The Cambridge Introduction to
Performance Theory

What does 'performance theory' really mean and why has it become so important across such a large number of disciplines, from art history to religious studies and architecture to geography? In this introduction Simon Shepherd explains the origins of performance theory, defines the terms and practices within the field and provides new insights into performance's wide range of definitions and uses. Offering an overview of the key figures, their theories and their impact, Shepherd provides a fresh approach to figures including Erving Goffman and Richard Schechner and ideas such as radical art practice, Performance Studies, radical scenarism and performativity. Essential reading for students, scholars and enthusiasts, this engaging account travels from universities into the streets and back again to examine performance in the context of political activists and teachers, counter-cultural experiments and feminist challenges, and ceremonies and demonstrations.

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Contents

vi   *Contents*

Preface

By the late 1970s the French and the Germans had taken a new word into their languages. This word was necessary because it enabled them to specify an activity for which there was otherwise no available term. The new word that entered their languages was the English word 'performance'.

The activity to which it was applied consisted of circumstances in which one or more people communicated in real time and shared space with another group of people. The method of communication did not explicitly refer to, and often made a point of rejecting, the conventions of what could be recognised as 'theatre'. It was a communicative activity seen to take place much more widely and variously than the practice of theatre. Indeed, although never before systematically recognised as such, it was identified as a regular occurrence in general human behaviour, capable of being done by most human beings in whatever society.

This insight came out of a widespread interest in analysing and explaining behaviour that had hitherto been assumed to be simply everyday, normal, natural. It gathered pace, across various disciplines, from the mid-1950s onwards. The first part of the book thus tracks the differing theories and definitions of human interactional behaviour which, beginning in different places, when taken together bring into being a concept of something which is called 'performance'.

By 1979 'performance' seemed to have gained so much currency, to have spread so far, that it was, some thought, a catch-all term, used to describe almost anything. Over a period of about twenty-five years, then, a concept comes into being, is felt to have such potency that it moves across academic disciplines and arts practices and gets formalised into degree programmes. That coming into being in part resulted from the work of scholars studying the world around them, but a lot of the potency that is attached to the concept of performance was put in place outside the academy, in the work of political activists and artists. A new concept of performance was formed in a new practice of performance, a practice shaped by its interactions with, its battles against the limitations of, the specific presiding economic and social

vii

structures, the institutions and violent hierarchies of capitalism, in post-1945 western Europe and the United States, and going on still. The emergence of the concept of performance is tangled up with, brought into being by, a set of particular historical circumstances, and it always carries their bruises.

To be accurate, what came into being was not a single concept so much as a set of closely related concepts, emerging from a set of circumstances. Together these circumstances all constituted a massive change in modes of thinking, but within that the concepts of performance developed as a variety of specific understandings and formulations, and they had generally specifiable genealogies. That it's necessary to make this point is again to do with language. While the French and Germans may have needed to import a term they did not have, English-speaking peoples have the reverse problem. In English the word 'performance' has a range of applications that is promiscuous to the point of gaudy. At one end it can be a synonym for general words such as 'do' or 'achieve' or 'work'. At the other end it has specific application to the work of actors. If you say a machine performs efficiently, you don't imply that it is presenting a fiction for the delight of an audience. If you say a child performs well in school you are not usually talking about a drama class. For the machine the word 'work' would do, for the child the word 'achieve'. While attempts are made to blur these meanings together, it's an English-language game, and nobody seems to want to do it with other verbs, such as 'operate'. But we could, with similar logic, say that a train company operates efficiently and thereby claim that it's handy at removing gallbladders.

At the specific end of its English range of meanings, 'performance' is used of what actors and other entertainers do in theatre institutions. There is a large body of writing about this activity and it could all be taken to constitute a theory of how performing is done in various times and places. It could indeed be called 'performance theory' but it could just as legitimately be called 'acting theory', and its materials, generated over centuries, would mainly be of interest to those who work in or study theatre. The French and German languages can adequately label this body of work without needing the term 'performance'.

So the time is now well overdue that we ask me to come clean about the thing to which this book claims to be an introduction. The phrase 'performance theory' has two main problems in it: first, what is meant by 'performance' and, second, is it a 'theory'? As I have said, I intend to set limits on what is meant here by 'performance'. In doing so I have made a book which differs from a number of other guides to performance theory. For instance Elizabeth Bell's book offers a very full and accessible account of a large range of material, but I part company with her when she says that 'The challenges

for performance theory are to account for all the resources . . . that we bring to the creation, participation, and study of performances' (2008: 22; my elision). Writing an account of the creation of performance would lead into acting theory – indeed Bell has a chapter on 'Performing Drama' – and 'participation' could be said to be in the territory of audience studies. These inclusions reveal Bell's disciplinary origins in a form of Performance Studies which emerged out of the text-based activities of 'oral interpretation'. By contrast my book does not come out of any particular disciplinary configuration of Performance Studies. It shuts the door on the set of theories that belongs with acting and theatrical performing, and it tiptoes cautiously around understandings of 'performance' that fit with the traditional work done by the university discipline of drama. So it takes a fierce line on excluding practices that I think belong elsewhere. Whether it is in Bali or Berlin, theatre or dance can be dealt with appropriately using models and terminology that pertain to theatre and dance. 'Theatre anthropology', for example, is not the same thing as and has a different remit from 'cultural performance', so I deal with the latter but not the former. We shall, however, regularly encounter the anxious attempts of performance to define its separation from theatre.

So that's what it's not. What it is (or tries to be) is a book specifically concerned with a set of related ideas that emerged from the mid-fifties onwards, and for which no other word but 'performance' would do. It endeavours to explain where those ideas came from, why they were necessary, who used them and what work they did. The journey takes us across a variety of academic disciplines from architecture, cultural anthropology and folk-lore to geography, sociology and theatre. It takes us from universities into the streets and back again, encountering on the way political activists and teachers, counter-cultural experiments and feminist confrontations, happenings and ceremonies, demonstrations and wanderings. The long middle section of the book looks at examples of the concepts of performance developing, and being put to use, in a range of contexts that include creative practice, pedagogy and politics.

As the term 'performance' evolves from its emergence into a position of dominance, different sorts of discussions happen around it. Its initial appropriateness may at first be tentatively inspected and then be fiercely guarded, histories may be told with different points of origin and shapes of development, lines drawn to discriminate oh-so clearly between what is and isn't. It is difficult to claim that all these discussions amount to one whole coherent 'theory'. Indeed the attempts to articulate a universal Theory often have the effect of flattening out the landscape in order to produce something slightly banal. In part this happens because the word 'performance' itself has become

so baggy, has mopped up so many possible meanings and applications, that discourse about performance is becoming damaged. It is relinquishing its capacity, and willingness, to be specific and settling into a generalised, all-embracing vocabulary that is both oratorically grandiose and intellectually vacuous.

Many scholars have warned about letting the word become universalised in this way, and I have taken those warnings on board. That is why I have spent time looking at a number of different circumstances where the concepts that got called performance were coming into usage and developing their own vocabularies, though my attention has been limited to Europe and the United States. What the range of examples offers, I hope, is a sense of the specificity of these various concepts, which have their own particular histories and uses. So too they have their different modes of working in practice and are amenable to different critical approaches. Solo journey is not collective ceremony and is not group play. In tracking the development of concepts I have tried to show that the process of discussing performance, making discriminations, telling stories and adapting previous ideas is a series of theoretical manoeuvres usually produced by, and servicing, specific interest positions. Thus even within the boundaries that I have set for it, the entity of 'performance' shifts, mutates, knots itself up and gets into downright contradictions.

But 'performance theory' doesn't just imply a theory *of* something, a theory that might tell us what performance is and how performance works. It can also use the concepts of performance as ways of making sense of other materials. Performance theory can be a way of framing objects of study, viewing them as performances, thereby facilitating a new sort of thinking about them. Thus it can explain how interactions work by, for example, drawing on analogies with theatre, or ritual, or ceremony, or play. But alongside this, performance theory does one further thing. It can invoke an idea of performance that embodies particular values and rhetorically deploy this idea to justify projects and positions, even facilitating adjustment to the same presiding structures against which earlier performance practices came into being. It successfully provided the language for the institutionalisation of itself.

There are, then, various performances, various concepts and various ways 'performance theory' might work. Seeking to avoid gathering everything up into a catch-all term, the book tracks this diversity. In a couple of summary moments I attempt to situate performance within a general context of thought and explain why it became such a potent concept. So if you want the short-cut introduction to 'performance theory' you'd best read, after this Preface, the conclusions to Parts I and III, and the Closing Note. You would, though, be missing out on sensuous practice.