Actors and Activists
Politics, Performance, and Exchange
Among Social Worlds

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For Jeanette Mey, a partner in every sense of the word, and for
Charles and Norma Schlossman, who raised me to think critically.
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Actors and Activists
Introduction

The relationship between politics and art constitutes one of the foremost contemporary issues—perhaps the central debate—regarding the humanities. This book argues that art is always, inevitably connected with politics. It combines critical and sociological thinking to offer a model of the relationship of performance and politics as an exchange between people working in different but overlapping social environments. Specifically, I examine the exchange between performers and political activists in three different situations covering the possible arts-politics combinations. My participation in and observation of activist-produced performance in Chicago in the early 1990s allows me to demonstrate that activists—“political people”—use performance in their organizing and build relationships with “theatre people.” Conversely, analysis of protests surrounding the casting and content of the musical *Miss Saigon*—particularly the public debates sparked by the objections of actors of color and Actors’ Equity Association to the casting of the White actor Jonathan Pryce in an “ethnic” role in the New York production of the musical—shows that professional performers use activist techniques to engage issues in theatre worlds and that these actors establish links with activists. Finally, the artistic and activist work of the performance artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller—known collectively as the NEA Four due to the denial of grants to the artists by the National Endowment for the Arts during the first Bush administration—reveals that some individuals and groups engage artistic and performance worlds simultaneously. My arguments hinge upon a social, rather than purely aesthetic, understanding of performance. I do not intend, however, to suggest that one should neglect the content of a performance, but rather that one should consider a performance as part of a negotiation within culture and among various contending ideas and identities. This approach points to an interconnection between the politics of artistic representations and struggles surrounding social representation.
(i.e., how people appear in a work relates to who creates it). The model of activism and performance as an exchange also offers an inclusive view that accounts for radical performance produced both inside and outside theater worlds.

Arguing for a theoretical and empirical connection between political activism and performance is neither obvious nor widely accepted. Some commentators concerned with political organizing—even, or perhaps especially, those people also working in the arts—question the utility of performance in political action. Just prior to the 1996 midterm Congressional elections the left-wing magazine The Nation published a cartoon bearing the headlines: "Why Congress Will Remain Republican." The body of the cartoon juxtaposes right-wing organizers planning conventional political strategies (e.g., phone banks and voter registration) and Leftists talking about their political art. One leftist says, "My performance piece against welfare cuts is on . . . if I get my funding." The cartoon is clearly ironic and self-deprecating; another leftist character says "I'm doing a cartoon for The Nation" (Wilkinson). Nevertheless, the cartoonist clearly expresses anxiety regarding the potency of performance in the political realm, a sense that performance isn't "real" political organizing. Is it reasonable, however, to blame the Right's ascendancy on the Left's attention to the politics of culture? If one accepts such a proposition, where does that leave women, people of color, gays and lesbians, and people from other communities who have insisted that cultural politics matter as much as votes (see E. Willis 16-28)?

The realm of activity I call institutional performance—groups of people organized specifically to create live performances, and including a diversity of genres from performance art to "mainstream" theater—comes under particular scrutiny. In a vein similar to The Nation cartoon—in an otherwise compelling call in The Drama Review for professional performers to examine their performance practice and become more socially engaged—Bradley Boney cites the domination of public discourse by television and other forms of mass communication and asks, "So how much do people talk about the theatre? Not much, outside drama departments" (100). I discovered first-hand that, contrary to Boney's contention, people outside drama institutions not only discuss the theatre, they use theatre. In January of 1991 I became a participant in grassroots organizing in Chicago opposing the Persian Gulf War. I tended not to discuss my work as a theatre scholar with my fellow activists because, like Boney, I feared that this work could not contribute to an active political process. Much to my surprise, theatre began popping up everywhere. The Bread and Puppet Theatre appeared as a central feature of an anti-war march in Washington, DC. Fellow activists talked about serving as ushers at mainstream theaters in order to see the plays free of charge. A meeting called to address a topic unrelated to theatre turned into a discussion of political performance.
strategies. People without a professional connection to the worlds of insti-
tutional performance nevertheless attended performances that piqued their
interest, discussed knowledgeably the concepts of political theatre, and cre-
ated performances as a part of their political organizing. I suggest that
Boney’s rhetorical question targets the wrong group: the problem isn’t that
people outside institutional performance worlds don’t value theatre, but
that the theatre world isn’t listening to outsiders’ discussions about its
activities.

I do not intend, however, to lionize the institutional theatre. Indeed,
Boney’s article accurately identifies the parochialism of that world. This
insularity becomes particularly clear when one reckons with conservatives’
and even liberals’ outright rejections of engagement between politics
and art. The religious and political Right’s attack upon politically engaged
art, particularly art addressing issues of homosexuality, feminism, and
other liberation struggles, constitutes the familiar example of attempts to
isolate art (including performance) and politics. In addition, many liberal
humanists and many others in the mainstream, when confronted with
demands that the arts become more responsive to the experiences of
women and minorities, view political activism and art as separate and even
mutually exclusive pursuits. While they may claim a liberal identity with
respect to government policies, many traditional humanists tend to view art
as the product of individual genius and see politics as an intrusion upon
art’s universal and humanistic qualities. For instance, Robert Brustein
argues, “The great artists and thinkers of every culture have always looked
for what is individual in humanity rather than what is general . . . . We value
such art as an antithesis to politics . . . .”; and drama critic Howard Kissel
simply declare “politicization can only hurt the theatre” (Brustein, “Use
and Abuse”; Kissel, “Color of Controversy”).

Those who call for a separation between art and politics attempt to
maintain an impervious barrier between categories of social life. Scholars
in the humanities and social sciences have critiqued the assumption that
categories of human experience are “given” and stable, arguing instead
that categories are constructed, negotiated, and permeable. I find particu-
larly illuminating the ideas forwarded by a group of sociologists identify-
ing themselves as “symbolic interactionists” and the theories articulated
by scholars working in what Joseph Roach calls the “interdiscipline” of
cultural studies. These critics reject the idea of static categories in favor
of a concept of culture and social life as existing in constant tension. As
scholar and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha states, “Despite our desperate,
central attempt to separatus, sustain, and mend, categories always leak
“(qtd. in Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography” 184). This is not to say
that categories of human experience automatically collapse or that they
serve no useful function. Rather, this view argues that social boundaries are
not pastelated concern walls but porous membranes created by human
activity. Such work has opened a space in theatre studies for the discussion of overtly political performance and of the ideological projects of main-
stream theatre. As the work of these scholars provides the foundation for my study, I wish to characterize it briefly here, beginning with the work of sociologists. (I shall discuss these theories in greater depth in Chapter 1.) Symbolic inter-
actionist sociologists articulate the concept of the "social world." In con-
trast to institutions such as associations, businesses, and schools that have
formal boundaries, rules, and structures, social worlds consist of networks
of individuals who share a common understanding of how to accomplish a
certain activity (social worlds may encompass institutions; e.g., Lincoln
Centre is an institution within the theatre world). Symbolic interactionists
argue that the character and structure of social worlds derives from the
negotiations of conventions by participants, and they oppose models that
view social structures as determining the behavior of people (Becker and
McCall 1-15). In particular, Howard Becker has examined the social
aspects of artistic work, considering art not in terms of aesthetics but rather
as an occupation (activity pursued as a type of work or due to a sense of
vocation). Becker describes "art worlds" in which networks of people
agree, consciously or implicitly, to follow certain conventions—shared
understandings and methods—in order to proceed with a certain type of
creative work (Becker, Art Worlds, 34; note that Becker's term is more
specialized than the vernacular "art world" that refers simply to activity in
the arts generally). Members of a given social world are referred to as "par-
ticipants" and as "members;" participants in an art world include those per-
suing art as a "career" (e.g., actors, playwrights, and directors), as well as support personnel (e.g., technicians and front office
workers, consumers, and critics). Social worlds are not static; members
frequently negotiate relationships with "outsiders" (indeed, "insider" and
"outsider" refer not to absolute categories but to degrees of experience and
engagement in a social world). Art worlds, according to Becker and other
interactionists, are inherently political precisely because their activities
enact negotiations regarding power and resources, and because they
always interact with other segments of society, including governments.
The symbolic interactionist view of artistic activity as inevitably con-
ceived with the use of society and with political activity coincides with the
vast array of contemporary critical scholarship regarding the politics of
representation (indeed, Becker and Michal McCall edited a collection
addressing the links between symbolic interaction and one such discipline:
cultural studies). Feminism, gay and lesbian studies, queer theory, neo-
Marxism, scholarship by and about women and men of color, performance
studies, and cultural studies all see performance as an inherently political
activity. I am indebted to all these fields, but rely primarily upon the liter-
ature of cultural studies (which intermingles with many of the other move-
ments).
Introduction

The introduction of this text discusses the role of performance in society, both inside and outside institutional theatre. The authors examine various contemporary critical theories that view representations, including those created through performance, as producing—not merely reflecting—social reality through the contest of culture. "Culture" constitutes a notoriously difficult concept to define; I follow Raymond Williams' articulation (in *Keywords* 87-93) of culture as a dynamic relationship among creative activity, individual learning, and social maintenance of customs and norms ("culture" in the anthropological sense). According to theorists working in the field of cultural studies, those in power wield authority through representation, influencing what a society values and believes, a process Antonio Gramsci labeled "cultural hegemony." Representation is also available as a tool to those who challenge the social order (Gramsci 206-208). Culture constitutes a matrix in which political struggles play out. As Edward Said puts it, evocatively using the metaphor of performance, culture is "a theater where various political and ideological causes engage one another. Far from being a placid realm of Apollonian gentility, culture can even be a battleground on which causes expose themselves to the light of day and contend with one another." (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xiii). Representation also affects politics because it has the capacity to accomplish what critic Jane Tompkins calls "cultural work." Writing on nineteenth-century novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Tompkins suggests that, within their historical situation, literary texts provided transcontinental society "with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts and recommending solutions" (Tompkins 200-201). As Said's assertion indicates, the same can be said of contemporary performance. Critics identifying themselves with the loose discipline of "cultural studies" account for the participation of artistic activity in the political process, arguing that both the powerful and the disenfranchised deploy representations in order to further political causes.

Combining the approaches of critical theorists with the ideas of symbolic interaction sociologists accounts for performance both as a form of representation that constructs political discourse and as a social activity that interacts with other sectors of society. One might be inclined to view the assertions of the symbolic interactionists and cultural studies theorists (and other scholars of representation) that performance is inevitably engaged in politics as an end unto itself. Yet, as Richard Scharine notes, to say that all art is political is "both true and a discussion closure" (Scharine xii). It is important, therefore, to view these declarations as a starting point rather than a terminus. Indeed, these theories have opened new pathways for analysis of performance that demonstrates empirically and theoretically the complexity of the interaction of art and politics; they have contributed to the diverse literature on performance and politics.
Introduction

A great deal has been written about politics and performance, and my work is indebted to this scholarship. A complete survey of this literature, if possible to compile at all, lies beyond the scope of this book; I summarize a few trends that both demonstrate the breadth of this scholarship and point to some gaps. One current is scholarship on politics and performance examines overtly political plays produced within "mainstream" theatre (i.e., the presentation of plays with political content by playwrights and actors on stages before a theatre-going audience). This tradition studies historical phenomena such as the Federal Theatre Project and the work of playwrights such as Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht, Langston Hughes, Meline, Arthur Miller, Baraka, Peters, Shange, Foster, Churchill, Kranitz, and Kushner (see Case and Kent; Stokowski; Hughes; A. Kent; Scharine). Another branch of the study of politics and performance examines theatre produced outside established venues, encompassing specific movements, such as the Workers Theatre of the 1920s, as well as a wide variety of less historically specific and often overlapping genres and terms alternative theatre, grassroots theatre, theatre for social change, radical theatre, radical performance, people's theatre, guerrilla theatre, theatre for development, experimental theatre, performance art, and—when considering work of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century—premodern performance (e.g., Auslander, Presence and Resistance, Rightly; Bjorkman, Band, Bambam, and Buntain, Cohen-Cruz, Dulan, Goldberg, Kershaw, Politics of Performance, Lott, Moseley, and Paulsen, Malpede Taylor, Sainer, Shaken, Theatrework Magazine, van Erven, Weinberg, and Weisman). Some of the performances examined in this vein engage politics overtly, while other work is political mostly due to its rejection of conventional forms and venues (of course, there is some overlap between "mainstream" and "alternative" theatre—plays by women, women and men of color, and gays and lesbians could be placed in either category, since they were staged in conventional venues but represented perspectives marginalized by "mainstream" US culture.) Similarly, performance studies has sought to address performance activity as a mode of human behavior, whether it takes place within or beyond the walls of theatres. Another, though smaller, current of the study of politics and performance examines performance created by political activists (e.g., Burbank; Cohen-Cruz; Fuoss; Kistenberg; Schechner, Future of Ritual; and Urgo). Only a very few studies attend to both activism and institutional performance (e.g., Kistenberg, Kershaw, Radical in Performance; and Phelan; Schechter, Satiric Impersonations), and these do not focus to any great degree upon interaction between activists and professional performers.

There exists, then, a vibrant literature on politics and performance—scholarship that is essential to this study and any understanding of the field. The scholars cited above have earned a place in theatre studies for the examination of political concerns in both texts and performance practices.
challenged the notion that performance ought to be considered only in terms of aesthetics and theatre history, and broadened conceptions of performance to include the full scope of human activity. There are, however, a number of issues that have fallen between the stools. The literature on politically engaged performance has tended to dwell upon “alternative” theatre, in which performers have taken up politics, and has given short shrift to cases in which activists have sought to engage performance. In both theatre and performance studies, discrete theatrical events script and staged by activists often have been conflated with the far less formal performativity of political demonstrations. Conversely, with some exceptions (e.g., Auster; McConachie and Friedman), few studies have discussed the participation of actors in political organizing. Finally, histories of social change movements have tended to downplay the importance of performance strategies in organizing (as noted by Burbank in “Ladies . . . 1980s”). While it would be inaccurate to say that scholars have ignored issues of performance and activism, performance emanating from within direct-action political organizations and the interaction between direct-action politics and institutional performance deserve further attention. A theoretical and empirical exploration of the connections between activism and institutional performance complements previous studies of politics and performance and contributes to contemporary critical and sociological theory that articulates a vital link between artistic activity, the representations it creates, and the political process. I offer a model of politics and performance as an exchange between insiders working in distinct but overlapping social worlds, and I illustrate this dynamic through analysis of a host of concrete connections between performance, activism, and political discourse. I follow an interdisciplinary approach, using methods including close readings of texts, performance analysis, historical inquiry, interview, and participant observation (I shall discuss my methodology in greater detail in Chapter 1). To better understand the connections I seek, consider this question: What would one expect to find if institutional performance did, in fact, interact with the realm of politics? One would expect “political people,” such as grassroots activists, to use performance and, furthermore, to forge relationships with professional performers. Second, one would anticipate that professional performers would engage in political activity and, furthermore, that they would establish links with activists. Third, as cultural studies theorist suggests, one would find that, at times, the lines distinguishing categories would blur and that individuals would negotiate insider statuses in both worlds. Finally, one would find evidence that these relationships among performers and activists participated in political debates beyond the confines of their own social circles. By applying a multidisciplinary technique that elucidates the negotiation between activism and performance, I believe I can provide evidence fulfilling each of these expectations.
Introduction

This study and the model it articulates contributes to an understanding of performance and politics specifically and art and society generally in a variety of ways. It supplements the literature on performance and politics described above, providing an historical account of late-twentieth-century exchange between activists and performers and offering a theory accounting for that exchange. It calls for greater attention to the offstage roles of professional performers in public life (as when an actor becomes a union president), and promotes the view that scholars should consider the performance work of activists and others outside the "theatre world." The model this book offers, I hope, can be applied in other arenas, including other relationships between performance and society, and between other art forms and politics. It buttresses the view that art constitutes a strand in the web of objects, actions, and ideas that make up a society's culture, and that any strand affects all the others. In this view, artistic practice, including performance, can be deployed, intentionally or unconsciously, to reinforce or resist the social order. Finally, along with many other scholars, I address the perceived crisis in theatre practice and scholarship by advocating a broad view of performance and a re-conceptualisation of theatre studies. Joseph Roach offers a particularly clear summary of this issue with respect to US theatre, examining the formation of American theatre and drama as a field within theatre studies, and arguing that the crisis in that field emanates from the exclusion of non-European performance and the dismissal of the concept of "theatre-in-life." Roach calls for a "re-opening" of that debate with three objectives: 1) to re-define the historical canon in line with current research in performance studies; 2) to expand the definition of performance beyond predominantly literate cultures and traditions; 3) to interpret American culture as a series of political boundaries both marked and contested by performances. Roach, "Mardi Gras Indians" 462. I seek to contribute to just such a re-definition of performance, arguing that, in order to consider the interaction between theatre and society (and thereby justify theatre's value as more than entertainment or esoteric knowledge), one must adopt an understanding of theatre as not only an aesthetic endeavor but also an institutional practice inextricably tied to the rest of society.

Linking activism and institutional performance raises thorny questions regarding the problems of mainstream theatre and its political potential. As mentioned earlier, I do not intend to celebrate mainstream theatre uncritically (nor, for that matter, do I seek to discount the challenges faced by progressive political activists in a postmodern culture featuring a resurgent Right, commercial mass media, and multinational capitalism). I share Roone's frustration with the parochialism of mainstream theatre, and agree with other scholars' warnings that live performance faces daunting obstacles in an era dominated by mass media and consumers. Too often
“theatre people” ignore the social implications of their work, privilege “classics,” contemporary melodramas, and vapid spectacles over social engagement, and avoid political questions such as “What does the work say?” and “Whom is it for?” This obstinacy leads to isolation at best and crass commercialism and exploitation at worst. In addition, as Roxy and Ausländer (Laurence) have argued, the mainstream theatre finds itself increasingly forgotten in contemporary societies dominated by mass media.

But do these problems preclude any radical potential in mainstream theatre? I seek to remain cognizant of the insularity of mainstream theatre throughout this book; yet, I suggest reactions against the hidebound condition of much mainstream performance can tend to describe walls between categories of human experience that might better be articulated as semi-permeable membranes. Baz Kershaw, for instance, sees continuing potential in what he terms “radical performance,” but argues that mainstream theatre has become increasingly irrelevant and complicit in the contemporary commodity culture (Radical in Performance 6–70). However, Kershaw defines “theatre” in terms of established theatre buildings, the conventional plays performed in them, and the audiences who attend them, while “radical performance” encompasses both activist performance and experimental theatre. While I agree with Kershaw’s critique of the commodification of mainstream theatre and applaud his celebration of radical performance practices, I find his dualistic radical-performance dichotomy too strict to encompass a more social reality. Does one regard Paul Zaloom, who worked in people’s theatre in the 1970s, as a sell-out because he later hosted *Beakman’s World*, a generally progressive network children’s television show on science? And while I grant it is the exception rather than the rule, can one exclude *Angels in America* from the category of “radical” simply because it appeared on Broadway? Moreover, contrasting barriers between “radical performance” and the “mainstream” may simply serve to marginalize the radical: for instance, David Roman and Holly Hughes (Hughes and Roman; Roman, Acts of Intervention), while not responding directly to Kershaw, argue that dividing “theatre” and “performance art” tends to marginalize the latter, creating a ghetto to contain radical impulses and minority artists. I perceive the need for a comprehensive term that can encompass a variety of live-art activities (and recognize interchange among these art worlds) while also accounting for differences among them. My broad term, institutional performance, seeks to include a diverse range of performance practices that sometimes are separate and sometimes overlap, and that are sometimes radical and sometimes reactionary. One can ignore neither theatre’s (especially commercial theatre’s) growing isolation nor its complicity with oppressive systems of power; yet, one also cannot ignore the radical potential of performances, even when staged in mainstream venues, just as one should not underestimate the value of performance beyond the “theatre world.”
Introduction

To support the arguments outlined above, I examine the exchange between institutional performance and political activism through analysis of events from late-twentieth-century cultural history. Pro-choice and anti-Gulf War activism, the Miss Saigon controversies, and the NEA Four’s work and lawsuit constituted elements of the political and cultural ferment of the era. The late 1980s and 1990s constituted a fruitful period in which to discover connections between activism and performance. During this moment in history, the inherent political nature of culture became clear to debates that raged around issues including affirmative action, arts funding; reproductive freedoms, the rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender; the representations of ethnic minorities in live performance and mass media; the AIDS crisis; sexual harassment; “political correctness,” and the use of the US flag in protest and art, to name only a few of the elements of the so-called “culture wars.” A number of social movements were active at the time, having arisen in the mid-1980s in response to new social problems, notably the AIDS crisis, and in order to counter the reactionary politics of political and religious conservatives (epitomized in military adventures in Central America and Grenada, domestic campaigns such as the “war on drugs” and the concomitant expansion of the “prison-industrial complex,” and a flurry of laws restricting abortion rights). Significantly, as my study shall show, professional performers played a central role in some of the major political groups of the era, notably ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) and WAC (Women’s Action Coalition). Politics and performance, always related, intersected overtly in this period in a myriad of social settings ranging from street theatre performed at demonstrations, to the covert actions of the Guerrilla Girls, to performances by gay performance artists in church basements, to mainstream plays such as The Normal Heart and Angels in America.

Activist-produced performance, the Miss Saigon controversies, and the NEA Four’s work and suit not only exemplify the exchange between politics and performance in an era of activism and cultural contest, they also related to one another and remain relevant to contemporary politics within and outside the art worlds. The events I analyze played out during roughly the same period (beginning in 1990-1991), participated in many of the cultural contests detailed above, and in some cases, influenced one another (for example, objections to the casting of Miss Saigon came to the fore at the same time as the defunding of the NEA Four, and defenders of the musical evoked arguments for artistic freedom raised by the NEA debates). The chronology in the Appendix offers a sense of the temporal proximity and interplay among these cases. While the cases have more or less concluded, each case also has clear resonances for politics and performance in the twenty-first century. The progressive activist movements that ebbed in the mid-1990s due to the end of the Reagan-Bush era reasserted themselves at the close of the century, and performance remained a key element in...
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This organizing example of resurgent activism include demonstrations following the homophobic murder of Matthew Shepard and protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the inauguration of George W. Bush. Touring productions of Miss Saigon continued to meet with protests (though they have not received the press that greeted the 1990-1991 controversies), moreover, the New York protests continue to represent a watershed event and a symbol of resistance for Asian Americans both inside and outside the theater world. Finally, the New Four lawsuit was not concluded until 1998; the NEA controversies continue to see these efforts to confront political issues generally and the NEA controversies specifically; the crisis in funding for the arts persists (the NEA's budget fell below $200 million in 1996—the first budget year affected by the 1994 Republican Congressional victory—and at this writing has yet to rise), and new arts controversies erupt periodically, often renewing the rhetoric of the 1990s debates, as exemplified in the case of New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's (thus far) failed attempt to oust the Brooklyn Museum of Art from its building and remove its funding due to the museum's hosting the Sensation exhibition and other works the Mayor found controversial. In addition to offering insights into contemporary politics and performance, the cases I examine constitute a set of events from the same period in late-twentieth-century history that represent the possible interactions between actors and activists: insiders to activism, insiders to professional performance, and insiders to both worlds. Considered together, the cases reveal that the social worlds of institutional performance and political activism have the potential to interact, and that such interactions participate in the political process on a national scale.

My discussion of exchange among actors and activists proceeds through four steps: 1) a theoretical model of the exchange; 2) evidence that “political people” value performance and forge links with institutional performance worlds; 3) demonstration of the converse—that “theatre people” engage activism and activists; and 4) consideration of the experience of those who work in both worlds simultaneously. Each phase of this argument also reveals negotiations between participants in social worlds and the blurring of boundaries between worlds.

Considering politics and performance as an exchange among insiders in social worlds offers new perspectives on performance’s relationship with society and the political process, and offers an alternative to questions of efficacy and audience that dog conventional articulations of “political theatre.” Chapter 1 takes up these issues, first analyzing perennial questions regarding theater politics, such as: Can a play change people’s minds? Does a political performance preach to the converted? I respond to these and related questions regarding the value of politically engaged performance by pointing to empirical evidence and diverse scholarship that answers these questions directly (though that argues, for instance, that plays...
do change minds, but I also contend that these sorts of questions misconceive the politic/perform relationship. If one views the text, production process, and audience reception of an overtly political performance as an isolated event, one will become obsessed with questions of impact and, in so doing, ignore a vibrant, diverse, and sometimes obscure and ambivalent social reality. If, on the other hand, one conceptualizes the creation and reception of overtly political performance as one star in a firmament of social activities, organized by people into recognizable and often overlapping constellations, questions of immediate impact become less pressing than issues of how performers interact with insiders in other worlds: moreover, when adopting this view one perceives such questions themselves as part of a social process. Moving beyond questions of impact, therefore, depends upon theories of social interaction and cultural studies sketched in this Introduction and rendered more fully in Chapter 1. Symbolic interaction sociology and cultural studies and related critical theory complement each other, offering a view of art: functioning politically not as a preacher but as a participant in society. Using these theories as a foundation, I build a model of politics and performance as an exchange between insiders in social worlds whose boundaries may overlap and, at times, blur. I suggest that performances staged at the intersection of political and performance worlds create meaning for audience members by offering them “pieces” in a social jigsaw puzzle that individuals and audience members link with other experiences as part of an ongoing engagement of political issues. Chapter 1 also contains a description of methodology, explaining that I perceive exchange between politics and performance in three types of situations: the adoption of the conventions of one social world by insiders to another world, direct cooperation among insiders to different worlds, and the blurring of boundaries between worlds.

Subsequent chapters use this model to analyze cases that epitomize the exchange between performance and political activity. Chapter 2 demonstrates that insiders in the world of activism—people who seek to provoke political change and who are not usually professional performers—value theatrical conventions and negotiate relationships with professional performers. I draw upon my participation in anti-war and pro-choice activist groups in Chicago to argue that political activists use the conventions of institutional performance as an organizing tool. I use the terms “activists” and “political activists” to refer to groups of people who organize through direct agitation, such as public demonstrations, in order to strive for social change, and who often, though not always, see themselves as part of national movements for social change. I begin Chapter 2 with a discussion of the history and characteristics of activist social worlds. Next, I seek to articulate distinctions between rooms, such as marches or meetings, that may be “dramatic” or “performative” but are not recognized as such by
activists, versus the creation of performance by activists that the activists themselves call “theatre” or “performance.” I refer to such self-conscious-ly theatrical activism as “activist performance,” a category that includes a variety of performances activities, from the staging of one-time events to the creation of activist theatre troupes. I seek to explain how and why activists turn to performance as an organizing tool, arguing that they devote time, attention, and resources to the creation of performances because they find that the conventions of performance help them achieve a variety of goals, from communicating their message to enlivening events. One could object that, even though activists often perform, this does not mean that they seek to forge links with participants in institutional performance. In the final segments of Chapter 2, I describe connections between activist performance and institutional theatre. The mere fact that activists call their dramatizations “theatre,” I argue, constitutes a reference to institutional performance. In addition, activists employ explicitly the conventions of institutional performance and build connections with professional performers and performance institutions.

Chapter 3 considers the converse of activists’ engagement of performance worlds, examining instances of exchange between activists and performance initiatives by insiders in commercial theatre, a world that represents institutional performance. As in the preceding chapter, I begin Chapter 3 with an analysis of the social world in question—the commercial Broadway musical—describing briefly its character as an art world and its relation to politics. I then examine the politics of representation evident in Miss Saigon’s text and production process, arguing that, prior to the controversies, the producers appropriated political rhetoric and reproduced oppressive stereotypes. Activism surrounding Miss Saigon also hinged on issues of representation: the controversies that greeted the musical’s New York production confronted the lack of representation of minorities in lead roles on Broadway and the portrayal of “ethnic” characters. The protests against the casting of Miss Saigon, I argue in Chapter 3, constituted part of a history of anti-oppression discrimination and a corresponding history of actors of color adopting activist conventions to fight discrimination. Having placed the Miss Saigon controversies in this historical context, I then analyze the debates surrounding the challenges to the casting of the musical from Equity and Asian American actors, disputes that reveal a vibrant exchange between activist and theatrical worlds. I next move to protests against the musical’s content: after Asian American actors drew attention to Miss Saigon, people in Asian American communities promoted the stereotypes of Asians perpetuated by the play. During these protests professional actors and community activists cooperated with one another, forging alliances and negotiated differences. I conclude Chapter 3 with a consideration of the negotiations of personal
identity and social activity. Professional actors undertook as they encoun-
tered the conventions of the world of activism and had to mediate profes-
sional and political concerns.

In Chapter 4, I present the case of people who negotiate insider status in
both the worlds of performance and activism and whose art-activism often
blurs the boundaries between the worlds. I begin the chapter with a char-
acterization of performance art as a social world and a discussion of the
links between this world and politics. I then discuss the work of Karen
Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller. I discuss the activist
performances created by these artists, arguing that their creation of politi-
cal meaning through performance may best be considered as the crafting
of puzzle pieces for an audience through the use of a "toolbox" of strategies,
and I detail their use of four such tools: commentary, transgression,
resistance, and performances of community. I also describe the connections
these professional performers maintain with activist social worlds, arguing
that the art-activists blur boundaries between activism and performance.

The four performers also clearly exemplify the intersection of politics and
performance because they became public figures in a national debate when
they were denied grants by the National Endowment for the Arts. The final
portion of Chapter 4 discusses the defunding of the four and their suit against
the NEA. This suit succeeded in reclaiming the artists’ grants (which,
they alleged, had been denied due to political pressure from the first Bush
administration) but failed to overturn a “decency” provision imposed
on the NEA by Congress. During the NEA debates, the performance
artists encountered a variety of conservative discourses, but also created
discourses of resistance through their activist performances. In addition,
the NEA Four case was a component of national struggles surrounding gay
rights, a woman’s right to choose abortion, affirmative action, the validity
of “new knowledges” such as feminism and multiculturalism, and the very
idea of “the public.” The four artists’ activist-performance practice and
their suit constituted a portion of an ongoing cultural contest concerning
the future of the public sphere.

I conclude by arguing that the art-politics exchange modeled in this
book has much to offer both institutional performance worlds and society.
Renewed attention to the public lives of performers and the performance
work of people from outside of performance institutions is necessary if theatre
practitioners and scholars are to bridge the growing chasm—recognized by Roach,
Boney, and others—between institutional performance (understood as including
both mainstream theatre and theatre studies) and postmodern US society. An engagement of the intersection of politics
and performance, however, also presents the daunting task of changing
ideas about what constitutes theatre, how it is to be created, and whom it
should serve. In addition, a sense of isolation and crisis is not unique to
performance, but pervades postmodern society. The perennial questions that
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embroil overtly political performance (e.g., what constitutes effective communication beyond the "converted") haunt all contemporary political action. A reinvigorated sense of the connection between cultural practices, such as performance, and political activities, such as activism, offers a means to cope with this widespread disaffection. Combinations of art and politics offer a vibrant set of tools for resistance and change that may shore up a public sphere contracting under pressure from conservative activists and multinational corporations.2

Notes

1The terms "White" and "ethnic" require explanation. I use the term "White" with considerable trepidation. It conjures up a theory of elaborate attempts to distinguish ethnic "purity," and also presents an inconsistency when used alongside the geographic designations currently employed to refer to other groups (African Americans, and so on). "White" is nevertheless preferable to the outmoded word "Caucasian," as used by the Chicago Manual of Style, 14th ed., sec. 7.2. It would not be accurate to refer to Whites as "Euro-Americans," since Europe has considerably ethnic diversity, both currently and historically. I have therefore used the term "White," but have to point out that it refers to a social construction of ethnicity. I also use several contemporary critical thinkers who use any categories referring to descent to call attention to social change while constructing such categories as evolving and constructed entities (see the discussion of Fuss et al. in Bloom, 142-143). Also, when discussing Miss Saigon, I sometimes refer to actors of color as "ethnic actors." This is a term used by several of the participants I interviewed and appears to be an "industry term" in the commercial theatre world; I have retained it in order to represent properly the character of the debate, rather than impose my own (and perhaps equally inadequate) words upon others. I do note, however, that all actors have an ethnicity, so referring to actors of color as "ethnic" constitutes something of a misnomer.

2Throughout the book, I use the terms "mainstream theatre" and "established theatre" synonymously to describe the production of scripted plays by commercial or not-for-profit organizations in buildings called "theatres." In fact, no adequate term exists to describe this realm of performance. Common expressions such as "traditional" or "conventional" theatre imply that other performances have somehow deviated from the norm. "Mainstream" at least implies a social relationship (where "traditional" and "conventional" imply historical and aesthetic comparison); it is more familiar than "established"; and performers and activists refer to it as such. Moreover, it is not difficult to maintain performances that support (or simply fail to question) the status quo. "Mainstream" implies that a theatre remains on a pedestalled level of performance, and it is not only an admirable goal but a difficult one to achieve. The term "established" in the United States implies that a theatre is "mainstream," but it also hints at the costs of the "established" status. It is also important to note that Philip Ausländer (Liveness) has analyzed the ways in which the rhetoric of live performance fostered assumptions about the specificity of sceness versus mediation. I do not see these in either the "imagery" of the live, but rather in the discourses of the organizational and institutional levels of representation. The term "mainstream" too often conflates the discourses of the two types of representation; it is still useful in the often overlapping but distinct worlds of what might be called "mediated" or "broadcast" performance.
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Statements by political, religious, and cultural conservatives—as well as views supporting overtly political art—may be found in Bolton. For an example of a commentator who identifies himself with liberal social policies but denounces an active engagement between activism and art, see Copeland, “Don’t Call.” The Wilson-Brustein debates constitute another obvious example of a liberal humanist’s confrontation with demands for change in theatre practice. First carried out in print, August Wilson and Robert Brustein debated face-to-face in January of 1997 (August Wilson; Brustein, “Subsidized”; Nunns). Wilson advocated the development of theatre for, by, and near black people, while Brustein defended the idea that individuals come first in art. Though the debate raised controversial issues—including equity in casting, the value of conventional vs. experimental plays, and the meaning of essential categories of race—some commentators saw the debate as diffusing the tension between the very issues it raised (Munk; for other responses to the debates, see “Beyond the Wilson-Brustein Debate”; “Plowing August Wilson’s ‘Ground’”; and Ambush).

Examples of scholarship using the cultural studies approach to performance appear in Reinelt and Roach; see in particular Roach’s introductory discussion (7-15). For a discussion of symbolic interactionist sociology see Becker and Michal. The term “symbolic interaction” was coined in 1937 by one of the field’s founders, Herbert Blumer, who admits that it is a “somewhat barbaric neologism” (Blumer 1). The idea of “blurred genres,” described in the text, appears in the work of Clifford Geertz (Reinelt and Roach 2). One should also note that the concept of categories of experience as permeable can be destabilizing, especially for marginalized groups (see S. L. Richards “Caught in the Act of Social Definition ...” 45-46; and Roach, “Mardi Gras Indians”).

My use of “negotiation” stems from the work of symbolic interactionist sociologists and neither derives from nor necessarily relates to Stephen Greenblatt’s use of the term in Shakespearean Negotiation.

It would be impossible to list all the contributions to the fields listed in the text, or to catalogue all the movements in contemporary critical theory. A more thorough discussion of these movements, however, appears in Chapter 1.

The idea that text producers and consumers of text have been urged by scholars as diverse as Foucault and Raymond Williams. For a particularly direct discussion of the “production of meaning” by texts, see Eagleton 64. For a discussion of Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony as applied to theatre studies, see McConachie, “Using the Concept of Cultural Hegemony to Write Theatre History.”]

I am aware of the charges—particularly those leveled by Justus Reid Weiner—that Said fabricated details of his own biography. Two things need be said about this controversy: first, it is not at all clear that Said is guilty of fabrication (see Fichten’s impassioned defense of Said); second, even if the charges are partially correct, they do not detract directly from or necessarily detract from the importance and relevance of his scholarship to this study and cultural studies generally.

I cannot claim, of course, to have “discovered” interchange among activists and performers, but previous studies have not noted its importance as a process of social exchange. Schechner, for instance, notes briefly that “there has been free trade of techniques, persons, and ideas between the avant-garde and political theatre from the days of Meyerhold, Brecht, and dada” (Chefs d’Oeuvre ?, 9). But he offers this passing reference in exchange for an extended discussion of the avant-garde and political demonstration as a process of mutual exclusion and opposition, which he characterizes as a “double bind,” or a “discussion of the avant-garde as a process of social exclusion and political confrontation.” Similarly, Kershaw considers the
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The relative lack of attention to activist performance in the literature on alternative theatre is exemplified by the fact that three of the most famous radical troupes in the US—Bread and Puppet Theatre, San Francisco Mime Troupe, and El Teatro Campesino—were all founded by trained artists and have worked, for the most part, independent of political organizations. Of these three famous troupes, only El Teatro Campesino was founded within a specific political campaign—the United Farm Workers' (UFW) grape boycott and strike, begun in 1965 and centered in Delano, California. El Teatro Campesino's connexion with the UFW was strong, changed as the company moved to other areas, but became much less activist upon its move to San Juan Bautista (Elam, Taking It 115, 141n2, 143n10). Described by El Teatro Campesino's founder Luis Valdez as a degree in theatre at San Jose State University before joining the boycott (Hirsch, Telling It 2-7), likewise, although Bread and Puppet Theatre has participated in numerous actions for peace and justice since its creation in 1962, its founder Peter Schumann denies commitment to a specific issue or campaign but instead protests the general lack of humanity in contemporary industrial societies (Shank 75; Schechter, Durov’s Pig 185-187). The San Francisco Mime Troupe has not, as far as I know, worked with direct-action groups with any consistency. I am not arguing that these practitioners or the scholars who study them ignore activism—obviously they do not. Nor do I mean to suggest that they fail or that they are “too artistic” to function politically. Rather, the theatrical (as opposed to “performative”) activity of activists has tended to fall between the stools of scholarship on politics and performance. Note that Burbank (“Ladies...”) also notes this omission in theatre studies.

Where in conventional theatre history does one place the public service of Mary Shaw, early producer of Ibsen plays in the US and an active suffragist, or Frederick O'Neal, co-founder of the American Negro Theatre, president of Actors' Equity, and vice-president of the AFL-CIO? Obviously, such figures have been kept at the margins of conventional theatre studies because of their gender or race, but they have also been ignored because their agitation and offstage service have not been honored. For information on Mary Shaw see Auster; on Frederick O'Neal's service see O'Neal entries in the bibliography.

“Every other article on the theatre talks about the theatrical ‘crossroads’ or ‘crisis’... , but our institutions are so entrenched that the theatre ends up resisting the crisis and avoiding the crossroads” (Boney 103). For other discussions of the crisis in theatre practice and scholarship see Roach, “Mardi Gras Indians”; Case and Reinelt; Toll, Entertainment Machine; and Kershaw, Radical in Performance. Ausländer, Liveness, and Dolan, Presence and Desire consider the obstacles faced by live performance in contemporary society. Note, however, that these scholars do value performance.

Several points made in the text deserve further explanation. Kershaw is not alone in suggesting “radical performance” as a category; see also Cohen-Cruz. On Zaloom’s people’s theatre work see Hennington-Burgess. On the trajectory of “Beakman’s World” see Van Deusen, “Theatrework Magazine.” I say that the program featured science education, moreover, though the show’s study of cuttlefish’s sex-changing abilities, among other scientific curiosities, was definitely “radical” in performance.
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seasoned a regular character. Zaloom appeared to be somewhat cynical about his own participation in the program, however. In his 2001 performance art work *Velvetville*, he staged a scene in which he goes to Hell and runs into Barney, public television’s purple dinosaur; when Zaloom asks what he’s doing there, Barney replies, “Didn’t you know that all children’s television hosts go to Hell?” Regarding *Angels in America*, performance artist Tim Miller articulated the mixture of surprise and delight many progressives expressed upon the Broadway drama’s success, an instance of overtly political commercial theatre; Miller told journalist Jan Breslauer, “If someone had told [AIDS activists and performance artists] five years ago that the most sought-after work in the American theater today would be an eight-hour epic with Blakean visions of AIDS, we would have thought they were nuts. Clearly, something juicy has happened.” (Breslauer, “Theatre Fights Back,” 11).

I prefer the term “radical performance,” but when I use it, I refer to a practice, not a category, of performance. Also, note that other scholars express a mix of frustration with theatre’s parochialism and hope for its potential. Dolan (13-15) questions the power of performance in the age of global mass media and capitalism, but also argues that productions can appear in mainstream venues without losing their political insight. Similarly, Kondo (About Face) recognizes that times are “bleak” and performance may enable stereotype, but also sees a radical potential in the pleasure.

Note that I don’t reject the phrase “culinary contests,” but when I use it, I refer to a practice, not a category, of performance. Also, note that other scholars express a mix of frustration with theatre’s parochialism and hope for its potential. Dolan (13-15) questions the power of performance in the age of global mass media and capitalism, but also argues that productions can appear in mainstream venues without losing their political insight. Similarly, Kondo (About Face) recognizes that times are “bleak” and performance may enable stereotype, but also sees a radical potential in the pleasure.

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Seattle in November of 1999 and of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Washington, DC, in April 2000. An eclectic group of protesters, including union members, environmentalists, and students, decried the secretive nature of these global trade organizations and used the occasions to question the equity of transnational capitalism. (The protests unfortunately also entailed property damage caused by a small fraction of demonstrators, and right-wing organizers supporting free trade and isolationism, such as the Buchanan Campaign, organized a large counter-protest at the protests.) The use of performance by contemporary activists has been widely remarked upon; for example see Gay's discussions of WTO and IMF protests. Protests opposing Miss Saigon outside New York City and the protests' enduring significance for Asian Americans are documented in the chapter on Miss Saigon. Events related to the NEA debates are documented in the chapter on the NEA Four, with the exception of the Sensation controversy. (Details and references for the Sensation controversy are given in the Sensation chapter.) While the controversy surrounding the Brooklyn Museum's Sensation exhibition generated much controversy, the museum's connection to the art world was ultimately forged by its display of contemporary British art organized by the collector's mother, Charles Saatchi. The Sensation controversy raised the issue of censorship in the art world, while also raising questions about the role of the museum as a cultural institution.

While I don't seek to celebrate activism uncritically, I note that many politicians, businesspeople, and members of the media maligned the public image of the left-wing political activist during the yuppie 1980s and entrepreneurial 1990s. Always viewed as outside the mainstream of US history, activists today are portrayed as malcontents, deviants, or even perverts, demanding a radical democracy that transcends the limits of liberal democracy. In my experience, those who work in following political science usually emphasize the importance of social movement networks and the role of the political in the development of new forms of political action. In all but the rarest cases, they find their motivation in dedication to social justice, not in nostalgia or juvenile anti-authoritarianism.

Also note that I usually refer to social worlds in the plural (e.g., the worlds of activism) in order to recognize the multiple groups and interactions that comprise an activity. To some extent, however, I refer to social worlds as the singular. I have drawn on a treasure trove of materials by Edward Said (Pemberton et al.) On the various debates surrounding freedom of expression that arose in the late 1980s and continued into the 1990s see Dubin, Arresting Images.

This review of the literature and of the world of radical politics is not exhaustive, but it does provide a foundation for the analysis that follows. This work is part of a larger project to explore the role of the arts and culture in social movements, focusing on the relationship between radical politics and contemporary art. It aims to explore the ways in which radical politics and contemporary art intersect, and to examine the potential for radical politics to transform cultural production and to be transformed by it.