

## chapter one



# Introduction

## Feeling the Potential of Elsewhere

Since the early nineteenth century, “utopia” has become a polemical political concept that everyone uses against everyone else.

—JÜRGEN HABERMAS, *Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics*

The consideration of the power inherent in performance to transform social structures opens the way to a range of additional considerations concerning the role of the performer in society. Perhaps there is a key here to the persistently documented tendency for performers to be both admired and feared—admired for their artistic skill and power and for the enhancement of experience they provide, feared because of the potential they represent for subverting and transforming the status quo. Here too may lie a reason for the equally persistent association between performers and marginality or deviance, for in the special emergent quality of performance the capacity for change may be highlighted and made manifest to the community.

—RICHARD BAUMAN, *Verbal Arts on Performance*

Artaud believed that the function of theatre was to teach us that “the sky can still fall on our heads.” We’ve known for some time that this vision of theatre is impossible, Utopian, possibly even hysterical (Artaud as Chicken Little). But the Slapstick Tragedy that opened on September 11th was also a Theatre of Cruelty and might warrant some utopian explorations. The sky has fallen on our heads, and what we are seeing . . . threatens to blind us. At a time when every cultural practice is reassessing itself and its role, perhaps we will re-entertain Artaud’s mad vision of theatre as a place to

encounter the unknown and the unimaginable, a place that teaches the necessary humility of not knowing.

—UNA CHAUDHURI, “A Forum on Theatre and Tragedy in the Wake of September 11th, 2001”

All true feeling is in reality untranslatable. To express it is to betray it. . . . This is why true beauty never strikes us directly. The setting sun is beautiful because of all it makes us lose.

—ANTONIN ARTAUD, *The Theatre and Its Double*

*Utopia in Performance* argues that live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world. *Utopia in Performance* tries to find, at the theater, a way to reinvest our energies in a different future, one full of hope and reanimated by a new, more radical humanism. This book investigates the potential of different kinds of performance to inspire moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential.

I take my performance examples from a variety of contemporary performance genres and locations: feminist autobiographical solo performance by Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, and Deb Margolin; “monopolylogues” by Lily Tomlin, Danny Hoch, and Anna Deavere Smith, in which a single performer enacts a number of different characters, knit together in various narratives of experience; *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* and *The Laramie Project*, which address audiences as citizens of the world and model political critique and engagement; and choreographer Ann Carlson’s solo performance *Blanket*, Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses*, and Deborah Warner and Fiona Shaw’s *Medea*, the dark beauty and poignancy of which lead to what I see as moments of utopia in performance. The aesthetics of these performances lead to both affective and effective feelings and expressions of hope and love not just for a partner, as the domestic scripts of realism so often emphasize, but for other people, for a more abstracted notion of “community,” or for an even more intangible idea of “humankind.” From the particular slant offered by theater and performance as practices of social life, this book addresses the cynicism of progressive commentators who believe the Left, especially, has given up on the possibility of a politics of transformation. Leftist academic pundit Russell Jacoby, for example, suggests, “Today, socialists and leftists

do not dream of a future qualitatively different from the present. To put it differently, radicalism no longer believes in itself.”<sup>1</sup> *Utopia in Performance* answers this claim with my own set of beliefs in the possibility of a better future, one that can be captured and claimed in performance.

*Utopia in Performance*, of course, is written in what has become the long moment after September 11, one in which progressive citizens of the United States have plenty about which to be cynical. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the crash of the third plane-turned-missile in a Pennsylvania field left the country frightened, insecure about our ability to protect ourselves, too scared, some might suggest, to dream of brighter futures. Worse, the attacks that day prompted an already conservative administration to use its power to curtail civil liberties, tacitly condoning racial profiling, wiretaps, and warrantless searches and seizures to weed out potential terrorists who tragically escaped federal notice before September 11. And as Michael Moore suggests in his trenchant documentary, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the Bush administration uses the calculated politics of fear to keep the citizenry passive, raising and lowering at random the Office of Homeland Security’s threat level based on vague “chatter” on already unreliable spy networks.<sup>2</sup> In this climate, and under the dictates of the so-called U.S. Patriot Act, new definitions of citizenship insist on an uncritical acceptance of diminished privacy and nationalist racism; on blind flag-waving that supports fascist acts that supposedly secure the homeland; and a virulent, war-mongering enforcement of xenophobic definitions of “America.” How can we hope for a better future in such an environment? What can hope mean, in a world of terror? What can performance *do*, politically, against these overwhelming odds?

For me, performance and politics have always been intertwined. At the theater, I first learned to articulate and sometimes to see realized my own hopes for some otherwise intangible future. I grew up on the tail end of the baby boom in a middle-class neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in which our community’s hopes were focused on upward mobility of a social, pecuniary sort. The Jewish traditions into which I was inculcated were conservative from a religious perspective, but culturally liberal, expressing a more inclusive commitment to caring for “all humankind.” Endowed with a post-Holocaust caution about the status of American Jewry, we nonetheless believed in a world of potential, if not for a brighter future, at least for one in which the traumas of the past wouldn’t repeat. Somehow, as I grew up, I incorporated the rhetoric of 1960s social radicalism into my own cosmology, devising a critique of the racism that sur-

rounded me and soon developing an awareness of gender and sexuality that was later articulated by feminist and queer theory and practice.

As Jews, my family suffered implicit discrimination in late 1950s and 1960s America, but we insulated ourselves from its excess by living in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods, belonging to the local temple and the Jewish Community Center, and otherwise trading in mostly Jewish businesses and culture. Because of these choices, the discrimination I saw was against the few Christians among us at school, or against the still fewer people of color in our neighborhood, until I started high school and the majorities and minorities reshuffled. Early on, though, my sense of compassion and indignity was aroused on behalf of those *we* considered the others, the marginal—never for ourselves.

In high school, my friends and I were integrated into a much more diverse world, one in which I found my own generous politics tried by my own sense of exclusion. My commitment to theater began at the same time, which is perhaps why I've always connected performance and the possibility for something better in the world. Leaving the ghetto of my erstwhile Jewish world, I traveled downtown to perform at the Pittsburgh Playhouse, taking acting lessons and mounting productions with people who never mixed with Jews. As a "Dolan," I passed as a non-Jew in those circumstances; I was young, thirteen years old when I started acting, but I could sense right away that suddenly, my identity made me vulnerable, rather than protecting me. My Jewishness remained invisible as I learned, turning my cheek to casual anti-Semitism, watching how this larger world worked, and losing myself in the fictions and fantasies and the displaced tragedies of drama. In theater, I learned to both disguise myself and revel in my visibility under the mask of character, performing ebullient turns of phrase and dress as Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals* and fierce, sex-denying poses for *Lysistrata*, before I really even understood what a sex strike might entail, knowing that the play's antiwar message was its most important point. In theater, I found ways to both free and constrain myself, to say who I was and to hide myself carefully. I watched, falling in love with my fellow women performers and surrendering to the seductions of performance. Whatever I would become in my life, I knew I would always be anchored here, in the ephemeral maybes of this magic place.

Although I've long since stopped performing, and more recently stopped directing theater productions, I've never given up my stance as a passionate spectator of performance. Performance continues to entice me with magic, to give me hope for our collective future. The performances I

discuss in *Utopia in Performance* are ones that moved or captivated me, that I've seen performed live in all kinds of venues across the country, since I hope that utopia can be grasped in performance in any location. My intent is not to provide a recipe or even a road map; creating or finding utopia in performance is of necessity idiosyncratic, spontaneous, and unpredictable. I know there are playwrights and performers whose work I'll travel long distances to see, but even so, I can't assure myself that any given experience at the theater will bring me one of those exquisite moments in which I feel charged, challenged, and reassured. My spectatorial anticipation often comes up empty, my horizon of expectations frequently disappointed. But every ticket I buy contains a certain promise. I agree with Marvin Carlson, a preeminent theater historian, who writes about his own theatergoing in a lovely, autobiographical moment of scholarship:

I also have now and then experienced moments of such intensity that they might be called epiphanies. It seems to me that theatre is perhaps particularly well suited as an art to generate such moments because it constantly oscillates between the fleeting present and the stillness of infinity. . . . Such moments of apotheosis are not everyday occurrences, of course. . . . Such moments will be different for every theatergoer, but I feel certain that we all have them, and treasure them. In an art that lives by, and survives largely in, the memory, such experiences have served me as touchstones, as permanent reminders of what I have been seeking in a lifetime of theatergoing.<sup>3</sup>

Such moments return me, too, to performance, lured by the possibility that in its insistent presence (and *present*), my fellow spectators and I might connect more fully with the complexities of our past and the possibility of a better future.<sup>4</sup>

*Utopia in Performance* defines and charts what I call *utopian performatives*.<sup>5</sup> Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. As a performative, performance itself becomes a “doing” in linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin’s sense of the term, something that in its enunciation *acts*—that is, performs an action as tangible and effective as saying “I do”

in a wedding ceremony.<sup>6</sup> Utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better. As feminist performance theorist Elin Diamond so evocatively suggests,

[A]s soon as performativity comes to rest on a performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects, all become discussable. . . . When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone's body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique.<sup>7</sup>

Theater and performance offer a place to scrutinize public meanings, but also to embody and, even if through fantasy, enact the affective possibilities of "doings" that gesture toward a much better world or, as director Joseph Chaikin, the famous founder of the Open Theater, once said, "a dynamic expression of the intense life."<sup>8</sup> By offering such concentrated, interpersonal, and "wish"-oriented moments, theater

becomes a privileged, intimate area of human experience within which one can demand that the promise of another dimension of existence be revealed, and that the impossible be achieved/experienced here and now, in the presence of other living human beings—the *impossible*, namely a sense of unity between what is usually divided in our daily life: the material and immaterial, the human body and spirit, our mortality and our propensity for perfection, for infinity, for the absolute.<sup>9</sup>

The performatives under consideration in this book allow fleeting contact with a utopia not stabilized by its own finished perfection, not coercive in its contained, self-reliant, self-determined system, but a utopia always in process, always only partially grasped, as it disappears before us around the corners of narrative and social experience. As feminist theorist Angelika Bammer suggests, we "need to reconceptualize the utopian in historical, *this*-worldly terms, as a process that involves human agency."<sup>10</sup> She continues, "[I]t is often the partial vision, rather than the supposedly comprehensive one, that is most able to see clearly. In the sense that the gaze that encompasses less is often able to grasp more, the partial vision is the more utopian."<sup>11</sup> "My goal," she says,

is to replace the idea of “a utopia” as something fixed, a form to be fleshed out, with the idea of “the utopian” as an *approach toward*, a movement beyond set limits into the realm of the not-yet-set. At the same time, I want to counter the notion of the utopian as unreal with the proposition that the utopian is powerfully real in the sense that hope and desire (and even fantasies) are real, never “merely” fantasy. It is a force that moves and shapes history.<sup>12</sup>

This sense of partiality and process informs the utopian performative, in which the various embodied, visual, and affective languages of the stage “approach toward” that which, as Bammer suggests, is “not-yet-set” but can be felt as desire, or as concrete fantasy, in the space of performance. Engaging the spectator in “a critical consideration of utopian enterprise, rather than simply aiming to secure his or her passive assent” makes the utopian performative nearly Brechtian in its gestic insistence.<sup>13</sup> In other words, utopian performatives are relatives of the famed German director and theorist Bertolt Brecht’s notion of *gestus*, actions in performance that crystallize social relations and offer them to spectators for critical contemplation. In some ways, utopian performatives are the received moment of *gestus*, when those well-delineated, moving pictures of social relations become not only intellectually clear but felt and lived by spectators as well as actors.<sup>14</sup> Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this “now” of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we’re seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later. The affective and ideological “doings” we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm. These moments, then, are cousins to the ideas of Brazilian radical performance theorist Augusto Boal as well as to Brecht, in that they provoke affective rehearsals for revolution.<sup>15</sup>

My investigation into utopia in performance, then, resists the effort to find representations of a better world; the word *utopia* means, literally, “no place,” and this book respects the letter of its sense by refusing to pin it down to prescription. I agree with Marxist philosophers Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse, both of whom I reference in these pages, who “see art as an arena in which an alternative world can be expressed—not in a didactic, descriptive way as in traditional ‘utopian’ literature, but through the communication of an alternative experience.”<sup>16</sup> Any fixed, static image or structure would be much too finite and exclusionary for the soaring sense

of hope, possibility, and desire that imbues utopian performatives.<sup>17</sup> Utopian performatives exceed the content of a play or performance; spectators might draw a utopian performative from even the most dystopian theatrical universe.<sup>18</sup> Utopian performatives spring from a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which take shape in moments of utopia as doings, as process, as never finished gestures toward a potentially better future.

Arts critic John Rockwell, writing about Anne Bogart's production *bobrauschenbergamerica*, says, "Mesmerizing moments are what those of us addicted to performance live for. Suddenly and unexpectedly we are lifted from our normal detached contemplation into another place, where time stops and our breath catches and we can hardly believe that those responsible for this pleasure can sustain it another second."<sup>19</sup> He describes an experience of utopian performativity. Such moments make spectators ache with desire to capture, somehow, the stunning, nearly prearticulate insights they illuminate, if only to let them fill us for a second longer with a flash of something tinged with sadness but akin to joy. Bloch calls them instances of "anticipatory illumination," which "evade our efforts to apprehend them directly."<sup>20</sup> That evasion prompts the sadness in our joy. At the base of the utopian performative's constitution is the inevitability of its disappearance; its efficacy is premised on its evanescence. Performance's poignant ephemerality grounds all our experiences at the theater.<sup>21</sup> The utopian performative's fleetingness leaves us melancholy yet cheered, because for however brief a moment, we felt something of what redemption might be like, of what humanism could really mean, of how powerful might be a world in which our commonalities would hail us over our differences.

### Spectatorship and Criticism

Given theater's ontological status, or its way of being, poised as it is between appearance and disappearance, and given the utopian performative's inherent ephemerality, this book poses several questions to the experience of writing about live performance. For example, how do we write about our own spectatorship in nuanced ways that capture the complicated emotions that the best theater experiences solicit? How do we place our own corporeal bodies in the service of those ineffable moments of insight, understanding, and love that utopian performatives usher into

our hearts and minds? How do we theorize such moments, subjecting them to the rigor of our sharpest analysis while preserving the pleasure, the affective gifts that these moments share? Performance theorist and critic Ann Daly, writing on dance, says,

Unlocking the dance is tantamount to unlocking myself. . . . Can I fine-tune myself to a new expressive frequency? Can I bring to this dance what it needs in order to be seen? . . . Criticism . . . is about sorting out the morass of perception into something orderly and interesting. It's about discerning relationships and making meaning. . . . [C]riticism takes a deferential position. . . . Criticism is the practice of appearing to disappear.<sup>22</sup>

Scholars, historians, and other thoughtful cultural critics face the continuing problem of how to capture and archive spectators' responses to performance. We rely on reviewers and their idiosyncratic reports of what they see not only to reconstruct the content and form of a given performance, but also to gain at least a glimmer of how it might have made the audience (and the performers, by virtue of their motivating presence) *feel*.<sup>23</sup> We write best about those performances we've been privileged to see. But part of the challenge of writing about performance as a public practice, one that circulates extensively and has some social impact, is to make it live well beyond itself, to hold it visually in memory, to evoke it with words, and to share it widely, so that its effects and potential might be known. Daly says, "Criticism is a gesture that carries the dance beyond its curtain time, extending it to readers near and far, present and future. Criticism transfigures dance into a much larger, discursive existence."<sup>24</sup> How can we capture, in our discourse, not just the outlines of a performance's structure and form, its content and the contours of its narrative, but the ineffable emotion it provokes in its moment of presence? How can we evoke, in writing, how its presence grounds us in a present, a moment of life at the theater, that seems somehow imbued with our past and our future, at once? How can I summon for you here my own experience of the simultaneity of time that infuses my argument, and that I feel during my richest, most memorable visits to the theater, many of which I want to conjure for you in these pages?<sup>25</sup>

During his tenure as the editor of *Theatre Journal*, the preeminent academic journal in theater and performance studies, David Román inaugurated a column in which various scholars write about their spectating

experiences.<sup>26</sup> This recurring essay encourages theater and performance scholars to think about how we consume and experience performance and to inscribe the specific, material details of our theatergoing—with whom we went, how it made us feel, and what a performance made us think—into our memorializing analysis. These notations will leave behind a consciously marked trail of how performances felt in very local, historicized moments in time. *Utopia in Performance* is my own archive of spectatorship, documenting my own pleasures and desires, my hope and yearning, my experiences of intersubjectivity in rich exchange with flickering moments of theatrical performance.

### Audiences as Participatory Publics

Documenting audience affect at performance requires a shift in focus, away from the notion of the singular spectator interpolated by representation, a trope my own work in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* and in *Presence and Desire* has engaged repeatedly.<sup>27</sup> *Utopia in Performance* instead examines the audience as a group of people who have elected to spend an evening or an afternoon not only with a set of performers enacting a certain narrative arc or aesthetic trajectory, but with a group of other people, sometimes familiar, sometimes strange. I see, in this social choice, potential for intersubjectivity not only between performer and spectators but among the audience, as well.

Audiences form temporary communities, sites of public discourse that, along with the intense experiences of utopian performatives, can model new investments in and interactions with variously constituted public spheres. Feminist political theorist Nancy Fraser notes that according to the influential German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, “the idea of a public sphere is that of a body of ‘private persons’ assembled to discuss matters of ‘public concern’ or ‘common interest.’”<sup>28</sup> Fraser goes on to suggest that public spheres are best considered multiple, since like community, or utopia, or other concepts at risk of totalitarian idealism, there can’t be “one” public sphere in which all are included. Additional publics, then, aren’t a distraction or fragmentation, but are a healthy sign of access and honesty. “Arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics,” Fraser argues, “better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public.”<sup>29</sup> “[T]o interact discursively as a member of a public, subaltern [meaning

marginal or disempowered] or otherwise,” she continues, “is to aspire to disseminate one’s discourse to ever widening arenas.”<sup>30</sup>

Considering theater audiences as such participatory publics might also expand how the *communitas* they experience through utopian performatives might become a model for other social interactions. *Communitas*, a term popularized in performance studies scholarship by anthropologist Victor Turner, describes the moments in a theater event or a ritual in which audiences or participants feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way; spectators’ individuality becomes finely attuned to those around them, and a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group bathes the audience.<sup>31</sup> Attending performance, disparate people constitute these temporary publics; such spectatorship might encourage them to be active in other public spheres, to participate in civic conversations that performance perhaps begins. If, as Fraser theorizes, “public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion [but are also] arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities,” then audiences at performance can be seen to be actively forming themselves as participating citizens of a perhaps more radical democracy.<sup>32</sup>

I saw a production at the Pittsburgh Public Theater that offers an example of how theater spectatorship can actively promote a sense of civic participation and emotional belonging. *The Chief* is a one-man show focused on Art Rooney, who owned the Steelers football team and stuck with them and the city that loved them through the team’s derision and adulation for more than forty years and, in the process, became himself a much beloved fixture in the city.<sup>33</sup> The short production chose a folksy conceit to allow Tom Atkins, the virtuosic actor who played Rooney, to indulge in stories, and to reminisce directly with the audience: Rooney is due at a Knights of Columbus dinner, at which he’s getting an award; his wife calls him to say he has some time before they need to leave. Rooney takes the occasion to “talk to some folks here”; he moves quickly into direct address and begins telling the audience stories about growing up in Pittsburgh; about boxing and gambling (for which Rooney was notorious); and mostly, about the historical exploits of the Steelers, which he relates in detail with a benign, patriarchal warmth and pride.

My family, with whom I attended *The Chief*, boasts a tradition of Steelers fandom nearly as long as Rooney’s. My great-uncle Joe Tucker was an announcer for the team, and my grandfather, parents, aunts, and uncles are longtime season ticket holders.<sup>34</sup> Although I’m the only one in my family who’s never been to a Steelers game, even I was caught up in the man-

ufacture of *communitas* that the actor's impersonation of Rooney's stories produced. Clearly, the audience understood the play's references, not only to growing up in Pittsburgh, and to local neighborhoods, stores, and events, but to the "immaculate reception" and other highlights of the Steelers' years on the field, all of which were absolutely opaque to me. Clearly, from their attentiveness, their laughter of recognition, and the energy of their presence, they were persuaded by Atkins's full and affectionate portrait of Rooney and moved by the telling of a history in which many of them, as Steelers fans, played however small a part. By the time the show ended, the audience was on its feet, applauding, teary-eyed, and honoring the memories that had been so fully and lovingly wrought before them. After the curtain call, spectators approached the small thrust stage like anthropologists shopping for museum artifacts, looking closely at the detailed memorabilia decorating the set, touching (until hurried away by ushers) the photographs and objects that called up such nostalgia, such team spirit, such civic pride.

That evening was the first time I understood, affectively and intellectually, what it meant to root for the team. After a lifetime of perplexity (and sometimes, horror) at the vehemence of my family's fandom, I finally understood, because the expression of that powerful, moving commitment took place in a theater instead of a stadium. The production translated into terms through which I could relate that heightened sense of community, of belonging, of desire, of utopia that *communitas* at a football game or at the theater summons. In those ninety minutes in the O'Reilly Theater, the present housed a precious, explicitly local past, and beckoned toward a future full of hope for the athletic performance of a team and for a community that wants so much to rally around the players who somehow represent them all.

The play was a valentine for the team and the city, a powerful statement of pride in collective memory and wistful longing for a time in the team's history that seemed more local, less corporate, and more "real." *The Chief* made the theater audience a microcosm of the civic audience, relaying the conventions of *communitas* from the football field to performance and in the process creating a moving night at the theater that borrowed the emotional rituals of football. In other words, people cheered for the play as they do for the team; they "got it" by productively crossing modes of spectatorship. Suddenly, the theater *was* the city. The play hailed spectator-citizens and affirmed their belief in their team, their city, and their history. The present evoked the past and made the audience hopeful for the future.

## Time and Utopia

The simultaneity of time brings force and effect to utopian performatives. Artist Ann Carlson, whose solo performance *Blanket I* I discuss in chapter 6, as a motto for her work quotes Einstein's theory that all time exists in the present. This sense of monumentalism allows Carlson to capture, often on her own body, the flow of the past through the present into the future. By layering a representatively elderly body over a soundscape of much younger experience, and plotting a movement trajectory that appears rather elliptically to lead toward death, Carlson's performance in *Blanket* inspires utopian performatives that reassure us of the profundity of a confusion of temporal domains.<sup>35</sup> Such simultaneity characterizes more progressive arguments for utopia; the Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson, for example, suggests that utopian discourse can best be grasped as a "neutralization" of that which is, now.<sup>36</sup> Jameson believes that "[t]he force of the utopian text . . . is not to bring into focus the future that is coming to be, but rather to make us conscious precisely of the horizons or outer limits of what can be thought and imagined in our present."<sup>37</sup>

Thinking of utopia as processual, as an index to the possible, to the "what if," rather than a more restrictive, finite image of the "what should be," allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that's always, itself, in process. Such a view of utopia prevents it from settling into proscription, into the kind of fascism that inevitably attends a fully drawn idea of a better world. Angelika Bammer says that the difficulty faced by movements that work toward social change is "sustaining the very principle on which [they are] predicated, namely the idea of the future *as possibility* rather than as preset goal. The difficulty, in other words, is to sustain the concept of utopia as process."<sup>38</sup>

Performance's simultaneity, its present-tenseness, uniquely suits it to probing the possibilities of utopia as a hopeful process that continually writes a different, better future. While many commentators typically conceive of utopia as a space (and, as feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes, "usually an enclosed and commonly isolated space"),<sup>39</sup> performance allows us to see utopia as a process of spending time. Performance's temporality excites audiences with a slight disorientation; its spatiality often anchors it to an imagined place, a "what if" of matter and expression. But performance always exceeds its space and its image, since it lives only in its doing, which is imagining, in the good no-place that is theater. The

utopic, Grosz writes, is “out of time”;<sup>40</sup> performance, too, rests lightly in its own moment, referring to all of time in the images of its spectacle, in the projection of its presence, in its gesture of hope toward the wishes, predictions, and resolutions of its future.

Writing about performance while I’m watching, I try to capture time, to write it as it flees, with my pen in hand, scribbling on my program in the half-dark. But utopian performatives force me to stop transcribing my experience of the present to some sort of imagined future; in those moments, I sit bolt upright, caught in the density of a communal epiphany that I need to experience now, that gathers its power through the impossibility of doing it justice in any subsequent moment. These moments of *communitas* complement the processual nature of utopia in performance. Victor Turner suggests that any “social world is a world in becoming, not a world in being”; social worlds, like utopia, are too often, according to Turner, thought of as “static concepts.”<sup>41</sup> On the contrary, Turner theorizes *communitas* as “anti-structural,” as “most evident in ‘liminality,’ [which refers] to any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life,” which includes, of course, performance.<sup>42</sup> *Communitas* doesn’t conform to rules of law, to regulations or prior social agreements. The very existence of *communitas* “puts all social structural rules in question and suggests new possibilities. *Communitas* strains toward universalism and openness.”<sup>43</sup> Although “social and cultural structures are not abolished by *communitas*,” Turner argues, “the sting of their divisiveness is removed so that the fine articulation of their parts in a complex heterogeneous unity can be better appreciated.”<sup>44</sup>

Turner’s theory usefully describes the social potential of utopian performatives. That is, rather than resting on an old humanist legacy of universality and transcendence, utopian performatives let audiences experience a processual, momentary feeling of affinity, in which spectators experience themselves as part of a congenial public constituted by the performance’s address. Hailed by these performatives, these moments of what Marvin Carlson calls “apotheosis” or “epiphany,” spectators can be rallied to hope for the possibility of realizing improved social relations. They can imagine, together, the affective potential of a future in which this rich feeling of warmth, even of love, could be experienced regularly and effectively outside the theater.

I write about my experiences at performances as ones of both intellect and affect; at a performance, I watch performers and audiences think and feel, and do the same along with them. Part of my project is to describe the

performance's effect on the audience as a temporary community, perhaps inspired by *communitas* to feel themselves citizens of a no-place that's a better place, citizens who might then take that feeling into other sites of public discourse. I write about performance to try to document, from a necessarily, productively partial perspective, its emotional efficacy as a way to think about its social potential. Feminist and Marxist theater scholar Janelle Reinelt, in her *Theatre Journal* record of her experiences as a spectator, writes, "The embodiedness of actors and spectators still trumps the mere page, but the belief, indeed the faith, that [theater] can entail intellectual rigor and ethico-political argument sustains me."<sup>45</sup> She captures the twofold project of experiencing performance, saying, "I still have experiences in theatre that cause me to question and cry, laugh and think, feel and reason, dream and critique. Sometimes other people do it with me."<sup>46</sup> Writing about the pull of those binaries, as part of our socially committed, aesthetically stirred spectatorship, lets performance critics like me and my colleagues document a complicated process of engagement with a live event whose presence I can only trace as I remember it in the future. I am left with words to describe what happens when, as Reinelt says, "I sometimes find my breath taken away by performances."<sup>47</sup>

### Using Theater

I see and write about performance with hope for what it can mean politically, but also affectively, through my faith that emotions might move us to social action. That is, I believe that being passionately and profoundly stirred in performance can be a transformative experience useful in other realms of social life. Being moved at the theater allows us to realize that such feeling is possible, even desirable, elsewhere. People use their audience experiences at the theater in myriad ways; everyone relates differently to what it means to be a spectator. I am a voracious, indiscriminate spectator. I go to live performance regularly at home in Austin, Texas, running the gamut from university theater productions that my position as a professor requires I attend to new plays, musicals, and classics at the Equity-contracted, professional Zach Scott Theatre. I see experimental performance and new plays in converted warehouses in marginal Austin neighborhoods, squinting at addresses and studying rickety aluminum structures for signs of theatrical life. I attend touring Broadway productions of shows like *Mamma Mia*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *Jesus Christ*

*Superstar* at the gigantic, twenty-eight-hundred-seat Bass Concert Hall on the University of Texas campus, and touring comedians and performance artists at the restored, vaguely baroque Paramount Theatre downtown. I see community-based performances in schools and senior centers, autobiographical work produced by teenage girls and people with disabilities. My eclectic tastes lead me to unforeseeable experiences, like feeling unexpectedly moved by a large-cast production of *Guys and Dolls* at a high school, or by seeing memoir-inspired solo performances by the graduating MFA acting class at the University of Texas.

I travel around the country and the world to see performance. In New York, I see cutting edge avant-garde work at P.S. 122 or LaMama on the Lower East Side; new plays off-Broadway at the Public Theater, New York Theatre Workshop, the Vineyard, Playwrights Horizons, Manhattan Theatre Club, and the Signature Theatre; chamber productions of rediscovered old musicals at City Center in midtown; and musicals and star-driven productions of straight plays on Broadway. I see regional theater productions, in Providence, San Diego, Chicago, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Madison, Santa Fe, and other cities with professional theaters. I'm game to see anything, because I love the potential I feel sitting in a theater, the palpable sense that anything might happen once the lights go down.

For someone who only sees performance at home (wherever home might be), the experience of showing up at the theater might be completely different than for a spectator who seeks out performance around the world. Likewise, for the inveterate, itinerant spectator, seeing performance in many different places changes the experience each time, resituating our relation to the inside and outside markers of community, of the peculiarly "insider" knowledge that influences reception, and to local, as well as translocal social practices of spectatorship. For some people, the community that supports the theater is more important than the play; for others, the performance provides an excuse for social congress, to be seen at or to participate in an event.<sup>48</sup> For others, the place slips from prominence as soon as the light floods the stage, and the only reality that matters is the usable fiction crafted by the actors. Some people read their program notes and stay for talkbacks, to extend the moment of intimacy with strangers; some people push up the aisle at the curtain call, more concerned with postshow traffic than with demonstrating their appreciation or respect for the play.

Theater sustains some of us as a daily practice that helps us order and define an existence that becomes more incoherent with each new global

political maneuver. Other people see theater as a novelty, whether boasting expensive tickets to a much-publicized Broadway production like *The Lion King* or *The Producers*, or gamely attending a local university performance by students in an Introduction to Acting class, or dutifully showing up for a high school production of a musical with a one-hundred-student cast and an awkward, tittering sold-out crowd. In *Utopia in Performance*, I'm interested in all these modes of spectatorship and audience practices. I consider what it means for people to collect the cultural capital (that is, the social "points" that sometimes derive from and can be flaunted about our spectating experiences) of seeing *Metamorphoses* on Broadway or seeing *Def Poetry Jam* live, rather than on HBO, as well as what it means for people to commit their time to attending a small city's local festival of performance that constitutes its own public audience from within a larger local community of spectators. I won't parse distinctions between "mainstream" and "alternative" or "community-based" and "popular" performance. I'm interested in how utopian performatives appear in many ways within, across, and among constantly morphing spectating communities, publics that reconstitute themselves anew for each performance.

The very present-tenseness of performance lets audiences imagine utopia not as some idea of future perfection that might never arrive, but as brief enactments of the possibilities of a process that starts now, in this moment at the theater. Many of us who've performed on stage ourselves, or who have participated in performance as collaborators, as well as spectators, know the magic, utopic moments that happen after weeks of rehearsals, of experimenting with people across a range of "what ifs" until we settle on the best choices. Those experiences resemble what musicologist MacKenzie Cadenhead calls the "phantom note" in choral singing. Cadenhead says, "In choral music there is a phenomenon called the phantom note. It exists octaves above the rest and is not sung by a human voice. It is magically heard when all vocal parts of a choir join together, the literal result of perfect harmony. In theater, this metaphorical phantom note is created by the component harmonies of all ensemble members."<sup>49</sup> In my own experiences participating in performance, I remember distinctly those moments of hearing the phantom note: performing, for instance, as the narrator in a bootleg production of Holly Hughes's underground lesbian classic *The Well of Horniness*, directed by a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, where I taught in the late 1980s. Cast with non-professional actors holding their scripts, we performed in a basement bar with a large gay and lesbian clientele. The harmony of the performance

came from the insane, hysterical glee with which the performers inhabited Hughes's campy characters, and the uproarious laughter with which the audience responded. The whole place swooned with inebriation, creating a bacchanalian atmosphere of communal transgression and delight. Performers and directors live to hear the phantom note and to make it audible for spectators.

But how can the profoundly moving experience of utopian performatives in performance (which might be considered phantom notes with community resonance and social implications) be conveyed or carried into the world outside the theater? Is the breathtaking moment of potential connection and emotion severed as soon as the house lights go up, and the audience returns to its more prosaic, individual arrangements of singles, couples, or trios to wade through the crowd to the exit doors? As theater theorist Bert States says, "The return from the play world is like the awakening from the dream: it is always an abrupt fall into the mundane, fraught with the nostalgia of exile."<sup>50</sup> Performers, too, often share such melancholic dislocation; singer Nina Simone once said that "the saddest part of performing" was that "it didn't mean anything once you were off-stage."<sup>51</sup> How can we sustain the wonder and intimacy and potential prompted by seeing, for instance, *Metamorphoses*, when the street outside the theater looks too bright, too blurry, too dirty, too fast-moving, when it clamors for our immediate attention, insisting that our pleasurable memory of the images created by the actors playing in water too quickly fade, leaving us only the residue of its loss?

Geography, though, changes the texture of these moments of departure. When I leave a theater in Austin, for example, the street isn't quite as loud or as bright as it is in New York. The soft air and thick trees cushion the shock of reentry and usually, the traffic has long since quieted down. Moving into the street with my companions, I can often hear other spectators murmuring about the performance, and sometimes I stop to talk to strangers about what we all just saw and felt. At a recent Laurie Anderson performance at the Paramount, for instance, I struck up a conversation with a stranger about Anderson's previous visits to Austin, about how this one seemed more intimate, slower, evidence perhaps of her own aging (and ours). I thanked him for his thoughts as we headed in separate directions, reminded of how spectators can take time together when we're not rushing to find taxis or steeling ourselves for the tumult of real life.

At a performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in the cavernous Bass Concert Hall, one of the four gay men seated in front of me and my partner

turned around at intermission to confess that the musical was the first show he ever saw on Broadway, back when he was “seven,” he joked. For no apparent reason, he wanted to talk, to reminisce, and when he turned, he found us receptive listeners (since I, too, was overrun with nostalgia for my own experience of seeing the show as a teenager, and my own amazement that these many years later, I still remembered every word of every song). Austin audiences have a reputation for standing ovations, indiscriminately rising to their feet at the end of most performances. Seasoned spectators tend to scoff and roll their eyes when this happens, before we, too, grudgingly get to our feet. But I’m moved by the respect and generosity of this gesture, this attempt to let the performers see us honoring their labor, each time. Perhaps these moments of public feeling that end our time together in the theater make us comfortable talking to each other as we move up the aisles and out onto the street. Perhaps the warm nights, and the proximity of our cars, and the generally relaxed and forgiving Austin atmosphere prompts us to be generous with each other and ourselves, allowing the moment of performance to linger longer.

In *Utopia in Performance*, I examine those moments, which performance theorist and practitioner Richard Schechner calls “cool down,” so reminiscent of when the lights come up after last call in a bar to reveal the tired, too human, sweaty flesh of ordinary people who’d been transformed only a moment ago by flashing lights and a persistent, irresistible beat.<sup>52</sup> The moments before that letdown are what I like to call “disco ball moments,” which are, in fact, utopian performatives.<sup>53</sup> How can we—or *should* we—bring the clarity of utopian performatives to the rest of our lives? Should utopian performatives work outside the frame of theatrical performance? Do they fail if they don’t translate to more quotidian life? Many commentators measure political theater only by its effectiveness in the “real world.” In *Utopia in Performance*, I try to resist such stark binaries between performance and reality, and suggest that the experience of performance, the pleasure of a utopian performative, even if it doesn’t change the world, certainly changes the people who feel it.

Perhaps instead of measuring the utopian performative’s “success” against some real notion of effectiveness, we need to let it live where it does its work best—at the theater or in moments of consciously constructed performance wherever they take place. The utopian performative, by its very nature, can’t translate into a program for social action, because it’s most effective as a *feeling*. Perhaps that feeling of hope, or that feeling of desire, embodied by that suddenly hollow space in the pit of my stomach

that drops me into an erotics of connection and commonality—perhaps such intensity of *feeling* is politics enough for utopian performatives. Perhaps burdening such moments with the necessity that they demonstrate their effectiveness after the performance ends can only collapse the fragile, beautiful potential of what we can hold in our hearts for just a moment. The desire to feel, to be touched, to feel my longing addressed, to share the complexity of hope in the presence of absence and know that those around me, too, are moved, keeps me returning to the theater, keeps me willing to practice a utopian vision for which in some tangible way, no direct real-life analogy exists. The politics lie in the desire to feel the potential of elsewhere. The politics lie in our willingness to attend or to create performance at all, to come together in real places—whether theaters or dance clubs—to explore in imaginary spaces the potential of the “not yet” and the “not here.”<sup>54</sup>

I won't claim that seeing *Def Poetry Jam* on Broadway or *Blanket* at a university theater changes the world. As philosopher Herbert Marcuse, whose writing about art and Eros profoundly influenced a generation of artists and activists in the 1960s, said, “Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world.”<sup>55</sup> He also says that art can invoke “an image of the end of power, the appearance of freedom. But this is only the appearance; clearly, the fulfillment of this promise is not within the domain of art.”<sup>56</sup> That is, we can't measure the effectiveness of art as we can a piece of legislation, or a demonstration, or a political campaign for candidates or for issues. But I do believe that the experience of performance, and the intellectual, spiritual, and affective traces it leaves behind, can provide new frames of reference for how we see a better future extending out from our more ordinary lives. Seeing that vision, we can figure out how to achieve it outside the fantastical, magic space of performance.

### Reanimating Humanism

Utopian performatives usefully point us toward redefinitions of concepts and values once held dear but more recently exhausted under the terms of postmodernism and the political ascendancy of a hardly compassionate American conservatism. In cultural criticism, postmodernist thought meant mistrusting the possibility of originality and insight, and abandoning belief in the transcendence of meaning and truth for a more cynical

relativity. The related arguments of poststructuralism, a theoretical method in literary studies that dismantled so-called master narratives and canonical texts and belief systems, usefully allowed commentators to deconstruct the inculcations of conservative ideas about gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and other identity markers, as well as to instill doubt as a generative mode of thinking. Partially through the effects of postmodernism in culture and poststructuralism in criticism, democracy and humanism somehow became bankrupt concepts in the progressive American imagination, driven to disrepair and disrepute by the cynicism of late capitalist globalism.<sup>57</sup> Part of my argument, in trumpeting the progressive potential of utopian performatives in performance, is that reanimating humanism and seeing, through performance, more effective models of more radical democracy might reinvigorate a dissipated Left. Through the power of affect, usefully explored and even harnessed at the theater, perhaps progressives can once again persuade one another that a better world doesn't have to be an out-of-reach ideal, but a process of civic engagement that brings it incrementally closer. Political theorist Mary Dietz says that "democracy [is] the form of politics that brings people together as citizens," that "democratic citizenship" is a relation of "civic peers; its guiding virtue is mutual respect; its primary principle is the 'positive liberty' of democracy and self-government, not simply the 'negative liberty' of non-interference."<sup>58</sup> How might a radical notion of democracy allow us to see it as a structure for liberation, rather than restraint?<sup>59</sup>

Part of the power I see in utopian performatives is the way in which they might, by extension, resurrect a belief or faith in the possibility of social change, even if such change simply means rearticulating notions that have been too long discredited. A desire to revitalize humanism or democracy doesn't have to be seen as naive and idealistic; Turner suggests that such belief, through "exposure to or immersion in *communitas* seems to be an indispensable human social requirement. People have a real need, and 'need' is not for me a 'dirty word,' to doff the masks, cloaks, apparel, and insignia of status from time to time even if only to don the liberating masks of liminal masquerade."<sup>60</sup> While Turner's suggestion seems at first most apt for performers who participate in generating *communitas* or utopian performatives, perhaps such need describes audiences, too, who might find, in performance, necessary ways to release themselves from the inhibiting restraints of the "as is" for the more liberatory possibilities of the "what if"; that is, a common human need to hope.<sup>61</sup>

The revised humanism I imagine doesn't devolve into the transcenden-

tal sign of “man,” and doesn’t become omniscient and omnipotent. This reanimated and reenvisioned humanism is contextual, situational, and specific, nothing at all like the totalizing signifier it once described. This wiser humanism has learned from the difficult work of identity politics and absorbs those lessons into its belief system. This reconstructed humanism is multiple, respecting the complexities and ambiguities of identity while it works out ways for people to share and feel things in common, like the need for survival and for love, for compassion, and for hope.

Referring to the events of September 11, 2001, leftist commentator Todd Gitlin says, “Terrorists remind us, you and I, that we share the common condition of citizens, that we are subject to all they are subjected to, that we cannot secede.”<sup>62</sup> Lest his emphasis on citizenship appear too nationalist (with its danger of xenophobia and blind, uncritical patriotism), Gitlin says,

I’m not complacent about how far we’ve come toward securing a human future, yet the growth of institutions such as the Hague human rights court tells me that we might be on our way; if not toward a federal world government, then at least toward a sort of Articles of Confederation in which we collectively agree that the enforcement of the collective good trumps the national boundaries that were the great political achievements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>63</sup>

Gitlin proposes, then, a postnationalist expression of humanism to replace the fractures of identity politics and to gather citizens of the world together in a common search for equality and freedom. I very much still identify as a feminist, and still feel community with people who call themselves “queer”; my perspective remains steeped in feminism, queer theory, and critical race studies. But I also want a more capacious form of response and address. While noting how the performances I discuss position the politics of identity, I find myself equally interested in how, through their particular performance styles and genres, these performances address something we might call our common humanity.<sup>64</sup>

In chapter 6, I search through performances, looking for models of reanimated humanism in moments of breathtakingly clear and hopeful interactions among performers and between performers and spectators. In Deborah Warner and Fiona Shaw’s production of *Medea*, for instance, I find an argument for love and faith, even amid the tragedy of infanticide. An overarching humanism seems to steer the performers in Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses*, as they enact historical myths and cajole us

with their continuing resonance. The “universal,” viewed through moments of utopia in performance, loses its insistent, transhistorical charge, and becomes, like *communitas*, like “society,” like “utopia,” a point of process moving toward what political theorist and philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls a more “human core.”<sup>65</sup> As Nussbaum admits, “Many universal conceptions of the human being have been insular in an arrogant way and neglectful of differences among cultures and ways of life.”<sup>66</sup> But, she suggests, “We do not have to choose between ‘the embedded life’ of community and a deracinated type of individualism. Universal values build their own communities, communities of resourcefulness, friendship and agency, embedded in the local scene but linked in complex ways to groups of [people] in other parts of the world.”<sup>67</sup>

Is it too much to ask of performance, that it teach us to love and to link us with the world, as well as to see and to think critically about social relations? As I note in chapter 2, I know I risk sentimentality with this work; I know I risk emptying even further overused signs like “peace” or “love.” Yet I find myself wanting to take back these words, to refill them, to ground them not in naïveté or troubling innocence, but in concrete, material conditions that give rise to empathy (and more) for others.<sup>68</sup> How can we use sentimentality as something positive instead of abandoning it?<sup>69</sup> Neoconservatives know how to use powerful, emotional images; witness, for example, the efficacy of antiabortion activism. Pending legislation in Texas will require waiting periods for those choosing to have an abortion, during which these women will be offered vividly photographed images of fetuses at various stages of development in an attempt to anthropomorphize a collection of cells and microbes.<sup>70</sup> Prochoice progressives can’t seem to agree on what counterimages to use that would encourage women to *feel* differently about their choices. We’re fearful of hegemony; some progressive scholars have internalized the lessons of poststructuralism too thoroughly to be able to settle unambivalently on one effective counterrepresentation.<sup>71</sup> In *Utopia in Performance*, I suggest that utopian performatives can accommodate the Left’s fear of prescription, while at the same time engaging languages of emotion and images, of passion and fervor as part of a necessary, crucial representational counterdiscourse.

## The Performances

Chapter 2, “‘A Femme, a Butch, a Jew’: Feminist Autobiographical Solo Performance,” begins to address such productive emotional entangle-

ments and effects. I mine for my examples the “Throws Like a Girl” series of women’s solo performances I curate for an Austin theater collective called the Rude Mechanicals that produces new work at the Off Center, a converted warehouse on the city’s East Side. In the series’ first installment in fall 2001, the Rude Mechs and I brought Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, and Deb Margolin to Austin to perform. They also led public workshops on generating performance for students and the University of Texas and Austin communities and visited classes and shared their insights in question-and-answer sessions with students and local artists and audiences. Their residencies reconnected me to deceptively simple but profound experiences of performance practice and theatergoing. The stories Hughes, Shaw, and Margolin told reanchored me to my own feminist, lesbian, and Jewish histories, while enabling me to feel an enhanced and broader sense of community that didn’t stand on the ceremony of identity politics. I supported the series as the curator, as the link between the solo artists and the producing theater collective; as a teacher, explaining the significance of this work to theater and to American politics for my students; as an artist, participating in the performance workshops and generating my own keen, heartfelt images; as a spectator, participating in breathless moments of utopian performativity with the rest of the audience; and as a facilitator, helping to translate political and performative languages back and forth across perceived divides until *communitas* felt—even momentarily—achieved.

The localness of the series and its embeddedness in the everyday work and emotion (what the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would call the “*habitus*”)<sup>72</sup> of my then-new hometown let me play these multiple roles in relation to these performances. Moving back and forth between the East Side theater and the theater building at the University of Texas, my curating and teaching, facilitating and discussing became as creative for me as performing. These practices carried their own utopian performatives out into the local community. The wide, rich context created around the performers’ work allowed other people also to experience themselves through various affiliations—as spectators, as workshop participants, as critics, as a community that hosted three generous, warm, inspiring artists. These communities of citizens created a wide public not just of feminists, Jews, and queers, but of people who care about the ideas and issues that these feminist, lesbian, and/or Jewish performers addressed, as well as about the pleasure provided to them as witnessing, active spectators. Gitlin says, “You don’t need identity politics to condemn

racial bigotry or hatred of gays. You can—you must—condemn them *as a human being*.”<sup>73</sup> To paraphrase his injunction, it wasn’t necessary to *be* a feminist, or lesbian, or Jew to respond to these performances; being a human being was enough. “Throws Like a Girl” brought University of Texas people and Austinites into various temporary communities, all of which highlighted us for ourselves. We saw ourselves as our “higher selves,” as a critic once said of Lily Tomlin’s *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, which I discuss in chapter 3. During the three months the series first organized my experience, I found intense moments of intersubjectivity not just between performers and audiences, but also among members of the audience. The residue of those visits, nearly four years later, galvanizes me still.<sup>74</sup>

Similar experiences resonate in other performances I discuss in this book, several of which also developed from artists’ residencies at the University of Texas in Austin. For example, in January 2003, the Department of Theatre and Dance cosponsored with Mark Russell, a graduate of the department and then the artistic director at P.S. 122 in New York, a five-day festival of international performance art called “Fresh Terrain.”<sup>75</sup> Seven performances, each presented several times through a tightly scheduled few days and framed by roundtables of invited critics and local faculty, anchored the concentrated event. The emotional intensity of “Fresh Terrain” felt much like what I’d experienced in the “Throws Like a Girl” series. The festival provided a site for people hungry for affective and aesthetic social experiences to nourish themselves with performance art in a range of styles and genres and facilitated focused attention on performance practices and their reception. Groups of spectators—students, faculty, local people, other artists, presenters from around the country—found community in the particularly intense, carefully defined experience of moving through several theaters in a single University of Texas building to see performances and of taking time to talk, together, about what we’d seen and felt and what it might mean. I discuss Ann Carlson’s *Blanket* (in chapter 6) as an exemplary moment in “Fresh Terrain,” one that generated utopian performatives by catching the audience in its generous, provocative embrace and by knitting us close together, even temporarily, in rapt attention to the simultaneous past/present/future of our own lives. *Blanket* asked us to help each other and help Carlson mark time, to acknowledge history, and to admit that a common mortal future waits for us all.

The festival or series format extends the temporary public the audience constitutes across a longer period of time, a condition that facilitates

utopian performatives. Although I saw most of the productions I discuss in this book on a single night, with a usually anonymous audience, some of my examples derive from these extended periods of communal spectating, which created more opportunities for critical and affective discourse around performances that a familiar group of people shared. Does it matter when the audience becomes familiar to itself? What happens when an audience reaches a level of comfort that dissipates the tension of strangeness that often charges spectators settling down so close to each other for an hour or two? Perhaps these more intimate audiences become micro civil societies

sustained by groups much smaller than the *demos* or the working class or the mass of consumers or the nation. . . . They become part of the world of family, friends, comrades and colleagues, where people are connected to one another and made responsible for one another. Connected and responsible: without that, “free and equal” is less attractive than we once thought it would be. [Civil society] requires a new sensitivity for what is local, specific, contingent—and, above all, a new recognition (to paraphrase a famous sentence) that the good life is in the details.<sup>76</sup>

An ongoing audience is perhaps a more receptive audience, attuned to the vocabulary of the theatrical moment and attentive to the responses of its fellows. Theater scholar and critic Martin Esslin says, “At its best, when a fine play in a fine performance coincides with a receptive audience in the theatre, this can produce a concentration of thought and emotion which leads to an enhanced degree of lucidity, of emotional intensity that amounts to a higher level of spiritual insight and can make such an experience akin to a religious one, a memorable high-point in an individual’s life.”<sup>77</sup> Esslin describes what I’m calling a utopian performative; does the “receptive audience” create the necessary condition for such moments?

For instance, the critical symposium at the “Fresh Terrain” festival at the University of Texas provided instances for the receptive audience to speak alongside performers about their mutual experiences. At one of the symposia, Canadian artist Daniel MacIvor said performance is about “teaching people empathy and how to listen.” He said that when he’s on stage, he feels like there are “people out there who become one thing, breathing together,” which is perhaps another way of speaking of *communitas*.<sup>78</sup> Ben Cameron, the executive director of Theatre Communications

Group, who served as a visiting critic, said performance “helps someone inhabit their skin boldly.” Mark Russell, the event’s curator, said performance “is something done very well.”<sup>79</sup> I was struck by how this language imagined performance as a practice in which the individual balances his or her needs with those of community, one where human interaction is about sharing breath; it rejects the language of capitalist production that we tend to use when describing how performance is created. That is, during “Fresh Terrain,” no one spoke of how performers were “used”; no one talked about the great performances directors “got out of actors.” The metaphor of use and extraction was discarded for language that described the intersubjectivity that makes theatrical magic, that harnesses desire to meaning making, and extends meaning making to a reinvigorated effort at world building. Madge Darlington, a core member of the Rude Mechanicals artistic collective, said on her symposium panel, “I *have* to see theater; I *have* to make this a society that *has to have* art.”<sup>80</sup> That imperative drove “Fresh Terrain,” since we moved as a spectatorial community from watching events, sharing our copresence as the motivators and makers of meaning, to discussing them, playing out the possibilities of how they felt and what they might mean.

On the other hand, how does the tension of proximity work for a more anonymous audience in the theater, whether or not it’s a consistent one, when an armrest becomes a site of cordial negotiation? How do we feel each other’s presences as reassuring or invasive, and what does performance do (what *can* performance do) to change the effects of those feelings? Can seeing performance teach us how to be physically intimate with strangers, in a culture that works harder to keep the space between us growing? As theater critic Eric Bentley comments about going to the theater, “Here one is, sitting down with total strangers to share experiences of considerable intimacy.”<sup>81</sup> Something in the very liminality of theater, in its suspension from the common distractions of everyday life, allows even an audience of strangers to be receptive to emotion. Bentley continues his wonderings about theatrical intimacy:

There are directors in the New York theatre who invite actors to pour out “love, *real* love” into the auditorium. The hope is that the audience will reciprocate. . . . Where in the auditorium does the amorous outpouring actually land? If the actor’s role is a ghost, an audience is a ghost of a ghost. At eleven o’clock, when the actor drops his role, he stands revealed as a man, but when the audience drops *its* role, it van-

ishes. These people leaving the theatre are not “audience”: they are Smith and Jones to whom the actor did *not* address himself.<sup>82</sup>

Only in the temporary public comprised by performance does the audience’s identity cohere. And in that coherence, spectators find themselves recipients of an “amorous outpouring” that would be impossible to receive without their peers surrounding them.

The third chapter, “Finding Our Feet in One Another’s Shoes,” investigates the potential for utopian performatives in solo performances that invoke multiple characters across the same person’s body. Lily Tomlin, in *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*; Danny Hoch, in *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop*; and Anna Deavere Smith, in *Fires in the Mirror*, *Twilight, LA*, and *House Arrest*, provide keen examples of performers who use the forum of theater and the vehicle of their bodies to bring multiplicitous communities together for polemical discussion. Written by Jane Wagner, Tomlin’s production joyfully bids for a reanimated humanism achieved through the specific social critiques of feminism. Hoch’s performance evokes experiences and people from his multiethnic, multiracial home in Brooklyn’s Williamsburg neighborhood, and presents for public discussion the complexities of lives typically not seen in front of audiences. Smith uses her own particular brand of ethnography to stage conversations among people too suspicious of, or hostile to, each other to talk in the same room. By bringing them together, for dialogic contemplation with the audience, Smith offers new, multiple perspectives that open up the meanings of historical events and material lives. All three performers conduct what performance studies scholar Joni Jones calls “performance ethnography,” practicing the details of cultural difference at the most minute level of the body—gestures, physical positions, inflections of speech and emotion—to experience another from within a specific cultural location.<sup>83</sup> These performances offer spectators a way to see the potential of imaginatively walking, even if metaphorically, in the shoes of someone else.

The fourth chapter, “*Def Poetry Jam*: Performance as Public Practice,” discusses how experiencing utopian performatives in performance might empower people to engage civically in participatory democracy. How can performance model—not just in content or form or context, but through the interaction of all three—ways of communicating in a public sphere that might encourage us to take mutual responsibility for reimagining social behavior? In this chapter, I recount my experience seeing a Broad-

way performance of *Russell Simmons [sic] Def Poetry Jam*, at which by renovating the conventions of audience/performer interaction, the old, hegemonically white theater became a forum for taking pleasure in and affirming experiences that Broadway theater typically erases. The young, multiracial, multiethnic, multigendered, pansexual cast of slam poets performed a reinvigorated image of American democracy, through which they expressed their patriotism, their claims to American dreams, without sacrificing their particular identities, passions, or social commitments. *Def Poetry Jam* modeled for a moment the potential of a nation built on pride in our differences, in which our mutual “otherness” explodes the horizon of American citizenship. The production reveled in what feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young calls “unassimilated otherness,” in differences cohabitating congenially in a newly roomy “unoppressive city.”<sup>84</sup>

In chapter 5, “*The Laramie Project*: Rehearsing for the Example,” I compare the Tectonic Theatre Project’s New York production of *The Laramie Project* with a production of the play at a professional theater in Austin. Both productions raised questions about how performance can prompt audiences to see themselves as citizens, to participate in a democracy that takes ethical responsibility for tears in the social fabric. The Austin production, in particular, represented how public spheres form around crises, and then are subject to media manipulation. This *Laramie Project* presented a struggle over the authority of discourse and its control. These productions used the occasion of performance to extend civic dialogue, creating a temporary public through the power of feeling the audience experienced together.

Chapter 6, “Militant Optimism: Approaching Humanism,” suggests how we might reenvision the project of radical humanism through the affective and aesthetic potential of utopian performatives. How can theater make transformation material, rather than just metaphorical? By discussing the off-Broadway production of director-adaptor Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses*, I argue that theatrical effects—like using water on stage, or asking actors to engage the full physicality of their bodies—can incite people to profound and creative responses that let us feel hope for the potential of our lives in human community. In Ann Carlson’s solo piece, *Blanket*, also discussed here, those theatrical effects graced a soundscape that captured a private and public history of significant moments in the civil rights struggles of the last fifty years in the United States. Carlson used theatrical images and metaphors to ignite a very material emotional exchange between herself and the audience in the present of her virtuosic

performance. Deborah Warner's Broadway production of *Medea*, with Fiona Shaw in the lead, used concise, incisive emotionality to insist that spectators experience the power of affect in theatricality. By telling a mythic Greek story, Warner and Shaw translated the magnitude of Medea's fury, pain, and grief into a commentary on contemporary gender relations, on corporate indifference, on the hypocrisy of community, and on the power of acting and design elements in performance itself.

### Intersubjective Radical Amazement

In many of the performances I study in this book, the performers' charisma and virtuosity motivate the utopian performative.<sup>85</sup> I realize that spectators seduced by a performer's powerful presence run the risk of coercive persuasion; I've engaged and sometimes agreed with the post-structuralist critique of the metaphysics of presence, in which, some theorists suggest, charisma is a force for fascism. For example, critic Ann Wilson says, "nostalgia" for presence is a "longing for human authenticity," and critiques the belief that theater can create just the kind of communal experience I detail in this book:

The simplistic notion that theatre makes some ineffable human quality present by tapping into an ahistorical human essence seems to me to be largely a counter-response to an awareness of the constructed nature of human identity. . . . I would suggest that the tenacious clinging to notions of presence and authenticity, to the essential human quality of theatre, probably needs to be re-thought if what it is to be human is to have a unified self which exists prior to technology. . . . It seems odd that we tend to see theatre as somehow removed from . . . technolog[y], as if it arcanelly maintained a space in which some essential humanity can be rediscovered.<sup>86</sup>

She says, "As much as we might yearn for a theatre which affirms an essential humanity allowing us to forge bonds with each other that might serve as the basis of community, this position seems like a nostalgia for a world which doesn't exist, if indeed it ever did."<sup>87</sup>

I understand Wilson's resistance, and share her hesitations about nostalgia for old forms of humanism that suggested people cohere as recognizable, fixed subjects. But utopian performatives debunk notions of

“ahistorical human essences” because they “do” community momentarily, in gestures of feeling that can’t last long enough to become transhistorical or essentialist. Utopian performatives are themselves technologies, mediations in Enlightenment notions of authentic selves and coherent, static communities. Despite Wilson’s reasonable cautions, I’m deeply interested in just how presence, in just how talent and magnetism, can be used as a means to progressive, rather than conservative, goals. Most of the performances I discuss here offered intense moments of electrifying presence: the intersubjective vulnerability of Hughes, Shaw, and Margolin in their solo performances; Tomlin, Hoch, and Smith, performing diverse communities of people on their own bodies; the def poets charging the audience with their powerful, seductive declarations of citizenship; *The Laramie Project’s* demonstration of community grief and redemption; Ann Carlson’s solo yet somehow collective, cross-generational tour through felt American history; Fiona Shaw’s violently devastated Medea; and the actors in *Metamorphoses* emerging transformed from a pool of Greek myths. All these work their captivating magic through the power of the performers’ presence, not to insist on authentic experience, or essential humanity, or premodern primitivism, but to see, for a moment, how we might engage one another’s differences, and our mutual human-ness, constructed as it is in these brief moments together.

Audiences often form community around a common present experience of love for a charismatic, virtuosic performer, not necessarily around their desire to be close to him or her, but through the performer, to be pulled into comfortable, more intimate proximity to each other. Intersubjectivity extends beyond the binary of performer-spectator (or even performers-audience) into an affective possibility among members of the audience. For example, Peggy Shaw moves into the house in a brilliant moment of *communitas* in her performance *Menopausal Gentleman*, taking individual people’s hands and holding them for a soulful moment of eye contact while she sings Frank Sinatra’s “My Way.” If she holds your hand, the moment is exquisite, but *communitas* comes from watching fellow spectators witness and anticipate this shared exchange. The house lights, which come up for this moment, call attention to our mutual copresence as affectively moving and somehow both necessary and comforting. This moment acknowledges that we all came here to do this, to share our attention, to acknowledge our pleasure, and to hope for our mutual, collective transformation. Although for individual spectators, this moment may represent the apotheosis of fandom or fetishization, admira-

tion or attraction (or actually, revulsion and repulsion), it allows the audience to see each other feeling, see each other reacting. When Shaw returns to the proscenium, the audience closes its ranks but is left a little nearer to one another, glowing with the remains of such public intimacy.

Tim Miller, in *My Queer Body*, pushes a similar moment even farther. He leaves the stage, nude, to sit in the laps of near-by spectators. Miller explains the moment:

There is one point in the show where I wander out naked into the audience, exposed by the glare of the follow spot as I get close enough to see people. I look them in the eye and acknowledge them as the community occupying that theatre for that evening. . . . At a certain point, I sit on an audience member's lap and look into their eyes. My butt naked on their lap. I try to speak simply to them about this feeling of loss and craziness inside me. "I AM here with you. My body is right here. I'm sweaty. I'll probably get your pants all wet. You are right there. Here, feel my heart. I still feel alone. A little afraid of all of you."<sup>88</sup>

This moment of literal physical interaction and emotional intersubjectivity refuses the mutual protection of the mystic gulf between stage and house, making the spectator's and the performer's mutual vulnerability part of the equation worked through in performance. Miller insists on his present materiality (even while his performance of himself remains heightened, despite his physical vulnerability—after all, he still has to project, to be heard), on his own fears and anxieties, perhaps to demystify his own virtuosity and to increase the audience's comfort. Of course, a performer doesn't have to come down off the stage to break through the sometimes intimidating wall of his or her own charisma—Ann Carlson, for example, manages the same effect/affect in *Blanket* by simply speaking directly to the audience—but the way they call out to an audience visually or emotionally often makes it seem as though they have left the frame. The fact that Miller and Shaw do touch the audience underlines intersubjectivity and provides it, perhaps, with a limit-case; their brief moments of physical exchange stand metaphorically for the intimacy they establish emotionally for the duration of their performances.

To make my case for *communitas* and for the necessary reanimation of humanism through performative gestures of utopic hope, I'm influenced by performance historian and theorist David Savran's call for a "sociology of the theatre."<sup>89</sup> Savran suggests that we look at specific material condi-

tions and modes of performance production to widen our frame of reference for how theater makes its meanings and interacts effectively in the public sphere. Following his lead, I chart here how geographic location, the economics of cities and of the arts, and contemporary discourses about identity and politics impinge on or delimit the possibilities for meaning in the performances I discuss. My aim is to see these performances as importantly material, as productions of history and ideology that suggest possibilities for a differently configured future.

As a result, I make a conscious choice, in *Utopia in Performance*, to write only about productions I liked, about performances that inspired me emotionally, intellectually, and politically. I'm committed to try to untangle how these performances "work," how it is that through some formula of form and content, context and time, they formed meaningful, moving, even transformational moments at the theater. I'm inspired by David Román's notion of "critical generosity," through which he argues that performance should be taken on its own terms, and read through the exigencies of a social moment, offering cultural criteria equally as important as more straightforward aesthetic ones. "Criticism," he says, "can also be a cooperative endeavor and a collaborative engagement with a larger social mission."<sup>90</sup> Part of my project here is to study the ways in which performance lets audiences see *as if for the first time* or *see anew*, through an alienation effect that's emotionally resonant, how to create moments of a future that might feel like utopia in the present of performance. Writing about the affective experience of theatergoing requires evoking the primary "stuff" of a moment of performance.

In this regard, phenomenology—the study of how objects are *perceived* by subjects, rather than what they *are*—provides a useful methodological launching point. As theater scholar Stan Garner argues, "[T]heater engages the operations of world-constitution . . . as spectator, actor, and character seek to situate themselves in relation to the world, both make-believe and radically actual, that confronts and surrounds them."<sup>91</sup> He says that "theatrical space is phenomenal space . . . in which categories of subject and object give way to a relationship of mutual implication."<sup>92</sup> I revel in my own love for theater and performance, and challenge myself to write from within that feeling, what Garner calls that "experiential 'stuff,'"<sup>93</sup> rather than masking that sustaining primary emotion behind a veil of abstraction or obfuscation. I want my writing to translate to readers those moments of intense affective response, to inspire them, too, to reconsider performance as a vital place for human connection and critique, love and

respect. *Utopia in Performance* licenses spectators (from the most critically engaged to the most casual) to pay attention to what we *feel*. I intend my writing to bring readers as close as possible to the experience of being spectators of the performances I describe, to take you, the reader, along with me, through my own imaginative emotional, intellectual, political, and even spiritual re-creations, and encourage you to seek out those moments in the performances you go on to see. *Utopia in Performance* allows me to linger in those moments before the house lights go up, to ponder how, rather than ending with the curtain call, utopian performatives might ripple out into other forms of social relations.