

About performance: a conversation with Richard Schechner.



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Editorial

About Performance: A Conversation with Richard Schechner[†]

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Richard Schechner is University Professor Emeritus at New York University (<https://tisch.nyu.edu/about/directory/performance-studies/3508301>, accessed 13 December 2021). As an experienced theatre director, scholar, and researcher, he pioneered the field of Performance Studies, which has opened spaces for deepening the confluence between social performance and artistic performance. He worked closely with anthropologist Victor Turner, from 1976 until Turner's death in 1983, in the development of questions around ritual and performance. Schechner's books include *Public Domain* (1968), *Environmental Theater* (1973), *Performance Theory* (1976, 2003), *The End of Humanism* (1981), *Between Theater and Anthropology* (1985), *The Future of Ritual* (1993), *Performed Imaginaries* (2015), and *Performance Studies—An Introduction* (4th edition, 2020).

Many of these publications were developed in dialogue with performances and plays with groups Schechner founded, co-founded, or with which he was deeply involved: East End Players, The Free Southern Theater, The Performance Group, and East Coast Artists. A way of working emerged, seen in works, such as *Dionysus in 69* (1968), *Commune* (1970), and *Imagining O* (2014), as well as the street “guerrilla theatre” Schechner staged in the 1970s that drew spectators into a more immersive and participatory experience of theatre. Schechner also created a singular relationship with the classic repertoire in pieces, such as *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *Oedipus of Seneca*, *Faust/gastronome*, *Three Sisters*, *Hamlet*, and *The Oresteia*. Schechner edits the *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies* (Cambridge University Press) and the Enactments book series (Seagull Books).

As guest editors of the Special Issue, Madeira, Elias, Cruzeiro, and Douglas prepared a set of questions for Schechner to discuss the central issues of Robert Owen’s construct of Eight Hours Work, Eight Hours Rest, and Eight Hours Leisure (8-8-8). Owen developed this concept in the early 19th century in an attempt to reform the negative effects of industrialisation on people working under factory conditions, by creating a different temporality founded in eight hours work, eight hours leisure, and eight hours rest. We were interested in exploring with Schechner the meaning (or otherwise) of this concept for contemporary times.

The conversation we present here explores the multiplicity of interests that underpin Schechner’s radical approach to the theory and practice of performance. He draws together the body and the mind, and reaches far beyond Western perspectives and concepts to seek to understand and deepen issues in and around human and non-human performance, in theatre and in life. We asked him to develop, among a number of diverse issues, one of his fundamental concepts, that of restored behaviour. This is a concept that allows us to understand humankind precisely as a maker of worlds, implicated in a performance that is always under construction, between a script of inherited behaviour and a script for behaviour that is always undergoing review.

Professor Schechner is currently working on two books about the Ramlila of Ramnagar, India, a 30 day cycle play, an annual religious environmental theatre event enacting the life of Rama, Vishnu’s seventh avatar.

Guest Editors:

Cláudia Madeira Anne Douglas Cristina Cruzeiro Helena Elias

Your life has been dedicated to a deep understanding of the role of performance in theatre, as a director, as a researcher, and editor and teacher. Why is performance important in human life? Is performance a kind of lens for seeing, and thinking [about] the world?

Richard Schechner: In *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, I wrote: “What are performance and performance studies theoretically? One way to parse existence is to distinguish among being, doing, showing doing, explaining showing doing. ‘Being’ is existence itself. ‘Doing’ is the activity of all that is, from quarks to viruses to sentient beings to supergalactic strings. ‘Showing doing’ is pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing (that is, performing). ‘Explaining showing doing’ is performance studies” (2014: p. 4). In other words, performance is the doing we are aware of and Performance Studies is the study of that awareness of doing.

Let me unpack that a little bit. I think of performance not only in relation to human life, but the life of Gaia, of the planet, the life of the animals on it, the life of the trees, even the life of the rocks. They are all performing, in my sense of performing—that is, they are *doing* something. They are engaged in a temporal process that, in the case of rocks, is almost incomprehensibly slow from a human perspective. Nearly three centuries ago, people in Portugal became aware of this with the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. It’s still in memory. What was that except the movement of two tectonic plates sliding past each other? All of a sudden, the earth moved, but the earth is moving all the time. Not only earthquakes, but the earth in orbit. On the planet’s surface we do not really experience the

movement of the earth either in orbit or rotation, except for the “motion” of the sun, moon, and stars (in inverted commas because what people see are not the actual motions, but functions of the earth’s rotation). The earth is in a slightly elliptical orbit around the sun, and the sun is also moving inside the Milky Way Galaxy, and the galaxy itself is moving as the universe is expanding.

At the most macro level, we have this question of moving and doing. If we go to the other end of the scale, the scale of quantum physics, we know that we cannot separate energy from matter where they come together in energy bursts or subatomic particles, neutrinos and such. In even trying to observe quantum events, we disturb and change those events so that the quanta, the bundles of energy, are also always in motion as, indeed, light is in motion. We are currently speaking on this Zoom connection, which is an electrical connection. I am here in New York; you are in Lisbon and Scotland. We are also simultaneously in each other’s presence. This is also a question of movement.

Many decades ago, I had this sense of movement and performance though I wasn’t able to articulate it, and had I been able to, I would not have been the first to attempt to do so. Not only Heisenberg’s indeterminacy principle and quantum physics, but, in biology, Darwin’s evolution as “descent [of species] with modification”, which is, in other words, the constant movement of the genes. My thinking developed under the influence of these and several other thinkers, including J. L. Austin, a philosopher of language who coined the term “performativity”. Furthermore, my collaborative work with Victor Turner on the ritual process—not ritual as a thing, but as a continuously changing, evolving, phenomenon—again, movement. Erving Goffman, whom I knew, but not as well as I knew Turner, developed the notion of “the presentation of self in everyday life” (the title of his great 1956 book) which is how we perform our everyday activities, how we are performing in this moment. For example, you have chosen to show your backgrounds on this video link, and I have chosen to blur my background. These are all performative or performance choices.

If we are always performing, how do we lift those particular performances we want to examine out from the universal, global, eternal flow of performance? How do we devise social or aesthetic tendencies, not as laws or absolute truths, but truths within context—phenomena that are true within specific “given circumstances” (to use Stanislavsky’s phrase)? In other words, how might we devise a theory of performance?

This is particularly important today, and will increasingly be important as human beings contact each other ever more agilely through digital devices, and as human beings come to realise, or hopefully realise, that we are, at one level, the current culmination of an evolutionary process. Will there be beings after us? Certainly. Surely humans, as we are now, are not the end of the story. We stand next to that great imaginary, God, but on another level, we are an invasive species. If creatures from another solar system observed us, they would say, “Why are these animals destroying the environment, eating everything up, exterminating directly or indirectly other animals and vegetation, and overcrowding?” Indeed, humans play two extremely different roles: being next to the divine insofar as one can conceive of that, and of being like locusts. Yes, I call God the “great imaginary”—humans create their (our) gods, not the other way around, and yet, it is a fantastic and powerful creation, both useful and destructive.

Understanding performance, both in its broad sense and in its narrower senses, will help us grasp the relationship between the almost divine powers and agencies of human beings, and the invasive and destructive parts of our historical experience, which is coming to a crisis now. It is ironic, of course, that the climate change crisis has been developing for hundreds of years, but we weren’t aware of it until the end of the 19th century. Dire warnings increased in the scientific community progressively over the past fifty years, but it has taken a long time to gain political attention with the Paris Accord—still not implemented—coming in 2015. Such failure is because politicians, whether authoritarian or democratic or royal or whatever, are under the pressure to satisfy the immediate needs of their citizens, like the anxious parent pacifying a screaming child, and under an equal if not stronger pressure to maintain their own power. Add to this the capitalist

drive for immediate profits. We are ruled by a combination of politicians, oligarchs, and corporations—the military–industrial–university complex—which resist undertaking the changes that are necessary.

Many years ago, in 1971 during my first time in India, I visited Auroville, a utopian community in a former French colony south of Madras (now Chennai) where I was living. I met The Mother, who had been Mirra Alfassa, a French woman from a Sephardic Jewish family. In 1920, she joined Sri Aurobindo, an Indian spiritual leader, previously Aurobindo Ghose, a Bengali revolutionary. In 1926, Sri Aurobindo went into seclusion after asking The Mother to run the ashram. He died in 1950, honoured for both his participation in the struggle for India's independence and his spiritual life. Among those eulogising him was Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1968, The Mother founded Auroville, the utopian community which I visited. To make an already too long story short, The Mother asked me to lay my head in her lap. Then she fixed me with what to this day is the most penetrating stare I have ever experienced. She asked me to renounce the world and join the Auroville community. She talked about “the crash of circumstances” coming to change the world. I declined her invitation. I was not ready to renounce the world. Later, I inserted the word “performative” and wrote an essay about “the crash of performative circumstances”, published in my book, *The End of Humanism* (Schechner 1982).

We are now in the midst of this crash of performative circumstances. These large things—global warming, threats to democracy where it exists, over-crowding, COVID-19 and the plagues to come, species extinctions . . . it's a growing list . . . are crashing together. We can clearly see their immediate as well as their long-distance consequences. So, we are in a place where we need to take radical, and I believe painful, action if we are going to change that.

What artists can do is something that I would like to talk about a little bit later, in my essay “Can We Be the (New) Third World?” (Performed Imaginaries 2015). I take Nehru's notion of Third World and extrapolate it to the global community of artists who potentially constitute a counterforce to the forces of industry, the military, education, and so on.

You have beautifully evoked performance in the context of movement in the world of the non-human, more-than-human along with the human, and yet, your idea of performance carries a kind of self-consciousness; it carries thinking.

Performance Studies is conscious; performances may or may not be conscious. You can perform without thinking about it, as we all do in everyday life. Or, our actions can become performances for others even if they are not conscious performances for ourselves. There are all kinds of ways that we record the performances of others who do not know we are, or will make performances from their behaviour: “candid-camera” entertainments; surveillance cameras, and animals. Of course, people are often aware that they are performing; and so are some animals, for sure. Then there are occasions, such as right now, when I am performing for you—or at least, I am conscious of what I say—in a mode that may not seem to be a performance in the theatrical sense. But, even as I speak, I am aware that later I will edit the transcript you send me which in itself is your edit of my words. There are so many possibilities. Theatrical performance is the most self-conscious and reflexive kind of performance. At least, most of it is. Some “theatre of the real” is both theatrical and not conscious of itself (Carol 2010, 2013).

I get up in the morning and brush my teeth and go through what I call my morning ritual. Each of you has a morning ritual, something that, if it was disrupted, you would notice and it would disturb you. If there was a hidden camera recording it, that would definitely be a performance, and it would also be a ritual, not a religious ritual, but a personal or social ritual. Social because so many people enact roughly the same routine in the morning.

How would you distinguish between a ritual and something that is a habit or a compulsion?

The distinction between ritual and compulsion is more or less socially determined. The compulsions we like we call rituals; and the rituals we do not like we call compulsions. The same for superstition. Your religion is superstition, my religion is truth. These are all sliding ways of identification. If I am an absolutist about anything, I am a relativist. In other words, without the vector, without knowing what intersects where, and what the context is, you really do not fully know what is going on.

Right now, there are five of us involved in a conversation. Because of the nature of that conversation, it is focused on me. It could be focused on any one of you. That would be a different interview. Once we know what is going on, we can say something about it. If you just dropped in from Mars, a visiting alien to the earth anthropologist, your job would be to figure out what is going on when you do not know what is going on. The job of performance theorists is to do the same thing. There are many conscious performances, but there are innumerable non-conscious performances as well. Otherwise, I would not be able to think that a tree is performing because I do not believe a tree has consciousness in the way we understand consciousness. But trees are aware of something. In Africa, the acacia tree is the favourite food of giraffes. When a giraffe comes and nibbles on an acacia leaf, if the wind is blowing in a certain direction, that tree gives off a tannin, a chemical that interferes with the digestion of giraffes, traces of tannin blow downwind to other acacia trees that then emit their own tannin, effectively thwarting the giraffe.¹ There is also increasing evidence of communication among root systems beneath the soil.² This is communication, but it is not language. It is performance, but it is not conscious.

The more we learn about the world, the more we feel and find that we are in an inextricably magnificent web that involves animals, vegetables, and minerals. What is terrible right now is that, as humans, as I said earlier, although we are near to the divine, we are also ripping apart this web of life. We are not treating it with the respect. I do not mean respect that it “deserves” because that is an ideological or religious idea, but the respect that it needs. Perhaps life is eternal, if one takes a galactic or whole universe perspective, but human life is not; animal life is not; certain forms of life are not, and we are in the process of really messing with that in a big way.

How can you relate these complex transformations we see today to your notion of restored behaviour?

Restoration of behaviour³ is a way of analysing what performance is. One of the key ideas is that the future creates the past, not that the past creates the future. It's a kind of anti-faith view of life. Or, perhaps it is a faith because it also addresses plausibility.

What do I mean when I say “the future creates the past”? All behaviour is made up of other kinds of behaviours. We repeatedly reconstitute strips of behaviour, just as a filmmaker takes clips of film and assembles them to make the story she envisions. I write and speak in English, for example. I did not invent English. I did not invent its grammar; I did not invent its words. But, the way I put words together in accord with that grammar, generates ideas that may seem “new”, uniquely Richard Schechner's. They can be new in combination, metaphor, syntax, and ideas but they are not new words; they follow known grammatical structures that make them comprehensible.

Returning to how the future creates the past. In behaving right now, I take into consideration the future project that I want to make. The sentence I am speaking, the house I am building, the performance I am rehearsing: anything, everything. Sometimes I consider the project consciously, sometimes not. Let us say, I am planning a supper party for a few friends. What shall I cook? I decide on bouillabaisse (which I did in fact cook a few days ago). Immediately, that future project of the supper party featuring bouillabaisse creates a past. I ask myself, “When was the last time I made bouillabaisse? Where is the recipe?” Then I reach up to my shelf; I find a book with the recipe. And, all of a sudden, I am constructing a story involving going the market, getting leeks and shellfish, and whatever it takes to make bouillabaisse. I rehearse the bouillabaisse in my mind, I follow the script, the recipe; I cook the bouillabaisse and then I join others in performing the supper party.

The future project—the supper party—generated the plan to serve bouillabaisse which in turn led to my cookbook, memories, the market, skills of cooking, and so on.

When we think of the future, we select from the past that which is most useful and relevant. The selection creates a past most conducive to the future we want to create. Once I decide on the supper party, once I have pulled down the recipe, once I start shopping, bouillabaisse becomes more and more inevitable. I cannot, in the middle of my bouillabaisse, without great disruption, decide to cook, what, a vichyssoise? Another French soup? Because I am deep into my bouillabaisse. The future is waiting for me. I need to meet it. I am “restoring” a past to bring into existence a future; I am selecting what from the past will make that future inevitable. I am making fate, destiny. On a small scale, yes; but fate nonetheless.

Restoration of behaviour helps us to understand that performance processes have the great potential for agency. And yet, agency is predetermined by the way we construct the past. We have agency only within the frame, the vectors, of what we know. I could have decided to do vichyssoise, but I did not. I decided to do bouillabaisse—so, I am free in that regard, to choose what to offer my guests for supper. I am well aware that there is a theory—and it is a correct theory—that if you knew everything about Richard Schechner, and everything about his life, you could have said in advance, “He’s going to cook bouillabaisse on this night.” But nobody knows everything about anyone, about everything. Such knowledge is beyond our capabilities. And yet, doubtlessly, everything is determined; paradoxically, even indeterminacy is determined. We live within the playful illusion of liberty, what in India is called “maya-lila”.⁴ Another paradox: playful illusion is a powerful fact.

To move from the personal to more inclusive matters: when we imagine the future of our species, when we imagine the future of our societies, what kind of pasts do we create? In the United States, at the present moment, for example, after the 25 May 2020 murder of George Floyd, there is a rising Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. People questioned U.S. history anew. And that history changed. Using critical race theory and other systems of analysis, many saw more clearly, or for the first time, the “structural racism” inherent in U.S. institutions and their history. The consequences of constructing a “new” history—restoring history, if you will—are still unfolding, and will continue to play out over time. On 8 September 2021, for example, the long-standing statue of Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia was removed. Lee was the commanding general of the Confederate States of America, the 11 southern states that from 1861 to 1865 fought the Union in a civil war over the question of whether or not slavery would continue. The Confederacy lost the war. More American soldiers were killed than in any war in American history. Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy. After the Civil War, many Southerners, and more than a few outside the South, thought Lee a great hero. To some segregationists and white supremacists, he is still a hero. But Black Lives Matter made many Americans “restore” our history. Wanting a different future, we are making a different past. People looking at Lee’s statue found it deeply offensive to all Americans but especially African Americans. People said, “No, he is not a hero, he is a traitor, he led the army for slavery. He doesn’t belong up on a horse on a pedestal in a public space. Take him to a museum. Display him inside the context of history. Say who he was but do not keep him in this place of honour”. This is history configured in the light of a non-racist, non-white supremacist, non-colonialist, non-sexist future. Will the U.S.A., or any society, arrive at such a future? Probably not entirely—every solution uncovers more problems—but we must always engage the process, always be on the way. And, of course, “restoring” history can also be regressive. Think of how the Nazis restored German history.

Restoration of behaviour applies also to artistic behaviour. We rehearse today selections from what we rehearsed yesterday, to prepare for the public performance tomorrow. The process of artistic creation—not only for the performing arts but for all arts—is restoration of behaviour.

Thinking about the relation between past and future, how do you think we can relate performance with the nineteenth century concept of reform in Robert Owen⁵'s construct of 8-8-8 (eight hours of work, 8 hours of leisure, and 8 hours of rest) as a socially inscribed temporality?

Of course, the notion of 8-8-8 is a function of the Industrial Revolution. It gets its greatest activation in Fordism⁶ and in time and motion studies. It constitutes a kind of bargain (a lousy bargain in my view but a necessary one at a certain point): you become a machine or a part of a machine for eight hours, then take eight hours for sleep or rest in order to function efficiently as a machine, and I will give you, as your pay-off, eight hours of leisure activities.

This is a specific social model, as you noted in the introduction to your Special Issue.⁷ It is designed to make the eight hours where you are a machine, as efficient and therefore as profitable to the owner as possible. It is not designed in the interests of people.

What has happened to this? First of all, let us go back to before the Industrial Revolution, when the world was more or less farming and handcrafts, and people structured time differently. Hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people still live that way, even in Europe. I can go to Southern Italy, and at a certain time in the afternoon, everything stops. People rest because it is hot and because that is their tradition. I do not know if it is the same in Portugal or Southern Spain, but between two and five only “Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun”.⁸ The logic of farming was work in the early mornings and late afternoons. You tended the animals and crops when it was cooler and when the animals needed feed or to be let out to pasture. Then, you returned again in the late afternoon or evening. Of course, there were other rhythms. When humans were hunters and gatherers, there were the best times for hunting and gathering. Hunting in natural habitats is not best in the middle of the so-called workday.

What is happening now is both an opportunity and a crisis. Within the foreseeable future, we will have machines to do most of our labour, if we so choose. We already have programmed robots to make most of an automobile and many other things, and to sort and package goods. Humans typically supervise the robots, . . . or not because AI (artificial intelligence) is so advanced. We can at last separate “work” from “labour”. Labour is Marxist alienated labour. It is something that you do not really want to do but need to do to earn money to live your daily life. Labour also fills time. Labour is something you would not do if you were not paid. Work, on the other hand, is something you want to do. Many people work; they enjoy what they do. But probably many more labour. One of the opportunities for societies is reducing labour and increasing work.

How can an understanding of performance, and art, in human life inform the transition from human labour to mechanised labour along with the economic and social implications?

I think every time a robot—or any AI device or program—replaces a human being, the human being still gets a certain amount of money. A robot replaces me, saving the manufacturer, say, USD 100. The owner ought to get USD 20 while USD 80 comes directly to me, the former labourer. The manufacturer can make a little profit but cannot just throw me out depriving me of my income. Once I am no longer at labour, I can seek either another labour or I can work: do something I really want to do, and hopefully be paid for it.

I doubt that what I have just described is going to come about because our systems—whether they are called capitalist, socialist, communist, or whatever—shift wealth upwards rather than distributing it among the workers.

Still, what I outlined raises the crisis of work. If people are liberated from labour, what will they do with their time? Instead of Owens' 8-8-8, we will have 16-8, that is a bunch of leisure time. The Romans also faced this crisis. When the Roman Empire was at its peak, it had so much wealth coming in from its slaves and its colonies, the people of Rome did not perform much labour. The people did not have much work to do either—in my sense of the

word. The Romans knew how to *veni, vidi, vici* but their victories came back to haunt them. Instead of meaningful work, the Roman oligarchs gave the masses bread and circuses.

At least for some of the world's population, a similar situation to the Roman. Social media, internet and digital entertainment, LARPs,⁹ and other vast avenues are our circuses. The entertainment is both seductive and corrosive. What is called "news" is entertainment, getting devoted adherents to pay attention to advertisements. Facebook is a platform whose algorithms promote the most extreme stuff because having people click and share is what drives profits.¹⁰ This is one of the places where artists can step in. We need to vigorously promote art and art-making from the people even more than for the people. Get millions of people to paint and sculpt, dance and make plays, sing, story-tell, and whatever else. These are activities that define and expand what it is to be human. Not everybody is a Shakespeare, but you do not have to be a Shakespeare to write or stage a play. Many people have great craft abilities and yet, machines took away the need for those craft abilities. Hand-made things—whether a work of art or a ceramic plate—are more expensive than what is made by machine. Again, the profit that the machine earns ought to be redistributed. A person ought to be paid to take a painting class. They ought to be able to sell or give away the paintings. Let machines labour while people work. Some artists will be great, such as Vincent van Gogh and Joan Mitchell; most will be bad, but that does not matter as much as hanging our own or someone else's photographs and paintings in each other's homes. The same for the performing arts—both in theatres and in found spaces. And crafts such as woodwork, furniture, pottery, and so on. The line separating arts from crafts is very thin.

Art—both "fine" and "craft"—are fundamental to being human. When I see a palaeolithic spear tip, the paintings in Chauvet cave or the caves in Sulawesi—and dozens of other sites—I see this artistic impulse expressed more than 35,000 years ago. These were not made just or even primarily for viewing—the caves were not the Louvre. The visual art was part of a performance complex.¹¹ Art-making is inherent in who humans are but the Industrial Revolution and Fordism, while creating countless objects and great wealth displaced art and art-making. Art was no longer created for ritual purposes; it became a value-added commodity, for sale. Ordinary people were told, "Art is made by specialists, artists, and you, ordinary person, you labour in the factory and during your leisure 8 hours we'll give you some bread and circuses or social media or whatever". Of course, many ordinary people devoted at least some of their leisure 8 to religion or participatory sports. In India, I have seen extraordinary items made as offerings to the gods. So it is not as extreme as I am describing it. But there has been a long-term shift to commodification: the market rules.

I think, part of what artists must do, is campaign for a reconfiguration—a rethinking—of the whole system.

Is the difference between the kind of art that you are describing here and the bread and circuses of the Romans, the difference between making meaning and just entertainment?

Yes, maybe, but it is a sliding scale. You can bake world-class "bread" and produce exquisitely artistic "circuses". The problem is to find ways to make people creators not solely or even mostly consumers. There is enormous reservoir of great artistic talent in ordinary people. People are multiply skilled. A plumber can also be a sculptor. Plenty of painters have earned money doing carpentry. "Working with your hands" ought to be celebrated, enhancing the bond linking mind to hand, essence to substance. "Advanced" societies have devalued the ordinary, especially in early education. I like STEM, (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) but the arts are equally fundamental. In my own artistic work, I ask spectators to participate, to be part of what people now call an "immersive performance".¹²

You are seeing a continuum from the plumber to the sculptor, through to the performance, where others might see categories. In the work that you have

done in terms of establishing a research field for performance and performance theory, how does the element of practice matter in critical thinking and theorisation?

That is a very interesting question. We need an expanded view of practice. Is thought, practice? Normally, when we say “practice”, we mean physical action. But I think that the thought experiments Einstein loved to do, are practice. Workshops and rehearsal are enacted thought experiments. What is the difference between thinking: “If train A is going this way at the speed of light and train B is going the opposite way at the speed of light, when they pass each other what is their speed relative to each other?” and saying in a rehearsal, “Try it this way?”. Then after the performers do, saying, “Try it another way”—and then after different ways have been tried, discussing what happened and figuring out what to do next.

Practice is fundamental to theory. You cannot prove theory without practice, and without theory you do not know what you are practicing. Sometimes, the theory implicit in practice is unconscious. Do non-human animals theorise? They definitely plan ahead, strategize. But do they embed these actions in larger schemes of thought? Is theory a human construction or inherent in phenomena? If what scientists describe and artists express exist independent of the descriptions and expressions, then theory is a phenomenon in itself. Are gravity and quantum mechanics “real” in themselves? What about a Picasso painting or a Diaghilev ballet? I cannot answer those questions.

This kind of complex discourse is something our species specialises in and enjoys. There are a few of us here, but around the world at this moment are millions not on this Zoom but doing something similar to what we are doing, engaging each other in ideas and possibilities. I love mind experiments, but I also feel we need to have, as much as possible, physical ways to embody our ideas. In my own life, I try to work face-to-face whenever I can. The pandemic has made that harder. I also practise Pilates and yoga. When I see other people my age who are not as adept physically or mentally, I suppose they do not practice. Of course, genes matter and disease can cripple even the strongest of us. Practice is no guarantee of mental agility at old age, but not practising is a guarantee of senility.

Do you think there are new forms of awareness evolving around the issue of gender? How do performers and performance studies reflect on this?

Of course, there are. Feminism in the United States has gone through a first, second, third, and fourth phase—each building on what came before. And there is very strong LGBTQ activism too. These movements can be thought of as expressions of identity. Who people are in relationship to themselves and in relationship to others. These movements are closely related to Black Lives Matter. It is about people wanting their rightful place within society. And changing society, when it is found lacking, which it often is.

To focus on gender, what seems new is that people feel they can change their gender identities—or have their recognised social gender identities match their actual or true gender. When I was a little child and learned about the birds and the bees, sex, what you saw, what others saw, was what you were. There was no fluidity between male or female, gay, straight, or bi. Transgender was not a word yet. For most people, Simone de Beauvoir’s “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (*The Second Sex*, 1949; English, 2011) was not yet fully understood. From de Beauvoir to Judith Butler and after, feminist thinkers have shown how gender is constructed. Ironically, some feel it is “essential”, there from before birth, but possibly in conflict with the gender assigned by society. It is a very complex issue.

For some, gender is destiny and the question is how to make one’s actual gender harmonise with one’s birth gender, or apparent birth gender. Through behaviour, pharmacy, and surgery (all or some of these), a person “transitions” from one gender to another. This is happening in the U.S.A. at least in all sectors of society. One of my grand-nephews—a suburban middle class Jewish young man—was identified at birth as a girl. From the time Hannah (a pseudonym) was 4 or 5 years old, “she” said she was a boy, and increasingly

behaved as a boy. His parents accepted the change and helped Hannah transition to Henry. Now, 15 years later, Henry is doing very well at college. No one questions his gender; outside of his family no one knows of his transition. Of course, there are many other people who proudly speak of their transition. It is a matter of choice. Is Henry in the closet? But of what value would it be to him or others for him to advertise his transition? I do not know the details of Henry's transition. I do know that Henry is "him", but when he was born, and for the first years of his life, we all addressed him as "her"—and that the choice, the change, was his choice. His parents did not say to him, "Hey, I want you to be such and such". He expressed, first, as a very little person, the wish to "do boy things and wear boy clothes" and so on. It went step by step, but it became a complete and healthy choice for him.

This is something new. Of course, trans people are not new, but the availability of drugs and surgery, along with the law supporting transition and increasing general acceptance of trans people are new. And all of it is performance. That does not make them false or unreal because being a cis person man or woman, is also a performance. So is being gay. Of course, I have had homosexual desires. Everybody does, I assume. The question is what do I choose my behaviour to be? Some people choose to behave gay, some straight, some bi. There are the other choices too. It is a busy world.

Race is also fluid in practice, but rigid in its current presentation. Many people—at least in the U.S. but I am sure elsewhere also—"pass". Yet, social race categories remain tight, though the term "person of colour" indicates a shift toward expansion, a vagueness. Genetically, race is all but non-existent. Socially, it remains extremely powerful, it "matters". It is ironic that the same society that enables gender choice abhors race choice. Sooner or later, if there is political progress, this will change.

We know you wrote a book, *The Future of Ritual* in 1993. Is ritual important in addressing our current crisis? Can rituals be invented?

Ritual is a huge topic. Ritual brings order and increases communication, among animals as well as humans. With humans, ritual is a way to communicate with, implore, and show deference to forces and/or beings felt to be superior ranging from socially powerful people, bosses and royals for example, to gods (including God). But rituals can also be mundane. Early in our conversation, I spoke about morning rituals; and I noted that one person's compulsion is another person's ritual, the difference being context, social circumstances.

If play is about looseness and choice—every game involves "moves", that is, making choices—ritual is about tightness and order. If I were writing *The Future of Ritual* again, I would discuss ritual as a subset of play, "tight play". Ritual is play because you can invent rituals, play with rituals, make new rituals. If rituals proclaim, and appeal to, permanence, the "eternal", the "almighty", they also come into existence relatively swiftly, evolve over time and then pretend to be unchanging. Just think of the history of the Roman Catholic Mass. Or how political leaders and parties invent or adapt rituals; not to mention sports teams and "secret societies" such as the Masons and college fraternities.

Play often occurs within rituals. For example, some Native American cultures feature the ritual clown who, within the framework of a ceremony, plays with, makes fun of, and taunts people. Among the Yaquis, ritual clowns are called Chapayakas, figures who play a major role in the Yaqui Waehma, "Yaqui Easter".¹³

How does fiction play a role in ritual?

All of human society is a fiction. That is, humans depend on the imaginary. We project, imagine, transform dreams—both actual dreams and dreams-as-metaphors—into reality. Human society is "natural" because our brains and our social structures make it natural for us to imagine.

Look around your room. Around your cities and countryside, even at the so-called "wild" and "untouched". We live in worlds we have constructed, not only the physical world of books, shelves, clothes, buildings, roads, farms, and so on. We also live in social structures that we are constantly generating, constructing, and deconstructing.

We should really think of reality as a fact–fiction continuum. Facts are those fictions that we agree on to call facts, and fictions are those facts that we think are malleable, that we explore that we think are malleable, that we explore.

This brings difficulty, of course. Having imagined, invented, the gods we worship, we also—sometimes secretly, sometimes openly—believe ourselves to be, or to be as powerful as, the gods. So-called “inalienable rights” and “absolute truths” need to be agreed on. They are the basis of our social contracts, indispensable fictions, performed imaginaries. Fictions, very consequential fictions. When we do not agree on what these are, we are in danger of moving from civil discourse to civil war.

If we go back to Rousseau’s social contract, we can see that it is a game. To play successfully, we need to agree on the rules of the game. Currently, in the United States, there are people who do not agree with other people on what the rules of the game are, what the contours of the fiction that is society are; what is inalienable and what is not. That disagreement is very serious; it may eventuate in the decline and fall of the United States of America, of what it has been trying to evolve into since the eighteenth century. On the other hand, we may, as I hope (because I am always hopeful), work—or play—through this crisis and renegotiate the social contract in a way that deeply improves it for women, people of colour, Native Americans, and other systematically oppressed people.

I think arts, and performance especially because performance is public and collaborative, can play a big part practically and theoretically. Artists at all levels can make pieces that bring these issues to the forefront, and that enact the society we want to bring in existence. In other words, be inclusive of these ideas and issues, of people and identities.

That is a fantastic way of ending.

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Notes

- ¹ See <https://www.africansafaris.com/acacias-v-giraffes-a-uniquely-african-tussle/>, accessed 13 December 2021.
- ² See <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2019/exploring-the-underground-network-of-trees-the-nervous-system-of-the-forest/> accessed 13 December 2021.
- ³ For a full explanation, see my “Restoration of Behavior”, 35–116 in *Between Theater and Anthropology*. 1985. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- ⁴ For more on this, see my “Playing”, 24–44 in *The Future of Ritual*. 1993. London and New York: Routledge.
- ⁵ Robert Owen (1771–1858), a textile manufacturer and progressive thinker for his day. In 1810, he called for, and instituted in his own factory, a 10-hour workday. In 1817, Owen proclaimed: “Eight hours labour, Eight hours recreation, Eight hours rest.” It took a long time before this goal was reached. Women and children in England were granted the 10 hour day in 1847, all french workers won the right to a 12-hour workday after the revolution of 1848. The eight hour workday in the USA started in the 1920s but was widely practiced until the 1950s. Of course, millions today around the world work more than 8 hours daily. The five-day workweek did not become standard in industry and commerce until the early 20th century, led by Jewish workers and Henry Ford, a strange combination given Ford’s anti-semitism. Adapted from Wikipedia and other online sources.
- ⁶ Fordism is (1) the system of mass production pioneered in the early 20th century by the Ford Motor Company or (2) the typical postwar WW2 mode of economic growth and its associated political and social order in advanced capitalism. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fordism>, accessed 13 December 2021.
- ⁷ https://www.mdpi.com/journal/arts/special_issues/eight_hours, accessed 13 December 2021.
- ⁸ Title and portion of the lyrics of a 1931 song by Noël Coward. Coward reportedly took the sentence from Rudyard Kipling who was referring to English colonialists in India.

- ⁹ In live action role playing (LARP) participants improvise within established rules (often moderated by a “gamester”) to—portray characters and develop a narrative ranging from total fictions to historical persons and events. LARPS take place in non-theatrical environments—homes, hotels, forests, beaches—anywhere suitable for the unfolding drama. The characters interact to drive the story forward, but the outcome is not known in advance. LARPS have many gaming and theatrical fore-runners and parallels from re-enactments of historical events and “theatre of the real” to Halloween masking and make-believe children’s games.
- ¹⁰ See *The Wall Street Journal* series “The Facebook Files.” <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039>, accessed 13 December 2021. Also former Facebook employee whistle-blower Frances Haugen’s testimony before the US House of Representatives. Haugen has also appeared on TV’s *60 Minutes*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Lx5VmAdZSI, accessed 13 December 2021.
- ¹¹ See my “Performing in the Paleolithic”, 203–230, in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 4th ed. 2020. London and New York: Routledge.
- ¹² For my early participatory work, see *Environmental Theater*, expanded edition, 1994. New York: Applause Books; The Performance Group, *Dionysus in 69*, Richard Schechner, ed., 1970. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- ¹³ See “Waehma: Space, Time, Identity, and Theatre at New Pascua, Arizona” 94–130 in *The Future of Ritual*. 1993. Routledge: London and New York.

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