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BA English Honours | Semester III | Calicut University

Drama: Exploring the Literary and Performative Elements

Course Code: ENG3CJ201 • Module 4 Notes

MODULE IV: POST-DRAMATIC THEATRE

1. The Post-Dramatic Turn: Deconstructing the Textual Hegemony

In 1999, German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann published his landmark treatise, *Postdramatisches Theater* (translated into English in 2006 as *Postdramatic Theatre*), identifying a monumental paradigm shift in global performance culture since the late 1960s. For over two millennia, Western theatrical theory was organized around the absolute primacy of the dramatic text: the playwright composed an autonomous, literary narrative featuring realistic characters, psychological motivation, conflict, and resolution, which the director and actors merely "interpreted" and illustrated upon the stage.

Post-dramatic theatre fundamentally de-centers the written word. It does not mean theatre without words; rather, language is stripped of its privileged monopoly over meaning. Language no longer tells a linear story; it functions as an acoustic soundscape, a rhythmic texture, or a visual graphic element alongside lighting, video projections, architectural space, and physical human bodies. In post-dramatic performance, the classical hierarchy of Aristotelian poetics collapses into a flat, democratic semiotic landscape where all media elements interact simultaneously.

2. Key Hallmarks of the Post-Dramatic Aesthetic

Lehmann identifies several defining stylistic and philosophical characteristics of post-dramatic performance:

- **Parataxis and Non-Hierarchy:** Replacing traditional syntactic hierarchy with simultaneous, overlapping stimuli. Sound, light, movement, and text occur at once without signaling which element the spectator "ought" to focus upon.
- **Simultaneity and Multi-Sensory Overload:** Audiences are confronted with complex, layered visual and auditory events that cannot be decoded through a single logical reading, demanding an active, individualized cognitive assembly.
- **The Demise of Character and Psychological Realism:** Actors do not "pretend" to be fictional characters inhabiting an illusionary fourth-wall world. Instead, they appear as performers presenting their own physical bodies, bodily endurance, and authentic vulnerability in real space and real time.
- **The Aesthetics of the Performative:** As performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte emphasizes, the primary focus shifts from the semiotic decoding of representation ("What does this signify?") to the phenomenal experience of presence ("What is happening between the performer's body and my body in this shared space?").

3. Performance Art, Spatial Installations, and Intermediality

Post-dramatic theatre dissolves the boundaries between conventional theatre, visual fine arts, and digital media:

- **Performance Art (Live Art):** Originating in the works of pioneers like Marina Abramović (*The Artist is Present*), Carolee Schneemann, and Chris Burden, performance art replaces theatrical acting with raw, unrepeatable physical acts that test the limits of human endurance, pain, and temporal presence.
- **Theatrical Installations and Found Spaces:** Staging performances inside abandoned industrial warehouses, psychiatric hospitals, cathedral crypts, or open city streets, transforming physical geography into an active dramatic protagonist.
- **Intermediality:** The seamless fusion of live performers with digital video mapping, algorithmic live-feeds, robotics, and holographic projections (exemplified by the pioneering technological theatre of The

Wooster Group and Robert Lepage).

4. Performance Studies as a Radical Field: Richard Schechner's Formulation

Richard Schechner, legendary American theatre director (founder of The Performance Group) and university professor at NYU, founded the radical academic discipline of **Performance Studies**. In Chapter 1, Section 3 of his foundational textbook, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*—titled "What Makes Performance Studies Special"—Schechner outlines the expansive, revolutionary scope of this field.

PERFORMANCE THEORY

Richard Schechner's Broad Spectrum of Performance

Schechner argues that Performance Studies is special because it explodes the narrow, elitist confines of formal dramatic theatre, encompassing the entire "broad spectrum" of human performative behavior:

- Play, games, and sports contests.
- Sacred religious rituals, shamanic ceremonies, and civic pageants.
- Everyday social interactions and the performative presentation of self (Erving Goffman).
- Political rallies, public protests, court trials, and state executions.
- Aesthetic performances: dance, theatre, music, performance art, and digital video streaming.

Schechner maintains that performance is not defined by what an object *is*, but by what an object *does* ("as" performance). Performance is fundamentally characterized by **Restored Behavior** (or "twice-behaved behavior")—actions that are rehearsed, learned, and re-enacted. Performance Studies operates as an open, intercultural, and politically engaged field that interrogates power, social construction, and human transformation across global cultures.

5. Virtual Staging and Digital Theatre: *The Art of Facing Fear*

The global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 shuttered physical playhouses across the planet, accelerating a revolutionary digital mutation: the birth of **Digital Theatre**. Far from being a crude video recording of a stage play, true digital theatre is born-digital—composed specifically for networked digital interfaces, Zoom grids, and livestreaming platforms.

A triumphant exemplar of this new medium is *The Art of Facing Fear* (2020), directed by Ivam Cabral and Rodolfo García Vázquez of the Brazilian theatre company *Os Satyros* in collaboration with performers across five continents (São Paulo, London, Lagos, Berlin, and Los Angeles). Rehearsed and broadcast live across multiple time zones, the production dramatizes a dystopian future where humanity is confined to domestic isolation by a global plague, terrorized by fear, authoritarian surveillance, and psychological breakdown.

Cabral and Vázquez masterfully utilize the affordances of the digital grid: actors perform live in their own homes, transforming bedrooms and bathrooms into claustrophobic stage sets. The video interface—split screens, close-up camera gazes, digital glitches, chat commentary, and atmospheric electronic scoring—creates an unprecedented form of global communal intimacy. *The Art of Facing Fear* proves that the theatrical impulse does not require a physical proscenium arch; as long as living performers and living audiences assemble in shared real time, theatre continues to reinvent itself as a vital witness to human vulnerability and collective resilience.

Advanced Theatrical Hermeneutics, Dramatic Theory & Performative Semiotics

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1. Core Theatrical Paradigms and Hermeneutic Debates

Critical inquiry into Post-Dramatic Theory, Performance Studies, and Digital Theatre reveals fundamental dialectical tensions across dramatic history:

- **Dramatic Text versus Performance Text (The Page-Stage Divide):** Classical literary criticism treated the playwright's written script (the dramatic text) as the supreme, authoritative repository of aesthetic meaning. In contrast, performance theorists like Richard Schechner and Hans-Thies Lehmann demonstrate that the *performance text*—encompassing scenography, lighting cues, vocal cadence, physical gestures, blocking, and audience spatial relationship—constitutes an autonomous semiotic system that frequently subverts, deconstructs, or exceeds the written dialogue.
- **Cathartic Absorption versus Epic Alienation:** The Aristotelian dramatic tradition prioritized dramatic illusion, emotional mimesis, and tragic *catharsis* (the purgation of pity and fear), encouraging audiences to accept fatalistic suffering passively. Bertolt Brecht radically overturned this with *Epic Theatre*, deploying the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation or defamiliarization effect) to dismantle emotional complacency, reminding audiences that social conditions are man-made historical constructs that can be changed through collective political action.
- **Feminist and Decolonial Dramaturgy:** Traditional dramatic canons historically codified patriarchal and eurocentric perspectives, marginalizing female agency and subaltern oral performance traditions. Feminist dramatists (e.g., Caryl Churchill, Manjula Padmanabhan, Lynn Nottage) dismantle the voyeuristic male gaze and expose domestic gender violence, while decolonial African and Indian playwrights (e.g., Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Mahesh Dattani) reclaim indigenous languages, folk rituals, and subaltern voices from colonial suppression.

2. Comparative Matrix: Classical, Modernist, and Post-Dramatic Theatre

A structured comparative assessment delineates dramatic architecture across theatrical epochs in Drama: Exploring the Literary and Performative Elements:

Theatrical Dimension	Classical Aristotelian Drama	Modernist / Epic Theatre	Contemporary Post-Dramatic Theatre
Dramatic Structure	Linear 5-act pyramid; strict unity of time, place, and action.	Episodic montage; narrative interruptions, songs, and didactic projection placards.	Non-linear, fragmented, deconstructed; paratactic collage of sound, body, and space.
Spectator Relationship	Passive emotional empathy leading to spiritual catharsis.	Critical, analytical observer provoked into socio-political consciousness.	Active co-creator, sensory participant, immersive witness in shared space.

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Role of Language	Supreme vehicle of poetic thought, characterization, and plot.	Dialectical argument, social critique, and defamiliarized gestures (*Gestus*).	De-hierarchized; language functions as acoustic sound, texture, or visual graphic alongside bodies.

3. Glossary of Essential Dramatic and Theatrical Terms

Critical Term	Theoretical Origin	Standard Theatrical Definition & Application
Hamartia	Aristotle's *Poetics*	The fatal tragic flaw, error of judgment, or vulnerability in a protagonist that initiates their downfall.
Verfremdungseffekt (V-Effect)	Bertolt Brecht	The alienation device designed to distance the audience emotionally from the stage action, enabling objective critical reflection.
Mise-en-Scène	French Theatrical Theory	The totality of visual and spatial staging—sets, costumes, lighting, blocking, and props—arranged within the performance space.
Post-Dramatic Theatre	Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999)	A theatrical paradigm that dismantles the primacy of the dramatic text, emphasizing sensory presence, physical performativity, and non-representational aesthetics.
Gestus	Brechtian Theatre	A physical gesture, vocal tone, or bodily tableau that embodies and reveals the underlying social and political attitudes of a character.
Liminality	Victor Turner / Schechner	The transitional, threshold state during ritual or theatrical performance where ordinary social rules are suspended and new identities can be forged.

4. Pedagogical and Analytical Roadmap for Dramatic Criticism

Conducting rigorous academic analysis of Post-Dramatic Theory, Performance Studies, and Digital Theatre proceeds through a four-phase methodological progression:

- **Phase 1: Textual & Scenographic Deconstruction:** Meticulously analyzing dialogue, stage directions, spatial geography, and visual iconography embedded within the play-text.
- **Phase 2: Historical & Political Contextualization:** Situate the dramatic work within its socio-political epoch—examining feudal class dynamics, colonial resistance, gender oppression, or post-war existential crisis.
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theatrical provocations.

- **Phase 4: Theoretical & Intertextual Synthesis:** Connecting the dramatic performance with contemporary feminist critique, post-colonial identity struggles, and the democratization of digital performance spaces.

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