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From a Formalist to a Practical Aesthetic in Undergraduate Theatre Studies: Becoming Relevant in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

As a new century unfolds, the "downsizing" and continuing marginalization of the humanities, including theatre, in American higher education correspond to three trends in the academy. First, in response to the fiscal crises that began in the late 1970s, universities have increasingly turned to the private sector for financial support as federal and state funding has been reduced. Second, universities have become progressively more market-driven, and so, commercialized. In this context, departments in the arts and humanities are often accused of losing their intellectual anchors. Third, students' intentions for the bachelor of arts degree have simultaneously shifted from developing intellectual qualities and a philosophy of life to that of preparing for economic security. As a consequence of the changing definitions of liberal arts education, subjects in the arts and humanities will have to reconsider their missions and curricular practices in order to attract students and remain *relevant*.

It goes without saying that the many aptitudes students gain in theatre education provide them with exceptionally important skills to succeed in the global economy. But in order to attract students to the theatre major, and convince them that these aptitudes will serve them well, we need to produce a theoretical framework for curricular practice that is critically and aesthetically more relevant to students hard-pressed to justify the time and expense of a college education in other than occupational terms.

In this study, I draw upon the links between Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of practical reason, Raymond Williams's theory of the structure of feeling, and Paul Willis's theory of grounded aesthetics to argue for regenerating undergraduate theatre by turning to what I call a *practical aesthetic* that would give emphasis to theatre's and performance's necessary and functional value in human communication. A practical aesthetic implies a radical departure from the prevailing *formalist* aesthetic that underlies the two generic curricular functions, or orientations. The *aesthetic-orientation,* which achieved primacy during the first half of the twentieth century, culminated in teaching the values of "art for art's sake"; the *market–orientation*, which developed after WW II, is characterized by professionalism and vocationalism. Both examples, I suggest, are whittling away the vitality and currency of our discipline.

In a curriculum that centralized a practical aesthetic, students would study theatre from historical, critical, theoretical, and dramatic perspectives. But these scholarly pursuits would be more directly tied to a new emphasis on devising courses as an essential part of the core curriculum. This intertwining would be geared to promoting students' capacities as cultural producers. In these courses, students would build on their already acquired and practiced aesthetic and symbolic creativity to develop their own material, material that engaged their own personal, social, and aesthetic interests, rather than those of their teachers.

In emphasizing theatre's functional value in the processes of understanding and meaning-making, we can project that theatre study would become more inclusive and relevant to students in a model of institutionalized pedagogy that can intelligibly claim an understanding of human agency. I mean that it can offer explanations, help make sense of the world, and participate in theatre culture, but do so only within structures of meaning already embodied within the participants through the language and culture by which they are constituted.

Introduction

As the new century unfolds, the "downsizing" and continuing marginalization of the humanities in American higher education, including theatre, corresponds to three trends in the academy. First, in response to the fiscal crises that began in the late 1970s, universities have increasingly turned to the private sector for financial support in response to the erosion of federal and state support. Second, universities have become progressively market-driven in an effort to sell the work of highly trained specialists, expert knowledge, and scientific advances for a profit (Bok, 2003, p. 203). As universities become steadily more "commercialized," they are more inclined to support departments of computer science, biochemistry, corporate finance, business, and other applied fields of study more generously than they do the humanities (Bok, 2003, p. 7). As a result, departments in the humanities are often accused of losing their "intellectual moorings" (Bok, 2003, p. 5). Third, students' intentions for the bachelor of arts degree have simultaneously shifted from developing intellectual qualities and a philosophy of life to that of preparing for economic security (Koeppel, 2004). Consequently, we are witnessing changing definitions of liberal arts education and subjects such as English, history, philosophy, religion and the arts will have to reconsider their missions and curricular practices in order to attract students and remain relevant to the liberal arts experience in the context of a global economy and culture.

Reflecting these fluctuations, our efforts as theatre educators to impart knowledge of, and experience and training in theatrical culture, are compromised by diminishing funds, smaller student enrollments, shrinking audiences (Neely, 1993), and questionable legitimacy in the academy. As theatre educators, we must rigorously ask ourselves, for what are we educating students? What is our role in a market-driven university setting? To answer these questions, I want to argue that if we are to reverse our second class status and become essential in liberal undergraduate education, we must compose new curricular theories and practices that will have currency with undergraduates as they also contribute to new formulations of liberal arts education. We can begin with a brief outline of theatre studies' place in higher education in the U.S since it entered the university at the turn of the twentieth century and struggled to become a legitimate field of study.

The growth of collegiate theatre during the twentieth century may be understood as an enactment of generational struggles over the content and worth of higher education. Historians of higher education have argued that the confluence of economic, political, and educational forces that consolidated the features of the modern university rest on an unresolved tension between two visions of the academy, those of *humanism* and *utilitarianism* (Veysey, 1965, pp.113-134). The first vision sees the function of higher education to be the advancement of a liberal and secular culture. The second fosters development of research-based, increasingly

technological knowledge, with social and economic payoffs. Theatre scholars have drafted curricula following these axes in the modern university.[1]

Achieving primacy during the first half of the twentieth century, the humanist axis in theatre curriculum was manifested in an *aesthetically-oriented* curriculum that culminated in teaching the values of "art for art's sake." The utilitarian axis produced after World War II, a *market-oriented* curriculum characterized by professionalism and vocationalism. Each vision can be characterized as promoting aesthetics of *formalism*. The aesthetic-orientation accentuates the formal construction of aesthetic artifacts and generally, the reproduction of the Western dramatic canon, along with new contributions, which generally favor mimesis and the realisms. The vocationalist orientation accentuates the formal elements of training actors, designers, and technicians with professional techniques for theatrical careers upon graduation. (The market-orientation for actors is arguably unethical since the possibility of professional careers for them is remote.) Both examples, I fear, continue to whittle away the vigor and educational value of our discipline. The legacy of this narrative is that theatre's position in higher education is as vulnerable at the start of the twenty-first century as it was at the start of the twentieth. Thus, we have negligible disciplinary and institutional power.

What is needed are new theoretical models that shun the traditional aesthetic/vocational framework and that will provide fertile grounds for revisioning the curriculum. These models, I think, should retain some of liberal arts' traditional concerns—its commitment to ideas and reflection, questions of human life and meaning, and attention to matters of character, ethics, and the development of citizenship. But these concerns should also accommodate a concrete engagement with the practical world that is typically associated with the applied arts.

It goes without saying that the many aptitudes students gain in theatre education provide them with exceptionally important skills to succeed in the global economy.[2] Regardless of what

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of the history of undergraduate theatre curriculum during the twentieth century, see Berkeley (2004).

[2] A very brief sketch of these aptitudes might include:
Communication and Performance Skills and Qualities: empathy, sensitivity, and understanding of others; ability to understand multicultural personalities and personae; ability to embody characters, behaviors, and personae from one culture to another; knowledge of the ways cultures—their habits, rituals, traditions, beliefs—are performed.
Professional Skills and Qualities: dependability; identification and analysis of practical problems; quick and creative problem-solving; ability to cope with pressure; experience in budgeting time and meeting deadlines on which others are dependent; zeal for creativity and innovation; focus and attention to detail; flexibility and experience working odd and long hours; collaboration in diverse social settings under intense conditions.

changes we employ, our catalogue descriptions and web sites should robustly emphasize these aptitudes. But in order to attract students to the theatre studies as a major, and convince them that these aptitudes will serve them well, we need to build a theoretical framework for curricular practice that is critically and aesthetically more *relevant*—even essential—to students hard-pressed to justify the time and expense of a college education in other than occupational terms.

We can start this project by looking at our current programs from the vantage point of students. To the great majority of young people entering colleges and universities, art is something special or heightened, displayed in galleries, textbooks, on proscenium stages, and in public broadcasting "specials," but not part of the everyday lives of "normal" people. Failing to register their own symbolic activities in the full aesthetic spectrum, these students view the arts as "belonging out there . . . in the arts world" (Larson, 1997, p. 13). We should recognize that, in our programs, the severance of aesthetics from the important business of life intrinsic to both the aesthetic and vocational orientations qualifies as elitist to the extent that each affirms and reproduces the official culture of so-called "high art." With high culture, the formal features of art designate its aesthetic, rather than its relevance to realities and concerns in everyday life. Depending as it does on the dissociation from living contexts, the institutionalization of the arts often establishes categories of exclusion more than of inclusion, with little appeal to most young people and little connection to their lives. We should hardly be surprised that the university's ever more pragmatic students look askance at our missions and practices. Thus, we need to develop curricula that is not only more relevant, but also more *inclusive*.

What is needed is a broader framework for understanding aesthetics as they are intertwined with performance. By aesthetics, I mean the variety of ways by which we constantly make provisional and working symbols of our lives and the worlds in which we live. This framework is now in the making and involves, at root, a broader epistemology than that of the positivists whose long tyranny of propositional knowledge in the West has demoted the arts as non-essential, or supplementary to, the business of human affairs. Our abilities to construe metaphorically and speculate figuratively are now claimed as primary sources of meaning in a formulation of aesthetics that stresses its practical, functional, and epistemic value in social and personal life.

Critical Thinking Skills and Qualities: identification and analysis of intellectual problems; ability to recognize political, social, and professional problems and power dynamics, analyze their manifestations and implications, and act on the basis of changed perspectives; knowledge of Western and non-Western cultures.

To this aim, I want to draw upon the links between Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of practical reason, Raymond Williams's theory of structure of feeling, and Paul Willis's theory of grounded aesthetics to argue for regenerating undergraduate theatre by turning to what I call a *practical aesthetic* that would give emphasis to theatre's and performance's necessary and functional value in human communication. Curriculum that reflected this attitude would build on students' already acquired and practiced aesthetic and symbolic creativity to develop their own material—material that springs from their lived experience in a hyper-turbulent world. In this way, students would be given the opportunity to build on traditions and forms of theatre to develop theatrical cultures that are unique to their historic moments.

Hermeneutics and Phronesis

An epistemology for such an undertaking has been in the making since the so-called linguistic turn emerged during the first half of the twentieth century and taken root across a broad spectrum of intellectual pursuits. Common to these discourses is an understanding that reality and knowledge are formed dialectically rather than positively. A dialectical ontology posits that *versions* of reality are elicited among groups of people as a way of mediating the world that uniquely confronts them. In place of neo-Platonic, Enlightened positivism, a contextualized conception of knowledge is proposed in which individual and social interaction are placed at the center of claims to legitimacy.[3]

We might say that this approach sees the origins of knowledge in the codetermined relationship between the dominant paradigms of thinking (foundations) and the particular (hermeneutics). In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (trans. 1975) argues that modern definitions of knowledge have become dominated by empirical methods, which are more or less heedless of inner historicity of experience. The goal of science, he claims, is to "objectify experience so that no kind of historical moment clings to it " (p.329). Gadamer thus distinguishes dialectical from *methodological* knowledge in which empiricism takes the object out of its historical moment and restructures it to suit the method. With *method*, the inquirer leads, controls, and manipulates the levers of understanding. Method is seen within the concept of a subject-object interpretive stance and is the foundation for modern technicist thinking.

For Gadamer, the dialectical approach is antithetical to that of method and its tendency to prestructure the individual's way of seeing. The hermeneutical, or interpretive situation in dialectic, on the other hand, is not that of a questioner who must construct "methods" by

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[3] Scientific fact and theory are not categorically separable, as Thomas Kuhn has shown, except within a paradigm, and therefore, there is no such thing as theory-free, "merely factual" data. See Thomas S. Kuhn (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press).

which to bring the object to clarity (the subject-object schema). Instead, the questioner finds him or herself "questioned by the matter at hand," that is, in the middle of a historical situation that must be grasped. To illuminate this relationship, Gadamer speaks of "the horizon of the question within which the sense of the text is determined."[4] The metaphor elicits a definition of understanding as a dialectical act between one's situational "horizon," and tradition—that which comes down to us, and encounters us. According to this characterization, truth is reached with the idiosyncratic perception of the interpretants in what is understood (Gadamer, trans. 1975, pp. 362-369).

With affinities to Aristotle's ontology of *being*, knowledge (i.e., understanding) in dialectical hermeneutics is always a linguistic and historical event (Gadamer, trans. 1975, p. 147). The contextualized quality of hermeneutics prevents it from becoming a systematic, essence-seeking philosophy in the Enlightened, neo-Platonic manner of empirical realism. Gadamer asserts the fallacy of thinking principles, standards, or criteria, can be removed from our own historicity; there is an essential openness and indeterminacy about them. It is rather the ability to capture uncertainty, mystery, and the barely knowable that perhaps signifies the chief virtue of open-ended, hermeneutical perception. From Gadamer's perspective, the theoretical foundations of "method" have been exhausted; the only avenue left is that of "conversation" toward points of contact, debate, the making of judgments, and a continuation of dialogue within some social context.[5]

We might summarize these comments by saying that this approach to knowledge sees it as a species of "practical wisdom," affiliated with the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*. Derived from Aristotle's distinction in *Nicomachean Ethics* between *practical* and *theoretical* wisdom, phronesis refers to knowledge that is practical by virtue of being directed to the concrete situation where judgments need to be made about courses of action (Aristotle, trans. 1980, p. 139). Aristotle maintained that the possibility of understanding any form of cultural life requires competence in moving within that life—a negotiation that involves deliberation and choice between the universal and the particular in which each is codetermined. Phronesis is often translated as "practical judgment," a term that bespeaks its rational element and suggests knowledge made personal through both reasoning and experience. Practical judgment (phronesis), for Aristotle, is the precondition for understanding and reflexivity. So an important characteristic of knowledge with a basis in phronesis, then, is that it is owned by the actor.

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[4] See Gadamer's discussion of "The Logic of Question and Answer," in *Truth and Method* (trans. 1975, pp. 369-70).

[5] Gadamer makes prolific use of "conversation" as a metaphor to explain the dynamic in dialectical knowing in *Truth and Method*. See, for example, pp. 367-368.

In *Truth and Method* and other writings, Gadamer appropriates Aristotle's concept of phronesis in terms that awaken its usefulness for our age. He elucidates phronesis as a form of experiential knowledge derived from interaction with others in a hermeneutical situation. This means that the interpreter encountering a text, a piece of tradition, or any phenomenon, seeks always to apply it to him or herself. In order to understand what constitutes the meaning and importance of the phenomenon, a person cannot disregard his or her particular hermeneutic situation, but must relate the phenomenon to this situation if he or she wants to understand it at all. Phronesis involves a peculiar interlacing of being and knowledge, then, not to be identified with an objectified knowledge (*sophia*).

For our purposes, we can summarize phronesis as a form of practical knowledge that replaces the framework of positivism with the necessity of elements that constitute who we are in the process of *becoming*—interpretation, reasoning, dialogue, and reflection. Curriculum as phronesis would define knowledge as a kind of action, or praxis, not as an accumulation of things to be transmitted, say, from one generation to the next. Who is learning, and the curricular form in which they learn, would be co-determined with what is learned. Theatre studies as a site for phronesis would study aesthetics not because they lead to abstracted (manipulated) truths, but because they will permit us to construct realities through a kind of democratic participation. An epistemological orientation that is dialogical and hermeneutic, phronesis opens the door for theatre studies to revise its intentions from curriculum-as-product to a communicative curriculum-as-conversation.

Gadamer attributes to Kant the severing of the aesthetic from its lifeworld characteristic of the modern era.[6] This paradigm beholds the subject as an empty vessel, receiving perceptions in an atemporal moment. The result has been the isolation of aesthetic experience from more pragmatic realms. The underlying problem for Gadamer (trans. 1975) is the modern identification of art as "aesthetic" rather than as ontological (pp. 82-84). Construing art as a form of "recognition" of historical situatedness, Gadamer (trans. 1975) claims the search for truth to be a *pragmatic* enterprise to the extent that aesthetic understanding is always about, and in relation to, self, others, and reality: "Understanding should not be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused" (p. 358). Gadamer invokes *tradition* as a middle term for both foundationalism and relativism, constituting horizons of understanding as the limits and extent of all that's knowable from a particular vantage point. Along these lines,

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[6] See Gadamer's groundbreaking discussion of the cultural effects of Kantian aesthetics in "The Subjectification of Aesthetics through Kantian Critique," in *Truth and Method*, 1975, pp. 42-81.

aesthetic recognition is *productive* because it leads to understanding in which formations of self and community have their origins.

The first item on Gadamer's agenda is finding a way to win back a horizon that includes both art and history together. Works of visual art, for example, do not really belong in museums, he surmises, collected together in a "placeless place." We need, instead, to modulate the concept of representation with which modern galleries, theatres, and concert halls have made us familiar and rehabilitate the *practical* value of art that was discredited by aesthetics based on pure form or expression (Gadamer, trans. 1975, p. 138). Aesthetic understanding as such does not come from methodological, or formalist, analysis of the art object but from openness to it, from "hearing the question put to us by the work" (Gadamer, trans. 1975, p. 372). Translating this notion into the terms of theatre studies means asking of the curriculum that it engage not in revealing truths which purport to transcend language and culture, nor in the reduction of understanding to a matter of subjective expression, but in what we might call, following Gadamer, a conversation between researchers (students) and their subjects.

Practical Consciousness and Structure of Feeling

Raymond Williams (1977) echoes Gadamer's agenda for an understanding of aesthetics as a pragmatic enterprise in countering the prevailing habit of separating the personal from the social (p. 128). The error of expressivist theories, Williams (1977) avers, is in failing to understand that meaning is always produced, never simply expressed (p. 165). Pure or spontaneous emotion is inconceivable because we can't abstract feeling, or detach the subconscious, from social consciousness. In a sense, we *learn* to know what to feel, Williams (1977) says, because our emotions are articulated within the context of historically conditioned experience (pp. 130-131). Attitudes and feelings may defy social norms, but can only be generated by the structures which produce those norms. In this way, art can be both reflective and critical of culture, but it can only exist within, never in advance of, its historical condition.

Williams, too, speaks of aesthetics as the product of a dialectic between received understandings and the tensions they generate within lived experience. Paralleling Gadamer's characterization of knowledge, or understanding, as open and indeterminate, a dialectic between tradition and one's situational horizon, Williams introduces his well-known theory of *structure of feeling*.[7] We can characterize structure of feeling as the shared values of a particular group, class, or society—the "area of interaction between the official consciousness

[7] Williams introduces the concept of "structure of feeling" in *The Long Revolution* (1961). He develops the concept subsequently in extensive writings on culture, drama, and literature.

of an epoch, codified in its doctrines and legislation, and the whole process of living its consequences" (Williams, 1981a, p. 159). The idea of structure of feeling—what Williams calls "the true social present"—embraces two interrelated features. It interweaves, first, affective and cognitive dimensions. Williams chooses "feeling" to emphasize a distinction with more formal terms like "experience," "ideology," or "discursive formation." With "feeling," Williams attempts to focus on the dominant values, beliefs, conventions, and semantics of a society as they are lived and felt in ordinary lives. It is "not feeling vs. thought, but thought as felt, and feeling as thought" (Williams, 1977, p. 132). Second, as a dialectical, living process, structure of feeling emphasizes a sensibility that is never fixed, but is always in motion—forming, reforming, and transforming.

> We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships . . . practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. . . Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognizable as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. (Williams, 1968, p. 10)

Corresponding to phronesis, structure of feeling leans toward the purposes of agency rather than determination. Williams's use of the term always stops at the point of "articulated experience," refusing to be proven, or settled, and made into "past tense." Although it evokes provisionality and fluidity in the process of analysis and interpretation, structure of feeling always implicates a unity in all its diversity, the unity of a process that forms practical consciousness.

This premise, Williams suggests, has special relevance to art and literature where so often the social content is of an affective kind. Art, Williams (1968) has said, engages us in the space between our experience and our ability to articulate and formalize it (pp. 133-135). Williams (1968) describes structure of feeling embodied in art as mediating two abstractions: it is "as firm and as definite as 'structure' implies, yet it is based in the deepest and often least tangible elements of our experience" (pp. 133)—or as Gadamer (trans. 1975) might say, uncertainty, mystery, and the barely knowable. It is this dialectical, double-edged quality that gives structure of feeling its power in describing aesthetics. On the one hand, structure of feeling lends itself to a simple, formalistic account of external attributes. In dramatic literature, the structure may be discovered, for example, in the plot line. But he stresses that while it is historically specific, structure of feeling is never reducible to structure alone. It admits the provisionality of the knowledge it constructs. In art, structure of feeling constructs *indirectly* from the course of intuition and feeling.

This perspective understands art as a dialectical, holistic, mediation of subjectivity and the dominant forms of a culture. Williams is claiming that no art is possible unless it is part of a general cultural semiology that bounds and mediates experience. As such, the aesthetic act gives rise to pragmatic, semantic, phonetic, and identity structures of meaning. Again corresponding to Gadamer's characterization of the aesthetic as productive, the powerful sense of recognition that happens when we engage with art, Williams (1968) says, can thus be understood as a connection with the semiology of our collective sensibility and is therefore an "inalienable [element] of a social, material process" (p. 133).

Gadamer's invocation of phronesis and Williams's structure of feeling beget, as I said, what I call a *practical aesthetic* that adjures the critical place of art in everyday lived experience. A practical aesthetic sets forth the principle that art has a *useful* purpose—a cultural "function" as both Williams and Gadamer allege—in gelling larger social practices and illuminating the big picture. In this way, art functions in the organization of a collective sensibility. As such, the arts need to be understood not as "eternal verities, or supra-historical categories, but as actual elements of a kind of social organization" (Williams, 1981b, pp. 12-13). A practical aesthetic presumes the arts are neither luxuries nor private engagements with subjective and eternal truths, but are rather concerned with the life of practical consciousness—its refinement, elaboration, and deepening. A practical aesthetic claims that metaphors emerge from the body to become part of the theoretical structures through which we perceive the world and regards as axiomatic that symbols *perform* rather than reflect meaning.

From here, we might think of theatre not only as a "medium of artistic expression" but as a dialectical, constitutive element of practical consciousness. Understanding theatrical or performance art in terms of a practical aesthetic, we can say that they describe culturally bound practices whose meaning is located in the opening between our hermeneutic lifeworlds and our ability to articulate it. As performance studies scholars remind us, they do more than mirror society; as signifying practices, they enact it. I have in mind an aesthetic formulation in which the arts are understood to offer metaphors that both illuminate and that help piece together human realities. A practical aesthetic carries the promise, then, of restoring the relevance of the arts to ordinary, everyday life in the public arena.

As I have proposed, we should reshape theatre studies curriculum to become more inclusive and relevant to undergraduates who might otherwise see the major as a pointless luxury. Building on Gadamer's and Williams's theories, the idea of practical aesthetics gives us a revised conception of performance and a rationale for theatre's place in higher education. With an account of its unique presence in practical consciousness, the rationale need not make special claims to "aesthetic knowing," "subjective expression," or any other speculative introversion. A theory of practical aesthetics suggests a role for theatre education in which

students' everyday lived experience becomes a platform for curriculum renewal, in a language that reaffirms the functional value, replacing previous pedagogical formulations that removed the arts from the lifeworld. In possession of an adequate aesthetic theory, we can now turn to its implications for revising undergraduate theatre studies.

Symbolic Creativity In Common Culture

Pursuing this thinking in practice, I want to propose curricula that would derive its aesthetic energies from students' own relationship to what Williams has famously called "common culture." Developing a curriculum that depends on the recognition of indigenous creativity would require that we attenuate the dominance of the received text, and turn a significant measure of the curriculum over to students. The British sociologist Paul Willis provides a critical perspective that lends credence to this possibility by exposing the extent of young people's *purposeful* symbolic practices in daily life. By exploring the ordinary uses of symbolic creativity in an ethnography of British youth, Willis documents vibrant symbolic life in everyday activity and expression (Willis, 1990).

To begin, he defines symbolic work as the *necessary* application of human capacities to, and through, symbolic resources and raw materials to produce meanings. These resources are collections of signs and symbols in images and artifacts of all kinds, including, for example, language, songs, texts, films, videos, plays, and performances that we inherit from the larger culture. Symbolic work, he argues, is more than just a *part* of everyday human activity. It is rather "an integral part of necessary work—that which *has* to be done every day, to ensure human existence" (Willis, 1990, p. 9). Necessary symbolic work is spread across the whole of life; it is a condition of it, and of our daily humanity. Symbolic work is broader than, logically prior to, and a condition of, material production, and this is what actually guarantees its relevance. (For Willis, those who stress the separateness and sublime in art actually assume and encourage a mindlessly materialist view of everyday life by counterposing this to their view of the "imaginative.")

In this light, he finds that while most young people's lives are not involved with the arts, they are actually full of expressions, signs, and symbols through which individuals and groups seek figuratively to establish their presence, identity, and meaning. The living common culture of youth consists, he shows, in extraordinary symbolic creativity in the ways they use, humanize, decorate, and invest with meaning their environments and social practices. They express symbolic creativity in music, dance, and fashion; in the banter and drama of friendship groups and the rituals of romance; in selective use of TV and movies, and in subversive styles. We can add to this panoply their involvement in YouTube, computerized social networks, gaming, web news, including blogs—in short, all manner of electronic communication. In their

symbolic work, the young repeatedly attempt to communicate something about their actual or potential cultural significance.

To describe these living symbolic forms as they occur in modern societies, Willis uses the term *grounded aesthetic*. Concerned with the useful production of meanings and explanations in relation to concrete situations, grounded aesthetics are

> the creative element in a process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, reselected, highlighted, and recomposed to resonate further appropriated and particularized meanings. (Willis, 1990, p. 21)

He suggests that these meanings provide us with "collective and personal principles of action" while at the same time holding and repairing the "precariousness and fragmentedness" of identity itself (Willis, 1990, p. 24). Grounded aesthetics produce an edge of meaning which not only reflects or repeats received expressions and appropriated symbols, but transforms what they represent in some identifiable way in what he calls "made messages." In this way, they provide a motivation toward realizing different futures, and for understanding the self as a creative force in bringing them about. So, in harmony with Williams's and Gadamer's aesthetic constructs, the effect for Willis is not *in* the text or artifact, as in a formalist aesthetic, but is rather a *mediation* and a *practice*, and as such, becomes a source of cultural production and agency. Conversely, the "official arts" (with which undergraduate theatrical and dramatic curricula are generally concerned) are typically removed from the possibility of a living symbolic mediation, even despite their symbolic richness and range. Willis, too, holds this to be true because the possibilities for symbolic creativity are too often limited by the (formalist) equation of aesthetics with artifacts.

From a point of view of grounded aesthetics and made messages, we can surmise that insofar as practices in undergraduate theatre education are predicated on the assumed superiority of high art, they will become largely irrelevant to the real aesthetic energies and interests of most young people. But the process of making messages and meanings in context, and from appropriated materials, Willis (1990) proposes, is effectively a form of education in the broadest sense. Where everyday symbolic work differs from what is normally thought of as "education," then, is that it "culturally produces from its own chosen symbolic resources" (p. 152). It is the specifically developmental part of symbolic work and creativity, and education about the self and its relation to the world. He highlights "the absolute importance of trying to think in future-oriented ways guided by the tendencies already evident within current common culture . . . to equalize the possibilities for us all to become fully developed cultural producers" (Willis, 1990, p. 150).

From an emergent perspective of necessary symbolic work, a curricular project of practical, grounded aesthetics would derive from students' everyday conduct in making messages in a way that would recognize an already active symbolic culture. Correlatively, theatre education could re-enter the broader plains of culture and the possibilities for the full development of human capacities, led not by elite culture, but by common culture.

Toward a Practical Aesthetic in Theatre and Performance Curricula

Toward these ends, we might consider defining our central mission to that of providing students with advanced tools and critical perspectives for developing their capacities as cultural producers. This approach suggests several interrelated uses of the curriculum as a domain for the exercise of practical aesthetics. First, performance curriculum would build on students' already active symbolic work in the production and reflection of student-devised performance texts.[8] The scholarly courses, second, would provide critical and theoretical tools for understanding the complex symbolic fields of theatre and performance. In the first area, we can revise the performance area with courses that elicit from students the creation of indigenous performance texts that draw from, and speak to, their changing cultural, entertainment, and communicative worlds. The curriculum as such would enable students to experiment with conventions, texts, artifacts, and media in exploring a contextualized relationship between performer, audience, and venue. In this curricula, the reproduction of pre-specified outcomes—for example, those of a teacher/director as the authority-figure—would be relinquished. Instead, learning outcomes would be evaluated on their own terms rather than on pre-specified objectives or the degree to which they implement particular ideas or skill sets. This model would diminish the precedence technicist strategies that shape teaching to the imperatives of "main-stage" and "black box" theatre productions and their bases in the literary text.

An interest in experiential praxis as such is reflected in numerous case-studies published in such American journals as *Theatre Topics*, *The Drama Review*, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, and *New Theatre Quarterly*. In individual courses and extra-curricular projects, theatre educators are thinking beyond the dramatic text to discover new dimensions of theatrical and performance culture, often in non-theatrical, site-specific spaces. The literature shows, however, that these courses are conducted on the basis of a single course or extra-

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[8] Shor (1987, p. 93) argues that when skills are not learned from problematic contexts drawn from experience, teaching serves to domesticate students to the methods of the discipline. By jointly addressing what Shor identifies as self-in-society and social relations-in-the self, each student embodied creation serves as a process of development as well as an object of reflection.

curricular project. I argue that we should put these courses, typically elective, at the center of the curriculum.

This commitment would change current priorities in our teaching. The first task would be to establish processes for personal, collaborative, and embodied exploration, with an emphasis on generating collective work that is launched from students' interests and that is true to their experience. Without prescribing outcomes, the teacher would introduce methodologies to initiate processes for building performances that engage their social, political, and aesthetic concerns. There is, of course, no all-purpose methodology and strategies for creating original performance texts that are rooted in everyday experience are, happily, proliferating. Teachers can turn to the wide array of possible models in contemporary devised and applied theatre now emerging in global theatrical cultures.[9] Many of them are theoretically and methodologically complex and difficult, while others are relatively straightforward. A teacher can choose to work with one methodology, mix aspects of several, or develop one her or himself. But regardless of the methodology, we can be sure that students will develop stylistics from their extensive knowledge of entertainment media and popular culture. In my own experience, I have seen that variety, humor, incongruity, interactivity, novelty, and high entertainment value (derived the imagery and iconography of communication media) become the bases of personal and collective exploration of serious subjects.

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[9] A sample of texts that consist of both practical methodologies for, and theoretical perspectives on, devised and applied theatre include:

- Aston, Elaine (1999). *Feminist theatre practice: A handbook*.
- Bicat, Tina, et. al (2002). *Devised and collaborative theatre: A practical guide*.
- Blatner, Adam, ed., with Daniel J. Weiner (2007). *Interactive and improvisational drama: varieties of applied theatre and performance*.
- Boal, Augusto (1995).*The rainbow of desire: The Boal method of theatre and therapy*.
- Doyle, Rex (2003). *Staging youth theatre: A practical guide*.
- Gómez-Pena, Guillermo (2005). *Ethno-Techno: Writings on performance, activism, and pedagogy*.
- Graham, Scott and Steven Goggett (2009). *The Frantic Assembly book of devising theatre*.
- Jellicoe, Ann (1987). *Community plays: How to put them on*.
- King, Paul (2001). *Pick and mix: A structured approach to devising stylized theatre*.
- Lamden, Gill (2000). *Devising*: *A handbook for drama and theatre students*.
- Mermikides, Alex and Jackie Smart (2010). *Devising in process*.
- Oddey, Allison (1994). *Devising Theatre: A practical and theoretical handbook*.
- Yordon, Judy E. (1997). *Experimental theatre: creating and staging tests*.

Many methodologies we can exploit will introduce students to the aesthetics and innovations of influential artists and teachers, often famous, who are at the cutting edge of the contemporary theatre and performance art scene. Their techniques would provide students with stylistically rich tactics to start the process. But in keeping with my argument, we should, at some point, turn that process over to the students, enabling them to develop performances that express their own intentions without the authoritative presence of the artist or teacher-as-expert.

A second teaching role would be to promote self-reflexivity while also providing critical tools for understanding the social and cultural forces that give rise to and shape performance media. In this way, theatre education can assist students in widening their symbolic access, serve to expand the range and reflexive purposefulness of the involvement, and allow them greater control over cultural agendas themselves. Therefore, I am *not* proposing that we jettison "high art" and the Western and global cultural heritages, along with traditional courses in acting and design, from the curriculum. My argument, first, is that they be approached differently. For one thing, the repertoire and the canon would play a role in opening access to the widest possible range of symbolic material and learned performance conventions. Symbolic work and creativity are not dependent on historical texts and learned skills but might be enabled by them. If they can earn their place in the tasks of students' necessary symbolic work, they will surely maintain their relevance—much the way musicians of popular music become interested in past traditions, techniques, and theory in order to stretch and deepen their music. Second, engagement with theoretical, historical, and dramatic and texts, along with revolutionary influences of important artists, writers, innovators, stylists, is fundamental to providing passage to the widest expanse of theatrical forms, traditions, styles, and perspectives. Courses in critical theory, for instance, would provide the tools not just for understanding historical and dramatic texts from contemporary points of view, but offer critical perspectives on embodied knowledge. Thus, I am not suggesting that we abandon traditional courses within the formalist archetype. But in the revisioned curriculum, existing training of students as actors, designers, technicians, and directors, along with performance theory, history, and literature, would be brought to bear not solely for the pursuit of "art for art's sake," nor as the teaching of skills with a vocational goal.

With the aim of revisioning theatre studies so that it keeps pace with changing definitions about the uses of liberal arts education, I propose that we replace the formalist aesthetic that now prevails in our curriculum with a practical aesthetic that would feature courses in which students create original, student-devised performance texts, guided by aesthetic tendencies already active in their everyday lives. Together with courses that introduce students to theoretical, historical, and critical languages, theatre studies would provide a liberal education that stressed the integration of foundations and hermeneutics. Against the official versions of

culture represented in liberal arts institutions, a practical aesthetic would replace aesthetic formulations that remove the arts from the lifeworld, promising to restore their relevance and usefulness to students' cultural and vocational concerns, interests, and goals while also invigorating the art form itself. Such a pedagogy would necessarily weaken the dominance of the dramatic text as the ground of teaching and performance.

In emphasizing theatre's functional value in the processes of understanding and meaning-making, we can project that theatre study would become more inclusive and aesthetically relevant to students in a model of institutionalized pedagogy that can intelligibly claim an understanding of human agency. I mean that it can offer explanations, help make sense of the world, and participate in theatre culture, but do so only within structures of meaning already embodied within the participants through the language and culture by which they are constituted.

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