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Rehearsing Democracy: Advocacy, Public Intellectuals, and Civic Engagement in Theatre and Performance Studies

Jill Dolan

Let me start this argument for academic advocacy with three salient anecdotes:

1) A member of the acting faculty in my department at the University of Texas at Austin has a decal pasted on his office door designed in the ubiquitous Ghostbusters symbolic style that transliterates as “Don’t Think, Act.” Although I very much respect this man and his work with students and department productions, walking past this declaration of his values each day challenges everything I believe in as a theatre educator.

2) A theatre department colleague and I were recently asked to join a planning committee for a conference organized by UT’s law school on questions of art and authenticity. One of their influential faculty members wants to address how a play’s reception changes over time, citing, for example, the antisemitism of *The Merchant of Venice* as a “problem” for twenty-first-century audiences. In addition to pondering legalistic questions about intellectual property and copyright infringement, he wants to address the law as content in cultural representations. Although Holly Hughes had just been to campus, performing at a local theatre her newest performance piece, *Preaching to the Perverted*, the law professor didn’t once refer to the legal challenge to the National Endowment for the Arts’s decency pledge or its upholding by the Supreme Court. Neither did he suggest that the conference consider censorship as a legal issue that historically haunts performance and representation. While we’re glad to be brought to the table for an intercollege, interdisciplinary event (with a budget, provided by the law school, of an astounding \$100,000), we resent being asked to address other people’s issues when they clearly have no knowledge of our own. Obviously, we will try to steer the conference conversations toward topics that are more germane to contemporary theatre and performance studies. But the invitation was extended through ignorance and presumption, and considered, once again, a theatre department as a service unit with no inherent history or critical discourse of its own.

3) In my classes this semester, in part because we've been studying and seeing quite a lot of queer solo performance art, my students are concerned with questions of political efficacy. They ask hard questions about how we measure a performance's effect, and how it encourages real political movement. They ask, is it enough that Hughes simply tells her side of the NEA Four's story, personalizing a public event, offering a critical accounting in a public forum? Although she positions her audiences as "perverted" for the space of her show, aren't they really already *converted*, my students want to know, predisposed to agree with her ironic, angry reading of Supreme Court injustices? Who can we presume as willing or able cocreators of the progressive meanings we might want performance to generate? Maybe engaging the hearts, minds, souls, and politics of a predisposed audience *is* already politically effective. Can political change actually take place within the conventional architecture of theatre production, or can it only happen in street demonstrations, such as those staged recently by student activists against the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and global corporatism? I'm happy to debate these questions with my students since I, too, find them crucial to understanding the political dynamics of theatre and performance. But I'm less cynical than they sometimes are about the power of performance to directly affect social life. Just the act of going to the theatre, of demonstrating a willingness to see and hear stories that might not otherwise be accessible, models a hopeful openness to the diverse possibilities of democracy.

These examples illustrate the conundrum of trying to do politically invested work not only in a theatre department but *through* theatre and performance in American culture. Our endeavors to engage students in civic life outside of the university, in a life of the politically engaged mind and the creative spirit, continually compete with calls to raw, unmediated artistry that take them out of history, out of time, out of the body politic by asking them not to think. Our work is hampered by misunderstandings of its complexity and history (antisemitism in *The Merchant of Venice* is certainly a shopworn debate in theatre studies) and by invitations to share our modes of production as material for other people's intellectual projects ("let's get the theatre department to put on a show, and the law school can do the heavy intellectual lifting"). Civic engagement through theatre is obstructed by basic despair that real change can be effected in the traditional space of performance. Such pessimism undermines the power of theatre to engage directly and urgently in public debate. Counter to such cynicism, I believe that theatre and performance and the academic departments in which they're studied are ideal places to rehearse for participatory democracy.¹ Making connections to social issues in our productions, teaching, and scholarship doesn't contaminate but enhances the multiple, profound resonances of our work.

In this article, written just before the 2000 election, I outline only a few of the numerous fronts on which theatre scholars, teachers, and practitioners might engage advocacy in the early twenty-first century. Some of my argument might not at first glance appear relevant to theatre and performance studies. But part

of my point is that everything in the public sphere should concern us. We should teach our students to enter participatory democracy as artist/scholars with the skills to be competent, engaged, thoughtful citizens. I focus here on 1) advocating for arts and education in the classroom, in our universities and colleges, and in public culture, 2) proselytizing for artists to claim their places as political agents whose work has currency, effect, and therefore responsibility in the public sphere, 3) teaching students to be artists, critics, intellectuals, and citizens of a participatory democracy, and 4) teaching the artistry of theatre, as well as its history, theory, criticism, and literature through attention to social issues and to the performative nature of political contestation and movement.

Advocating for the Arts and Education

The current generation of arts advocacy was shaped as a response to aggressive conservative incursions against art as a federal entitlement in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Arts advocacy over the last ten years has led to a growing interest in working through government and private structures to integrate the arts more fully into public and political life. Joni Cherbo and Margaret Wyszomirski, for example, in the introduction to their edited collection, *The Public Life of the Arts in America*, suggest that

we are now engaged in constructing a new policy paradigm for the arts and culture. Once distinct cultural issue areas, arts interest groups and disciplines are beginning to find kindredness and to rally around both the concept and potential of delineating an arts sector or industry. Changing social, economic, and political circumstances and an evolving arts infrastructure, not simply controversy over the fate of the NEA, have brought us face-to-face with the necessity to redefine and update our aging arts and cultural policy paradigm. (8)²

The national endowments (as Cherbo and Wyszomirski describe, and as Jane Alexander relates in her moving memoir of her years as Chair of the NEA) were originally established to make the “high arts” more accessible to a wider range of citizens. Their peer review panels were meant to ensure a lack of government interference in decision making and to make sure that artists and humanists were judged according to aesthetic or academic merit rather than by partisan political concerns.

Because the endowments have now been thoroughly eviscerated by conservative congresspeople and the radical right, we have come to accept government intrusion in the form of accountability measures, decency pledges, and the wholesale redistribution of grant money away from individuals and producing organizations. We’ve acquiesced to the politicization of arts funding. Alexander recounts that, though she tried to argue for art as a vital public practice, most of her time was spent navigating the dangerous and unpredictable waters of congressional ideological conflict. It wasn’t always this way. When the endowments were first established, they were meant to create forums for public

debate and enfranchise artists who wouldn't otherwise be supported by the private sector. As a result of this mandate, twenty-five years worth of oppositional and mainstream, radical and conventional art flourished side-by-side across the American landscape, illustrating a diversity of ideas about what art can do and what "America" means in the public imagination. Douglas Crimp has suggested that the Reagan/Bush administrations understood exactly the power of art to stir radical participation in democracy. Crimp argues that the administrations purposefully set about to dismantle the endowments to clamp down on avenues for public dissent.³

Although Congress is now working on an appropriations bill that contains the largest (although still negligible) increase for the NEA in the last ten or more years, US culture remains contentious where the arts are concerned. The halcyon days of the endowments, when federal support for the arts and ideas was considered an entitlement, have clearly ended. Conservatives have stopped arts entitlements just as they have dismantled affirmative action, welfare, and other social service institutions. Although the federal budget for the arts translates into a laughably small figure per citizen (Alexander reports that in 1993 the NEA cost each taxpayer \$.68), the NEA's budget remains a convenient flashpoint for political outcry and grandstanding. New NEA funding policies carefully steer away from art practices that could be considered controversial. As Tim Miller remarked in a recent public lecture at UT, the Puritan heritage of this country continues to prevail, expressed as an intense fear and loathing of the body. Art remains a site of struggle over the national character: we're really not that far from the Astor Place riots of the nineteenth century, except that now the spectators aren't fighting each other, they're fighting the artists. In cities all over the country in the 1990s, productions deemed "unacceptable" to local so-called standards of decency were censored, often out of basic ignorance about their content and form. Theatre and performance became places where citizenship was redefined, where being a woman with a mastectomy (as in Susan Miller's *My Left Breast*, censored in Alaska) or a gay man living with HIV/AIDS (as in numerous censored productions of *Angels in America* all around the country) or simply being a gay man or lesbian (as in Holly Hughes's or Tim Miller's work) was enough to cause one's exile from the category of taxpayer with basic civil rights.⁴

Because of these debates over art in America, theatre studies educators should indeed be practicing advocacy in the classroom. We need to advocate for our students and ourselves as citizens of a democracy-in-the-making, however compromised, however imperfectly realized. Advocacy in the classroom means bringing these issues to the public forum that the university provides and giving our students the critical tools with which to engage debates about censorship, about art as a public entitlement, about who has the right to speak in public forums using federal money. As Helene Moglen argues,

To speak for advocacy is not to endorse indoctrination but to foster communication. To teach the skills of advocacy—difficult skills to teach and learn—is not to hinder but to promote free speech. . . . we have an

obligation to speak—and to help our students speak—as knowledgeably and articulately as we can on behalf of commitments that are deeply rooted in our cultural and personal experiences. In the openly political, as distinguished from the politicized, classroom, students are prepared for the practice of democracy by learning how, respectfully, to disagree. (210)

One way to prepare students for democracy might be to argue that the arts are indeed political—that they create a space for dissent and debate, disagreement and critical refinement, a forum through which to think about values and in which to install new visions of self, community, and nation.

Theatre and performance help shape and promote certain understandings of who “we” are, of what an American looks like and believes in. As theatre and performance educators, training our students to enter an industry whose representations structure our national imagination, whose images citizens look to for knowledge, understanding, and support, means training our students to look past the classroom’s walls into the larger culture. How dare we teach them that art is outside of history, outside of ideology. How dare we spread such gross untruths and call ourselves ethical educators. Our colleges and universities, just like our theatres, aren’t pristine places free from controversy: they are also interpolated into systems of power and ideology. They struggle with endemic social scourges like racism, sexism, and homophobia; they are caught in contentions over money and class, access and entitlement. We’re part and parcel not just of the institution but of the world in which we teach, and we need to start training our students to understand their work as part of a much larger political system of power and enfranchisement.

Artists as Public Intellectuals

Another strategy we might employ would be to teach our students (and to consider ourselves) to be public intellectuals with an expertise in performance. For example, commentator after commentator in this election season has remarked on how the presidential race will be decided more on the basis of personality, “likeability,” and imminent celebrity than on substantive issues. The 2000 election has played out on talk shows and late night television. Even when the candidates do debate in more structured public forums, their performances are compared to those they fashion for *Oprah* and David Letterman. As Neil Gabler suggests persuasively in *Life The Movie*, we judge our political leaders according to the values of entertainment, considering their celebrity status and the stories we’re told about their lives more intently than their positions on key social issues. Gore’s ratings soared in the polls after he passionately kissed his wife before his keynote speech at the Democratic convention last August; the act made him human and romantic, and supposedly lured the women’s vote (as though women are drawn only by staged political displays masquerading as Harlequin novel plots).

Even when Bush and Gore or Cheney and Lieberman do debate in so-called neutral forums, their performances are mediated by camera angles and on-line producers who create a set of narrative trajectories underlying their gestures and their words. The reaction shots, the split screens, the cutaways to Tipper or Laura or to “ordinary” citizens, all pander to our desire to see the drama, the conflict, the agon not through differing political philosophies or platforms but through the “contestants” personal style and ability to manipulate the camera to flatter their own images.⁵ The performative nature of political travail makes it easy to talk about performance in everyday life in my freshman seminar, Introduction to Performance Studies. As columnist Ellen Goodman notes, “Instead of being . . . citizens, we’ve all become drama critics. . . . The casting call perspective flattens out the differences in experiences and issues—who’s right? who’s wrong?—into differences of style—who’s comfortable? who’s not?” I disagree with Goodman, however, since I believe our citizenry might benefit from the skills of performance criticism. Those of us actually trained to look critically at performance, to study its links to ideology and culture, can offer ourselves as experts who study the election and the debates through a performative lens—not one that stresses entertainment value, but one that looks at gesture, narrative manipulations, contexts, and “spin” with an eye toward the politics they convey.

Carol Becker, dean of the faculty at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, suggests that with this degrading of public political forums into spectacle, “now is a crucial time to . . . take one’s life as a public citizen quite seriously” and to teach our students to take a role in public life (237). All of our students bring different sets of dreams and desires to their ideas of themselves as artists—as actors, directors, designers, playwrights, dramaturgs, or even critics—many of these dreams musically scored to the siren call of celebrity culture, which measures success against tabloid notoriety. But what kinds of values do we, as faculty and administrators, want to inculcate as alternatives? How are we training our students to become active citizens in participatory democracy? Becker says, “What we mean by training artists . . . is imparting a commitment to the notion that being an artist means developing a creative approach to the complexity of the world” (238). But artists tend to be positioned or to position themselves (“Don’t Think, Act”) outside of history. “We do not have in our collective consciousness . . . images of artists as socially concerned citizens of the world, people who could help determine, through insight and wisdom, the correct political course for us to embark on as a nation” (239).

Within the walls of federal power, Alexander describes how radical it was for her to ask for meetings with members of Clinton’s cabinet. Although most of the secretaries welcomed her effort to forge connections between their work—on poverty, violence, accessibility, entitlements—it’s clear from her account that taking the arts seriously as a form of public policy making or policy-influencing was a bit of a stretch. And the fact that Ronald Reagan was an actor is hardly what Becker means as an example of the artist as public intellectual steering the

nation's course. Reagan, in fact, according to Gabler, exemplified acting over thinking. Each of his meetings was carefully scripted, and the language of performing and theatre was used to shape most of his encounters. He consistently lived his life as though it were a movie, reducing politics to image and entertainment.⁶

The binary of aesthetics versus politics is pernicious in our teaching just as the binary of entertainment versus politics is insidious in our culture. These are the very conflicts the artist as public intellectual could mediate and ameliorate. Art is profoundly political. The NEA Four became objects of congressional vilification in part because they gave lie to the notion that art could be separate from public life. They dared to take overt, graphically illustrated stands on political issues: on lesbian and gay sexual practice, on human variety, on violence against women and gay people, against the corporate greed that has refigured American values. For this, and for using their bodies as the predominant vehicle of their art, they were silenced, humiliated, and denied their due as citizen artists. Becker writes,

In their role as spokespersons for multiple points of view and advocates for a critique of society, artists may well be understood as public intellectuals—those who believe in and take seriously the importance of the public sphere and who create, for an increasingly shrinking collective arena able to house real debate, work they expect the world to respond to. (240)

The performers—or more generally artists—I most admire are people who want to be heard and debated, who want to reopen a counterculture in which to assert healthy opposition to the dominant. When I asked Hughes recently why, given the elegance of her language in its written form, she needs to perform her work, she replied that she wants the dialogue, that she needs the presence of an audience to certify she's part of a public sphere in which contentious ideas and alternative viewpoints can still be taken up and debated. Tim Miller sees his latest piece, *Glory Box*, as pedagogy. The show teaches his audiences about the plight of gay and lesbian binational couples, who don't have the right to immigrate to maintain their relationships. Miller and his Australian partner could be forced to leave the US when Alistair's student visa runs out within the year. *Glory Box* indicts a country Miller loves and doesn't want to leave, and describes his desire to participate in a democracy that excludes him simply because of who he loves. This is how theatre and performance can have direct effect, setting out in moving, personal yet profoundly political style a message about legislative limitations on love. As Janelle Reinelt writes, in her own polemic for radical democratic theatre,

Theatre and performance, seen as an institution whose chief function is the production of the social imaginary, can play a potentially vital role in shaping social change. In a time when much theatre practice, especially in commercial and regional venues, seems anemic or irrelevant to public life, the affirmation of this constitutive function of theatre is essential. It means that we will

have to reconceive of our theatres as a place of democratic struggle where antagonisms are aired and considered, and where the voluntary citizenry, the audience, deliberates on matters of state in an aesthetic mode. (289)

Miller reports that when he's on tour with *Glory Box*, spectators after every visit write to tell him they've called their congressperson to advocate for gay immigration rights, and that they feel empowered by asserting their wishes as constituents. Surely, Miller's performance models and proselytizes for participating in democracy.⁷

Civic Engagement: Practicing Participatory Democracy

In addition to arguing for the arts as necessarily political, and training students as public intellectuals, we might also teach them how to be artists/scholars/citizens in a participatory democracy. As theatre studies professors, students, scholars, and practitioners, we could do the university and the society a great service by training our students to participate in public life through the arts. *Academe*, the bimonthly bulletin of the American Association of University Professors, recently published an issue devoted to civic engagement and higher education. Writer after writer stresses the university's public mission and the necessity that it be rearticulated in an era when corporatism more and more drives higher education's goals and structures. Barry Checkoway, writing on the *Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the American University*, says this document

formulated the idea of an engaged university whose strategy would include efforts to conceptualize research as a public good, integrate civic content into the curriculum, and make knowledge more accessible to the public. . . . The declaration imagined an institution whose students would develop their civic competencies, whose faculty members would promote public culture at their institutions, whose staff would contribute to community building, and whose administrators would articulate the purpose of research universities as agents of democracy. (26)⁸

I find myself quite moved by this idea. It speaks to my activism and my idealism, and offers rhetoric I can rally around. In my new book *Geographies of Learning*, I argue that theatre studies (and women's studies and queer studies) faculty need to address the ubiquitous theory/practice division that hobbles our field by seeing our work as part of a larger conversation with the widest possible public culture. I argue against the isolation of theatre departments in marginalized campus environments, where romantic discourses about artistry persist, robbing student artists of critical tools with which to engage the world. I argue for the immersion of theatre and performance departments in public life, lending our forums (and university theatre production seasons are indeed public forums, often the largest or most stable in the surrounding community) to debate the issues of the day from multiple perspectives, in all their complexity and contention. I argue for the relevance of "pure" theory and research but insist that those scholars

and writers who can should translate their ideas to wide public audiences so that theory becomes a tool in movements toward greater social justice. I'm not arguing for "dumbing down" our ideas or diluting the complexity of our thought, but I am arguing that we should both "teach the conflicts" (to borrow Gerald Graff's evocative phrase) and make translations that will bring more and more people into a vital public conversation through theory and theatre.⁹

But I'm not interested in subscribing to a notion of democracy or civic engagement that barely disguises a desire for an imaginary wholeness and agreement, in which white middle-class heterosexual men are polite but authoritative to their subservient wives, their passive children, and their servant-class people of color (much like the Southern Baptists would ordain). We can't just blithely take up the terms of democracy or civic responsibility without engaging them in a rigorous critique. Elizabeth Hollander and John Saltmarsh write,

Higher education . . . has a particular opportunity to educate students in their democratic rights and responsibilities. . . . [S]uch education does not mean teaching students to be a part of some nostalgic notion of America's democratic past. Instead, students need to learn to participate in the diverse democracy of the future; they must fully understand how democracy has been deficient in its inclusiveness and what it takes to make democracy work in a multicultural world. (30)

My argument that we should rehearse democracy through our productions and teaching, then, requires a deep understanding of its exclusivity, of the fact that some citizens are apparently more valuable than others. We need to engage students in a critical understanding of democracy. Johnella Butler, too, sees a conflict "between our national aspiration to be a democratic republic and the reality of our being a nation whose commitment to democracy is threatened by racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ageism, excessive materialism, and a peculiar numbness toward the suffering of others" (52). Art, perhaps, can make the body politic feel others' suffering more acutely, moving us closer to real democracy, if people can be persuaded toward radical change through empathy and unexpected identifications with those once considered other or alien to them. Maybe political change does happen through empathy as well as through Brechtian alienation. Perhaps this emotional awareness is what our culture needs to even begin to see the limitations of our democratic ideals.

Rather than trying to legislate representations of pleasure and straining to conform our desires to some inadequate, universalized norm, we should investigate the complexities and contradictions in our various pleasures through their representation in entertainment and the arts. Wendy Steiner says, "What art can do, and do very well, is show us the relation between what we respond to and what we are, between our pleasure and our principles. As a result, it inevitably relates us to other people whose pleasures and principles either do or do not coincide with our own. Comparing one's pleasure with others' makes

one compare ideologies” (59).¹⁰ During this campaign, Gore and Lieberman pandered to conservative calls for “increased morality” in entertainment, threatening to legislate against violence in Hollywood films if elected. Although Lieberman’s record of support for the NEA is impeccable, I find his blithe insistence on censorship chilling. Clearly, the politics of culture remain an important ideological battleground.

But Richard Rorty, in his provocative book *Achieving Our Country*, suggests that the Left in twentieth-century America abdicated its responsibility to democracy by retreating into a politics of cultural critique rather than agency. He suggests, “[A] contemporary American student may well emerge from college less convinced that her country has a future than when she entered. . . . The spirit of detached spectatorship, and the inability to think of American citizenship as an opportunity for action, may already have entered such a student’s soul” (11). He continues, “Leftists in the academy have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right in making cultural issues central to public debate . . . The academic Left has no projects to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by building a consensus on the need for specific reforms” (14-15). I disagree with Rorty that identity politics (i.e., feminism, the gay and lesbian movement, and the civil rights movement) are responsible for this stalled state of leftist affairs or that cultural politics are secondary to economics or other social concerns. Retheorized, theatre and performance are cultural modes central to politics of all sorts. As Reinelt insists, theatres might be considered spaces “patronized by a consensual community of citizen-spectators who come together at stagings of the social imaginary in order to consider and experience affirmation, contestation, and reworking of various material and discursive practices pertinent to the constitution of a democratic society” (286). It’s only our history of denigrating artistic practice as nonideological and ahistorical that sets it (and other cultural representations) outside the public sphere.¹¹

On the other hand, Rorty’s call to reengage in notions of “our country” to promote the possibility of equitable social justice is compelling. I’ve learned quite a lot from postmodernist studies that conceptualize the circulation of power as complex and capillary; I find these propositions theoretically foundational and will continue to teach them to my students. But I’d also like to use the classroom to proselytize—not for a particular political perspective (although I will never mask my own) but for the necessity that each student develop his or her own deeply felt investments in the public sphere, that each student *have* ideas, *have* a point of view about our country’s drift, about world politics, about the operation of real power, about how global corporatism plays out on a very local scale.

I’ll proselytize for my theatre studies students to be informed, active agents in participatory democracy in the hopes that what we know of democracy on stage, in popular entertainment culture, in our daily lives, becomes a livable, inclusive ideal, one to which I personally can resubscribe as one of its current

outcasts. Every time I hear Gore and Bush condone the Defense of Marriage Act, and intone that marriage should only be between a man and a woman, I feel democracy creep farther from my reach. I don't want to be married, and I feel that the mainstream gay and lesbian movement's emphasis on gaining this civil right is overweening and misplaced.¹² But I would like to have the right to choose my marital status, as heterosexual citizens do. I'd like to have the right to the privileges marriage entails, such as being considered next of kin in a hospital emergency room, or in adoption proceedings, or in financial and real estate and inheritance transactions. When my own partnership is excluded from these democratic proceedings, it's difficult to invest in "my country."

And yet, pace Rorty and Tim Miller (however strange bedfellows they might be), I don't want to remain an outside agitator. Becker notes that "artists also identify with the exile, the one who is spiritually, if not literally, removed from his or her own land—and is neither assimilated nor assimilable" (244). Perhaps this is why theatre and performance have historically attracted so many gays, lesbians, queers; why theatre and performance dominate the expressive culture of so many racial and ethnic communities; why theatre departments tend to be step-children in university systems that privilege other more stable, less fleeting objects of study. Perhaps this is why my students have responded to our queer guest artists with pleasure, respect, and even love—because, as artists, my students too are exiled from the center, from a hegemonic core that values materialism, objects bought, sold, displayed, discarded, over the ephemeral, public, intimate encounter of a night of performance.

I want to teach my students, through their investigations into theatre architecture, play texts, performance studies, and theory, to be competent enough to participate effectively in an inclusive, diverse democracy. I want the classroom we share to be suffused with the potential of transformative politics, in a however utopian vision for a better future which, through our criticism, our theory, our art, we all participate in shaping. I want them to participate in our limited and compromised democracy, to make it better, more suitable for more people. I want candidates like Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan to be included in future televised presidential debates so that people can understand the range of viewpoints attempting to be heard in the American polity. I want my students to read newspapers so that the debates of the day can inform their choices as artists and scholars in everything they produce for the stage or for publication. I want them to know that both Lieberman and Lynne Cheney (respectively representing the Democrats and, through her husband, the Republicans on the presidential ticket) helped found the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, an advocacy group that "fights what it considers political correctness on campuses and seeks to move power from 1960s-era faculties into the hands of alumni and trustees" (Arenson). The group is virulently conservative about educational policy; it would reinstall a core, canonical Western curriculum, and remake campuses in the image of the 1950s, before the student antiwar protests, feminism, or the civil rights movement.

I want all of my students—those who would be artists and those who would be critics or academics—to understand that these issues will directly affect their lives, that the election will determine the course of arts funding, censorship decisions, educational policy, affirmative action, and academic freedom for many years to come. I want my students to aspire to be on the cover of political journals, not just *People*, and to speak in forums for debate. I want them to be artists/scholars/citizens, influencing the shape of public life and its meanings. Becker points out, “Few artists would describe themselves as attempting to enter political life through their work; however Edward Said quotes Jean Genet as once saying, ‘The moment you publish essays in a society you have entered political life; so if you want not to be political do not write essays or speak out.’ This is also true of artists” (245). Taking the stage, too, is an entrée into public life, which requires theatre makers and spectators to be aligned and invested in its outcomes. Brecht said those who don’t make overt political choices, who don’t take stands, are simply aligning themselves with the status quo. Such apathy can only be self-defeating when the arts and higher education are under attack.

Student Rehearsals: Out of the Academy, Into the Streets

The recent wave of student street activism around the country and the world represents a hopeful sign of the resurgence of political critique beginning on campuses and then moving into other arenas of the public sphere. Galvanized by the movement against employing sweatshop labor to produce academic apparel, student activists extend smart analyses of global corporatism and the ways in which universities and colleges collude with its operations. The United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) established the Workers Rights Consortium, persuading a number of colleges and universities to join the group, whose members pledge to consider working conditions when they job out the production of their “branded” T-shirts and caps. By pointing out the wealth gap between the laborers who create these goods and the corporations who employ them, and drawing a direct connection to the newly corporatized universities capitalizing on this labor, the USAS has made a persuasive economic argument about global disenfranchisement. The protests against the WTO in Seattle in November 1999; the demonstrations during the meeting of the World Bank in Washington, DC, in April 2000; the protests staged at the Republican convention in Philadelphia in July 2000 and at the Democratic convention in Los Angeles in August 2000—all represented movements against global corporatism’s outsized influence in world politics.

Because most of the protestors are young, and many of them are students, Naomi Klein describes the protests’ trajectory as nonlinear, their structure inspired by MTV-weaned activists and the influence of the Internet; they take what Klein calls a “surfer’s approach to activism reflecting the Internet’s paradoxical culture of extreme narcissism coupled with an intense desire for external connection” (“Vision” 20). But the movement is also inspired by “old/new” politics; to counter centralized corporate strategies with wide and determining influence, the protests

are organized by decentralized affinity groups, which bring their particular interests and commitments to the protest as a whole. The events are governed through community-based decision making that, as Klein describes it, becomes unwieldy and perhaps undermines its own effectiveness. But better anarchy than fascism.

Performance is fundamental to these public protests. Huge puppets, resembling the visual style of *Bread and Puppet*, dominated many of the demonstrations.¹³ These puppets serve as theatricalized icons for democratic values and are protected as free speech. For example, Arts Wire reported that apparently “forestalling the destruction of visual props which occurred in Philadelphia during the Republican convention . . . U.S. District Judge Dean D. Pregerson barred the Los Angeles Police Department from seizing any puppets or written material from the headquarters building used by people planning protests at the DNC” (ATHE Advocacy Watch). The theatre-inspired language of “props” and the performance-oriented choice of puppets to make political claims in the public sphere represents a reinvigoration of radical street performance as a vital public vehicle for political reimagings.¹⁴

Journalists document several examples of such performance. In Los Angeles, “the protests’ ‘meta-message’ about the corporate takeover of democracy was delivered by theatre troupe Billionaires for Bush (or Gore), by young activists gagging themselves with fake million-dollar bills and at demonstrations against Gore’s ties to Occidental Petroleum” (Klein, “Cries” 6). Describing student actions around the country, another notes, “[A]t the end of March hundreds of students, many bearing hideously deformed papier-mâché puppets to illustrate the potential horrors of biotechnology, joined Boston’s carnivalesque protest against genetic engineering” (Featherstone 12). “On April 7, student antisweat protesters wearing duct tape over their mouths—to protest the fact that students have no say in campus decisions—met the University of Oregon president at the airport, frightening him so badly he left the baggage claim and hid in the bathroom” (Featherstone 14). This is agitprop theatre, crystallizing issues into a few broadly drawn images and gestures to score political points. And it seems to be working—again. These were the methods of the 1960s, for civil rights and antiwar activists, and of the 1970s, for feminists, and of the 1980s, for pro-choice activists, and of the 1990s, for AIDS activists.¹⁵

While local news cameras and producers edit these protests to their own ends for broadcast, and newspapers underreport turnout and don’t adequately cover protestors’ demands, the performance strategy demonstrators incorporate is visual and persuasive, and can provide the sound bite that conveys, perhaps, a lasting message.¹⁶ Performance of the moment also creates community, images, and energy for protestors to rally around, take pride and pleasure in; it focuses anger, as well as political momentum and desire. Performance, in its liveness, in the commitment of bodies we bring to it, challenges the alienation of the media. For theatre and performance studies educators, advocacy means teaching performance as political currency, as a tool for participating in democracy, as an expressive mode of being heard, seen, encountered, contended with as

someone—an artist/scholar/citizen—who has something to say in our current systems of power and representation.¹⁷

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Notes

1. My essay's title and my thoughts about rehearsing democracy throughout are indebted to Augusto Boal's notion of theatre as "rehearsal for revolution."
2. In addition, *The Nation* reports, "A new academic field of 'cultural policy' . . . is beginning to look at the tension between artistic freedom and political reality in the many communities where some variant on 'decency and respect' is advocated as a criterion for publicly supported art. With support from arts foundations, cultural policy centers are now operating at Princeton, Ohio State and other scholarly enclaves, while the Center for Arts and Culture in Washington, DC, is attempting to bridge the academic and policy worlds with seminars, conferences, and web pages" (Heins 36). See also <<http://www.culturalpolicy.org>>, the web site for the Center for Arts and Culture.
3. Douglas Crimp made these remarks at a roundtable addressing how to generate progressive responses to the arts funding and censorship crisis. The meeting was sponsored by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 7 February 1997.
4. Alexander describes meeting with Charlie Stenholm, an influential congressman from West Texas, a Democrat she needed to secure a vote in the House. She writes, "Charlie was clear: the gay and lesbian community had made the NEA a battleground, he said. I pointed out that the battleground included controversial heterosexual art as well, and that the NEA did not make the battleground. I suspected that there were plenty of homosexuals in Texas, just as there were in the other forty-nine states, and that they were part of the taxpaying public too" (121). Nonetheless, Alexander couldn't persuade him to act against what he perceived as his constituents' interests.
5. Many journalists and editorial writers have commented on this effect. See, for example, Goodman, Rich, and James.
6. Gabler writes, "But if Reagan thought of himself as a politician/actor, he also thought of his presidency as the movie in which he was starring. . . . literally everything was scripted for him on half-sheets of heavy bond paper in oversized type, even his own private conversations . . . Advisers learned to use Hollywood terminology to communicate with him, and Secretary of State George Shultz once coached him for a meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev by telling the President how to act 'in this scene.' Reagan himself compared his daily routine at the White House with the routine of an actor: preparing at night for the next day's scenes, 'running lines' during briefings with his advisers in the terminology of movie actors rehearsing dialogue, then going before the cameras in the morning. He would even criticize Nixon's line readings, with the disdain of a seasoned pro for the amateur" (110).

7. The performance in Austin, TX, also raised larger issues around immigration, given the state's proximity to the border with Mexico. One of my Chicano students, in fact, pointed out that she and her sisters had lived for four years as undocumented aliens before their immigration status was resolved, without the option Miller and his partner have to leave. One of my Canadian students also pointed out that immigration in Canada for gay people is actually not very easy. Widened to include issues of ethnicity, race, and health status, as well as sexuality, immigration is a coalitional political issue that may be well served through performance.

8. Checkoway explains that in 1998, 1999, and again in 2000, higher education and civic leaders participated in a national conference series titled "Strategies for Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University" at the Wingspread conference center in Racine, Wisconsin (26). The conferences were sponsored by universities, professional organizations, and foundations.

9. Herbert Blau reminds us how theory and theatre have always been linked. He also insists, apropos of the "Don't Think, Act" salvo, that "there is, moreover, politics aside, a certain repression involved, a censorship, in the effort to separate the artist who suffers from the one that thinks, stripping the intuition from the theory. It is a repressive force which follows . . . the romantic disjuncture between heart and head" (444).

10. I'd like to thank Marla Carlson for first calling my attention to this quote.

11. See Kelley, especially 103-24 for an elegant refutation of Rorty's attack on identity politics and his exclusionary formulation of "our country."

12. For a trenchant critique of these assimilationist, mainstream gay and lesbian politics, see Warner.

13. See Bell in Colleran and Spencer, and Bell in Cohen-Cruz.

14. Jan Cohen-Cruz, in the introduction to *Radical Street Performance*, says, "By *radical* I refer to acts that question or re-envision ingrained social arrangements of power. *Street* signals theatrics that take place in public by-ways with minimal constraints on access. *Performance* here indicates expressive behavior intended for public viewing. . . . Radical street performance draws people who comprise a contested reality into what its creators hope will be a changing script" (1).

15. Featherstone notes that "although the struggle against homophobia has largely disappeared from the student progressive agenda, the tactics—militant, theatrical and often campy direct action—of early-nineties groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation have clearly influenced the new crew of student activists" (15).

16. Gabler writes, "In a study of the evening network news programs' campaign coverage, Professor Kiku Adatto of Harvard found that the average length of an uninterrupted sound bite declined from 42.3 seconds in 1968 to 9.8 seconds by 1988" (101).

17. I'd like to thank Stacy Wolf for her helpful comments on drafts of this essay.

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