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Bala, S.

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## Scattered Speculations on the 'Internationalization' of Performance Research

*Sruti Bala*

### IF INTERNATIONALIZATION IS THE ANSWER, WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

In her collection of essays<sup>1</sup> on Comparative Literature, provocatively entitled *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Spivak reflects on how disciplinary formations are inseparable from large-scale political developments. According to Spivak, the founding of Comparative Literature after World War II can be connected to the massive flight of intellectuals from fascism in different European countries and to the recognition of the simultaneous existence of their vastly different literary and linguistic canons. The emergence of Area Studies as a field of inquiry in several American universities in the 1980s and 1990s can be similarly linked to the rise of US power during and directly after the Cold War, and to the attempt to gather knowledge about the world in terms of self-contained 'areas', as well as movements between areas. Cultural, Postcolonial Studies and Ethnic Studies as university disciplines can further be related to the manifold increase in immigration in the US and Europe (Spivak

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S. Bala (✉)  
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
e-mail: s.bala@uva.nl

2004, pp. 2–4). In my view, such an analysis marks less of a causal and more of a correlative relationship, as it seeks to pay attention to the lateral structural influences that shape any disciplinary formation, in addition to acknowledging its vertical genealogies. It cannot be reduced to claiming that war or immigration directly led to the emergence of the disciplines, but moreover that the histories and legacies of these disciplines are intertwined with broader socio-political transformations. In a similar gesture, one could ask: to what larger development can the emergence of International Performance Research, as a particular trajectory of Theatre and Performance Studies, be correlated or laterally connected? If International Performance Research is the answer, what is the question? What demands does the addition of the qualifier ‘international’ pose to a Humanities department in a city like Amsterdam, historically marked as a global mercantile centre, with a knotted legacy of slavery and prosperity, of colonization and liberal thought? What could ‘international performance research’ mean when situated on a slick rural campus university such as Warwick in the UK, flushed with management school money, and in the run for top university rankings? How would ‘international’ accommodate itself in the landscape of Nordic Theatre Studies, or in the contemporary arts education setting in Belgrade following the Balkan wars of the 1990s? What vision of the university could the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies hope to offer, by way of this enticing and ambitious call for internationalization?

### EDUCATIONAL TURNS AND THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

By the late 1990s, as European universities were witnessing an indisputable shift towards the market, the buzzword of ‘internationalization’ was heard in university contexts and indexed in educational policy briefings across the world. As Hanneke Teekens, former Director General of NUFFIC, the Netherlands Universities Foundation for International Co-operation, matter-of-factly notes in a report on ‘Global Education’, ‘international education has become an industry, and co-operation and competition in higher education are increasingly two sides of the same coin’ (NUFFIC 2013, p. 6). National education agencies such as NUFFIC, German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) or the British Council launched offices in ‘emerging market’ countries such as Brazil, India, China, Mexico, Russia and Korea, tying up with banks and employing private agents to recruit students, or even launching offshore campuses and branches.<sup>2</sup> Facing the pressures of

dwindling public resources, particularly in the Humanities and Arts, universities encouraged and exhorted departments to raise monies for running or launching their own postgraduate programmes. These programmes needed to be 'attractive' to international, that is non-European students, who bring in significantly higher tuition fees and raise the prestige and competitive profile of the universities. Failure to be involved in such expansion activities implied the threat of closure, mergers, take-overs and staff cuts, particularly for those departments with a traditionally small number of students and/or with a stubbornly non-vocational orientation. Universities thus became full-fledged stakeholders in the financialization of knowledge, and 'internationalization', implying mobility and financial gains, was one of its key stakes.

While universities have been turning towards the market, art institutions, theatre and performance companies and festivals across the world have conversely become increasingly interested in education and research. This educational turn in curation and cultural practices manifests itself in the emphasis on process-led, participatory, discursive, pedagogical formats, outside of conventional exhibition settings and events (Rogoff 2008). Here too, 'internationalization', most often understood as project-based collaborations between art institutions in two or more countries, is often presented as the new frontier of artistic practice. Both the educational turn in the art world and the financial turn of the university world can be explained through their proximities to the knowledge economy. However, it would be incorrect and cynical to write off the significant interests in international cooperation ties as purely economically driven, or directly derivative of state and capital. Rather, it marks a complex complicity with the politics of 'internationalization', as enabling as it may be limiting, as insightful as it may be vexing, or as critic Raymond Williams put it, 'finite, but significant' (1977, p. 114).

The presence of international students, as well as the possibility of developing a vision for the discipline in tandem with other institutions located in other parts of the planet, are not a nice extra, but can be argued as a necessity. They are necessary on the one hand because of the realities of the gradual devolution of public and structural support and downsizing of humanities and arts departments, so we either forge alliances or fail. On the other hand, they are necessary because the framework of the national may have been a reasonable departing *premise* of the field of Theatre Studies, but it does not offer in my opinion a *promise* for its future.<sup>3</sup> The study of theatre and performance in the world cannot only be the sum of

Theatre Studies of all nations or linguistic regions. Nor should Theatre Studies in one country view itself as pledged to teaching and studying only theatre and performance cultures from that country. This does not imply there should be less deep and ongoing engagement with local performance histories. Rather, internationalizing Theatre and Performance Studies demands thinking of the potentials that the field offers when dispossessed of the boundary marks of the national, which then leads to a questioning of all kinds of allied boundaries, from logocentrism to anthropocentrism. This opens out a stunning array of issues: it relates to the way the objects of study are conceived, it relates to questions of language and vocabulary, to canon formation, to non-textual knowledge, and to exploring the myriad ways in which theatre and performance respond to or are impacted upon by the currents and pressures of 'the global'.

Such a wide range of issues can at best be answered with scattered speculations.<sup>4</sup> Rather than attempt a systematic disciplinary genealogy in the way that scholars such as Shannon Jackson have ably undertaken in *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (2004), or offer specific institutional histories, as various anniversary or Festschrift publications marking the jubilees of academies or university departments do, I offer some reflections on the lateral correlations between performance and pedagogy. Based on my own experience as former programme coordinator at the University of Amsterdam of the Erasmus Mundus MA Programme in International Performance Research (MAIPR), I ask how the call for the internationalization of the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies profoundly calls into question assumptions on the teaching and learning of the discipline. Might the pedagogy of 'the international' be more than just a tool of disciplinary formation, but also serve as one of the means to critique consistently the discipline itself, bringing into relief its foundational certainties and endowing the discipline with the courage to know its own limits? How has the task that internationalization confers upon the discipline been implemented in the classroom and in the curriculum? Two aspects of internationalization, as drawn from my Amsterdam experiences of the day-to-day work of teaching, working with students and cooperating with partner institutions, are charted here. The first relates to the challenges of using English as the language of internationalization in Theatre and Performance Studies. The second aspect pertains to

questions of embodied learning, which emerge from an understanding of performance as epistemology.

### THE LANGUAGE OF INTERNATIONALIZATION

The predominance of English as a medium of instruction in any internationally oriented graduate programme may be an obvious choice at the University of Amsterdam, given the influx of students from all over the world, as well as the increasing number of faculty members with a limited knowledge of Dutch. Yet the adoption of English has made evident how language plays a crucial role in the operation of a discipline. Being the first language to only a handful of students and to even fewer faculty members, the use of English in the classroom was and continues to be a thorny matter. To start with, many different ‘Englishes’ coexist or rub against each other, revealing vastly different forms of thinking and cultures of discussion or scholarship. This is not just a matter of an amusing diversity of accents, but of the never-ending work of making sense of what is meant with what is said. Through a constant, tacit translation into and from English of even the most basic terms of the field, teaching and learning performance tends to start with the recognition of the inappropriateness of English or the untranslatability of certain terms to or from someone else’s English. Even the name of the field, ‘Theatre Studies’, is contested: it could be read in terms of its valences as ‘theatre science’ (Dutch: *Theaterwetenschap*, German: *Theaterwissenschaft*), ‘Theatre Studies’ (Russian: Театроведение, Arabic: دراسات مسرحية), ‘theatrology’ (Greek: Θεατρολογία) or ‘theatre/dramatic studies’ (Chinese: 戏剧学). In my experience, the struggle with English in the classroom always leads to productive discussions and learning moments. If I take for granted the meaning of a concept such as ‘representation’, I am forced to reassess this assumption by students who demonstrate how to undo the term in several ways when approached from another language. Where a different concept exists for ‘political representation’ as opposed to ‘aesthetic representation’, as for instance in the Dutch concepts of *vertegenwoordiging*, *voorstelling*, *tentoonstelling* and *verbeelding*, there is a potential for learning from and through translation. In languages where the notion of ‘acting’ does not carry the double connotation of ‘doing’ and ‘pretending to do’, as it does in English; where ‘a play’ has no etymological connection with ‘to play’; where one and the same concept, for example ‘*nāṭya*’ in Sanskrit, can refer to music, dance, drama, performance and ritual, the theorization of

performance starts to feel like stepping into previously uncharted territory. As a 'keyword' in the sense of Raymond Williams, the different concepts of Performance Studies become operative concepts through being subject to retranslation, in that their 'meanings are inextricably bound up with the problems [they are] being used to discuss' (1976, p. 13).

The use of English further implies leaving out certain texts from the reading lists because of their unavailability in English translation. It makes it convenient to resort to those texts that are assumed to form a 'common ground', where common tends to mean 'least common denominator', rather than 'shared'. In preparing for class, I find myself often choosing performances based on what I considered to be easily accessible to all, or which are widely circulated in the media and well documented, thus excluding examples and art works that require learning from the vernacular, the rural and the subaltern, and that place demands of rigour that could not possibly be met in a short MA programme. Information, archival materials and performance documentation are disproportionately available on different cultures and regions of the world. Some performance cultures are written about, but hardly by their own representatives. As a course facilitator on performance theories, I sometimes catch myself trying to insert an obligatory text from an African or Asian source in the reading list out of a well intended, though possibly no less naïve, sense of cross-regional parity. I have come to realize that indigenous performance or indigeneity in a contemporary sense is not accessible in some pure form, but often routed through the very same Enlightenment discourse that both erased it as well as made it legible (Scott 2004). Internationalization is no innocent or friendly gathering of different nationalities on a level playing field. The MAIPR programme sought to engage critically with the Anglo-American paradigm of Performance Studies by inserting the European and 'other' non-European perspectives on performance. This is no straightforward venture, as it requires working in English in order to dispossess English of the assumptions that accompanied its predominance in the field. The regionally specific, the national, the 'strictly' European (EU), the 'broadly' European (the Balkans, Russia or the Caucasus) and at least three species of the non-European (First, Third and to a very limited extent Fourth World) are all variously invoked in this call for 'internationalizing' performance research. Understanding that the shared privilege of English is also a loss or a limitation was therefore just as crucial as learning to analyse and speak or write about performances in English. The process of internationalization has thus opened out a complex process of approximation of language in relation to theatre and performance.

## EXERCISES IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The second aspect I wish to highlight is the broadening of the curriculum from Theatre Studies to Performance Studies in Amsterdam, which has strengthened the demand for interdisciplinarity, a practice arguably inherent in the field of Theatre Studies long before it became a policy catchphrase. The cross-pollination of the field with developments in Globalization Studies, Anthropology, Philosophy, Literary Studies, Art History, Memory Studies, Musicology, Media Studies or Educational Sciences can expand the capacity for lateral thinking, while simultaneously pressing for methodological clarity. Such institutional shifts accompanying the ‘linguistic turn’, ‘cultural turn’ and ‘performative turn’ in the Humanities over the past century inform not only a change in the curriculum, but also equally a change in pedagogical modes. The expansion from theatre to performance suggests that when we focus on the live, embodied act as the object of our analysis, we need to consider not only how liveness constitutes an object of knowledge, but also, and more critically, how it is constituted as a way of knowing, as epistemology. As Diana Taylor has argued in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, it is necessary to search for new ways of garnering information and undertaking field research, especially in accessing non-textual sources and undocumentable practices, and consistently appraise our methods of analysis (2003, pp. 26–27). Yet what does it mean to take seriously this perspective of performance as epistemology in terms of designing and adapting the curriculum? In a continental European setting such as Amsterdam, where practical training in the arts is undertaken in arts academies and thus institutionally separated from arts research in the university, where arts and humanities institutions are increasingly placed in competition with each other for public resources, and where criteria such as student numbers, employability, market viability and commercial success are unashamedly being applied in assessment and accreditation procedures, this is no simple task. The tools of ethnographic and sociological research are necessary supplements to established interpretive methods in the humanities, though not sufficient, because they still recognize the distinction between ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’ (Conquergood 2002, p. 146). This implies attempts at knowledge formation that extend beyond reading, discussion and writing, to embodied and collective endeavours. Such an approach takes inspiration from scholarship and practice

in the Global South and critical postcolonial thinking. One example of an exercise in embodied, experiential learning is one introduced by Antônio Araújo, Brazilian theatre director and professor at the University of São Paulo in Brazil, who served as guest scholar on the MAIPR programme. In exploring questions of cultural familiarity and strangeness in urban spaces, a group of students were asked to approach strangers on the public Dam Square in Amsterdam and request them to arrange the students in a row, according to their perception of the students in terms of the most familiar to the least familiar physical appearances, or in terms of the most feminine to most masculine appearances. Done with care and appropriate preparation, such deceptively simple exercises provide the experiential basis for reflecting on and for theoretical works and bring what might be regarded as dull academic debates to life.

Another instance of my own quest for a pedagogy appropriate to such an aim is as follows. For a class on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, it becomes methodologically interesting to send students out on the streets on an experiential assignment, to walk into a shop or place of leisure that is totally unfamiliar to them, such as a tattoo shop, a casino, a table dancing bar or a Turkish football and tea club (all fortunately closely located to the Theatre Studies building on the Rembrandtplein in Amsterdam). The knowledge generated through this embodied experience then feeds into the discussion of the texts of Bourdieu. It allows for unravelling the complexities of the concept of the habitus, in addition to presenting different cultural perspectives. It does not require an excruciatingly boring PowerPoint presentation on the relevance of habitus to performance theory. Such activities in the classroom setting have the additional 'synergy effect' – another favourite term in EU jargon – of Dutch students becoming small-scale cultural ambassadors. By explaining to their co-students how exactly to spot the difference between the audiences of venues such as Carré or the Stopera in Amsterdam, they sometimes unexpectedly recognize that they are indeed knowledgeable about the gradations between commercial, popular and elite culture and become conscious of how to articulate what is taken for granted. Through a discussion of the casting politics of a theatre production, students help question their own as well as each other's assumptions on race and gender, revealing that what seems to be common sense is in fact a result of sedimented, normative thinking.

## TOWARDS A META-VOCATIONAL FUTURE FOR INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE RESEARCH

This publication comes at a time when the universities of the world, particularly the Humanities, are deeply undermined by the logic of management and corporate growth. Yet this is not the place for lamenting the shallowness of excellence, impact factors, accountability or research valorization. I certainly hope that all graduates of Theatre and Performance Studies find satisfying jobs under humane working conditions. I hope that the university management will concentrate less on real estate speculation and demonstrate sensitivity and sanity by investing in not only the digital but also the ‘analogue’ Humanities. Yet my real desires for the field of Theatre and Performance Studies lie in what Spivak calls the meta-vocational scope of aesthetic education (2012, pp. 1–34).

For me, the task of pedagogy in relation to the internationalization of theatre and performance research is to expand and problematize the canon, to bring onto the map practices and histories and articulations that were not given a place when the map was actually made. When we speak of globalization and internationalization, the trajectory of transfer is largely from the Global North to the Global South, rarely the other way around (except perhaps when we note that practically every object we possess is made in China), and even more rarely between countries of the Global South. Rarely do the cultural detail and the idiom of the Global South travel with ease to other places. Crossing borders is no jolly affair from the perspective of peripheral societies and countries. There are many Shakespeare and Ibsen productions in Nepal, but how many Nepalese plays are performed by non-Nepalese companies in any other country? Theatre makers around the world may be described as Brechtian, but is any European or Australian or Asian theatre director ever called Buenaventuran? My vision for the discipline is that we come to learn to pay attention to and listen more painstakingly to those less visible, and perhaps less fashionable, articulations of the transnational and transcultural. This demands stepping on unfamiliar territory with patience and respect, it demands choosing difficult topics of study which may not be accomplishable in three-year grant cycles, for which literature may not be found in the lists of big corporate publishing houses such as Palgrave Macmillan, for which we have to learn new languages and find ways to work with poor documentation. Leaving aside measurable outcomes, the pedagogy of internationalization that I seek in theatre and performance is

one that does not fear contamination, or an unsettling of subjectivity. The questions that arise in these pedagogical situations of ignorance and bafflement offer what audacious hopes one has for the future of the discipline.

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this chapter was published in Dutch (Bala 2014).
2. The Netherlands Education Support Offices (NESO) of NUFFIC are located in countries of purported strategic (read financially profitable) importance to the Netherlands. Their main purpose is to attract and recruit students to study in the country. For the Netherlands, this is a relatively recent phenomenon, and it follows a competitive trend started in the 1990s in the USA, the UK and Australia. The presence of foreign desks of international agencies such as NUFFIC in countries like India has led to the sprouting of events such as educational trade fairs, professional university mobility consultants, educational loan providers, specialized visa and insurance companies, retailers and distributors of educational materials, and preparatory tuition courses for International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examinations.
3. The distinction between ‘premise’ and ‘promise’ is taken from Paolo Virno (2004, p. 25).
4. ‘Scattered speculations’ is a term borrowed from Spivak (2012, pp. 429–442).

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**Sruti Bala** is Associate Professor in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Amsterdam, where she coordinated the MA in International Performance Research Programme (MAIPR) between 2008 and 2013. Her research interests are in the fields of participatory art, art and activism, feminist theatre and performance, translation and performance pedagogy. Recent publications include the anthology *The Global Trajectories of Queerness: Re-thinking Same-Sex Politics in the Global South*, co-edited with Ashley Tellis (Leiden: Brill, 2015) and the special double issue of the *European Journal of Humour Research* on 'Humour, Art and Activism', vol. 3, issues 2/3 (2015), co-edited with Veronika Zangl. She is currently completing a monograph on *The Gestures of Participatory Art* (forthcoming, Manchester University Press). She is on the editorial board of the journals *Akda: The Asian Journal of Literature, Culture, Performance* and *Rupkatha: Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*.