

## **The Making of a Theory: Theatre, Science, Power**

Eleven years ago our research project set out to develop an “aesthetics of the performative” from the perspective of theatre studies – that is to say by approaching theatre performances as performative art form par excellence. Our approach was based on the observation that the arts had been undergoing a ubiquitous shift from artwork to art event since the 1950s. As a result, the term “performativity” was lifted from its original meaning rooted in the philosophy of language and reinterpreted. In the course of the performative turn in the arts and cultural studies, the term was no longer used just to describe the constitutive and effective power of language but also cultural actions in general. Within the context of theatre studies in particular, performativity was thus understood in terms of performance, determined by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators.

The aesthetics of the performative developed within the framework of this research project also marked an attempt to apply the performative attributes of performance – seen particularly clearly in the works of contemporary theatre groups such as Rimini Protokoll, Signa, She She Pop, or Gob Squad – to scientific analysis. Thus, theatre studies responds to theatre practitioners’ own demand to compliment performance practices with more theoretical approaches that go beyond semiotics. The analytical focus here lies on performance as fleeting interplay between actors and spectators: actors act and are seen, spectators watch and react. Thus, performance analysis within theatre studies faces a special challenge given that it is based on the experience of another’s bodily presence as opposed to the analysis of artifacts. As such, aesthetic experience in performance is always already intertwined with social, ethical, and political factors.

Following eleven years of research under the banner of an aesthetics of the performative we now wish to self-critically identify the unanswered questions and blind spots of our project and reflect on its possibilities, scope, and limitations. The conference will feature three thematic focal points: Firstly, we wish to examine methodical procedures within theatre studies; secondly, we will investigate the role of power in and through performance and its academic discourse; thirdly, we wish to discuss the potential scope of an aesthetics of the performative inside and beyond the realm of theatre studies.

### **(1) Methodology**

The aesthetics of the performative focuses on ephemeral and sensual phenomena within performance (e.g. movement, rhythm, atmosphere, interaction, bodily presence, voice) that semiotic methods of analysis have so far only examined from the viewpoint of their potential meaning rather than their experiential qualities. Our premise opens up a number of new methodological problems and challenges for theatre studies. As such, the “discovery of the spectator” in theatre practice and theory inevitably requires the “discovery of the theatre scholar” as participant, director, and co-creator of his or her “object of study”.

We are convinced that an aesthetics of the performative offers us the chance to rethink the conditions, instruments, and limitations of the methodology of theatre studies. In particular, we must ask ourselves the following questions: Does not an aesthetics of the performative require the reformulation of the concept of the theatre scholar to redefine him or her as an engaged observer rather than “only” as a participating observer? Do theatre scholars co-constitute and change their field of study through their own work – for example through processes of articulation, institutionalization, and canonization, as increasingly seen today in performance art? What are its methodological consequences? What are the implications of an understanding of performances as irretrievable events for the methods of theatre historiography, which faces the challenge of analyzing historical events in which the scholars themselves could not participate? What, then, remains as the object of theatre historiography and what is its value in the context of an aesthetics of the performative? To what extent does the analysis of performances uncover an epistemological problem that becomes relevant to other disciplines as the performative turn sweeps through cultural studies and the humanities? And, finally, how can theatre studies profit from the methods of these other disciplines?

The section probes the methodologies through which performative processes, their genesis, course, and effects can be adequately analyzed. The following approaches are to be tested in terms of their scope: phenomenological approaches, methodological considerations from anthropology, theatre criticism and “performance as research”, methods from theatre historiography, and cultural-analytical approaches.

## **(2) Power/Structure**

The constitutive nature of performance covers a broad spectrum of meaning generation, body norms, gender identities, social groups, rules, legal structures, decisions, etc. Performance contributes to the creation of structuring norms, rules, and institutions. Here we are interested in the relationship between performativity and power. We will examine, for example, whether the

normative and institutional structures of social space and its actors, constituting and determining not just theatre performances, can be meaningfully captured by the term “power”. In what ways would power have to be redefined with regard to performative processes if it was not – as is often the case – meant to describe hierarchies, authority, suppression, or restriction?

The relationship between an event and its structure is reciprocal. Structural frames, such as the process of staging, the institutional structure of theatre, or general, social norms of behaviour, precede all theatre events. However, artistic performance practices also shape these established structures by either consolidating and undermining them. We will thus focus on two areas: the first refers to the institution of theatre, its norms of behaviour, and the artistic staging process. How are power relations realized through the institution of theatre? Furthermore, we wish to examine the level of concrete artistic processes. What social forces rule this game? Lastly, how and when do interrelationships between these two levels become perceptible and effective? To what extent can theatre be understood as a privileged place of experience that plays and experiments with processes of structuring?

### **(3) Discussing the aesthetics of the performative**

The final section examines whether and in what way Erika Fischer-Lichte’s book (developed from the research project), *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Routledge, London and New York, 2008), opens up new perspectives and addresses innovative questions that reach beyond theatre studies. For this section we wish to invite speakers from the fields of theology, cultural anthropology, law, visual art, translation, and theatre studies from a different culture to discuss the following questions on the basis of the book: Can the aesthetics of the performative be seamlessly translated into other theatre cultures or applied to the practice and analysis of other art forms? Are there interferences between an aesthetics of the performative and other theoretical approaches that place dimensions of the performative at their centre? Does the aesthetics of the performative provoke actors of religious and ritual performances? What questions can emerge for law in this context, for example in terms of copyright? How is an aesthetics of the performative relevant to the field of visual art?