

Essential Ruptures

Herbert Blau's Power of Mind

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From the 1950s until today, some six years after his death, Herbert Blau has been regarded as one of the United States' most significant theatre intellectuals. That rare combination of theorist, educator, and artist, his career spanned more than six decades, twelve books, three performance companies, numerous distinguished academic appointments, and countless students and collaborators. As a stage director, he introduced American audiences to Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, and Jean Genet. His San Francisco Actor's Workshop production of *Waiting for Godot*, at San Quentin State Prison, launched him to widespread attention by appearing prominently in the introduction to Martin Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd*. During the 1960s, he called for a desublimated future free from state repressive violence: the marriage of socialism and surrealism. He denounced the commercial American theatre and proposed its decentralization in his influential book *The Impossible Theatre*. Later, as co-artistic director (with Jules Irving) of the Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre, he stuck his finger in the eye of New York's banker class with a production of *Danton's Death*, tailor-made to outrage his patrons. Drummed out of town, he founded innovative training programs at CalArts and Oberlin and nurtured the careers of Allan Kaprow, Nam June Paik, and María Irene Fornés, to name just three. When European poststructuralism arrived in North America during the 1970s, it entered theatre (and later performance) studies largely through Blau's intervention. It risks understatement to say that his life was one of enormous creative fecundity.

The 2018 volume, *The Very Thought of Herbert Blau*, edited by Clark Lunberry and Joseph Roach, provides an excellent introduction for readers unfamiliar with Blau's work and serves as a *Festschrift* for those already better acquainted. It features contributions from leading American scholars and theatre artists in the form of personal reflections, critical analyses, poems, correspondence, and wide-ranging dialogues, including a reprinted 1992 *PAJ* interview. Together, these inclusions shed light on a thinker whose work actively reshaped debates

in the field of contemporary performance in ways that continue to reverberate. As Elin Diamond writes in her essay on Blau, noting his vast field of interests, "Meditations on appearance, repetition, bodily texts, temporality, history, and the illusory and elusive workings of power are central to Blau's theatre theory," as are "modernism, Shakespeare, psychoanalysis, the politics of the left, [and] deconstruction." To these, I would only add two abiding meta-questions that concerned Blau persistently. The first had to do with what Blau called "the future of illusion" (borrowing a phrase from Freud), and by this he meant both the future of theatre as such and the future relationships between ideology and performance beginning to be glimpsed in theory during his own lifetime. (His 1992 book *To All Appearances* explores this link most exhaustively.) Blau's second major enduring question was less overtly political and more phenomenological in orientation, concerning the relationship between theatre and the activity of consciousness. As he put it, "To start thinking is already to be theatrical," and when thought recognizes itself as "carnal, skin-close, intestinal, pulsed," it occasions itself in performance.

Despite his tremendous body of work, it is to Blau's credit that his thinking never quite settled around any single, handy concept or portable buzzword. Rather, from his earliest writings in the 1960s on the deplorable state of the regional theatre, to his later works in which first contacts with "theory" were enacted, Blau's thought seems always to rove and writhe in a state of continual agitation, never tarrying too long with any single notion ("occlusion," for example, or "occasion," important though those terms were to him in his book *Blooded Thought*). Some found his prose as clotted as the coagulated blood that drew his theoretical attention in the introduction. But it also had moments of fine, coruscating, Brechtian wit, as when he observed, in the opening pages of *The Impossible Theatre*, that "while the theatre can't carry the whole weight of the world on its back, like any other human enterprise it ought to carry its proper share."

Trained originally as a chemical engineer before pursuing his Ph.D. in English Literature at Stanford, Blau was most urgently concerned with what he called the molecular physics of theatrical form, particularly where that physics recedes into Heisenberg's uncertainty. He is well-known for his attention to disappearance in performance as an ontological or hauntological fact, a vanishing point where mortality ghosts the live. For Blau, famously, "the one performing . . . is dying in front of your eyes." A shocking and saturnine insight, likely one inspired by years in the rehearsal studio thinking through Beckett, Artaud, and the history of tragic drama, both ancient and early modern. But even if the performer is always dying in performance, then as with the ghost of Hamlet's father, so crucial to Blau as it was to Jacques Derrida's writings on Marx, the question theatre always raises is also one of repetition: "What, has this thing appeared again

tonight?" Blau remains perhaps the only thinker our modern American theatre has produced who could endure the thought of the tragic in all its bloodedness, one whose stature in American criticism and theory is only rivaled by that of, say, a Raymond Williams or Terry Eagleton in the UK. For Blau, as for Williams, tragedy names the crises and catastrophes of history, revolutions failed, stalled, never undertaken, and endlessly deferred. Such a sensibility was forged in the historical impasse of the Cold War, with the nuclear threat of extinction ever looming, and seems only more urgent today.

But Blau also registered tragedy in another key, one attuned to language's essential emptiness, its fundamental inability to correspond to the world it purports to name. Here he is, writing on the "baroque, purple passion" of Genet's discourse in his essay "Disseminating Sodomy," in terms that just as easily describe his own perspective: "Genet has suffered the solitary confinement of a displacement so severe it causes him to *see* words, as Sartre had pointed out, as irreparably separated from what they name. It is a faculty or opposing power not picked up from theory or the history of poetry but from some engrailed and divinatory separateness in himself." When words and things contain no necessary unity, when language cannot truthfully designate what it names, this amounts to what the philosopher Mario Untersteiner once called "a tragedy of the intellect," an epistemological and metaphysical catastrophe of the highest order. Blau knew this catastrophe in his very nerve endings. And where the violent separateness of signs from things, seeming from being, is concerned, here he is again in a comment to Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta in his 1992 *PAJ* interview with the editors:

Now for me, [. . .] the great mission of theatre [is] to grant meaning to appearances, the appearances in which we commonly live, the feeling that we have about whatever constitutes reality, that we're always in the immanence of theatre, that we may be perceiving at any moment—even among the three of us now—merely the appearances of what should be transparencies. Which is to say, you ought to be what you appear to be. But at some limit of our knowledge of each other, there is always the sensation that somehow we're not seeing it, or each other, truly. Through the entire history of the canonical drama, we appear to be dealing with some essential rupture that even love can't heal, a fundamental wound that prevents us somehow from being precisely what we are, and to be perceived as what we are.

This is a characteristically Blau observation: penetrating, disturbing, and grandiose. (Who today dares venture a claim that begins with the words, "Through the entire history of the canonical drama"?) Theatre is play that mourns the

non-identity of appearances and reality, signifiers and referents, subatomic particles as they appear to the researcher and as they are “in themselves,” never fully knowable. None of Rilke’s solace was available to Blau. Rather, he followed Beckett’s disconsolate path: “You’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!” The rupture that continually unsettles the essence of things can never be healed, let alone cured, not even by love. It was an unremittingly negative position, a paradoxically generative hopelessness bespeaking the utmost modernist rigor. Back to Genet and sodomy, where Blau describes the anus in terms that depict the prophetic vision of a post-representational theatre that Genet and Blau shared: “the swarming hole, the void, the place of darkness, entry to the *not-yet*, as with the puerperal in-capacity of woman. It is the place of *imitation’s end*.” Apart from Leo Bersani, perhaps, only Herbert Blau could extract from the premises of homosexual anal pleasure a conclusion aiming at the (rear) end of mimesis. What Genet wants instead, Blau claims, is not imitation in its classical, Aristotelian sense, but “an eternal mimicry, a transumption of mimesis, *transuranic* . . .” Genet’s theatre, like Blau’s writing, is radically unstable; it decays, radioactive to its core.

Now, as I name-drop everyone from Heisenberg to Rilke to Leo Bersani, I indulge in what Blau’s Stanford mentor, the poet and critic Yvor Winters (another name-drop), called “the fallacy of imitative form.” Blau’s allusion-laden sentences and densely packed paragraphs are still something of a shock to behold on the page. For some readers, his writing seemed like pure hot air, *blau*-viating. One early reviewer wrote: “Names are dropped at a ferocious rate. At first Blau’s erudition is impressive, soon it becomes tedious. . . . All meaning becomes lost in some sort of intellectual word association game. Style takes precedence in these books. But what is the content? It is not entirely clear.” Admittedly, tracing Blau’s thinking through all its convolutions and divagations can be a laborious affair. But, as with the theatre he prized most, his own writing was often in search of a meaning that was determined to remain elusive, and what comes off as an excess of *mere style* in his prose is best regarded as a necessary effect of his restlessness in the quest. In Blau’s own description, he wrote “as if the only way to say it were to say it all at once.” If he sometimes sounded prolix, pedantic, needing to go to the very limits of a thought or say the absolutely last word, it came from a place of unstinting generosity.

Many contributors to this volume examine that aspect of Blau’s work, mining Blau’s rhetoric for its hidden meanings. Richard Schechner notes that “Blau wrote and overwrote,” comparing the length of *The Communist Manifesto* (45 pages) to that of Blau’s *Impossible Theatre* manifesto (309 pages). Words words words, indeed. Peggy Phelan describes Blau’s syntax as “mazelike,” and Bonnie Marranca calls it, in similarly spatial terms, “a field of composition.” Sue-Ellen Case sees Blau

as a modern Tiresias traversing a modernist Wasteland, littered with the fragments of fathers past: “Marx, Brecht, *Lear*, Kafka, Aristotle, Foucault, *The Orestia*, Goethe, Genet, *White Devil*, Calderón, Artaud, Cézanne, Stella, Grotowski, T.S. Eliot, and Beckett, to name only a few chained through Chapter One of Blau’s *Take Up The Bodies*.” Moments later, after she herself yokes together Shakespeare with Aretha Franklin, Artaud, and Van Gogh, she confesses: “You see, Blau’s style is contagious, or more precisely, contagion. A veritable plague, as Artaud and Camus inscribed it.” Clause by clause, comma by comma, the names of past fathers drawn from the rich history of European art and literature bind together Blau’s corpus in a veritable concatenation.

Perhaps Blau could never finish mourning the dead God of monotheism, that most final of fathers, victim (as Blau conceived it) of brain damage, modernity’s most terminal patient. By contrast, Case notes that Gertrude Stein eschewed commas and allusions alike in her writing, a more radical, future-oriented approach. The distinction is a gendered one, and though she acknowledges the strengths of both orientations, she is also at times skeptical of Blau’s “easy, self-referential brilliance.” An even more tough-minded reader would likely read Blau’s writing as having few reservations about lumping together disparate individuals, groups, movements, and ideas, where their differences should be more closely parsed. Blau was no hair-splitter, but the splitters ultimately took the field in American scholarship, and Blau remained an outsider. And anyway, scholars have since moved on from Blau’s concerns into terrains that are more diverse and technologically contemporary, just as the field has departed from the study of theatre and dramatic literature in favor of performance and performativity. In Case’s view, even the flavor of theoretical writing has altered, shifting away from the more elliptical, self-referential forms of *écriture* practiced in the 1980s toward more concrete and referential writing styles. She asks the \$64,000 question: “will the very thought of Herbert Blau continue to matter among twenty-first century readers?” before venturing that, “Blau may not be assigned in future seminars.”

True confessions ahead. Although I have been a professional student of theatre for the past fifteen years, eleven of which were spent in graduate school between 2005 and 2016, I was never once assigned a text of Blau’s as required reading for a seminar, and had not read a word of his prior to beginning research for this review. (I was also born long after Blau abandoned his directorial practice of theatre, and I have never made the pilgrimage to the Theatre on Film and Tape archives at the New York Public Library to watch recorded performances from his San Francisco days. I currently have no way of knowing for myself whether Blau’s directing work was *artistic* in any sense of the word, though this question was debated mightily in his own time.) Of course, Blau’s reputation always

preceded him. His thinking has now thoroughly entered the bloodstream of performance theory and criticism. But from this millennial's vantage point, that Blau "may not be assigned in future seminars" seems already like accomplished fact. Although the volume's contributors could, like Horatio and Marcellus, lead me to the battlements, I confronted Blau's ghost there mostly on my own, as will future students of performance theory. Indeed, he seems ripe for rediscovery by a younger generation of scholars now devoted to "performance philosophy," the "new formalism," and postdramatic theatre. All three subfields would benefit from Blau's uncanny prescience.

Several other commentators in the collection make clear Blau's central importance to defining the field. Peggy Phelan notes in a passing comment that Blau actively welcomed a generation of feminist theorists into the profession, including herself, Case, Diamond, Janelle Reinelt, and Vicki Patraha. She opines: "As Blau's writing makes clear, thinking is the performance we still need to become conscious of." And Elin Diamond's own contribution argues that Blau's practical theatre work presaged the later deconstructive insights of Derrida and Judith Butler. She quotes Blau, speaking of his Oberlin-based theatre company KRAKEN: "What appealed to me in poststructuralist thought was that it seemed to be theorizing what we were doing." With Blau, artistic practice helped pave the way for contemporary theory, for, as Diamond says, in a summary of poststructuralism, "The theatre itself tells us that nothing is irreducible or foundational. What appears to be foundational is an effect pretending to be foundational—theatre's oldest preoccupation." Theatre and performance history furnish the history of ideas with a genealogy of deconstruction, and theory is always simply playing catch-up with what performance has always known.

Alongside these theoretical reflections, *The Very Thought of Herbert Blau* also includes several brief anecdotes about Blau the person, portraying him in colorful detail and evincing his sprawling influence in the arts. Mabou Mines director Lee Breuer recalls his time as Blau's twenty-year-old assistant director for the Actor's Workshop's *King Lear*, when Blau dictated his directorial notes to Breuer each night while relieving himself at the toilet seat. The clown Bill Irwin and the poet Linda Gregorson fondly recall their experiences as young acting students in Blau's KRAKEN ensemble, and their insights seem to mirror each other. Irwin recalls a rehearsal when Blau remarked, "The question for humans has always been 'Why are we not gods?'" only for Blau then to explode in a fury, grabbing his own shirt: "I mean, I ask, 'WHY THE FUCK AM I NOT A GOD?' That's the question." In her recollections of Blau, Gregorson suggests that, "Making theatre was the way he raged against death." At the tragic essence of things, there may be some essential rupture that even love can't heal. But even so, love can still lead

us to grieve, to rage, to care for one another, to experience pleasure, and above all, to think and act together in the little time we are allotted.

Too much thinking can lead one astray of acting, of course, as both Hamlet and any novice theatre student can attest. In the studio, the question always arises as to when thinking becomes acting. (Or as Blau often asks, when actual thinking and action even begin, when they *precipitate*.) The director Julie Taymor maintains a more ambivalent memory of Blau from those Oberlin days. She found Herb's work with KRAKEN to be too cerebral, "elitist," and "insular" for her taste as a college student. In her interview with Clark Lunberry, she suggests that Blau uncritically confused the actual theatre with his own solipsistic *Theatrum Philosophicum*. This was a conflict in Blau's theoretical outlook from the very beginning, when he wrote: "The institution of theatre and the ideal form of theatre may be at war." Taymor finds there to be too much slippage between them in Blau's thought. When Lunberry mentions that Blau often felt that the brain is "the best stage of all" and that students "may engage with a play far more profoundly if they *don't go to a production*," Taymor will have none of it: "That's not theatre; that's *thinking*. That's thought; that's imagination. But it's *not* theatre!" Lunberry counters by mentioning Blau's view of the actor as dying in performance, and Taymor responds with an eye roll: "I just think, 'oh, come on already'; the actors are *living* in front of your eyes. They are living and creating. *They're not dying!*" Of course, we are, all of us, simultaneously living and dying at once, the two terms being only apparently antonyms. But regardless whether the actor is living or dying before the spectator's eyes, elsewhere in the volume, the scholar Martin Harries observes trenchantly that, "Very likely that person is doing a whole lot of other things there as well."

Several other contributions in the book are worthy of note for their philosophical vividness. Daniel Listoe puts Blau's theories of theatre and history into dialogue with Walter Benjamin, Maynard Mack, New Historicism, Louis Althusser, Derrida, and others, in order to showcase Blau's tragic view of historical action. For Listoe, Blau should be remembered alongside "the more radical implications of a rejected New Criticism that was never so simple." Likewise, the *PAJ* interview with Blau figures him as an aggressive, unrepentant formalist. Marranca calls him "a lapsed modernist," to which Blau responds: "I'm not quite sure whether lapsed or prelapsarian." In a pithy phrase, he sums up his interests as "catastrophe theory." Their dialogue threads together the materialist and messianic dimensions of his thinking in a way that seems even to surprise Blau, devoted secularist, himself. Meanwhile, *The Very Thought's* co-editor Joseph Roach meditates on "Blau's Shakespeare," weaving together *The Winter's Tale*, questions of double casting, and the intimate details of Blau's family life. Blau had described

in graphic, anatomical imagery the sight of his daughter's birth and his mother's corpse within just a few pages of each other in *The Eye of Prey*. This conjunction of birth and death becomes a thought-image for Roach, allowing him to eulogize Blau and offer him a gentle corrective. Throughout his own long career, Roach has focused on how performance functions as a form of surrogation, in which performers aim always to fill the spaces left behind by death and disappearance. "That the survivors almost always fail does not keep them from trying," Roach notes. Against Blau's more morbid outlook, Roach emphasizes a pastoral horizon of new life and regeneration.

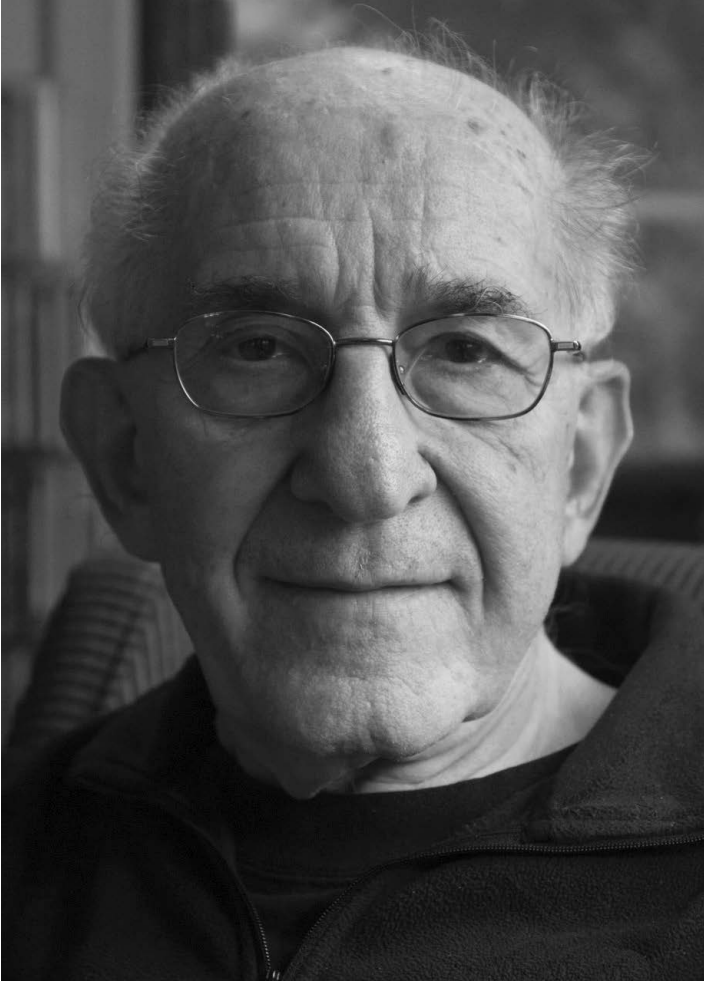
In one last inclusion, which takes the form of a theoretical playlet set within a theatre auditorium, Martin Harries and the playwright-theorist Julia Jarcho discuss Blau's vision of how the theatre addresses and divides its audience, especially when both the performer and the spectator must already be understood, as in psychoanalysis and Marxism, to be internally divided. Here again the fact of an essential separation at the root of things comes to the fore. Harries and Jarcho ultimately raise the question of what theatre's unstable "scenes of address" might mean within a broader landscape of modern media and politics. Even more recently, Harries and Jarcho have co-organized seminars on the death drive and performance as part of the American Comparative Literature Association conference, a subject they also touch in this volume. Even if Blau is no longer with us, there may be others of a younger generation already poised to surrogate the dynamic energy that survives on past his death. Jarcho is among them. Just this past season, Minor Theatre, the downtown company she helms, premiered her new play *Pathetic*, a dramatic "riff" on Racine's tragedy *Phèdre*.

Thinkers like Jarcho and Blau suggest another path for theatre in both higher education and the artworld. They put forward a vision of performance as critical research and pedagogy, combining theory and scholarship with interdisciplinary experimentation in the studio, where cutting-edge ideas can be tested as in a research laboratory. But if Blau offers theatre intellectuals the vision of a model life in the profession and an example for the future of the discipline, those will not have been his only legacies. Reckoning with Blau's specter also requires that we critics and makers of performance and art reconsider the importance of tragic thinking during times of crisis. By this, I mean tragic not only in the morbid sense of deathliness and catastrophe that obsessed Blau, but also in the sense of action and redemption. Because of course: tragedy means death in the downfall of the protagonist, but it also means the survival of the polis and the indestructible endurance of life itself, more broadly. As our planet continues to face, say, the certainty of ecological disaster in the present and decades to come, how are we, as humans, thinkers, artists, and activists worldwide, to embody

this thought? Can theatre have any part to play in saving the world, as Blau once suggested it could, hoping against hope? It seems an impossible question. But if there is to be a future at all (let alone a future for theatre and illusion, as Blau so often wondered), we may have to return to first principles.

What is there, then, in the intestinal thought of drama, with its collisions and crises, its stunning reversals, its politically laden moments of recognition, that can be useful, even necessary for our world today? The very thought of Herbert Blau serves as a roadmap back to the source, even if that origin is always a blooded, pulsing wound. What is needed now, more than ever, in art and political life, is precisely Blau's sense of risking everything for the *precipitousness of the moment*. There may be no cure for being on earth, no true healing love can provide. But even if the theatre cannot take the weight of the world on its shoulders, it still needs to learn, fifty-five years after *The Impossible Theatre*, how to imagine the impossible and carry its fair share.

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Herbert Blau, 2012. Photo: Dick Blau.