Lines of Activity
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Lines of Activity

Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity

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For some time now, I have found myself trying to integrate performance and scholarship, a combination that took many forms depending upon changing definitions of both of those terms. Sometimes it meant bringing homework to cattle calls; later it meant taking field-notes in rehearsal; and later it meant seeing performance in places not conventionally defined as “theatrical.” At its best, I found that performance functioned as a vehicle for understanding the big questions. Whether conceiving performance as practice, as paradigm, or as epistemological location, it was to me the most useful place from which to speculate upon the nature of identity, space, temporality, and social interaction. More recently, performance provided a point of entry for thinking about memory, history, absence, and presence.

My animating belief is that the skills of the performer—her navigation of sight lines, props, and blocking—can be expanded to understand the intimate mediation of visuality, material culture, and embodiment. Practiced in the co-ordination of words, gestures, image, light, and space, it seems to me that the theatrical artist is particularly well-positioned to speculate on the interdisciplinary event of culture. Combining such proprioceptive intelligences in the day-to-day decisions of rehearsal, performance knowledge further requires attention to the operationality of culture, moving between acts of abstract speculation and the urgent and stubborn pragmatics of getting the production “on its feet.”

That someone with such peculiar preoccupations found herself reading Jane Addams’s Twenty Years at Hull-House is a geographic coincidence for which I am perpetually grateful. Being a student in Chicago meant becoming a student of Chicago. For the would-be performance scholar, it meant learning of the relation between highly theatrical episodes of social history and the construction of Chicago’s civic identity. From the Haymarket Riot of 1886 to the Democratic convention of 1968, such events illustrated the distinctively gritty, grimy, pork-barrelling style in which this City of Big Shoulders performed itself. This civic sensibility also underpinned Chicago theatre where companies and playwrights claimed “Chicago” as an adjective
for a theatre that was raw, spontaneous, authentic, wore a crew cut, and suffered no fools. At the same time, the highly gendered, cross-class nostalgia of such theatrical work—what some of my colleagues dubbed Chicago’s “sweaty boy theatre”—braced against another of the city’s performance genealogies. This one—recorded by Jane Addams—had a differently gendered and differently valenced type of cross-class nostalgia. Initiated by women, if not exclusively composed of them, its trajectory of social performance directed itself outward to the Chicago collective, advancing the city’s and indeed the nation’s concept of public welfare. Significantly, it created and maintained the festivals, playgrounds, neighborhoods, parks, community centers, museums, sidewalks, and streets in which Chicago could continually re-perform itself. *Lines of Activity* is an attempt to re-stage that second strain of Chicago dramaturgy.

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