order to produce goods and services (live performances) for consumers (audiences). And it is very adept at doing this over and over again, show after show.

Although *Noises Off* has always been popular in both professional and amateur repertoires, it is notable that there have been multiple high-profile productions of the play, in well-known subsidised and West End theatres, in London during roughly the past fifteen years. These have often involved extended runs and commercial transfers (in some cases to Broadway as well as the West End), all by different companies or producers. I cannot think of another play with a similar production record during this time. This could just be coincidence, but it is also fair to suggest that the play’s theatrical mechanics – which are central to its appeal – began to take on a different inflection during a time when the workings of London’s wider economy grew increasingly opaque (even if the effects of their operations were not). Part of the appeal of *Noises Off* now is that it allows audiences to identify a clear relationship between economic cause and effect – between

the mechanics of the production process and malfunction – in a way that has become more difficult to achieve in the wider economy.

It also throws into stark relief how intensively and extensively theatre spatially manages its labour-vis-à-vis other forms of stage technology. *Noises Off* highlights, as well, the importance of systems and replication within this process, so that a performance can be reproduced over time and space. And it draws attention to the fact that such practices and processes happen at the microcosmic level of theatrical production (ironically by putting them on full display, under the glare of stage lights).

Noises Off shows that one form of spatial management is key to this process: blocking. Put simply, *blocking* refers to the spatial organisation of theatrical labour in relation to stage technologies (e.g., props like sardines, scenography like doors, lighting, costumes, and so on) and spectators (predominantly, though not exclusively, in relation to their visual and aural registers). It may refer simultaneously to the movement of actors onstage and, just as importantly, the notation of that movement (which may take various forms, such as the graphic and textual mark-up within a stage manager's prompt book or stage directions in a published script). As Ric Knowles observes, blocking is an important element in creating meaning in theatre:

Proximity or distance and the movement through space are central to meaning-making in the theatre, as are the vertical and horizontal axes of the spaces of performance and reception, the arrangement of actors and audiences into groups, the arrangement of the auditorium, the stage, and the performers in ways that direct the audience's gaze. 'Blocking' in the theatre (the arrangement and movement of actors in space) is used to produce tension, reveal relationships of power, relative status, distance, or intimacy as actors group themselves together, stand apart, invade on another's personal space, or organise themselves in dynamic or static, comfortable or tense relationships to one another, the set, and the furnishings.⁴

The importance of blocking within many theatrical production processes is demonstrated by the amount of time and attention devoted to it during rehearsal, the care and oversight given to it during the course of a run, and the extent to which it is the concern of multiple participants in the endeavour. While the division of labour in modern theatre usually involves the separation of tasks into discrete spheres of responsibility, blocking is one area in which actors, directors, stage managers, and designers share an ongoing, if not equal or consistently maintained, interest. Through it, we can index that division of labour and begin to see the hierarchies it involves.

Perhaps because it is such a commonplace feature of modern theatre, blocking can be taken somewhat for granted. Its frequent disavowal by contemporary theatre practitioners could also mislead us into thinking that it no longer matters. As is often the case in theatre, though, there can be a substantial gap between rhetoric and practice – just because an actor or director disclaims blocking does not mean it still does not happen. Blocking has received minimal attention in theatre and performance scholarship, and it tends to be addressed fairly cursorily in practitioner pedagogy (though the ways that it is addressed in such training reveal important things about the division of labour within the theatrical production process and the complex negotiation of power and authority it entails). The ‘spatial turn’ in theatre and performance studies, along with more recent experiments in performance practice, have not changed this scholarly inattention; while there is now arguably a greater appreciation of the complex spatiality of performance than before and theatre scholars and practitioners have embraced a broader repertoire of spatial forms of performance, there is nonetheless a risk of overlooking some of the less exceptional but equally important spatial practices upon which theatrical production has come to depend.

In this chapter, I view blocking as an industrial practice – one that addresses, at a granular level, the fundamental economic problem of producing and reproducing a performance over time and space. When I characterise blocking as ‘industrial’, I do not mean it as a synonym for a sector of the economy but instead in the sense outlined by Marx in his early writings, as the process by which labour power is transformed through the creation of things that ultimately stand apart from the workers who made them (even if, as in the theatre, this abstraction is sometimes difficult to discern).⁵ As I will discuss in the first section, this is not the way that blocking commonly has been viewed, either in performance theory or in practitioner pedagogy (the two fields where it has received some, albeit minimal, attention). Blocking has commonly been treated as either an aesthetic problem of stage composition or a mechanical problem of stage organisation (as in the hoary, if not wholly incorrect, advice to actors to ‘say your lines clearly and don’t bump into the furniture’). Today blocking is most frequently discussed within practitioner training, where it is often conceived as a largely uninteresting practice (especially in directing and acting pedagogy) or as a purely technical exercise (as in stage management training). But if we read this training literature from a different angle, we begin to see blocking as an industrial practice – one that reveals the

sometimes-fraught divisions of labour on which theatre production processes have commonly come to depend.

In the second section of the chapter, I look at blocking in action. Here, though, I am less interested in the movements of live actors than I am in the forms of notation that blocking commonly involves, which are most obviously found in stage managers' prompt books (though I do discuss the interplay between these two manifestations of blocking in the latter part of the chapter). Blocking has come to entail the creation of increasingly complex forms of notation that are especially important to the operations of modern theatre production and, in turn, to its potential geographical reach. I see this notation as a kind of industrial script – one that is enacted simultaneously with the artistic script that accompanies it (whether in an actual performance or in a hypothetical one in the future). Blocking notation seeks to improve the efficiency of the production process because it abstracts key elements of the work from the worker. It means that the production process does not require the involvement of one actor to transmit the blocking associated with their part to another actor taking over the role; anyone who knows how to read the notation can do this, sometimes far removed in time and space from the original performance. This spatial abstraction also breaks any proprietary relation between an actor and their blocking – once rendered in notational form, it gains a life independent of the actor who originally created it.

Furthermore, blocking notation not only illustrates forms of spatial management in which modern theatre has come to be engaged; it provides the means to *do* this management. It renders the spatiality of production visible in codified form and allows for changes in this spatiality to be tracked over time; it offers a means to verify that production is unfolding as intended; and it supplies the key spatial data necessary to mount further productions of the same show, in other times and places. As I will discuss in relation to two National Theatre productions – the 2000 production of *Noises Off* and the 2011 production of *Frankenstein* – this notation can be both managerially intensive (as in *Noises Off*, which demanded an especially complex coordination of resources for each performance) and managerially indifferent (as in *Frankenstein*, which involved the lead actors alternating the play's two main roles). Blocking notation also offers a way for theatre to reproduce its labour power over time and space efficiently while maintaining managerial discipline – something that is especially important when production expands to the scale of transnational theatre production, where the same show may be in performance simultaneously in multiple locations, and where the licensing of what commercial

producer Cameron Macintosh Ltd calls ‘replica reproductions’ often expressly mandates the replication of a particular staging.

Notation is undoubtedly important to the efficient operation of individual theatre productions, but abstracting all manner of staging from those who originally enacted it also enables the geographical reach of theatrical production to expand exponentially. When the replication of an entire *mise-en-scène* no longer requires the involvement of the artistic and technical personnel who initially executed it, theatre’s productive reach has the potential to grow enormously. Modern theatre, then, has evolved some very considered and distinctive spatial marshalling of its own labour, technologies, and audiences. And these quotidian, often overlooked spatial practices reveal how industrious it can be.

Industry, Blocking, and the Spatial Division of Theatrical Labour

Take, for example, a fairly conventional professional production process in English-language theatre culture. Although there are, of course, variations of this model, a three- or four-week rehearsal period, followed by a run of several weeks, is a fairly common occurrence. Anyone who works on such a show quickly realises how much of its production process depends not on ephemerality or constant innovation but on systems and replicability: finding ways to repeat the performance, in much the same way, over an extended period of time and, sometimes, space. This is the case regardless of whether a run is several weeks or several months or several years long. Producing and reproducing a performance, then, demands an array of techniques to coordinate, instruct, manage, discipline, verify, document, and deploy theatre’s constitutive resources (whether human, mechanical, or ‘natural’). What is happening here is theatre finding ways to be industrial, though not in the sense of how we might commonly use the term.

At its most fundamental level, industry involves what Marx refers to as the ‘*exoteric* revelation’ of humanity’s ‘*essential powers*’ through labour.⁶ In other words, industry is manifest ‘in the form of *sensuous, alien, useful objects*’ (such as theatrical performances and their attendant artefacts) that are created through a process of abstraction – to a greater and lesser degree, and in many possible ways, industry is part of the process by which the work comes to stand apart from the worker.⁷ This abstraction is economically and experientially labile; it may be liberating and pleasurable (‘creative’, even) while simultaneously being exploitative (in that it may involve the commodification of labour). Theatre complicates such ‘exoteric

revelation', though, because in the theatre event the performance usually appears inseparable from the performer; abstraction is undoubtedly present (the actor and the character remain two different entities) but semiotically and phenomenologically this distinction is not always possible to discern, at least from the perspective of the spectator (though they know in principle that the distinction exists). But as I will discuss, such abstraction is more apparent from other vantage points within the production process.

Industry also implies systematic production and, importantly, reproduction – the ability not only to produce goods and services more than once but also to reproduce the mode of production itself, in the broadest economic, social, and cultural senses. As Marx observes in the first volume of *Capital*, every 'process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction' and, as feminist critics such as Isabella Bakker, Sylvia Federici, and others have pointed out, this is as much a social (and especially gendered) process as it is a strictly economic one.⁸ Modern theatre production is no different in this regard, where frequently the goal is not just to make a new performance every night but to repeat the same performance multiple times, and to sustain the production apparatus – human and otherwise – that makes it possible to do this. Industry, moreover, is usually thought to denote some sort of aggregation of activity. Whereas in economic geography this has usually been understood in terms of an aggregation of producers who share broadly similar production methods and/or produce similar goods or services, it is also fair to think of industry in terms of networks of productive practices, in a single place or across space and time (and theatre might be an especially interesting place to track these ways of working). And, finally, industriousness is the quality that makes all of these things happen. If theatre has not commonly been thought of as industrious, this has more to do with flawed hermeneutics than actual practice.

Speaking of theatre in industrial terms, though, seems both to diminish it (since it threatens to subsume its value within an economic and managerial calculus) and misrepresent it (since theatre often does not seem very industrious). As cultural economist David Throsby points out, such sentiments are to some extent a legacy of deeply ingrained, Romantic ideals of artistry, which have inflected thinking about the arts in Europe and North America since the early nineteenth century, and which often valorise the singular creator (the 'creative genius') to whom material needs, especially monetary ones, should be unimportant. The assertion that art and artists might be part of an industry arguably only amplifies this unease.⁹ Proposing that art is often industrial risks

undermining the romance of artisanal production and the status of the artist as a privileged producer. As a producer working in an industry, the artist begins to look more like either a worker or an entrepreneur (and sometimes both simultaneously). The former bears the taint of collectivity, while the latter bears the taint of commerce. Industry also implies a submission of the artist to systematic production, which undermines the singularity of the artist and highlights the fact that artistry depends on multiple intermediaries between the creator and the artistic product, and that the role of the artist in coordinating this production process is usually heavily circumscribed. All of this risks contaminating the consumer's encounter with the work with the whiff of either money or social relations. While both, of course, are always present in some way or other, neither is seen as wholly desirable. Locating theatre's industry in its 'creativity' does not necessarily address the problem either, since a great deal of theatre's industriousness does not depend on creativity.

Thinking about theatre in industrial terms is also somewhat at odds with familiar discourses arising from within theatre and performance itself, where the ephemerality of live performance has tended to be valued highly: the proposition that a given performance, at its best, offers an intense, transitory experience that will never happen in the same way again (that it will be, to quote the title of one prominent acting guide, 'different every night').¹⁰ It is difficult, however, to set aside the fact that ephemerality still usually depends on some form of systematic theatrical production, whether or not the techniques involved ultimately bring theatre into the sphere of market exchange, and a significant extent of the production process is devoted to minimising variation rather than encouraging it.

The key problem, then, is for theatre to become industrious in the sense Marx outlines, and blocking has become one way to do this. In the *longue durée* of Euro-American theatrical production, blocking is nothing new. Or, at least, one of its fundamental concerns – how to organise performers optimally on the stage – is not new. Performers have always moved on the stage in some sort of coordinated fashion, and these movements have always played an important part in the creation of theatrical meaning. This being said, we can see modern conventions of blocking being practised in British and continental European theatres in the middle of the eighteenth century, and in the nineteenth century blocking is being recorded in a way that is recognisable today (though, as I will discuss, some of the nuances within this bigger picture are important). Although I am not trying to undertake a history of blocking in this chapter (however interesting that might be) it is nonetheless important to acknowledge

instances where theatre theorists and practitioners are working out the industrial potential of blocking, even if they do not articulate it in these terms.

While it is difficult to locate a particular source for the term, 'blocking' is commonly thought to take its name from the wooden blocks – each often representing a character – used to work out actors' positions on a stage maquette, usually so that these could then be learned by actors in rehearsal and subsequently reproduced on stage (this practice is depicted in Mike Leigh's 1999 film *Topsy Turvy*, which contains a short scene in which William Gilbert, of Gilbert and Sullivan fame, arranges little coloured blocks on a model of the set of *The Mikado*).¹¹ Blocking develops during the eighteenth and nineteenth century as a highly flexible practice. It serves the growing desire among some thinkers and practitioners to move away from declamatory acting styles in order to achieve greater verisimilitude and increasingly 'natural' (though not yet naturalist) stage compositions from the late eighteenth century onwards. At the same time, it is caught up with increasingly complex and expansive forms of staging that could serve all manner of theatrical spectacles. Such practices were arguably aided by lighting and scenic inventions, such as those developed by Philip de Loutherbourg and installed in David Garrick's Drury Lane in the 1770s, which facilitated greater use of the entire stage, and, later, by the formulation of complex systems of staging notation, which made it easier to document and reproduce a show, both in a particular theatre and, ultimately, in an imagined theatre somewhere else, in the future.

Discussion of blocking, or the spatial concerns underpinning it, has largely been confined to two, quite different, spheres: early modern performance theory, and, to a greater extent, twentieth- and twenty-first-century practitioner pedagogy. Arguably the most notable example of the former is philosopher Denis Diderot's essay 'Conversations on *The Natural Son*' (1757), which was published alongside the script of his play *The Natural Son*. This wide-ranging essay, which consists of a series of imagined conversations between the author and Dorval, the lead character in the play, not only takes up staging but also dramaturgy, genre, mimesis, language, and more (that Diderot's concerns are so wide-ranging is a testament both to his intellectual curiosity and to the fact that *The Natural Son* is a bit of a mess of a play – it is no accident that Diderot is now remembered primarily as a theorist rather than a playwright). As an advocate of verisimilitude, Diderot is displeased with what he sees as an excessive reliance on the *coup de théâtre*, the sudden and unexpected turn of