Towards an Idle Theatre

The Politics and Poetics of Foreplay

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There is a woman who every payday, after finishing work, takes a train to Coney Island, reaches the amusement park, and positions herself on a breeze-hole, in the “fun-wax house.” She wears a skirt, which spreads widely around her body when hit by the air coming from below. Her name is Hannah and she devotes her spare time to the breeze-hole, partly playing for herself the famous skirt-blowing scene from Billy Wilder’s *The Seven Year Itch*, partly just enjoying the feeling of the breeze on her naked legs.

This is her pass-time.

Not far from her, in the funhouse, there is a young, muscular boy whose name is Arizona. He also goes to Coney Island almost every day in his spare time. His pass-time is positioning himself in front of the mirror maze and seeing his own image reproduced time and again on the mirroring walls as a sort of narcissistic hallucination.

Hannah and Arizona are alone, alongside each other in their solitary pass-times, accidentally exposed to each other, to someone else’s amusement. They occupy a precarious space in the funhouse. It is conceived as a place to walk through but they loiter and over-stay, with no purpose other than their own enjoyment—the physical pleasure of the activity itself and the pleasure of imagining a picture of themselves in the scene they themselves set up.

The time of their enjoyment—their pastimes—somehow defines this space in the amusement park as temporarily theirs, even though they inhabit the space with no thought of property. They own only the time of their childish enjoyment, an enjoyment that appears as a spectacle from the outside. At the end of the day, the voice of the Barker advertising the many attractions of the funhouse for a paying audience announces among its attractions Hannah’s and Arizona’s pass-times:


This scene is pivotal in the play *Why Hanna’s Skirt Won’t Stay Down*, written and directed by Tom Eyen and performed at La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in 1965. To this day it is one of the plays most affectionately attached to the history of La Mama, as well as to the legendary

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narrative of the Off-Off-Broadway scene of 1960s New York. I am offering this scene to you, in a sense, as a prologue to my argument. Eyen’s characters, their mode of performing for themselves and for others, the specific temporality of their scenes, are called upon to conjure a peculiar mode of performance, which I shall refer to as foreplay.

I propose foreplay as a notion to describe amateur theatre labor both for the temporality and sensibility of the term. I am interested in the relation of amateur labor to love, which is etymologically the force—the desire, the pleasure—that drives the amateur laborer to pursue the activity without compensation. I am also interested in the amateur’s position in the social system of theatre production, a system that does not recognize amateur labor as labor, but might

Figure 1. Steven Davis and Hellen Hanft in Why Hanna’s Skirt Won’t Stay Down, La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, June 1970. (Courtesy of La Mama Archive/Ellen Stewart Private Collection)
subsequently profit from the wageless conditions in which it is produced in the first place as a pass-time, hence welcoming and affirming a process of self-exploitation on the amateur laborers’ part.

I employ the word labor here in the sense of Marx’s early writings, in which labor refers to all forms of human doing, not only and not directly those contributing to an economic outcome. Likewise, I employ an expanded notion of theatre production, using the latter term to refer to a process encompassing all stages of circulation and exchange of the (theatre) commodity. I include consumption as a fundamental stage of the production process insofar as it actualizes as product that which in earlier stages of the process existed only in potentia.

Recouping these expanded notions of labor and production is crucial for a number of reasons, as an important strand of feminist critique has clearly spelled out in relation to reproduction or housework (Federici 1975; Waring 1988; Dalla Costa 1999). First, such an expansion can account for non-monetized activity such as amateur theatre, an underrecognized form of labor producing value that exceeds monetary exchange as the main measure of productivity. Secondly, it points to a fundamental feature of theatre production: its enactment in a public sphere, with its constitutive dependence on audience consumption for the production of value. In line with the detailed analysis of the labor of consumption developed by Miranda Joseph, I too hold that the “work of the audience, their productive consumption of the [performance] work, their act of witness” participates in the production of exchange value under any circumstance, especially if we understand exchange value as a distinctive discursive articulation, helping to define — beyond direct monetary trade — the ontological status and social identity of the theatre labor witnessed by the audience (2002:66). As Marx made clear, in all processes of production, consumption retrospectively grants an ontological status to the product itself — or more precisely, it brings to completion what the product of labor aspired to be in the very first place:

A railway on which no trains run, hence which is not used up, not consumed, is a railway only dunamoi [potentially], and not in reality. [...] Consumption produces production in a double way, (1) because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed. [...] Thus the product, unlike any mere natural object, proves itself to be, becomes, a product only through consumption; (2) because consumption creates the need for new production, that is, creates the ideal, internally impelled cause for production. (1973:91)

Foreplay and Time

In the Oxford English Dictionary, the word foreplay features as an entry under the prefix fore, and it is defined as: “stimulation or love-play preceding sexual intercourse.”1 According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, foreplay is also any “action or behavior that precedes an event”: the nature of the event whose advent foreplay announces and prepares is not clearly specified. By its own definition, however, foreplay appears as a slippery territory of crescendo that cannot claim the status of an arrival. By its very nature, foreplay refuses to be its own stable signifier: its very function is attested retrospectively, as if only a future occurrence — intercourse — were in fact entrusted to open the “proper time” of the activity itself. Indeed, like the railway where no train yet runs, foreplay is a labor of desire projected towards completion, towards the possibility of “consummation,” without necessarily the guarantee of arrival. The concept of foreplay, however, inhabits a paradox: the “event” that might possibly bestow its ontological status on the foreplay is precisely that which would put an end to foreplay as such. In other words, if the accomplishment of foreplay is what justifies its temporality of deferral (along with the pleasure accumulated throughout its duration), the event, then, is both foreplay’s end in terms of its purpose — and its end in terms of duration.

I am borrowing the paradox haunting the ontological status of foreplay to refer to the condition of many theatre artists, who remain “amateurs” insofar as the product of their theatre labor has not achieved the status of event in a specific economy of attention, remuneration, recognition. That is, until the productive consumption of an audience values it to be of “use”; to be recognizable as exchangeable if not yet exchanged. The amateur theatre labor I am referring to, therefore, is not a leisure activity or an after-work diversion, already granted a place in the time regime of capitalist leisure. It is a practice often taking place after work hours simply because it is not itself a sufficient source of livelihood. Artists are busy with their practices during free time because unpaid theatre labor does not count as one’s business if unremunerated, no matter how busy one may be with it. Many unpaid theatre artists, however, carry on their love’s labor in the hope of one day transforming that labor of love into their primary means of support. This particular quality of amateur theatre production can therefore be considered a distinctive form of preparation: a preliminary activity (of unknown duration) that does not perceive or present itself as propaedeutic, but which already participates in the production process and is projected towards a horizon of evaluation. This is the moment at which it will be “consummated” by catching the attention of an audience who might offer it the chance to be considered “proper” theatre.

We could posit proper theatre as one which, to quote Nicholas Ridout, “knows its own history, claims its place in the discourses of the arts, while acknowledging, with more or less good grace, its position in the economies of capitalist leisure” (2006:6). A theatre in which — for instance — a ticket is paid for in advance, granting (first of all economically) a professional status to the event, and where this purchase defines the domain of the encounter happening as the result of the agreement implied by the purchased good: the time of performance. This time, accordingly, is subject to a system of property rights: spectators purchase the chance to occupy a public space for a certain time span, as well as the opportunity to pay attention to the forthcoming event, which is considered in advance worth attending, worthy of attention. The private, proper attention of spectators, when sitting in a theatre seat rented for a certain amount of time, is accordingly expected to be labored for: in order to get the pleasure of the event paid for up front, spectators will share the working hours of performers, offering in exchange the private property of their leisure—a time defined by the contours of both temporal and purposive ends.

Another name for this sort of amateur labor, especially in relation to the market of performing arts (understood, as Joseph proposes, not merely in economic terms but as a “market-status” [2002:42]), is precarious labor. Even when amateur theatre labor is in fact “consummated”—succeeds in catching the attention of an audience and hence has the chance to be put to use (by being performed in a “proper” theatre, by participating in a festival, or by acquiring temporary funding for development as a so call “theatre project”), “consumption creates the need for new production, that is creates the ideal, internally impelled cause for production” (Marx 1973:91). After having even temporarily entered a market that we could call “a market of attention,” amateur labor is therefore projected into a new production horizon, towards which the laborer will now direct herself in order to maintain (or to create anew) the conditions for her labor to endure. In other words, participating in a market of attention, the amateur theatre laborer must inhabit a precarious status similar to that of foreplay, anticipating a potential recognition of her practice as labor in a specific politics of producing the event.

However, just like foreplay, precarious labor can possibly disavow its implication in a teleological end from within the production system in which, necessarily, it is embedded, sustaining the pleasure of its doing as labor—hence establishing a struggle with the temporality constructed by the deadlines of finality. Just like in foreplay, what supports the doing of precarious labor can always be pleasure rather than finality, even if its time is always already projected

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3. For a more detailed analysis of the “economy of attention” in which the theatre commodity is produced and consumed, see Palladini (2011:59–77).
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I employ the notion of “persistence” in the acceptation proposed by Boyan Manchev (2011). Towards a horizon of productivity. The sort of resistance that a precarious laborer can perform is a resistance of the conditions of production that are given as the presupposition of a desired realization of her labor in something achieved, something produced, something consumable. She can resist this realization of her labor, I suggest, by making love to her own time — making time itself her lover, as it were.

Towards a Labor of Idleness

What I propose as a poetics of foreplay is a particular temporality of performance, which although structurally projected forward in time towards the horizon of its consumption, chooses instead to defer its own accomplishment. The enjoyment of the act reproduces the possibility of its persistence. The politics of foreplay is the potential to exceed, by means of enduring pleasure, the time regime of a productive economic system, the temporality of deadlines and potential opportunities predating an agenda of finality on the amateur labor. In a theatre of foreplay — an amateur theatre predicated on love without recognition, achievement, status — experiments in alternative uses for the accumulation of pleasure during performance making reconfigure the specific mode of production, as well as the labor that produces the pleasure. In other words, resistance to productivity within the system of production might come from actions that defer achievement, that enable precarious labor to endure by means of its “love drive,” and that seek to protect this love from the “internally impelled cause for new production” (Marx 1973:91). The love endures by means of an attitude towards time that disavows the summons to become an event, articulating a different (shall we call it autonomous?) duration for labor itself.

We shall describe this attitude in terms of idleness, and posit this notion as something radically different from leisure, insofar as it is not conceived in a dialectical relation with the time regime regulating work in the system of productivity. The notion of idleness I am calling upon here draws upon Walter Benjamin, in particular in his Arcades Project, the never-completed collection of notes and quotations assembled from 1927 to his death in 1940, a period, it should be noted, in which the philosopher confronted a severe and prolonged condition of unemployment. The book itself can be considered in terms of amateur labor or as a peculiar form of foreplay: a sustained and undervalued promise of completion that accompanied the philosopher until the very last moment of his life.

In The Arcades Project, Benjamin devotes a short section of the convolute m to the notion of Müßiggang (idleness), and pinpoints some crucial features that mark idleness as different from leisure. He writes: “Idleness seeks to avoid any sort of tie with the idler’s line of work, and ultimately to the labor process in general. That distinguishes it from leisure” (1999:803). Whereas the very idea of leisure in modernity necessarily relies on the organizational demarcations of work-time, Benjamin looks at idleness as an attitude and praxis of “an unlimited duration, which fundamentally distinguishes it from simple sensuous pleasure of whatever variety” (806).

Although profoundly connected with the capitalist economic order in which, over time, it flourishes, idleness for Benjamin is not simply the last outpost of a disappeared “proper” leisure; it is rather a peculiar form of engagement with activity. Hence, it is not a condition defined by the absence of labor, but rather a scenario enabling and temporarily hosting forms of labor not yet recognized or allowed as “proper.”

The German word Müßiggang is etymologically and conceptually complex, and it is worth observing it closely in order to better understand how idleness may be differentiated from laziness, as well as from sheer inactivity. Müßiggang is produced by the conjunction between die Muße — leisure — and Gang, literally referring to the practice of “walking, passing,” and directly

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4. I employ the notion of “persistence” in the acceptation proposed by Boyan Manchev (2011).
echoing the habit of the flâneur so prominent in the constellation of idle figures sketched out in *The Arcades Project*. Secondly, *Missiggang* stems from the same linguistic root of the word “duty”—*das Müß*—almost to suggest that idleness itself is generated from “duty”; or, alternatively, that it might be a praxis pregnant with necessity, regardless of whether the idle labor will eventually give birth.

There is therefore an ambivalence embedded in the idea of idleness, which doubles the ambivalent status of precarious labor. The “improper,” apparently inoperative labor of the idler may well be regarded as perfectly functional in relation to the exploitation process at work in the domain of busy-ness, especially in the context of the neoliberal economy in which the category of what can be considered in terms of labor is continuously shifting. In other words, another way to look at idleness could be as the theatrical mask of precarious labor, sheer free time offering itself to be appropriated and retrospectively evaluated as such, in an always-forthcoming capitalist economic system. Benjamin already recognized this process in specific instances of his own culture, as well as in the culture of the late 19th century he analyzed so thoroughly: “there are two social institutions of which idleness forms an integral part: the news service and nightlife. They require a specific form of work-preparedness. This specific form is idleness” (1999:802). This work-preparedness or potential for work in a sense haunts idleness, as much as the potentiality of consumption haunts the duration of foreplay. On the other hand, though, as in much foreplay, this very work-preparedness could resist its own tendency to overlap with both work-expectation, and simple exhaustion. In this preparedness, in fact, idleness is also the precondition for resisting proper forms of work in the present, and proposing a different duration for labor itself, outside of a time-oriented sequence in the production process.

The potential in idleness for resistance doesn’t lie in denying its ambivalent status of “work-preparedness.” Rather, it rests in the capacity of nourishing amateur labor with an enjoyment that is somehow forgetful of the seeming “duty” haunting its finality, its drive to production. A useful insight to better describe this sort of attitude is offered again by Benjamin, featured in a sets of notes composed during roughly the same period as but not included in *The Arcades Project*: the writings documenting his experiences with hashish and mescaline. In one of those texts (also called “protocols”), composed in May 1934 after an experiment with drugs supervised by the doctor Fritz Fränkel in Paris, Benjamin notes down some reflections on the verb *Säumen*, literally meaning to linger on, to loiter, to dawdle, and connected by Benjamin to a specific attitude of children’s activities. The best part of children’s happiness, Benjamin writes, is its *Saumseligkeit*, that is: an absolute absence of hurry (2006).

This peculiar sense or attitude towards time, which Benjamin describes as a sort of unraveling of experience, is considered as proper to childhood insofar as the latter can be regarded as a life period not directly embedded in the time regime of adult productivity—even if it is projected towards adulthood in a developmental conception of life. Upon closer observation, however, this time sense can also be compared to the temporality at stake in certain acts of lovemaking: an absolute absence of hurry, in fact, can characterize the enjoyment of gestures that are both implicated in, yet somehow also avoid the teleology of a merely productive desire.

Making love to one’s own time, therefore, means to allow precarious labor to persist in its nature as an act of love, proceeding in an absolute absence of hurry and thus resisting the compelling impulse of “becoming event” fostered by the economy of attention which might otherwise appear to enable its very existence.

By proposing the notion of foreplay as a loving subversion of the time regime of capitalist production as well as professional theatre production, I am conjuring an attitude towards theatre labor that is not directly related to a specific technique, but it is instead a matter of temporality and sensibility. Reclaiming the possibility of such an attitude seems particularly urgent in the contemporary context of the neoliberal economy, which constantly profits from a so-called time flexibility on the worker’s part, including the availability of free time as a boundless resource of labor power.
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The fundamental conditions of production in which theatre labor takes place, however, cannot be considered entirely new; likewise, the sort of amateur theatre labor I have referred to, while not entitled to “claim its place in the discourses of the arts” (Ridout 2006:6) has many precedents in the history of performing arts. Foreplay can thus also be understood relative to another temporal sense present in its two words—fore and play—as a play that took place before. This attitude towards time has many precedents in the theatre. We can consider experiments by a number of artists who, over the courses of their lives, struggled to make the pleasure in their theatre-making endure, even though their labor was never recognized in a capitalist economy of attention or in a system of direct remuneration.

Among such artists, there is one in particular whose theatre practice seems to stand as a definitive example of the sort of resistance that precarious labor might perform by means of deploying a mode of alternative temporality. This artist, we might suggest, developed a peculiar mode of making love to his own time, and invited spectators to join this love making by experimenting with a peculiar sort of idle consumption in the unraveling of an act of extended witnessing. That theatre artist is Jack Smith.

I would like to suggest that the peculiar idleness that characterized Jack Smith’s theatre practice found a somehow direct equivalent in the activity of spectators participating in the specific economy of attention fostered by his work. Rather than offering an analysis of a specific performance, I will entrust the task of describing this temporality to the writing of a particular spectator of Smith’s work, who—in a sense—might be considered to have experimented with a distinctive form of “foreplay writing” in relation to the reception of the 1960s and 1970s underground performances. That theatre spectator is Stefan Brecht.

In 1978 Brecht published a collection of texts entitled Queer Theatre intended to be the second volume of the ambitious and never accomplished series of books devoted to theatre experiments in the New York downtown art scene. These texts constitute an extremely precise survey as well as a very personal account of Brecht’s own participation in and enjoyment of these performances. Brecht writes about Smith’s midnight series of performances in his loft on Mercer Street involving an extremely slow and protracted setup for a scene that continued into the early morning. The preparation for the scene was the show itself, which would end simply with the completion of the preparation. That is, the idle anticipation was the point, and the spectacle of the completed preparation (an enormous accumulation of junk in a massive pile in the center of the stage) was the end. Brecht describes friends/spectators entering the room, passing by, falling asleep on the sofa, helping Smith organize the huge heap of junk at the center of the scene—as a sort of rag picker, a figure so dear to Benjamin—committed to the collection of traces of everything that is disregarded by history and by the modern city. Brecht describes friends/spectators chatting among themselves, smoking marijuana. He recalls himself falling asleep, smoking, helping Smith organize the junk pile. He found himself participating in an enchantment that was part of a longue-durée labor of desire sustaining a performance that was constantly denying or deferring itself as an event—but which could be encountered in precise moments of attraction, in striking images glimpsed from the chaos of rejected and discarded “accomplished” images. The sort of production/consumption emerging from Brecht’s writing is one that allows Smith’s labor to become itself, but to do so, as in the activity of children, in an absolute absence of hurry:

Sleepiness, boredom—in the case of many [spectators] probably irritation or anger—alternate with mild hilarity and a trancelike appreciation of the beauty of the form of time displayed as object—this last feeling strengthening in intensity as this object is progressively constituted. The only real feeling of objection that I have noticed in myself might be put: why the fuck am I not fucking instead? (Brecht 1978:17)

We could call Smith’s theatre practice, “consummated” by Brecht—as it was by many other spectators who had the privilege to witness this labor—an idle theatre, insofar as it proceeds
with the prospect of an unlimited duration, even if it is projected towards meeting the attention of specific “consumers,” who did in fact confer upon it a peculiar use: the critical “appreciation of the beauty of the form of time displayed as object” (Brecht 1978:17). These consumers did not place “proper” demands on the theatre labor in which they were invited to participate, but were rather called upon to mobilize their own pleasure to sustain their act of witnessing. Borrowing a term proposed by Joe Kelleher, who writes about the time delay between the moment in which an image is produced and the moments spectators will encounter it, the consumers of Smith’s amateur theatre might be considered as “latecomer spectators,” spectators who “to crawl to encounter the image, and crawl over the representation in a way that’s not going to be comfortable in any sense of the word” (2008:58). Latecomer spectators, in a sense, are consumers who also defer the accomplishment of their attention, along with the pleasure at stake in their participation in a labor of persistence that seems to mime the precarious condition in which this theatre labor took place.

Towards an End

Hannah and Arizona are still standing in the Coney Island funhouse. The passing of their time and their foreplay differ from free play since it happens precisely in the interstices of a place of amusement constructed (and later abandoned) as a fitting capitalist leisure activity. As idle theatre labor, it exceeds the subordinated time and space assigned to leisure in the capitalist time-sequence, as well as the exploitable status assigned to free time in the neoliberal capitalist economy. I see it producing an accumulation of pleasure that is not dependent on an economic measure of productivity, although it is exposed and later incorporated into the show-business. I wish to imagine the spectators that might find themselves consuming Hannah and Arizona’s labor. Unraveling the Saumseligkeit of their self-enjoyment, I am interested in what kind of value might be produced in their performances beyond the value exploited in the form of spectacle by the amusement park barker.

Foreplay is a precarious labor of love that may stand on its own, unrewarded by attention from elsewhere; as the idle playfulness that returns and keeps transforming itself in relation to the capitalist economic system in which, over time, it flourishes. The undervalued practice that comes from a nonlinear genealogy of past and future theatre labor is a labor of love whose traces and strategies of resistance are displaced, in keeping with their very nature of dépense, but whose enduring not-yet-eventfulness denies the orgasmic destiny of disappearance.

References


