



WRITING & PERFORMANCE

The evolution of text in performance takes many forms in the last half century: as dramatic literature, as fragment, as archive, as intertext, as poetry. While contemporary transformations in theatre have moved increasingly away from staging new plays in favor of collage-based work, performance in the visual arts has embraced language as a narrative mode, and dance has become both more theatrical and more text-oriented.

What are the issues that influence your thinking about writing and performance? How are they reflected in your process and the kind of work you do?

People often ask me how I can stand to be bombarded with so many different opinions all the time while trying to make a show, but I actually need the intellectual chaos in order to keep myself and consequently my audience off-balance. My goal is to make people hold their breath in fear and anticipation of what will come next, barely giving them time to recover from one blow before they are reeling from the next. I want to create work that disarms audiences with humor and then excoriates them, pummeling them from unexpected directions until they are left disturbed, exhilarated, and without answers.

YOUNG JEAN LEE, a writer and director, has toured her shows to more than twenty cities around the world with Young Jean Lee's Theater Company. She is the recipient of a 2010 Prize in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a 2011 Guggenheim fellowship.

JONATHAN KALB

About a decade ago, with four books and twenty-five years of incessant theatregoing behind me, I suddenly found myself, like Dante, uncertain of the road. The eight years I had spent chasing and contemplating Heiner Müller—a brilliant and splendidly literate artist yet also an infuriating and maddeningly elusive one—had left me longing to pour myself into a new subject with sturdier enthusiasm. My first book, on Samuel Beckett, was essentially an act of love, so a new subject equally gripping was the ideal ticket. But what would that be? What had kept me returning to the theatre when, as most fair-minded observers admit, it is dreadful 80% of the time? What I had loved about the avant-garde—its innovative energy—had all but dried up by the turn of the millennium. So many veteran avant-gardists seemed stuck in a funk of self-plagiarism, mannerism, and media-envy, and most of the youngsters I knew struck me as pseudo-subversive, their defiance compromised by the leveling and trivializing effects of consumer and media culture. The one trend that attracted me—the “real pretending” work of groups like Nature Theater of Oklahoma and Forced Entertainment—I wanted to see more of before jumping into a book-length study.

What to do? One day in Hannover, at the Expo 2000 fair, I was chatting easily with complete strangers seven hours into a twenty-one-hour production of *Faust*, when I had a revelation. It suddenly seemed remarkable that this Brobdingnagian piece of theatre felt intensely energizing rather than exhausting as one might expect, whereupon I recalled other such curiously revivifying endurance adventures in my theatregoing past. I also marveled at how much riskier, more urgent, and sharply delineated Goethe's dramatic experimentation seemed than the antics and titillation that have passed for rebellion for a good long while; a text completed in 1831 had me reflecting more fundamentally on the real business of the avant-garde—courageous probing into the nature of reality, the limits of language, and the relentless drip of time—than anything I'd seen in years.

That moment was the seed of my new book, *Great Lengths*, which reconstructs and examines a selection of theatrical marathons over three decades that happened to be landmark experiences for me. In analyzing these long works, I also consider why others like them have proliferated recently in the attention-challenged West, why thousands of busy and intelligent people not only bother to attend them but go out of their way to do so, and what they might have to say to us about why we still need the theatre. “Enthusiasm combined with critical thought: what more could we want of ourselves!” wrote Rosa Luxemburg, level-headed revolutionary *par excellence*. A beacon, that woman.

JONATHAN KALB teaches at Hunter College and is the author, most recently, of *Great Lengths: Seven Works of Marathon Theater*.

PAUL LAZAR

I’m a lifelong New Yorker. My father did the thing that a lot of my contemporaries did: came to New York from a smaller town because New York had art and artists that interested him. At that time it was the Cedar Tavern—de Kooning, Franz Kline, those people. Those were his pals. I grew up around abstract art and around people who were often ambivalent about mainstream values and mainstream success. My father was also friends with Ornette Coleman so I also had the great good fortune of growing up with his music and the music of his contemporaries in my head. When I consider this bit of personal history, it helps me understand why I still feel like a tourist when doing a straight play even though I love doing it and greatly admire the art and craft of everyone in my midst. When I saw Squat Theatre and the Wooster Group and *Miss Universal Happiness* (Foreman with the Wooster Group), and Beckett’s *The Lost Ones* by Mabou Mines, I felt like that was the theatrical expression of the tradition that was in me on an almost genetic level. So it is hard to write about because it’s hard to write about oneself on the cellular level.

I would rather write about something that I can look at from a distance: great experiences in the so-called straight theatre. I saw Ben Gazzara and Colleen Dewhurst in a production of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, directed by Edward Albee on Broadway in 1973. I have nothing brilliant to say about it. I spent a few hours watching this weird, hilarious, deeply in love couple, George and Martha, torture each other and others. I believed every moment in the sense that I never doubted their simulation of “reality.” And no amount of incredibly fun and brilliant Foreman essays about how straight plays can only confirm what you already know can plant an iota of doubt in my mind that that play, when played the way I saw it that night, is the richest mindfuck imaginable. Speaking of which, I also got to see John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson in Pinter’s *No Man’s Land*. What stays with me about that, more than thirty years later, is the liquid flow of language that has only been rivaled by the Wooster Group. Maybe because they, in their own inimitable, radical fashion, are the inheritors of the ensemble tradition. The real thing, the living together artistically for your whole life. As opposed to the hackneyed, overuse of the word “ensemble,” as in “this is a real ensemble piece.”