Gabriel Drozdov

Prof. Brewer Ball

THEA 203: Special Topics in Theater History

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<div align="center">Wesleyan Poem About Dog Education</div>

Prior to Wesleyan, I wrote from an Aristotelian perspective. I thought theater and poetry

"succeeded" when they examined complex and potentially unanswerable questions about the human

condition. I used a "scholarly" (i.e. unemotional) perspective to judge art as imitations[1] and

representations of larger matters, rather than as self-contained expressions. Of course, many

playwrights utilize theater to educate audiences about contemporary issues[2], but instead of flatly

imitating reality, playwrights begin with an "Aristotelian element of thought" and explore beyond

that initial idea.[3] The resulting plays passionately struggle with questions about art, society, and

individualism. In my presentation, I wanted to investigate theater's intrinsic emotional content

through an unconventional (but passionate) educational medium, which was slam poetry.

My poem is united by a series of questions that gradually hone in on personal struggles.

"What is the purpose of theater?" becomes "What is theater?" becomes "Why do I write?" becomes

"Why do I breathe?" In its most general form, the question is "About what?" and the answer is,

"Who knows." We studied different applications of performance in various cultures this semester,

and while traditional western theater, by which I mean narrative plot structures with discernable

characters, still reigns as the dominant focus of academia, this type of theater alone cannot answer

broader questions about the purpose of performance. Likewise, the questions I ask about theater

extend to all types of performance, such that I can contemplate why we, as a united people, perform.

Essentially, I feel that everyone must ask of themselves what it is they do ("About what?") and

thusly perform the inevitable struggle for meaning in life ("Who knows").

In response to Aristotle/Plato's foundations of theater and inspired by Jennifer Doyle's piece on emotion, I wanted to teach about emotion without diluting the subject with inaccessible verbosity. I utilized slam poetry in order to give a physical lecture, or really an educational performance, wherein my words expressed frustration and difficulties with theatrical analysis but my speech emphasized the weight of such quandaries. I felt that in order to be helpful to my peers, I would have to be honest with my complete incomprehension of language and art. In computer science, every function has a corresponding bit sequence that computes additional values, and everything is a logical process. Conversely, theater's emotional foundations are inexplicable except in performance, and classroom discussions can only represent what once was. I wanted to convey my emotional response to theater and I could only do so in an emotional language, so I wrote a poem.

The written portion of my presentation featured several ASCII images[4] of dogs. I converted relevant photos of dogs in my life into these text images as to represent that representations of larger concepts come in basic forms.[5] Otherwise, I derived the dog imagery from Pavlov's dogs, and although I use dogs to concretely symbolize our roles as habit-makers, dogs abstractly represent my complete incomprehension of explained phenomena.[6] Pavlov demonstrated classical conditioning by training dogs to salivate at the sound of a dinner bell, even when food wasn't present. Perhaps my largest frustration with education is my inability to form thoughts outside of what I've been taught. I can ask questions about what I don't know, but if there is no preconceived habit with which to approach the issue, I stop. I ask questions, but I am still live like a dog.

My performance is an ongoing study to hopefully reach a cathartic moment at some point in my life, and every course I take arms me to endure that journey. To finish, some poetry:

Stop— breathe— / What do you want to do? / Did you think, when you were eight, / that this is what you'd pursue? / Ten years ago, how would you know / that there'd be no path for you? / Welcome to Wesleyan— / Now go be babies, learn lots, shoo //

Notes

[1] "Imitation" is jointly defined by Aristotle and Plato in Aristotle's *Poetics* and Plato's *The Republic.*

[2] Some examples of playwrights include Tony Kushner (*Angels of America*, which discusses treatment of homosexuality and AIDS in America), Joe Penhall (*Some Voices* and *Blue/Orange*, which discuss treatment of schizophrenic patients), and Nilo Cruz (*Two Sisters and a Piano*, which discusses political control over activists and Cuban citizens).

[3] "In order to write whatever you think your play is about, which unfortunately is the first thing we're asked, [the idea] should never be conscious. You can do all the research in the world you want, but at some point the trick is to take this hand that has the Aristotelian element of thought, and put it behind your back, and do not look at it again… Everyone's always saying… 'Gosh, you're always doing these things that are so political.' I actually don't know it in writing. I mean, I'll finish a draft and go, 'Oh my god, I'm going to get killed.'" —Paula Vogel, at the 2012 Comparative Drama Conference

[4] ASCII refers to the American Standard Code for Information Interchange, which consists of the standard text you see across any electronic devices. ASCII images are composed of these letters, numbers, and symbols whose distinct shapes are used to create pictures.

[5] As a side note, this also hearkens back to my computer science interests.

[6] Again, concrete and abstract representations of functions are computer science concepts, in which concrete specifications demonstrate how something is actually implemented, while abstract specification demonstrate how someone can use the program.

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