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“REBECCA SCHNEIDER’S PERFORMANCE STUDIES REMAINS”

This is the transcript of a video-interview I realized with Rebecca Schneider, Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at Brown University, in May 2012. In this conversation Professor Schneider talks about her work as a Performance Studies scholar and the specific focus of her research interests. By thinking critically about certain aspects of this discipline, above all in relation to Theatre Studies, she underlines the dialogue between performativity and theatricality, as well as the importance of a certain kind of historiography in Performance Studies research methodology. Moving from the ontology of Performance Studies to the ontology of performance, she finally focuses on the idea that performance does not disappear, as she explains in her most recent book, “Performing Remains”.

CC: You come from the Performance Studies department at NYU: you gained your Masters there and then your PhD; you also taught there but now you are the Chair of the Theatre and Performance Studies department here at Brown University. I was wondering if you can talk a little bit about your personal experience in this field.

RS: Well, I was extremely fortunate to be at New York University at such an exciting time, when basically Richard Schechner, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Brooks McNamara, Michael Kirby and Marcia Siegel in dance had brought together this very exciting emerging group of thinkers around this brand new idea of performance in what Richard has called the “broad spectrum”. It’s not of course a brand new idea but it was taking a disciplinary shape and that was very exciting. At that time Peggy Phelan had just been brought in, and so she was a new addition to the department, coming out of Literary Studies. She brought psychoanalytic lines of investigation with her. While I was there they then brought in Michael Taussing, an anthropologist, who at that time was thinking very rigorously about the work of Walter Benjamin, as well as the College of Sociology led by Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, asking questions about the sacred and tragedy. I had taken a course about shamanism and tragedy and another with him about capitalism and Benjamin, that were very foundational for me.

So these were people that had not been trained in the same field and were coming together in one department, figuring out a field as they went along. That was extremely exciting. The questions were very new and there was a lot of debate. I think one of the reasons it was successful was that in a sense they flattened the field, which means they brought in a very large number of graduate students. There were always a lot of people around the table having discussions. And several of us who completed the course were lucky to go on and get jobs, because at that time we thought: “We are going to have a PhD in something no one has ever heard of; how

we are ever going to get a job?” But the reality is that those of us who came there hadn't done so because of the market, for jobs, or we never would have been there. We came there because we were driven to ask these questions.

Fortunately, the field of Theatre Studies at large did become the right sort of place for this new initiative. Across campuses, across other Universities there were new mandates for the globalized, the transnational... we didn't call it transnational then, but for thinking about Theatre Studies in a global prospective, which meant that there was a new pressure on departments to include African ritual traditions as well as, let's say, Asian, non-Western, as it was called then, theatre forms. That demanded a kind of Performance Studies perspective, the ability to talk about what the relationship between ritual and performance or theatre and a drumming-based performance is. It so happened that there were jobs in the field because of this teaching pressure, and Performance Studies people could get these jobs. I was fortunate because I also had a theatre background, so I was employable in theatre departments. So that's one story.

Obviously NYU also had the fortunate cousin in the Northwestern program around Dwight Conquergood, that was growing up in Chicago out of oral interpretation and communication studies So NYU came out of theatre and dance, Northwestern out of communication and oral studies... studies of oral histories. And we found conferences where we could meet up, like the Association for Theatre in Higher Education: this was before Performance Studies International. We would meet there and made a focus group. Another really foundational aspect in Performance Studies in my view was the Women and Theatre Group, a sub-group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education where many of us from Performance Studies would meet and debate questions about gender which were very focused and intense at the time. The first P*Si* was in 1990 or 1991, perhaps unofficially: I don't know if counted as the first P*Si*, but we had a Performance Studies conference at NYU. I remember debates about whether Performance Studies International should be a capitol “i” or a little “i”. It was a very exciting time.

I went on from there to Yale. I had taught at NYU but then I taught a class at Yale, and then I was a Visiting Assistant at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. I then became a Tenure Track Assistant Professor at Cornell University where I got tenure but moved to Brown to help them found a new PhD program, where I am now Professor and Chair of the Departmen. . We changed the name of the department at that point to Theatre and Performance Studies, and our Performance Studies students have done very well in the market, so we are pretty happy about it.

CC: Would you explain a little bit more about the difference you have experienced between the Performance Studies Department at NYU and the Theatre and Performance Studies Department here at Brown University?

RS: Well, it's interesting that of several of us who got a PhD in Performance Studies and have gone into the field... you know, there is no one, except André Lepecki I think, in a Performance Studies Department who has a degree in Performance Studies. It's curious that several of us with doctoral ??? degrees in Performance Studies sort of went on and found ourselves in Theatre Departments and had to figure out how Performance Studies fits within theatre: is it the same as theatre? Is it different from theatre? What is the overall umbrella? Is Theatre Studies an umbrella under which Performance Studies sits, or is Performance Studies an umbrella under which Theatre Studies sits? Or is an umbrella the wrong metaphor?

When I came to Brown there were already people doing Performance Studies. The Department was called Theatre, Speech and Dance and we felt that actually we had to bring theatre and dance together for instance, instead of thinking that you have theatre here and dance here, and over there that media department, and over there visual time-based art; so Performance Studies could be more of an intermediary or could help us actually have these exciting conversations between our forms that were already under the same roof. We wanted to think more profoundly about dance together with theatre, which as I said earlier, from a global perspective, if you think about African or, Asian traditions for instance or many of the American ones, like American musicals, you have to think dance and music, you have to think of these other forms together with the spoken text, with drama. The primacy of drama was loosening a little bit with thinking about performance.

Clearly a lot of rigorous work in Theatre Studies had already been in that direction: the semiotics of the theatre, thinking about the theatrical operations of the body as a sign-making mechanism. This was already thinking beyond the text, thinking beyond the limits of what happens in theatre according to the text-centric action of the playwright narrative. We found ourselves already in league with all of those efforts in Theatre Studies. We changed the name of the Theatre Department to a Theatre and Performance Studies Department because we didn't want to lose the reach of aspects of Theatre Studies that had already been working in this more semiotic and phenomenological way. We didn't want to lose a rigorous study.

Sometimes Performance Studies in its... I don't want to say "pure form", because there can be no pure form for Performance Studies, it's like an oxymoron... but Performance Studies without Theater Studies, it's possible that you wouldn't necessarily have to study theater to study performance behavior. But in our

department we really had a strength in Theater Studies, so we wanted to keep the studies in theater history, in theater and dramatic theory, we wanted an historical aspect. When I went through NYU, one didn't have to know history for instance. I happened to have studied theater, so I came with that. It wasn't a requirement, and I don't think it necessarily should be, but in our department we offer that. What we think now, what we are working on are things like the theater history of photography, or the theater history of film, because one conceives the medieval screen for instance, the screen of all aspects of the author and spectator/performer relation relative to the advance of photography, as a kind of trajectory that results in all sort of screens. Why is that not in the historical register of photography? We would like to consider the theatre history of these things more profoundly. And in a sense say that something like photography could be seen as a performance, a performance study, a study of our relationship to screens; but to do that really well, one needs to know something about the history of screens and of performance.

This might be a long way round of answering your question, but one of the differences is that Theater and Performance Studies in our way of looking at it contains history and historiography a little bit more than does Performance Studies, at least in its NYU variety at present. In terms of looking at Performance Studies in the US, when I said at the beginning that it's interesting that those of us who have degrees... I was thinking of Shannon Jackson who has a degree in Performance Studies from Northwestern and who did the same thing at Berkeley: they changed the name into Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies. Now that doesn't mean, as with us, that these are separate things: that theatre is separate from Performance Studies, separate from dance, but it does mean that one doesn't lose the trajectory of the study of craft even, because the other difference is that we both, Berkeley and Brown, and I think Stanford maybe, changed their name too. I don't know what they are changing it to but I have heard that they have maybe changed their name... you know these are strong programs that have undergraduate study as a major part of it, and the training of craft happens with undergraduates. So they want to study acting and directing and dance and these kinds of things. That's not a requirement, it doesn't happen at NYU because they don't have any undergraduates. So that's a difference as well.

CC: They are going to have one soon I think...

RS: Yes I think they are going to have one soon and we'll see what happens with that, but they have another place at NYU where students can study acting and those things.

CC: If we use the kind of metaphor we used before, the metaphor of the umbrella or the metaphor used by Schechner when he talks about a “broad spectrum of actions”, we think about all these things which are under this huge umbrella of performance. I am thinking about what the Performance Studies perspective can give which is new in terms of analyzing each specific object. I mean if we think about scholars who come from Theatre Studies and who have always studied theatre as an object of analysis, then I think: “What can a Performance Studies perspective give that is new to this specific object of analysis?”

RS: To the theatre you mean? To the study of theatre?

CC: Yes, but that is just an example. Then the same thing can be said about dance or everyday life; everything is under this kind of umbrella, so that basically, everything each time is analyzed as performance.

RS: At one point the Performance Studies perspective was new, but it doesn't seem very new right now; but maybe it is new in some places. I think quite a while ago it was scandalous even to say that one is going to look not only at what happens to this discrete object in the theatre... no, it wasn't scandalous... I mean at the beginning there was a great deal of resistance in the academy, in traditional Theatre Studies to Performance Studies, because one of the criticisms was that Performance Studies was “the study of everything”. I mean if everything is performance then nothing is discrete, and if nothing is discrete, how can you study anything? But I think this is linked to what happened in the art world in general. If you think about what happened in the visual arts with the huge explosion of time-based performances, performance-based art, it becomes very clear, and already was in the 1960s that intermedial performance, intermedial art expression was going to demand a new way of thinking about art. That that long tradition of segmented art disciplines, that long enlightened tradition of segregating the arts into these sorts of discrete categories was rapidly unraveling with mid-century performance work, time-based work. I have tried to write a little bit about this in a couple of publications: one was an essay, “Solo, Solo, Solo”, that I did in a book called *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance* (edited by Gavin Butt, Blackwell Publishing, 2005), but I also take up the subject in my recent book *Performing Remains* a little bit, about this kind of undoing of the sure spaces between media. In that book, *Performing Remains*, I look a lot at photography and I try to read the sort of problem that theatre has had with photography and photography has had with theatre: theatre has claimed that a photograph is not the thing itself, that it can't capture theatre, and meanwhile

photography is trying to claim that it was there, in the thing that is the image; it says: “We can’t be theatrical! We are evidence!”. There is a lot of tension between these forms. At the same time, if you look really closely, the pose is deeply theatrical, and you have myriad examples in the rise of Naturalism of posing, even posing for photographs on stage. So these media think about each other and they think through each other.

One thing Performance Studies does is help us think about the spaces between media. It helps us think about intermedial negotiations that one kind of medium is always sort of posing as another kind of medium. Remember that famous image of the Etienne Decroux mime.... I can’t remember the year, but it’s early... and he’s standing with the camera taking the photograph, the theatre and the camera together. Well, what kind of discrete medium is going to let us think about that? Photography? Why a mime? What does a mime mean? We need to think of theatre and photography together, and one way to do that may happen under something like Performance Studies or with something like Performance Studies. Thinking about the squeaky, leaky boundaries between media is one thing that Performance Studies brings to theatre that’s new. I mean theatre has always been porous, leaky, composed of many different disciplines: scenographers, visual artists, dancers, actors, writers; it already has this betweenness; it’s the medium of the between; it’s a medium that won’t stay pure; it’s the medium everyone loves to hate in terms of the long tradition of anti-theatricality.

I don’t know what Performance Studies brings to Theatre Studies. I am right now actually more interested in returning to a way of thinking about theatricality. Thinking about philosophy, many articulated in the 1980s and ‘90s what has been called “the performative turn”. You have the work of Judith Butler engaging with performativity, taking up John Austin from the 1950s and a lot of queer theory. We are thinking about performativity because what performativity can do is render something real and through an act, you know, “how to do things with words”, that performativity creates the real through a reiteration that doesn’t understand itself as reiterative. What I tried to argue in *Performing Remains* is that this thing that John Austin calls useless to performativity, which is theatricality, is actually of extreme interest. What many scholars are now calling the “affective turn”, thinking about the production of affect in a neo-liberal economy, and many of the Italian thinkers have been absolutely central to this, and thinking about “immaterial labour”, requires consideration of the construction of affect; and the circulation of affect requires thinking about theatricality, about the production of emotions that are given to circulate and may not be real, like this performative thing that is done. I am interested in theatricality and think it has a lot to offer to Performance Studies, and by that I also

mean the history of theatre. I can say that because I have a PhD in Performance Studies and I am not saying it as a theatre historian who is just angry at Performance Studies. I am saying it as a Performance Studies person who wants to see that kind of rigorous analysis take place in the field.

CC: I would like to take a step back to something you just said, which is about the importance or the lack of importance of historiography in Performance Studies. I am not talking about the historiography of the field, but about an historiographic investigation of the object of analysis itself.

RS: That's interesting. I think it is necessary, but don't mistake me, because I think there is a new form of historiography. When you say "the analysis of the specific object in the field", I mean one of the issues with Performance Studies is "no object is discreet to itself". You know, that specific object is not a specific object; it's already composed of a myriad problems of looking, of spectatorship, of engaging the object from a perspective, if you will, of your viewing, and it's already going to be other than itself, because of your engagement with it. So, there is not this idea of the mastery of a specific object so that one can tell the lineage of that object. One has to engage with the volatile relational contingency of when one thinks one mixes that object in the moment. There is a pressure on telling the history and on thinking about history, in this new moment of the undoing of the specificities of the object.

How does one do it? I mean how does one tell that story. In a way one has to tell the story of telling stories; and of course historiography is about history thinking about history. History thinking about itself. It's not just the narrative or the chronicle; it's not just the history. Historiography is in the sense of "how do we come to this place to try even to tell this story of this object"; and I have to be critical of that, of the fracturedness of my attempts to even do that. But there are ways to tell that history or to bring history in, even while complicating that linear march of a kind of enlightenment, investment in forward-moving progress-oriented time. If you think about certain historiographers like Carolyn Dinshaw, whose book *Getting Medieval* has been very informative to me because she really writes about the affective echoes across time that might happen in an object; an object might retain some kind of affective echoes from another time. The challenge in that isn't necessarily just a kind of recovery of some sort of unproblematic story of how this object travels to come to this place; but to engage in a set of desires about knowing and about accounting for, "how do we account for this?" Sometimes it looks like a very different historiography, and this is maybe why people say "we don't need that, we don't need that kind of history perhaps"; but we do need an account of our implications, our

tangledness in time. And to my mind that's best served by deep study of other moments in time. To account for our entanglement in time, our genealogy that brings us to a moment of trying to think about telling history differently. We are best informed by looking at other efforts in other moments in time to tell the historical narrative, as we devise new ways of telling those narratives to ourselves. Some people do it by a personal narrative, some people say "my personal history is the only history that I might have to bring to this object". Other people may say something different, but I disagree that one doesn't need any kind of engagement with history or historiography.

CC: So it's more about a new way of thinking about historiography in terms of Performance Studies, when the object is performance...

RS: One of the reasons my book *Performing Remains* is about reenactment is because historically there has been this idea that performance disappears, a basic idea of Performance Studies; I give an account of it in my book. But, you know, Richard Schechner said this in 1985; it was picked up by many people, Peggy Phelan, famously reiterating "performance becomes itself through disappearing and it cannot be recorded" etc. etc., and that's all been a very important thing to think with; but it also says "then, if performance disappears, it has no means of remaining, it doesn't have a means of remaining in the archive, whereas in the object-based and text-based archive, what about the body as an archive? I mean psychoanalysis gives us the body as an archive; there are many examples: Foucault gives us the eruptive body... there are many examples of the body as an archive. But to tell those stories, to tell a history in that way... this is why Foucault calls it a genealogy and not a history. We aren't finished with figuring out what it is to enunciate a past that comes to us through that which has been forgotten. That's a different kind of history, but it doesn't happen in isolation to what does remain in the archive. It's like what Diana Taylor argues; it's some kind of crosswind that we can become better at thinking through.