

## 10.1 On Theatre Abstracts

'Absorption and Focalisation: Performance and its Double'

**Maaïke Bleeker**

Josette Féral (1982) defines performance as a 'primary process lacking teleology'. 'Performance rejects all illusion,' she states (1982: 171). Performance 'presents, it does not represent' writes Chantal Pontbriand in the same issue of *Modern Drama* (1982: 155). Inspired by Derrida's analysis of the opposition of speech to writing, Féral and Pontbriand point out (and reject) the illusory character of dramatic representation, opposing it to performance as a 'primary process' and thereby 'revealing what remains hidden behind symbolic mediation.'

Féral then proceeds to an understanding of performance as the other, or underside, of theatre.

A closer look reveals that Derrida's deconstruction inspires Féral and Pontbriand (and many others with them) to reconfirm rather than deconstruct binary oppositions. In their texts, deferral and displacement, rather than questioning the immediate presence of performance, serve to safeguard it against the illusion of theatre. Consequently they threaten to reiterate precisely those notions of directness and immediateness that Derrida is so eager to deconstruct.

In my article, I argue for a deconstructive reversal of Féral's definition of performance as the underside of theatre: If performance is understood to be the underside of theatre, is it then also possible to understand theatre as the hidden underside of performance? What new understanding of the relationship between theatre and performance would then be possible? And additionally, what new understanding of what is at stake in the deconstruction of dramatic theatre?

I perform my deconstructive reversal starting from Michael Fried's notorious article 'Art and Objecthood' (1968, originally 1967). Both Féral and Pontbriand refer to Fried's text. Both adopt his terminology of 'presentness' in order to explain the particular experiences of performance that result from the deconstruction of dramatic representation, mediation, and points of view characteristic of the theatre. I confront their argument with a later text by Fried (*Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, 1980) in which he, surprisingly, locates the origins of 'presentness' (as opposed to theatricality) in Diderot's theory of dramatic representation. As I demonstrate, this opens up the possibility of an understanding of the presentness of performance not in terms of the absence or undoing of points of view (Féral) but rather as the effect of their remaining invisible. Furthermore, Fried's reading of Diderot suggests that dramatic representation actually may be used to an similar end, namely of absorbing (Fried) their audiences into an experience that erases the awareness of the relationship between what is seen and who is seeing. Finally, Fried's later work illuminates the relationship between strategies of absorption and what might be called traces of metaphysical thinking in the field of vision, as well as with the relationship between such traces of metaphysics in the field of vision and certain modernist traditions in art.

Steam Radio: On Theatre's Thin Air

**Steven Connor**

There is a venerable tradition that emphasises the airiness of theatre; seeing actors as ghostly shades, able to be dissipated by a puff of wind, and the braggart business that transpires upon the stage as gust and bluster, so much hot air. I suggest that the air is among the most important of the unacknowledged frames or material contexts for what goes on in the theatre. Air is in one sense literally the raw material of theatre; the inert, unshaped reserve of matter that is shaped into utterance. Early modern and popular theatre are drawn to the intractable materiality of air, in particular in the visible forms of fire and smoke. Yet modern theatre develops an allergy to air, not least in the growing anxiety about fire. Thus it habitually abstracts or evacuates the air, attempts to substitute a kind of air-conditioning for the condition of air that it must always inhabit. This allergy to or forgetting of the materiality of air is disguised in the widespread mysticism of the breath in the theatre and writing about it; yet, for all its prominence in the training of actors and performers, the regimes of breath- and voice-training work to efface the work of the breath, or rather to ensure that it is all put to work, leaving no unconsumed residue in the form of the wheeze, the gasp, the grunt, the whistle. I appeal to this ragged residue, suggesting that theatre is live art, not because it breathes the breath of life, but because it is always short of breath, since this is what breathing means. In an era of electro-magnetic virtuosity, theatre can still be, cannot but continue in some sort to be, broken-winded - a kind of steam radio.

"Chronicles of the Indeterminate: ordering chaos in the retrospectives of Forced Entertainment"

## **Sarah Gorman**

This paper compares two pieces of work created by Forced Entertainment to mark their tenth and twentieth anniversaries namely, [A Decade of Forced Entertainment](#) (1995) and [Marathon Lexicon](#) (2004/5). It comments in particular upon an apparent reluctance to engage with the notion of 'theatre' and 'theatricality' in the first performance lecture, and remarks upon a potential 'return' to theatre in the second durational piece. The essay posits a certain sedimentation of meaning with regards to definitions of 'theatre' and 'performance'.

'Troublesome Amateurs: Theatre, ethics and the labour of the mimetic'

**Adrian Kear**

This essay considers directly the relationship between ethics and mimesis, articulated through the figure of the 'amateur' and its concomitant refraction of the concept of artistic labour. It explores the ways in which contemporary performance's adoption of the rhetoric of amateurism both reveals and disguises its fascination with the extension and recuperation of 'technique', on the one hand, and somatic 'authenticity', on the other. Pina Bausch's *Kontakthof* (2002), Forced Entertainment's *First Night* (2002) and Victoria's *Übung* (2001) are examined in terms of their negotiation of the complex patterns of desire, identification and, most especially, *comedy* circulating between directors, actors and audience. Who is laughing at whom and how is elaborated through the matrix of Henri Bergson's *Laughter*, and the concept of mimesis is subjected to sustained critical interrogation. T. W. Adorno's notion of an instrumental 'mimesis of mimesis' is deployed here in order to illustrate 'amateurism' as an economic and ideological problem, which in turn reflects upon its appropriation by this 'radical' theatre as an *alienating* function.

'Acting on the Media: the actors' modes of being on stage in an age of technological mediation.'

**Anja Klöck**

This essay offers a re-thinking of the professional practice of acting vis-à-vis the "epistemological turn" that has been recently proclaimed by scholars in the field of German Media Studies (Engell und Vogel, 2001). This epistemological turn may be located in an increasing number of scholarly investigations that, assuming a "medial *a priori*" in contemporary post-industrial societies, ask questions about and develop analytical tools for the various ways in which media "always already" make possible and condition the production and circulation of information, knowledge, and experiences in everyday life.

This shift, proclaimed on the level of academic discourse, is recognizable also in the institutions of German subsidized repertory theatre. A recent project by Andreas Kriegenburg at the *Thalia Theater* in Hamburg offers an example of an ensemble of traditionally trained actors working through the question of what it means to represent and remember in an age of technological mediation. Taking the actor's body/memory as a site *par excellence* where culture and technology intersect, different modes of being on stage in this production are discussed in terms the actor's/the actress' mediality.

'An Artificially Intelligent Agent Prepares'

**Nancy Reilly-McVittie and Catherine Liu**

The theorization of subjectivity as an inherently performative construct was one of the consequences of recent thought experiments around the notion of what it is to be human.

The notion of *being* human is increasingly reduced to the idea of *acting* human. Our notion of *being* human has been deeply disturbed along the borderline between the human and artificial intelligence. As this borderline begins to dot, break up and dissolve, it becomes necessary to consider a future in which the ability to *act* human may no longer come natural to post humans and artificially intelligent autonomous agents. The need could arise for a systematized course of sentimental education, one that would serve as an initiation into the performance of 'authenticity'. This paper outlines the possibility for a fresh use of Stanislavski's acting technique.

'Translating Bodies: Siddons, Cowley and the Stage Sublime'

## **Mick Wallis**

This paper explores how we might model the ways in which the stage and its nexus of social and ideological contexts compose bodies as phenomenal presences. Its starting point is a particularly sharp instance of such presence, the being-on-stage of Sarah Siddons in a Neoclassical tragedy. In this case, it is suggested, a process of ritualisation maps actress, role, gesture, dramaturgy and dominant sensibility as an internally-echoing palimpsest – to produce a sensation of transcendence. In the course of its enquiry, the paper asks how Jameson's notion of the 'political unconscious' might be folded in with the notion of 'habitus', to help historicise stage presence. The paper situates itself as one of a pair of linked essays, the other being a performance project.

'Once More with Feeling'

## **Martin Welton**

This paper explores the phenomenological possibilities of other senses, presented by the experience of performing theatre in the dark, as an actor in Sound and Fury's 2003 production *The Watery Part of the World*. Whilst it might be assumed that in the absence of vision, hearing becomes the primary sense, a major focus will be on touch or feeling. Whilst the distance senses, of sight and hearing are most often presumed to characterise the theatrical event (and subsequently the supposed objectivity, of the critic or theorist), the role/s played by proximity senses are (pardon the pun) often overlooked. The paper draws on the work of the psychologist J.J. Gibson to advance an idea of the theatrical event as an environment, in terms of its affordances, for perception and action.

Artists Pages

## **James Yarker**

*Our Secret Theatre* is a poetic meditation on the often complex relationship between theatre and its audience. This piece makes reference to the Stan's Cafe projects *It's Your Film*, *The Black Maze*, *Be Proud of Me* and *Of All The People In All The World*. It also reflects on relative invisibility of alternative forms of theatre in the UK.