

FROM HERE TO MODERNITY: MONTAGE, MEDIA,
AND THE COMPOSITION OF THEATER

A Prospectus

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Richard W. Mitchell

Spring 1999

FROM HERE TO MODERNITY: MONTAGE, MEDIA,
AND THE COMPOSITION OF THEATER

Richard W. Mitchell

Approved:

Darrell Bourque
Professor of English

Joseph D. Andriano
Associate Professor of English

Luis Alberto Urrea
Assistant Professor of English

Lewis R. Pyenson, Dean
Graduate School

Prospectus

The proposed dissertation, "From Here to Modernity: Montage, Media, and the Composition of Theater," will include two plays, as well as a critical/theoretical introduction. The critical/theoretical introduction of the dissertation, "Theory," will be comprised of three sections. The first section, "Composing Theater/Performing Modernity," will formulate possible approaches for an oppositional theatrical and artistic practice engaged (in both form and content) with elements of (post) modernity. Additionally, this section will examine these approaches within the context of my own theatrical practice. The next two sections will discuss the aesthetics and performative elements of the two plays, *Potlatch* and *The Composition of Herman Melville* (Part I), both of which I directed (in earlier versions) in workshop productions. Following these sections will be a works cited page which will include all research materials that informed the first part of the dissertation and the plays.

The first section of the dissertation will begin by explaining the unique properties of performance. Unlike electronic media, performance cannot be paused, rewound, fastforwarded, or preserved on magnetic tape. While many view this as a drawback, performance's ability to resist reification is actually its greatest attribute, particularly within a world where life's most momentous events often seem to exist as much (or more) for the "Kodak moment" as they do for themselves. Yet it remains difficult, if not impossible, for the theater artist to combat the non-stop barrage of everyday imagery. As Jean Baudrillard argues, images, representations, are now as real as "reality" itself; indeed, they have become "reality," which, according to

Baudrillard, is merely a series of free-floating "simulations" lacking any sort of referents.

Antonin Artaud, however, believes that the performing body has the potential to break up such "simulations," as well as the ossification of everyday life, through a primal, "primitive" theater which viscerally affects the spectator. The essay will examine the problems of presenting theater (itself a simulation) within a world of simulations, and the possibilities offered by Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty" to create a type of theater that goes beyond simulation.

While ideas from both Baudrillard and Artaud have informed my theatrical practice, the theorists who have exerted the most influence upon my work are Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin. Thus, the essay will explain some of Brecht's theatrical innovations—such as the alienation effect and his development of a non-Aristotelian "epic" theater—and examine Walter Benjamin's belief that an oppositional artistic practice must utilize what he calls the "image sphere" in order to create an effective aesthetic within a world dominated by images. The essay will also discuss how Brecht, Benjamin, Artaud, and Baudrillard have affected my own theater work.

The next section will focus on *Potlatch*. In addition to drawing connections between the play and some of the ideas of the aforementioned theorists, this section will explain my approach to developing and directing the play. It will describe, for example, the production's "environmental" staging which enabled the performance to take place in front of, behind, and through the audience, with—at times—three different scenes taking place simultaneously. This section will also examine *Potlatch*'s use of "primitive" ritual, as well as the play's subversion of Western society's firm beliefs in such concepts as the linear, evolutionary progression of history, capitalist exchange, and the "centered" subject.

The discussion of *Potlatch* will be followed by an examination of *The Composition of*

Herman Melville (Part I). This section will discuss the play's utilization of quotations from various texts, its self-reflexiveness, and its lack of linear plot. It will also discuss how the work's hybridic form—encompassing biography; nineteenth century history; fragments from novels, poems, journals, letters, and essays; actors; large-scale video imagery; and music—enables the performance text to examine conflicts inherent in Melville's art, his life, and society while embodying the fragmentation and alienation that have become central tenets of (post)modernity. Additionally, this section will examine the play's coextensive use of live performers and large-scale video imagery, both pre-recorded and "live." Citing specific examples from the play, as well as ideas from Benjamin, Artaud, Brecht, and Eisenstein (particularly his notion of dialectical montage), this section will attempt to explain how the juxtaposition of electronic imagery with live bodies can complicate the spectator's experience with both the electronic media and performance by drawing attention to both mediums in new, perhaps startling, ways.

This section will conclude with a discussion of how the performance texts created during productions of both *Potlatch* and *The Composition of Herman Melville* (Part I) resemble what Elinor Fuchs calls "performance theater." That is, although the production of each play shared an affinity with conventional theater in its creation of an imaginative world through acting, lighting, costuming and sets, and sound, it also contained elements of performance art in its "continuous awareness of itself as performance, and in its unavailability for re-presentation" (Fuchs 79-80). In addition to examining the "performance theater" aspects of each production, this section will also emphasize the importance of studying drama from a performative perspective.

The two final sections of the dissertation will consist of the plays. The first play, *Potlatch*, examines the somewhat surreal connections between indigenous culture(s) and Indian reservation casino gambling, a phenomenon that has spread throughout the United States. The play moves

back and forth in time, from a village on the Northwest Coast in 1836 to an Indian reservation casino in the year 2000, while juxtaposing contemporary and indigenous world views. At the heart of the play are the conflicts generated by radically different forms of exchange. A "primitive" form of indigenous exchange, the potlatch (which emphasizes community while frowning upon the accumulation of private property), is juxtaposed with Western forms of exchange: trading between colonialists and indigenous peoples, and Indian reservation casino gambling. *Potlatch*, which includes adaptations of indigenous rituals and a glimpse into the behind-the-scenes machinations of the cut-throat casino industry, is based, in part, on Kwakiutl ritual and storytelling, theoretical and descriptive monographs on the potlatch, and on books and articles emphasizing the more negative aspects of the casino gambling industry in the United States.

The final play, *The Composition of Herman Melville* (Part I), utilizes (as indicated above) both live actors and video imagery while focusing on Melville, his writing, and his conflicts with his wife Lizzie and son Malcolm, who committed suicide while still a teenager. Through Melville's life and work, the play also examines the implications of the profound social and technological changes taking place in mid-nineteenth century America while suggesting parallels between the past and the present. Additionally, the play's foregrounding of its textuality—i.e., of Melville's writing, of characters reading, paper floating down from above, close-ups of Melville's wife copying his unwieldy tomes, video images mirroring the "live" images of actors—helps to create a self-reflective theatrical experience which brings attention to composition, not only of the play and of "Melville," but also of the world, which—as Brecht constantly stressed—is always in process. And the juxtaposition of live actors with video imagery—which often includes not only actors on closed-circuit TV, but also pre-recorded contemporary

images—attempts to make connections between past and present while historicizing and problematizing contemporary experience within the "image sphere."

This dissertation will conclude with a Works Cited section listing the many texts that informed the writing of "Composing Theater/Performing Modernity," *Potlatch*, and *The Composition of Herman Melville* (Part I).

[The selected bibliography is omitted here to conserve space.]