Agitated States: Performance in the American Theater of Cruelty
Anthony Kubiak
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Ann Arbor

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For Susan
Acknowledgments

Although it has been a long stretch between books, it has never been idle time: ten years, in fact, is barely adequate to assess “what went wrong” in some of the theoretical thought of the 1980s and 1990s. This book is a small attempt to realign performance studies, to reinvigorate the reading and performance of dramatic texts, and to question what became the truisms of political and cultural analysis in those decades. No one has been more valuable to me in this long process than Jon Erickson, whose supple mind, incisive analyses, and friendship lie behind every passage of this book. Our discussions and debates over the past decade have influenced my thinking in ways too numerous to cite.

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Although deeply and profoundly theatricalized, American culture has never understood its performative nature because, in its tendencies to the materialist, the pragmatic, and the anti-intellectual, it has refused or failed to think through the ontologies of performance. Even today, the preponderant voices in theater and performance theory are of a constructivist, cultural materialist bent, positions that tend to critique theater and performance as document or event or cultural formation from a position seemingly outside the theatrical, or, conversely, through the idea of the performative as a controlling metaphor. The approach of most contemporary performance theory is, as a consequence, ideologically (but not necessarily politically) driven. The major weakness of such ideologically driven positions, as Herbert Blau contends, is their failure to take into adequate consideration the theatricality of their own theoretical apparatus.

The basic problem raised by the various manifestations of the theatrical in America, I suggest, seems less the result of skewed ideology in need of correction, or the naming of particular historical conditions, than a confusion and uncertainty about the more abstract aspects of memory, history, and identity. What is needed, in the case of American cultural history, is a recognition of the depth of the theatrical in our history—and not, in the parlance of much critical theory today, merely performance or the performative—in the formulation of identity, and identity’s lack. I am suggesting an embracing, a recognition, a deploying of theater itself as the space within which we can begin to see the profound depths of the theatricality and performativity of American culture: theater as theatricality’s cure. Here, then, theater is not the pathology. Rather, the pathology is a refusal to recognize the necessary infection of the social—including the theory that attempts to appre-
hend it—by the duplicities of the theatrical: that any manifestation of the social (including critical theory) is at once theatrical.

But this is not to claim a too rationalist position for the drama. This space of theatrical reflection is not only a space of thought or recognition, but also of emotion (which we now know to be essential to rational thought), and so a space of intensity, brutality, and beauty. Within it we might take the measure of the human, her history and ontopolitics, certainly, but also her fragility, her power, her hopelessness, her damnation, her redemption, concealed as merest possibility. This theater, then, is no mere Brechtian space of distancing, nor is it merely a vehicle for the “return to humanism”: the irony is always that within this space of reflection, thought becomes embodied, and in so becoming, becomes strangely secret and hidden. But in a theatricalized culture that has no viable theater—American culture—this hiddenness of thought, like theater itself, is foreclosed, is refused entry into cultural consciousness, and so returns in the hallucinatory remains of enormity—slaughters, genocides, racisms, Civil Wars, and now, children assassinating children en masse.