

THREAT IS DEEP

NEW WORDS FOR POETS THEATER

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Talking around a tradition of Poets Theater would inevitably extend to an inclusion of contemporary practitioners, possibly making clear how Poets Theater operates today (and why). Yet, as is the case with many texts that seek both a cultural context and an aesthetic resonance in a space more peripheral to—if not utterly outside—history, it's worthwhile to look at the art just as it stands now, especially if the term "Poets Theater" is an eyesore, a headache, or otherwise tiring for no particular reason. But perhaps I am only delaying talk of this tradition because in fact I am interested in *poetry* as well as *theater*. I'm interested in poetic lineage and theatrical history. Separately. Enough about me! Conceptually, "Disorder, mental, strikes me; I /...though the observers appear clear"¹ fits well the task of bringing the two genres/disciplines together. The use of *genres* pointing to ideas, *disciplines* to practice. Typically, American Poets Theater is composed of volunteers, makeshift sets, and a hint of magical un-expertise (cultivated sloppiness?). And a survey of the active history and sophisticated *mise-en-scène* of such Poets Theater might emphasize the following moments: Bunny Lang and Frank O'Hara at Harvard in the 1950s, sets by Edward Gorey; the Fluxus movement, "happenings," and productions from The Living Theater in the 1960s; the year 1964 for LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), which saw the Obie award—winning "Dutchman," among his other drama; Pedro Pietri's amazing "The Masses Are Asses," which premiered in New York in 1974; plays mounted by the San Francisco Poets Theater from 1979-1985;² a continuum of this Bay Area tradition at Small Press Traffic, often coordinated by the likes of Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy; BAM audiences throwing tampons at the stage during "The Birth of the Poet," a Kathy Acker/Richard Foreman opera in 1985; and Fiona Templeton's *You the City*, a play attended by one person at a time (text published by Roof Books in 1990). This list leaves much out, notably the trajectories of Cocteau, Beckett, and Stein. For language is the most calculated understatement of the years. Everyone writing plays disrupts linearity through language, yeah? And utopic texts like the 1950s' radio dramas of Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann reflected society's corruptive desire for social order through the lyrical heights of language (and the actions of murderous squirrels, who act as harbingers of death for those couples doomed to love thoroughly³...a transgressive act!).

Bachmann's work in this media is sure apt for an undertaking of Poets Theater now. What radio drama seems to compel best is the imagination, as poetry does. According to radio theorist Andrew Crisell, all the signs in radio are auditory: they use time, and not space, as their primary structuring agent.⁴ "But there is an important difference between words which are written or printed on a page and words on the radio, and that is that words on the radio are always and unavoidably spoken." In Becket-

tian terms, speaking = uttering. Uttering relates personality, in theater? (“Personality is one of the scatter-effects of Character”⁵). Certainly in radio. If I hear a French accent, there’s a character. In theater, character is a fun default. It’s equally as easy in a poetic project to feel like *focusing on* language, and *making absentee* person. Rodrigo Toscano’s recent book, *Collapsible Poetics Theater*, demonstrates his “body movement poems,” “modular activities” and “poetics theater plays” on the page, a more central element to the CPT (not only a book title) than we realize: the physical page—in performance—is played with, relied upon, dropped, flown, and generally centralized. Toscano is energized for the *making*, *undoing*, and certainly *collapsing* of a theater treated for the social body. Terms are not thrown about loosely. In Phase I of CPT, Toscano indirectly re-terms: “character” and “actor” become “entity,” the “stage” becomes a “contact-zone” and the “cast” a “contact-group.” An equilibrium between players/entities is established, though “*the threat* of each entity completely re-routing or even scuttling a given reading—through intentionally fucked up intonations of a given text—remains constant.”⁶ What’s incredible is that Poets Theater is a threat to order, and that entities are threats to equilibrium. Threat is deep; even multiplicity is still threatening. Polyvocal pieces are more and more prevalent among poets and playwrights, hinting at our efforts to equalize (provoking discomfort with lack of distinction), create cacophonies of sound, resist traditional structural modes, etc. What follows from an effort to equalize is the dissolving of individual character traits. In much current writing, for instance, characters A, B, and C might variably have nervous legs, low IQs, or violet auras or not—but often they are *types* who witness strangeness in a place (the theater) meant to show something. As Toscano writes of his “Poetics Theater”: “As time and space are also not treated in a realist mode in PT (there being no ‘characters’ to grid onto it, no ‘psychological’ reactions to massage per say), how could ‘situations’ like ‘situation at the scaffold’ ‘touch us’?”

For Toscano, utterance is used as a rhythmic device which endows each utterer with a “tempo-power,” as he calls it. I want a tempo-power. Work that emphasizes pacing and language among entities can seem to disregard the humanity or flux of the individual (a Marxist tale). Toscano’s use of the page-in-hand is the link, however, from text to body. A drama-theory text I once encountered suggested that a director uninterested in character might pin a pink or red construction-paper heart on each performer’s chest—a corny reminder that you’re working with a physical being. But a shift occurs when internalized rhythm extends to physicality: we move from situational (or psychological) entertainment to rhythmic or perceptual spectatorship (new ways of viewing). This effect, in some cases, makes dance-theater and movement-based work all the more poetic than language-based work. My desire for a tempo-power is spectatorship lending itself to participation. See “Eco-Strato-Static” from CPT:

Is anybody coming?
 I see somebody.
Somebody coming?
 Somebody coming.
Say something.
 What?
 HELP.
 Okay.
What’s happening now?
 They’re talking to me about an innovative product.
What is it?
 Some kind of art-thing.
Can it be fashioned into a lever, or a ramp?

I'll ask'em.
What do they say?
"Depends on how you look at it."

Sure, this excerpt is a dry look at the Duchamp room, or at bottom, an atypical "dialoguing" that considers art, commerce, functionality, witlessness, media saturation, and so on. What it also does is incite performance. Look at the roll of pronouns: anybody, I, somebody, somebody, somebody, something, they, me, it, it, I, 'em, they, you, it. Not specters exactly, but inviting reminders of personage and objecthood. We've been here, said it, will say it again, or a line like it, let's ask for help, let's go to the sidewalk and look across the street, or let's do that and remember what we said and saw, and then find a stage and some people to watch us; let's invite them to look at this thing, not for destabilization necessarily, but to be the silent butler.

We are dealing with the actionable mind and heart then, I keep reminding myself. The physical stage unifies mind, time and space. Mac Wellman: "Drama takes place in phase space. The continuum of phase-space is to time as time is to space. Theatricality takes place, as it were, perpendicular to time, along the phase-space continuum. We do not know what we are doing."⁷ Easy (in this essay-writing, in making a stance) is a linguistic divestment—re-termining, as Wellman and Toscano have done. The words we have for theater get in our way; they become restrictive. Look at "scene" — "poetry scene" and "theater scene" tend to both envelop and smother work before it's started. A scene is where we go to be touched? Or as Toscano might write, we go to be served ("The CPT is vomit-sick of serving people"). If an audience expects to be served (emotionally or otherwise) and Toscano's Poetics Theater is an attempt to rewire and rein in, or group together the persons on- and offstage, then what's onstage must divorce entertainment and pursue new forms. "Character," "voice," "motivation," "situation," "setting"—even "world," "stage," "direction," "production," "dramaturgy," "vision," "relationship"—I'm like, pacing around them, OK, say I know that replacement is not solution, as new terms are also vulnerable...what I'd rather talk around is that "phase-space." Those practicing Poets Theater in new incarnations all over Chicago, New York, and still, San Francisco, might think constantly about duration and *threat*—be it formal economy or extension, "scene" phases and their relation to currents in political and domestic life, and timeliness, tiredness, and/or popularity of this hybridity itself. Interest in the two genres colliding is also appearing in reverse. Playwrights like Kristen Kosmas, Jenny Schwartz, and the experimental members of Joyce Cho;⁸ the resurgence of interest in British playwright Sarah Kane; poet Ariana Reines's turn as playwright in her Obie-award-winning "Telephone;" anthologies like *New Downtown Now*;⁹ and the productions of avant-garde-theater stalwart Richard Maxwell all point to what I suspect is a larger group of theater artists focusing on a fluctuating, textual deformation of the play.

Notes

¹ Edwin Denby, "Disorder, mental, strikes me; I," *Complete Poems*, Ed. Ron Padgett, New York, Random House, 1986.

² See *Hills 9: Plays and Other Writing*, Ed. Bob Perelman, Berkeley, CA, 1983, for plays by Alan Bernheimer, David Bromige, Jean Day, Rae Armantrout, Bob Perelman, and others.

³ Ingeborg Bachmann, "Good God of Manhattan," Trans. Lillian Friedburg. *Three Radio Plays*. Ariadne Press, Riverside, CA, 1999.

⁴ Andrew Crisell, *Understanding Radio*, London: Methuen, 1986.

⁵ Mac Wellman, "Speculations," *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008.

⁶ Rodrigo Toscano, "PT as seen through CPT," unpublished early essay draft, 2008.

⁷ Wellman.

⁸ www.joycecho.org

⁹ *New Downtown Now*, edited by Mac Wellman and Young Jean Lee, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006.