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Performing the World: The Performance Turn in Social Activism

Dan Friedman and Lois Holzman

The performance turn is widely acknowledged. The premise that all (or much) of human practices are performed, that humans, through performance, function as the active social constructors of their world is not only embodied in the discipline of performance studies, but has become part of the dialogue in anthropology, linguistics, ethnography, folklore, psychology, sociology and history.¹ What is generally less recognized, both by many scholars and by political activists themselves, is the performance turn in social activism.

The collapse of the Communist revolutions of the twentieth century have called into question the value of ideology (in particular) and cognition and knowledge (in general) to provide a way out of the developmental dead ends – pervasive poverty, constant warfare and violence, the rapidly expanding gaps in wealth and opportunity – that appear to have trapped humanity.² Acknowledging this, a growing number of political and social activists, community and youth organizers, progressive and critical educators and therapists, and others have been turning to performance as a way of engaging social problems, activating communities and experimenting with new social and political possibilities. This shift is allowing social change activists in both modern and traditional cultures to organize, through performance, something new with what exists. The performance turn has the potential to be socially and culturally transformative/revolutionary because, in our view, performance is a creative social activity that allows human beings to break out of old roles and old rules.³

This chapter will focus on several aspects of the performance turn in social activism that have been made manifest at and through *Performing the World* (PTW), seven conferences that have taken place since 2001. PTW is a cross-disciplinary gathering of performance practitioners and scholars from every

continent, many of them grassroots community organizers. It not only provides the opportunity for participants to learn from and inspire each other, but also to create informal international networks and collaborations.

In unpacking the origins and development of PTW and in analysing the larger performance turn, the authors draw upon their insider position. Both are leaders of the performance community that initiated and organizes PTW and both have been engaged in performance activism for three decades. Holzman, a developmental psychologist, along with the late Fred Newman, is the founder and remains the key organizer of PTW. Friedman is the artistic director of the Castillo Theatre in New York City, and as such he has interfaced with the theatre world relative to performance activism.

Performance activism has a number of distinct, albeit related, origins. Political, experimental and educational theatre is one vital source. Another is the performance turn in psychology and the social sciences, part of the larger embrace of performance associated with some versions of postmodernism. A third is to be found in the grassroots community and political organizing led by Fred Newman and his colleagues in New York City beginning in the early 1970s.

Political, experimental and educational theatre

We begin with political theatre, in particular with agit-prop, the amateur theatre activity of urban workers that emerged in the years following the Russian Revolution in both Germany and the Soviet Union and spread across the globe with the encouragement of the communist movement.⁴ The 1960s saw the re-emergence of amateur political theatre, most immediately relevant, 'guerrilla theatre', the legacy of which continues in groups like the Guerrilla Girls, Improv Everywhere and the Yes Men, as well as in the contemporary phenomena of flash mobs.⁵ Additionally, from the professional avant-garde came environmental theatre, which eliminated the clear distinction between the audience's and the actors' space, thus expanding the performance space beyond the stage.⁶ The Living Theatre, during the same period, worked to transform the dynamic of the theatre from one in which actors perform a story for a passive audience, into one in which actors and audience both take part in a performed ritual.⁷ These experiments helped to make clear (as agit-prop did a generation earlier) the possibility of performance by non-actors and to tie this conviction to a progressive politic.

Another theatrical stream flowing into the emerging river of performance activism has been educational theatre. Educational theatre has come to refer to the use of theatre as an educational tool in schools, as well as in settings outside formal educational institutions. In this latter sense, educational theatre has given birth to Theatre for Development, a term used primarily in Africa and Asia, to describe explicitly didactic theatre produced to educate communities on subjects ranging from HIV/AIDS to agricultural techniques, etc. Often this theatre work is funded by European-based NGOs or religious organizations that see theatre as a tool in the arsenal of helping the poor country to 'develop,' hence the label.

Closely related to educational theatre is 'theatre for social change,' a label more often used in the wealthy countries, particularly the United States, for theatre functioning at the grassroots level, often outside of formal theatre buildings, with the goal of fostering social change. In some ways it is the contemporary manifestation of the agit-prop and street theatre traditions of the twentieth century, although it is usually created by trained theatre artists who bring plays and/or the theatre-making process into communities from the outside. The most influential current within this stream is Theatre of the Oppressed in all its multiplying variations. While the Theatre of the Oppressed does not go as far as bringing performance *off* the stage into daily life, it does encourage the non-actor to take the stage.⁸ Another current in the mix is Playback Theatre, which uses improvisation to bring people's lived experiences directly onto the stage, as actors 'playback' theatrically life stories told by audience members.⁹

In recent years these various tendencies within educational theatre and theatre for social change have embraced a common identity as 'Applied Theatre.' The label refers to the common approach of *applying* theatre as a tool to teach, engage communities, spark conversations, etc. about social, political, educational and cultural issues. Many practitioners who identify with this label, and for whom applied theatre and theatre activism are synonymous, have made PTW their home over the past decade.

Performative psychology

Another source of performance activism is the coming together of on-the-ground community organizing for progressive social change with the emergence of a performance turn within psychology and the other social sciences, of which Holzman and Newman are a part.

Among academics and practitioners critical of the social-scientific mainstream (on ethical, political and/or scientific grounds) who make a shift from a natural science-based and individualistic approach to understanding human life to a more cultural and relational approach, some have come to understand human life as primarily performatory. Contrary to mainstream psychology's premise that the essential feature of human beings is our cognitive ability (often accompanied by a subordination of our affective ability), performative psychology puts performance 'center stage.' To performative psychology theorists, researchers and practitioners, people's ability to perform – to pretend, to play, to improvise, to be who we are and 'other' than who we are – is simultaneously cognitive and emotive. It is seen as an essential human characteristic, essential to our emotional-social-cultural-intellectual lives – but dramatically overlooked by mainstream psychology.

This shift has breathed new life into qualitative research within the social sciences, spawning the methodology known as 'performative social science' or 'performative inquiry.' This approach involves breaking out of the typical academic performance of text, graphs, tables and Power Points and developing alternative modes of communicating psychological concepts, research and practices. Originating in the work of Ken and Mary Gergen¹⁰ (and a few other qualitative researchers) in the 1990s,¹¹ performative social science is 'the deployment of different forms of artistic performance in the execution of a scientific project. Such forms may include art, theater, poetry, music, dance, photography, fiction writing and multimedia applications. Performance-oriented research may be presented in textual form, but also before live audiences, or in various media forms (film, photographs, websites).'¹² Among the dozens of topics they cite are health and medical treatment for women with breast cancer, involving patients playing roles in a theatre production, and immigration, bringing audience members into interactive relations with artefacts and activities related to Mexican immigrants.¹³

Another direction performative inquiry has taken is studying performing by creating opportunities for people to perform in new ways. For example, there are practitioners who use theatrical performance techniques in non-theatrical settings to support the expression of people's creativity and sociality. Included here are various non-traditional therapies, including psychodrama, social constructionist, collaborative and narrative approaches.¹⁴ There are also educators who have made this performance turn, becoming attentive to creativity as *socially performed* and learning itself as a creative activity. Some relate explicitly

to teaching and learning as improvisational¹⁵ and develop performatory practices of student-teacher engagement.¹⁶

This is the direction taken by the community we the authors are part of. We became convinced that performing in new ways is key to ongoing human development and that ongoing human development is a necessary bicondition of global cultural and political transformation.¹⁷ Our brand of performance activism links performance inextricably to human and community growth and development. PTW was born as an organizing tactic of this community; we now offer a brief intellectual history of its activities.

We began by working in the poorest communities of New York City in the 1970s and have gone on to organize middle-class and wealthy people to work with us to support poor people to develop and provide leadership to the process of positive social change, free of government, corporate or university dependence. This organizing has led to, among many other things, the development of outside of school youth programmes, a theatre, a research and training centre, social therapy practices, independent electoral campaigns and self-governing organizations on a national and international stage.¹⁸

In the course of nearly four decades of this work, we have come to understand performance as a human capacity to be both who we are and who we are not at the same time (as actors on the stage are themselves and their characters). It is this ability, we believe, that allows human beings to develop beyond instinctual and socially patterned behaviour. This understanding of performance has, for us and increasing others, changed the very nature of social change activism.

In coming to this understanding/practice of performance, our organizing experience was enriched by Newman's training in analytical philosophy, the philosophy of science and the foundations of mathematics, and Holzman's training in developmental psychology, psycholinguistics and cultural-historical activity theory – and by the embrace by Newman, Holzman, et al. of the early methodological writings of Marx, the later writings of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky.

From Marx we took his dialectical methodology and insistence that human beings are not isolated individuals: 'As society itself produces man as man, so it is produced by him. Activity and mind are social in their content as well as in their origin: they are social activity and social mind.'¹⁹ For Marx, the transformation of the world and of ourselves as human beings is one and the same task: 'The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or

self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.'²⁰ Revolutionary practice, we came to understand from Marx, is not so much the organizing towards a specific goal as it is a new conception of method, a conception of method that involves a unity of human beings and the world we've created/are re-creating.²¹

From Wittgenstein, we came to an understanding of the limitations of language (and, by extension, of ideology). His later writings present a way of doing philosophy without foundations, premises, generalizations or abstractions.²² His method exposes 'the pathology' embedded in language and in conceptions of language, thoughts and emotions and introduces the concept of *language-games*. Playing language-games 'bring[s] into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life'²³ (Wittgenstein 1953, *PI*, 23) and 'the mental mist which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent' (Wittgenstein 1958, *BBB*, p. 17).²⁴ Extending Wittgenstein, we concluded that clearing the mental mist required performance.²⁵

Vygotsky²⁶ brought Marx to bear on issues of human, particularly childhood, development and learning and formulated Marx's dialectical method in the following manner:

The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study.²⁷

Continuing to build on Marx's dialectical method, Newman and Holzman expanded Vygotsky's statement of method and posited that human beings not only make and use tools but we also make new kinds of tools – *tool-and-result tools*. In fact, people develop through tool-and-result methodology. Vygotsky showed how little children become speakers of a language by playing language games with us, and in their pretend play. In both activities, the tool or process, and result or product, come into existence together.

Vygotsky said, 'In play it is as though a child is a head taller than he is. Play is a leading factor in development.'²⁸ He is telling us that in play, we are who we are *and* who we are becoming *at the same time*. He noted that children learn by playing with the adults and older children around them, creating performances of learning. Newman and Holzman,²⁹ building on this and looking at the organizing work being done by hundreds of their colleagues,

came to realize that human development happens, not just with children, but with people of all ages, when we relate to them as 'a head taller', that is, as who they are becoming. Just as a baby and mother perform conversation before the baby speaks correctly, school age children can perform reading or math or science before they know how, and adults can learn how to run their world by performing power.

Relating to each other 'a head taller' is what the performance community that created PTW does with thousands of inner-city children and adolescents, with people in emotional distress, with adults who want to learn to be better parents – with each other, with everyone. We all have the capacity to play as children do, to do what we do not yet know how to do, to be who we are and other than who we are at the same time. This is performance. Performing is taking what exists and creating something new out of it. This is our performance activism.

Our performance activism on the ground

The theoretical work outlined above has been done under the aegis of the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy (founded by Holzman and Newman)³⁰, which has functioned as the conduit/interface between the community organizing and the performance turn in psychology and other social sciences. An international non-profit education, research and training centre, the Institute has introduced and organized thousands of educators, mental health and medical workers, scholars and community organizers across the globe to the performance approach outlined here.

One key Institute activity is the ongoing research and extension of social therapy, which Newman began practicing and developing in the late 1970s as a group therapy in which building the ensemble, as distinct from analysing the individual, is considered the curative, development activity.³¹ Out of the experience of social therapy (with its group-building activity based in conversation and improvisation) emerged social therapeutics as a method of organizing for social change and development in which human beings are related to as creators of their culture and ensemble performers of their lives. Increasingly, over the last two decades, social therapeutics has understood the core of its method to be performance and its core activity as that of bringing performance and play into daily life.

The All Stars Project (ASP)³² has greatly expanded the reach of this approach. Founded in 1980 by Newman and developmental psychologist and community and political activist Lenora Fulani, the ASP is a non-profit almost totally funded by individual contributions. Under the leadership of Gabrielle L. Kurlander, an actress and director, who has been its president and CEO since 1990, the ASP has expanded from a local New York City talent show raising money on the streets to one of the leading youth development efforts in the United States. Kurlander has built a fund-raising operation, based on building strong relationships and the active participation of donors, that has raised some \$80 million for its performance-based programmes, and interfaced with educators and policy-makers.

The oldest and largest of the ASP projects is the All Stars Talent Show Network (ASTSN), which is active in New York City, Newark, New Jersey, Chicago, Illinois and the San Francisco Bay Area in California. Starting as a modest event in church basement in the South Bronx in the early 1980s, today the ASTSN involves approximately 10,000 young people aged 5–25 each year who produce and perform in talent shows in high school auditoriums. The Development School for Youth is a year-long training and enrichment programme functioning in four US cities in partnership with corporate executives to provide 'cosmopolitanizing' business and cultural experiences, leadership training and paid internships to young people. The programme gives working-class youth the experience of trying out the performance of the business world, in the process discovering that they *can* create new performances, all kinds of new performances. Youth Onstage! (YO!) is the ASP's performance school and youth theatre. It provides young people with some of the tools of the theatre – most importantly, we think, improvisation and ensemble building – to make use of in their daily lives.

YO! also functions as the youth theatre of Castillo.³³ Founded in 1983, the Castillo Theatre brings professionals and community performers together on stage, produces many original plays derived from the issues and concerns of the communities from which it has emerged, and serves as a conduit for the influence of political and avant-garde theatre to New York's working-class and poor communities.

The most recent organizational project of the All Stars is UX, a free school for adults, where the most popular courses are Improv for Everyone, Acting for Everyone and Public Speaking. In its first 3 years, it has had over 3,500 students, 80 per cent of them adults, overwhelmingly Black and Latino.



Figure 20 *A Season in the Congo*, Photograph by Ronald L. Glassman/Courtesy of the Castillo Theatre © 2009.

What all of these programmes and activities have in common is encouraging participants to build social ensembles within which they can perform (as distinct from simply behave, that is, act out well-learned roles) in their daily lives; these projects embody and generate our version of performance activism.

A brief history of PTW

PTW was initially a coming together of the academic turn to performance in psychology and other social sciences, represented by the Gergens, and the on-the-ground work of helping people to create new performances off stage, represented by Newman and Holzman.

Their collaborations began in the 1990s with two conferences merging academic content and performance: the Institute-sponsored 1997 conference, 'Unscientific Psychology: Conversations with Other Voices', experimenting performatively with the content and form of academic presentations, and a series of Performative Psychology symposia at American Psychological Association Conventions using plays, poetry, dance, comedy and other performance genre to present postmodern ideas to audiences of psychologists.

The success of these ventures, coupled with the desire to bring performance activists together with performance scholars, led to the first PTW in 2001, co-sponsored by Newman and Holzman's Institute and the Gergens' Taos Institute. 'Performing the World: Communication, Improvisation and Societal

Practice' was held in the seaside village of Montauk, New York, 11 months after 11 September. It included theatre artists, dancers, performance studies academics and young people from the All Stars youth programmes. Most of the 250 participants came from the United States, with about two dozen from other countries.

There has been both continuity and transformation over the seven PTW gatherings that have taken place between 2001 and 2012. The number of participants has doubled, and international presence has increased to more than 50 per cent, with 35–40 countries now represented. The 'performance politic' of the activists who launched PTW was there from the beginning, but was difficult to see until the conference became co-sponsored by the ASP and moved to its headquarters on 42nd Street in Manhattan's theatre district in 2008. The ASP's presence in working-class communities fused the PTW movement more deeply with the Black and Latino populations of New York. This created an overall environment in which the real host of these gatherings of 400–500 people from dozens of countries was not two organizations but the actual community created by the All Stars and the Institute. Nearly 200 volunteers – poor, working-class and middle-class young people and adults – staffed PTW; another 100 + across the five boroughs of New York City were housing hosts, providing attendees with a place to sleep (often a living room couch) and come home to each night. These experiences – for South African theatre professors, Brazilian teachers, youth workers from Peru, Park Avenue businessmen, unemployed mothers in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, non-profit managers in Manhattan's East Village, and high school students in Harlem – were not only once in a lifetime developmental moments for individuals, but embodied the methodology of the community.

One ongoing PTW theme has been the role of the performance approach to youth development, particularly poor youth and youth of colour. PTW 2008 featured a plenary, 'Performing Youth: A Conversation Across Borders', with Fulani and youth from New York, Johannesburg and Juarez, and an International Youth Talent Show. PTW 2010 explored 'The Performance of Blackness' through a mass theatrical performance, songs, raps and conversation involving scores of youth and adults. In 2012, PTW participants joined 200 young people at their All Stars Talent Show Workshop in Harlem and youth organizers from nine countries participated in a pre-conference training in how to bring the All Stars Talent Show to their communities.

The nature of social transformation and the means of achieving it has been another significant thread in the PTW tapestry. One especially provocative

performance was that of critical psychologist Ian Parker and the Institute's Newman. In a PTW plenary session, 'What is Revolution?' they shared their very different views on Marx, political action and psychology. Parker argued that knowledge and ideological positions are essential to making revolutionary change, while for Newman, 'the critical revolutionary activity is the creating activity, not the knowing activity'³⁴

The two major activities from which PTW participants have been drawn over the years – psychology and theatre – have been in dialogue throughout PTW's history. The plenary, 'Theory/Practice: Culture and Psychology, Therapy and Theatre', in 2010 featured – among others – Woodie King, Jr, founding producing director of the New Federal Theatre, Judith Malina, founder and artistic director of the Living Theatre and Patch Adams, a medical doctor and pioneer of performance as therapeutic for the sick. The 2012 plenary, 'The Therapeutic Power of Performance', featured seven leading play and performance activists and psychologists from Taiwan, France, Colombia and the United States who explored with each other and the audience the developmental potential of the therapeutic turn in performance and the performance turn in therapy.³⁵

Perhaps, most relevant to this volume has been the ongoing conversation between the academic discipline of Performance Studies and the social change methodology of performance activism. Although this conversation remains in its early stages (this chapter is, in fact, a part of that conversation), as early as 2008 Richard Schechner led a PTW session entitled, 'The Performance of Studying Performance: Building Bridges Between the Academy and Performance Communities'. In 2012, Schechner and Friedman led a plenary on 'What is Performance and How Do We Know It?' In this session, Friedman unpacked the specifics of this community's approach to performance activism and Schechner called for a 'New Third World' of those neither allied with capitalism nor religious fundamentalism spearheaded 'by performance theorists and performance artists, persons who understand that 'playing deeply is a way of finding and embodying new knowledge, renewing energy and relating on a performatory rather than an ideological basis.'³⁶

Performance activism around the world

There are many ways to perform activism and hundreds of them have been demonstrated and documented at PTWs over the years. Here we can offer only a tiny sample.

Alexandra Sutherland of South Africa's Rhodes University's drama department works with the theatre company Ubom!³⁷ to challenge the fixed identity of the disenfranchised and poor. The 'Art of the Street Project' creates devised plays with township children who perform them in the National Arts Festival. This performance of who they are becoming (actors in an arts festival) transforms who they 'are' (poor children who beg on the streets). Similarly, Alex's theatre-making workshops with prisoners are more than 'rehabilitation' – they are, again, an identity-challenging, 'becoming' activity.

In Peru, Ursula Carrascal's VIDA involves children from very poor areas polluted by marine debris, lead and trash, in performance activism through 'Eco Dance', her environmental education dance programme. A regular PTW presenter, in 2012 Ursula led 'Dance to Survive', a performance created by children of the indigenous Cantagallo people who live on a garbage dump next to the Rimac River in Lima. Their dance gives them possession of their people's traditional culture and, at the same time, puts forward their demands for environmental clean-up and concerns about global climate change.

Sanjay Kumar leads the Pandies' Theatre for children, women, slum-dwellers and the homeless in New Delhi. Sanjay's recent PTW presentations have been plays devised from scenes created from the lives of boys who live on the train platforms – as part of an effort to bring about humane legislative policies towards the rape of boys in India. In Calcutta psychologist Ishita Sanyal teaches improvisation to the schizophrenic outpatients at Turning Point. Their performances in public squares are designed to develop both the patients and the community by changing the perception they both have of the mentally ill.

All of the PTWs have had titles. In 2010, we made its title the question that underlines performance activism – 'Can Performance Change the World?' Two years later, with the world situation appearing even bleaker, we asked, 'Can Performance ~~Change~~ Save the World?' Of course, the answers to these questions will not emerge intellectually or abstractly. They can only be performed.