

Post-Postmodern Theatre and Performance Studies:  
Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Pedagogy

Theatre in academia is struggling. It hasn't quite begun to sing its swan song yet but its wearisome jazz hands are looking awfully tired. Theatre and Performance Studies have been the red-headed step-children of the academy since their insertion into scholarly major-hood, but in recent years as the war on arts education has been tumultuously fought, they have struggled to keep their footing. In fact, the Association for Theatre in Higher Education's scholarly journal *Theatre Topics* just put out a special issue this year on "Theatre And/As Education" as a miniature call-to-arms for all theatre scholars and practitioners in the field of academics. Unlike Richard Schechner's 1992 lament for theatre in the academy<sup>1</sup> (or his slightly less pessimistic stance in 2000)<sup>2</sup>, *Theatre Topics* co-editor Gwendolyn Alker tentatively begins her preface to the journal with a discussion of the disciplinary divides she has personally witnessed within her own institution as well as within the field in general. "This special issue of *TT*" writes Alker, "attempts, among other things, to acknowledge, locate, and challenge some of these divides, as well as to record some of the excellent interdisciplinary work that is being done with theatre pedagogy."<sup>3</sup>

Although I celebrate the highly necessary intervention she and D.J. Hopkins (editor) are making in the field through their choice to highlight this struggle in a special issue, I aim to take their discourse a step further. By using the work of Jeffrey Nealon and Shannon Jackson as two sides of the same pedagogical coin, I hope to use this paper to propose a new way of thinking

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<sup>1</sup> Schechner, Richard. "A New Paradigm for Theatre in the Academy." *The Drama Review* 36, no. 4 (Winter, 1992): 7-10.

<sup>2</sup> Schechner, Richard. "Theatre Alive in the New Millenium." *The Drama Review* 44, no. 1 (Spring, 2000): 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Alker, Gwendolyn. "A Note From the Editor." *Theatre Topics* 25, no. 3 (September, 2015): 182.

about Theatre and Performance Studies within the academic institution—not as separate majors to be constantly compared to those in the math and science departments and divided from the rest of the arts and humanities, but as a pedagogical tool for a new kind of interdisciplinary educational system wherein all students (no matter their focus) receive a well-rounded liberal arts and sciences education.

### Theatre As It Is and As It Was

*“Life moves and changes and the theatre moves and changes with it.”*

–Robert Edmond Jones, *The Dramatic Imagination: Reflections and Speculations on the Art of Theatre*<sup>4</sup>

Although drama has been taught in English departments for decades, Theatre only entered into American academia as a full-blown major in the mid-1920s,<sup>5</sup> making it one of the youngest arts majors within the grand scheme of many academic institutions. Ever since its introduction to the university, theatre departments have been forced to prove their worth within the larger university system. Many programs are currently being downsized to minor concentrations and clubs or being synthesized into film and media studies. It has become a worry of many theatre departments as to how they will be able to continue funding their productions, their faculty, and their students. Such a constant battle for funding and validity would make anyone weary of joining up with even newer, fledgling programs (like the postmodern turn to a

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, Robert Edmond. *The Dramatic Imagination: Reflections and Speculations on the Art of Theatre*. New York, New York: Routledge, 2004. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Klein, Jeanne and Peter Zazzali. “Toward Revising Undergraduate Theatre Education.” *Theatre Topics* 25, no. 3 (September, 2015): 261.

Performance Studies curriculum or even the new trend towards interactive majors like Game Production/Design or Interdisciplinary Arts). Shannon Jackson writes at length about the institutional shift regarding Theatre and Performance. “While the scholarly rhetoric called for cultural inclusion under the performance umbrella, the institutional rhetoric sounded much more adversarial,” creating an opposition between the two areas and making the rift between the young majors decidedly harder to bridge.<sup>6</sup>

Theatre programs have made their mark in academia as a member of the performing arts—to be judged alongside established performance majors like Dance, Speech, and Music, sometimes even branching out into Visual and Studio/Installation Art departments. Theatre is described in the academy almost as if it is a skilled trade. Requiring virtuosity and discipline, theatre courses are most often taught by those who consider themselves theatre artists in their own right (not to be confused with the banal and conventional performances of everyday life preached by Performance Studies professors who are often solely scholars and professional audience members of theatre). Jackson calls this difference of practical and scholarly vocabulary a “conversational stall” between those “who-are-preoccupied-with-making” and “he-who-is-preoccupied-with-meaning.”<sup>7</sup>

This “stall” creates a disconnect between the two majors (Theatre and Performance Studies) that would be much better off in the academic waters if they were to start swimming together rather than on separate sinking life rafts. Theatre practitioners (those preoccupied with making) and Performance Studies scholars (those preoccupied with meaning) are consistently pushing against each other, despite their similar goals specifically within the university setting. To use academic lingo, the learning objectives for both majors revolve around the desire to craft

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<sup>6</sup> Jackson, Shannon. *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson, 111.

a conversation through the creation of a piece of performance art in a communal space that produces a lived experience and cultivates the minds of the audience into understanding and open-minded members of society.

In an essay featured in May 2011's edition of *Theatre Survey*, Marvin Carlson reproached this consistent separation of theatrical minds: "It is critical that whatever their future course, American university theatre programs must no longer allow themselves to be drawn into the ongoing antagonism between those who study the theater and those who create it." It was, he added, "a very easy trap to fall into when American professional theater moved into the university."<sup>8</sup> Joseph Roach even goes so far as to suggest that theatre studies has been doing performance studies all along.<sup>9</sup> Shannon Jackson completes this triumvirate with her refrain that Theatre and Performance Studies "sustain a network of disavowed connection and disavowed difference, an array of blindspots, synecdochic fallacies, and reinvented wheels. In such a complicated space, one scholar's experiment turns out to be another's tradition; one scholar's core comes back as another's periphery."<sup>10</sup>

Listening to the voices of Carlson, Roach, and Jackson, theatre artists and performance scholars alike can only move forward if they recognize their reliance on each other, despite their difference in vocabulary. Theatre programs can only become "legitimated" within the American university system through the scholastic work of performance scholars. Performance Studies programs can only exist if there are practical works of theatre and performance for them to expound upon. Perhaps, as Nealon proposes, scholars and practitioners within this praxis/scholastically-driven hybrid should be more focused "not [on] inventing anything new in

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<sup>8</sup> Carlson, Marvin. "Inheriting the Wind: A Personal View of the Current Crisis in Theatre Higher Education in New York." *Theatre Survey* 52, no. 1 (2011): 117-23.

<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Jackson, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, 77. Her thoughts here also pertain to the genre of Drama in Literature departments in conjunction with the fields of Theatre and Performance Studies.

terms of what art ‘is’ on a traditional register, but [on] inventing new questions, juxtapositions, [and] modes of provocation”<sup>11</sup> that would require both Theatre practitioners and Performance Studies scholars to work together as a team of experts in the varied areas of Theatre and Performance Studies.

With this common goal in mind, it seems as though the first step for Theatre and Performance Studies departments in the modern academic institution is to combine their efforts into one, broad, interdisciplinary major. Although some colleges and universities have already taken this necessary step (University of Maryland being an example), this will take some pushing and further communication between departments in many other schools. But in the capitalistically-driven American academic model, those who do not preach the bottom-line are usually the first on the chopping block. Theatre and Performance Studies do not aim to create reproducible goods or services, therefore their literal/financial worth is not as readily seen or understood in the grander academic scheme of things. By broadening the major to encompass all things theatrical, the Theatre and Performance Studies major has a much stronger chance of survival within the scholastic jungle.

### Not Your Mother’s Liberal Arts

*“In contemporary business-speak, we’re an operation with astonishing flexible specialization among its workforce of highly trained (yet hilariously underpaid) symbolic analysts, boasting multiple successful product lines (American history, government, literature, and politics, as well*

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<sup>11</sup> Nealon, Jeffrey T. *Post-Postmodernism Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 166.

*as Plato, ethnic and gender studies, and Shakespeare), and a broad-based constituency of loyal customers (no shortage of majors in the liberal arts).”*

*-Jeffrey T. Nealon, Post-Postmodernism:*

*Or: The Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism*<sup>12</sup>

Assuming that we are combining Theatre and Performance Studies into a hybrid major from here on out, this area of scholastic study will still be attempting to survive in an academic environment that is slowly starting to eliminate the arts and humanities in favor of focusing on the STEM majors.<sup>13</sup> The American university, whether we are ready to admit it or not, has become a capitalist factory in which students are the cogs and their production of information and intellectual goods is the commodity. As Nealon explains, “Economics has become the default setting for understanding virtually everything in our world,” and that includes academia.<sup>14</sup> If a major is not seen as economically viable, then it is erased. If a department is not producing the desired level of knowledge commodity, then it is disbanded. To speak plainly, theatre departments require a massive budget compared to those of many other arts majors and the payout isn’t always enough to break even. Economically speaking, the Theatre major consistently runs the risk of ending the semester in the red (unlike the Science department whose faculty and graduate students seem to have the time and ability to vomit new, easily commodified theorems ad nauseum).

To make matters even worse, there is, according to Shannon Jackson, an institutional feminization of the arts and humanities that forces them to constantly legitimize their existence within the grander scheme of masculinized American academics. “In addition to the spectre of

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<sup>12</sup> Nealon, 188.

<sup>13</sup> STEM being an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

<sup>14</sup> Nealon, 180.

feminized ornamentation and amateurism, in addition to the spectre of sexual inappropriateness,” Jackson writes, “theatre practice could also be associated with a kind of nurturing and unaccredited maternalism.”<sup>15</sup> Feminized subjects within the patriarchal ivory tower of academia are often understood as necessary evils—the general education courses used to create the image of well-rounded students, but not worth majoring in since these subjects rarely create commodities of economic worth or lead to careers with six-figure salaries.

In Nicholas Ridout’s book, *Passionate Amateurs*, he claims the necessity to looking at such feminized ornamentation and amateurism as a passionate and powerful mode of communication and community collaboration. Ridout writes of these passionate amateurs: “one opens oneself to the experience of encounters with others as marking simultaneously the limit of one’s self, and the place where one’s self, as such, is constituted, not by its integrity and individuality, but precisely by its appearance in relation to others.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, he proclaims the necessity for a communion—there is no way for an individual to survive on his own without the support of others, so why are we constantly separating ourselves from our fellow arts and humanities departments within the academic sphere?

The only way out of this predicament, according to Nealon, is to work *through* the dominant, patriarchal discourse to create our own space.<sup>17</sup> The tactic to accomplish this, I propose, is to make allegiances with the arts and humanities courses that are still considered necessary for general education purposes in all universities: Art, English, History, Languages, and Religion. As Jackson notes, all of these departments “have much more to do with each other than current conversations let on. Such terms function inconsistently at different times and

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<sup>15</sup> Jackson, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Ridout, Nicholas. *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Love, and Communism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Nealon, 174: “The only way out is through.”

different places; they are invoked out of convenience at moments when knowledges need re-organization or when vague institutional developments require some discursive support.”<sup>18</sup>

The perceived gaps between the major concentrations are not nearly as large as they are presented to be. After all, it is in the STEM majors’ best interest to stay on top rather than help to unite the arts and humanities. With that in mind, once an interdisciplinary bridge is built between all of these under-supported departments, the goal will no longer be to “legitimize” their existence, but to question the patriarchal institution of higher learning’s reluctance to fund and support the arts and humanities that create the leisure commodities that are consumed by those who are in the STEM majors.

Even though many of these departments are suffering their own attacks from the STEM-minded corporation that is American academia, these feminized areas are still thought to be important enough to require at least one course in each area from all students. Such general education requirements recall the mindset of the well-rounded student, a commodity in itself that is slowly being erased in favor of the specialized worker. What is consistently forgotten about Theatre and Performance Studies is that it is a unique conglomeration of all of these core general education courses-- but it also has roots in the almighty STEM curriculum (particularly in the areas of Technology and Engineering). Theatre and Performance Studies is a single major that requires students to be well-rounded artists, literature analysts, language experts, and religious, social, political, and economic historians. They are encouraged to engage in more than just performance practices—students of Theatre and Performance studies are often required to take courses in the design and technical aspects of the theatre as well, many of these courses pushing them into the accepted realms of technology, engineering, and general mathematical problem-solving of the STEM majors. For a student to be successful in this particular field of

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<sup>18</sup> Jackson, 77.



study, they must prove their skills in all of these areas—and compliance/support across the various arts and humanities fields would help to strengthen this mentality of a completely well-rounded student. From cross-listing courses to allowing credits from outside majors, I believe the next step in an overhaul of the entire academic institution is for all Arts and Humanities departments to start working together to secure their mutual futures in American academics.

### Performing Pedagogical Change

*“In sum, performance is about doing, and it is about seeing; it is about image, embodiment, space, collectivity, and/or orality; it makes community and it breaks community; it repeats endlessly and it never repeats; it is intentional and unintentional, innovative and derivative, more fake and more real. Performance’s many connotations and its varied intellectual kinships ensure that an interdisciplinary conversation around this interdisciplinary site rarely will be neat and straightforward. Perhaps it is time to stop assuming that it should be.”*

*-Shannon Jackson, Professing Performance:*

*Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*<sup>19</sup>

Theatre and Performance Studies is a multifaceted major that requires courses that can easily be cross-listed in other arts and humanities departments. It calls upon the basic necessities of communication and of textual analysis, of relationship development and of technical prowess. Most of all, this major is messy in all the right ways. It requires interpersonal skills and compromise, triumphs and failures, thinking spatially and emotionally. Theatre and Performance

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<sup>19</sup> Jackson, 15.

Studies involves teaching those who create and those who consume how to live and think more critically.

But this versatility does not limit itself to just Theatre and Performance Studies—it is palpable in the fields of Literature, Philosophy, History, Art, and Religion as well. Using the analogy of “synergy” within English departments, Nealon explains that “while English has large investment holdings in reading literary theory and teaching writing, it simultaneously has investments in a lot of other diversified markets. This is not chaos or intellectual incoherence,” he continues, “but a diversified investment strategy, with each investment intimately connected to all the others.”<sup>20</sup> Students and faculty members in all arts and humanities departments housed within a truly Liberal Arts University environment walk a fine line between specialist and generalist, or, to borrow from Ridout once more, passionate amateur. “Spurred by the emphasis on specialization and by a university structure that rewarded disciplinary distinction in both senses of the word,” cites Jackson, “generalism could be greeted with suspicion and, like the term ‘amateur,’ could connote vagueness and imprecision. Of course,” she goes on to say, “the term specialist depended upon the concept of generalist in order for the rigor of the former or the expansiveness of the latter even to be registered.”<sup>21</sup> This pitting of specialists and generalists against one another does nothing more than continue to separate departments from the inside-out.

Terms like “the authority on,” “expert in the field of,” and “various research interests include” denote a very particular vocabulary of institutionalized power. Such terms lead to in-fighting between those who are considered “specialists” and those titled “generalists.” There is a power in being the “expert” with the most in-depth knowledge of a very specific subject, but that “expert” can only teach one or two very specific courses. Although “generalists” have more

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<sup>20</sup> Nealon, 189.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, 18.

of a breadth of knowledge, their abilities are highly valued in the academic economics of a struggling department—they can be asked to teach many courses in many areas branching from introductory courses to specialized senior-level seminars.

Removing the power structure of “specialist” versus “generalist,” we can get down to the core—what are we focused on learning, how is that focus impacted by the surrounding context, and why is this focus important for our students to understand? The questions we ask our students shape and shift their knowledge—by opening up their focused passions to encompass the surrounding influences and contextualizations, they gain a fuller understanding (a breadth) of their focus that helps them to better understand it in greater depth. Creating a middle ground between “amateur” and “expert,” we can instead have faculty members and students who have a particular focus in an area or two, but who are also well-rounded in various other areas of their discipline so as to better be able to contextualize their focus and relate to other members of the department outside their chosen realms. Changing the questions we ask ourselves and our students about their liberal arts education is the first step towards really re-thinking the way the Arts and Humanities can continue to exist within the current American academic environment so focused on the quantity of commodity rather than the quality of communication and humanistic knowledge.

### Interdisciplinarity: Or, Ways to Overthrow Our Future Robot Overlords

*“Innovation—it’s what the humanities do.”*

*-Jeffrey T. Nealon, Post-Postmodernism:*

*Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nealon, 192.

In current academic discourse, students are rarely rewarded for thinking humanistically; they are asked only to *think* critically—pushing the dialectic of mind over body to the limits. The function of the mind to create more (commercially viable) knowledge commodity is the key to surviving academia while the understanding of the body as a physical, emotional, and spiritual thing is no longer considered a necessary skill. Martha Nussbaum perhaps says it best in her book *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*:

...Educators for economic growth will do more than ignore the arts. They will fear them. For a cultivated and developed sympathy is a particularly dangerous enemy of obtuseness, and moral obtuseness is necessary to carry out programs of economic development that ignore inequality. It is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you have never learned any other way to see them.<sup>23</sup>

Scholars and practitioners of Theatre and Performance Studies make their living off of the ability to treat people as complex identities. Yes, they often manipulate their audiences into feeling some sort of emotion or understanding some new idea, but the overall goal is the same: we're all still human and we all have basic human needs and desires. Through the creation of theatre productions and performance art pieces, students in this field of study are forced to think innovatively and creatively—formulating entertainment that also has a message for the general population.

Although all departments in the Arts and Humanities are unique (and must learn how to articulate their uniqueness), I believe that, contrary to Nealon's ideas, departments banding together is more important than "prov[ing] that it exists in profound *contrast* with the kind of

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<sup>23</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 23.

thing done by members of other enterprises (history, sociology, statistics).”<sup>24</sup> Instead, I hypothesize that showcasing the importance of each department in *comparison* to one another is more useful in academic institutions as a way to highlight the ways in which these under supported departments are critical to the inner workings of the university system as a whole. These departments are much more than Intro to Theatre, Composition I, Intro to Art History, and the many other foundational courses that are often required of the student body to fulfill the façade of a liberal arts education. We are more than a training facility for the basic tools students need to become more marketable or commodifiable in their chosen STEM majors.

Furthermore, the ability to think about a wide range of cultures and various groups within the larger context of the global economy and of global history is imperative in this increasingly globalized society. Nussbaum goes so far as to say that such skills are “crucial in order to enable democracies to deal responsibly with the problems we currently face as members of an interdependent world.”<sup>25</sup> Without empathy, without interpersonal skills, the American student outside of the university setting would not be able to add to society as easily without consultation. The awareness and knowledge of cultural identities and histories around the world is incredibly important as the world continues to not only include the physical, but also the virtual space around us—highlighting newer power structures that must be delicately dealt with outside of the university borders.

Cultural and historical knowledge isn’t the only thing provided by the Arts and Humanities as disciplines worth supporting. Creativity and innovation within English and History and Art and Theatre and Performance Studies majors, is the key to any chance of competitiveness within the larger academic structure (if competitiveness is what is necessary for

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<sup>24</sup> Nealon, 185. My emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum, 10.

survival). Such skills, fostered primarily within the arts and humanities departments, are a necessity within the fields of general scientific, engineering, and medical research. These skills not only help to advance our society, but they are part of what makes us undeniably human. “Indeed,” claims Nealon, “as robotic technology increasingly takes over most vocational branches of skills work... the virtual, seemingly misty and ethereal abilities that the humanities trade in (thinking, innovating, problem solving) look like they will in fact be the only economically viable human commodity of the future.”<sup>26</sup>

### A New Academy

*“If we do not insist on the crucial importance of the humanities and the arts, they will drop away, because they do not make money. They only do what is much more precious than that, make a world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as full people, with thoughts and feelings of their own that deserve respect and empathy, and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favor of sympathetic and reasoned debate.”*

*-Martha C. Nussbaum, Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities<sup>27</sup>*

Unfortunately, I’m afraid that concerns over job security and the power relations already built into the academic system will tempt faculty members of privilege to continue to work within this flawed and biased system so that they can continue to benefit from it. Perhaps I am naïve to hope that the genuine concern for students’ well-rounded, liberal arts educations and desire for the Arts and Humanities to thrive in the American university system would and should

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<sup>26</sup> Nealon, 193.

<sup>27</sup> 143

trump the financial desires of the academic elite. Maybe I should only invest my future academic work in interdisciplinary, counter-cultural institutions like Reed College or Visva-Bharati University who are already ahead of the curve I am only beginning to outline in this paper. Or maybe, just maybe, enough of my fellow colleagues will join faculties and together we can learn to play the institutional game and work to revolutionize the importance of Arts and Humanities departments in the American university system—not in adversarial opposition to STEM majors, but in healthy, cooperative addition to them.

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