Understanding Performance

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The purpose of this summer was to better understand performance by dividing it into two different models for analysis: “formal” or staged performance and “informal” performance. Commonly, our idea of “performance” falls under the former category—Shakespeare plays, Ballet competitions, Jazz concerts, among others, are all artistic performances, offered through staged venues and bounded by time. Theater occupies an important place in formal performance, and given my interest in this field, I have devoted a large portion of my summer to laying the historical and theoretical foundation for further examination of staged theatrical pieces. Analyzing the works of Bertolt Brecht, twentieth-century German playwright, director, and scholar, has been particularly helpful in building a theoretical framework for examining theater. Working with Professor Bechtel, I have studied Brecht’s theories to 1) explore the evolution of his plays through time and their immediate social context, and 2) understand the relevance of his ideas and their role in transforming modern theater.

Comparing Brecht’s first full-length play “Baal” with his later, more well-known “Mother Courage and Her Children” illuminates the dramatic change in style and purpose reflected in his work. Unlike the singsong prose of “Baal,” the heavily political “Mother Courage” subscribes to Brecht’s technique of “Epic Theater.” This methodological approach to production rejects the naturalistic, melodramatic theater that completely engaged the audience in the story and encouraged escapism. Rather, Brecht designed for the audience to always recognize that they were watching a play. In “Mother Courage,” elements of Epic Theater are characterized by the use of narration, of placards revealing the events of each scene, and songs emphasizing the themes of the play. By doing so, Brecht hoped to create a theater of critique that detaches the audience from the characters, garner a response of thought (as opposed to emotion), and inspire the masses to critique the familiar hierarchies and relationships in society.

My role as dramaturg for the professional U.S. premier of Adriano Shaplin’s “Switch Triptych” at the Portland Stage Studio Theater, directed by Professor Bechtel, allowed me to see how Brecht’s theories were applied onstage. The production choices reminding audiences of the constructed nature of the theater include 1) characters breaking the fourth wall, 2) presence of lighting and sound technicians among the audience and 3) historicization of conflicts. When we experience characters talking to us, or see the lighting technician spotlight an actor, it becomes harder for us to lose ourselves in the story. Rather, we become aware of our role as the audience and find ourselves provoked, not absorbed, by the false reality of the play. Brecht’s method of historicization draws from the belief that events from the present cannot be examined objectively. Only by creating historical representations can the theater allow audiences to thoughtfully reflect on contentious, pertinent issues from the present.

While studying Brechtian theories and its practical application onstage, I gained an understanding of performance beyond the stage. Aspects of theatricality, in fact, exist in many other forms, ranging from religious rituals and political movements, to performance of gender and sexuality. Such are the behavioral and social activities that constitute “informal” performance. Much like in staged productions, analysis of informal performances helps us better Schechner, grasp the values of different cultures and groups. Understanding performance, thus, requires us to recognize the many ways “performance” permeates our lives. According to Richard Schechner, the founding father of New York University’s Department of Performance Studies, “theatre is only one node on a continuum that reaches from ritualization in animal behavior (including humans) through performances in everyday life” (Bial 45). By studying the works of Brecht, Artaud, Schechner, Turner, among others, I was able to deepen my understanding of performance and how it manifests in a variety of disciplines. This summer has helped me lay the foundations for further academic study of performance as a compelling object for analysis.

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References: