Forum Kritika: Performance and Domination

THE PITFALLS OF THEATRICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Lionel Pilkington
National University of Ireland, Galway
Lionel.Pilkington@nuigalway.ie

Abstract

Beginning with Frantz Fanon's description of the problematic yet energizing effects of decolonization in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), this essay discusses the ways in which the theatre of modernity appears especially attractive to anti-colonial and post-colonial nationalist movements. This dominant and institutional model of theatre presents the colonized, not only as physically decorous, but as efficient and ready for work within a capitalist economy. The essay examines these propositions in relation to twentieth-century Irish theatre and drama. The second part of the essay examines the continuing centrality of performance and professional theatre within current discourses of neoliberalism and performance management. The essay concludes by referring briefly to an array of contemporary theatre groups that re-awaken theatre's potential for ethical self-awareness by refusing many of the core conventions of institutional theatre.

Keywords

Btheatre and political emancipation; decolonization; theatre of modernity; capitalism; bourgeois nationalism; Frantz Fanon; postcolonialism; neoliberalism; Fordism; Post-Fordism; Irish drama; performance management

About the Author

Lionel Pilkington teaches English at the National University of Ireland, Galway. He is the author of *Theatre and the State in 20th Century Ireland: Cultivating the People* (London and New York: Routledge) and *Theatre & Ireland* (London: Palgrave, 2010) and of various essays and edited books dealing with Irish theatre and cultural history, postcolonialism and cultural politics.

Well before becoming swallowed up within capitalist production, virtuosity was the architrave of ethics and politics. (Virno)

What a rhetoric of political emancipation and theatre have in common is an ability to stretch out the possibilities of human action beyond what seems ordinarily imaginable. Rehearsing action in the subjunctive mood is what defines an insurrection and it is also what characterizes the experience of a theatrical performance. Central to both is the opening up of space for imagining new social relationships through sequences of exhibited human action; it is in this broad sense that theatre no less than the spectacle of uprisings and protest gives hope to those struggling to resist oppressive regimes. No surprise, therefore, that when the Martinique-born political activist Frantz Fanon attempts to articulate the energizing effect of decolonization on those formerly colonized, he does so by reaching for a theatrical vocabulary. Like a spectator “crushed by inessentiality,” decolonization transforms the colonized into “privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history’s footlights upon them” (*The Wretched* 28). In French, the complete sentence from which these phrases are extracted reads as follows:

La decolonisation ne passe jamais inaperçue car elle porte sur l'être, elle modifie fondamentalement l'être, elle transforme des spectateurs écrasés d'inessentialité en acteurs privilégiés, saisis de façon quasi grandiose par le faisceau de l'Histoire. (*Les damnés* 40)

Whether Fanon’s term ‘quasi grandiose’ is translated as ‘grandiose’ (as in the Penguin English language edition quoted above) or as ‘grand’ or ‘imposing,’ what is conveyed in either case is the impression that decolonization is a process with the potential to trigger a life-changing effect on the individual but also, and problematically, full of concealed difficulties. Seizing the state is just the beginning. Experiencing the position of ‘privileged actors’ gripped by the bright and potentially distorting beams of the theater’s floodlights could lead to a mere inversion of the social order with one elite replaced by another and, therefore, a structural replication of colonialism’s injustices. Indeed the dangerous attraction of ‘bourgeois nationalism’ is the topic upon which Fanon expatiates in a later chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*: “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness.” The ambivalence evident in Fanon’s description of decolonization’s effect on the colonized as a privileged actor seized by the ‘quasi grandiose’ atmosphere of theatrical limelight (as one might be seized or paralyzed by stage fright) is well suited to Fanon’s dialectically thoughtful insistence that the battle against colonization “does not run straight along the lines of nationalism” (*The Wretched* 119). “If nationalism is not made explicit,” this later chapter concludes, “if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley” (*The Wretched* 165).

One could remark, therefore, that Fanon's evoking of the institutional theatre has a striking appropriateness because it describes the difficult and uneven emancipatory effects of decolonization. Also remarkable, however, is the constraining character of Fanon's comparison and the kind of theatre that is here evoked. Even if decolonization is enunciated as a theatrical transgression (a spectator bravely and defiantly invading the stage), the vista of passive spectators crushed by inessentiality and privileged actors dazzled by the lights of a brightly illuminated stage invokes a particular and historically specific theatre: the European theatre of modernity with its paying audience sitting in the darkened auditorium and paid actors performing on an expensively-lit stage. For Jacques Rancière—a contemporary French philosopher opposed to the totalitarian character of contemporary neoliberalism and concerned with formulating the requirements for a radically democratic alternative—this Manichean division between powerless audience and empowered actors “embodies allegories of inequality” and thus conceals a highly tendentious and authoritarian conception of knowledge (12). It is a mistake, insists Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator*, to view spectatorship as a state of deprived agency, and he argues that we need to formulate a theory of the spectator as already emancipated and empowered if we are to develop a meaningful theory of radical political change. Moreover, and as we shall see, there is a range of specific politically constraining effects or ‘pitfalls’ entailed by Fanon's recourse to a dominant institutional conception of theatre, and there are good reasons for working to change this.

One of the reasons why the theatre of modernity was so attractive to Ireland's anti-colonial nationalism was because it seemed to offer a living embodiment of the unity and political maturity that formed the basis of its claim to national independence. As the 1897 fund-raising manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre puts it, the work of the theatre in presenting Ireland positively and in resisting its misrepresentation as the “home of buffoonery and easy sentiment” was seen as earning “the support of all Irish people who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us” (Gregory 9). Even more than the other diverse national institutions and organizations that were also established at the end of the nineteenth century (such as the National Gallery, the National Library of Ireland, the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association), the mere existence of a national theater exposed to all the strikingly anomalous absence of that entity which national theaters are most usually associated: an independent parliament and a sovereign state. That representation could work in a national theater would show up the need for it to take place in the world outside. It is this prestige and legitimating authority with which this dominant model of theatre was associated that accounts for the broad spectrum of political support given to the Irish Literary Theatre during the early years of the twentieth century. In Ireland imagining theatre in the exclusive and normative terms of the theatre of modernity went alongside a contemporary nationalist deligitimization

of elements of Ireland's rich tradition of peasant performance practices such as, for example, the 'acrobatic' and 'un-Irish' practice of *sean-nós* [old-style] dancing. As Helen Brennan's history of Irish dance explains it, *sean-nós* Irish dance "set a value on precisely those elements—involving an energetic, unashamedly exhibitionistic, highly competitive style of performance—which was being rejected by the new aesthetic of Irish-Irelanders" (41).

What was endorsed implicitly by Ireland's national theater project was a system of representation that, perceptually, was assumed to be closely associated with modern constitutional democracy. "An audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory" inferred that Irish citizens were just as capable of spectating deferentially as anyone else, and that behaving like an audience meant accepting the logic of delegating political and imaginative authority to representatives on stage and that this—by extension—had implications for accepting the processes of a national parliamentary democracy. Contradicting Ireland's longstanding reputation for recidivist and violent insurrection, then, the structure of the institutional theatre of modernity—with its fantasy of a deferentially passive audience and of privileged actors on an illuminated stage—offered an emblematic demonstration of a sought-for political quiescence, calibrated according to European norms of constitutional democracy and—not least—reassuringly free of the clamor of revolutionary demands. To this extent, bourgeois nationalist Ireland's acceptance of the protocols of the theatre of modernity was itself a cherished performance—and one that showed that Ireland would and could conform to a Western model of circumscribed representational democracy. It was in this context that unionists vigorously opposed to any form of national independence found positive propaganda value in the audience protests against J.M. Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907 (Pilkington 6-61).

But the postcolonial attachment to the theatre of modernity has deeper roots. As Fanon's earlier work, *Black Skin, White Masks* expresses so eloquently, the racist discourse popularized by colonizing powers has a long-lasting and profoundly damaging somatic and psychological effect. As a Martinican confronted by the gaze of a racist on a street corner in the French city of Lyons, Fanon recounts an experience of existential trauma. His impression is that of being reduced to a status close to that of an animal, a lower form of being incapable of refined thought and summarized by the humiliating drum beat of a colonial stereotype: 'dirty nigger':

Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema... I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'"... My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning on that white winter day. (*Black Skin* 112)

For Fanon his body is “given back” to him by the racist as marked by a bizarre and threatening lack of coordination and of bodily deportment. The experience of his body that is returned to him evokes cannibalism, the ‘tom-tom’ and a popular advertisement for bananas from 1940s France. In an Irish context, there is a similar physical disjointedness at play in a web of performance practices characterized as pre-modern and associated with the racist stereotype of the Irish as simian-like and violent: from the weird ululations and performative bending movements of a keener at a funeral wake to the wild gesticulating gestures of a *sean-nós* dancer. In welcome and soothing contradiction to the colonized’s reputation for disjointed bodily movement, then, Ireland’s national theater project offered the reassuring impression of bodies moving in coordinated ‘natural’ movements. This was a theatre that would show that Irish bodies were capable of moving naturally: that is, that they were capable of moving productively in time.

For a postcolonial country the theatre of modernity offers a deeply attractive model of performance because it shows the body of the colonized not as distorted, grotesque and physically out of joint as it has been represented—in Ireland’s case “a home of buffoonery and easy sentiment”—but as capable of moving decorously and, thereby, of conforming to fundamental disciplines that are easily recognizable as ‘natural’ to a modern spectator. Unsurprisingly, the claim to emancipation is framed in the historical circumstances of its formulation. Thus, the postcolonial body is shown as capable of functioning productively insofar as it is shown as moving together in time with others. Moving together in time is, of course, a precondition for the organization of labor within a capitalist economy preoccupied with what is known as ‘Fordism,’ mechanized mass manufacturing that depends on a disciplined regimentation of the working body. To this degree, one might say that anti-colonial nationalism shows an abiding preoccupation with presenting the body of the colonized as ready and able for labor within capitalism. Further, and closely connected to this function, is the way in which the theatre of modernity consolidates the work/leisure dichotomy that is so central to such an economy. Riffing on the forgotten irony of the term ‘leisure industry,’ the German political theorist Theodor Adorno notes that the concept of ‘free time’ is simply “a continuation of the forms of profit-oriented social life” (189). The suspended clock time or ‘time out’ that is represented by the theatre audience’s experience of an evening’s leisure-time performance operates within an overarching and crucial frame of expectation: that by the time of the performance’s conclusion the audience will emerge from the experience re-calibrated to the regimen of a forward-moving capitalist economy. Adorno describes this as a widely accepted convention: “a behavioural norm of the bourgeois character... modes of behaviour proper to the domain of work, which will not let people out of its power, ... smuggled into the realm of free time” (189-90). “Being normatively ‘modern,’” writes the United States critic and queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman, “is a matter not only of occupying an imagined place at the new end of a sequence but also of living a coordinated, carefully syncopated tempo

between a quick time that seems to be enforced and a slow time that seems to be a matter of free choice" (xii). But for a country whose colonial history makes the experience of modernity seem always tantalizingly just out of arm's reach, the issue of the body moving properly in time is one of extraordinarily vital, visceral and troubling importance.

Moreover, with the longstanding tendency to think of colonized countries as backward and as infuriatingly lackadaisical about time ("Monday morning," as the narrator of Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* intones, is always in Ireland a long long way off), theatre restores cultural life to a more reliable and productive rhythm. Plays as diverse as J.M. Synge's *A Playboy of the Western World*, Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* or Brian Friel's *Translations* may be regarded as object lessons in how to move properly in time: diagnoses, that is, of what must be done in order to act productively in support of a modern capitalist economy. Irish drama, one could say, tends to bring its audiences to a point where they are better equipped to recognize the plenitude and scarcity of the present moment and the need, therefore, to move ever more speedily forward and to work harder with renewed and galvanized determination. With some notable exceptions—most prominently the theatre work of Samuel Beckett—speeding up in order to catch up is a key preoccupation of modern Irish theatre.

An important additional factor in assessing a postcolonial attachment to the theatre of modernity is this theatre's fundamental conditions of production. This dominant model of theatre not only rehearses and exhibits a readiness to work within a capitalist economy, but the manner in which we as spectators encounter the evening's theatrical performance entails an automatic disregard for those flagrantly exploitative and unjust aspects of labor within capitalism. The theatre of modernity, we could say, makes labor appear so effortless that—as labor—it evaporates into thin air. If the acting that we see taking place on stage looks like labor—if we see sweat pouring down the face of the actor or notice the actor forgetting her lines—we might want our ticket money back. This is bad theatre: it is the theatre of the amateur and not what we paid to see. A basic condition of production in the institutional theatre is to make labor look exactly like leisure. As Nicholas Ridout's recent brilliant analysis of this phenomenon makes clear, theatre is a place where work that is repetitive, exploitative and unequal is presented as freely given and as altogether free of injustice. Ridout's summary of the conditions of work that prevail in this kind of theatre is succinct:

[O]ne notes how the employee's time is regulated with rigorous force by bells and curtains, how both the rehearsal process and the nightly routine of performances are dominated by repetitive activity, how wage levels are set in structures of extreme differentiation, how these are maintained by a huge pool of surplus labour which renders effective industrial organization impossible, and how the core activity itself is both a metaphor of alienation and alienation

itself... The actor is both sign and referent of the wholly alienated wage slave.
(100)

Turning to the particular case of postcolonial theatre that we have been discussing—Ireland's national theatre at the Abbey—it should come as no surprise that in 1925, that is within three years of the establishment of the Irish Free State, the country's Cumann na nGaedhael government not only provided for an annual subsidy for Ireland's national theater but urged the rigorous 'professionalization' of its actors. For a government that at this time was intent on an accelerated rowing back on the insurrectionary militancy that had given rise to the foundation of the Irish Free State ten years previously and was intent simultaneously on presenting Ireland as fully and unproblematically capitalist (see Regan and Rubenstein), funding an institutionalized theatre of modernity had an immense ideological importance: it made the cruelties, economic deprivations and inequalities associated with labor in the Irish Free State all but disappear conceptually.

So far this essay has suggested that thinking critically about the theatre of modernity—the dominant model of theatre that is so attractive to postcolonial discourses of political emancipation—is important because it helps us to understand how liberation movements fall prey to counter-revolution. Post-independence Ireland in the 1920s is a case in point. But thinking philosophically about the conceptual basis of the theatre of modernity is just as important in the context of the current ruinously damaging social effects of a post-Fordist or neoliberal economic agenda. As numerous commentators have shown, the last thirty years have seen the relentless undermining of public services and welfare provision in order to facilitate an economic model of flexible accumulation and the free movement of capital. Left/Right political categories have dissolved and the state's interventionist role in relation to welfare provision has been transformed into an active facilitation and full-scale ideological support for a free-wheeling market economy. French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* document—in fastidious and melancholy detail—the entrenchment in France of a deregulated financial system, the growth of *precarité du travail* and the relentless transfer of risk from employers to employees. As the virtual non-commemoration in Ireland of the 1913 Dublin Lock Out shows and as the organizational disarray of the union movements in most European countries sadly demonstrates, 'labor' as a concept has a dying political purchase serving only, as an embarrassment to those political parties with the misfortune to be described as 'Labor'. Conceptually, 'labor' is a term drained of meaning and has been replaced by the category 'work'—an activity so all-consuming and so all-absorbing that it is presented as the natural essence of who you are in society and key indicator of your social contribution. In some countries to be unemployed—that is to be without paid labor—is to present yourself as the target of ribald caricature and demonization. The writer Rhian Jones provides a useful exposure of this in relation

to the United Kingdom (see Jones). Disablingly, writes the Italian theorist Paolo Virno, work in this neoliberal sense seems not only to have lost its visibility as paid labor but has absorbed the distinctive traits of political action.

Crucial to the disappearance of labor as a category and the breaking up or blurring of the visible distinctions between work and labor and between work and political action, Virno argues, is the concept of performance. Far from being the opposite of the subjunctive, imaginative world of the theatre—a sort of bad joke at the theatre’s expense—contemporary performance management discourse is parasitic of the theatre’s propensity to stretch out and expand limitlessly the menu of what might be possible in terms of capitalism’s demands on the worker. As anyone who has had even the most perfunctory encounter with performance management techniques will attest, managing a worker’s performance is about insisting that the worker simply cannot give enough. What is required of the worker, in fact, is a gymnastic and obedient virtuosity not dissimilar to the amazingly fast-moving and regimented movements of a *Riverdance* performer (see Monks). Performance management thus draws extensively on theatrical performance in order to position the worker in a constant state of ‘servile virtuosity’: an apparently limitless ability to improvise and to adjust to whatever the employer requires. Setting limits on one’s virtuosity at work or on the degree to which work can be allowed to mushroom exponentially in what used to be called one’s personal life is calibrated now as a lamentable lack of ambition, attracting incremental sanctions on career progression, up to and including dismissal. This condition of ‘servile virtuosity’, Virno concludes, describes neoliberalism’s “stubborn personalization of subjugation.”

Like the circumstances of the postcolonial, in other words, today’s performance management strategies offer an object lesson in the ideologically compromised character of the theatre of modernity and the way in which such a model of theatre actively hinders a programme of anti-capitalist political emancipation. Neoliberal regimes cherish this enlightenment model of theatre, even sometimes to the point of fevered sentimentality, as a repository of forms of cultural expression that are entirely compatible with the demands and exigencies of global capital. The importance of *Riverdance*, *the Show* to Celtic and Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland is a case in point. Neoliberalism reveres and supports the idea of the professional actor because a professional actor appears as living embodiment of a worker who does what she is told in any number of roles and situations; a potent figure of the somatic internalization of the laws of the market place. As Virno’s writings suggest, the professional actor is a model *par excellence* of that combination of obedience and virtuosity that is demanded of all workers within today’s service-oriented capitalist labor market.

Despite all of this, the virtuosity of an actor’s body in performance remains an important location for thinking radically and analytically about social relationships in a way that opposes neoliberalism’s project of economic and political totalitarianism. “The politics of theatre,” writes Hans-Thies Lehmann in *Postdramatic Theatre*, “is

a politics of perception” (185): that is, something not always noticeable as ‘politics’ but which involves a making strange of the way in which the world is experienced perceptually. Theatre and dance groups like ‘Forced Entertainment’ (UK), Maguy Marin (France), Theatre Club (Ireland), the Nature Theater of Oklahoma (USA), and many others, give increasing emphasis to the pool of ethical relationships and responsibilities that can be shared between performer and spectator in the theatre. They do so within the context of a knowing awareness of the operation of the theatre of modernity and its conventions within a capitalist economy. The brilliantly-named theatre company ‘Forced Entertainment’, for example, uses and parodies a variety of theatrical conventions partly to call attention to the ways in which the institutional theatre of modernity takes for granted a structure of exploitation (hence ‘forced’ entertainment) and partly in order to call attention to the ethical face-to-face encounter between actor and spectator which, uniquely, takes place in the theatre and thus can be used to reveal the processes by which we can find ourselves bound to conventions that work against our interest. Another common starting point for these theatre groups is a taking apart of the theatre of modernity either by ‘using language because it is wrong for the stage’ (see Costa) or by pursuing an interest in theatrical and performance forms that are home-made and anathema to high culture, like cabaret, stand up and amateur dramatics (see Bailes and Beaufallet). Performance today may be the darling of neoliberalism but there was never a more important time to work practically and theoretically for theatre.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Ed. J. M. Bernstein. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Bailes, Sara Jane. *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*. London: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Beaufallet, Ève. "Le Pouvoir Libéereur, Libidineux et Incontrollable de las Fiction: Entretien avec Tim Etchells." Program. *The Coming Storm*. Centre Pompidou, Paris. Oct. 2012.
- Brennan, Helen. *The Story of Irish Dance*. Dingle: Mount Eagle Publications, 1999. Print.
- Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2005. Print.
- Costa, Maddy. "'Theatre Is Awkward, Weird and Dirty': Nature Theatre of Oklahoma Head This Way." *The Guardian* 30 Apr. 2013. Web. 10 June 2013.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Les Damnés de la Terre*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte & Syros, 2002. Print.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. London: Penguin, 1990. Print.
- . *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto, 1986. Print.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- Gregory, Augusta. *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1972. Print.
- Jones, Rhian E. *Clampdown: Pop-Cultural Wars on Class and Gender*. Winchester: Zero, 2013. Print.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Monks, Aoife. "Comely Maidens and Celtic Tigers: Riverdance and Global Performance." *Goldsmiths Performance Research Pamphlets*. London: U of London, 2007. 1. Print.
- Pilkington, Lionel. *Theatre and the State in 20th Century Ireland: Cultivating the People*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2011. Print.
- Regan, John M. *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921-1936*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999. Print.
- Ridout, Nicholas. *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.
- Rubenstein, Michael. *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2010. Print.
- Virno, Paulo. "Virtuosity and Revolution." *16 Beaver*. 16 Beaver Group, 1 May 2004. Web. 10 June 2013.