



*radical*  
*street*  
*performance*

ROUTLEDGE

an international anthology

EDITED BY

*Jan Cohen-Cruz*

## Radical Street Performance

*Radical Street Performance* is the first volume to collect together an extensive array of writings by scholars, activists, performers, directors, critics and journalists.

The more than thirty essays in this anthology explore the myriad forms this most public of performances can take:

- agit-prop
- invisible theatre
- demonstrations and rallies
- direct action
- puppetry
- parades and pageants
- performance art
- guerrilla theatre
- circuses

These essays look at performance in Europe, Africa, China, India and both the Americas. They describe engagement with issues as diverse as abortion, colonialism, the environment and homophobia, to name only a few. Editor Jan Cohen-Cruz has introduced and organized them into thematic sections: Agit-prop, Witness, Integration, Utopia and Tradition.

*Radical Street Performance* is an inspiring testimony to this international performance phenomenon, and an invaluable record of a form of theatre which continues to flourish in a televisual age.

Including contributions by: Eugenio Barba, Augusto Boal, Yolanda Broyles-González, Dwight Conquergood, Abbie Hoffman, Baz Kershaw, Adrian Piper, Nellie Richard, Richard Schechner, Diana Taylor, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and David Welch.

**Jan Cohen-Cruz** is Associate Professor of Drama at New York University. A one-time member of the NYC Street Theatre, Jan has facilitated theatre workshops at prisons, psychiatric facilities and schools.

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# **Radical Street Performance**

## **An International Anthology**

Edited and with introductions  
by

**Jan Cohen-Cruz**



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# General introduction

- Jan Cohen-Cruz

## I

**T**HE FOLLOWING THIRTY-FOUR ESSAYS describing projects in over twenty countries evidence a formidable range of radical street performance in the twentieth century. By *radical* I refer to acts that question or re-envision ingrained social arrangements of power. *Street* signals theatrics that take place in public by-ways with minimal constraints on access. *Performance* here indicates expressive behavior intended for public viewing. It includes but is not limited to theatre, which typically keeps actors and spectators in their respective places through presentational conventions supporting a pre-set script. Radical street performance draws people who comprise a contested reality into what its creators hope will be a changing script.

Typically, theatre transports the audience to a reality apart from the everyday; radical street performance strives to transport everyday reality to something more ideal. Because the desired spectators are not necessarily predisposed to theatre-going, it takes place in public spaces and is usually free of charge. Potentially, street performance creates a bridge between imagined and real actions, often facilitated by taking place at the very sites that the performance makers want transformed. As Diana Taylor states, 'the conscious move out of "cultural spaces" in the strictest sense of the word . . . posits that society as a whole is culture – the site in which symbols and identity are forged, negotiated and contested' (12).

Not only space but also time is more contiguous with everyday life in street performance than in conventional theatre. Radical street performances respond directly to events as they occur whereas professional theatre schedules are planned well in advance. The temporal context of radical street performance is the duration not of the show but of the struggle; in her essay here about street performance in the former Yugoslavia, Dubravka Knežević describes the Women in Black, who staged silent protests in the central square of Belgrade every Wednesday during the years of fratricidal strife. Their only time frame was continuation until the war ended.

The above notwithstanding, radical street performance is a deceptive term about which little can be generalized. 'Radical,' despite its general identification with left-wing projects, can equally refer to right-wing agendas, as Marguerite Waller's excerpt on anti-immigration actions and counter-actions exemplifies. Though usually considered in terms of mass movements, radical street performance may operate on an individual level, inspired by experimenters like Allan Kaprow who merged art, which can raise consciousness about all that it frames, with life, which integrates unexpected stimuli into a general flow. This collection includes radical street acts that range from Adrian Piper's individual strategies to challenge racism as she experienced it in everyday life; to community-wide efforts, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work with the Kamĩrĩĩthũ Cultural Center; to that which was global in ambition, as the Nazi Nuremberg Rallies, described herein by David Welch.

The usual rhetoric of street performance configures the street as the gateway to the masses, directly or through the media. But the impulse to perform in the street reflects more the desire for popular access than its sure manifestation. Like community, truly public space may be ever longed for but non-existent materially. (See Anderson 1983.) Space is always controlled by *someone* and exists *somewhere*, so is inevitably marked by a particular class or race and not equally accessible to everyone. Public space has shrunk as private enterprise has taken it over for commercial purposes. What gets called street performance spills beyond the physical street and into parks, cafes and union halls, each with its own clientele. While the mobility of much street performance facilitates the seeking out of diverse audiences, one must question if access to a broader audience really is a difference between performance in the street and in theatre buildings.

Is street performance an indirect conduit to broad and diverse audiences through its ability to attract journalistic attention? In their essay in this collection, Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz devote as much attention to handling the media as to creating the performance. Of course groups with limited means, less compelling presentation or unpopular messages have a harder time gaining media attention. Even the largest demonstration in American history, the June 12, 1981 Rally for a Nuclear Freeze, received

less national coverage than an annual Rose Bowl Parade. Abbie Hoffman constructs the media itself as street theatre, the carrier of expressive action to the broadest cross-section of people.

Who are these masses that street performers hope to reach – the working class, the dispossessed or the disenchanting? Does radical street performance reach only those already convinced, a criticism leveled, for example, at the pro-choice theatrics that I examine?<sup>1</sup> Or in an effort to reach an ideologically broader audience, must practitioners find so entertaining a way of communicating their message – see Baz Kershaw on Welfare State International in a nuclear-submarine producing town – that they risk watering down their ideals? Do street theatre audiences ever include a broad cross-section of people? Or do different street events reach different constituencies while some reach none at all, lost in the hustle and bustle of contemporary public space, or too fleeting to make a difference?

Nor can one generalize about street performers. Some are working actors who explore street theatre as a means of bringing their politics into agreement with their profession. Others are not actors by vocation but rather are driven by a tremendous incentive to change their own reality. Yet others are looking for a form to integrate their political yearnings. My hope is that this book will encourage cross-pollination among such performers whether professional actors or not. All manifest a bravery in taking to the streets, and sometimes also an arrogance, as their shows are often imposed on people who have not chosen to be spectators. Street performing has an altruistic side, too, offering one's body for some common goal, without the safety of an impermeable frame. In my own street theatre days, performing on an open flatbed truck, I was egged by kids from atop a building, gawked at by people watching from their cars, their headlights illuminating the last darkening moments of the show, and propositioned by spectators who associate women in public with prostitution.

The diversity of street performers is manifested in the genres they use. Rallies, puppet shows, marches, vigils, choruses and clown shows are just some of the forms employed to capture both media and popular attention in a plethora of different contexts and circumstances. Sometimes the skills involved are instrumental in drawing a crowd, as with the Danish Odin Teatret in the streets of a small Italian village. Sometimes the utter simplicity, such as that displayed by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, merely circling the square displaying photographs of their 'disappeared' children, is equally compelling. Partly because it is so varied, street performance is less easily pigeon-holed, and hence politically devalued, as 'just theatre,' apart from the ebb and flow of life.

The sources for street work are equally eclectic. Whether to support or critique the status quo, performance has a long history in public space. Both

the church and the state have relied on the street for the display and reassertion of power; as far back as the ancient world and prominently again in medieval and early modern Europe, '... the relationship between theatre and monarchy, processions and power, was intimate' (Davis 1986: 8). The medieval plays that moved out of the church in the twelfth and thirteenth century, cosmic in scope, encompassed events from creation to the last judgement and needed more space than the church provided. Going outside also meant using the vernacular rather than Latin, thus rendering the discourse understandable to more people. Be it the grisly spectacle of a public execution or the resplendent excess of a royal wedding, powerful groups have long represented their dominance in the most accessible places.

Examples also abound of performative ways to challenge the status quo. Mikhail Bakhtin inspired a whole literature around carnival: was it an escape valve, serving to keep people in their place, or did the taste of a world more to the masses' liking lead to change? (Historically both have happened. See Part four, 'Utopia', for references.) Ritual, a conservative force in culture, providing a structure for people to go through predictable changes, has been explored as a vehicle for less socially ordained processes of transformation. Popular forms of entertainment, even if originally produced for commercial reasons, have frequently been adapted to political ends. Processional forms used to display power have also been used to amass it; public manifestations by the disenfranchised have been a way to build resistance to the status quo. This book documents multiple occasions during which the street regained its role as an arena for the display and creation of power.

## II

Numerous considerations informed the selection and organization of these essays. One criterion has been an edge of danger; indeed my colleague David Schechter suggested entitling the book 'Disturbing the Peace', from the charge most frequently leveled against street performers on the numerous occasions of arrest. While I did not have a translation budget, I stretched my reprint fund to commission nine new pieces. I have not included essays on some of the most renowned companies. Focusing on range of forms first and nationality second, the US is perhaps over-represented because of the diversity of work I am familiar with here. I considered arranging the book according to how theatrically each case study manifests itself on the street, beginning with invisible theatre and ending with the Nuremberg Party Rallies. However, after I chose essays that are strong individually and representative of different currents in street performance, a pattern suggesting five categories emerged. Though a few of the essays might have been at home in

several sections, these categories set up some fascinating juxtapositions, evidencing that a given form may serve quite a range of ideologies. I describe them in more detail at the top of each section, but briefly they are:

- 1 Agit-prop: Attempts to mobilize people around partisan points of view that have been simplified and theatricalized to capture by-passers' attention directly or by way of the media. Popularly identified with the whole domain of street theatre, this represents but one approach to the form.
- 2 Witness: Publicly illuminating a social act that one does not know how to change but must at least acknowledge. The site of such performance usually relates directly to the event being scrutinized.
- 3 Integration: The insertion of a theatrically heightened scenario into people's everyday lives to provide an emotional experience of what might otherwise remain distant.
- 4 Utopia: The enactment of another vision of social organization, temporarily replacing life as it is, and often performed with public participation.
- 5 Tradition: The use of a communally shared cultural form bespeaking common values, beliefs and connections, to address a current concern.

Given the wild array of configurations that radical street performance in the twentieth century has taken, individual essays provide examples of particular purposes, forms and historic/geographic moments. The danger is that too much can be looked at through this lens; the danger should be counted on.

## III

My first impulse to do street theatre was disappointment at finding the regular theatre world so insular. I had naively thought that a life in the theatre would afford me contact with a great range of people and experiences. Instead I found actors largely spending their time with other actors. When, in 1971, I joined the New York City Street Theatre, I did so to combine making theatre and making contact with people in diverse situations – inner-city neighborhoods, migrant camps, prisons and Indian reservations. I was deeply disturbed by the division of the world into 'haves' and 'have nots.' Certainly the street theatre I'd seen in Paris in 1969 in the aftermath of the celebrated 'events of May' (see Jean-Jacques Lebel's essay) was a major influence.

By the late 1970s, I came to believe that change was brought on more by people making theatre than by watching it. Thus I shifted from performing in traveling street theatre to facilitating community-based workshops. I

discovered, researching this book, that such a move was in fact widespread. Sixteen years ago, Welfare State International, for example, gave up its vagabond ways and settled in Cumbria. (See Baz Kershaw's essay.) In both the US and Europe in the late 1970s, on-going drama workshops were established at a range of sites hitherto accessed by street theatre: prisons, senior centers, housing projects, day-care centers, unions, schools, churches; facilities for the physically handicapped, emotionally impaired, retarded, abused, seriously ill. Street theatre is thus one of the sources of the current community-based theatre movement.

The most pervasive pattern to emerge in this collection is the persistence of street performance in periods of social flux – either leading up to, during or just after a shift in the status quo. When one needs most to disturb the peace, street performance creates visions of what society might be, and arguments against what it is. Street performance is porous, inviting participation of all who pass. We make the magic circle round the players; we are the stage. Cultural critic Marshall Berman frames such performances as public dialogue, the creation of which he calls 'the city's most authentic reason for being' (1982: 322). Whether theatre professionals in New York City parks challenging the stereotypical representation of gays and lesbians, or Chinese students dancing their desire for democracy in Tiananmen Square, moments when a new consciousness is trying to come into being are shrieked and celebrated, sung and sashayed, paraded and proclaimed into public awareness by radical street performance.

## Note

- 1 I do not mean to disparage 'preaching to the converted.' See Tim Miller and David Roman's wonderful essay by that name in *Theatre Journal* Vol. 47, No. 2, May 1995.

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## Peter Handke

### THEATER-IN-THE-STREET AND THEATER-IN-THEATERS

Translated by Nicholas Hern

**W**HETHER OR NOT READERS AGREE with Handke's conclusions, his manifesto-like essay vividly sets up two of the major questions of this collection: *Is theatre in the street intrinsically different from theatre in theatre buildings? And, how does radical street theatre performed by non-actors inform that which is performed by professional actors?* Writing in the 1960s, Handke captures the highly polarized spirit of that time in the US and Europe when street theatre burst upon the scene and many of us practitioners, though inspired by Brecht, sought a more direct form of theatrical activism.

Brecht is a writer who has given me cause for thought. The processes by which reality can operate, processes which had hitherto unfolded smoothly before one, were rearranged by Brecht into a system of thinking in terms of contradictions. He thereby made it possible for those processes by which reality operates, which previously one had often seen as operating smoothly, to be conclusively contradicted by means of the Brechtian system of contradictions. And finally the state of the world, which had hitherto been taken as intrinsic and natural, was seen to be manufactured – and precisely therefore manufacturable and alterable. Not natural, not non-historical, but artificial, capable of alteration, possible of alteration, and under certain circumstances *needful* of alteration. Brecht has helped to educate me.

The central contention of the forces of reaction and conservatism about those sections of the population who exist in an untenable situation, namely that these people 'wouldn't want it any other way,' has been shown up by Brecht in his antithetical plays as enormous and vile stupidity. People whose will is dragooned by social conditions into leaving those social conditions as they have always been, and who are therefore actually *unable* to will any change – these people 'naturally' don't want it any other way. It's *natural* that they don't want it any other way! No, it's artificial that they don't want it any other way. The conditions in which these people live are manufactured as a precaution precisely so that they remain unaware of them, and not only are they unable to will any *change*, they are unable to will anything *at all*.

Brecht made plays out of these contradictions – *plays*: in this respect Brecht's only successors are the Berliner Kommune led by Fritz Teufel. They are a Berliner Ensemble whose effectiveness is in marked contrast with that of the legitimate Berliner Ensemble. The legitimate Ensemble sets up its contradictions only so as to show their possible resolution at the end, and it points out contradictions which no longer exist (at least not in that specific social form) and which cannot therefore lead to any conflict. The members of the Kommune, however, have thought afresh; they have shifted their antithetical performances away from accepted antithetical arenas (theatre-buildings) to (still) unaccepted antithetical arenas, and have avoided furnishing (extending) the ends of their performances with manufactured, ready-made recipes for the new order, because the performances themselves, the *form* which the performance takes, has already offered a recipe for the new order. As in football when people 'act out' the possible shots at goal, so Brecht 'acted out' alternatives in his parables, but secure in what was sociologically the wrong arena with what were sociologically the wrong means, infinitely removed from the reality which he wished to change, and using the hierarchical system of the theatre in order hierarchically to destroy other hierarchical systems. Those at peace with the world he left in peace, granting countless thousands a pleasant hour or two.

He did, it's true, change the attitude of actors, but he did not change the attitude of audiences; and it is historically untrue to say that the actors' attitude even indirectly changed the audiences' attitude. Despite his revolutionary intent, Brecht was so very hypnotized by and biased towards the traditional idea of theatre that his revolutionary intent always kept within the bounds of taste, in that he thought it tasteful that the spectators, since they did remain spectators, should (be allowed to) enjoy themselves unlit. To the same end, his last wish for each play was that it should be 'entertaining.' Other people would possibly characterize this attitude as 'intellectual cunning': it would seem to me, however, to be the cunning of a thoroughly selfish intellect.

Add to this that Brecht is not content with the mere arrangement of contradictions: in the end a proposed solution, a proposed resolution comes

into play – a future on Marxist lines. I say, comes into *play*: the spectator, who has been made to feel insecure by the play, is now to be reassured because, in the course of the play, a possible solution on Marxist lines is specified or at least suggested to him. What upsets me is not that it is a Marxist solution which is specified, but that it is specified as a solution in a *play*. I myself would support Marxism every time as the only possible solution to our governing problems – ‘governing’ in every sense – but not its proclamation in a play, in the theatre. That is just as false and untrue as chanting slogans for the freedom of Vietnam when this chanting takes place in the *theatre*; or when, as in Oberhausen recently, ‘genuine’ coal-miners appeared in the *theatre* and struck up a protest song. The theatre’s sphere of relevance is determined by the extent to which everything that is serious, important, unequivocal, conclusive outside the theatre becomes *play*; and therefore unequivocation, commitment and so on become irretrievably played out in the theatre precisely because of the fatal limitations of the scope of the performance and of its relevance. When will people finally realize this? When will people finally recognize that seriousness of purpose in places meant for play is deceitful and nauseously false? This is not a question of aesthetics but a question of truth; therefore it is a question of aesthetics. This, then, is what riles me about Brechtian methods: the unambiguousness and the lack of contradiction into which everything dissolves at the end (even though Brecht pretends that all the contradictions remain open) appears, when it happens in the theatre, purely as a matter of form, a play. Every kind of message, or shall we say more simply: every suggested solution to those contradictions which have just been demonstrated becomes *formalized* on the playing area of the stage. Slogan chanting which aims to be effective in the theatre and not in the streets is modish and kitsch. The theatre, as a social institution, seems to me useless as a way of changing social institutions. The theatre formalizes every movement, every insignificant detail, every word, every silence; it is no good at all when it comes to suggesting solutions, at most it is good for playing with contradictions.

Committed theatre these days doesn’t happen in theatres (those falsifying domains of art where every word and movement is emptied of significance) but in lecture-halls, for instance, when a professor’s microphone is taken away, and professors blink through burst-open doors, when leaflets flutter down on to the congregation from the galleries, and revolutionaries take their small children with them to the lectern, when the Kommune theatricalize real life by ‘terrorising’ it and quite rightly make fun of it, not only making fun of it but, in the reaction provoked, making it recognizable in all its inherent dangerousness, in its lack of awareness, its false nature, its false idyllicism, and in its terror. In this way, theatre is becoming directly effective. There is now Street Theatre, Lecture-hall Theatre, Church Theatre (more effective than 1,000 Masses), Department Store Theatre, etc.: the only one that doesn’t exist anymore is Theatre Theatre – at least not as a means of

immediately changing prevailing conditions: it is itself a prevailing condition. What it could be good for (and has previously been good for) is an area of play for the creation of the spectator's innermost, hitherto undiscovered areas of play, as a means by which the individual's awareness becomes not broader but more precise, as a means of becoming sensitive, of becoming susceptible, of reacting, as a means of coming into the world.

The theatre is not then portraying the world: the world is found to be a copy of the theatre. I know that this is a speculative approach; but I would not accept that the alternative to speculation is action. Admittedly, I do have doubts as to whether the impetus to change conditions in the Marxist sense (which was also mine) can as yet be said to result from a more precise awareness on the part of the spectator or listener, although I hope so; that is, I doubt it the more I hope so. The theatre in the theatre can create only hypotheses, proto-theses of new modes of thought; as a play, it cannot directly and unequivocally demonstrate the thesis itself, the new mode of thought which points to the solution. Brecht of course absorbs the thesis, the solution into the play and deprives it of its force and reality. One might say that the Berliner Kommune, however, who have certainly been influenced by the theatre but certainly not by Brecht (although they may venerate him for all I know) perform their thesis, their argument right in the middle of reality. It is to be hoped they will go on performing until reality too becomes one single performance area. That would be fine.