

PS: Can We Talk About Something Else?

This paper challenges the misperception that performance studies and “conventional” theatre history are intellectually or professionally opposed to one another. While reputable theatre historians no longer question the legitimacy of the “performance studies project,” many still question the centrality of performance studies to the theory, practice, and pedagogy of theatre history. Conversely, performance studies as an emergent field no longer defines itself by its opposition to theatre history, though such history is often confined to a small portion of Schechner’s “broad spectrum.”

Is theatre history a subset of performance studies? Or vice-versa? In the second section of this essay, I imagine the two fields as equally central, drawing on Philip Auslander’s useful distinction between theatre as an object-driven discipline and performance studies as a method-driven one. Reading Auslander’s pragmatic move through a theoretical understanding of performance’s inevitable doubling, I explain how it is possible for performance studies to be wholly contained within theatre history and for theatre history to nevertheless be wholly contained within performance studies. Yet the rhetoric of opposition (performance studies *versus* theatre history) continues to haunt scholarship in both disciplines.

Rather than allow disciplinary turf wars to paralyze the field, the third and final section of this essay suggests that the concept of *theatre historiography* offers an opportunity to redirect the conversation in a more productive direction. Surveying the contemporary state of the profession, I demonstrate that some of today’s most dynamic and productive scholars are untroubled by an imagined opposition between performance studies and “theatre history proper.” Indeed, if we consider the full range of ideas and methods deployed by historians of theatre and performance, we can see that the critical intersection between these once separate discourses is not just desirable but inevitable.

About the Author

Henry Bial is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in Theatre at the University of Kansas. His books include *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen*, *The Performance Studies Reader* (editor), and *Brecht Sourcebook* (co-editor with Carol Martin). His new anthology *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions* (co-edited with Scott Magelssen) is due out this Fall from the University of Michigan Press. Dr. Bial is a 2001 graduate of NYU’s Department of Performance Studies.