2   Theatre

Prague school contributions

Theatre's "*density of signs*" makes it an ideal subject for semiotic analysis (Barthes, "Literature" 262, emphasis in original). But semiotic theory and analysis as applied specifically to drama and theatre only began to develop in Europe fifteen years after the posthumous publication of Saussure's *Course*, with the appearance in 1931 of Otakar Zich's *Estetika dramatického umění: teoretická dramaturgie* (*Aesthetics of the Art of Drama*) and Jan Mukařovský's "Tentativo di analisi del fenomeno delll'attore" ("An Attempted Structural Analysis of the Phenomenon of the Actor"). These publications were foundational for the work on drama and theatre of the Prague School Structuralists throughout the 1930s and 40s, which was continuous with the literary poetics of the earlier so-called Russian Formalists, with whom they shared membership. The Prague School introduced to theatre and performance studies and into theatrical practice a number of key concepts that have continuing importance, including such basic devices as foregrounding (*aktualisace*) and showing (*ostension*), extending into many of the central concerns of theatrical practice.

Two of the key contributions of the Prague School derived directly from Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky's 1925 concept of "*ostranenie*," variously translated as "making strange," "estrangement," or "defamiliarization," – a concept that is directly relevant to Brecht's later *verfremdungseffekt*, or "defamiliarization" effect (see Chapter 1). For Shklovsky, one of the key functions of art was to make ordinary, taken-for-granted elements of life visible again by making them "strange," "seeing things out of their usual context" (9) or

removing them from the sphere of "automized perception" (6), and thereby seeing them "as if for the first time" (6).

As applied to drama and theatre by Prague School theoreticians this making strange emerges as *aktualisace* (foregrounding), and *ostension* (showing). *Aktualisace* can simply involve the drawing of some element of a production to the audience's attention, foregrounding it as what in later chapters I call a show's primary mode of communication. For Prague School member Jiří Veltruský (1919–94), "the figure at the peak" of the theatre's communication system is the (lead) actor ("Man" 85) – though as his compatriot Jindřich Honzl (1893–1953) argued, this hierarchy is not the same for all historical periods, or crucially, I would add, all cultures, in some of which the community rather than the individual is at the centre. But *aktualisace* also involves an element of denaturalization. Fellow Prague School theorist Bohuslav Havránek (1893–1978) distinguishes between automization and foregrounding (*aktualisace*). In the former he finds an element of the taken-for-granted, where the means of expression does not draw attention to itself and the relationship between signifier and signified is taken as given; in the latter he points to devices that present themselves in ways that are "uncommon," unusual, or striking – serving more than the simple purpose of direct communication (9–10). Havránek is discussing poetic language, but as Keir Elam reminds us, "foregrounding is essentially a spatial metaphor" (*Semiotics* 16), and in spite of efforts by some experimental directors to the contrary, it is difficult to imagine it *not* happening in the theatre. Directors routinely wrestle with control of focus (what the audience is looking at), designers construct frames and perspectives using colour, shape and light to catch and direct the audience's eye, and actors routinely upstage one another (foregrounding themselves), or try to avoid doing so. Indeed, the simple act of placing in theatrical space something that is not normally seen there – mud, running water, fire, a falling leaf – can allow it to be seen afresh because it

is out of context. Similarly, words, artefacts, or performance forms, when taken out of their accustomed cultural contexts, can be seen differently, as if in quotation marks.

Herta Schmid, following Ivo Osolsobě (1928–2012), traces the concept of *ostension* back to St. Augustine, and she regards it as "one of the fundamentals of the art of theatre" (68). Simply put, ostension is showing. It is the act, for example, of demonstrating or explaining what something is, not through description, definition, or telling, but through the act of putting forward (ostending) a concrete example of the thing being indicated. Elam uses the examples of a child who asks "what's a pebble?" being shown one picked up from the beach, and of a person who orders a beer by showing an empty bottle to the server (*Semiotics* 26). He calls ostension "the most 'primitive' form of signification," and cites Umberto Eco's argument that it is "the most basic instance of performance" (Elam, *Semiotics* 26; Eco "Semiotics" 110). In a sense this is because the act of showing is what distinguishes theatre and performance from other arts and communication systems. In fact performance *consists* of ostending actors, objects, and actions through the use of indices (see Chapter 1), foregrounding (*aktualisace*), or pointing (*deixis* – gestures, or words such as pronouns or names – I, you, here, there, this, that – that are in themselves semantically empty but derive their meaning from the place in which they're used or the persons using them). But of course ostension is also necessarily selective. As Marco De Marinis points out, "the act of ostension always makes some of the concrete traits pertinent at the expense of others" (*Semiotics* 88), and it is this selective act of ostension that constitutes the artfulness of theatre as well as its potential to distort. In performance, moreover, things are at once ostended as the things "themselves" *and* as signs, insofar as they stand in for other things in their class (a chair on stage for a chair within the fiction, an actor for a character, and so on). This doubleness is part of the richness of performance that was emphasized by the Prague School but often forgotten by later drama and theatre semioticians.

As I have indicated, Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) might be regarded as one of the founders of the semiotics of drama and theatre, but in his so-called "anti-semiotic turn" (Schmid 73–9), in apparent contradiction to the dictum that everything on stage is a sign, he declared that the work of art was simultaneously *a sign and a thing*, in constant tension, depending on whether its sign-ness or its thingness was ostended (Mukařovský, "Intentionality"). Mukařovský was writing about the work of art as an aesthetic object, but he was not alone in recognizing the simultaneous phenomenal and signifying qualities of things in the theatre. Indeed, his Prague-School colleague Petr Bogatyrev (1893–1971) applies this insight, not just to the overall artwork, but to the doubleness of costumes and other objects on stage, which function as "both material object [clothing] and sign [of period, social class, occasion, and so on]" ("Costume" 13). In fact, he argues, "cases where costume is only a sign are quite rare" (14).

When ostended, things can become signs, but in doing so, they nevertheless retain their "thingness," which exceeds their sign value as "non-semiotic surplus," in the words of Herta Schmid (78). Later scholars have made much of this thingness, including phenomenologists of the theatre such as Bert States, who uses the examples of functioning clocks, fire, running water, children, and animals as things that "do not always or entirely surrender their objective nature to the sign/image function" (*Great Reckonings* 29). They insist on (also) being what they are. But States treats among such "things" virtually everything that makes up theatre, including, for example, the sound of an actor speaking her or his lines, sound that, he argues, "is not consumed in its sense" (*Great Reckonings* 26). This insight has become the basis for an antisemiotic turn in theatre studies since the 1990s that manifests itself in approaches through phenomenology, affect theory, and most recently, cognitive studies, where scholars such as Bruce McConachie argue that some of the basic insights of semiotics are "empirically incorrect"

(*Engaging* 212). I will take these approaches up more fully in Chapter 3.

Beyond such fundamental concepts as foregrounding and ostension, the Prague school introduced and extended its semiotic analysis to a long list of theatrical topics, ranging from Chinese Theatre (Brušák), Greek theatre (Honzl, "Hierarchy"), and folk theatre (Bogatyrev, "Semiotics," "Forms"); to dramatic text (Veltruský, "Dramatic"), dialogue (Veltruský, "Basic," *Drama*), plot (Veltruský, *Drama*), costume (Bogatyrev, "Costume"), sets and props (Honzl "Dynamics"; Veltruský, "Man"), directing (Honzl, "Pohyb"), acting (Honzl, "Herecká"; Veltruský, "Man"), delivery (Burián, "Příspěvek"), mime and gesture (Mukařovský, "Tentativo"); and many other aspects of theatrical production. Much of this work, as Veronika Ambros has argued persuasively, was forged within a "laboratory" context in Prague in the 1930s, where semiotic analysis and theatrical experimentation were very much linked. Indeed Honzl and Burián, cited above as theoreticians, were also leading avant-garde directors, Bogatyrev's work on folk theatre was transformed to the stage, and Burián's productions in turn inspired one of Mukařovský's key essays (Ambros 46). This practical approach to a field of study that is often criticized in its later incarnations for engaging in theory for its own sake – "we theorized too much," as one of its leading theorists has lamented (De Toro 112) – is a key reason why a return to Prague School insights is important, especially for theatre practitioners. Indeed, it might serve as a model for a future "semiotic pragmatics," as Michael Sidnell terms it in calling for a new theatrical praxis that he calls "semiotic arts of theatre" (11). Chapters 4 and 5 of this book are intended in part to respond to this call.

Beyond Prague

The work of the Prague school was cut short, first by the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948, and again by

the Soviet invasion ending the so-called Prague Spring in 1968 (as the Russian Formalists' work had earlier been foreshortened by the Russian revolution and the Soviet ban on formalism). They had accomplished much, and their work continued to be influential as many of them individually, along with other scholars, built upon their foundations. What they didn't do was attempt to develop the kind of formal taxonomies of theatrical signs that constituted the work of so many semiologists of drama and theatre in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, beginning with Tadeuz Kowzan's generative 1968 contribution, "The Sign in the Theater."

Kowzan's taxonomy is relatively basic, and involves thirteen intersecting theatrical sign systems, mostly centring on the actor. These include word, tone, mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hair style, costume, properties, settings, lighting, music, and sound effects, each classified as temporal or spatial, auditive or visual, associated with the actor or outside of the actor, and also classified as spoken text, bodily expression, the actor's appearance, the appearance of the stage, or "inarticulate" (non-verbal) sounds. Subsequent mappings expanded upon Kowzan's in various ways, including taking reception and offstage contexts into account, and distinguishing between different types of codification, such as Keir Elam's "theatrical," "cultural" and "dramatic" codes and subcodes, which he maps across twelve categories (*Semiotics* 51–6). But attempts to apply these taxonomical exercises to the practical analysis of theatrical performances or dramatic texts, such as Elam's 18-column, 21-page "dramatological score" of the first 79 lines of *Hamlet* (*Semiotics* 168–89), have proven to be virtually inscrutable, and certainly useless for practitioners. As Fernand de Toro has recently argued, "this segmentation," this attempt "to establish clear, controllable, classifiable, and stable units [...] rapidly proved inadequate, particularly when the attempt was to determine the minimal units of communication," and particularly when it was "carried out independently of its cultural and social context" (110). Such classificatory systems,

moreover, are also easily aligned with a kind of subjugating power/knowledge that subtends colonialism, imperialism, and other forms of domination (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*). They were met, for the most part, with scorn by theatre artists, particularly in the English-speaking world.

Much of this later work did nevertheless also produce and develop concepts and approaches that have been extremely useful in performance analysis, in particular by moving writing about the theatre beyond sophisticated gossip, pop-psychology, and literary impressionism to something much more precise, and by shifting the vocabulary of some rehearsal halls, at least, in similar ways. Chief among these concepts and approaches have been tools for the analysis of "character"; of language; of story, plot, and action; of time; of space; of *mise en scène*; and of performance text. Each of these is worth considering on its own.

Character

"Character" is a problematic word for scholars of theatre and performance – and perhaps not problematic enough for many practitioners – largely because of the baggage it carries from the Euro-American tradition as it exists outside of the theatre. Indeed, one of the central, though not often articulated, reasons for the division between theatre and performance in recent years has had to do with an attempt on the part of the latter to escape the idea that actors play, and people have, consistent, individual, and coherent "characters" in the dominant understandings of the term as they emerge from 19th-century European psychology, fiction, and morality (in which people "*have* [good or bad] character," or are understood to be "people of character") – understandings that have been reified in the dominant Hollywood film tradition and in television drama. One of the major contributions of a structuralist approach to the study of theatre and performance has been to move it beyond the kinds of character analysis that has often,

in academic and journalistic criticism, in rehearsal halls, and in secondary school assignments, resembled the amateur psychoanalysis or ethical assessment of fictional figures as if they were "real people."

Such understandings have often seemed foreign, quaint, or naïve to scholars and practitioners from outside of the western tradition. Within the European context a different approach to character in theatre began with the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp (1895–1970), the French philosopher Étienne Souriau (1892–1979), and the Lithuanian A.J. Greimas (1917–92) of the Paris School of Semiotics. Propp did not study theatre as such, but his 1928 book, *Morphology of the Folktale*, undertook the structural analysis of Russian folktales according to the "act spheres" (he identifies seven) of their "dramatis personae." Souriau, in his 1959 book *Les Deux Cent Mille Situations Dramatique* (The 200,000 Dramatic Situations), identifies six similar "functions." Building on Propp's work, Greimas in his 1966 book *Structural Semantics* proposed an "*actantial*" model that associates "acteurs" with particular narrative actions or forces, rather than with psychological motivations or objectives. Importantly, for Greimas "acteurs" included not only characters, but also animals, things, the weather, or even abstractions, any of which can exert pressure on the action. The most thorough application to drama and theatre of the actantial model has been carried out by Anne Ubersfeld, in her 1978 three-volume book *Lire le théâtre* (the first volume of which was translated in 1999 as *Reading Theatre*).

The actantial model is, as Ubersfeld concedes, "incontestably a summary approach" (62). It can occasionally seem rigid, taxonomic, and prescriptive, and it tends to inscribe oppositional binaries between subject and object, sender and receiver, hero and villain, helper and opponent, and so on. In all of these ways the model betrays a certain Eurocentrism. It also tends to betray its roots in the analysis of narrative, adapting somewhat awkwardly to the stage. Nevertheless, the model usefully articulates the fundamental principle that

50

character, as Ubersfeld puts it, is "the locus of *functions* and no longer [...] a substance-copy of a human being" (72, emphasis in original), and as such it is useful for understanding theatrical forms beyond those of western naturalism with its emphasis on delving the depths of human nature and motivation. In the actantial model performers, human and otherwise, *do* things rather than *have* characteristics and motivations. Following this, I consider the stage to be populated with what I think of as "dramatic postulates" – "what-if" propositions, rather than simply characters, and this way of thinking can be extremely helpful for those engaged in theatrical devising, which often involves free-ranging exploration and privileges sites, images, props, and actions over character and story.

Each dramatic postulate exerts a range of magnetic attractions and repulsions within what Martin Esslin calls "the field of drama," and each exerts its own narrative and performative force. The analysis of a fundamentally naturalistic play or performance might involve considering, for example, what forces Nora in *A Doll House* brings into play among many others within the fictional world of the representation, rather than why she behaves the way she does according to the psychological analysis of cause-and-effect motivations that are often based on "back stories" invented by actors or critics. In "postdramatic" plays such as Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* (Figure 2.1) where the actors speak stage directions and the relationship between actor and text is uncertain – or indeed in any play that focuses on the materiality of text, or in which the script resists attributing lines to individual speakers (as in the landscape plays of Gertrude Stein, or in Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis)* – actantial analysis is rewarded with clear understandings of the forces at play that constitute the performance's complex orchestration of tension, suspension, complication, and release, but that elude traditional character-based analysis. But actantial analysis can fruitfully be applied to many plays outside of the character-driven western naturalist tradition, plays such as *Chocolate Woman Dreams the*

Figure 2.1   Johanne Madore and Rodrigue Proteau in the 1987 Carbone 14 production of Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* in Montreal, dir. Gilles Maheu
Source: Photo by Yves Dubé.

Milky Way, where the central performer is acted upon by four female figures from Guna cosmology, each embodying forces that bring her safely home, but none requiring psychological justification.

Language

The "actantial" approach to the analysis of character and other "*acteurs*" is complemented by what has become known as the "performative" turn in the semiotics of drama and theatre (see Elam, *Semiotics* 142–53, "Much Ado"; De Marinis *Semiotics* 150–7), which draws on the work of John Searle and J.L Austin to consider language on the stage less as simply *descriptive* or *declarative* than as *performative*, less as simply *representing* an action than as *performing* one. Instances of speech as action occur whenever an utterance promises, threatens, warns, commits, constitutes, denies, declares, offers, offends, accuses, appoints, affirms, sentences, marries, baptizes, and so on. But virtually every utterance can be understood to have some element or degree of performative force insofar as all utterances have elements of *assertion* or *persuasion*. Outside of western technologies of representation, speech, and in particular prayer and invocation, has always been understood to have powerful, even potentially dangerous performative qualities, especially when it invokes or implicates ancestral or spiritual worlds.

Neither Austin nor Searle was talking about theatre; in fact Austin explicitly indicates that a speech act will be "in a peculiar way hollow if said by an actor on a stage" (Austin 22), because actors are not authorized to perform the acts, do not "really mean" what they say. But it is clear that *within* the fictional world each act of speaking *does* something: it changes the relationship between the characters, between the characters and the action. When these speech acts are taken together to form a play's dialogue, they can be understood to *constitute* the dramatic action: they move things forward.

53

And as De Marinis notes, onstage dialogue also "acts" on the audience outside of the world of the fiction, or as Austin puts it, "produce[s] certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, and actions of the audience" (De Marinis *Semiotics* 56; Austin 101). Indeed, Luigi Pirandello has called dramatic dialogue "spoken action," and for the makers of theatre it is always a good idea to consider, not simply what a line of dialogue or a unit of text says or tells us, but also what it *does*. But speech acts are not all that constitute a play's action.

Story, plot, and action

Story, plot, and action are what actants (human or otherwise) enact, the force fields within which "dramatic postulates" function. For the purposes of this book, story (also known as *fabula*) is understood as a raw chronological sequencing of events, action as what *happens* or what is *done* (usually involving change), and plot as how it's all put together. Most semiotic analyses of drama and theatre, emerging on the one hand from linguistics and on the other from narratology (the study of narrative), focus to a considerable extent on the story that is "told" at the expense of the actions that are performed, and because they also emerge from Structuralism they focus on plot as the organization of the story. They focus on what Elaine Aston and George Savona call "the transformation of story into plot" (10). Much of this work, beginning with Veltruský's observation that the formal divisions of units of action into acts and scenes is "a matter of convention" (*Drama* 82), consists of analyses of such conventions (the three-act structure, the five-act structure, the "French scene" – in which a new scene begins whenever a character enters or exits the stage).

Some of this work takes on a distinctly prescriptive feel, as theorists try to determine how to construct a "good play." Work that focuses on action tends to define it by way of intentionality. Summarizing the philosophical theory of action,

54

Keir Elam describes the conditions necessary for the performance of an action as follows: "there is a being, conscious of his [sic] doings, who intentionally brings about a change of some kind, to some end, in a given context" – and, Elam adds, to a given purpose (*Semiotics* 109). This is a peculiarly teleological (end-driven) understanding of what constitutes action, and it is useful primarily for theatrical works that concern themselves with cause-and-effect sequences involving the representation of successful or failed human projects. It works far less well for postmodern, poststructuralist, postdramatic, or devised work-in-progress, or for culturally specific or intercultural performances such as *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* that are neither mimetic nor linear.

It may be useful, however, to consider the structuring of theatre and performance as something that, unique to the arts, happens in both time and space, as is suggested by the naming of the two units into which plays are traditionally divided: *acts* (which happen over time) and *scenes* (which occupy space). Structure is something that is crafted by playwrights, directors, and dramaturges (who are explicitly charged with focusing on structure in new play development), and it serves directly to shape the impact and meaning of a performance. Performances don't simply "have" a structure, but are crafted in space and time by practicing artists and audiences, and they are an essential part of meaning production, reinforcing or undermining conscious thematics.

Time

Theatre and performance "take place" in time; that is, they employ temporal sequencing and duration to communicate with an audience that comes together with the performers for a specific period in what is generally known as "real time." Within that duration – proverbially "the two hours traffic of the stage" – the timing of the dramatic action can be organized in whatever way is purposeful, communicating through

sequencing, duration, tempo, rhythm, and so on. While stories begin with an initiating event and move consecutively through to an end, plots often rearrange chronology, beginning, perhaps, *in medias res* (in the middle of things), or even at the end, perhaps including flashbacks, or skipping over periods in which "nothing happens" – and some plots indeed organize actions that do not constitute stories in any recognizable sense.

Many plays from *Oedipus Rex* to *A Doll House* turn on the revelation of actions that precede those depicted on the stage. Arthur Schnitzler's 1897 play *La Ronde* uses a kind of relay structure, in which one character only from each scene carries on into the next, temporal "development" imitating the round dance after which the play is named. *Same Time Next Year*, by Bernard Slade, involves two characters, married to others, meeting once a year for twenty-four years for an affair, the "action" of the play primarily involving their discussion of what happens between their meetings. One recent award-winning Canadian play, Colleen Murphy's *The December Man*, begins at the end and moves chronologically backward to the story's beginning. African American Ntozake Shange's *for coloured girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* has no single story or central character and no clear indicators of temporality; rather it lyrically orchestrates the bodies of seven Black women dressed in different colours who begin in isolation, fragmentation, and distress and move toward community, ultimately assembling the rainbow of the play's title.

Each of these and many other structures shape and are shaped by what the plays or performances are setting out to do, and what meanings they are attempting to convey. In the case of *Oedipus*, the focus is on consequences; in the case of *A Doll House*, on realizations; and in the case of *The December Man* (which deals with the so-called "Montreal massacre," in which thirteen engineering students and one staff member were murdered because they were women) – or virtually any

56

work that begins with the end of the story – the focus is not on "what happens next?" but on "why did this happen?" or even "how could this possibly have happened?" And in the case of *for coloured girls* the focus is on assembling a community of minoritized women within something that might be understood as mythical time: non-linear, non-historical, cyclical (Eliade, *Myth of Reality*; *Myth of the Eternal*).

Semioticians have found various ways of discussing and analysing temporality in the theatre that are useful for artists orchestrating performances and scholars and artists analysing them. Elam identifies four "temporal levels" in the theatre, not including "actual performance time" (the time of the encounter between the audience and the performers): *discourse time*, the fictional "now" of the action and enunciation – the "present" in which speech happens; *plot time*, the order in which events are shown or reported; *chronological time*, the order in which the events reported would have occurred; and *historical time*, the historical period from which the events are drawn, which is moved forward to constitute the "now" of the fiction (Elam *Semiotics* 105–7). These distinctions are analytically useful, particularly in clarifying the dramatic present (discourse time) as the moment in which performative *action* happens and discoveries and transformations occur. They are perhaps particularly useful for practitioners, who need to discover ways of marking, clarifying, and distinguishing different temporal registers and to be sensitive to the temporal, durational, and transformational experience of audiences.

While Elam brackets off "actual performance time," Anne Ubersfeld identifies this as one of theatre's "two distinct temporalities," arguing that it is the relationship between "the time it takes for a performance to be completed" and "the time pertaining to the represented action" that constitutes "*theatrical time*" (126). This formulation is useful in distinguishing between theatre (in which the represented action is almost inevitably already completed in the past, to be re-enacted on stage in the present) and performance (which aspires to

happen fully in the present). It is also analytically useful for its acknowledgement of the rhythms of the work, and for its focus on audience experience in the moment of reception and the audience's role in constructing meaning in "real time."

One of the difficulties about time for semioticians is that, while it can be represented (through verbal indicators, the presence of clocks and sundials and so on), time *itself* is non-representational: "time is, by its very nature, outside mimesis," as Ubersfeld says (134). Time in the theatre often tends to function as an organizational principle (much in the way it does in music through tempos, time signatures, and structural divisions into bars, phrases, movements, and so on), and as such, in addition to the sheer phenomenological effect of its immediate rhythms and durations (as in the "slow-motion" work of an artist such as Robert Wilson), it can employ structural principles derived from such things as the rhythms of nature in a 24-hour or annual cycle in much the way that ceremonies, rituals, and communities structure themselves. Literary structuralists such as Northrop Frye and C.L. Barber have made much of such patterns in individual works by artists such as Shakespeare and in the structuring of dramatic genres and entire canons. Indeed, in his *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye categorizes the entire literary and dramatic canon in four seasonal parts: the mythos of spring (comedy), the mythos of summer (romance), the mythos of autumn (tragedy) and the mythos of winter (irony, or satire) (163–239). This cyclical (vs progressive) understanding of time is similar to that of many of the Indigenous peoples of the world, for whom past and future only exist as functions of an ongoing and eternal present, and for whom specific narratives are not unique, but serve as instances of larger, ongoing cultural stories.

Space

Stories are not the only things that structure and are structured by performances, which are primarily constituted by

action(s). Indeed, a performance can take place, as in much performance art and postdramatic theatre, without a story, except insofar as audiences themselves often construct stories out of what they see. But performance cannot occur without some form of action, and actions quite literally "take place" – they occur in space as well as time. As many performance artists and theorists have argued, action is not merely mimetic (as in Aristotle's definition of tragedy as "the imitation of an action" (12)), nor is it merely representational, in the semiotic sense in which a signifier represents a signified, or a sign stands in for a "real world" referent. There are times, or ways of seeing, in which an action is best considered phenomenologically, as something to which human consciousness, at least initially, responds directly, viscerally, and unreflectively without the intermediary of meaning or interpretation. Nevertheless, actions feed meaning systems, and however they are intended, they tend ultimately to be "understood," or "read" by audiences as meaningful.

Theatrical action is also relational, in that it carves out spaces between performers and between spectators and performers, and these spatial relationships are charged with meaning. Proximity or distance and the movement through space are central to meaning-making in the theatre, as are the vertical and horizontal axes of the spaces of performance and reception, the arrangement of actors and audiences into groups, the arrangement of the auditorium, the stage, and the performers in ways that direct the audience's gaze. "Blocking" in the theatre (the arrangement and movement of actors in space) is used to produce tension, reveal relationships of power, relative status, distance, or intimacy as actors group themselves together, stand apart, invade one another's personal space, or organize themselves in dynamic or static, comfortable or tense relationships to one another, the set, and the furnishings. When Hamlet typically stands downstage right, silent and dressed in black in Act 1, scene 2 of Shakespeare's play as the colourfully-dressed court upstage left

celebrates his mother's wedding, we know all we need to know about his situation long before he speaks his line, "oh that this too, too sullied flesh would melt" (I.2.129). When Krogstad quietly invades the Helmer's comfortable middle-class home in the second act of *A Doll House*, the threat he wields is palpable. When Stanley Kowalski typically invades the personal space of his sister-in-law, Blanche Dubois, early in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the atmosphere immediately becomes charged.

Theatre and performance semiotics has much to learn from proxemics, a term coined by social anthropologist Edward T. Hall in 1963 to refer to the study of spatial (or territorial) relationships. Audiences can read a great deal about the relationships between characters, their level of interpersonal comfort or intimacy, their relative and shifting status (see Johnstone), their degrees of power or authority, by the ways, including posture, gesture, and movement, in which they occupy space. This includes, analytically, paying attention to different cultural codings of spatial relationships, and expanding the spectrum of what Hall identifies as intimate (touching, embracing), personal (close friends, family), social (acquaintances) and public space – this last presumably including the public address of the theatre and the most frequent relationship between the audience and the stage. But not always. Attending a mega-musical involving crashing chandeliers or landing helicopters – or attending one of Max Reinhardt's outdoor spectacles or those at Berlin's 3500-seat Grosses Schauspielhaus ("the theatre of the five thousand") in the 1920s (see Styan) – involves a very particular kind of spectatorship. It is an experience of a very different kind from, for example, the intimate cross-cultural one of sitting knee-to-knee as solo audience at *BIOBOXES: Artifacting Human Experience* (Figure 2.2), a production by Vancouver's Theatre Replacement in which the stage sits on the shoulders of solo actors from different cultures, and individual audience members successively visiting the six "box stages" decide which language they would like to listen
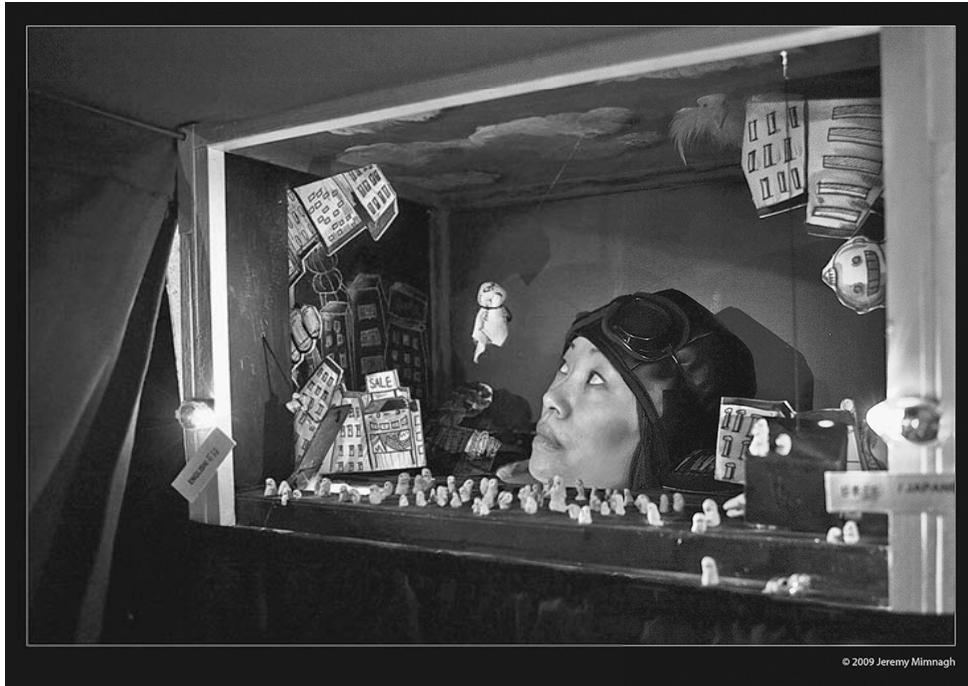
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Figure 2.2   Cindy Mochizuki in Theatre Replacement's *BIOBOXES: Artifacting Human Experience*, dir. James Long and Maiko Bae Yamamoto
Source: Photo by Jeremy Mimnagh.

in (the actors change languages at the flick of a switch) and worry about where to position their hands or whether their breath is fresh (see Kim).

Spatial relationships apply to more than interpersonal and intercultural relationships between and among bodies in space. They also have to do with the spatial arrangement of things. In addition to the functions of stage objects identified by Ubersfeld – to serve both as concrete presences and as "figures," iconic, indexical, and metaphorical (122–4) – Andrew Sofer points to their movement and use in space. These, he argues, are what define them as props (as opposed to set pieces and furnishings, whose semiotic significance is largely static, at least within scenes). In *The Stage Life of Props* Sofer's case studies include the Eucharist wafer in the medieval theatre, the bloody handkerchief on the Elizabethan stage, the skull in Jacobean theatre, the fan in Restoration and early-18th-century comedy, and the gun on the modern stage. In each case, the prop is understood as a "mobile physical object" (20). Props are not just *things* (though their thingness has its own uses); they are also, like bodies, spatial and temporal *signifiers*, whose movement through space and time is tracked by audiences and productive of meaning. As Sofer argues, "a prop is an object that goes on a journey; hence props trace spatial trajectories and create temporal narratives as they track through a given performance," and these are "dimensions that allow the object to mean in performance" (2).

In recent years there has been what Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri call a "spatial turn" (2) in theatre studies. Theatre scholars have drawn on the insights of cultural and other geographers' discussion of space not as something given, empty, or "absolute," but as a set of social relationships that is *produced*. Some theatre and performance theorists have used these new geographical understandings of space and place to find ways of analysing work that resists classical readings rooted in mimetic narrative. Dean Wilcox, for example, in a 2003 essay on "Ambient Space," develops an approach that

brings together the work on space and place of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (place is space endowed with value) with that of philosopher Edward Casey (space becomes place when it is inhabited) in order to examine 20th-century modernist and postmodernist performances from John Cage to the Bauhaus to Samuel Beckett to Richard Foreman, where space is less important for its representational than its organizational qualities – and this is still more true of site-specific performances in which the place of performance "presents itself" (Lehmann 152), and can be considered a co-creator of the action. Other theatre scholars consider "social space," in Henri Lefebvre's three-part classification, to consist of spatial *practice* (competencies in traversing and negotiating space within a particular social formation), *representations of space* (built environments – including theatres – that spatialize social order and social power), and *representational spaces* (oppositional or "underground" codings of space, including those of art) (Lefebvre 33).

Explicating these classifications, theatre historian Michal Kobialka has usefully identified *spatial practice* as "perceived," *representations of space* as "conceived," and *representational spaces* as "lived" (559). Lefebvre's concept of representational spaces resonates with what anthropologist and performance studies progenitor Victor Turner (1920–83) had earlier called the "liminoid" (in-between) spaces where art, play, and performance can generate social change, and with what Michel Foucault called "heterotopic" space (*Order* xv–xxiv; "Of Other Spaces"), glossed by Kevin Hetherington as "spaces of alternate [social] ordering" (viii). None of these conceptualizations is expressly semiotic in approach, but each addresses issues of meaning production and social change, including those having to do with how sign systems and therefore meaning change over time.

Some of the most important work by theatre scholars grappling with "places of performance" (Carlson, *Places*), and the spaces that performance constitutes, has had considerable

significance for the understanding of the production of meaning since the 1990s. Marvin Carlson kick-started a minor industry when he published *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* in 1989, primarily because he "read" (semiotically), not only the architecture of theatre buildings, as his subtitle suggests, but also the location of performance within cities and even, in his opening chapter, "the city [itself] as theatre" (14–37). This work has been followed by extensive studies of the ways in which cities perform, and are performed by, their occupants and visitors alike (see Garner, "Urban"; Hopkins, Orr, and Solga), or the ways in which "city stages" are shaped by material conditions best understood through the lenses of political economy, urban planning, and physical or quantitative as well as cultural geography (see McKinnie).

Carlson is perhaps at his most compelling in his discussion of the medieval city as contestable urban space for the staging of religious, civic, and royal power (14–21). And it is also the study of medieval theatre that has produced one of the most generative conceptualizations of stage space to date: Robert Weimann's distinction between the *locus* and *platea*, introduced in his 1978 book, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in Theatre*, and developed further in *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, two decades later.

Weimann finds on medieval and early modern stages a productive tension between, on the one hand, *loci* – specific representational (or mimetic) spaces that participate in the play's *fabula* and are occupied by the play's characters; and, on the other hand, *platea* – non-representational, unlocalized public space that is occupied and shared by the actors and the audience, is contestable, and is very much part of the non-mimetic moment of performance. In the medieval and early modern theatre the *loci* were assigned to the powerful, but the *platea* was the subversive space of devils, clowns, fools, and ordinary folk, who ran among or enjoyed special relationships with audiences (particularly the so-called "groundlings," who enjoyed the audience spaces closest to them). The *platea* was

64

often the forestage, where intimacies and alliances between the actors and the tradespersons, apprentices, and *hoi poloi* were shared.

Weimann's schema has implications throughout the history of theatre, and it kicks in whenever direct address, the breaking of the so-called fourth wall, or other metatheatrical devices are employed. Tom in Tennessee Williams's classic *The Glass Menagerie* moves from *platea* to *locus* as he shifts from narrating to representing his family and his younger self. The "Stage Manager" in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* occupies a shifting *platea* as he metatheatrically introduces, characterizes, and reflects upon the play's various characters in their respective *loci* in the fictional town of Grover's Corners. But always in the theatre there is the tension between the "then" of the represented story and the "now" of its representation, between the story and the storytelling, between narrative and performance, and this tension is the interpretative space where meaning is negotiated.

Weimann's analysis of staging practices resonates intriguingly with Michel de Certeau's distinction in *The Practice of Everyday Life* between place – the fixed *loci* from which the powerful deploy *strategy*, and space – the shifting grounds (*platea*) upon which the marginalized, colonized, or otherwise disempowered, exercise *tactics* (guerrilla-style) in response (xix–xx, 34–39). De Certeau introduces these distinctions in the same book in which his famous chapter "Walking in the City" appears, a key essay "poised between poetry and semiotics" (During 151) in which he discusses the ways in which ordinary folk negotiate their individual, agential, and tactical routes at ground level through a city planned in the abstract – strategically – as if from above. Performance studies scholarship has productively taken on the combined challenges of Weimann and de Certeau. D.J. Hopkins begins his 2000 book, *City/Stage/Globe* the same way de Certeau opens "Walking in the City," with the view from the twin towers of the former World Trade Centre in Manhattan, from which

the city planners' grids were clearly legible. He proceeds to demonstrate how such a reading of the city "from above" as representational (and therefore semiotic) space emerged in the early modern period, replacing the street-level, tactical experience of the medieval city as performed and contestable public space.

An interest in variously contestable public space drives the work of a number of scholars who have followed Carlson. David Wiles, in his 2003 book, *A Short History of Western Theatre Space*, takes a multifaceted approach to conceptualizing theatrical space that considers power relations inflected in seven types of performance space over time: "sacred space" (temples, cathedrals, altars, and other spaces set apart from the quotidian); "processional space" (through which performance, performers, and participants move); "public space" (squares, piazzas, marketplaces, and hubs); "sympotic space" (banquet halls, cafés, bars, and music halls where the performance is not the only thing consumed); "the cosmic circle" (theatrical spaces that at once reflect Platonist metaphysics and the ancient "circle of society"); "the cave" (or "cube," into which the individual spectator peers at shadows and reflections as through a fourth wall); and finally "the empty space" (that holy grail of modernist practitioners, the myth that any space can be one of sheer, ahistorical potentiality).

Postcolonialist theatre scholar Joanne Tompkins, in her 2006 book, *Unsettling Space*, treats the contestability of theatrical space quite differently, though she, too, deals with power relations, including those between settler/invader and Aboriginal populations whose enactments encode different understandings of space. Tompkins considers what Una Chaudhuri calls modern theatre's "geopathology": "the double-edged problem of place and place as a problem" (Chaudhuri, *Staging Place* 53), analysing spatiality (particularly spatial instability) as a productive tool of *un*settlement in postcolonial settler/ invader societies, in Tompkins' case Australia. "When space, place, and landscape are staged in stark geopathological

66

terms, they look back to history, but they also contribute to the development of a different future" (163).

The book-length study that explicitly employs a semiotic approach and has significantly shaped subsequent scholarship on theatrical space, including my own (Knowles, *Reading* 66–91), is Gay McAuley's 1999 *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*. McAuley opens her book with an epigraph – "the theatre is space" – from Anne Ubersfeld, whose semiotic work influences her study profoundly, and she structures her book around a development from Ubersfeld's and fellow semiotician Patrice Pavis's taxonomies of spatial function in the theatre (Ubersfeld 94–125; Pavis, *Dictionary* 344–5). Indeed McAuley's introductory taxonomy – considering the "social reality," "the physical/fictional relationship," "location and fiction," "textual space," and "thematic space" (25) – is characteristic of the many taxonomies of 1980s and 90s theatre semiotics. What McAuley does with these in application, however, is a revelation.

In discussing physical space McAuley pays close analytical attention not only to the usual suspects – the theatre building, the stage (which she calls "presentational space"), and the audience-stage relationship – but also to "audience space," including such things as stairways and corridors, cloakrooms, bars and restaurants, and box office, as well as "practitioner space" backstage and, most notably, rehearsal halls, which may be off-site but which are where a production takes its shape and takes on much of its meaning. These rooms leave indelible traces and need to be considered carefully by practitioners, historians, and theorists alike. Subsequent chapters consider with equal nuance the placement and movement of bodies in performance; the relationship between space and the ways in which acts and scenes are structured, mapped, and scored by directors, dramaturges, and actors; the tracking, use, shifting meanings, and spatial semiotics of props, real and unreal, present or absent, used or misused in rehearsal and in performance; the spatial dimensions of language and

text, including their physical "placement" in performance; and the spectatorial experience of space by people who "go" to the theatre, where they engage in complex ways with the processes of looking and exchanging looks across the varying distances between themselves as well as between themselves and the actors.

Discussing Ubersfeld, McAuley argues in her introduction for an understanding of "dramatic space" as something that involves "the dramatic geography of the action as a whole and is indeed a means of conceptualizing the whole action or narrative content of the play" (19). Spatial arrangement, taken together with that other organizing principle discussed above, temporal sequencing, as combined means of "conceptualizing the whole action," leads to another key concept in the semiotic analysis of theatre and performance: what has come to be known as the *mise-en-scène*.

Mise en scène

Patrice Pavis, who has perhaps contributed more than anyone else to a theorization of the concept, defines the *mise-en-scène* as "the bringing together or confrontation, in a given space and time, of different signifying systems, for an audience" ("From Text" 86). If plot is the purview of the playwright, deviser, and dramaturge, *mise-en-scène* is usually understood to be that of the director, in collaboration with the entire creative team and, ultimately, with audiences. The concept of the *mise-en-scène* emerged only after the emergence of the director (in French, "*metteur-en-scène*") as an independent artist or *auteur* in the late 19th century in Europe. But as Pavis says, "though the director has not always existed, there has always been a *mise-en-scène*" (*Languages* 137). And although Pavis rightly points out that the concept of the *mise-en-scène* emerged from and is "localized in" the west (*Analyzing* 303), the term is capacious enough to be applicable to organizing principles

behind a broad range of theatre and performance practices emerging from most cultures and intercultures.

Mise-en-scène does not refer to the staging "of" a dramatic text or scenario, the "realizing" of a such a text's potential, or (in semiotic terms) the translation of textual signs into the signs of performance. Nor is the *mise-en-scène* something that is always explicitly articulated; it is best understood as a process rather than a blueprint for a final product. It is "a signifying *activity* founded in meaning-making by inter-relating heterogeneous elements," sign systems that employ different codes (*Languages* 137, emphasis added). Pavis uses the examples of dramatic text, which is based in a linguistic system that is fundamentally symbolic (in Peirce's sense) and therefore arbitrary, as opposed to performance, which is primarily iconic, based on a resemblance between a sign and its referent. "Speaking semiologically," he says, "linguistic arbitrariness and stage iconicity cannot be reconciled or mutually cancelled out" (*Languages* 143.) They can, however, be brought together dialectically, either in a kind of synthesis or in productive tension, and this is the function of the *mise-en-scène* and in practice the role of the director. This assemblage, moreover, extends beyond the broad categories of text and performance to the languages of movement and gesture, vocal expression, set, light, and costume design, sound and music, some of which are spatial, some temporal, some spatio-temporal, but all of which employ distinctive coding systems brought together polyphonically on the stage. There is, of course, always a different weighing of these modes of communication, each *mise-en-scène* foregrounding, highlighting, blending, contrasting, and harmonizing elements differently, and it is these differences on which semiotic analyses of performance need to focus for scholars and practitioners alike.

One of the great advantages of the concept of the *mise-en-scène* is its abandoning of the hopeless search for a basic unit of stage communication, the elusive integrated sign, in favour of something Pavis elsewhere calls an "integrated

semiology" (*Analyzing* 323). A focus on the *mise-en-scène* also has the potential to reverse the trend I have described in theatre semiotics in the 1970s and 80s towards increasing segmentation. Rather than dismantling, fragmenting, or segmenting a performance, Pavis argues, "the spectator needs to perceive and thus describe the totality, or at least an ensemble, of systems that are themselves already structured and organized, that is, what is understood nowadays by the term *mise-en-scène*" (*Analyzing* 8).

Performance text

If *mise-en-scène* is a structural system that functions as the glue that holds the various sign-systems at work in a performance together, the performance text – another key, if more contentious concept – is what is read by audiences and analysts. The performance text is quite distinct from the dramatic text (the literary artefact that often gets confused with "the play"), or from the script (which is one of the many contributors to, or traces of, the performance), in that it concerns itself with all aspects of performance even when there are no words involved, but "textualizes" them in order that they can be "read." Pavis argues that "the performance text is the mise-en-scène considered not as an empirical object, but as an abstract system, an organized ensemble of signs" (*Analyzing* 8–9). He usefully refers to "the *writing* of the performance text *by* the *mise en scène*" (*Languages* 158, emphasis added).

If Pavis has been the key figure in the theorization of the *mise-en-scène,* Marco de Marinis, in 1982 (translated into English in 1993), has most explicitly and controversially theorized the performance text. In a project that begins by "abandon[ing] the search for the definition of a language of theater" (*Semiotics* 2), de Marinis turns away from the *mise-en-scène* toward the construction of the performance text, understood as a more capacious entity. For de Marinis, the performance text is distinct not only from the dramatic

text, but also from the theatrical performance. The latter, he argues, "involves theater as a material object, the phenomenal field that is immediately available to perception" (48). The theatrical performance, that is, is the event that the audience encounters and to which it immediately (phenomenologically) responds. "Performance text," according to de Marinis, "refers instead to a *theoretical object* […], the theoretical model of an aspect [the textual aspect] of the observable performance phenomenon" (48, emphasis in original). The performance text, for de Marinis, is "an explanatory principle" constructed through the process of analysis rather than merely the pre-existing object of such analysis, and it *constitutes* all of the various elements of performance *as textual* (though De Marinis is careful to indicate that "reading" a performance as text "does not exhaust all aspects of theater" (1)). Like the *mise-en-scène,* the performance text is "characterized by a double heterogeneity, in its expressive media as well as its codes" (61) by "'ephemeral' presence, lack of persistence, […] multiplicity of codes, multidimensionality" and its organization into a coherent entity that de Marinis calls "the textual structure of performance" (83) (which might be understood as the equivalent, on the reception side, of the *mise-en-scène*).

De Marinis's formulation has been criticized by Michael Sidnell for dematerializing the performance text as merely a mental construction and thereby contributing to the mounting frustration with semiotics in the 1990s and beyond, particularly among practitioners (Sidnell 16). But the move has its advantages in acknowledging pragmatically that, because of the ephemerality of performance and the multiplicity of positions and conditions of its reception, analysis can rarely consider the theatrical performance "itself." Indeed, most writing about theatre deals with reconstructions of various kinds, at worst analysing the writer's own notes and memories, at best the material remains of productions housed in archives or recorded on film and video. As a "theoretical object," however, the performance text systematizes the processes of

reconstruction and analysis while also taking full account of the role of the spectator in the production of meaning.

Audiences and spectatorship

The final chapter of de Marinis's *The Semiotics of Performance* is devoted to "The Spectator's Task" (158–88) in decoding the performance text. Reception, as decoding, has always been at least implicit in the semiotic analysis of drama and theatre, but the turn from considering the spectator as simply "the target of theatrical manipulation," in de Marinis's words, to considering her as "the coproducer of the performance, the active creator of its meanings" (158) – apart from the key contributions of Brecht as both practitioner and theorist – emerges only in the 1980s and 90s.

As a Marxist, Brecht was primarily interested in the role of theatre in the activation of audiences for the purposes of producing social change. Brecht critiqued the soporific role that he felt had been assigned to audiences in the dramatic or illusionistic theatre since Aristotle. His "epic theatre," in both theory and practice, was dedicated to developing an interactive relationship between the audience and the stage, positioning characters, actors, and audiences within history, eschewing universalist discourses and presenting the possibility of change. Through devices such as the defamiliarization effect (*verfremdungseffekt*, Brecht 192), the "not-but" (25, discussed in Chapter 1), historicization (190), and the gestus (86, 198, a moment at which the social attitudes encoded in the *mise-en-scène* crystalize and become visible), epic theatre aims to activate spectators' awareness and assessment of social and discursive ideologies that inform the production. Brecht's plays are full of "gestic" moments, the most frequently cited being Mother Courage's silent scream at her own complicit role in the loss of her son in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, figuring at once her anguish and her need for survival while projecting the social cause of both: war makes people

72

act in contemptible ways. But there are gestic moments throughout the history of theatre, ranging from the moment in Shakespeare's *Richard II* when the crown "freezes" briefly between Richard and Bolingbroke before it passes to the usurper; to the arrival of the corpse of the central character's son, Olunde, in Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, at which point the relationship between the spiritual and quotidian, traditional and contemporary worlds of the play tragically crystalize; to nodal points in the most naturalistic of plays. Even in the paradigmatic realist drama, Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, the servant Jean's cleaning of the Count's boots – especially when he cleans them using his own spit, as in Mike Figgis's 1999 film version of the play – functions as a gestic moment *par excellence*, crystalizing class relations and their impact on and implications for individuals. Each of these and other such moments demands a response, an interpretation that is actively engaged, not simply with character, but with the social significance of the action. As Susan Bennett argues, Brecht called for the production and reception of theatre as "a co-operative venture," producing Louis Althusser's "new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends" (Bennett 30; Althusser, *For Marx* 151).

Writing in 1982 and virtually reintroducing the study of reception in the theatre, De Marinis brings together approaches to reception from literary theory, and proposes the idea of a "Model Spectator" (*Semiotics* 166; see also De Marinis, "Dramaturgy"), based on Umberto Eco's "model reader" ("The Role" 7), one who is inscribed in, implied by, and indeed instituted in the performance text, whose encyclopaedic knowledge creates the conditions for "*complete communication* [to] be fulfilled" (167, emphasis in original). Acknowledging the difference between a hypothetical Model Spectator and a "real" one, de Marinis proceeds to examine various kinds and degrees of "theatrical competence" (171) that shape reception as well as production. De Marinis defines theatrical competence as "the *sum total of knowledge, rules, and skills that account for the ability*

to produce performance texts as well as the ability to understand them" (171, emphasis in original). Fundamental examples of such competencies include understanding, in a proscenium arrangement, the convention that within the fictional world of a naturalist performance there is an invisible "fourth wall" between the stage and the audience, or in theatres of various styles and periods understanding that asides cannot be overheard by other characters on the stage or that soliloquies provide windows into the unspoken thoughts of the characters who deliver them.

The relevance of a spectator's competence extends beyond the basic and crucial familiarity with and capacity to "read" the theatrical codes and conventions that constitute performance *as* performance in any given culture or period. Such competencies also involve what Keir Elam (drawing on Julia Kristeva, see Chapter 1) calls the "intertextual" (Elam, *Semiotics* 83): the capacity to recognize and understand the traces of other voices, discourses, texts, cultural texts, and performances necessarily embedded in the text, scenery, acting, directorial style, and so on, as well as the capacity to respond to broader extra-textual cultural references. Theatrical examples include the knowledge of the generic and stylistic conventions of tragedy, comedy, kabuki, or Kathakali. Still more complex examples of more specialized knowledge include the capacity to recognize intertextual references and citations of previous work (recognizing, for example, the cast and action of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*) or even knowledge of the *corpus* of work by specific writers and directors without which a given production might be simply baffling or annoying (understanding the role, for example, of the strings that inexplicably crisscross the stage and auditorium in the work of experimental American director Richard Foreman).

The more experience the spectator has, and the more deeply she is embedded in or closely aligned with the production's theatrical and cultural codes, the closer she approaches

74

de Marinis's conception of model spectatorship, but also the more likely she is to be bored – a negotiation of which practitioners need to be particularly and constantly aware. As Elam notes, part of the pleasure of spectatorship, when it does not simply involve the passive consumption of familiar theatrical comfort food, is in learning the codes, including assisting in the establishment, however provisionally, of new ones (*Semiotics* 85). And as Elaine Aston and George Savona point out, "the history of any period of theatre involves the history of the education of the spectator in particular habits of spectatorship" (160). This interplay between the familiar and the new or different has driven the constant search for theatrical innovation throughout theatre history, and has also been at the root of healthy and unhealthy intercultural experiments. On the other hand, rarely has new work from outside dominant cultural traditions failed to be met with incredulity on the part of some spectators or reviewers who felt themselves to be disenfranchised: "that was all well and good, but how am I supposed to *understand* it?"

Three of the most generative concepts in reception studies, borrowed from the reader response theories of Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Hans Robert Jauss, respectively, have been that of textual "blanks," or "gaps," that of the "interpretative community," and especially that of the spectator's "horizon of expectations." Each of these has been applied to the theatre by Marvin Carlson and Susan Bennett, most extensively by the latter in her now standard study, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. Iser posits the idea that a text controls successful reading, but does so through the use of gaps, or blanks, which draw the reader in and allow her to contribute imaginatively to the completion of the work (Iser, *The Act* 168–9). Anne Ubersfeld uses the same word – "gaps" – to describe openings in the dramatic text that are filled in performance (29), but it might be more useful to consider gaps left within performances themselves. Bennett points to intermissions as examples, but perhaps the use of offstage spaces

or even sounds is more generative. Whenever an actor exits through an onstage doorway to enter an offstage world that is left to the audience's imaginations, spectators are asked to fill in gaps, to imagine for themselves what the offstage kitchen, bedroom, backyard, or town might look and feel like. Action, too, frequently takes place offstage and is the more powerful for being left to the audience's imagination. Powerful examples of this are the sound of the door slamming that concludes *A Doll House*, the gunshot heard "*from within*" at the end of *Hedda Gabler* (Ibsen 777), or the climactic actions of Greek tragedies as reported by messengers.

Iser labelled his gap-filling reader *The Implied Reader*, which clarifies the degree to which he felt the text controls the reader's performance. The concept is not unrelated to Eco's Model Reader, or to Stanley Fish's concept of the "interpretative community," which, however, looks less to textual mechanisms that contain and constrain readerly meaning production than to socially defined communities, "made up of those who share interpretative strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (Fish 171). For Fish, reading strategies *precede* texts, indeed *constitute* (or "write") them, and are primarily socially conditioned. As Bennett suggests, however (43), Fish is remarkably unconcerned with most of the identity characteristics that one might associate with communities: class, politics, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, or ability. Indeed, Fish's categories of linguistic and literary competence and semantic knowledge risk (re)inscribing hierarchies of interpretation within the academy or among other specialized readers, in spite of his apparently liberatory agenda.

What might it mean to consider theatre audiences as "interpretative communities"? Theatre audiences, after all, might be understood more readily to share theatrical and cultural competence than the readers of books, given that they gather to view a performance, for possibly similar reasons, at the

same place and time, preconditioned, perhaps, by similar local knowledges. Audiences for the premiere of Métis playwright Marie Clements's *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, for example, assembled at Vancouver's Firehall Theatre, just blocks from where the femicides that are the play's subject took place, knowing that the murderer had recently been released on parole. This specialized local knowledge might valuably be understood to constitute those audiences as interpretative communities of a very particular kind.

On the other hand, what would it mean to consider audiences, particularly in the culturally heterogeneous cities of the 21st century, as intersections of *different* interpretative communities, experiencing as much "psychic polyphony" (Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics* 95) because of their diverse reading strategies as they do because of the "heterogeneity of expressive media" interacting on the stage? As Dennis Kennedy says, "audiences are pluralistic [...], gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, education, health and age all condition reception" (188).

Insofar as the audience for a specific performance *can* be understood to constitute a relatively stable interpretative community, it is perhaps because it has been constituted *as* an audience to share a range of "horizons of expectations," as Jauss calls them. Jauss considers three factors that create such expectations: genre, intertextuality, and "the opposition between fiction and reality" (Jauss 25). Each of these obtains in the reception of theatrical works, where the last has particular resonance given iconicity (resemblance between signifier and signified, sign and referent) as theatre's dominant signifying mode.

There are many crucial ways in which horizons of expectation for performances, and therefore audience responses, can be shaped, both consciously and unconsciously. These include, in addition to those cited by Jauss: the theatre's or theatre company's history, mandate, and target audience; the reputation and profile of the artists; publicity and review discourse, posters, programs, and advertising; the façade, architecture,

and front-of-house spaces, facilities, and amenities of the performance space; ticket pricing and procedures; audience-stage relationships; the auditorium and seating arrangements; the neighbourhood in which the space is located; access and modes of transportation; and the historical and cultural moment of reception, including recent events, local, national and international politics, popular culture, and the prevailing *Weltanschauung* (world view). An audience attending the Comédie-Française – "the theatre of Molière," France's centuries-old state theatre in the 18th century Salle Richelieu in Paris's first arrondissement, and the Parisian home of French classical theatre – comes with significantly different expectations from one attending a production by the lesbian troupe Split Britches at the WOW café, a woman's performance venue four floors above street level in New York's Lower East Side. Each spectator arrives prepared to "read" the production through particular lenses, and to produce significantly different meanings.

A show advertised as a "laugh riot," featuring the star of a popular television sit-com and presented at a comedy club with a well-stocked and comfortable lobby bar or even table service, has a good chance of meeting its target audience. But Marvin Carlson retells the cautionary tale of a notable production that failed to meet the expectations it had generated. The American premiere of Samuel Beckett's existentialist/absurdist classic, *Waiting for Godot*, at the 1956 reopening of the Coconut Grove Playhouse, a former movie theatre in Miami, was billed as "The Laugh Sensation of Two Continents" (qtd in Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics* 21). It featured well-known comic actors Bert Lahr and Tom Ewell (recent stars of *Harvey* and *The Seven-Year Itch*, respectively). The audience left in droves. Most productions fall between these poles, as theatres attempt to push the boundaries of audience expectation, while audiences hope to be surprised and challenged within the limits of their own comfort zones. And some audiences are more tractable than others: opera audiences are notoriously recalcitrant; off-off

Broadway tends to attract a more iconoclastic crowd. Targeted community audiences for culturally specific work often afford it a level of understanding that more general or mainstream audiences don't.

In recent years, since the publication of the first edition of Bennett's *Theatre Audiences*, scholars have tended to write less about audiences and more about spectators and spectatorship (though Helen Freshwater's 2009 *Theatre & Audience* is an exception to the rule). I suspect that this is partly because "the audience" refers to a collectivity, while "the spectator" connotes something more individualistic and atomized, indicative of a more fractured or pluralistic (or postmodern) understanding of reception. It may also be the case that, since the English language publication of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, both in 1994, scholars have been preoccupied by spectatorship as a defining and all-pervasive feature of contemporary life not limited to the staging of shows or performances. Finally, since the ascendancy of performance studies in the academy and the advent of globalization and global touring in "the entertainment industries" (one thinks, for example, of the work of Robert Lepage, Yukio Ninagawa, and Robert Wilson), there has been much less emphasis on text, or indeed on representation, in semiotic and other studies of theatre and performance. It is true that de Marinis's translator chose to discuss "the model *spectator*" ("spettatore" in Italian can be translated as spectator, audience member, witness, or onlooker), but de Marinis is clearly talking about the *reader* of a "performance text." Scholars such as Dennis Kennedy in his 2009 book *The Spectator and the Spectacle* and influential French philosopher Jacques Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator*, first published in French in 2008 and translated into English in 2009, have concerned themselves with spectatorship as an independent and primary activity rather than a secondary, parasitic, or even interpretative one that is dictated or controlled by the spectacle itself. Rancière's "emancipated spectator" is an

active, individual subject, not the member of an audience-as-community; his project is to "challenge the opposition between viewing and acting": "viewing," he argues, "is also an action" (13), and "being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation" (17). Ultimately, this version of spectatorship is concerned with the limits of (semiotic) representation itself: for Rancière, sometimes a spectacle is just a spectacle.