

“Performance Studies: Is it Real?”

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People who work in the area of Performance Studies make claims about the interdisciplinary character of their work. For example, Richard Schechner in the Introduction to his revised edition of *Performance Theory* says of his own work: “My speciality is performance theory - which for me is rooted in practice and is fundamentally interdisciplinary and intercultural.” (Schechner, 1988, p. xv) In the first chapter of this same book he offers a critique of contemporary methods of analyzing theater - ancient as well as contemporary. He concludes the chapter by stating:

I suggest other tools, other approaches. Mathematical and transactional game analysis, model building, comparisons between theater and related performance activities - all will prove fruitful. These approaches are difficult; often they demand that the theorist, critic, and practitioner learn the language of other disciplines (but hasn't this always been the case?). (pp. 27-28)

In a pre-publication copy of a forthcoming textbook on Performance Studies, Schechner (1995) expounds in greater detail about the qualities of and reasons for Performance Studies:

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535-475 BCE) asserted that "You never step in the same river twice." Heraclitus believed that the whole material world was in continuous flux, that there was no ultimate reality except change. Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle asserts something similar. Performance studies-- as an "approach" or a "discipline" or "field"--is a response to this kind of uncertain, always-in-flux, radically relativistic world. In a world of continuous change and uncertainty, performance studies asserts that examining a broad range of events, behaviors, and phenomena "as performance" offers a way of understanding. Performance studies deals with the broad range or spectrum of performances, from art to popular entertainments, sports to the presentations of self in everyday life, from religious ritual to state ceremony, from staged dramas to social dramas, the highly charged conflicts that mark political and economic life. As I've noted, all of these are performances, all of them, and more, can be studied as performances. Performance studies, like every academic discipline, is founded on principles encoded in key terms such as "restored behavior," "presentation of self," "ritual," "social drama," "expressive culture," and others. Working from a very broad

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definition of what is or can be studied as performance is not a denial or rejection of the aesthetics of theatre, dance, or the other performing arts. Nor is it a simple extension or projection of art aesthetics into social and religious life. It is to argue that there is more to performance than the artistic; that it is important to develop and articulate theories concerning how performances are generated, transmitted, received, and evaluated; that these systems of transformations vary from culture to culture and epoch to epoch. In pursuit of these goals, performance studies is insistently intercultural, inter-generic, and inter-disciplinary. (Schechner 1995, “Chapter 1”)

In each of these instances, Schechner insists upon the interdisciplinary nature of Performance Studies. He is not alone. Ronald Pelias and James VanOosting (1987) of the University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale argue for a paradigmatic status for Performance Studies distinct from (but nonetheless grounded in) Oral Interpretation:

Performance studies asserts a new theoretical orientation framed squarely within the discipline of human communication and enriched by such fields as anthropology, theatre, folklore, and popular culture. From within speech communication, performance studies derives from the interpretation of literature and focuses on the performative and aesthetic nature of human discourse. It is based in art, carries epistemological claims, posits methodological procedures, and calls for new pedagogical approaches. (Pelias and VanOosting 1987, p. 219)

Preferring to refer to Performance Studies as “cross-disciplinary” (p. 229), Pelias and Van Oosting situate Performance Studies within the field of speech communication, but with “clear links to theatre, ethnography and folklore, popular culture, and contemporary literary criticism.” (p. 228)

Performance Studies is clearly an emergent field of inquiry and practice. As such it is still seeking a clearly articulated identity, methodology and community to which it is accountable. This is reflected, for instance, in its academic locations. At Northwestern University, Performance Studies exists as a full department within the School of Speech, and offers degrees at the undergraduate and graduate levels. It is housed in the same building as the Department of Theatre. At Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Performance Studies is an area within the Department of Speech Communication. At New York University, Performance Studies is a department within Tisch School of the Arts.

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These academic locations (and their attendant literatures) reflect the varying and overlapping academic communities which claim the name of Performance Studies, and which determine its methodologies and its accountabilities. As indicated by Pelias and VanOosting, people in fields such as ethnography, oral interpretation, dance, theatre, speech communication, anthropology, and cultural studies may be involved with performance studies.

To what degrees, then, is Performance Studies interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary? To what degrees is it confused? What are its assumptions and methodological procedures? Who are its key figures? What is the nature of its literature? Upon whom does it rely for guidance, articulation of its perspectives and challenges to its assumptions and presumptions?

This paper only begins to address these questions. First, I will survey briefly the journals and persons in the Performance Studies field who write out of the Oral Interpretation/Speech Communication tradition of academic scholarship. Through this survey, I will also identify “key players” in performance studies from this tradition. Then I will examine two different approaches to Performance Studies, one exemplified by Richard Schechner of NYU and the other by Ronald Pelias of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. It is out of this examination that I will position my own work in Performance Studies in an upcoming essay.

Performance (and Performance Studies) as an Essentially Contested Concept

In their review of the state of Interpretation and Performance Studies, Mary S. Strine, Beverly Whitaker Long and Mary Frances HopKins (1990) make reference to what W. B. Gallie (1964) calls an “essentially contested concept” in their description of performance:

Performance, like art and democracy, is what W.B. Gallie (1964) calls an essentially contested concept, meaning that its very existence is bound up in disagreement about what it is, and that the disagreement over its essence is itself part of that existence. As Gallie explains, “Recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly ‘likely,’ but as of permanent potential critical value to one’s own use or interpretation of the

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concept in question” (Gallie, 1964, pp. 187-188). Scholars in interpretation and performance studies value performance as process, activity, achievement, and as an object of study. Although they place performance in a valorized category, they recognize and expect disagreement not only about the qualities that make a performance “good” or “bad” in certain contexts, but also about what activities and behaviors appropriately constitute performance and not something else. (Strine, et al, p. 183)

Strine, Long and HopKins write out of the community of scholars involved with Oral Interpretation and Speech Communication. The literature of this community is represented by scholarly journals such as *Speech Teacher*, *Communication Monographs* (formerly *Speech Monographs*), *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Text and Performance Quarterly* (formerly *Literature in Performance*), *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, *Central States Speech Journal*, *Carolinas Speech Communication Annual*, *Western Speech*, *Communication Education*, etc. These journals constitute what may be called “key artifacts” in the meta study of Performance Studies. By examining the themes and issues addressed as well as the citations and authors referenced and cross-referenced in these “key artifacts,” it becomes possible to begin to map the terrain traversed by these scholars in Performance Studies.

For example, representative figures in the Oral Interpretation/Speech Communication tributary of Performance Studies include Elizabeth Fine, Jane Haskell Speer, Jill Taft-Kaufman, Wallace Bacon, Thomas Sloan, Katherine Loesch, Francine Merritt, Lilla Heston, K.M Langellier, Mary S. Strine, Beverly Whitaker Long, Mary Frances HopKins, James VanOosting, Ronald Pelias, Leland H. Roloff and others. In addition, there are close affinities with the field of Ethnography (as indicated in the Pelias and VanOosting article) and representative figures here would add the names of people such as Richard Bauman, Dwight Conquergood, Clifford Geertz, R. Rosaldo, Erving Goffman, J. Fernandez, J. Van Maanen, and Victor Turner. The overlaps with Anthropology are also readily apparent.

The other tributary, the Theatre stream, is represented pre-eminently by the journal started by Richard Schechner, *TDR: A Journal of Performance Studies*. Over the years, the identity of this journal has been modified. It started out as *The Tulane Drama Review*, when Schechner taught at Tulane, and then became just *The Drama Review*, when he left. It then became *TDR: The Drama Review*, and, when acronyms became all the rage,

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silently slipped into being called *TDR: A Journal of Performance Studies*. But Theatre and Drama has its own well-developed literature and population of professional journals as well. Some representative journals include *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre History Studies*, *Essays in Theatre*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, *Modern Drama*, *Journal of Essays on Performance Theory*, *Artforum*, *Mime Journal*, *Educational Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Quarterly* (succeeded by *New Theatre Quarterly*), *Theater*, *Comparative Drama*, *Theatre Arts*, *Spectator*, *The Stage*, *Plays and Players*, etc. In addition, writings on performance relating to semiotic theory can be found in journals such as *Semiotica*, *Degrés: Revue de synthese a orientation semiologique*, *Semeia*, *Soundings*, etc.

Strine, Long and HopKins point out that as an essentially contested concept, performance engenders healthy disagreements which energize the scholarly endeavor. Through the contesting of ideas and positions, clearer articulation of positions is possible, leading to a richer understanding of performance (p. 183). Thus, it is possible to view Performance Studies as the field of contest between amiable factions. Or perhaps field of play is a better allusion. As in any contest of game of play, it is possible to focus either upon the players involved individually or the field of play. When speaking of the players, i.e., the people from varying scholarly disciplines, the description looks more like cross-disciplinary work. That is, Performance Studies looks like people from different academic positions talking to one another, working on a common task or addressing a common problem. If one looks at the field of play, i.e., the conversations occurring between people and the exchange of ideas, knowledge and points of view, then Performance Studies looks more interdisciplinary. That is, in this view, Performance Studies dwells in the *inter areas*, the spaces *between* persons and disciplines.

Two Approaches: Schechner and Pelias

Both Richard Schechner and Ronald Pelias make specific claims about doing Performance Studies. An examination of their work reveals differences in approach and practice. Pelias represents the Oral Interpretation/Speech Communication tributary to Performance Studies, whereas Schechner can be said to represent a Theatre/Anthropology tributary. Pelias and VanOosting in their manifesto cited earlier argue for Performance Studies to serve as a particularly embodied way of studying texts:

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Performance Studies takes participation as its working procedure. Its mode of inquiry demands physical, sensuous involvement in a performance event. The methodology depends upon personal responsiveness, somatic engagement, and cognitive analysis. Performance Studies mandates a methodology of participation. (p. 219)

In his book, *Performance Studies: The Interpretation of Aesthetic Texts* (Pelias, 1992), Ronald Pelias defines his understanding of Performance Studies as “the process of dialogic engagement with one’s own and others’ aesthetic communication through the means of performance” (p. 15). The main thrust of Pelias’ use of Performance Studies is essentially pedagogical and hermeneutical: as a means for studying and learning, and finally as a means for interpreting and understanding.

Performance offers an experience, an encounter with another sensibility. Experience allows for learning, for new knowledge. Accordingly, performance can function as a mode of inquiry, a method for understanding the aesthetic communication of others. Thus, performance becomes an experiential, investigative tool facilitating comprehension. The performer’s primary concern lies with using performance as a way of knowing rather than as an artifact or product. The performer pursues performance work in order to make experience intelligible. (pp. 20-21)

Being from the stream of Oral Interpretation, Pelias’ focus is upon the interpretation and understanding of texts, in whatever form they may be found. This textual bias stems from the development of literate cultures in the West, which led to a split between the written work and the performance of that written work (pp. 26-30). Recent theories in culture, post-structuralism (in literary theory especially, (Barthes 1979, 1981)), anthropology, and communication studies have muddied the distinctions between text and performance, and the expansion of Oral Interpretation/Speech Communication into the field of Performance Studies represents this muddying. Thus, while focusing upon performance as a means to study and understand the aesthetic utterances (texts) of others, the possibility remains also to study the various performances and performative behaviors of persons and cultures as well. In fact, there is a reciprocity between using performance as a means for understanding and the study of performance itself: as one engages in the act of performance, one becomes aware of one’s shifts in perception and relationships with

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others. One questions the nature and purpose of performance in this process. This leads to the study of performative behaviors in everyday life and performances in general.

Richard Schechner ([1977](#), [1983](#), [1985](#), [1988](#), [1990](#), [1993](#), [1995](#)) represents a different angle of approach to the study of performance, one which is influenced by theater and anthropology. Schechner has taught theater at Tulane University and [Tisch School of the Arts](#), and from 1967 to 1980 was the artistic director of The Performance Group in New York City. At the time Schechner published his first edition of *Essays on Performance Theory* ([1977](#)), he was approached by Victor Turner to participate in the 1977 Burg Wartenstein Symposium No. 76 on “Cultural Frames and Reflections, Ritual, Drama and Spectacle.” This began a series of collaborations between Schechner and people such as Victor and Edith Turner, Barbara Myerhoff, Erving Goffman, and others. In 1981 and 1982 a series of conferences on ritual and theater were held. The conferences were designed to explore the role of performance and ritual in the expression of culture, and how the sharing of performance experiences across cultures might lead to increased respect for and enjoyment of one another’s cultures ([Schechner and Appel, 1990](#), p. 1). Schechner’s own research into the phenomena of performance has led him around the world ([1983](#), [1985](#), [1993](#)) to observe the drama, rituals, and other performances of a wide variety of cultures. In addition, his own theoretical essays have referred heavily to anthropological descriptions of rituals, festivals and other activities of cultures world-wide.

Schechner’s methodology features two aspects of the field of play analogy made earlier in this paper. The first aspect is reflected in the diversity of persons gathered at conferences to explore the nature of performance: scholars, performers, choreographers and directors from across the world ([Schechner and Appel, 1990](#), pp. 2-7). An interdisciplinary character emerged from the conversations and sharing of performance work in these conferences. The intellectual goal of the conferences

was to approach the genres of theatre, dance, music, sports, and ritual as a single, coherent group, as performance. The underlying question became whether or not the same methodological tools and approaches could be used to understand a noh drama, a football game, a Yaqui deer dance, a Broadway musical, a Roman Catholic Mass, and Umbanda curing ritual, a Yoruba masked dance, and a postmodern experimental performance? (p.3)

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This approach is clearly eclectic in its choice and gathering of individual “players.” Papers were presented at the conferences in addition to witnessing various performances, rituals and worship services. Many of the papers were revised based upon conversations between participants and published in later books. This reflects the *inter* nature of Schechner’s work, the role of the playing field and the development of performance theory out of the conversations between diverse disciplines and trainings.

Another aspect of the field of play analogy is revealed in Schechner’s books. For example, in his essay on “Actuals” in *Performance Theory* (1988), he moves between the following topics: a description of Tiwi ritual combat; the idea of art as an event - an “actual”; Art as mimetic or imitative - Platonic and Aristotelian categories of aesthetics; the notion that a play is about itself - that artwork makes its own demands in accord with its indwelling form or action; which leads him to ask the question: “What is the relationship between performance in non-Western, non-industrial cultures and that of Western, industrial cultures?” He then hypothesizes the following “Yearnings” found in North America: Wholeness, Process, Organic growth, Concreteness, Religious transcendental experience. He then distinguishes between actualizing (creative condition) and the actual (the artwork). This leads him to discuss the wholeness of shamanism, and to make comparisons between artists and the dream world of Australian aboriginal experience, asserting that in both, experience is indivisible but exchangeable. He then engages in a description of the Elema of New Guinea and the Hevehe cycle which is 6-20 years in the making. This is followed by a description of plays put on by The Performance Group: *Dionysus 69*, *The Constant Prince*, *Akropolis*, etc. The juxtaposition of these plays with rituals and performances in New Guinea and Australia, etc., reveals the field of play. In a manner analogous to the conferences described earlier, Schechner gathers in this essay various performative events and/or settings and lets them “play” off against one another, in order to see what understanding might arise concerning the nature of performance.

This eclectic play is reflected in the course description of one of the classes Schechner teaches at Tisch School for the Arts:

Special Project: Liminoid Performances in New York Now

On-site investigations of performances that are not considered “legitimate arts” related to current trends in performance art and theory. Topics include wrestling, demolition derbies, sex shows, surgical operations and medical procedures, police

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sting operations, subway and street performers, and begging routines. On-site visits are combined with classroom demonstrations/simulations and readings in order to focus on the relation between "liminoid performances" and more established "art" and "ritual" genres (Schechner 1997).

Tentative Concluding Comments

Both Ronald Pelias and Richard Schechner identify themselves as working in the area of Performance Studies. Pelias is rooted in the tradition of the oral interpretation of literature whereas Schechner is rooted in the tradition of Western theatre. Both to a certain extent work performatively with texts, and both expand the definition of what constitutes a text for study. Pelias uses performance in order to come to a deep understanding of a text or aesthetic utterance, whereas Schechner studies various performances and rituals in order to understand performance itself. Both are committed to the central necessity to study performance by means of performance. That is to say, in Performance Studies, performance is not only the object of study, but the means for studying it. This may appear tautologous at first, but every methodology is actually theory-laden, and every form of research must be matched in some way to the thing being researched. Since performance events engage persons in their totality, Performance Studies claims a methodology based upon the total engagement of the researcher. And since performances occur within communal settings and spaces, Performance Studies claims a methodology which draws upon the gathered insights, knowledge and expertise of a community of scholars and practitioners.

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