



## Interview with Marvin Carlson

by Matteo Bonfitto

Transcription: Andrea Paula Justino dos Santos

Matteo Bonfitto - *My research is about the tensions between the work of the actor and the work of the performer. I am interested on the performative. I have read your books and I would like to know what you think about the development of the performative since Austin's theory. Do you think, since then, there have been further developments in relation to the performative?*

Marvin Carlson - It is a big question. Performative has turned out to be one of those words like “modernism” that is picked out or, to be more accurate, “deconstruction” words that operate partly as metaphorical terms, partly as descriptive terms. Therefore, they can be utilized to generate further discussions in fields pretty far from their original use. I do think there is a kind of original use in Austin, however, this is quite fundamental, the idea of - how can I say this without using the word “performative”? -, the idea of focusing upon a dynamic, a quality of agency of doing, how to do things with words; the idea that words are not simply decorative, as they might be in a lyrical poem, or as resonant of certain kinds of meanings or deeper meanings, but that they actually can be utilized to accomplish something, to carry out some kind of action; and that emphasis on doing something, which he applies to particular kinds of language, or particular employment of language. People have been spread out into all kinds of human activities, whatever they are consciously produced activities, and whether it is language or anything else. They are consciously produced with the idea of making a physical change in their surroundings with words, so you can talk about performative. All these things are involved in Austin's. It is not just a matter of saying something which causes the hearers to do some activity, but it is also on the part of a person who makes the speech, or the consciousness of saying that speech with that in the mind. And you can easily see, just to take the example of what interests us the most, how applicable that is to theater. There has long been the idea of theater as performative. In English, as you know, a theater is one of the performing arts. When people have traditionally spoke of theater as a performing art, they have been focusing on the idea that

simply there is something done, that it is an action carried out. They have a focus, or there has been implied in that term that it is carried out, in order to create a particular effect or a particular kind of reaction on the receiver, the audience. With Austin's idea of performative and the implications of that, if there is anything we are more concerned with is the other side of this equation: not on what the actor does, but whatever the actor does, the effect that has on those observing; the world which the actor has created. I primarily spoke of theater because this is our concern, but this can be spread out to all things, we can talk about the performative implications on the corporate world or political conventions or debates. It can go into really very broad range of cultural activities and I do think that all the way from Austin onward, there has been a kind of grounding that this now focuses upon the agency, the efficacy of the action, whatever the action is.

*MB - In your book, you described different approaches to performance, sciences and performance art. If we consider (Richard) Schechner, he sees theater as part of the performance universe. It is just part of it, as if performance would have a broader horizon that theater would be within it. Your approach is very different because you do not like to establish a hierarchy between theater and performance, as you think of performance in different ways.*

MC - I think that is right. What I tried to do in my book was not to advocate some particular idea of performance. And my feeling is that Schechner has a particular idea of performance, about what he means by performance and he is very articulated about this. There is a hierarchy, as you say, for Richard's theory: maybe it would be unfair to say that theater is inferior to performance, but it is certainly subsumed in the performance. That is fine, he does have a very specific agenda, which is for one thing, to call attention to his readers to this general human activity which he calls performance; to suggest people how a lot of things are related or, in fact, connected under this rubric. And also, (he wants to) argue that this is a very central human activity, very determining element in human culture. So, this is an agenda for a particular idea of performance. What I was trying to do with my book is something quite different: to explain, as clearly as I could and understood, the different ways the idea of performance and performative have been used by different theorists in different situations. So, I talked about Schechner's idea, what he is up to, what it is at stake, but then I also go to other theorists and ideas of performance including people concerned with linguistic performance – just within

language, Austin and that tradition. Not to try to argue that one is superior to another, but to clarify what are the different ways this term has been used and what are the advantages, or what can you do with the different usages of this term. What has been used to do?

*MB - If you think on the contributions given by performance art, at what level did they influence what was produced in the 80's and 90's?*

MC- You are talking about performance art specifically, not the more general concept of performance... because there are different answers.

*MB - If you consider the broad concept of performance, maybe that would be a more interesting question.*

MC - I can very quickly answer both. If you are talking about the broader concept, and particularly as Schechner has defined it, there has been a strong impact not only in theater as a discipline, or as a body of study, but also on practical work done in the theater. What Schechner really did by emphasizing the theatrical qualities or performative qualities on a lot of human activities, going beyond theater into rituals, sports and events - he made theater scholars, even if they are not performance scholars, much more aware and tolerant of material that did not fit the traditional Western modern theater that is both anthropological and ethnographical. In that, theater scholars began to look at, let's say, North-African story telling or puppet theater that, traditionally, they have not considered as part of their domain. So, there is a much more broaden cultural approach to theater, because now theater scholars will look at things that are not like Shakespeare or Moliere. Maybe, they do not even have scripts. That is the anthropological side of it. There is also a cultural side, theater scholars are willing to consider the theatrical myriads, or the myriads of theatrical study, what used to be called popular forms, i.e., the circus, minstrel shows. When I was a graduate student, no one would ever think about doing a serious academic study on something like minstrel shows. Now it is a major form, there is a large study. We are not as devoted to Western model but to the Western model of high art. We are now much more open to popular manifestation of theatrical material, and performance studies have done both of those things for theater studies. Now, performance art specifically, which is a much more liberal field, and, at least in the USA, in some extent in Britain too, it is usual to talk about a particular kind of solo performance that is still around, but was particularly popular in the end of the 20th century. I think the effect on the theater has been much less than the effect of the concept of performance in general.

But I think you can see an almost flexible attitude towards what kind of material you present on the stage, more use of solo performance, as a genre, many people are solo performers now, they do not call themselves performers, but they have been given a kind of legitimacy by the popularity of performance art. I think there are other reasons for this, aside from performance art, but surely performance art was an important area for experimentation with multi media work, especially with digital work, television and so on. That would have come in anyway; just because that is the world we live in. But performance art was much involved with that kind of thing. Partly because of the connection of the performance with autobiography, on the other hand, with various kinds of technical displays, which do not have to be electronic, it can just be the manipulation of physical objects, like puppets or something like that. It also helped to develop a theatrical culture which is not so much based on story telling, as narrative, as when it came along. It provided other kinds of structures and other ways to organize material on stage, both visually and linguistically. I think all of these things probably would have been developed without performance art, because there is a long modernist tradition, not only in theater, but going back to Gertrude Stein, and people like that in America, so technology would have come anyway. There is a long solo performance tradition in USA that goes back to the 19th century. All these things were around. So, I am not saying in any case, this is something that performance art created, but performance has reinforced certain alternative ways of experiencing theater. So, I think there are these various things and, of course, a lot of people who are very much involved in performance art... Individual artists have gone to develop their own careers, work with other people; (they) influenced the stage in other ways as individuals as well. So, just to take one example, Spalding Gray, who is a very important performance artist, he is equally important surely for the work he did with *the Wooster Group*, which is not really performance art, but which utilizes some of that material, i.e., the autobiographical, the direct address to the audience, certain amount of technology, all these things – nobody would call *the Wooster Group*, well they are alike, but I have never heard them be called performance art – and yet there is certain amount of innovation within that group connected with the innovations of performance art. And I think you can extend that out to almost any of the major experimental American groups, of the last 20 years, *Mabou Mines*, *Radiohole*, any of these people mixed some of those elements.

*MB - I am a performer and a scholar too. I have to confront some questions that are really complex: if you look at the work developed by some theater artists or performers, i.e., Grotowski or*

*Marina Abramovic, they raise some questions which are related to what you could call “gnosis” instead of “epistemology”. Do you recognize the tension between gnosis and epistemology in theater or performance studies?*

MC - I think that distinction can be made specially the more self conscious or the more experimental the work is. People like Radiohole, and artists like Richard Foreman, (for) people like these, those questions can come up and they are involved if you really are trying to say what kinds of philosophical questions are these. But I guess I have to say, first of all, I do not think, especially in America, those kinds of questions apply to most of the theater. I think you are talking about people like Richard Foreman or the Wooster Group, that is to say, a certain very small part of the experimental theater. And I think that is less cruel to European theater, where people like Abramovic are much more visible, known, they are much more part of the discourse. But I also say there is in European theater, not so much in England but the continent, when theater scholars write about theater, the writing is much more theoretically based than it is in this country. Here, first of all, this is a very conservative theatrical culture, I am sure you are aware of. Most of theater is very conventional, it does not change much from decade to decade, and a lot of this is what Peter Brook called “deadly theater”. A great deal of it. And that is reinforced by the majority of theater-going public want to see that, the major the critics approve that. So, I think these questions are important and you can find artists that illustrate them, but in American theatrical culture in general, they are very marginal. I often wonder why that. I think there are a couple of reasons, money is that, like most things in the USA, it all goes back to money; this is a capitalist society and, of all the theater cultures I know, the American theater culture is by far the most commercial. We have no National theater, no state supported theater, even the British are much more willing to accept, at least a part of the theater, as a cultural product, they are rather concerned about this too, but at least this is there. In USA, for most people, even the ones who go to theater, this is entertainment, it is not an academic or even a culture pursue. When a normal German goes to theater, it is part of their domain, it is part of a cultural enrichment; when normal theater goers go to theater in New York it is entertainment. It is higher class than television, but it is the same kind of thing. And, so, therefore you do not spend a lot of time thinking about the philosophical implications, because general assumptions are not there. Unless, of course, you are sophisticated enough to say: everything has philosophical implications. But I think another thing that also contributes to that is: there is in much American art, and specially theater

more than in music, literature or painting, there is an institutional anti-intellectualism. I mean, institutional. The most professional actors and directors I know, even if they in fact have strong intellectual interest, tend to deny this. In America there is a kind of strong anti-intellectualism in culture generally, but in theater, there are a number of directors saying: “I never read anything; I never think about what I am doing, it would corrupt my work”. It is a kind of cheap romanticism, the general romanticism. This idea that somehow when you think about what you are doing, it corrupts it in some way. Now, that is not uniquely an American idea, a lot of artists feel that way, but it is very strong in USA. And so, there are exceptions, again, Richard Foreman would be a good exception, he brags about the philosophical ideas, but he is very unusual in that way. I think what that means is that, by and large, the people who raise epistemological questions about theater either are foreigners... There is a Portuguese dramatist, Armando Rosas, who sent me a notice about a play he is doing, I think in a large theater, which is called: “Mary of Magdalena, a gnostic comedy”<sup>1</sup>. I thought when I got that, “you know this man is not American”, this is a European title. Now, I guess it would not absolutely astonished me to see an announce in the Village Voice about a gnostic comedy, but it would surprise me, and I would know for sure that it is a very small off Broadway theater, for a very limited audience. You would never say gnostic comedy in any big theater, even a medium size one. So, your question is a good one, but I think where you would find people willing to discuss or engage would be at universities, not in the theater. Or if, there are very few groups of experimental Americans – do you know David Levine’s work? Well, David is very interested in these kinds of questions, particularly the epistemological questions and he is not ashamed, as that is what he does. But again these are people very far in the experimental theater.

1.  
*Mary of Magdala,*  
*A Gnostic Fable*

*MB - I think you are a brilliant scholar, you a reference to me, of course. But I am curious about this because I would like to ask how you deal with that, i.e., you are supposed to produce epistemological, scientific material. But when you confront a work like that produced by Grotowski, or people who mention or clearly say: “my work does not belong to science, it just has to do with another thing, energy, sort of ritualistic processes”, how do you account for this kind of work, since you have to keep inside this scientific horizon? Do you understand my question?*

*MC - I understand, but I do not know if I have a good answer for that. I can only speak for myself and how do I do that. I have to say that, for me, it goes back to a kind of gnosis and epistemological split. For I do, as a theorist and critic, there*

is a good variety of epistemological (things) I can work with and I try to select the academy tools that would give me more useful results for the analysis I am doing. But I also recognize that, in human experience, in any of arts and religion, there is a point where analysis does not work anymore, where you are certainly dealing with the realms of a kind of gnostic connection with something else that cannot be articulated, it can be experienced, but it cannot be articulated. Speaking for myself, all I can say is, at that point, analysis stops. I have a couple of essays about this. One of them is called "The Eternal Instant", this is an attempt to articulate what cannot be articulated in theatrical experience, or why it cannot be. All I can say is for myself, I simply accept this. Ironically, as I argue in that article, for me, and I think for most people who really have a deep feeling for theater, or religion if you like, what really keeps you going or attracted to that art or experience is the very thing you cannot articulate. So there is a kind of paradox, what attracts me most deeply in theater, I know is there, I felt it, but I cannot say much of anything about it. My friends in science say ultimately we will know enough about the brain that we can. I do not believe this, but let them prove this. There is a lot of speculation now, perhaps with the more and more sophisticated neurological investigations going on, we will eventually be able to articulate discursively what this more mysterious deep feelings and connections and relationships are. All I can say, I doubt it, but what do I know?

MB - *That paradox you mentioned interests me very much.*

MC - It is a paradox, though. Anybody who has had profound experience, in theater or any other art, knows they had them, knows they are among the most important experience of their lives, but cannot say much about it, discursively. The only way you know they existed, because other people have and know what they are. I was in some communication with a young man, two or three years ago, who was running a Doctoral dissertation. He was trying not to explain these experiences in theater, but simply to collect, as many as he could, from people who went to theater - and were more dedicated to go to theater - and ask them to explain in, as much detail, just what was happening in theater: what was going on? What were all the components? What is the totality you can reconstruct when you say I am thrilled or whatever? What was actually happening? What was delighting? I do not know what he ever found out about this, but he was trying to see if there is a certain constellation of experiences that might begin to indicate some of the triggers to this. The only thing he came up with, when I was talking to him, was transforma-

tion. He felt there are moments when some important psychic shift was happening in you as a result of what was going on stage. But often technically some important shift was happening on stage, the kind of insight into deeper level realities. I remember that four or five times I had that experience on theatre. And one of the simplest was when I saw Lawrence Olivier playing the father, Tyrone in "Long day's journey into night". There is an incredible moment in that production where - I do not know if you remember in the play - there is a moment in the last act where there is a kind of connection between father and sons, a really intimacy, and in the middle of that, he stops and says "we got all these light on, do you mind if I turn one of them off?" This is so typical of him, because we are always trying to say a few... But what Olivier idea was, they were sitting around the table, there are a couple of small lights around the corner, but the main light was a single light bulb and the light fixture hang direct over the stage; and he climbs up on the table, and reaches the light and unscrew the light bulb. I did not think much at that time why he did climb to the wall. So there is the moment, he climbs up and just before he, well, he knew what he was going to do, he was right up the light bulb, and he looked down to the audience and within the play, what was happening was, the old actor now near his death, suddenly is hit by the light again. And he certainly has his feeling the light on him. But also Olivier at this time was in his seventies and you suddenly saw not only the ageing Tyrone, but Olivier looking out with that light, time of your experience with him also, and it was just stunning, I mean I never forgot it, the world has stopped, for me, this is the essence of theater. I can talk about that and I have, as you can tell, I kind of try to say what was going on in that moment and why it was so important to me. But ultimately those things being put together go beyond that I can easily articulate. It has to do with what the essence of what theatre is, what acting is, and the body of the actor is, and what the collective memory of that body is. For Olivier was to me and to the theatre at that time all that is part of that. So it is very complicated. To use a term in aesthetics, I do not think they use it today anymore (...) It is a useful term, the "funding of experience", that is to say, the layering on of more and more material out of previous experience. So anyway, I described that and he was working with the idea of some kind of breaking through into a deeper or more universal insight and, in this case, this would be perhaps suddenly seeing all the implications of not just Tyrone, but Olivier and the whole process of acting and the experience of acting. So, heaven knows when we are finishing with this equation - it is great project, but I did not have a lot of hope with this.



MB - *What you said is very important it seems that experience cannot be accounted for, I mean deep experiences.*

MC - No, you are quite right.

MB - *That is a very big paradox for a scholar.*

MC - It really is, of course. What can I say, it would be nice, if we felt that we can really explain everything, but then also that is kind of cheap. If I could really explain discursively what is going on in a great symphony, we would not need the great symphony, it is what it is.

MB - *On the other hand, maybe this anti-intellectualism comes from this impossibility as well...*

MC - I would like to believe that, but I am not sure. I am sure some of it is that, just the idea of that ultimately. But I also have to say if that is the main problem, if you recognize that these experiences cannot really be articulated, they really are ineffable experiences, then, it seems to me that people can simply say that, they can say, "look, they are experiences here that gone beyond language." They go beyond language. But they much more commonly say, they are dragged by language, "if I think too much about this, or if I talk too much about it, it will in some way corrupt what I am doing." It is very different. One can argue in a way almost the reverse, that is, if you're aesthetic experience is so tenuous or so endangered that merely applying an articulate discussion would destroy it; it is not worth very much. Then you are reckoning that this is an experience that is deeper than language, because that can undermine this, but that is very different than saying "oh, I do not care what you say or how you articulated, this is not going to diminish it or compromise it in any way".

MB - *As concerning this issue 'experience', besides Kant, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, you recommend an author specifically who deals with this problem?*

MC - Well, all the ones you mentioned do. Of course, the influence of Dewey is very strong in USA, and I think to try to be more positive about this American attitude toward art, I think part of this is a reaction against Dewey, that is another thing that characterizes much American art is its utilitarian quality, what it is good for? What can we do with this? Now, it is true for a great deal of American performers. This is not necessarily a bad thing as a great deal of American performer was devoted to certain social causes, to raising consciousness of ethnic or gender issues and so on. Indeed, it is hard to find... you could not write the History of American Performing Arts

and leave behind those kinds of questions. That is most what it is all about. But a great deal of what we call... if you read performance theory, this is not so much of Schechner, but it is certainly to a lot of other performance theorists. It is been picked up by and utilized very productively by writers concerned with what can performers do culturally or socially. And I am not complaining about that, I am just saying there is no question there has been a very socially useful development. But I find that when I am speaking to my German colleagues, I talk about performance, they find it very peculiar that Americans do not seem to have any idea of the aesthetic dimension of performance - it is just not something we talk about very much. (We talk about) what performers do, what money can be made out of performance, but not how this performance impacts on the inner life. That is not there, and I think that part of the concern that - this sort of new romantic concern that you get a lot of American theater artists is a resistance to that John Dewey American pragmatism, what kind of ethical thing can I get out of this? So, I think to go back when you mentioned Dewey, Kant... Merleau-Ponty has not been used, or indeed I would say phenomenology in general has not been used as much in theory as you would expect. It would seem as a very preferable kind of analysis to do, but there has not been much of it. There is only a philosophy professor, Wilson, who wrote a book on phenomenology, which is very good. But once you got passed those two, occasionally articles... there was a time back in the eighties where Michael Kirby was the editor of *The Drama Review*.

MB - *I read one of his books, "A Formalist Theater".*

MC - He was very interested on phenomenology, he had really dry and unproductive methodology in his hands, I mean, you can go back and read some of the articles from TDR at that time. He encouraged what you might call not a deep description, they are just descriptions of performances that really were just what he thought they were objective chronicles, "when the curtains comes up and somebody comes out of this door and walk three steps and put that book on..." and it goes through this sort of totally dry and interesting... this is phenomenology as its worse, and t does not indeed, unlike real phenomenology, it does not even attempt to address the reception, what the effect is.

MB - *What do you think about (Jean-François) Lyotard? He is not a phenomenologist, but he wrote "The Theater of Intensities"... I do not know if you read this.*

MC - I read this, well I find Lyotard, in general, inspirational but not very useful - I mean, in a way he is like Artaud, he is certainly more disciplined and articulated, but it is the same kind of problem, it seems to me it is almost a poetic evocation of an experience, and I find a great deal of this in Deleuze as well. Not just to knock the Europeans,(...) he is a great friend of mine I am always inspired about what he writes, but I find it more stimulating than useful. I cannot say, "now, this gives me better articulate..." I can repeat what he says, or rephrase it. I think certainly within the field of theater analysis, or indeed artistic or cultural analysis, there is no question on the important role played by what I am calling the "inspirational writing", but I think, for me, that is what it is. I like to read it, and sometimes, to be fair there are times where I say, "wait a minute, now I can get at a question... this makes some connections for me, it opens up the way to get out the question I had before". So, it is not just idle inspiration, it is productive inspiration. But I think that is a very different kind of world that of Merleau-Ponty or even Kant.

MB - *You cannot provide an analytical tool.*

MC - I have read pieces which were saying, "a Deleuzian analysis of something..." And usually, I will not mention any names... to be honest, I cannot see other than the usage maybe of some Deleuzian words. I say ok, that is from Deleuze, I can see how it is Deleuzian. And second, and even worse, I find it the attempt to apply Deleuze analytically does not really illuminate that for me; but maybe I just have not read it right order.

MB - *There are some interesting concepts like rizoma.*

MC - No questions, I think this do provide analytical tools, some of the concepts... the same goes for (Joseph) Blau - there are wonderful concepts in Blau's writing that can then be extracted and be very productive and make you think about things in new ways.

MB - *It was great listening to you.*