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SKULLS OF PERFORMANCE, THE BONES OF A COMMON AFFILIATION: JOHN DAWSEY INTERVIEWS RICHARD SCHECHNER



FRAGMENTS FROM SCHECHNER IN BRAZIL

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During his visit to the University of São Paulo in mid-2012, Richard Schechner spent a morning with John C. Dawsey for an interview. The two researchers and teachers already had crossed paths by some of their common interests, but their meeting surprised many of us with their fun and playfulness.

Schechner's illustrious visit, the personality who was one of the founders of the Department of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University in the early 1980's, was organized by the Centre of Anthropology, Performance and Drama (known as NAPEDRA for Núcleo de Antropologia, Performance e Drama), University of São Paulo, coordinated since its beginning in 2001 by John Dawsey.

Richard Schechner, one of the most cited and well-known references in the field of the performance studies¹, was not intimidated by the narrowness of the economy class seat for the long flight to Brazil with stop-over in Panama. He arrived well-disposed and behaved like a hurricane on the days he was here: he showed a relentless breath to offer lectures, present seminars, coordinate workshops, dance capoeira, write down thoughts, draw motions and ask a lot of questions.

His acting posture was cradled in avant-garde theater: he was founder and director between 1967 and 1980 of the New York experimental theater The Performance Group - TPG, which later became Wooster Group. In 1992, he founded another theater company, East Coast Artists, where he worked as an artistic director until 2009². His initial proposals carried out street theater experiments, protested against the Vietnam War, relied on ancient Indian texts to invent training for actors, the Rasabox³.

1 In the year 2014, there were author's publications in 17 different languages. Some of his main books are: *Environmental Theater* (1973/2000); *Between Theater and Anthropology* (1985); *Performance Theory* (1988, 2003a); *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (1993); *Performance Studies: an introduction* (2002, 2006). There are five pieces of his work that were translated to Portuguese, they are: "Pontos de Contato entre o pensamento antropológico e teatral" (2011a), "11 de Setembro, Arte de Vanguarda?" (2011b), "A Vanguarda Conservadora" (2012b), "Pontos de Contato revisitados" (2013), "Podemos ser o (novo) Terceiro Mundo?" (2014). There is also the compilation "Performance e Antropologia de Richard Schechner" (2012a), organized by Zeca Ligério.

2 In the theater Richard Schechner produced and directed: *Dionysus in 69* (1968), *Commune* (1970), *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1975), *Oedipus* (1977), *Faust / Gastronome Three Sisters* (1995), *Hamlet* (1999), *YokastaS* (2003), *Swimming to Spalding* (2009), *Imagining O* (with three versions: 2011, 2012, 2014), among other works. Some of these pieces were staged in other languages and in countries of different continents.

3 Offered as a training or workshop, the Rasabox is a technique developed by Schechner from his research on philosophy and performance in India. "Rasa" is the central term in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata Muni, text on Indian classical aesthetics of approximately 2,000

Richard Schechner has always seemed to challenge the boundaries between the audience and the actors to redefine the senses of performance.

Schechner is still the editor of *The Drama Review - TDR* and has also edited a series of important books to the field of performance studies. This field that he extended with his artistic-intellectual performance and opened with a conception of performance that gives account of a wide range of practices: theater, play, ritual, dance, music, parties, popular entertainments, sports, politics, interactions of everyday life, etc.

Schechner's visit to the University of São Paulo was an event desired by students and researchers at NAPERDRA, instigated that they were by the readings of Schechner's dialogues with Victor Turner. His coming was carried out under the thematic project of research "Anthropology of Performance: drama, aesthetics and ritual"⁴, which investigated, discussed and performed the paradigms of theater in anthropology with a view to the varied, changing and fluid forms of the concept.

NAPERDRA, which brings together researchers in search of knowledge associated with the performing arts and researchers of the arts interested in anthropology, mirrors in its own way the meeting of the theatrical director who made his anthropological learning with Victor Turner, the anthropologist who, in turn, in his relationship with Schechner, became an apprentice of theater⁵.

Two are the landmark books of the open field with this encounter: *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play*, by Turner (1982); and *Between Theater and Anthropology*, by Schechner (1985). An interdisciplinary field, between anthropology and theater, which in the NAPERDRA experience is configured as an "off-center and expanding universe" (Dawsey et al 2013, 21).

Assuming the discussion not only of the social foundations of aesthetic life, but also of the aesthetic foundations of social life, the NAPERDRA researchers drew on Schechner's text, *Ritual to Theater and Back: The Efficacy-Entertainment Braid* (2003)⁶ to think of the twisted interactions of ritual with theater, as well as of aesthetic dramas with social dramas.

years. *Nāṭyasāstra* is a large book of about 4,000 pages dealing with myths and the origins of the performing arts: dance, music, theater.

4 The project was possible because the support of FAPESP (Processo FAPESP no. 2006/53006-2).

5 Victor Turner and Richard Schechner became colleagues and interlocutors since their meeting in the USA in 1977, until Turner's death in 1982.

6 Currently published as one of the revised chapters of *Performance Theory* (2003). This essay was first published in December 1974, entitled "Ritual to Theater and Back: The Structure / Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment", in *Educational Theater Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 4.

Schechner, like Turner, seeks to show continuities between ritual and theatrical manifestations, but avoids the unidirectional orientation of the emergence of theater from ritual. Rituals produce theatrical events, and theaters can provoke ritualistic experiences. Performances are thus seen as braids of elements of ritual and theater. And the more “braided” the performances are, the more electrifying they tend to be, Dawsey believes⁷.

In Schechner’s (1985b) “Selective Inattention” essay, we find the symbol of infinity-loop model to think of the continuous interactions between aesthetic dramas and social dramas. Life and art reinventing itself, overlapping, creating hybrid forms. It is an interactive and matrix mirroring process.

If the texts and films of the researches of NAPEDRA sought to contribute to the consolidation of the field of performance anthropology in Brazil, besides the delimitation of an empirical field, Dawsey points out (2013b), the notion of social drama produces a methodological deviation, a theoretical inflection. It invites our attention to the gaze that comes from the margins⁸, to dramatic moments or to interruption of social life, moments of danger.

In many of these researches, published in *Antropologia e performance: ensaios NAPEDRA* (2013), can be detected the perspective of deviations suggested by Walter Benjamin and the epic theater of Bertold Brecht. John Dawsey (2013b) even proposes a “Benjaminian anthropology” to re-think the paradigms of dramatic theater.

The desired meeting between Richard Schechner and John Dawsey did not happen without theatrical play. There were consecutive days of exchange between places in the audience and on the stage: seminars, lectures, a Rasabox workshop, capoeira, Afro-Brazilian dance, the play *Bom Retiro, 958 metros* presented by Teatro da Vertigem, this interview recorded on video.

The meetings are always full of exchanges. Inevitably, when we meet, we exchange: looks, ideas, suspicions and trusts, smiles. Perhaps the sense of exchange (trocar, in Portuguese) has affinities with that of touch (tocar). At these encounters, we come together, we intermix, intersect. Transformations occur. Something is revealed, sometimes with estrangement.

⁷ Vide “Tranças [apresentação]” in *Antropologia e performance: ensaios NAPEDRA* (2013).

⁸ John Dawsey (2007) notes that the etymology of “theory” as well as “theater” refers to the “seeing” - from the Greek *thea*. He considers, then, that the way Roland Barthes defines theater - as an activity that calculates the place from which things are seen (Barthes, 1990) - is particularly relevant to anthropology.

For the interview, Schechner and Dawsey set the stage: they created a peculiar scene in one of the rooms of the Laboratory of Image and Sound in Anthropology - LISA of USP. They selected and moved various objects to frame their dialogue. Objects previously forgotten on some shelf or corner of the laboratory were called to protagonism and animated the game between the two: old cameras, typewriter, indigenous clay sculpture of a multiple subject.

Featured is a B&W photograph - probably from the 1940s or 1950s - of a small crowd that looks at us, smiling, but defiantly shame. The three cameras also are aimed at the audience. Old and mechanical cameras stare at this 21st century digital, which then records the interview. Eyes and lenses that seem to face the viewers, a mirroring revealed by inversion.

There is also a wall clock hanging from the computer's shelf - which, incidentally, has disappeared from its usual place. The analog clock reminds us of time, which rotates counting the same minutes, repetitively, twice a day.

In building the setting for their meeting, Schechner and Dawsey evoked a common affiliation: a grandmother with a scientist's apron. Between the two professors of performance anthropology was invited to sit a grandmother skeleton with more body than skull.

The joke with academic serenity illuminated the metatheatre of science. The presence of the skeleton seemed to revolve the earth of lower strata - and of those who have been buried - in this mixed and moving field of theater and anthropology. Something about the past lives, the predecessors, the remembered ancestors and also those forgotten. A common bond in a conversation with some unanswered questions.

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