TDR Comment

Theatre History’s “View of the World”

Steve Tillis

Saul Steinberg’s famous New Yorker cover, “View of the World from Ninth Avenue” (29 March 1976), foregrounds New York’s Ninth Avenue, replete with fully drawn buildings and pedestrians hurrying to and fro. The Hudson River flows across the middle of the illustration, on its far shore a strip of land labeled “Jersey.” Farther west lays a mostly barren plain, set off with some comic-book mountains and the names of a few stray states and cities. The Pacific Ocean is only a bit broader than the Hudson, with the barest hints of China, Japan, and Russia visible on the distant horizon. The top third of the illustration is a bland and untroubled sky.

Steinberg’s illustration is an affectionate (if pointed) comment on the parochialism of his hometown. American scholars of theatre history are no better than Steinberg’s New Yorkers, though our “View of the World” foregrounds Europe and marginalizes to a Steinbergian degree all theatre not construed as part of the Western tradition.

I recently analyzed a representative sample of theatre history textbooks, drama anthologies, and required courses in college theatre and drama departments. I found that the content of American theatre studies is extremely parochial. Of the 12 theatre history textbooks I examined (none of which limits itself by title to the West), the amount of text devoted to the world beyond Euro-America very rarely exceeds 10 percent, and often falls to as little as 4 percent. Of the 21 drama anthologies I examined (again, none limited by title to the West), only four include any Asian plays, while only half a dozen include any work from Africa. Of the 80 theatre/drama departments I surveyed, 55 require scholarly courses for their majors. Of those 55, only 10 have course descriptions that indicate any non-Western content. That content ranges from a single play to an entire course on non-Western theatre. Mid-range is a course description that reads: “Emphasis will be on Western culture, but the course will also include non-Western drama.” (Another four departments label one or more courses “World Theatre,” but do not explicitly indicate what the content is, so it remains unclear whether or not anything non-Western is actually taught.) Granted that what actually happens in a classroom can differ from what appears in a course description, the survey indicates that the great majority of departments require their majors to take courses that are thoroughly

The Drama Review 48, 3 (T183), Fall 2004. © 2004
New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Eurocentric (by which I include Euro-America). Most of the remaining departments do little more than pay lip service to the world beyond the West.

Parochialism is sometimes explained as the product of ignorance. The parochialism of theatre history studies in America, however, is not occasioned by a lack of available information on non-Western traditions. Over the last generation, excellent full-scale histories, analyses, theoretical works, and translations of plays have been published for many traditions in India, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the indigenous Americas.

Parochialism persists because many college teachers willfully ignore the excellent materials available. I am convinced that people choose parochialism, for the most part, not out of disdain or dislike for any particular portion of the world, but because they don’t know how to treat non-European theatre within the historiographic approach in which they have been trained and to which they have become accustomed.

This approach began to take shape during the Enlightenment, when it was first argued that human history is the story of the progress of freedom. According to historian Lawrence W. Levine, the historiographic approach associated with this thesis “painted Western Civilization as the end product of all world history, or at least of the world history that mattered, since entire continents, whole peoples, and complete historical epochs were ignored as if they had not existed” (Levine 2000:21; italics in the original).

Adapting the progressivist thesis to theatre history was easy. The crucial move was to replace the story of “freedom’s progress” with its theatrical equivalent, progress toward realism and the spoken word. These variants pointed toward the same kind of modern Western theatre, thus rendering theatre history into a teleological metanarrative.

The progressivist thesis in theatre studies leads to an approach that is no less exclusionary than was the one in general history studies. For example, literary theatre in China has a longer continuous history than in Europe, but since the Chinese tradition has no place in a narrative concerned with the progress of Western realism and spoken drama, why take it too seriously? Brockett and Hildy’s History of the Theatre (9th edition, 2002), devote all of nine pages to Chinese theatre, compared to 575 for the West.

Even in terms of the West alone, however, progressivism is bad historiography. At the heart of the thesis is a kind of shell-game. The earliest theatres in the West, we are invariably told, are the ancient Greek and the liturgical medieval. The textbooks overlook the fact that both these “original” theatres were in large part musical, with the Greek theatre also involving dance. One of the central arguments of progressivism is that, from the Renaissance onward, music and dance became ever less relevant to Western theatre, giving way to the more socially relevant realism and the more rational spoken word. In making this argument, progressivism excludes from serious historical consideration such forms as masque and opera (and later, American musical theatre) because of their ample music and dance. Also, numerous traditions of popular entertainment—pantomimes, clowning, animal acts, and the like—are not studied seriously.

The reasoning here is circular: progressivism excludes forms with significant music and dance, along with popular entertainments, and focuses instead on spoken drama as evidence of a progress away from precisely that which progressivism itself has excluded. I need scarcely add that if historians really wanted to exclude music and dance from their approach, they’d no longer be able to discuss Greek and liturgical theatres and the entire progressivist thesis would self-destruct. It is certainly worth noting, however, that while this shell-game costs us the opportunity to study some vital Western forms, it “justifies” the choice of parochialism, since theatre outside the West is frequently
musical and/or danced; moreover, non-Western theatre is sometimes without the single-authored spoken text taken to be one of the defining characteristics of “progress.”

Were scholars to foreswear the progressivist thesis and move beyond Western parochialism, how might they meet the challenge of world theatre history? Also, on a more practical level, how might they set about teaching it?

An immediate task is to conceptualize the field of theatre without the equivocation that excludes post-Renaissance and non-Western musical and danced theatre forms. We might assert that theatre is performance of a communicative action that occurs within an aesthetic frame (among additional possible frames) shared by performers and their audience, making use of whatever performance practices are available. This expansive definition encompasses performances ranging from the fictional and documentary to the ritualistic and circus-like. Some historians will no doubt prefer to focus their studies on the more limited field of dramatic theatre, a subset of the field of theatre itself. If so, they can apply the additional frame, also shared by performers and their audiences, of fictional action.

A conceptualization of dramatic theatre along these lines would allow for the consideration of Greek theatre, liturgical drama, and European spoken drama as part of the same field of study; it would also allow for the broadening of that field within the Western world to encompass such diverse forms as masque, opera, and musical theatre. Moreover, it would hasten and require the realization that within the same field of study belong many non-Western forms, ranging from kabuki and kathakali to Balinese barong and the koté-tlon of the Bamana tribe in Mali, with individual forms variously emphasizing music, dance, a written or improvised text, or bringing together these and other elements such as performing objects and scenography in any sort of combination.

A conceptualization of the more expansive field of theatre along the proposed lines would draw into consideration an even fuller panoply of performance activity, as more and more scholars are inclined to do. Greek dramatic theatre took place in the context of procession, recitation, and ritual. The Ashura processions of the Shi’ites in Southwest Asia, the praise songs of West African griots, and the konj kaiko (a ritual pig killing, dancing, and feasting) in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea provide at least partial analogies to the opening pompe (procession) of the City Dionysia, the dithyramb contest, and the pig sacrifice that purified the theatre of Athens. If only because dramatic theatre is often presented in the context of other theatrical activity (which might also include popular entertainments and civic ceremonies) there is good reason for theatre historians to embrace the more expansive conceptualization of their field.

A long-term task is to develop the means for managing the field of study. One way is to adopt the idea of “world regions” of theatre. Central to this idea is the realization that until the past 200 years or so, theatre forms were relatively limited in their migrations. Although Indian religious texts and practices spread throughout Southeast and East Asia, for example, eventually exerting a profound influence on the theatre of those regions, Sanskrit drama seems never to have migrated beyond South Asia itself. Owing to the limited migration-range of theatre forms, one can think of world regions as cultural or multicultural areas that host their own distinctive arrays of theatrical activities.

It’s important to remember, however, that regional arrangements are not static; we need to locate world regions in time as well as in space. Thus, the ancient Mediterranean region existed from roughly 500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. The European region emerged in the 900s, and many centuries later expanded into the Americas, literally colonizing it for the Euro-American region. The
emergence dates of indigenous American theatre regions are impossible now to ascertain. The North American indigenous region significantly contracted by the 20th century, though recent decades have seen it stabilize and begin expanding again with a resurgence of Native American performance. Sub-Saharan Africa presents a special pedagogical problem because, as far as I know, no one has yet attempted a thorough geographical-cultural survey of its traditional forms. Although it’s therefore difficult to speak of the specific regions it might contain, one can certainly say that its theatre cannot be encompassed in some catchall “non-Western” category.

The idea of theatrical world regions can provide us with, in effect, a base-map of theatre, helping us to develop an overview of the spatiotemporal distribution of forms. On the basis of this multiregional map we can then move toward an interregional understanding of world theatre history that takes cognizance of the ceaseless interaction between forms of different regions, as well as of diasporic and global extensions of forms, especially in the last couple centuries.

This move to the multiregional arises from the realization that while theatre forms were historically limited in their migrations, theatrical world regions have never been isolated entities. Locales where regional boundaries meet have always presented border zones in which theatre forms have the opportunity to mingle with unusual ease. Also, there are locales whose affiliations shift from one region to another, often owing to the migration of theatre forms concurrent with conquest or settlement. These locales are transition zones in which newly arrived forms mingle with older (sometimes intentionally suppressed) ones. Sometimes border or transition zones become dual- (or multi-) affiliation zones. In such locales, theatre forms of two or more distinct regions are simultaneously maintained, often among differing segments of the population. Finally, there has always been an active circulation of materials that can be transmitted with greater facility than entire theatre forms, such as stories (as with the aforementioned Indian texts), design ideas, dance patterns, musical instruments, and so on. Theatrical activity in these various zones, along with the sharing of circulating materials, has always worked against regional separatism.

The movement of theatre has been accelerating during the past 200 years or so. Theatrical texts, training techniques, and performance practices now circulate freely: *The Oresteia* has been deconstructed in Japan while many American acting students practice the Suzuki training method; minstrel-based blackface is a central component of Ghana’s Concert Party even as hip-hop combines techno and African elements. Forms themselves undertake unprecedented migrations owing to diasporic movements, colonialism, and the sheer ease of international communications. The present situation might best be described as one in which various regions coexist to a greater or lesser degree within an emerging global region: much of the world has become a dual-affiliation zone. In Nigeria today, one might see performances of the traditional *apidán* of the Yoruba tribe, of European spoken drama that bears the influence of *apidán* (such as Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*), and of Yoruba Traveling Theatre, a 20th-century form influenced by both *apidán* and European spoken drama.

Given the obvious complexity of the subject, how might world theatre history be taught? I see two basic alternatives. The first is a survey approach that would require at least two semesters. A world survey sequence does not attempt to be “comprehensive” or to impose a teleological metanarrative on theatre history, but rather moves section by section through the various world regions, providing an overview of significant forms and trends in each; it concludes with a section on the emerging world region of the past two centuries. The second is a comparative-analysis approach that can be managed in a single
A comp-analysis course works with a selected number of forms (or zones, or regions) and examines them in light of a specific historical issue. One might compare, for instance, the relationship between urbanization and popular theatre in 14th-century China, 16th-century Europe, 17th-century Japan, and 20th-century West Africa. The virtue of a comp-analysis course is the limited number of forms to be dealt with at a single time: the teacher is more fully able to prepare for unfamiliar material, while students are afforded a relatively in-depth interregional study. The corresponding weakness of the approach is that it lacks the broader contextualization provided by the survey approach.

Survey and comp-analysis courses can serve as either “gateway” or “capstone” courses. As gateways, they provide a basic orientation to world theatre history before directing students to more regionally based studies. As capstones, they give students an opportunity to integrate and supplement their regionally based work. Either way, one must admit that these courses will provide real challenges for their teachers, who by and large will have little preparation for teaching outside their areas of specialization. Team teaching offers at least a partial solution: many theatre/drama departments already have specialists in various regions, while other departments might have faculty with expertise in particular cultural traditions. Ultimately, however, the solution is simply time, for the more that teachers work with world theatre history, the more they will learn of it. The pay-off will come with the succeeding generation of scholars, who will be begin their careers already prepared to teach about the world.

If, however, the challenge of the world seems too daunting, we could always go in the other direction and become more parochial, not less. It would be easy enough for American theatre scholars to view the world from the vantage point of Broadway, which conveniently enough happens to cross Saul Steinberg’s Ninth Avenue. We already know what the westward vista looks like. Turning about, we might imagine a bustling foreground filled with theatre marquees, cabs at the curb, and lines snaking away from every box office. The East River flows across the middle of the illustration, with a patch of Queens and Brooklyn beyond; then comes the narrow strip of the Atlantic Ocean. On its far side is the barren plain of Europe, marked with the names of three or four cities and some comic-book Alps; off to the right is a hint of Africa and along the far horizon, the merest indication of Asia. The top third of the illustration is, as before, a bland and untroubled sky. We could give our regards to Broadway and tell the rest of the world to stuff it.

References

Brockett, Oscar, and Franklin J. Hildy

Levine, Lawrence W.

Steve Tillis received his PhD in dramatic art from the University of California, Berkeley, and currently teaches at Saint Mary’s College of California. He is the author of Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1992), Rethinking Folk Drama (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), and “East, West, and World Theatre” (Asian Theatre Journal, 2003), among other works.