

# Theory for Performance Studies

A student's guide

Philip Auslander

First published 2008  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to [www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk](http://www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk).”

© 2008 Philip Auslander

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Auslander, Philip, 1956–

Theory for performance studies: a student’s guide/Philip Auslander.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Performing arts—Social aspects. 2. Performing arts—Philosophy. I. Title.

PN1590.S6A885 2007

792.02’2—dc22

2007005254

ISBN 0-203-94483-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-97452-6 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-415-97453-4 (pbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-94483-6 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-97452-3 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-97453-0 (pbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-94483-7 (ebk)

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction	1
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Predecessors</b>	7
1 Sigmund FREUD	9
2 Karl MARX	14
3 Friedrich NIETZSCHE	20
4 Ferdinand DE SAUSSURE	25
<b>PART II</b>	
<b>The theorists</b>	31
5 Louis ALTHUSSER	33
6 Mikhail BAKHTIN	39
7 Roland BARTHES	45
8 Georges BATAILLE	51
9 Jean BAUDRILLARD	56
10 Walter BENJAMIN	61
11 Pierre BOURDIEU	67
12 Judith BUTLER	73
13 Hélène CIXOUS	79

vi *Contents*

14	Gilles DELEUZE and Félix GUATTARI	83
15	Jacques DERRIDA	91
16	Michel FOUCAULT	97
17	Hans-Georg GADAMER	104
18	Luce IRIGARAY	108
19	Julia KRISTEVA	112
20	Jacques LACAN	117
21	Henri LEFEBVRE	123
22	Emmanuel LEVINAS	128
23	Jean-François LYOTARD	132
24	Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY	136
25	Edward W. SAID	141
26	Gayatri Chakravorty SPIVAK	147
27	Hayden WHITE	153
28	Raymond WILLIAMS	159
29	Slavoj ŽIŽEK	165

# Introduction

## Theory for performance studies – who needs it?

What is theory and why is it important for performance studies?

Theory, from the Greek *theoria*, which means “a viewing” or “spectacle,” offers a way of seeing. A theory is something like a conceptual lens, a pair of spectacles, which you use to frame and focus what you’re looking at. It is a tool for discerning, deciphering, and making sense.

In my view, performance studies is a paradigm-driven field, by which I mean that it takes the concept of performance as both its object of inquiry and its primary analytical concept (I will explain further shortly). The central question animating the discipline is: “What is performance?” The more contexts in which we look at the concept of performance and the more cases to which we apply it, the better we will be able to answer that question. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that we will come up with more and more useful answers to the question, for performance studies is not about discovering a single theory of performance. Any answer to the basic question constitutes a *de facto* theory of performance, that is, an idea of performance that is used to make sense of various practices and forms of expression. Every theory frames and focuses our attention on some things while leaving other things outside the frame or out of focus. Thus, performance studies is always in search of new theories that might open up new ways of seeing and interpreting performance. Performance studies *is* theory: it is the myriad conceptual tools used to “see” performance.

The approach I take here to looking at the relationship between performance studies and theory is unique. There are already excellent books that offer an overview of the discipline or of the concept of performance: Richard Schechner’s *Introduction to Performance Studies* (Routledge, 2nd edition 2006) and Marvin Carlson’s *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2nd edition 2004), respectively. *Theory for Performance Studies* does not survey exclusively those theorists assumed to be central to performance studies (many are absent, in fact) and it is not a guide to key concepts in the field. Rather, it seeks to discuss the various relationships a list of twenty-nine canonical modern and postmodern thinkers have to performance studies. (By canonical, I mean that the importance of these figures is generally accepted in academic circles and that their influence is not confined to

## 2 Introduction

performance studies or any other single discipline. These are theorists whose ideas have had broad but unevenly distributed influence over a variety of fields.) In some cases, the thinkers discussed here are central to performance studies (Judith Butler is an example), while in other cases their relationships are more tangential. This inquiry allows the reader to position performance studies in relation to other fields and disciplines that draw from these same thinkers. It provides a guide to what some figures have contributed to the field and how the thought of some others might inspire new directions.

I wrote this book with three audiences in mind. First, it is for undergraduate students in courses on theory and methodology in performance studies. This book complements existing basic texts by providing concise synopses of the ideas of key figures in intellectual history and their relevance to performance studies. It is also to a certain extent a companion volume to *Performance: Critical Concepts*, which I edited for Routledge (2003). I have cited contributions to that collection here where it was reasonable to do so. The present book provides further intellectual context for the essays collected there.

Second, this book is for graduate students. Not only will it serve masters or doctoral students seeking theoretical frameworks for thesis or dissertation research, but also it will prove useful as they prepare for a career in teaching.

Finally, *Theory for Performance Studies* is intended for teachers and scholars of theatre and performance who need a resource to help them introduce students to contemporary theoretical perspectives and who are themselves interested in how these perspectives might speak more directly to performance studies.

### Theory and performance studies: the disciplinary context

In some contexts, I would characterize theatre studies and performance studies as closely related fields that are nevertheless quite different in significant ways. In a nutshell, I believe theatre studies to be an *object-driven* discipline. That is, there is an object (or a set of objects, if you prefer) called theatre, and the purpose of theatre studies is to study that object using a variety of tools (some historical, for example, some critical or analytical). Even while acknowledging that what “theatre” is may vary culturally and along other lines, and while there may be disagreement about whether or not a particular object belongs to the class “theatre,” there must be a general agreement that we know what theatre is for the discipline to function (just as there must be some general understanding of what art is in art history, what music is in musicology, etc.).

As I have said, I consider performance studies to be a *paradigm-driven* discipline. There is no object (or set of objects) called performance(s) the study of which performance studies takes as its purpose. Rather, there is an idea, performance, that serves as the paradigmatic starting point for any

inquiry that occurs within the disciplinary realm. In principle, this paradigm can function as a lens through which to examine almost anything. The project of performance studies as a discipline is to trace the paradigm through analysis of the myriad contexts in which it appears and to which it can be applied.

The two disciplines have different relationships to theory of the sort under discussion here. Theatre studies is the older discipline and was based largely in a positivistic approach to the history of theatre, until the early 1980s when many scholars began to look at theatre through other theoretical lenses, including many represented by the figures discussed here. From that point on, theatre studies has become a discipline increasingly shaped by theory, as can be seen, for example, by comparing the kinds of scholarly articles published in *Theatre Journal*, which began publication in 1979, with those that appeared in its predecessor, the *Educational Theatre Journal* (1949–78).

Performance studies, by contrast, came into being as a theoretical discipline. Emerging originally as a confluence of ideas drawn from humanistic and social scientific disciplines that included theatre, anthropology (including the study of folklore and oral traditions), and sociology, performance studies sought to focus on the idea of performance, understood to be broader and more inclusive than theatre, through the lenses provided by these and other disciplines. That the field had a theoretical slant is evident in the title of the first book by Richard Schechner, one of its founders: *Essays on Performance Theory: 1970–1976* (originally published 1977; Routledge, 2nd edition 2003). Over time, performance studies, too, has been reshaped through the influence of theory. Arguably, the original confluence of theatre, anthropology, and sociology has yielded first to poststructuralist and feminist theoretical approaches, then to the influence of cultural studies and postcolonial theory.

I offer these definitions and tell this story in part to explain why it is important to look at performance studies from a broad theoretical perspective. As an inherently interdisciplinary discipline, performance studies is open to intellectual influence from all directions – one never knows what set of ideas will open up a new way of understanding performance. The multidisciplinaryity, not only of performance studies but also of the growing academic interest in performance, is very clear in the sources of the books and articles cited in the bibliographies included here, whose fields of origin include, besides theatre and performance studies: sociology, anthropology, speech communication, literature, music, philosophy, dance studies, cultural studies, geography, psychology, and political and cultural theory, among many others.

In assembling these bibliographies, I have not made a sharp distinction between theatre studies and performance studies, primarily for practical reasons. When most of the theorists under consideration here discuss performance, theatre is their primary reference point and they implicitly

## 4 Introduction

understand performance primarily in terms of theatre and theatricality. To have limited the cited sources only to those that truly focus on performance and performativity, but not theatre, would have been unnecessarily restrictive. The happy result is that the present volume will be of as much value to theoretically inclined students of theatre as it is to those in performance studies. I have tried, however, to focus the bibliographic citations mostly on sources that discuss *performance* rather than literary interpretations of plays, for example. I have included such material only where it seemed particularly apposite.

### Conversations

This book is not only a guide to how theory since the 1960s has transformed the intellectual landscape in which performance studies finds its place, but also an invitation to join in the conversation – regardless of the theoretical stands one adopts.

The contemporary theoretical perspectives introduced in this book did not emerge miraculously, *ex nihilo*, from the solitary minds of their authors. They were developed in conversation with those who preceded them. In this regard, four theoretical predecessors are particularly important: Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ferdinand de Saussure. Together with others, these four constitute a common context for theoretical discourse since the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, their concepts and questions continue to set the agenda for contemporary theory. Whether or not one embraces them, one must have a basic understanding of their contributions. Therefore Part I of this book is devoted to these four predecessors to contemporary theory and also examines their direct contributions to the study of performance.

Just as the theorists introduced in this book were engaged in dialogue with their own theoretical predecessors, I invite today's students of performance to be in conversation with the theories and theorists described here. Whether or not one ultimately declares oneself a Kristevan or Foucauldian or Lacanian – or, for that matter, a Marxist or Freudian or Nietzschean or Saussurean – it is important to attend to the questions these thinkers raise. What happens to our view of performance and the way it produces meaning, for instance, when we question the nature of language? Does language represent a natural correspondence between word and external referent, or, as structuralists would argue, is language a semiotic system in which the linguistic sign is both arbitrary and based on difference?

### How to use this book

This book is designed to be useful. I assume that most readers will not read it from cover to cover, but will go to it for help with particular theorists and theories. The four predecessors introduced in Part I are presented in alpha-



betical order by last name, as are the twenty-five entries in Part II. Every entry in the book has three main sections: a list of key concepts, the main body of the text, and further reading.

At the beginning of each entry is a short bulleted list of key concepts, which I have identified as particularly important for students of performance to understand. These concepts are listed in the order of their appearance in the main text.

The main body of each entry begins with a brief biographical sketch. In the discussion that follows, key concepts are highlighted where they are first explained. Thus a reader interested in one particular key concept can quickly scan the entry for the discussion of it. I also offer some discussion of the theorist's ideas directly related to performance and possible implications of the theory for performance studies. I do not indicate all the possible implications, however, as if that were possible: these discussions are intended to be suggestive, not comprehensive.

Finally, each entry has a further reading section which includes two subsections: first, a "By" subsection listing primary texts; second, an "About" subsection listing texts about the theorist as well as texts on performance that include a significant discussion of the theorist or application of the theorist's ideas. Within each of these subsections, one or two key texts are indicated with asterisks. I recommend these as starting points for further reading.

This book suggests multiple possible ways that we might see performance. Although the theorists I explore here are sometimes difficult to understand on first contact, I believe that they are well worth the effort. My goal has been to provide initial access to their work, to explain their key concepts, and to give suggestion for further study. As readers move beyond my short introductions to the primary and secondary texts listed in the Further Reading sections, I fully expect that they will develop more complex and subtle understandings of the potential contributions of these theorists to the academic study of performance than I can present here. Happy theorizing!