

# Teaching Postdramatic Theatre

Glenn D'Cruz

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Anxieties, Aporias and Disclosures

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## PREFACE

After teaching theatre, drama and performance studies for almost 30 years, I am now, more than ever, acutely aware of the gap between the academic vocabularies I use to teach theatre practice and those my students employ to make sense of the same phenomenon. Perhaps this is a consequence of growing older and realising we no longer share common cultural referents. Then again, this generational anxiety about terminology may have more to do with a personal disposition than any general, quantifiable cultural condition. No doubt, readers of this book will form their own opinions about the extent to which my observations and arguments apply to their contexts.

I first studied theatre in the 1980s. Although my desire to become an actor inspired my interest in the field, the critical theories popular in this era seduced me. Theatre scholars commonly cited philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault and frequently drew on the discourse of postmodernism in the context of explicating experimental theatre. And, like many people of my generation, I believed that thinking about performance through adjacent disciplines enriched creative practice and generated new settings and techniques for teaching theatre. I still hold this view. However, I am sceptical about the truth claims made by all critical vocabularies, including my own. Consequently, this book often adopts the ironic tone of Richard Rorty's pragmatist philosophy, aspects of which inform its central argument. Scepticism is not the same thing as outright dismissal, so while I often express frustration with the protocols and practices that govern academic approaches to theatre, I

continue to invoke and use theoretical vocabularies and concepts in my teaching.

That said, the disparity between this work's anecdotal and scholarly registers is intentional and, to some extent, unavoidable. The book's style *performs* its argument by exposing the tensions between its different stylistic registers: the work combines anecdotal reflections with critical analyses. It is important to declare at the outset that I have lightly fictionalised the short, reflective narratives to preserve the anonymity of my students and academic peers.

The book's primary thesis is that different vocabularies perform different functions, and we need to be mindful of the limitations of academic discourse when we teach creative practice. This is not to say that serious scholarship is pointless, or that it cannot productively inform artistic practice. On the contrary, most of this book enthusiastically invokes a wide range of theoretical discourses. Moreover, I engage with Hans-Thies Lehmann's critical vocabulary, derived from his concept of postdramatic theatre, to underscore its pedagogical value as well as its limitations within the context of creating theatre with students.

Finally, this book intends to generate a series of provocative questions about the status of creative practice in academic institutions by approaching postdramatic theatre from the perspective of a pedagogue/practitioner as opposed to a scholar engaged in performance analysis. It does not suggest that analysis is anathema to creativity, or that theory necessarily impedes artistic practice. Indeed, this book frequently uses academic vocabularies to critique dramatic writing and performances. I hope my scepticism towards critical and institutional orthodoxy will resonate with teachers, students and perhaps even professional practitioners.

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