

The “Doing Aspects” of Theatre and the Emergence of Theatre of the Real

In his work with the Performance Group, Spalding Gray learned that a performer should have the “courage and technique to lay his mask aside and *show himself as he is in the extreme situation of the action he is playing*” (Schechner 1973: 126). He worked on an approach to acting that was something apart from “as if” and closer to “as is:” creating character somewhere between character and “work-on oneself” making the performer’s experience both the basis for the creation of character and for the creation of the work itself. The interpretive domain of making a work came from the performer’s experience translated and transformed into physical and scenic ideas. According to Gray, the performer-centric autobiographical *Rumstick Road* was partly attributable to Richard Schechner’s approach to actor training. “He [Schechner] emphasized the performer, making him more than, or as important as, the text. That made him very unpopular with critics and playwrights, but he was a liberator from assembly line acting techniques. The way that I interpreted Schechner’s theories was that I was free to do what I wanted, be who I was, and trust that the text would give this freedom a structure” (Gray 1979: 33).

Another understanding of the importance of performers contributing to the making of a piece can be found in Schechner’s essay “Drama, Script, Theatre and Performance,” particularly with regard to his notion of “script.” In this essay, Schechner noted how the practices of the post-World War II American and European avant-garde focused, “on the doing aspects of [staging a] script” and the ways in which the four terms in the title of the essay were being broken apart by theatre directors and performers (Schechner 1973: 71).* The “unified [theatrical] event” was disassembled by directing the gaze of the spectators to structural seams of the performance to reveal the means of constructing a work (73) an approach that became one of the hallmarks of The Wooster Group formed from members of The Performance Group. Schechner’s now well-known assertion that performance is a broad category of which drama, script, and theatre are parts disrupted long established disciplinary approaches and hierarchies and was more generally part of the way theatre practitioners re-conceptualized their contributions to making theatre. In this way of thinking, a performer could be herself or a version of herself as well as a character onstage. A director could also be a set designer and playwright. A set could be a character in the play. A text could be used for its auditory textures more than the meaning of its words. Action and image were as important as words. And words might not even be necessary. In my paper I will examine Schechner’s theoretical influence on Gray’s *Rumstick Road* and the importance of that influence for the emergence of theatre of the real as a practice not based on text but on

theatrical innovations involving the redefinitions of performance in the US in the 1960s and beyond.

- * “Drama, Script, Theatre and Performance” was first published in *TDR* vol. 17, no. 3, 1973. It was first republished in *Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976*, Drama Book Specialists, 1977. Subsequent publication was in *Performance Theory: Revised and Expanded Edition*, Routledge, 1988 and then in *Performance Theory*, Routledge 2003. In this essay, I am citing the 1973 publication.

About the Author

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