
South Africa: A laboratory for theatre research

Temple Hauptfleisch



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SOUTH AFRICA: A LABORATORY FOR THEATRE RESEARCH

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Concepts

Before we begin, a few words about the title and some concepts implied by it.

In the first place, the word “laboratory” is used here in a metaphoric sense, to refer to any place or situation where one might conceivably observe, manipulate and otherwise experiment with the object of study, or specific facets of it. For those of you familiar with the way in which Lee Strassberg, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and others have used the term “theatre laboratory”, this represents ~~only ONE~~ ^{one} sense in which I shall be using it. While our concern is somewhat more academic than that of most of the individuals mentioned, their kind of “action research”, aimed at what Charles Marowitz (1978, p. 125) describes as the exploration “of certain problems of acting and stagecraft in laboratory conditions, without the commercial pressures of public performance”, is an essential and largely underestimated element in theatre research. On the other hand one may also think of the “laboratory” as something larger, more amorphous — the country itself, its peoples, customs, and structures — within which theatre operates and may be observed.

The word “theatre” poses two problems. In the first place it is very limiting, for it implies a specific kind of activity, within specific and clearly prescribed circumstances. In the second place behind its very preciseness lies a vast range of disparate yet intermeshed activities, all in some way part of the “theatre” construct. Both these issues are of cardinal importance in devising any kind of research on the performing arts.

To provide for the full spectrum of possible activities to be found under the rubric “theatre”, it might have been better to use the word “performance”, as defined and popularized by Richard Schechner and his colleagues at the Department of Performance Studies at New York University (see for example Schechner, 1977). In that case it would include all kinds of formal and informal ritual within society, from tribal dance and political rallies to laser concerts. For the purposes of

this paper the word “theatre” encompasses this, as well as the more traditional forms of entertainment.

The concept of “research”, and more specifically “theatre research”, as used in the title, is linked to the second issue raised above, namely the multi-dimensionality and communal nature of theatre. Studying theatre one feels would entail studying something which has no circumscribed and directly observable boundaries. Unless you wish to see theatre as the written text (in the traditional manner of literature departments) or as that single event on a specific night in a specific place with specific actors (as most drama departments do), the concept “theatre” must be seen as a series of interrelated procedures and processes, not as a single artefact. The implications for the “research” are that any kind of significant study need to be both multidisciplinary AND clearly focussed. Theatre research therefore implies any kind of systematic study of the processes of theatre, the products or the results achieved, irrespective of the specific research procedures or theoretical models employed in each case.

1.2 Research in South Africa

Theatre research is undertaken quite widely in this country, but the concept itself has no real independent academic standing, for it is mostly seen as an element of either literary studies (often as the subsection “drama”) or drama studies in theatre departments (sometimes appearing there as “textual criticism”, “dramatic theory” and/or “theatre history”). Certain educationalists, communications scientists, sociologists and others express an interest in theatre from time to time (mostly for their own purposes), but by and large it remains an undiscovered and underdeveloped field of study. And strangely so, for South Africa in fact presents us with the most fascinating spectrum of research possibilities imaginable — which, of course, brings us to the main point of this paper.

1.3 Procedures

Accepting the broad definitions provided above, I shall now take a brief look at the general requirements for a “laboratory” and the extent to which the South African situation satisfies those requirements. Thereafter we shall consider some more specific areas of research for which South Africa provides the ideal laboratory for experimentation. Finally I

should like to consider a few of the problems facing the (new-style) theatre researcher in South Africa.

2. A LABORATORY

2.1 Some requirements

Should one consider a hypothetical “laboratory” for theatre research, one might postulate a few requirements, such as for instance the following:

- * A problem or problems to solve
- * A research environment
- * Staff
- * Means for manipulating and comparing behaviour and events
- * Measuring and recording instruments
- * Guinea pigs of some kind, or other objects of study
- * And, of course, funds.

Once more, the definitions are open, and used here simply to provide us with a frame of reference. Nevertheless we may ask whether South Africa does in fact conform to the overall pattern.

Regarding the first two points (a research environment and staff), as well as the matter of funding, it is possibly sufficient to point out that the country actually maintains a sophisticated research infrastructure for the social sciences, including theatre and drama research. This includes the facilities and funds of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the facilities and manpower of the universities and technikons, and in our special case, even the experimental companies of the state-funded and other theatre organizations. As I have discussed this matter elsewhere in much greater detail (Hauptfleisch, 1982 and 1984), I would like to pay more specific attention to three of the foregoing “requirements”, namely the guinea pigs and objects of study; the available measuring and recording instruments; and finally some of the more interesting problems to be solved.

2.2 Three characteristics of the South African laboratory

2.2.1 *Guinea pigs and objects of study*

The socio-cultural situation in South Africa has evolved along lines which have provided us with a number of relatively unique cultural

artefacts and relationships. For our purposes the following five offer intriguing possibilities:

(a) The geo-cultural placement of the country, as a meeting place of the traditions of West, East and Africa, implies the potential development of hybrid, home-grown tradition made up of the forms, themes and techniques borrowed from the various theatrical forms practised in the countries of origin. It may also imply that remnants from such older traditions are possibly to be found here: that theatre archaeology would be a profitable exercise in some cases. Among the most important influences (OBVIOUS influences that is) over the years have been the British theatrical tradition, the Dutch, the American, later the German and French, and the African performances both local and, indirectly through print, of Francophone Africa. Less obvious has been the Indian and Japanese influence. Also most noticeable at one stage was the influence of the Classic Greek and Roman theatre. Thrown into a melting pot here at the Southern tip of Africa, this mixture has already produced, and will no doubt produce many more and profound works of theatrical art. Also, it has helped in the evolution of a number of uniquely South African theatrical structures and processes.

(b) The multi-cultural nature of South African society has of course made itself felt in every phase of our daily lives, also in our art. It undoubtedly permeates the nature of our art — its form and matter — as well as our responses to that art. It colours our perceptions about art, depending on our specific position within the socio-cultural spectrum and the particular value-systems we have inherited, imbibed or selected.

From a researcher's point of view, this situation opens up numerous possibilities of cross-cultural, sociological and psychological research.

(c) When one considers the range of "performance" in South Africa, as well as the additional "literary" products that are produced by certain artists for the lucrative prescribed book market, the opportunities for original research become quite considerable. One has here, at the one end of the continuum, what one might term traditional indigenous performance (including such matters as African dance and ritual forms) and at the other end the kind of laser concert spectacular to be found at Sun City. In between lie a myriad of forms, with varying origins, aims and functions. These include pure entertainment forms (comedy; musicals; thrillers), educational forms (theatre for young people; community theatre; psycho-drama) committed theatre (political theatre;

what Coplan, 1980, terms ‘‘popular theatre’’; agit-prop), and the many variants, hybrids and alternatives available.

Taking into account the fact that most of these forms are also distributed along the cultural axis referred to previously, it becomes clear that an initial requirement for any South African theatre study is to define the parameters of the study closely. On the other hand, the very range of traditions, forms and performances creates valuable opportunities for comparative analysis and experimentation. (See Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984, for an outline of the range.)

(d) The dynamics of South African history — social, political, cultural — has left its mark on the arts in the country, as on everything else. In the case of theatre one has such factors as the country’s share in the British empire (the role played by itinerant actors ‘‘playing the Empire’’ and stopping off at the Cape en route to the East and Australia/New Zealand) and the impact of the Boer War. There is the tremendous influence of nationalism and cultural aspiration on the formation, promotion and maintenance of specific traditions — the role of the *Taalstryd* (language struggle) of the Afrikaner, and the accompanying social, economic and political campaigns, in the evolution of the dynamic Afrikaans theatre; the impact of the Black Consciousness movement and the post Soweto period on the changing, stimulating and dynamic theatre of the townships — as well as on the ‘‘traditional’’ theatre of the last few years. One thinks of The Space in Cape Town, the Market Theatre in Johannesburg — even the work of the Performing Arts Councils today! (See Coplan, 1980; Tomaselli, 1981; Steadman, 1981.) There are many other examples from the history of this century alone: the rebellion of 1914, the 1938 centenary of the Great Trek, the 1948 election, the 1952 Van Riebeeck Festival, the 1960 security scare and the station bomb, the 1976 protests, the border war, the Biko affair, and — quite probably — the new constitutional dispensation (1984).

If one includes all the numerous and complex rules, regulations, mores and other regimentations of our social and cultural life over the years, the impact of South African history on the form and content of our theatre is undoubtedly profound and all-pervasive. It is also an essential element for understanding that theatre.

(e) The last factor is simply the fact that theatre in South Africa today is highly amenable to study: it is (largely) desegregated, often multi-racial, outspoken, it is involved in all facets of society and we do have

a large, well trained and financially independent corps of actors and other theatre artists. The tools for experimentation are thus at hand.

Given these five conditions, let us now briefly consider some measuring and recording instruments available to the serious theatre researcher.

2.2.2 Measuring and recording instruments

For many years the activities of the student of drama have been seen as either descriptive (“what has happened, when and where”, “who did what”), interpretative (“what does the text or performance say”), or evaluative (“is it good”, “if so why”). The tools were those of traditional historiography and literary criticism.

Since the late fifties and particularly the mid sixties the whole arts studies paradigm has been revolutionized. The primary impetus for this has been a radical redefinition of the concept of the “text”, and the realization that any text can only grow from and exist in an “extratextual” context. This realization and its evolution has been greatly advanced by the theories and discoveries of linguistics (De Saussure, Chomsky) sociology (Taine, Grosse, Harrison, Barnett, Toffler), communications (Poyatos, McLuhan, Birdwhistell), anthropology (Mead, Levi-Strauss), social psychology (Sapir, Osgood, Lindzey and Norman, Goffman), political economy (Marx, Plekhanov, Antal, Hauser), and aesthetics (Veltrusky, Mukarovsky, Langer, Barthes). From these origins evolved a number of more specific approaches to the arts, notably semiotics and semiology, reception studies, sociology of theatre, theatre archaeology, performance analysis and the polysystem theories of Even-Zohar and colleagues (Even-Zohar, 1979).

Up till the mid seventies, at least as far as theatre is concerned, most of the work was largely theoretical, trying to establish the basic concepts and to evolve workable models for research design. Unfortunately a great deal of the work focussed on particular issues (such as how audiences react to specific stimuli, how to describe the specific “meanings” of theatrical codes, the function of non-verbal elements on stage, and so on) and was not integrated within a larger, more comprehensive research theory. More disturbing in a way was that these discoveries and developments were occurring in isolation, often geographically distributed, and were not linking up with developments within the dramatic field itself. One thus finds alongside the drama theories of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, Brook, Marowitz and others (which constitute PERFORMANCE theories), the

middle of the road analytic approaches pioneered by Styan, Bentley, Beckerman and others (these are largely theatre oriented TEXTUAL approaches). There are also the descriptive, performance oriented, studies evolved by Schechner and his school, the whole semiotic movement spearheaded by the Prague school, and finally the varying "empiric" studies of economists, sociologists, psychologists and others, involved in the activities of a number of research institutions throughout the world.

Then, at the beginning of the seventies, a few academics began to question the validity of this segmented approach, asking for the institution of a more comprehensive definition of "theatre research". (See for example Steinbeck, 1970; Tindemans, 1972; Barker, 1978; and Van Kesteren, 1982a.) What they sought was an integrative approach to the study of theatre, one which would make room for all the varying approaches we have noted thus far.

While we are yet far from Carlos Tindemans's dream of a fullfledged science of theatre research (1972), an enormous amount of valuable work has been done in the methodological field, particularly by the various theatre research institutions in Europe (Leiden, Amsterdam, München, Paris) as well as certain universities in the USA (notably Bowling Green, Iowa and New York).

For us in South Africa the experiments and discoveries of these European and American scholars are vital, for they provide us with a number of tools with which we might explore this theatre laboratory of ours. While I do not have the time here to discuss these techniques in detail, I would nevertheless like to point out some of the most valuable at our disposal.

(a) At the purely practical level there are awe-inspiring advances in technology. The evolution of the modern-day video and other recording equipment have greatly minimized the vast problems encountered in the documentation of performance, even though a mere filmic recording can never truly re-create the event. Similarly the computer has not only revolutionized the art itself, but has also supplied researchers with a tool the uses of which we have hardly begun to explore. Besides its undeniable value for the theatre archivist and the statistician, it now holds a great deal of promise for the student of theatre response, as our colleagues studying the mass media evolve programmes with which to assess the impact of THEIR art. (At the HSRC for instance the com-

munications section is already using such a system, imported from America. Its potential value for theatre research still has to be looked at.)

(b) One of the best advanced techniques in theatrical recording has obviously been that of choreology, or the notation of movement and dance. It is a highly specialized technique and experts are few. Its importance for the descriptive study of dance is obvious, but less obvious yet possibly more crucial in this country is its uses for the notation of traditional performance (see Larlham, 1981).

(c) Perhaps the most stunning advance in the theoretical field has been that of semiotics and semiology. In Europe the idea of applying semiotic concepts to the study of theatre comes a long way, from the work of the Prague school, Eco, Peirce, Greimas, Übersfeld, Hess-Lüttich and others, to the latest work by Van Kesteren and Pavis. In the Anglo-American world (of which we are a part — at least as far as theatre studies go), the publication of Keir Elam's *The semiotics of theatre and drama* (1980), proved a tremendous incentive, and spurred a great deal of new and promising work in the area, also in South Africa.

The possibilities of semiotic analysis seem endless, once one manages to enter the maze of terminology spawned by the concept, yet somehow it has long remained little more than that: a potentially useful technique. The greatest single problem facing the theatre researcher is to capture and record that ephemeral moment of theatrical "magic" which each performance creates. And semiotic notation would seem to provide an answer. And yet, in a 1982 article, Patrice Pavis wends his way through a fascinating study of notational techniques to come to what he calls "a rather skeptical and disillusioned halt" (Pavis, 1982, p. 129), for he eventually concludes that "no system of description really prevails for the theatre. . . ." (ibid).

Semiotics has entirely altered our concept of how arts and theatre in particular function, and that in itself is a tremendous boon. How to go from there, from an awareness of the way signs work to a comprehensive description of a total communicational interaction between artist and audience, is another question. An important question.

But, for the time being, we have an intriguing and enormously valuable tool for gathering and interpreting data.

An important outflow of the semiotic approach has been the evolution of the so-called polysystem theory, first developed by Even-Zohar in 1970. This system and process based approach to cultural study has

tremendous possibilities for theatre studies. It is able to host and integrate much of the disparate data other techniques allow us to gather. Also, it provides a useful basis for the identification of research priorities.

(d) Whereas the semiotic approach to theatre was a European development, the concept of “performance studies”, and the descriptive techniques based on it, arose in America. Almost certainly an outflow of the reactionary and “alternative” theatre of the sixties and early seventies in the USA, the concept of “performance” — as being any form of human activity which has a ritual and social intent — was devised to make room for such activities as street theatre, the “happenings” staged by the Living Theatre and other groups, environmental theatre, community theatre and numerous other spin-offs of the original anti-establishment impetus.

Once again the prime motive was cultural-historical, to record, document and make available for analysis the artefacts of a cultural event which only exists in time. For remember, such events seldom leave any texts.

The most important figure here is of course Richard Schechner, himself a graduate of the sixties movement, and his colleague Michael Kirby, editor of the influential *Drama Review*. The Schechner-approach seems to be an important bridging point between the requirements of theatre history (which is also cultural history), theatre archaeology (which is anthropology-based) and current theatrical practice. In fact, the theories had their origins in early ethnological studies undertaken by Schechner himself (1977).

In South Africa we are fortunate enough to have a few New York University graduates, a number of them involved in major research programmes and holding senior teaching posts.

(e) Besides the notational and descriptive techniques discussed above, a major influence has also been the increasing awareness of the social nature of theatre and the arts (for example Bruford, 1955; Schalzky, 1980; and Schoenmakers, 1982). Besides a great deal of theorizing from socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural perspectives (often with a Marxist base), the result has been the development of a number of more empiric and statistical research procedures by which to study the processes of theatre-making, the reception of the “messages” and the impact of theatre. While students of the arts are traditionally highly sceptical of the so-called “quantification techniques” of social scientists,

preferring the safe ambiguity of their qualitative techniques, they nevertheless at times find the few "hard facts" that DO emerge useful springboards to further speculation.

If one accepts the role of the theatre researcher to be, at least in part, that of an observer on behalf of posterity, and therefore a contemporary writer of cultural history, then the accumulation of ANY relevant data becomes significant. And when that particular data may also serve to gain insight into specific processes of creativity — even if only at a specific point in time — then it becomes a criminal neglect NOT to make use of the facilities available.

For present purposes then, I should like to refer briefly to a few techniques which, it would appear to me, could be useful in our laboratory.

* *Audience surveys*: The idea of determining the nature of the theatre audience (a biographical profile, his likes and dislikes), has been with us for many years and numerous such studies have been undertaken throughout the world. In a survey of such studies in the USA alone for the years since 1960, Dimaggio and Useem (1983) identified no less than 74 of theatre audiences, 7 of opera audiences and 6 of dance audiences. In some cases, such as that of the League of Broadway Producers, the surveys are undertaken annually. In South Africa the most comprehensive studies of this nature were undertaken by the HSRC (CESAT) between 1978 and 1983.

The kind of data gathered in this way is simplistic, because it is usually undertaken for promotional purposes, and suffers from all the problems that confront questionnaire-type studies. Nevertheless it does provide the groundwork for further analysis and in-depth study of public involvement in the arts.

* *Economics of the arts*: Closely linked to the foregoing are studies which flow from the realization that theatre is an industry as well as an art form. To survive, theatre (or at least most forms of theatre) has to be run as a business venture. Because the principles behind this are commercial, the research itself also requires a commercial and administrative approach.

Since the appearance of Baumol and Bowen's major study of the performing arts (1966), a number of similar studies have appeared, undertaken by economists on behalf of concerned arts promotional bodies (for overviews see Dimaggio et al, 1978; Lowry, 1978; Shanahan

et al, 1979; Kamerman and Martorella, 1983). While this aim limits the long-term value of the research, I do believe that the findings of such studies are invaluable as socio-cultural documents and for our understanding of the complex communal creativity that takes place in the theatre. Such a study has yet to be done in South Africa.

* *Theatrical response*: This category of empiric research is possibly less defined than the other two, but it is meant to refer to all sociological, communicational and especially psychological studies undertaken to determine the way in which individuals and audiences respond to theatrical signs and situations.

This kind of study is true laboratory-style work, normally undertaken with willing participants — which usually means students in a drama department or theatre research institute. Factors looked at are cognitive response (Gourd, 1977; Tan, 1981), emotional response (Schoenmakers, 1983), perceptions of non-verbal elements (Thayer, 1960; Schempp, 1969; Rabby and Harms, 1971) variables influencing general response (Morgan, 1951; Clark, 1951; Vrieze, 1953; Reynolds, 1971, Vlassenroot, 1980), interpretative competence (Van Kesteren, 1982b). The techniques employed usually include the use of questionnaires, various attitudinal measures (such as the semantic differential), and the manipulation of the stimulus material (a play, or a segment of a play — even a video recording of the play).

The results of this kind of work are usually very tentative, despite the rigorous statistical controls exercised in most cases, because of the many variables involved. However, the refinement of these techniques, as well as others currently being experimented with, may eventually change our conceptions of theatre as radically as did the insights of Marx, Freud, De Saussure, and Stanislavsky.

2.2.3 *Problems to be studied*

Based on the outlines provided above, we can now consider the kind of research to which our South African laboratory best lends itself. (Because the aim of this paper is to consider ways of extending the range of theatre studies in South Africa, I am not going to refer to the obvious traditional areas such as theatre history, biography and textual analysis — the need for ongoing work in these areas is without question.) There are eight major areas of study which I think will require a new interdisciplinary approach.

(a) *Studies of cross-cultural response to theatre.* Unlike the American and European communities where most of the current response research is being undertaken, South Africa does not constitute a homogeneous society for which one can postulate a kind of general societal response. The challenge here is not only the application of the available techniques, but the development of our own versions of them.

(b) *Descriptive studies of evolving theatrical forms.* Not only is it one of the most crucial priorities that we document and preserve such remnants of the original indigenous performance as we can, but in the process we have the opportunity of actually recording the birth of new forms and intriguing variations of the old ones.

(c) *The educational uses of theatre and drama.* Today educational drama has become hot property in the post-graduate marketplace. While local expertise is limited and the few trained specialists find themselves almost over-extended, the majority of the work is being done at school level. (CESAT alone is running a vast programme in this field, with the help of various colleagues from training institutions.) What concerns me more however, is the tremendous potential of drama and theatre techniques for adult education and education for the deprived — in literacy work, in social work, community development, public health programmes, psychiatric treatment, and so on. Specialized as the field is, we have need of such techniques, geared to our society's needs.

(d) *Studies of communal creativity.* Studies of the interplay of author/performer/community under the impact of political, socio-economic and cultural forces. Given our range of cultural and performance variables, the possibilities for experimentation are almost limitless within this polystem.

(e) *Studies of propaganda theatre* — all kinds of propaganda, leftwing, rightwing, pro and anti. One needs to look at the form and style, at the content, at the impact. And conversely perhaps, the “propaganda” content of the “uncommitted” theatre, the comedies and entertainments we all go to see. Do they carry some kind of “hidden curriculum”? The state of flux in the country today (socio-politically speaking) makes this an exciting field of study — though difficult from a methodological point of view.

(f) *The role of the artist — and performing artist in particular — within society.* Acting HAS been described as the second oldest profession

in the world. And theatre has been banned in many countries, also in ours during the previous century. Yet to some there is a glamour to the stage. The dramatists again have alternatively been seen as entertainers, mere second-rate authors, and hailed as prophets. What is the situation here? And are these perceptions dependent on cultural values, or not?

(g) *The socio-economic basis for theatre in South Africa.* There is no single “theatre industry” in this country, rather a whole range of different theatre companies. Some State funded, some commercial and independent, some privately sponsored, some semi-professional, some amateur and so on.

The point is that a great deal of time, money, energy and manpower is expended on creating and keeping alive this multi-limbed creature. And we know so little about how it functions that, should it ail, all we can do is treat the local symptoms. Usually by pouring in more money — or by scrapping a project or two.

The methodological groundwork for comprehensive study of the way theatre functions as an economic system has been laid, what we require is to set up a multi-disciplinary team to apply the techniques here.

(h) *Theatre laboratories.* The final suggestion is perhaps the most idealistic, but it is also essentially theatrical: it is a call for the institution of one, or more, real “theatre laboratories”, in the Grotowskian sense. Places where theatre artists may experiment, not with more ways of making plays, or further mutilations of Shakespeare’s works, but with the ways in which words on paper, individuals on stage, and people in an auditorium fuse to create meaning and emotion which can outlive the moment.

As researcher my interest lies in two things here: Firstly in simply being there, with my tools, to measure, record and preserve for analysis. To be able to say, eventually, “Perhaps THIS is what happened”. Secondly because it could be there that the kind of spark, thrown off by a few theatrical events such as those created by Athol Fugard and Barney Simon with the help of friends, may be cloned, and cloned again. May eventually create a uniquely South African theatre, a totally South African theatre, by everyone, for everyone.

Even in a talk about empiricism, one may dream, I suppose.

3. CONCLUSION

What I have said today has been intended as a look at some alternative perspectives on the old paradigm for theatre studies. Much of what I mentioned implies a great deal of organization, co-ordination, funding, goodwill and honesty. Perhaps more than any other we need the latter two commodities, for the researcher here is faced by a number of problems, not the least of which is the fact that he has to be unbiased in a country where bias is so entrenched. Unfortunately mutual suspicion between cultural and other groups (including academic communities!) has reached such dimensions that it is stifling our poor fledgling science.

But then, being a man of the theatre, and therefore a true believer in miracles, I know we shall be there when the curtain rises.

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