



contents

<i>Series editors' preface</i>	vii
“Theatre,” “&,” “Dance”	1
<i>Interlude: Participatory theatre does dance marathons</i>	14
Interconnected Histories	18
<i>Interlude: Verbatim theatre does bharatanatyam</i>	29
Expanding Forms	33
<i>Interlude: Dance history does Greek tragic drama</i>	45
Overlapping Methods	50
<i>Interlude: Downtown dance does musical theatre</i>	60
Conclusion	66
<i>Outrolude: European dance theatre does European vernacular dance and theatre</i>	71

<i>Annotated bibliography</i>	78
<i>Bibliography</i>	83
<i>Index</i>	89
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	92



theatre & dance

“Theatre,” “&,” “Dance”

To label something “theatre” or “dance” matters quite a bit. For professional artists, it determines which festivals or venues they are invited to present at, and therefore who comes to see their performances. For scholars, it determines how they position their research, and the academic literature they are expected to reference ultimately shapes not just the argument they make but who will read it in the future. And for performing arts students, to study one or the other determines the core skills they will develop and the rubric on which those will be evaluated.

But what does it mean to talk about “theatre” or “dance”? Do we still imagine theatre only as a performance where a group of people sit in the dark watching another person or persons recite lines onstage and pretend to be someone else? Do we still imagine dance as a mute, nonmimetic activity that sequences rehearsed movement to music in order to

call attention to the prowess of the performing body and, in so doing, something intangible yet felt? Today, there are abundant examples of how such lingering characterizations group dance and theatre in separate silos, from academic departments to professional programming.

However, to delineate these art forms using markers such as spoken text or skilled physicality or musicality immediately raises countless counterexamples. Picture a performance whose staging slips from articulated words to the sounds and spacing of the body producing them. Or another made entirely of pedestrian gestures, supported by some singing into a microphone and onstage costume changes, in an event that is less focused on the movement itself than what the movement's doing does—what it makes the audience think or feel. Both occur on stages (or not), involve text (or not), are illuminated (or not), use sonic elements (or not), are done by trained bodies (or not) that are wearing something (or not), and are performed for audience members who watch all of the pieces unfold in time and space, and somehow make their own sense of what they see.

The artificial divisions between the thing most often called “theatre” and the thing most often called “dance” in both academic and artistic spheres have overshadowed their interdependence. At the same time, the ampersand between theatre and dance is not a singular site at which the two come together. Rather, the “&”—a shape formed with both tangle and space—holds them just far enough apart to give us a chance to pose questions about the entanglements that have been pervasive and persistent between the two. Clearly there

are some times and places in which those entanglements were more energetic than others. However, the ampersand between theatre and dance has such a long history that it might in fact be more useful to consider their currently accepted separation to be the anomaly. *Theatre & Dance* thus calls attention to a past and a present in which the two are inextricably intertwined. This brief survey builds a picture of North America and Europe in which the ampersand between theatre and dance reveals their interdependence and becomes visible as the rule, rather than the exception.

In order to make the case for the fundamental yet too often overlooked interdependence of theatre and dance, I turn to history, form, and method, which guide the next three sections respectively. The first section, “Interconnected Histories,” highlights the larger ecosystems of practice of which all past performances are a part. I consider such ecosystems on multiple scales, from the person-to-person networks of artistic interaction to the longer historical trajectories in which those are situated. The second, “Expanding Forms,” explores how and why the interdependence signified by the “&” is important to the making and making sense of work that appears in contemporary theatres and festivals. To do so, the section highlights the training and devising processes through which theatre and dance forms have come to share many features, as well as the residual traces these processes leave behind. Finally, the third section, “Overlapping Methods,” focuses on crossing disciplinary boundaries in academic scholarship. It foregrounds how interdependent perspectives impel scholars

from all of the involved disciplines to add to the analytical toolkits they use to engage with past and present practices.

Between these three overview sections are five interludes in which I turn to closer readings of performances that played for small to medium-sized audiences over the past ten years. Whereas the argument throughout the primary sections has to do with the implicit entanglements between theatre and dance that are there in all performances in both forms, these interlude examples are chosen because they work very explicitly with that interdependence. Specifically, each calls up recognizable features of one form, then pulls those features into the other form, redeploying them in a kind of “genre drag” of sorts. In other words, these interlude performances involve dances that play with theatre, and theatre that plays with dance, enabling each to do their own thing better. Their play at the amper-sand highlights what each brings to the table, at the same time as it points towards the fissures and openings of the forms themselves. The interludes represent a diverse set of practices, ultimately bringing together participatory theatre, social dance, contemporary postmodern concert dance, musical theatre, physical theatre, Indian dance drama, experimental dance, classic tragedy, and European dance theatre. With each interlude, I pose a specific question to explore how thinking about dance can help to understand a particular piece of theatre better and vice versa, as well as what these interdependent practices themselves propose about “theatre,” “&,” and “dance.” These examples are thus not about reinforcing disciplinary or aesthetic separations,

but about finding and practicing new ways to support the making and study of cross-genre practice that underpins so much of contemporary performance.

But first, by way of further introduction, it's useful to think a bit more about just what it means to talk about "theatre," about "dance," and about the "&" that sits between them. I'll use the remainder of this section to set out some provocations and parameters for what follows. To do so, I work through the slipperiness of key terms, including the concepts of "embodiment" and "theatricality," and then highlight some of the cultural contexts in which discussions of the ampersand are inherently embedded.

Many readers will have come across the term "dance theatre" (or the German "Tanztheater"), often used to describe the work of choreographer–dancer Pina Bausch, among others. Yet this term is incommensurate as a catchall for the many North American and European performances that draw upon the mutual support of theatre and dance elements in different ways. Some other terms are: "total theatre," "physical theatre," "performance," "musical theatre," "opera," "dansical," "interdisciplinary performance," "revue," "Gesamtkunstwerk" or "total work of art," "devised performance," "story ballet," "cross-arts" or "interarts practice," "cabaret," "postdramatic theatre," and "mime." Once you pay attention, you may also notice that you are also accustomed to interpreting various, even fuzzier terms, such as the use of "stage dance" or "theatre dance" to distinguish dance occurring in theatres from dance that takes place in other institutional settings, such as the intimate

moves of partnered salsa in a nightclub or the ritualized walking dance of a second line parade in New Orleans. Of course all of these types of dance from various settings can be and are recontextualized—moved from the stage to the street and vice versa.

Clearly coming to precise definitions of dance, theatre, dance theatre, etc., would be quite a project, but that is not what this book seeks to do. Rather, it begins from a question about form and perspective: What do we see when we—as scholars, students, and practitioners—pay attention to the ampersand between dance and theatre practices? Pursuing this requires letting go of the belief that we can establish some timeless properties or stylistic features that distinguish the two forms. However, that doesn't mean the “&” conflates the terms that are placed on either side. Instead, it sets them in tension. Specifically, this book belongs to a series in which “theatre” occupies the left-hand side of the ampersand; *Dance & Theatre* would be a different book. The thing on the right, in this case “dance,” poses questions about the workings of the thing fixed on the left, “theatre,” questions that consider what dance has been doing all along with theatre and how.

At the same time there is the issue of what gets called what in the pages that follow, in which there are still two separate terms. On the one hand, I am arguing for the interdependence of theatre and dance; while, on the other, I do so by placing them on opposite sides of the ampersand. So why not just call them all “theatre” or “dance” or even “performance”? Although I am writing toward a future in which

the myriad tensions and entanglements between theatre and dance become even more evident and ever more tangled, discerning the vestigial markers of each is still important to getting to this point. To jump straight away to a catch-all term, such as “performance,” risks leaving latent biases intact, even while claiming to move onwards. In addition, to do so would ignore the mechanics of nomenclature, in other words what people have historically meant by these terms, and how what is absent and what is present in those meanings have manifested in performance cultures over time. Instead I call up examples of particular iterations of theatre and dance in particular situations, in order to find out what these terms and the practices to which they refer have been asked to do at given points in history, both separately and together, and how each form has helped to define and delineate the other in the process.

When trying to articulate the various questions posed by the ampersand of *Theatre & Dance* the slippery concepts of “embodiment” and “theatricality” quickly arise. Although theatre has often come to take ownership of questions concerning theatricality, and dance those about embodiment, such concerns are shared, as I elaborate in the final section on methods. Embodiment is critical to the authors of *Physical Theatres* (2007), Simon Murray and John Keefe, who separate “physical theatres” from “the physical in theatre.” The former is a term that first appeared in the UK in the late 1960s under the influence of Polish director Jerzy Grotowski’s Teatr Laboratorium—Laboratory Theatre—but has become increasingly dominant in particular since

the 1980s. (By 1999 the UK director Lloyd Newson, who used the term “physical theatre” in the 1980s as a challenge to the abstract work that era named “New Dance,” was complaining that physical theatre was “a term I’m hesitant to use because of its current overuse and abuse to describe anything that isn’t dance or traditional theatre” [1999: 109].) Murray and Keefe point out that the idea of “physical theatres” can also be understood in the context of a 2000-year history that far precedes the particular terminology: “the ‘physical’ in physical theatre is redundant excess, since all theatrical performance is embodied activity” (2007: 4).

At the same time, “embodiment” can mean a number of things and call upon a variety of practices. So how do we address the interdependence signified by the “&” without reducing it to the body as the lowest common denominator of meaning making? Failing to ask this question and look for other commonalities risks reinforcing the duality of mind and body, or making essentialist claims about the body as some more authentic form of expression than that available through language alone. But this is not about opposing the verbal and the nonverbal. Indeed as theorist Hans-Thies Lehmann—to whom I will return later—puts it: “The wordless dance may be boring and overly didactic, while the signifying word may be a dance of language gestures” ([1999] 2006: 145). And to identify dance practice only with embodiment and virtuosic physicality overlooks a long history of dance decentering the body. Picture historical experiments in which theatrical costumes, sets, and even projections were used to extend or alter

the limited properties of the human form, as in the work of Oskar Schlemmer and Alwin Nikolais. Or picture the kinetic sculptures of contemporary choreographer William Forsythe's "choreographic objects" that are designed to ask: "What else, besides the body, could physical thinking look like?" (n.d.). Likewise, one of the important things that dancers and dance theorists have done is to propose ways to attend to both the specificity of physical experience and the intellectual or imaginary world that is made possible in and through that experience. In other words, a body onstage is not an end in itself, but a gateway to the alternative ways of thinking and knowing that occur all the time with and through that body.

This is where theatricality also comes in. Many productions may be called "theatrical" by virtue of being situated in a theatre space. Then there is the often-pejorative use of the term to describe a kind of showy, over-the-top exhibitionism or heightened emotive state that is legible from way back in the "cheap seats" of such a space. However, we can also think of theatricality more specifically as a flexible concept developed by theatre-makers and scholars in order to offer a particular way of understanding the play between multiple types of reality. This reflects upon the ways in which performances come to be legible as relating the everyday to the extraordinary. Because every performance negotiates a kind of doubleness between that which is done and that which appears to be done, theatricality is a useful tool to consider the complexity of embodiment, for example how staged bodies call up social and representational meanings

on the one hand, while at the same time eliciting sensations and emotions by virtue of doing so in a lived human form, the balancing of which requires a degree of virtuosity.

Heightened theatricality and embodiment tend to mark some of the most familiar moments and ways in which we are accustomed to picturing intersections of theatre and dance. One of the most well-known manifestations is the dance theatre that comes to the fore with Pina Bausch in Germany in the 1970s through early 1980s. Her work is epitomized by the iconic images of women and men in evening attire, alternately performing gestural phrases and screaming or throwing themselves on the floor amid elaborate sets covered in leaves, or carnations, or water, or dirt. This work was radical for so many reasons at the time, including how it used the tools of theatrical spectacle to create surreal vignettes in which the performers lived out visceral experiences before an audience. It was this work that, as one eulogy for Bausch notes, inspired a subsequent generation to make work “blurring any recognizable distinction between ‘dance’ and ‘theatre’” (Manning 2010: 12). Yet, in choosing case studies for this book, I want to draw attention to what else can be seen on North American and European stages once the question of relationships between theatre and dance is no longer answered by such an elegant and yet seemingly self-evident union. Even in the case of Bausch herself, I have argued elsewhere, the canonical status of her early “vintage” period means that her later renegotiation of formal elements has not been adequately considered (Elswit 2013). This book’s turn to many other artists and

works seeks to hold space open to consider the “&” itself in a broader range of times, places, and spaces, not to mention multiple configurations of embodiment and theatricality.

At the same time, it is important to be aware of the cultural assumptions that are both on display and tested by the ampersand, because concepts such as “theatricality” are specific to particular aesthetic conventions and how they are understood to operate in the world. For example, choreographer Akram Khan describes his experience of working between the theatricality of Indian kathak dance and that of British physical theatre: while the former narrates stories through a codified system of choreographic signification that depends on the interplay of nonordinary (theatricalized) movement and gesture, the latter offered him a means to explore contemporary social issues by tapping into the ways in which repeated social gestures from everyday life may be recontextualized as stage choreography (see Mitra 2015: 42–43). Khan’s example calls attention to the scope that is inherent in working through the divisions between theatre and dance. You can’t begin to distinguish individual artistic forms without already coming from a worldview in which “art” functions as its own category of knowledge production. This separation of art as a field of practice distinct from everyday life is tied to institutional practices that only begin to take shape within eighteenth-century Europe, alongside Immanuel Kant’s separation of the aesthetic from other modes of experience. The distinction of “theatre” and “dance” as aesthetic categories—in the sense taken up by this book—thus only makes sense within

a particular Western post-Enlightenment framework that is built upon the foundational disinterestedness of art, in which something generally becomes recognizable as artistic performance once its social and ritual functions are shifted to the background.

Today the global circulation of performance means that this legacy of separation not only impacts the dominant paradigm in, for example, North America, but is present in other performance communities as well. At the same time, such histories come into conversation with other lines of thought and practice. For example, some of the more orientalist moments of European artistic modernism involved imagining non-Western performance practices in order to move beyond text-based forms of drama and dance toward physical and potentially transformative stage work. (In this category I include Antonin Artaud's fascination with Balinese theatre, E. Gordon Craig's with various Asian puppetry practices, and Bertolt Brecht's with Chinese opera, to name just a few.) It is telling that these modernists all felt the need to turn to something that they identified as outside of their world, in order to bootstrap themselves into different ways of thinking about theatre and dance. But to try to understand the physicalized theatre of Japanese *noh* versus the theatricalized movement of "classical" Indian dance forms requires seeing them in terms of not just their formal elements as most modernists did, but also their own philosophies of what performance is, how it functions, and what it can do in the world. Likewise the "total theatre" paradigm found in many African and African diasporic performance

practices tends to unite movement, speech, song, poetry, gesture, games, and improvisation, but that artistic pluralism too has longer histories. Although this book focuses on North American and European stages, it does so with a global awareness, in particular an understanding of how forms and practices circulate, and an acknowledgement that no perspective is absolute.

While I provisionally separate history, form, and method into the sections that follow, they operate in tandem, as this discussion of terminology and parameters already suggests. Histories of practices and theories are imprinted on forms in the present. Loosening presumptions about form to begin from the ampersand's perspective of interdependence enables us to consider specific past performances differently, at the same time as it expands our repertoire of contemporary aesthetics. It builds new scaffolding on which to develop not just the theories but also the practices that have at times been artificially divided by scholarly departments or by the institutional idiosyncrasies of professional performing arts programming.

The next section turns to a series of historical moments of coexistence, influence, and borrowing between theatre and dance. I propose a counter-history of the ampersand in order to ground contemporary questions about expanding genres by recalling their longer trajectory within interconnected ecosystems of practice. In the process, I elaborate a technique that I continue to use throughout this book for articulating interdependence by shifting scales of perspective: from zooming in on micro-levels of artistic interaction,



index

- academic scholarship 1, 3–4, 28, 38, 50–60, 67, 81
- adaptation 41, 46–47, 61, 62, 65
- ampersand 2–3, 4, 5–7, 8, 10–11, 13, 18–19, 23, 28, 33, 37, 42, 50–51, 56, 59, 60, 66–70, 71, 77, 78
- Antigone* (Sophocles) 46–47, 48, 49
- Antigone* cycle (Harrell) 45–50, 69
- Artaud, Antonin 12, 22
- audience 2, 10, 14–18, 19, 25, 26–27, 29, 34, 36–38, 43–44, 48–49, 57, 58, 61–62, 75–77
- Balanchine, George 21
- ballet 5, 18, 21, 24, 25–26, 37, 65, 78
- Bausch, Pina 5, 10, 27, 36, 37–38, 57, 82
- Beckett, Samuel 22
- Bessie awards 33–35, 43, 51, 66
- bharatanatyam 29–33, 80
- bluemouth inc. 14–18, 64
- bodies (*see also* embodiment) 1–2, 8–10, 12, 26–27, 37–38, 40–41, 45, 52–54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 66, 68, 73, 76, 79–80
- Bogart, Ann 40–41
- Brecht, Bertolt 12, 23, 26, 27, 36, 47, 82
- Butler, Season 70
- choreography 11, 21, 26–27, 30–32, 35, 38, 54, 64–66, 66–67
- circus 20, 21
- conceptual dance 35, 55, 81
- Cunningham, Merce 21, 23
- dancing 15–18, 32–33, 41, 46, 58, 63–64, 65, 73, 76
- Dance Marathon* 14–18, 64, 69

theatre & dance

- dance theatre 4, 5, 6, 10, 27, 54,
 57–59, 63, 66, 70, 71–77
 deskilling 38–39, 45
 devising 3, 5, 36–37, 40–42, 60,
 74, 80
 diegetic dance 32, 64–65, 70
 Dorky Park 71–77
 dramaturgy 15, 18, 19, 36–37,
 55, 70, 82
 DV8 Physical Theatre 8, 29–33,
 42, 64
 ecosystems of practice 3, 13,
 19–20, 28, 50
 Elkins, Doug 60–66, 69
 embodiment (*see also* bodies) 5,
 7–11, 26–28, 53–54, 68
 Eurhythmics 20
 form 2, 3, 4, 6–7, 11–12, 19,
 24, 26, 28, 33–44, 48–49, 54,
 58–59, 61, 67, 77
 Forsythe, William 9, 28, 57
Fräulein Maria 60–66, 69
 Fuchs, Elinor 44
 genre drag 4, 18, 29, 40, 45–46,
 50, 61, 71
 Gert, Valeska 22–23, 82
 gesamtkunstwerk 5, 26
 gesture 2, 8, 11, 13, 24, 25, 26,
 31, 38, 39, 44, 54, 58, 68, 73
 global circulation 11–13, 25,
 31–32, 33, 71, 73–75, 79–80
 Graham, Martha 47–48
 Greek theatre, ancient 24–25,
 45–47, 49, 60, 70, 80
 Grotowski, Jerzy 7, 40, 58
 habits 35, 38–39, 42, 43, 72
 Harrell, Trajal 45–50, 69
Hell on Earth 69, 71–77
 history 3, 7, 8, 13, 14–15,
 18–28, 31–32, 43–44, 45–46,
 48–49, 53, 54, 56–57, 59–60,
 67–68
 improvisation 13, 16, 23, 30,
 40–42
 Indian dance drama 4, 11, 12,
 31–32, 70
 influence 21–22, 25, 52
 interdependence 2–4, 6–7,
 8, 11–12, 13, 19, 20, 26, 40,
 50–51, 59, 67–69, 71, 77, 78
 Jooss, Kurt 27
 Judson Dance Theater 23, 36,
 38–39, 45–48
 Kant, Immanuel 11
 kathak 11
 Khan, Akram 11
 Laban, Rudolph 20, 41
 Lecoq, Jacques 20, 40
 Lehmann, Hans-Thies 8, 26, 57–59
 Lemon, Ralph 70, 82
 Living Theatre 22–23, 47
 Louis, Murray 24, 82
 Macras, Constanza 28, 69, 71–77
 Malina, Judith 22, 47
 Meyerhold, Vsevolod 20, 82

- modern dance (American and European) 20, 21, 26–27, 47–48, 56–57, 58, 61
- Monk, Meredith 23, 57
- musical theatre 4, 5, 21, 51–52, 60–66, 70, 80
- Newson, Lloyd 8, 29–33, 42, 64
- Pagneux, Monika 20
- participatory theatre 14–18, 70, 81
- pedestrian movement 2, 36, 37–39, 45, 67, 71–73, 75–77
- physical theatre 5, 7–8, 11, 29, 42, 63, 64, 70, 79
- postdramatic theatre 5, 26, 36, 57–59
- postmodern dance (*see also* Judson Dance Theater) 4, 47–48, 59, 65–66, 70
- Punchdrunk 70
- Rainer, Yvonne 38–39, 45
- realness 47–48
- rehearsal processes 30–31, 37, 40–42, 74
- Reinhardt, Max 23, 26
- remix 46, 48, 61
- Robbins, Jerome 21, 24
- Schlemmer, Oskar 9, 56–57, 82
- social dance 4, 5–6, 14–18, 25, 70, 72–73
- The Sound of Music* 61, 62, 64, 65
- Szuki, Tadashi 40–41, 58
- technique (*see also* training) 1–2, 30–31, 37–40, 42–43, 66, 75–76
- theatricality 7, 9–11, 12, 16–18, 26–28, 33, 39, 48, 53–54, 68, 69
- theory/practice 13, 22, 55–56
- To Be Straight With You* 29–33, 64, 69
- total theatre 5, 12, 24, 80
- training (*see also* technique) 1–2, 3, 20–24, 30–31, 37–42, 46, 52–53, 56, 63, 72, 75–76
- Twenty Looks* series 45–50, 69
- vaudeville 18, 21
- verbatim theatre 29–33, 74, 81
- Viewpoints 40–41
- visual arts 19, 56, 69, 80
- voguing ball scene 45–50
- Wagner, Richard 26, 27
- Wilson, Robert 23–24, 28, 39, 58, 82
- Wooster Group 23, 70
- Zaporah, Ruth 41, 82



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