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CRITICAL ARTS

A Journal for Media Studies



(Special Issue: Drama and Theatre in South Africa)



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Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1980: South African Cinema. Sexism in Advertising.

Vol. 1, No. 2, June 1980: Censorship in South Africa. Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising.

Vol. 1, No. 3, September 1980: Theatre and Drama in South Africa. Semiology of Theatre.

CRITICAL ARTS

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A Journal for Media Studies

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CRITICAL ARTS

Vol 1 No 3 October 1980

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EDITORIAL

This, the third issue of Critical Arts: A Journal for Media Studies, carries a special issue of theatre and drama. Four of the papers repose within an African context, three of them relating directly to South Africa. Temple Hauptfleisch's survey of theatre research in South Africa shows up a paucity of investigation into the socio-economic, socio-cultural and political functions of theatre in this country. Most students of drama and theatre in South Africa avoid contentious issues by concentrating on text and playwright. In contrast, Hilary Blecher's contribution describes an exercise in improvisation in a squatter camp in Boputhatswana and extends the conventional notion of theatre beyond that of the proscenium arch and the elitist activity of "going to the theatre". It is an unfortunate fact that few, if any, South African university drama departments are involved in this kind of activity. Rather than being governed by the developmental needs of South African society, most departments seem to be perpetuating the capitalist interpretation of entertainment, to offer an escape, to assist the theatre-goer to forget the troubles of the world, in spite of the fact that all theatre, critical or not, is informed by the world outside of the theatre. All theatre and drama is a response to political, social, economic and psychological forces. Theatre cannot be isolated from these influences, it is not simply something that happens on a stage, divorced from social reality and social history.

Following from a discussion of Blecher's improvisation experiment is Ian Steadman's article detailing the paucity of informed critical responses to South African theatre. Locked within the confines of our Western blinkers, few critics in South Africa are even aware that the majority of South African theatre is, in fact, black, both in terms of original plays and local imagery. What is lacking is a critical framework within which to assess the semiotics of black theatre. To some extent this framework is provided by Keyan Tomaselli's discussion. "Black Theatre: Text and Context", to be published in English in Africa in March 1981.

A more general, theoretical discussion, however, is provided in the first article in this issue by Patrice Pavis. Although this particular paper has little to do with South African theatre and drama, it does provide a basis for theoretical discussion for future research on the subject of indigenous theatre. Pavis' discussion should be seen against the background of the preface to this issue where he relates some of the responses by some South African university drama and French departments to the need for rigorous critical frameworks. "Does it compare favourably" appeared to be a constant refrain. The preface, which has been included at Pavis' request outlines some of his experiences occurring during a tour of South African drama departments during 1979.

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PREFACE

Patrice Pavis

When I told the editors of Critical Arts that I could either write about semiotics of the theatre or tell about my experiences when "touring South Africa in search of semiotics", I did not really expect them to prefer the second topic, which is obviously the more difficult, even from a "scientific" point of view.

Since there's no doubt that I very much enjoyed what I discovered and made many new friends, I hope I can forgive for not naming in full all the persons and institutions who helped me. Perhaps I might thus sum up in a metasemiotic extract some of my South African impressions: signifieds are certified exact, signifiers might be a little mixed up.

I had been invited to teach a few weeks in the drama department of one of the major universities. I lectured on dramaturgy, performance analysis and semiotics. I found the students (2nd and 3rd year) very interested in learning how one could redefine structurally notions that were confronted in everyday practice as actors - notions such as action, character, plot, story, etc. I tried to use as little new terminology as possible, but I had sometimes to be abstract and theoretical. Since the students in question are very practice orientated, I was worried about coming up with my "heavy artillery" of semiotic concepts, especially when I started drawing maps of different sign models à la Saussure, à la Peirce or à la Ogden and Richards. Even in Europe, those new critical methods are often looked upon as slightly weird; and I wanted to avoid showing up as a recently imported, new scientific prophet (I don't have a long white beard). The analysis we made of the SABC-TV production of Wilde's Salomé gave me the opportunity to clarify some theoretical notions by observing them at work in the performance. It seemed difficult to overcome the attitude based on value judgements (I kept being asked if the production "compared favourably"). Avoiding such meaningless comparisons, I tried to "read" the TV play along some coherent lines (oppositions of colour, of acting styles, of psychology and metaphysics). Thus, we could discuss different options of the mise en scène, its possible interpretations, the ideological and aesthetic contradictions it contained. The idea they found most difficult to accept was that a given text could "produce" different meanings and could be recreated by its interpreters. A slight panic could often be felt in class rooms, when I made this point: if meaning is only relative, if a text can be manipulated and we also can be manipulated by discourse, what comes after?

After all those warming-up exercises, I jumped into my blue Volkswagen and started my unguided tour. I had no fixed programme in the other universities, but I was determined to test their semiotic potential and visit them all. Packed in our small car, my wife and I noticed soon, especially when crossing the Karoo desert, that semiotics can be a long and painful process. I began to associate South Africa with a semiotic analysis: in each main town, I felt I had to simplify what I had just explained in the previous one and to sum up in an "all-you-always-wanted-to-know-about-semiotics-but-were-afraid-to-ask" manner. I found it hard to change the topic from technical problems to more social concerns, because our talks seemed often to be predetermined by pre-

suppositions which took the shape of two frequent, innocent questions:

1) How do you like our beautiful country? 2) What do you know about the real situation after only three weeks? Discourse often appeared possible only through allusion to the non-said or in ruptures and fragmentation.

But still, I was very warmly welcomed at the University of the Fountain of Youth (although I probably did not compare favourably: I had only a pair of blue jeans left, after all our luggage had been stolen, in front of the "Royal Hotel"!)). The same evening, I attended a rehearsal of a contemporary Afrikaans play; the director had had to suppress the central motive of the threat of castration, so that the play lost all its impact and degenerated into a drawing-room comedy in a rural setting. Once again, the outside world (its constraints and its self-censorship) made the work of the actors meaningless. I felt sorry for the energy they were obviously putting into the production of this "emasculated" play. The following morning, I tried to explain to three different groups what a theatrical sign is, and how we receive and interpret it. (The same afternoon, again I was placed in front the tape-recorders of the SABC-TV studio and interviewed about semiotics and theatre in South Africa: it was a fight against time and recorders). I really was frightened to be "taped down" by the very swift journalist, whereas I enjoyed very much the direct and down to earth questions of the students. After almost three hours of talk, I suddenly noticed, looking through the window, that the campus police were beginning to tow my car away; I was just explaining what a framing device is, how the performance has to be limited in time and space and how difficult it is to set the limits of the modern work of art. This time, I thought it appropriate to illustrate my theory by my action: I opened the window, shouted that I would move my car myself and jumped on the window sill. At this moment, it became evident that the centre of my discourse was situated outside and that the class-room could no longer function as a closed entity. But I did not have to jump outside: the police had been warned that the blue car belonged in fact to a "Professor from the Sorbonne". The equilibrium of our semiotic world was re-established...

The greatest cultural shock I had - amongst many others - was to watch at the tribal university, black students learning to dance the waltz. All the buildings were empty on this Saturday, but the cultural "transfer" seemed more remarkable in this innocent and beautifully danced waltz than anywhere else. I had very interesting talks with lecturers on the concept of performance and how it could be applied to ritual and ceremonies of the black communities.

There were many other visits and discoveries. At the University of Wine and Sun, we discussed the trends of theatre production in Paris. I tried to explain the difference between "re-reading" a classical play and simply directing in an extravagant, fashionable manner using cheap effects. The departments of the University of the Holiday Camp Province and at Collossus Universi seemed to stress the acting programme. One of them was showing a Beckett production: the Beckettian situation was so well reconstructed that we had to stand in front of the locked doors of the theatre when we arrived after a search of two hours for the hidden campus. So the play ended up with my apoplexy at being deprived of my Beckettian entertainment. On another occasion we were trapped on a Sunday in a tiny town with only one restaurant and a university theatre. The students were rehearsing a nicely "stringed" musical comedy.

At the University of the High Spirits, I had the opportunity of lecturing in the French and in the Dramatic Art departments. Whereas in the first department students and staff seemed to be reluctant and afraid of the idea of "deconstructing" a text, the second showed much interest in experimenting

with semiotic tools. This happened in the only department where semiotics of performance is taught as such and one could already sense the curiosity and critical mind of the students, but also the latent tensions reflected in the staff's methods and ways of life.

Driving home after an exhausting day "with the High Spirits", I re-discovered the huge figure-head of the Metauniversity which overlooks the motorway: it looked like the Lacanian transcendental signifier/Phallus, which Jenny S., a brilliant semiotician, had just mentioned in her lectures. I liked the concept of this University of Universities where knowledge seems to be concentrated in the thousand cells of a bee-hive, in order to be then automatically transformed into a honey-like power. I admired the seriousness and coherence of the work of the Romance Languages Department where each staff member corresponds with hundreds of unknown brains. One could have studied epistemology, communication sciences or social relations, just by watching the organisation of the offices.

I must say that my most lasting memory is not connected with theatre studies, but with zoosemiotics. A young scientist, Jean-Pierre, was studying in the bush the social behaviour of vervet monkeys. He spent months (compared with my few hours) observing their social distances, in search of the rules of their everlasting pseudo-semiotic game. I wish I could have brought back the whole bunch with me to demonstrate to my students in Paris the importance of knowing the proxemic code between actors when directing a play. This is precisely what I have to illustrate this afternoon, back in Paris, and I am afraid it's going to be abstract and theoretical again!

ERRATA Vol 1 No 2 June 1980

With reference to John Coetzee's article "Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising":

1. "section IV" referred to on p.34 refers to the text on pp.39 and 40 starting with paragraph 2 on p.39.
 2. p.38, paragraph 3, line 34. The sentence starting on this line should read, "The images of desiring subjecthood that the models offer their beholders are elements of an unpredictably shifting repertoire of which no one knows the source".
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