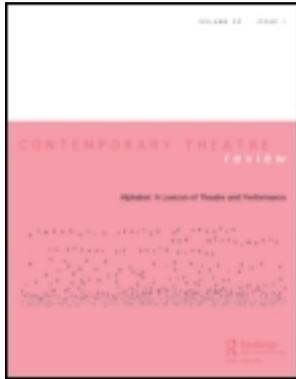


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Contemporary Theatre Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gctr20>

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Published online: 04 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: Claire MacDonald (2014) Performance and the Writing Life: A Conversation with Bonnie Marranca, Contemporary Theatre Review, 24:2, 262-271, DOI: [10.1080/10486801.2014.885899](https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2014.885899)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2014.885899>

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# Performance and the Writing Life: A Conversation with Bonnie Marranca

Claire MacDonald

The New York-based writer and editor Bonnie Marranca has a unique voice in modern American arts and letters. As a writer she has championed the experimental tradition in theatre and performance for more than 35 years. As an essayist she has consistently explored form in relation to artistic experiment. As a publisher she and her former husband Gautam Dasgupta began, in the 1970s, to shape a publications list including translations from the European avant-garde as well as the newest and most radical American theatre texts. As editor of *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* she has brought the voices of countless artists and writers to the page in interviews and articles and fostered critical writing in dialogue with theatre and art making. The book list, the more than 100 issues of the journal, and her own extensive writings, now constitute an archive of national and international importance.

Over the course of a long afternoon in the late fall of 2011, I recorded a talk with her at her downtown apartment close to the Hudson River. The occasion was prompted by the imminent publication of the 100th issue of *PAJ*, as well as by the Excellence in Editing Award for Sustained Achievement which had been recently given to her by ATHE (Association for Theatre in Higher Education). It seemed an appropriate moment to uncover the narrative of her own writing life in the changing context of New York's art world. We don't think as much about the way in which responsive, public writing interacts with the life of

the arts, as we do about the practice of art itself, yet Bonnie Marranca's life-work exemplifies the same interest in form, experience, and expression as the artists about whom she has written, and with whom she shares cultural roots. Cosmopolitan, eclectic, and yet focused on the trajectory of the modern performing arts through one highly charged locale, New York, her work sits at the cross-roads of scholarship, contemplation, and public criticism. The interview explores connections within her work and considers the way in which it has developed in conversation with artists in and around New York, bringing to light her continuing interest in spirituality, ecology, and modernism, the cross-connections between the avant-garde and popular culture in America, and her interests in writing, voice, and the essay.

**Claire MacDonald:** *I want to begin by thinking about your development as an essayist and as a writer and go right back to the days of your early reading. Were there books in your house? Was there music?*

**Bonnie Marranca:** Music is really my great love. I come from a family who are all great music lovers. My father sang all the time, popular standards of the kind that Frank Sinatra might sing. My mother played the piano. My parents bought me a piano when I was five years old, and I eventually took lessons. I didn't actually go to the theatre until I was in high school when the class went to see *A Man for All Seasons* but as a child I saw amateur shows, neighborhood dance recitals, and musical evenings. I grew up at a time when there were really

wonderful television shows and variety shows with singers: Frank Sinatra; Judy Garland; Nat King Cole; Dean Martin; the *Ed Sullivan Show*. It was also a time, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when performers from vaudeville and burlesque and some of the great comics were still on TV – Sid Caesar; Ernie Kovacs; Jimmy Durante; Phil Silvers; Burns and Allen; Milton Berle; Red Skelton; Sophie Tucker. I've always been very interested in singers in particular, and in performance styles, and my sense of involvement with performance was shaped early on by being able to see all the great performers that my family watched on television. We all loved entertainment. I can't recall if there were books in the house, though we were always read to as children. I don't recall being a great reader in grammar school or high school. I was playing outside all the time with the neighborhood kids.

**CM:** *How did the interest in writing arise? Was it when you went to college?*

**BM:** I was the sports editor of my high school paper – it was an all-girls school – so I was doing some writing then but I don't really have an answer for how I got interested in writing, or why. I didn't know any writers, I didn't have any relatives who were writers or intellectuals. I had very traditional family. Nobody was in the arts.

**CM:** *As a girl in England I remember that one of my aunts gave me a book of James Thurber's when I was 13. It was so different from anything I had read that I remember realizing with a shock what a huge world of writing there was out there. Did you have any of those experiences in your teens?*

**BM:** When I was about 14 or 15 my mother gave me *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and that has had a tremendous effect on my life. I've often thought about the fact that had she lived she would have been one of the great women writers of Europe. I was struck looking at her original diaries by how much she had edited them, even while she was in hiding, and you could see the markings crossed out on the page. I also remember vividly around the same time reading a book by Françoise Sagan.

**CM:** Was it *Bonjour Tristesse*?

**BM:** Yes, I think so – probably.

**CM:** *They are each an adolescent's view of the world.*

**BM:** In a way, they have the intellectual seriousness and the more sensual side that appeal to me.

**CM:** *You come from an Italian family. What about Italian culture and Catholicism, were they influential? I know you studied Latin in college.*

**BM:** I studied Latin for seven years and had planned to be a Latin teacher. It was probably my study of Latin that propelled me to being a writer. I

entered college as a Latin major and only changed in my Junior year. I loved working with words and I loved the elegance of Latin. Many years ago I remember Richard Schechner telling me that my phrasing is very 'Latinated', but I also model my writing on music. I'm very concerned with the primacy of the voice in writing, that it's a speakable language. I like to have the notion of the intimacy of the voice in writing, and that comes from a certain kind of rhythm that I work on in the sentences, and very much in how sentences move from one to the other and how they're constructed. It's all very musical in my way of working.

**CM:** *That's a big theme in American twentieth-century poetics: how to get that clear vernacular voice. I think about your interest in Gertrude Stein. I've always thought that you were also mistress of the sentence. Thinking in terms of Latin, you also have quite a valedictory style. Your recent essay on trees and Robert Wilson, in the book on his Watermill foundation,<sup>1</sup> has you almost coming forward to address the reader directly. It's very economical, very clear, very much part of your approach. I wonder if you are saying that an interest in editing and writing arose at the same time.*

**BM:** I don't know that I had a consciousness of that in high school. I should mention though that I was an editor in college and started the drama and arts page of the college paper. I started reviewing then, in my Junior year. That's around 1968.

**CM:** *You went to Montclair State in New Jersey. Were those teachers influential, or was it later, when you came to graduate school, that these things came together?*

**BM:** I think it was probably my adolescent interest in writing that may have fused in college. I had supportive teachers in the English department where I eventually switched after going out of the Latin department. At that time, a degree included music appreciation and art appreciation classes, the novel and poetry, philosophy, history, science. I can't explain why I suddenly decided that I could be a reviewer or how I came to start the drama and arts page on the college paper but I was always interested in all forms of what I regarded as serious art or entertainment. My tastes were very eclectic. I would write about Judy Garland whom I went to see at Seton Hall University then. I would also write about shows at La MaMa that I would come in to New York and see. My interests were always in

1. Bonnie Marranca, 'Tree Lines', in *The Watermill Center: A Laboratory for Performance*, ed. by José Enrique Macián, Sue Jane Stoker, and Jörn Weisbrodt (Stuttgart: Daco Verlag, 2011), pp. 18–23.

writing about music or performance and I started to go to theatre in college since Montclair State was so close to New York City. I would often come in Saturday night and I would see a 7 o'clock and a 10 o'clock show, and maybe a matinee the next day. At that time there were many things, like the Al Carmine's Judson musical, *In Circles*, based on a Gertrude Stein play. I remember seeing *Tom Paine* and early stagings of *Hair*, before it really came to be a full show. I saw the Alvin Nikolais dance company. I saw early Pinter premieres like *The Birthday Party*.

**CM:** *Were you taking notes? Did you keep a performance journal?*

**BM:** No. I've never kept journals because I've always tried to cultivate my memory. I never wanted to feel that when I came home from an event I'd be forced to sit down and write about it. When I finished college I worked for a very famous Broadway press agent, Max Eisen, whose office was in the Sardi building right in the heart of the Broadway district.

**CM:** *And then you went to CUNY, the City University of New York?*

**BM:** There's one big element that also fits in here. In the last semester of my senior year, in 1969, I went to the University of Copenhagen and lived abroad for six or seven months. I lived with a Danish family, attended the university and then stayed on in Europe for a few months after that. During that time I began to see opera, dance, and visual arts and theatre wherever I could, in many different countries. That experience really cultivated my ongoing interest in the arts and gave me a tremendous reservoir of experience. I came back to New York and worked several months to save money to go back to Europe, and I went back again in 1970 for five months. I had gotten myself a work permit to stay on in London after my travels on the Continent, and, believe it or not, one of the clerical jobs I had was at Johnny Walker. For a short while I even had an apartment at Redcliffe Gardens. I went often to the museums and theatre in London, and I recall vividly Ingmar Bergman's production, which he later disowned, with Maggie Smith as Hedda Gabler. She had a long black dress and came all the way downstage at the end and held a revolver to her head. So I had a lot of exposure to European culture and great works of art my first two years in Europe.

**CM:** *Can you remember some of the things you were seeing?*

**BM:** I saw quite a lot of the Royal Danish Ballet because I was right in Copenhagen, and museums in Denmark and Sweden. I saw the major art

collections in Rome and Florence. I was in Berlin, at that time, in Athens, in Paris, in London, Vienna, and Barcelona. I hitchhiked around Europe, too. At this time I became very aware of architecture, which is also a big interest of mine.

**CM:** *This is less than a decade before you began to write some really groundbreaking accounts of what was happening in the performance culture of the United States. In terms of the development of taste, was this period also a beginning of an interest in the avant-garde?*

**BM:** I had that proclivity in college, though I can't exactly tell you where it came from because I had a very traditional upbringing. In college, on my own I started to explore Off-Off Broadway, the museums and music. I always gravitated towards very experimental things but I must say I also loved Broadway musicals. I saw the original productions of so many of the great musicals of the late 1960s and 1970s, for example, *Hello, Dolly!*, *Funny Girl*, *Follies*, *Company*, *Sweet Charity*, *Applause*, *Mame*. I loved that kind of work, too, because I really admire virtuosity.

**CM:** *You and I have talked about this in relation to New York artists – Meredith Monk, whose mother was a popular radio artist, or Joan Jonas who talks about the influence of television shows. Perhaps that's something that hasn't really been talked about – the American avant-garde's eclecticism, its multiple roots – everything from Yiddish theatre to vaudeville to radio to TV. The avant-garde is very multi-influenced in the USA.*

**BM:** I think so. If you recall in the *Einstein on the Beach* documentary,<sup>2</sup> Bob Wilson has a segment in which he talks about Jack Benny and how he held his arms in a way that was perfect for the small television screen frame. I think many of us who are now in our 60s and 70s would have seen the great era of television when so many of the performers who created the American musical, comedy, and the popular song tradition were very available to us.

**CM:** *There's also a sense that downtown New York is a small city in itself in which you run across artists because they live and work here, and I wonder if that was also true that quite early on in your career you were beginning to meet artists. When did you meet Bob Wilson, for instance?*

**BM:** Around 1973 was the first time I saw Wilson's work, *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*. PAJ was started in 1976, and I was already a critic

2. *Einstein on the Beach: The Changing Image of Opera*, dir. by Robert Wilson (PBS, 1985).

for the *SoHo Weekly News*. When I was going to graduate school and living in New York I was writing for magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Crawdaddy*, *Downbeat*, *Stereo Review*. I was writing a lot of record reviews and I did many interviews with pop and rock singers. I gradually shifted to the experimental scene and, by the early and mid-1970s, I began to write about Richard Foreman's work and Mabou Mines. That's the period I began to know them, and Wilson. I began to write about downtown work but I also wrote about plays by European writers and new American works. It was Carl Weber's production of Peter Handke's *Kaspar* that drew me toward theatre as well.

**CM:** *Remind me of the years you were in graduate school.*

**BM:** I went to Hunter College in the MA program in Theatre around 1972 where I studied with the great Harold Clurman, one of the founders of the Group Theatre, and I also took a class with Lillian Hellman. Then I moved over to the CUNY Graduate Center for PhD studies. I took leave in 1976. Both Gautam Dasgupta and I were students there and married in 1975. We were also both writing for the *SoHo Weekly News*. I was going to do my dissertation on Mabou Mines, and Gautam was going to do his on Robert Wilson. We actually did all of the course work and exams, and we just never did the dissertations.

**CM:** *You started a publishing house instead.*

**BM:** *PAJ* was started in 1976. New York was a great time in the 1970s. Downtown in cafés and theatres, people were having serious conversations about art and politics and culture. It was an era when many of the alternative spaces were founded, like The Kitchen, Artists' Space, Franklin Furnace, The Idea Warehouse, the Drawing Center, and many of the magazines and publications – *Avalanche*, *Art-Rite*, *October*, *The Fox* – and also on the Lower East Side, clubs like Pyramid, Club 57, and The Mudd Club. In these worlds – both the theatre and the visual arts world – I had the opportunity to meet many of the major figures who have now been brought into performance history. Besides the artists I mentioned earlier, I am thinking of artists like Carolee Schneemann, Joan Jonas, Trisha Brown. I was fortunate enough to meet them at an earlier point in their lives and to be able to have them write for the journal or be written about or interviewed. Kaprow was another one, and Yvonne Rainer, Alison Knowles, and Dick Higgins. Many of them created the foundations of video art and performance.

**CM:** *I would also like to ask you about people like Andrzej Wirth and Daniel Gerould, the teachers that*

*you had at CUNY, people who came to New York from another period of European intellectual life. It has often seemed to me that they were formative for you.*

**BM:** At CUNY I was fortunate enough to have studied with Daniel Gerould [he died in February 2012]. He was a translator of French, Polish, and Russian, and brought a wealth of knowledge to courses on dramatic structure, melodrama, tragicomedy – genre courses that are perhaps not taught so much anymore – but with Dan you really learned how to take a play apart. We were also exposed to twentieth-century European literature, and in particular to regions of the world that were not so much a part of the general curriculum, such as Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. Dan's method of teaching dramatic structure is something that I have retained, and I base my note-taking still on that kind of methodology, which is very formal and very structural. When I begin a writing project and take notes, I probably take them in the same form that I took them as a student trying to understand a play. I can use this for performance as well, so that was very formative. Andrzej Wirth, who has been a great part of my European experience, left Poland and taught in American universities in the 1960s and 1970s, a brilliant intellectual who survived the Warsaw uprising and was educated in the underground during that period as a young man. Andrzej was also a professor at CUNY for a few years, and in his class we learned early on in the 1970s about Heiner Müller. In fact, it was Andrzej who introduced the idea of the post-dramatic, long before the Hans-Thies Lehmann book – Lehmann was a student of his. Andrzej Wirth later went back to Europe and started the now famous theatre institute in Geissen, where for the first time in a German university theory and practice were brought together. Andrzej brought Bob Wilson, Heiner Müller, John Jesurun, and other artists to work with students. Out of that program came many of the people who have created the contemporary German theatre. I'm thinking of the playwright René Pollesch, also Gob Squad, Rimini Protokoll, She She Pop, and there are others in literature and filmmaking, too, so it became extremely influential as a new model of education within the German system.

**CM:** *Andrzej Wirth and Daniel Gerould wrote and translated for PAJ as well. You drew very much on the contiguity to European thought, didn't you?*

**BM:** Dan, as a matter of fact, edited several anthologies for us, for example on international symbolist drama and on American melodrama. He

brought so much of the Polish literature into being in our publications, plays by Rosewicz, Witkiewicz, Russian plays. It's incalculable what someone like Dan Gerould has done for the creative foundation and expansion of what we know of as the modern theatre, in terms of his translation and his anthologizing.

**CM:** *It's extraordinary to hear that history, and I now want to turn to your own contribution as one of our great critics, and to that formative moment for many of us in the English-speaking world when we began to read Bonnie Marranca, which was around the time of The Theatre of Images. You've described for me the moment when you really began to see something different happening in New York and to write about it. Can you think back to that moment and why it was so important to you to write about and publish that first book and that analysis?*

**BM:** By the early and mid-1970s I'd already had substantial European experience and in New York I had followed visual art and dance and performance on a regular basis. I went to some of the Philip Glass concerts that he gave over the course of a year at the Idea Warehouse in Tribeca, where probably all of his audience in the world fit in one room. Around this time I also saw Richard Foreman's *Pain[t]* and *Vertical Mobility* for the first time, and things like Mabou Mines's *Red Horse Animation*. I was already familiar with the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, and The Performance Group, and I had seen Jack Smith, Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, and Robert Ashley performances, which are historic now. I began to think about how all this fit together. It worked out in a strange way. I had reviewed a book in *Crawdaddy*, Karen Malpede's *The People's Theatre in America*, about the political theatre at that time. I also published in *Arts and Society* and *Michigan Quarterly Review*. I was writing for another paper before the *SoHo Weekly News*, which was called *Changes*, a radical downtown paper on arts and politics, edited by Sue Graham, who was the wife of the legendary jazz musician Charles Mingus.

The publisher of the Malpede book, Ralph Pine of Drama Book Specialists, contacted me after he read my review in a magazine and invited me to lunch. We got to know each other and one day on my way to class I stopped by his office to say hello, and I gave him an idea for a book – I even suggested who should do the book – and he said to me, 'Why don't you do it?' That's how I came to get that contract for *The Theatre of Images*! I have to say that I used all the knowledge that I had up to that point. The book came out in 1977 and was finished the year before, so I'd only been a few years

in the downtown world. But I had enough knowledge to put together what I saw happening in terms of this theatre as a departure from a theatre in which there is a hierarchical structure with the play at the top of the pyramid. The artists who were written about in the book posed new vocabularies in terms of design, the use of language, the performing body, performance space. That was what was exciting about the avant-garde vocabulary then. Any time there was a new theatre all these elements would be rethought and reconfigured in a unique way by the people in that particular company or by a particular director. I think sometimes *The Theatre of Images* is misrepresented as anti-text and post-modern, but it isn't. I thought of that theatre as high modernist. And I've always valued the text; it was simply just another way of looking at the poetics of language in these works.

**CM:** *But it has a tremendous confidence as a voice that can speak to history. I think that's a very interesting thing that from the get-go as a really serious writer you have a sense of 'Here we are now, in this moment. This is what I am seeing. This is what makes it different.' Do you recognize that in your own trajectory, if you like, that you've always had that sense of speaking to history?*

**BM:** In terms of the journal, I'm well aware of trying to balance several generations at once. In other words, to try to find a way in which *PAJ* includes very contemporary new ideas and signals different directions that the performance world is moving into, while also looking at things in terms of the various legacies and histories. That's a very strong point now and a major part of my editorial introduction to *PAJ 100* – looking back over 35 years – because where we started with the journal in 1976, and what constituted a journal or the field, at that time, is vastly different at this point. Then, people focused on productions of plays and on great European directors and on the up-and-coming American experimental theatre. It was a very small world, in a way. Now what constitutes the study of theatre or performance has moved in so many different directions, and we're in the midst of seeing performance history and its legacies being constructed before our eyes, particularly in the museum.

**CM:** *Can we take a moment here to reflect on some of those changes of direction, and the ways you've responded to them as an editor?*

**BM:** In the late 1970s performance art and video art (as they were known then) were in formative periods and we were still trying to develop critical vocabularies for them. The rise of performance studies as an alternative to what can be understood as

theatre studies drastically changed the field of theatre, as did the turn to theory. A major change is that dramatic literature has now all but slipped away as a primary interest of contributors. Over the last 15 years, as what constituted the idea of performance evolved, and my own interests changed, *PAJ* seriously tilted toward visual arts interests – performance, video, installation, photography, sound – and coverage of gallery and performance-related museum shows. As the idea of the ‘avant-garde’ was called into question in the 1980s, the context changed. The bringing together of cultural studies and postmodernism meant that *PAJ* began to cover multiculturalism, ethnicity, feminism, and gay theatres as they became more prominent and politicized. By the end of the 1990s, globalization and human rights had come to the forefront. And now, into the new century, we have seen a return of an interest in groups, as well as in disability, trauma, cities, ecology, and identities, understood, perhaps, in new ways.

**CM:** *In those changing contexts, what kinds of writing – and voices – have you sought to encourage?*

**BM:** More and more, journals are seen as archival, a record of ephemeral arts that are largely lost to history, unless written about. I have always been deeply attached to that mission. *PAJ* began in the era of poststructuralism. Certainly my own essays and experiments in the essay form grew out of my ongoing interest in moving beyond theatre and bringing techniques of fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction into the essay, rooted in the personal voice. Of all performance-oriented journals, *PAJ* has substantial contributions written by artists, either writings or conversations, a feature I’ve encouraged. I could do this, or rather *PAJ* could do this, because we were free and independent of the university system, which has grown more prescriptive and conformist. *PAJ*’s assistant and contributing editors also influence content in the journal. For example, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck and Josh Abrams edited an entire issue on London and contribute pieces drawn from the UK; in New York, Joseph Cermatori lends his interest in new music and opera stagings. I’ve always encouraged knowledgeable, independent thinking in well-written, readable, journalistic essays. When we started people then wrote simply out of love for their subject and interest in the new art forms, unburdened by the prerogatives of academia to build a promotional file, and unencumbered by fashionable conference topics and trends and the politicizing of criticism. I have never considered *PAJ* an academic journal.

**CM:** *I think, as we talk, that there’s always been an active engagement with witnessing history as it*

*comes into being in your work. That sense is also very clear in your first book of essays, *Theatrewritings* (1984), which I remember being so excited about when I read it. I think of it in its old cover, that matte cover with the bluish color and the fact that the two words are run together. It was also immensely exciting because for those of us who were students in the late 1970s the visual arts were more interesting critically. No one was writing very interesting theatre stuff, except here was Bonnie Marranca actually pointing out what was going on in a counter tradition of theatre, and why it was that this really constituted (a) something new, and (b) something connected to earlier avant-garde poetics. Were you aware of yourself as being that significant voice, or was it just what you were doing?*

**BM:** I’ve just always written about things in terms of responding to various kinds of questions or ideas I have. I’ve always written out of the love of writing. I don’t feel compelled to write for any other purpose than for my own enjoyment. *Theatrewritings* was actually a direct, conscious sense of wanting to think of writing about the arts in a different way than, say, if I had called it ‘Theatre Criticism’, because I was very much involved in making a distinction between criticism and writing. By that time I already wanted to think about my writing in terms of essays, and the literary tradition, rather than what constituted criticism. I’ve always admired Susan Sontag’s work and the essays of Roland Barthes, Joseph Brodsky, William Gass, Elizabeth Hardwick, John Berger. That book also shows my interests at that time, because there are essays in it on Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand as well as Laurie Anderson and Meredith Monk, and there’s a good deal of material about the avant-garde as well as an essay on Pirandello and one on Chekhov. I tried to bring my understanding of contemporary performance to bear on some of those modern writers.

The book reflects my interest in experimenting with the essay form: that’s why it’s called *Theatrewritings*. The Pirandello essay was written in a series of sections on different themes, and I wrote them in no particular order, and I laid them all out on the floor and then I put the essay together. I worked on that essay for a year. It was very much inflected by poststructuralist ideas because I started it by writing about how there’s a character in an old Pirandello play with the name of ‘Marranca’. I use that as a jumping-off point. In the Chekhov essay, due to my interest in the voice, you notice that there is my voice as the writer but it’s interwoven with Chekhov’s letters, so there’s his voice, too. There are dual voices in that piece. I

chose topics that were interesting to me at the time; for example, I wrote about Chekhov as a gardener. That led me into the next book of writings, which was called *Ecologies of Theatre* (1996).

**CM:** *You're looking back at a couple of things there that are very interesting to me, in that your writing prefigured very acutely what later happened to writing, at least 15 years after Theatrewritings, when we began to think about 'performative writing'. I also want to ask you here about Sontag because, though your writing is very different from hers, she also wrote in terms of eclectic cultural subjects which, when taken together, allow us to have a kind of feel for the time we're living in, as did Roland Barthes.*

**BM:** I was very attracted to the sensuality of Roland Barthes's work and I read quite a lot of it as a young critic. I was very interested in Sontag's work, because it always had such a contemporary feeling about it, and it covered so many topics. Frankly, I have always thought of myself as an intellectual not as an academic, so that anything could be a topic for writing. Even though I'd been teaching since 1985 in many different schools around the country, such as Duke or Princeton or the University of California, San Diego, University of Iowa, NYU, Pratt, and then in Europe at theatre institutes in Barcelona and in Berlin, I never had, until 2005, when I joined the Faculty of The New School, a permanent position in a university. Two decades ago I did have a tenured professorship in Texas but I gave it up because I couldn't live in that culture.

I liked my life as a kind of itinerant scholar in different parts of the country or in Europe. I never was part of a system in which one would get locked into a certain kind of theoretical writing, academic conferences, promotion, and the pressures of publishing. I always thought of myself as part of the downtown experimental world and I simply took the same freedom those people had to experiment with their performance styles and their ways of making texts as my own desire to experiment. It became perfectly natural to me; I could see myself as part of that same world. Speaking of Sontag, one of the really big thrills of my life was when she complemented me on the Pirandello essay, and I've always thought that perhaps it was because I talked about Pirandello making a case in his work against photography.

**CM:** *But that sense of experiment is quite revelatory as we think about that. To take some of those essays as touch points, the two that strike me immediately are your essay on Gertrude Stein, that is, your introduction to her Last Operas and Plays (1995),*

*and your inventory on The Wooster Group<sup>3</sup>. The Wooster Group was a very successful experiment in 'how to write', to apply a Steinian phrase to it. Stein – who we often think of as a kind of foremother of the contemporary if you like – is for you one of the great figures in American experimental writing. Tell me about your interest in Stein.*

**BM:** I suppose from my graduate school years when I first became interested in Stein, up until the time I actually wrote that essay in the mid-1990s, I had always been obsessed with Stein. As it happened, I saw not only *In Circles*, but another musical version of her work, called *A Manoir*, and Richard Foreman talked all the time about Stein, Robert Wilson talked about her. So many of the major directors have done a Stein work: Anne Bogart, Elizabeth LeCompte, Wilson, Foreman, Judith Malina. She was so much a part of everybody's thinking downtown. John Cage constantly refers to Stein and so many people in poetry, in theatre and in playwriting have always talked about Stein. The last piece Maria Irene Fornes was working on was about Stein and Alice B. Toklas.

I set myself the task of writing about her for the volume you mention, and I probably had about 70 or 80 pages of notes from my readings of her work. This essay took the better part of a year. One day I was finally able to start from the blank page. I'm still interested in Stein. Whenever I am in Paris I go by the Rue de Fleurus and stand in front of her apartment. In preparing to write the essay I had the occasion to be in Paris, and I went and sat a lot in the Luxembourg Gardens and took notes about where certain statues and entrances were, and details like that. I looked at the way the trees were cut so some of those elements, like the reference to the park or the pleached trees, enter into the essay. I remember many years ago saying to Susan Sontag one time, 'I'm surprised you haven't written about Gertrude Stein.' All she said was, 'I tried.' I hadn't done my own at the time but I always wanted her to read the essay I eventually wrote. I don't know if she ever did, but I sent it to her and I sent it to William Gass, another essayist whom I admire and who wrote brilliantly on her.

**CM:** *Something that you've talked about in regard to Stein is the spatiality of her work, and throughout your own work you've written about the different ways that language can be used in scenography and dramaturgy. You start to remember the pleached trees in your Stein essay, and in the light of that, your recent essay on*

3. The Wooster Group: 'A Dictionary of Ideas' in Bonnie Marranca. *Performance Histories*, New York: PAJ Publications (2008), pp. 39–61.

*trees in the Watermill book makes more sense to me. You always notice the context of the landscape, and of course you have written about gardens, just as you have written about food. I just briefly want to touch on what those kinds of editorial projects mean to you as a cultural critic. You haven't only written about theatre, you've been drawn to other ways in which to make sense of the culture we live in.*

**BM:** Looking back now of course it all seems to fit together in a holistic way, though at the time when I'm in the middle of it, I am not always thinking about my life in that way. Now you can see that everything has been very much of a continuous flow; my life in the world enters into my interests in the arts. Around the late 1970s I was lucky enough to be able to have a second home in the Hudson Valley, 125 miles from New York City, and so I began to be a gardener there and to spend much more time thinking about the landscape, growing my own food, and having a much different environment from the urban environment. I had never been on a farm. I grew up in an old town in New Jersey, about a half-hour from New York City. My grandmother and my father grew flowers and vegetables. I gradually became subsumed in the Hudson Valley for parts of every year.

All these things actually led to an anthology that I edited in the late 1980s, called *American Garden Writing* (1988), which oddly enough became very popular. It was a Garden Book Club selection, and a Penguin paperback. It included garden literature from the eighteenth century to the present, from all over the United States, and I wrote biographical notes to each one of the pieces. For a while I thought, maybe I'll leave the theatre and get into gardening and landscaping, but that didn't happen because I was always drawn back to the arts.

Then in 1991, I edited the *Hudson Valley Reader* (1991), which drew on the writings of people who lived in or traveled through the valley from the seventeenth century to the present. This region had the Hudson River School of painters, Indians, the first steamboat travels, the architect Andrew Jackson Downing, and nature writer John Burroughs, plus all the material from the American Revolution because battles were fought along the Hudson. Charles Dickens, Henry James, and Harriet Martineau traveled there. I wrote short articles to introduce the dozens of texts in that book.

All this while I was gradually moving toward my next book of essays, *Ecologies of Theatre*, so that's where Stein's landscape as play, Wilson's dramaturgy as an ecology, and *The Mus/ecology of John Cage* came into play. There has been a trajectory where I would get interested in things in my daily

life that would propel me to look at art works and writing in another way. I began to think about looking at work in terms of whether it was set in a forest or on a beach, in different kinds of woods, and then, what about the climate and the quality of air. There are so many ways that were drawing me into ecology, it wasn't just a political system, but it had to do with themes of biocentrism, different dimensions of space and setting.

**CM:** *That interplay between New York City and the hinterland of New York State and the river that lies behind it is also something that is a continuous narrative in post-war American art. The Cage and Cunningham circle bought land upstate, and David Tudor lived there until he died. There were the artists' communities that included Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, George and Susan Quasha, Carolee Schneemann. Linda Montano is actually from the Hudson Valley.*

**BM:** Carolee Schneemann has lived upstate for decades in an eighteenth-century home. Joan Jonas, Richard Serra, Philip Glass, and that generation bought places in Nova Scotia. So a lot of artists have lived part of the year in a hothouse of urban life and then have gone summers some place else to do more quiet work. The Hudson Valley is now filled with artists, moving permanently out of New York City or going back and forth between the two places.

**CM:** *The Ecologies of Theatre also suggests another reading of the relationship of urban and country life that has almost to do with the ecology of networks, the friendships, the dialogues, and as you say, the 'place' of intellectual and creative life, really particularly around this city, which has been so productive in a way that I can't think of any other city – can you?*

**BM:** It is a kind of ecosystem; you can look at a community that way. Put together the organizations, the funders, the critics, the spaces, and the artists and you can look at it in that sense. Urban life and the levels of productivity in the age of the Internet are often overwhelming. Sometimes I wish I could run away and just take a bunch of books and sit in a hotel and read and write. One of the ways I have coped with the lack of time to do all the essays I would have liked to write is to edit anthologies of writings on subjects that I am interested in, like the garden and Hudson Valley books we talked about. The third one in this trilogy of anthologies is my food writings volume *A Slice of Life: Contemporary Writers on Food*, which was published in 2003.

**CM:** *If we think about something you've discussed with me before when we have talked about the writer as citizen, it is that writing about food, or thinking about food, is part of the hospitality of culture, the hospitable act of what it means to be here in the*

*world. I cannot think of you without food and gardens, as they come into public life. It's about the breadth of the life that we live. Your food book is also political really.*

**BM:** Some years before I worked on it I had given a keynote address on food and performance at the Maine College of Art. Like many people, by the end of the 1990s, I got more and more interested in food culture, from my travels and from changes in the New York restaurant culture. Every time I have another interest, and in between other essays on performance, I start working on a book about it. *A Slice of Life* has writings by authors you would not think of as writing on food. There is an account of the women who created a cookbook in Theresienstadt and Wole Soyinka on hunger strikes, Terry Eagleton on edible écriture, Umberto Eco on eating in airplanes, Roland Barthes on chopsticks. I wrote an introduction, 'The Theatre of Food', about my experiences growing up in an Italian-American family and then traveling through Europe and Asia, and I later expanded this to include much more about food and performance art. That now has become more and more prominent, a facet of museum-going, as museums use food events to bring in more of the public and have them at times participate in these events, as, for example, at the Tate Modern a few years ago when Fluxus artist Alison Knowles made a salad for several thousand in the Turbine Hall.

**CM:** *The last theme for this conversation, the one that really brings us into the twenty-first century, and another theme for all of these artists, is spirituality. I think of your introduction to Plays for the End of the Century (1996), where you began to raise large questions, again, very revelatory for me in terms of an approach to writing that was both intimate and public. You began to curate conversations and round tables around spirituality, to really unpack the relationship, if you like, between landscape and materiality, and setting and context, and the interest that all of these artists have always had in a bigger imaginative and spiritual world as well. That's been a major part of your thinking.*

**BM:** For years, I had noticed that there are so many artists in New York who are drawn toward Buddhism, and from the start of the late 1980s there have been many controversies in the so-called 'culture wars', around Catholicism. Earlier I said I had gone to Catholic school for 12 years. I'm very interested in saints' lives and the architecture and paintings in churches, and a certain kind of mysticism, like the writings of Meister Eckhart. I'm interested in the writings of Catholicism as an intellectual world. One of the things I wanted to

do with *Plays for the End of the Century* – I was going counter to the kinds of anthologies that were appearing up to that point for several years, all having to do with some form of identity politics – was to make a statement against the postmodern notion that everything is socially constructed. I felt that there was a great drive toward people becoming interested, once again, in authenticity. That anthology was the bringing together of a group of our prominent playwrights: Maria Irene Fornes, The Wooster Group, Reza Abdoh, Erik Ehn, Adrienne Kennedy, and Richard Foreman, to show that here are all these plays that have saints in them, discussions about religion, and spiritual or ethical themes. Everything wasn't about race or gender, there were other theological, liturgical, spiritual currents. That interested me very much because I was well aware by this time that for most of the century, in every generation and in every art form, there are deeply spiritual currents in modernism and the avant-garde and contemporary work. I felt that the theatre world was oblivious to this whereas it was a persistent theme in visual art thinking.

**CM:** *You are now PAJ's sole editor. What do you think it is important to do as an editor, in an age of rapidly changing technologies and ways of reading and writing? How are these changes informing your work?*

**BM:** *PAJ's vision has been very consistent because I have had the luxury of editing it since 1976, and through my writing, teaching, research, and attending events, I try to track the sensibility of our time as the basis of editing PAJ. The most important activities of an editor are both to reflect the achievements and directions in new work, be mindful of its historical context, and articulate new areas of research and discovery. Now, when so much of performance history is being reconstructed it is possible to see how PAJ has helped to shape this history, so there is a sense of responsibility that goes along with it. PAJ is now read mainly online, where it is in color, in the 112 countries we reach, though we still continue to publish the print version. I would be loath to give up the physical copy, but it may come to that in the future. Nowadays readers don't read a journal cover to cover so the idea of shaping a journal and table of contents is virtually obsolete. Essays have become shorter because reading habits have changed, and, in fact, it is easier to find people to write a few-page review than to commit to an essay. Fragmentary forms of the essay and, funnily enough, the excessive use of dashes in essays, are elements I've noticed in recent years, and in some cases the slippage of casual blog-*

style writing into the essay. I am surprised there is so little experimentation with new, short forms of critical writing. Right now, the university presses that host journals use templates that don't offer the flexibility for experimentation, and, anyway, who has the time or money to take on this job. I think we are all in the beginning stages of the Internet revolution and in time the web will be more interactive in terms of images, text, and sound.

Over the last several years we have made big strides with the MIT Press Journals division, which publishes *PAJ*, in getting onto our website video and audio clips attached to specific journal articles. An index to plays and interview pdfs with audio clips from *PAJ* are on our site. For our 100th issue the MIT Press staff was instrumental in creating for our webpage podcasts with artists featured in the issue. The issue also appeared in a Kindle version. The last few years we have been converting cassettes of interviews from our archives into mp3 files, getting them cleaned up and edited for audio clips attached to the print version in the journal. Many more will be online by the end of 2013. Enhancing features on the *PAJ* website will be an ongoing major focus, in addition to finding new forms of writing and documentation, such as the Performance Drawings portfolios that were instituted in 2008.

**CM:** *That brings us right into the present and suggests that we talk about what you want to write about now, as somebody who is always watching what the temperature is, if you like. How are you seeing things at the moment, as PAJ comes to its 100th issue?*

**BM:** I think that for the foreseeable future we'll be taken up with the construction of performance history. One of the major issues is that it seems performance history is being constructed entirely out of art history. I want to return to a theme that for ten years or so has been a major part of *PAJ*, and was also instrumental in our changing the name in 1998 from *Performing Arts Journal* to *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, which is to bring together these two histories of performance in the twentieth century, and the twenty-first – one in the visual arts and one in theatre – for a much larger view of performance history. I would like to see a more comprehensive arts training so that we are

actually training arts writers in many more art forms than in visual arts or in theatre. I think we are in a period where people are again very interested in art writing, though that may be more people coming from visual arts. I find that field very lively in terms of thinking about what is 'contemporary', and what constitutes art writing now. In the theatre, there is a turn away from dramatic literature, and going more toward collage and other kinds of non-literary texts. We may be moving toward a new poetics, and that can be very encouraging.

I think it's a great time to be writing about the arts because there's so much to think about in terms of where the contemporary arts are going, and also with regard to issues such as media, globalization, poetics, the performing body. There's a lot of work to be done in terms of digging back into history. There is much to be done in terms of archiving, creating much larger histories of each art form, bringing the art forms together in new ways, and simply finding a way to write for the kind of world we live in. Having said that, we just don't have time to write about all the things that we want. It's a question of time, and having the mental space and peace to allow thoughts and dreams to enter your mind.

I really try to make a lot of time for myself when I'm away, spending part of the year in Europe and also many months at my home in the Hudson Valley where I am out of the day-to-day racing around to different performances and living an intense urban life. I've just made time for myself to be in the garden, to be swimming in the afternoons, to watch the birds, to enjoy the sunset, and to be a part of that kind of environment. I think it's more and more important today as we are so overwhelmed by the technology that has linked us in a way that makes it impossible to keep up the level of communication. I'm a proponent of the Slow philosophy, so while I enjoy a very fast life in New York, part of me is drawn back to that Italian way of the Slow philosophy, of just stopping, turning everything off, and having a nice time with a lot of friends, being in nature, having good conversation and good food, and really enjoying life.