

Richard Schechner

On Receiving an Honorary Doctorate,
Warsaw, October 2017

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*Acceptance speech on the occasion of the award of an honorary doctorate degree from the
Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy in Warsaw*

For this great honor I'm receiving I thank the Senate of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy in Warsaw and its Rector, Prof. Wojciech Malajkat. I thank Profs. Dariusz Kosiński, Jarosław Gajewski, Wiesław Komasa and Tomasz Kubikowski. I thank Tomasz Plata for nominating me. Finally, I thank Joanna Klass for the many opportunities she's opened up for me in Poland.

I suppose that the honorary degree indicates that I have accomplished something in my life, that I have acquired a modicum of knowledge, if not wisdom. Old age – and I am in the midst of old age – offers terrors, privileges and responsibilities. The terrors are obvious: dementia, decrepitude and death. The privileges are also obvious, if one has lived what society deems a 'successful life'. But the responsibilities? To move out of the way of the young, who deserves their time in the sun? To share what a lifetime of experience has taught? To insist on clarity of thought? I've given my life to studying performances – not only has art, but as behaviour and a way of knowledge.

Knowing what performances are, what they do, how they structure our everyday lives – personal, political, social and artistic – can, maybe, help save the world. Maybe you think that's an absurd assertion to make while Syrians suffer an unending civil war, Donald Trump is president of the United States and Vladimir Putin is president of Russia, fascism and neo-Nazism rise in Europe and the US, and Isis, Boko Haram and the Taliban terrorize. And while global warming, habitat destruction, pollution and over-crowding demonstrate that humans are a destructive invasive species ruining the earth.

I am two months into my 83rd year. For 73 of those years, the US, my country, has used its military outside American borders. Big wars, small wars, long wars, short wars, good wars, bad wars, just wars, greedy wars, invasions, incursions, missions, actions in Europe, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa. Think of it: the Second World War, the Cold War, the Korean War; Granada, Lebanon, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Serbia, Libya, Panama, Cambodia, El Salvador, Colombia, Liberia, Egypt, Syria, Zaire, Kosovo, Bosnia, East Timor, Yemen, the Philippines, Congo, Ivory Coast, Haiti, the Dominican Republic,

Nicaragua, Honduras. Plus untold stealth actions and black operations and wars waged on America's behalf by surrogates led by American advisors. The US Congressional Research Service in its 'Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad' reports that from the end of the Second World War in 1945 to 2015 there were 209 occasions when American forces went on missions outside the borders of the US. From 1979, every year saw American military action abroad. And what about the wars within American borders – I am using 'war' only partly metaphorically? The War on Drugs, the War on Terror, the War on Cancer, and so on. The rampant gun violence from the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to the bombing of black churches, the murder of black citizens by police, and plethora of mass killings, the most recent in Las Vegas on 1 October. Not to mention ongoing street and domestic violence.

American society and culture is infected and deformed by its largely self-created plague of wars. Continuous war both creates and requires a paranoid, xenophobic, political-cultural-social-educational-economic system of weapons research and testing, standing armies, policing and spying. In the US, we are bombarded (yes, I am aware of the metaphor) by messages telling us to enjoy the benefits of peace – consumer goods, leisure and free speech – while waging (again, note the metaphor) wars both foreign and domestic. Going on vacation? Take off your shoes and belt before passing through the metal detector. The message is disturbingly schizoid: live 'normally' but 'if you see something, say something'. The perpetual war machine needs both jingoism – America is the best, the greatest, the freest – and paranoia – America is under attack, our 'way of life' threatened, 'they' are penetrating our borders.

All these military 'engagements' (married to war?) cost plenty. American spending on arms averages out to \$330 billion (in 2012 dollars) a year from 1940 to the present. That adds up to about \$25.5 trillion (\$25,410,000,000,000) – more than 91 trillion zlotys (91,476,000,000,000 PLN). Can you even imagine what such a pile of gold would buy if put to constructive uses? Healthcare, education, public works, housing, arts? Maybe it doesn't make sense to unilaterally disarm. But neither does it make sense to be the world's number one military spender for years, decades, generations... forever. Not since Rome – and remember how swiftly Rome went from republic to imperium to decay – has an empire so extended-expended itself. And the cost is not just dollars. The cost is personal, cultural and spiritual.

What is it about war? The foundational myths of Indo-European and Middle Eastern cultures celebrate battle, conquest and martial valour: *The Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Gilgamesh*. Yes, ancient Greek theatre brings the claims of women against war; witness *The Oresteia*, *Antigone*, *The Trojan Women* and *Lysistrata*. But other plays – *The Persians* and *Ajax*, for example – glorify heroism and war. The Old Testament features the Ten Plagues, God's war against Pharaoh, the destruction of Jericho, the ethnic cleansing of Canaan, and King David's bloody expeditions. The Qur'an commands pitiless war against unbelievers. The European Middle Ages extolled the Crusades. Shakespeare was no pacifist, nor was John Milton, Ernest Hemingway or even Joseph Heller. Pop culture – from video games to contact sports – is driven by

violence and saturated with metaphors of war. In fact, war is a powerful performative, an operation of the creative imagination drawing people into enactments of valor, martyrdom and national identity in myriad powerful narratives.

For all that I've just said, the wars among people aren't the most destructive, finally. They are exceeded by the overall human war against nature, which is approaching specicide or possibly globacide. At one point, the myth of intrepid explorers 'conquering' the planet was a useful performative. No longer. We need to think not of conquest but of collaboration; to recognize that the animals, plants, lands, seas and air – the biosphere, the whole world, 'Gaia' – is a singular living organism. We are in the midst of the world's sixth great mass extinction. The fifth came when an asteroid smashed into the Gulf of Mexico 65 million years ago. The current mass extinction is caused by *Homo sapiens*, us. Today's mass extinction is due to a polluted atmosphere driving temperatures up, melting ice and acidifying oceans; to poisoned rivers and lands, mono-culture agriculture, invasive species, over-population, overfishing, deforestation and a lot more. If we continue on the path we are on, humans will make the world uninhabitable for ourselves – *Homo sapiens* will go extinct. After we are gone, just as after the Cretaceous crash, the organisms that survive will evolve to take advantage of new ecological circumstances.

Some see a wholly different, Utopian future where science and technology are *dei ex machina*. Fusion, solar and wind energy, robots, nano-engineering, desalinated ocean water. Maybe even terraforming the moon and/or settling Mars. We humans will limit population, conserve biodiversity and engineer the genome, bringing into existence new species and superior human beings. Or maybe *que sera sera*: global warming isn't so bad. The earth once was mostly tropical, wasn't it? As Mumbai, Amsterdam, Dhaka, Shanghai, Houston, Miami and dozens of other great cities struggle against flooding, and low-lying islands such as the Maldives vanish altogether, populations migrate to Antarctica, Greenland, Northern Canada and Siberia.

Sometimes clichés and platitudes are useful. So here are some: Ignorance is the plague. Denial is the plague. Disrespecting nature is the plague. Sexism is the plague. Racism is the plague. Xenophobia is the plague, wealth inequality is the plague. Greed is the plague.

What can overcome the plague?

Performances are – or can be – models of utopian societies. The process of making performances – collaborative interactions and collective decisions leading to public displays – is a positive social model. Workshops are ways to destroy ignorance; rehearsals are ways to creatively relate to others not by submerging or ignoring differences, but by exploring differences as the group devises a common way forward; performances offer to the public the outcome of such active research.

Performance studies, the academic field I have helped to devise and develop, is based on the axiom that we live in a performatized world where cultures are colliding with each other, hybridizing at a swift and increasing rate. These collisions are not always politically correct or pleasant. Populations and ideas are on the move, pushed by war, ideologies, religions, famines, disease, hopes for a better life, government intervention and global trade. The outcome, if there is to be 'an' outcome, of all

this circulation is neither clear nor certain. As I noted, some argue that the near future will bring unimaginable technical progress, while others foresee doom. I myself shuttle between these. My brain, my thinking, is pessimistic while my belly, my passions, are optimistic.

Performance studies is a response to and an analysis of the contradictory circumstances we are experiencing. Performance studies holds up critical lenses to societies, groups and individuals who embody and enact their personal and collective identities. Performance studies arises from the premise that everything and anything can be studied 'as' performance. The tools of performance studies are drawn from other disciplines and have not yet coalesced into a coherent singularity. Performance studies borrows from, adapts, and makes use of the social and biological sciences, history, gender studies, psychoanalysis, social theory, critical race studies, game theory, communications theory, economics, popular culture studies, media studies, and theatre, dance, music and film studies.

Over the past 125 years, the notion of performance has been stretched, twisted and expanded. This expansion was at first driven by the avant-garde and by interactions between non-Western and Western cultures. Later, the expansion was also driven by the Internet and social media, with a resulting blurring of boundaries between the actual and the virtual, between so-called 'art' and so-called 'life'.

Performances in the broad sense, in social life, the arts, politics, business, medicine, science and popular culture mark identities, bend and remake time, adorn and reshape the body, tell stories and provide people with the means to play with, rehearse and remake the worlds we not merely inhabit but are always already in the habit of reconstructing.

Having spoken in such generalities, I must qualify by saying that every genre of performance, even every particular instance of each genre, is concrete and specific, different from every other. Not only in terms of cultural difference, but also in terms of local and even individual variation. No individual screening of the same film is exactly the same as every other – the audience and circumstances qualify each screening. At the same time, something carries over from event to event, each event is both 'original' and 'not for the first time'. This paradox must be understood and accepted. Each unique event is made of bits of past events, languages and behaviours. The tension among permanence, repeatability, ephemerality and originality is what constitutes the process of behaviour and the representations of behaviour at all levels and all instances. Understanding this is powerfully important in a period of accelerating digitization where reproducibility, interchangeability and sameness seem to have the upper hand. But even cloned performances are different from each other when experienced by different audiences or the same audience at different times. The Heraclitian river cannot be bathed in twice.

The development of performance as a category of theory as well as a fact of behaviour and action makes it increasingly difficult to sustain the distinction between appearances and facts, surfaces and depths, illusions and substances. More than that: appearances are actualities, appearances drive actions. In modernity, what was 'behind', 'beneath', 'deep' and 'hidden' were (often) the 'most real'. But in postmodernity – and whatever will come after – the relationship between depths and surfaces is fluid and

dynamically convective. What was hidden is tossed upwards; what was skim is plunged to the interior.

To turn now towards the social consequences of this performance-studies way of thinking. Clearly, we are in an epoch of unrest, uncertainty, dissatisfaction and turmoil. Huge populations are angry, confused and restless. Will this dissatisfaction lead to revolution? And if so, what kind of revolution? Armed struggle? Cultural reformation? Something not yet articulated?

In 1955, in Bandung, Indonesia, Jawaharlal Nehru addressed representatives of what came to be called 'the Third World':

I speak with the greatest respect of these Great Powers [the US and the USSR] because they are not only great in military might but in development, in culture, in civilization. But I do submit that greatness sometimes brings quite false values, false standards. [...] I submit that moral force counts and the moral force of Asia and Africa must, in spite of the atomic and hydrogen bombs of Russia, the U.S.A. or another country, count. [...] Therefore, are we, the countries of Asia and Africa, devoid of any positive position except being pro-communist or anti-communist? Has it come to this, that the leaders of thought who have given religions and all kinds of things to the world have to tag on to this kind of group or that and be hangers-on of this party or the other carrying out their wishes and occasionally giving an idea? It is most degrading and humiliating to any self-respecting people or nation.¹

Today the world is not bipolar as in Nehru's day. It is triangular – with tensions arising from conflicts among the claims of ideologized religion, militarized politics and globalized economies. These forces overlap, even as they are often in competition with each other. Paradoxically, they are mutually dependent even as they are antagonistic to each other.

Against this tri-polar world, in the spirit of Nehru, I am proposing a 'fourth world', aesthetics. I propose that we make aesthetics a counterweight to religion, politics and business along the lines of Nehru's 'moral force'. Nehru's third world had a specific geographical location, the global south. Today's fourth world is a proportion of people everywhere with a majority nowhere. It is also part of every person – that part which rejects absolutism, deadly force and – for lack of a better term – 'ugliness', whether of form or purpose. What unites the new fourth world is a community of purpose and a mode of inquiry (the experimental and avant-garde, if you will). The fourth world is at present incipient, not fully realized; seeds, not yet wholly grown. This fourth world of aesthetics needs to organize itself as 'non-aligned', neither capitalist, whether of the US, European or Chinese brand, nor communist/socialist, nor fundamentalist-religious, whether Islamic, Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or whatever. The vanguard of this new fourth world are – and here I hope you won't think me too arrogant – performance theorists and performance artists who practice collaborative performance research; persons who know that playing deeply is a way of finding and embodying new knowledge.

1 Reprinted in G. M. Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1956), pp. 64–72.

What would be the manifesto of this Performance Fourth World? It has four axioms:

1. To perform is to explore, to play, to experiment with new relationships.
2. To perform is to cross borders. These borders are not only geographical, but emotional, ideological, political and personal.
3. To perform is to engage in lifelong active study. To grasp every possibility as a script – something to be played with, interpreted and reformed/remade.
4. To perform is to become someone else and yourself at the same time. To empathise, react, grow and change.

I realise that what I am proposing is almost unimaginable, because it is so hard for people to take seriously those who are not doing business, making war or enforcing the will of God. But we must take seriously those who play; those who create playgrounds and art spaces. We must take seriously the personal, social and world-making force of performance.

All well and good. But can I offer examples? There is a lot going on in the region where art, scholarship and social action interact. Here, because my time is short, I will offer one powerful instance only. Performance artist and activist Eve Ensler's project, One Billion Rising, which is a response to the December 2012 rape-murder of 23-year-old Jyoti Singh in Delhi, India. Each year, One Billion Rising (OBR) combines political protest, activism and art. From 14 February through 8 March 2018, One Billion Rising is calling for 'Artistic Uprisings' around the world:

- Hold and stage an event that brings together women from different marginalized and most oppressed sectors from each community – and have them tell their own stories through monologues/spoken word/song/film/dance.

TELL THE STORIES OF WOMEN! MAKE THEIR INVISIBLE STORIES VISIBLE! EXPOSE THE WORLD TO WOMEN'S ISSUES FROM THEIR LOCAL CONTEXTS AND FROM THEIR OWN VOICES!

- Invite radical artists who have curated creative work that fits the theme of *OBR Revolution: Solidarity* to join! ²

In reference to OBR's 2016 campaign focusing on dance:

What we [...] did was show the power of art and dance and the astonishing and political alchemy that occurs when art and activism happen simultaneously. Dance is one of the most powerful forces on the earth and we have only just begun to tap into where it can take us.³

OBR is not a movement with a known endpoint – except ending violence against women – and, concomitantly, ending violence against the planet.

The 'woman question' is as vital today, maybe more so, as when American women assembled in Seneca Falls in 1848 to press for their rights; the injustices as palpable as those Ibsen portrayed. Think of the unfolding scandal of movie producer Harvey Weinstein forcing actresses

2 www.onebillionrising.org [accessed on 8 February 2018].

3 www.onebillionrising.org [accessed on 8 February 2018].

to have sex with him. And before him, the actions of Bill Cosby, Roger Ailes and Bill O'Reilly. But, really, this is not an 'American problem', it's global and it is as deeply engrained in cultural practice as war is. Dealing with violence against women is not only a matter of equality but of changing the future history of human imagination. Like slavery, which once was common, such violence must be 'unthinkable' and 'barbaric', even if some people and societies still practice it.

One Billion Rising is an example of 'social theatre', a genre of performance using aesthetics to make societal change. As James Thompson and I wrote in 2004:

Social theatre takes place in diverse locations -- from prisons, refugee camps, and hospitals to schools, orphanages, and homes for elderly. [...] The varieties of social theatre [...] can be put into four groups that have a logical and sequential relationship to each other: 1. theatre for healing; 2. theatre for action; 3. theatre for community; 4. theatre for transforming experience into art. [...] Performance studies recognizes all areas of social life as topics for performance theorists. Social theatre carries this banner into practice by going to hospitals, prisons, and war zones and proving that performance itself is a method for understanding what goes on there; for intervening, participating, and collaborating in positive ways with people who live in these sites.⁴

Social theatre and experimental, aesthetic performance art and theatre converge. The number of progressive avant-garde/experimental artists is too great to list even a fraction of them. *TDR*, the journal I edit, has for decades championed the work of these artists – such as Forced Entertainment, the Yes Men, Gob Squad, the TEAM, Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, The Assembly, Builders Association, Komuna// Warszawa and many more. These groups are one basis for the new fourth world of aesthetics. To these theatres, add visual artists, filmmakers, novelists, poets, videographers and scholars, and it adds up to an enormous potential for expression, awareness and change. What's needed now is for individuals and groups, movements and tendencies, artists and scholars to coalesce into a unified force for positive change. As artists to create and as professors to teach the imaginative performative basis of the world we want to call into existence. We must theorise, imagine, invent and perform alternative ways of becoming.

4 James Thompson, Richard Schechner, 'Why „Social Theatre“?', *TDR/The Drama Review* 48:3, Fall 2004, pp. 11–12, pp. 15–16.

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ABSTRACT**Richard Schechner**

On Receiving an Honorary Doctorate, Warsaw, October 2017:

Acceptance speech on the occasion of the award of an honorary doctorate degree by the Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy in Warsaw

While summarizing his professional achievements – his research on performance – Richard Schechner analyses the development, widening and transforming performance as a theoretical category and as actual behaviour. He reflects upon the consequences of this process, as well as recognizes that knowing what performances are and how they structure our everyday lives can help save the world – the world of rising fascism, civil war in Syria, global warming and overpopulation. The author begins with his own backyard, asserting that American society and American culture is infected and deformed by its largely self-created plague of wars. He understands war not solely in military terms, but first and foremost as a performative, that is an operation of creative imagination that makes people personalise virtue, martyrdom and national identity in the form of a thousand powerful plots. It is not only between people, but also between humans and nature. Schechner locates the conflict in the tri-polar world of religion, armed politics and globalised economy, and recognises the chance of counterbalance in creating a new 'fourth world of aesthetics' – created by visual artists, filmmakers, writers, poets, scholars, etc. – by performers.

The paper was presented by Schechner during the ceremony awarding him with the title of doctor honoris causa from the Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy in Warsaw.