

Theories of Performance

Theories of Performance invites students to explore the possibilities of performance for creating, knowing, and staking claims to the world. Each chapter surveys, explains, and illustrates classic, modern, and postmodern theories that answer the questions, "What is performance?" "Why do people perform?" and "How does performance constitute our social and political worlds?" The chapters feature performance as the entry point for understanding texts, drama, culture, social roles, identity, resistance, and technologies.

Written specifically for the undergraduate classroom, this book explains performance theories in ways that are accessible to students and relevant to their lives, and it richly illustrates theories with examples that encourage students to think more, to think harder, and to think differently about performances around them. The text incorporates a variety of pedagogical strategies to encourage students to demonstrate, apply, extend, and share their discoveries about theory. Each chapter provides student-centered exercises, activities, and prompts.

From Aristotelian tragedy to online avatars, dramatism to performativity, cultural performance to public protest, canon wars to virtual reality, **Theories of Performance** brings classic, modern, and postmodern theories to life in the classroom.

*"Elizabeth Bell has done a prodigious, expert, and original synthesis of the new work in performance studies here, by grounding performance in communication theory and practice. Students reading this book will more readily see how and why performance is a way of communicating, empowering them to critically participate in producing and consuming the myriad texts and performances in which we are immersed. The 'Act Out' and other boxes present effective and innovative learning activities; they move performance from a display of competence to participation in bodily knowing. In short, **Theories of Performance** is an exceptional accomplishment."*

—Kristin M. Langellier, *University of Maine*

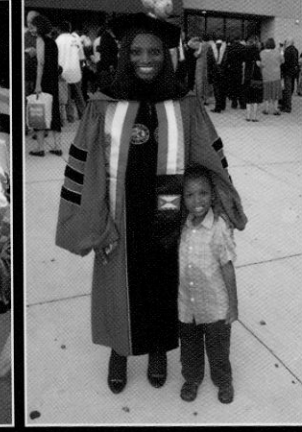
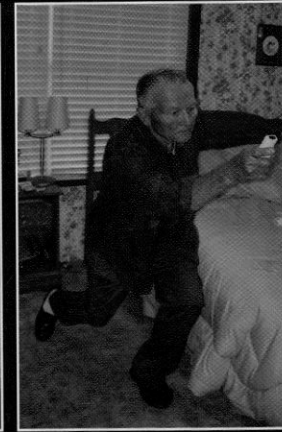
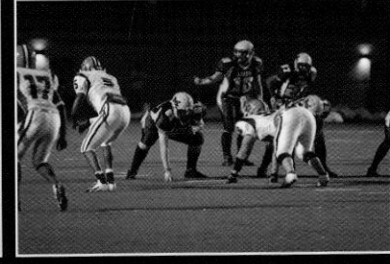
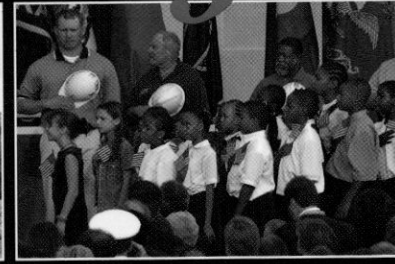
*"**Theories of Performance** is the BEST synthesis of performance studies issues, concepts, and methodologies that yet exists. This textbook is invaluable and will make performance studies classrooms 'smarter' and more sophisticated both in terms of content and in practice. What a treat it will be to offer students a text that takes the best thoughts, practices, and examples and presents it to them in an engaging, surprising, and provocative format!"*

—Keith Pounds, *Hofstra University*

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Elizabeth Bell

ISBN 978-1-4129-2636-6



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To my teachers Paul H. Gray and Beverly Long Chapin

Elizabeth Bell
University of South Florida

 **SAGE Publications**
Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore

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For information:



Sage Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

Sage Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

Sage Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bell, Elizabeth, 1953—
Theories of performance / Elizabeth Bell.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4129-2637-9 (cloth)
ISBN 978-1-4129-2638-6 (pbk.)
1. Performance. I. Title.

BF481.B375 2008
302'.1—dc22

2007036498

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

08 09 10 11 12 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acquisitions Editor: Todd R. Armstrong
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FIGURE

Everyday Theorizing

Write a theory question that asks What? Why? or How? about one of the following typical activities. Put all the questions in a hat. In groups, have each group draw one of the questions to answer. Your answer should be a start in building a theory (a model, a guess, an explanation, a proposition) that explores this activity.

Write one theoretical answer in a discourse of representation (assuming language is neutral). This answer might rely heavily on the "scientific observation" of cause and effect. Write a second answer in a discourse of understanding (assuming meanings are created together). This answer might rely heavily on the jargon of "insiders" who understand the terminology. Write still a third answer in a discourse of suspicion (assuming power is obscured by language). This answer might rely heavily on politics that spell out the "have's" and the "have not's." Perform your answers for the class. How does language change across your theory answers?

Crossing the street in busy traffic

Ordering fast food

Hitting middle "C" in a song

Drawing a picture

Falling asleep

Naming a new pet

Two Models of Communication

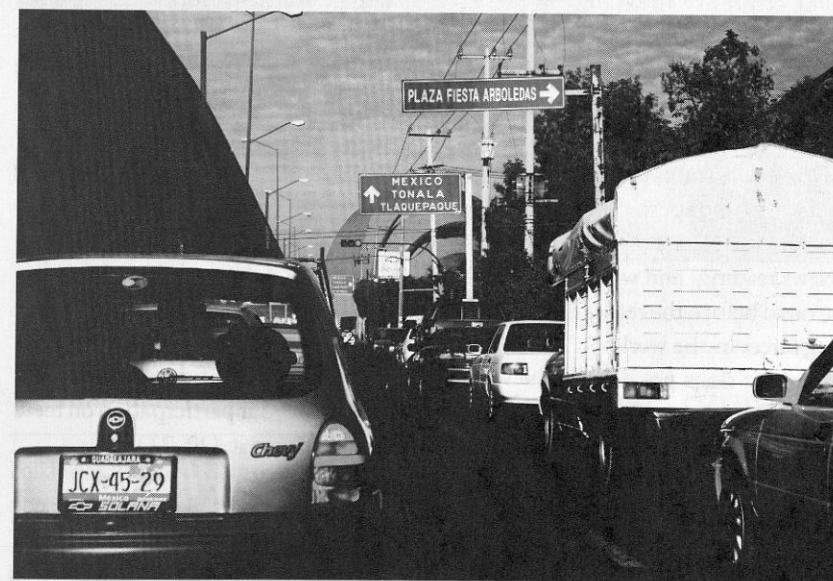
Drama—written and staged plays in the West—has been studied, performed, and theorized for more than two thousand years. Theatre is a rich academic discipline and practice that has engendered many important theories in and of performance: from Aristotle to Augusto Boal, Shakespeare to Stanislavski, Brecht to Bakhtin. This book will necessarily cover some of their concepts, but performance theories that feature the Western stage are not the primary focus.

Instead, this book will focus on theories that have been central to the complex and dynamic relationship between performance and communication. Communication, as well as theatre, has a two-thousand-year history in the West. Aristotle, after all, wrote *The Rhetoric* and *The Poetics* to explore the many strategies for moving audiences in both the forum and the theatre, for making ethical choices in both political and aesthetic realms, for creating action in both oratory and poetry.

Communication theorist James Carey (1988, 4) describes the early connections between communication and democracy as intimately tied to space and bodies. In ancient Greece, citizens relied on the *spoken word* to participate in affairs of the

city-state, and men needed to be *within walking range* of the civic centers to participate. Carey concludes, "Democracies or republics were limited, then, by the range of the foot and the power of the tongue" (4). Almost two thousand years later, the Constitution of the United States "proposed a republic on a scale never before imagined or thought possible." The young United States had formidable communication barriers to overcome: Communicating out loud, in person, and on foot were impossible because of geographic barriers, across an entire continent, with a virtually unlimited population. For the United States "to cement a union," citizens relied on horses for transportation and the printing press to disseminate crucial information.

These two different ways of communicating, the Greek city-states' reliance on orality and presence and the young United States' need for print transported across distances, gave rise to two very different conceptions of communication that are still at odds with each other. Carey labels the emphasis on orality and presence the Ritual Model of Communication. He labels the emphasis on transportation and geography the Transmission Model.



SOURCE: Photo by Ed Fladung (www.edfladung.com). Copyright © 2006 by Ed Fladung.

The Transmission Model of Communication

The prevailing view of communication in the United States and in most industrialized cultures is the **transmission model**. In this view, communication is defined as "a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people" (Carey 1988, 15). This definition relies on the metaphor of geography and transportation. Carey details how roads, rivers, and railways both determined and paralleled communication media: Telegraph,

telephone, (and now) cable lines are built next to roads, rivers, and geographic boundaries, marrying geography and transportation with communication and control. When the telegraph was invented, it was heralded as a way to spread Christianity and American democracy across vast distances and peoples. In the transmission model, several synonyms apply to communication: “imparting,” “sending,” “transmitting,” or “giving information to others” (15). The transmission model casts communication as a vehicle for politics and trade to control people and money across vast distances. This model has limited, albeit interesting, implications for performance as a mode of communication.

The Ritual Model of Communication

The **ritual model** of communication radically departs from that commonly held notion of communication. Carey (1988) defines communication here as “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (18). Its synonyms rely on the root of communication as communion, especially for the centrality of orality and presence: “sharing,” “participation,” “association,” “fellowship,” “common faith,” and “community.” In this view, communication is not imparting information, but representation of shared beliefs. These beliefs are expressed in community ideals and embodied in material forms: dance, plays, architecture, news stories, even strings of speech.

Carey elaborates this ritual view of communication with the example of reading the daily newspaper:

News reading, and writing, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one. What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information, but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world. . . . Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it. (20, 21).

The ritual view of communication maintains that culture is created, maintained, repaired, and transformed in and through communication.

This model has rich implications for performance to gather us under an umbrella called “communication” to explore talk, identities, bodies, relationships, communities, cultures, and technologies as and in performances. As we stand under this umbrella’s protective cover, we’re also getting wet. We are communicating when we talk about performance as a mode of communication. Carey frames the “wetness” of communication in this way:

One of the major problems one encounters in talking about communication is that the noun refers to the most common, mundane human experience. There is truth in Marshall McLuhan’s assertion that the one thing of which the fish is unaware is water, the very medium that forms its ambience and supports its existence. Similarly, communication, through language and other symbolic forms, comprises the ambience of human existence. (23–24)

Communication, the ambience we swim in every moment and the umbrella we stand under to explore that ambience, is both mundane and special. Those “special” moments are often marked as performances. Theories that pay attention to performance as one mode of communication—in everyday life, in rites and rituals, in cultural traditions and resistance, in identity creation and transformation, and in and through media—are rich accounts of individuals and groups “swimming” in the ambience of communication.



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Performance as a Communicative Form

Folklorist Richard Bauman (1992a, xiii–xv) makes five claims about communication and the expressive—the especially meaningful—forms it can take in culture. These five claims will be touchstones throughout this book for connecting theories of performance to communication.

1. Communication is “the ways in which information, ideas, and attitudes pass among individuals, groups, nations, and generations.” Communication is a construction, rooted in social relationships, and produced in the conduct of social life.
2. The expressive forms of culture, forms of art, play, display, and performance, offer an especially productive vantage point on culture, society, and communication.
3. Communicative forms constitute social resources, “equipment for living.”
4. Communicative forms and practices are differently valued . . . and differently accessible to members of society.
5. Communicative forms and practices are cross-culturally and historically variable.

Bauman's (1992a) definition of communication locates social life in communication, created in and across language, order, roles, identities, and culture. He argues that the study of communication ought to explore how communicative acts "organize, produce, and reproduce" society (xiv). All the chapters in this book will explore theories that make claims about that production in and through performances.

Second, the "expressive forms of culture," created in and through communication practices, are myriad: art, play, performance, ritual, film, theatre, dance, conversation, jokes, political protests, advertising, carnivals, family stories, and so on. Bauman claims these communicative forms are *expressive* because they are specifically crafted *in performances* to accomplish three ends: to heighten experience, to comment upon experience, and to make experience available for contemplation.

How, for example, is a particularly funny joke told at the water fountain a performance that accomplishes these things? First, the telling of a great joke holds the possibility for *heightened* experience. It lifts us momentarily out of ordinary life, what Victor Turner (1988, 41) calls "boredom, ennui, and spleen," creating something *extraordinary*. Second, the content of the joke will *comment* upon experience. The teller will craft the tiny tale in ways relevant to and illustrative of common experiences in the listeners' world. Such commentary is always a description of common ground and an evaluation of our world. And finally, the joke is an opportunity to *think* and to think *differently*—about ourselves, the joke teller, the story, the audience, and the world. Performances as modes of communication are intricately linked to opportunities for experience—as heightened, as commentary, and as reflection.

Bauman's third claim, that expressive forms are resources, draws on the work of Kenneth Burke, explored in depth in Chapter Four. Burke's famous essay, "Literature as Equipment for Living," argues that literary texts, like proverbs, are "strategies that sum up a situation." In turn, these strategies provide useful guidelines for individual and collective action. For Bauman, expressive forms of communication—like proverbs, jokes, stories, folktales, organizational stories, myths, and stage plays—are not ends in themselves, but means to social and political ends. Performance not only holds life together but can transform life. Many of the chapters in this book, but especially Chapter Eight, "Performing Resistance," will approach performance as a way to challenge the status quo of social and political life—making it anew, and hopefully, better.

Bauman's fourth claim, that all expressive, communicative forms are differently valued and differently accessible, is easily confirmed by looking at the world around us. A quick survey of the audiences and performers at a ballet, a hip-hop concert, a rodeo, a comedy club, an evangelical church service, a professional wrestling match, a cyber chat room, a quinceañera, or a college philosophy classroom makes this point. The value of and access to these performances are socially embedded, economically charged, and politically loaded. Value and access will be particularly relevant in Chapter Nine, which explores technology and mediated performance.

Finally, for Bauman, communicative forms and practices are cross-culturally and historically variable. What "counts" as a performance is embedded in a particular culture and in a particular historical time. These variations testify to the richness and dynamism of expressive forms, their cultural centeredness, and historical transformations. Chapter Five, "Performing Culture," draws on theories that explain how we perform and enact culture.

Bauman's five claims about communication—its forms, productivity, resources, variation, evaluation, and embeddedness—account for performance as a particularly rich process and product of communicative interaction. Where one stands in relation to that interaction—inside or outside of its historical, cultural, ethnic, racial, gendered, and desiring lines—is the subject of the first "Theory Meets World" box below. All of the "Theory Meets World" boxes in this book are drawn from published works by performance scholars in Communication. Through analysis of specific performances, these scholars are drawing important connections between performance theory and practice, between Communication Studies and Performance Studies, and between the always interesting ways that individuals shape and are shaped by performances.

THEORY MEETS WORLD

"Don't (SNAP!) Make (SNAP!) Me (SNAP!) Read (SNAP!) You! (SNAP!)"

E. Patrick Johnson (1995) explores multiple performances and interpretations of SNAP! as part of the communicative and expressive repertoire within African-American culture. Like many performative gestures, SNAP! is difficult to describe on the page, but Johnson writes:

The "SNAP!" is onomatopoeic in form, in that the word sounds like the behavior. It consists of placing the thumb and the middle finger together to make a snapping sound. . . . Along with the actual snapping of the fingers, the arm makes a sweeping motion, usually from left to right, the snap coming at the end of the movement. . . . The snap is used by itself, in combination with words or with other nonverbals such as rolling the eyes. (123)

Johnson locates snapping in a variety of contexts and purposes within African-American speech communities. In "Girlfriend Culture," African-American women snap to offer compliments to other black women: "Girl, you are wearin' that dress!" (SNAP!), or to accentuate a "read," "Like if I wanna say that somebody is a tired, old, heifer wench, I might snap on each word in some kind of motion, so they'll get the point" (132). In "Queen Culture," African-American gay men "who are particularly flamboyant ('grand'), extremely effeminate ('nelly') and temperamental ('bitchy')" snap as part of a larger verbal art in African-American culture—playing the dozens, a stylized form of verbal dueling. Johnson offers this example:

A group of gay men are standing on the sidewalk conversing when another gay male passes by. The passerby has on a pair of shoes that one of the men recognizes as coming from "Payless Shoes."

M1: Chile. She [he] tryin' to work them shoes like she got them from a real store, knowing that she got 'em from Payless. SNAP!

(laughter)

(Continued)