Afterword: Please Mind the Gap between Theatre and Philosophy

Martin Puchner

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Afterword: Please Mind the Gap between Theatre and Philosophy

MARTIN PUCHNER

Studying the intersection of theatre and philosophy isn’t easy. The standard histories of both disciplines tend to ignore each other, if they aren’t outright hostile. In most theatre schools, the first thing one is told is that drama comes from “dran” meaning “action,” and that theatre is an art of the body, not of ideas. On the side of philosophy, the hostility is even more pronounced. From the beginning of their august undertaking, philosophers have had very unkind things to say about the theatre. Their critique has come in three different flavours. Most common is a moral one, with acting, the pretence of being someone else, being seen as immoral and actors, therefore, as akin to prostitutes. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s invective against actors, coming at the heels of many centuries of similar attacks, is a ready example. Somewhat less common is an aesthetic opposition, according to which, theatre mixes the different art forms, including music, poetry, and the visual arts, into some sort of unseemly concoction. Nietzsche’s polemic against Wagner’s total work of art comes to mind. But the most important critique of the theatre has emerged from philosophy’s core concern: epistemology. Here, theatre is seen as a place of untruth that philosophy must shun in order to come into its own. Plato’s cave parable is the ur-scene of this tradition.

Philosophers have tended to ignore the anti-philosophical or anti-intellectual trends within theatre, which only confirmed their suspicions about this art form. Thespians (to use the term recently revived by Freddie Rokem), by contrast, have complained bitterly, no one more so than Jonas Barish, who hurled the invective “prejudice” at philosophers critical of the theatre when he diagnosed an “anti-theatrical prejudice” at work within this discipline.

Those happy few intent on studying theatre and philosophy in some kind of combination thus have had to convince their colleagues that the two endeavours share more than meets the eye. Take, for example, representation or imitation. Isn’t Plato obsessed with the theatre precisely
because he cares so much about imitation, which is at the centre of his pedagogy? And doesn’t this prove that imitation is a shared concern of theatre and philosophy, even though their approaches may be different? Or what about language? Many playwrights, especially in the twentieth century, have presented us with so many meditations on and interventions in language – didn’t language become central for philosophy just at the same time? Or seeing: theatre means “place of seeing” and conveniently derives from the same root, *thea* [sight, view], as the word “theory” (*OED* online), itself close to the heart of philosophy. Doesn’t this prove that theatre and philosophy share an investment in seeing, even if philosophy’s inner contemplation of truths may be different from gazing at spectacles? Indeed, the original meaning of *theorein* was that of going on a pilgrimage to a festival (Nightingale 42). Small wonder that, once you start looking at all these shared concerns, you also notice that there are scores of playwriting philosophers (most of them French, from Voltaire and Sartre to Alain Badiou) and philosophizing thespians (many of them German, from Lessing and Schiller to Brecht) as well as exponents of the play of ideas (often British, from Shaw to Stoppard). Clearly, the two endeavours are deeply entangled with each other.

Such entanglements have not always received the attention they deserve and now stand at the forefront of the study of the relations between theatre and philosophy. The renewed interest in these relations is an exciting development and one that increasingly enjoys some institutional support, due to the efforts of scholars like Laura Cull – who has founded a society called Performance Philosophy and a book series published by Palgrave and has organized various conferences – but also of the editors of the present volume. The sheer size of some these initiatives – the society boasts over seven-hundred members – testifies to the fact that something is happening. Have we finally come to the end of the two prejudices, the anti-theatrical prejudice in philosophy and the anti-philosophical prejudice in theatre?

In what follows, I will argue that the concern with these prejudices, and hence the hope of overcoming them, is misguided and speaks to a larger misconception about how to think about the study of theatre and philosophy. In particular, I will argue against an underlying assumption – namely, that the true objective of the study of theatre and philosophy should be the reconfiguration of the whole field, the belief that the very division within universities and intellectual traditions between theatre, on the one hand, and philosophy, on the other, is to be deplored and that the fundamental problem in the study of theatre and philosophy is precisely the “and.” Wouldn’t it be great if we could get rid of the “and,” and with it of the distinction itself, and start all over again, without the “and,” without the division between theatre and philosophy, without the anti-intellectualism of theatre and the anti-theatrical prejudice of philosophy? Once we got rid of
all these impediments, we could create a new, level playing field, in which we can all get along and indulge in theatrico-philosophical pursuits to our hearts’ desire.

I, for one, plead guilty to having harboured such fantasies. In my own work in theatre and philosophy, I have felt that I was up against the mutual distrust of the two endeavours and have emphasized shared themes and concerns, from language to the root *thea*. And yet, I have become suspicious of approaches to theatre and philosophy premised on the hope that the “and” separating them can or should be undone. First, as a hope, this is certain to be squashed by ingrained intellectual traditions and institutional settings as well as by the many other differences between the two disciplines. For one thing, theatre and philosophy are not traditions, or institutions, or disciplines of the same type. Theatre is an art form, with a long history and surprising stability; attached to it is a much more uncertain tradition of commentary and reflection that has been only hesitantly and belatedly integrated into the university, when it exists there at all: many universities still don’t have theatre departments, including Harvard, Princeton, Oxford and Cambridge. Where they do exist, they are often, in the first instance, theatre practice departments. Theatre studies as an academic discipline is, therefore, not only recent, but also small, and much as we may deplore this fact, not particularly high up on the academic totem pole.

Philosophy, by contrast, is not an object of study, like theatre, but an intellectual practice, and can lay claim to having invented the institution of the university itself. If philosophy has trouble finding its own niche within the university today, it is not because of a position of weakness, as is the case with theatre and theatre studies, but rather, of strength. It can claim historical connections, even ownership, over natural and social sciences as well as the humanities, even if it has had to give up some of these claims, withdrawing, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes yielding to outside pressure, from the position as the queen of the disciplines.

The differences are not just ones of power or prestige, although these are enormous. More crucial is the fact that the two are fundamentally different types of endeavour that appear comparable only by virtue of having been brought into the same institutional context within the modern university; by virtue, that is, of having been turned into departments. As departments, they now seem similar and compatible, giving rise to the hope that they may be combined and merged at will. But such mergers would be up against the fact that they each look back at a proud and impressive tradition, both enjoying surprising stability, and are each intensely concerned with their own history. Theatre harks back to Greek theatre in much the same intense way that philosophy harks back to Greek philosophy. These two endeavours aren’t going to shed their skin any time soon.
But even if one were to overcome all of these difficulties and were able to force theatre and philosophy into parallel positions, from which, in a second step, the walls separating them could be dismantled, the ideal of the one, shared field of inquiry would still be misguided; it would mean, quite simply, throwing out the baby with the bathwater. What makes the study of theatre and philosophy interesting, even thrilling, is the very fact that they two are so utterly and irreconcilably different. It is the and that makes all the difference; it is the gap between theatre and philosophy that makes the study of their relation interesting, and even possible, in the first place. The study of theatre and philosophy should take its point of departure from this gap, and this gap should remain at the forefront of our inquiry. Put more strongly, studying theatre and philosophy means minding the gap between them.

What kind of approaches to the study of theatre and philosophy follow from this premise? One might do well to begin by focusing on those who respect this gap and use it productively (rather than on those who try to play it down or bridge it). One example would be philosophers who use terms and procedures taken from theatre precisely because they seem so alien, and therefore startling and fresh. Another example would be thespians who do the same with philosophy. To my mind, a particularly intriguing member of the first group has always been Kenneth Burke, not a philosopher precisely, but a sui generis intellectual. Perhaps because of his peripheral position with respect to intellectual traditions and institutions, he undertook one of the boldest experiments in minding the gap between theatre and philosophy. Under the name “dramatism” he took five central terms of dramatic theory – namely, act, agent, agency, purpose, and scene – and turned them into an instrument for analysing the entire history of philosophy, from Plato to George Santayana. By gauging the “ratio” between “scene” and “agent,” for example, Burke could compare how Marx conceived of the importance of material circumstances and human action with the way in which American pragmatism saw ideas bumping up against historical contingency (the scene).

Burke didn’t think there was anything wrong with the gap between theatre and philosophy. Forcing the two into some sort of arranged marriage didn’t even cross his mind; so outlandish an idea it would have struck him. A take-no-prisoners formalist, Burke simply turned to theatre, of all places, in order to find there inspiration for his intellectual machine, his dramatism, that allowed him to compare the underlying “dramatic” structure of different philosophical systems.

Inspired by Burke’s example, I have recently begun to subject Ludwig Wittgenstein to similar treatment (see Puchner, “Dramatism”). Noticing the prevalence of references to theatre in Wittgenstein’s later writings, most prominently his insistence that his signature term “Sprachspiel” should be
understood in the sense of “playing theatre,” I have reconstructed Wittgenstein’s approach to language as a “dramatic” one. Not only can his terms, including what is usually translated as “language game,” be elucidated through this dramatic angle (the proper translation might well be “language play”). Wittgenstein’s very procedure of writing philosophy by constructing elaborate examples, which are populated by characters and props and revolve around different sequences of action, is a dramatic one as well. When seen from this angle, it is not surprising that different dramatists, from Thomas Bernhard to Tom Stoppard, should have been drawn to Wittgenstein, not only for his philosophy, but also for his mode of writing.

This method does not suggest that we bring Wittgenstein home into our happy family of thespians. A dramatic approach to Wittgenstein is productive precisely because it looks at Wittgenstein from an unusual angle that brings to the fore aspects of his work that would have otherwise remained obscure. Even though Bernhard clearly felt some kind of kinship to Wittgenstein, to whom he devoted not only a play but also two novels, the thought experiment of somehow merging the two with the hope of thereby achieving some sort of union of theatre and philosophy produces, in my mind at least, only an utterly depressing and lifeless monster.

Burke and Wittgenstein availed themselves of some of the resources of theatre in order to advance their own philosophical projects, keeping the theatre itself at a safe distance. In other cases, however, theatre and philosophy seem to be moving closer together. A good example is the enormous investment, within certain traditions of twentieth-century philosophy, in Antonin Artaud. Artaud’s experiments, undertaken under the name of Theatre of Cruelty, became the catchword of Parisian philosophy, and the leader of this fan club was Gilles Deleuze. In his book *Différence et Répétition* (*Difference and Repetition*), he developed a philosophy that kept turning to theatre not, as he said, to create a “philosophical theatre,” which would mean some kind of fusion of theatre and philosophy, but rather to “invent, in philosophy, a unbelievable equivalent of theatre” (17). But not just any old theatre would do as such an equivalent; for Deleuze wanted to oppose the regime of repetition, an approach to history and thought premised on identity and associated, in his mind, with G.W.F. Hegel, with a brave new world of endless multiplicities, a series of unruly differences that could not be controlled by subsuming them under some sort of identity. The only problem with this approach was that traditional theatre abounds in repetitions, as the word “rehearsal” indicates. In French, the point is even easier to comprehend, indeed unavoidable, for in this language, rehearsal is simply “repetition.” What to do?

Enter Artaud. For Deleuze, Artaud’s theatre of cruelty was precisely what he needed, a “theatre of multiplicities that is in all respects opposed to the theatre of representation” (48), the latter being Deleuze’s word for the bad,
traditional theatre that pursues, night after night, the same false project of representing some sort of identical ideal. Don’t we have here a perfect example of collaboration between philosopher and thespian, proof that theatre and philosophy must not be kept apart for ever? Can we follow Artaud and Deleuze into a new world of fusion and mixture?

I don’t think so. To begin with, it is important to realize that the theatre of cruelty never really existed in the first place. Yes, Artaud tried to realize his vision with a few theatrical experiments, but these experiments were all complete failures and, therefore, did not have any effect on theatre history. As I have argued elsewhere, the medium in which Artaud realized his theatre was that of the manifesto, and it was through the immensely successful and influential publication of his manifestos that Artaud’s vision acquired the significance it has today.

However, the very absence of any realized theatre of cruelty was a major reason why that theatre would play such a role in philosophy. The theatre of cruelty became a perfect screen onto which philosophers like Deleuze could project their own, purely philosophical vision of a theatre of multiplicities and differences, unencumbered by the reality of repetitive theatrical production. The function of Artaud, in philosophy, is thus that of an empty screen that makes possible the philosophical fantasy of a non-existing, and probably impossible theatre of cruelty, whose very impossibility becomes the perfect starting point for its career as a philosophical cipher. Deleuze and Artaud – the two are not the confirmation of some new-found alliance between theatre and philosophy but rather a folie à deux, an enormously productive appropriation of theatre by a philosopher who explicitly did not want to produce some kind of fusion, a “philosophical theatre,” but rather an “equivalent” operation, an equivalence that precisely avoids any suggestion of fusion or mixture. Deleuze, in other words, is minding the gap between theatre and philosophy, without the least worry that this gap is a problem that should be solved.

Deleuze is not alone. In his creation of a philosophical equivalent to theatre he followed his master, Friedrich Nietzsche, whose Birth of Tragedy is probably the most famous, and also the most marvellous philosophical projection of theatre that ever existed. Classicists were outraged when this work was published, and not only because of its exalted tone. They noted innumerable inaccuracies, absence of evidence, and a host of inventions that violated the norms of academic philology. And they were right, of course. However, their complaints were misguided, in the sense that the point of Nietzsche’s text was never to provide anyone with an accurate account of what Greek tragedy was like (just as we don’t turn to Deleuze to understand what Artaud’s theatre of cruelty was like). Rather, it was the very act of invention, the immense projection of a philosophical fantasy onto the early history of theatre that must be recognized as its true purpose.
Nietzsche was in the midst of a difficult philosophical project – namely, to return idealist philosophy to the body – and he created his own, invented version of tragedy (his philosophical equivalent) as a solution. Such philosophical projection was much easier for Nietzsche, since only classicists would object to the accuracy of this fantasy, Greek tragedy being located in the distant past. For Deleuze, the operation was only marginally more difficult, even though he chose to turn to contemporary theatre, where his fantasy of a theatre of multiplicity should have been in much greater danger of colliding with theatrical reality. It was lucky for him that it didn’t, because Artaud’s theatre of cruelty was nowhere to be found, or rather, because it existed only in the ephemeral space between failed theatrical experiment and successful manifesto. Nietzsche and Deleuze, in other words, weren’t doing something essentially different from what Burke and Wittgenstein were doing. They, too, wanted to solve philosophical problems, and in order to do so, they turned to the theatre. Incorporating theatrical techniques or sensibilities into philosophy didn’t mean that they ceased doing philosophy. Rather, it was one more way of doing so. Nietzsche and Deleuze were minding the gap between theatre and philosophy every bit as much as Burke and Wittgenstein.

It is with this observation in mind that one can turn to something of an ur-scene between theatre and philosophy; namely, Plato. Inspired by modern dramatists with a keen interest in Plato, such as Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and Georg Kaiser, I have projected our own, expanded sense of drama and theatre back onto Plato, noticing that the philosopher’s dialogues, with their scenes, characters, and meandering actions could be described as a strange form of drama of ideas (Puchner, Drama of Ideas). Testing this reading by looking for allies in the history of theatre, I noticed that there existed a group of dramatists who likewise had recognized, in Plato, a dramatic imagination that they then proceeded to translate into their various dramatic idioms, producing plays centred on Socrates and furnished with material taken from Plato’s dialogues. I called the phenomenon dramatic Platonism.

What is happening in this particular constellation between theatre and philosophy? I don’t think Kaiser’s calling Plato a dramatist, or David Herkovits’s putting the Symposium onstage with the Target Margin Theatre, as he did in 2007, means épater la différence. Rather, dramatic Platonism should be understood as a product of the gap: it derives its energy from the gap and not from the idea of eradicating it. When seen from this perspective, dramatic Platonism describes uses and appropriations of theatre and philosophy that go in both directions. On the one hand, we can see how Plato used dramatic techniques, incorporating them into what he called by a relatively new name: philosophy; on the other, we see modern playwrights, like Kaiser, use Plato in order to solve problems of their own – namely, how
to create a non-Aristotelian modern drama. What the project didn’t suggest is that the difference between theatre and philosophy was or should be abolished. Plato’s own harsh judgements on theatre are the best reminder of the fact that he sought to keep the theatre at a distance, even as he used some of its devices.

When modern dramatists make use of Plato, they mind the gap from the other side, as it were, since now it is philosophy that is made a convenience of by dramatists, not the other way around. When dramatists generate their own fantasies of philosophy, they do so primarily by latching onto philosophers themselves and proceed to bring such philosophers onto the stage. This tradition began when Aristophanes introduced Socrates to his audience in *The Clouds*, thus creating his own, theatrical fantasy of the first philosopher. Others followed suite, including the authors of Socrates plays mentioned earlier, but Shaw’s Tanner, in *Man and Superman*, or Tom Stoppard’s Moore, in *Jumpers*, belong to this group as well. The proper question to ask of these cases is not whether and to what extent these stage philosophers are accurate depictions of their models (the real Socrates, Shaw, A.J. Ayer), nor whether the theatre does justice them. Rather, the question should be, What do these dramatists want from philosophy, and what kind of theatrical problems do they hope to solve by dragging philosophers onto the stage?

It is noteworthy that, with very few exceptions, philosophers are a source of comedy when they are introduced into theatre, blinking at the footlights like so many deer caught in the headlights of a car rushing at them. The theorist best equipped to explain this phenomenon is Henri Bergson, who identified any character in the grip of an idea as an example of his comic formula; namely, that something mechanical is encrusted onto the organic. Oblivious philosophers, with their heads in the clouds and controlled by some idée fixe, will invariably lead to laughter.

At this point, one may wonder to what extent these fantastic projections can become a sign of outright rivalry or even hostility. Plato has Socrates complain that Aristophanes’s *Clouds* helped fuel sentiments against the philosopher, thus contributing to his ultimate death. Are dramatists simply hitting back at philosophy with their stage philosophers, taking revenge for the anti-theatrical prejudice?

Undoubtedly, fantastic projections may become charged with hostility. However, I would consider this hostility as one of several possible attitudes one might take toward the gap; indeed, as a way of minding the gap, albeit in a particularly aggressive manner.

The same is true the other way around, with philosophical projections of theatre. Here, the much-bemoaned history of anti-theatricalism can come more clearly into view; for philosophers have not always been as enthusiastic about their imagined theatres as Deleuze was about Artaud (though one
should add that, in this instance, Artaud himself exhibited much hostility toward the institution of theatre and thus did some of the distancing work for Deleuze). Plato’s invectives against theatre, Rousseau’s complaints about actors, and Nietzsche’s biting critique of Wagner, all these are so many ways in which philosophy has produced its own fantasy versions of theatre, admittedly in a critical mode. However, once one gives up the hope of somehow reconciling theatre and philosophy, it becomes unnecessary to deplore this philosophical anti-theatricalism as a prejudice that must disappear. Saying that Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, along with many others, harboured a prejudice makes sense only in so far as we shouldn’t mistake their versions of theatre as accurate representations of the art form. But this prejudice is not a moral failing from which they must be cured in order to become responsible citizens of a liberal democracy (Barish’s hope). Rather, in each case, these philosophers were confronted with a problem, the problem of “truth” in the case of Plato, the problem of “representation” (in a political and an aesthetic sense) in the case of Rousseau, and the problem of mixing art forms in the case of Nietzsche, and they produced their own, idiosyncratic versions of theatre in order to solve these philosophical problems. That these versions were negative is true, but this should not distract from the fact that, structurally, they were projections every bit as philosophical as Deleuze’s enthusiasm about Artaud or Nietzsche’s enthusiasm about Greek tragedy. The very fact that someone like Nietzsche would invest so much energy in Greek tragedy and then use an anti-theatrical rhetoric to denounce Wagner shows that the two are, or at least can be, the product of the same operation (in his later work, Deleuze also used anti-theatrical expressions, evidently having developed doubts about what theatre could do for him).

The distance afforded by the gap thus creates various types of projection, positive or negative, fuelled by rivalries and kinships, but in each case, we are dealing, not with attempts to bridge the gap or even get rid of it entirely, but on the contrary, with operations that are being made possible by the gap in the first place. Minding the gap means giving up the fantasy of eradicating the difference between theatre and philosophy, but it also means being mindful of all the intriguing and complicated and fascinating operations that occur across it, from both sides. The key question to ask of these operations is not, Do philosophers and thespians like each other (rather than hate each other)? But rather, Why, in each case, do they use each other? For what purpose? To what end?

This question might be asked of Bertolt Brecht, a consummate dramatist and theatre maker, who strategically used philosophy to elucidate his own practice and theory of theatre. I am not so much thinking of his reading of Marx and other Marxist writers, which undoubtedly influenced his worldview and hence his theatre making. Rather, I am thinking of his life-long
project, the Messingkauf or “Purchase of Brass.” A series of dialogues, it re-casts Brecht’s signature practice, epic theatre, into a new idiom. It does so by strategically introducing, into the midst of a happy band of thespians, a philosopher, who is shown to be utterly out of place. He knows nothing about the theatre and is bewildered by the way in which the actors, the director, and a dramaturge talk about their craft. After some back and forth, he can be brought to admit that yes, there might be something in the theatre that could help him with his philosophy; he might instrumentalize the theatre, that is, but only at the price of utterly transforming it. The name given to this instrumentalization is not theatre, but théâtre, a change or inversion that marks the gap, the gap between theatre proper and theatre as used by a philosophy. Brecht the thespian introduced a philosopher into the theatre in order to estrange it.

Minding the gap between theatre and philosophy thus means observing how they use each other. Sometimes these uses will be irreverent (the thespians loudly protest the intentions of the Brechtian philosopher), sometimes full of enthusiastic appreciation (as in the case of Nietzsche and Deleuze), and sometimes suffused with outright hostility (Plato, Rousseau). But the point is that we should not be distracted by the value, positive or negative, that happens to be attaching to the use. We should be looking at the dynamic of the use, and that dynamic is, in all of these cases, driven by the fact that theatre and philosophy are so utterly different from one another. Describing the relation between theatre and philosophy as a series of projections or appropriations does not mean denouncing them as such. On the contrary, these appropriations and projections are often enormously interesting and productive. It is only important to recognize them as projections (or uses, or appropriations) because, only if we recognize them as what they are, can we form an appropriate picture of them.

This is probably a good place to clarify that, in using the formulation of minding the gap, I do not mean to scare people away from the gap, as from the gap between the train and the platform. Rather, I mean to encourage us always to keep the gap in mind when dealing with theatre and philosophy, to pay attention to it, to tend it, and to cherish it. Minding the gap is a way of doing theatre and philosophy, but without hoping to do away with the “and.”

Once we firmly keep the gap between theatre and philosophy at the forefront of our work in theatre and philosophy, we can also understand the dynamic behind what is surely one of the most intriguing case studies in theatre and philosophy: Samuel Beckett. The way to begin this inquiry is by asking why it was Beckett, of all modern playwrights, who has attracted the most and also the highest level of philosophical commentary (or projection, as I prefer to call it). The answer is not obvious because his plays are marked by a deliberate avoidance of anything smacking of stage
philosophers, with the possible exception of Lucky, in whom Beckett presents us with nothing other than the demise of philosophizing onstage. Lucky, who can be made to think by uttering a single command — “Think, pig!” (41) — will do what he calls thinking just as he will do what he calls dancing when commanded to do so. But the result is notoriously miserable. One might say that Beckett is trying to bring the tradition of the stage philosopher to an end.

Another way of putting this is to say that Beckett is minding the gap between theatre and philosophy, or even reinforcing it. In Beckett’s theatre, not even theatrical fantasy figures of philosophers are allowed onstage, as if he were worried that such those figures might appear as somehow bridging the gap, after all (e.g. when we take them for actual philosophers). In a similar vein, Beckett refused to elucidate the philosophy “behind” his drama or the ideas he was presumably trying to express in them. There were no such ideas, he said, and in any case, he was only interested in the “shape of ideas” not in the ideas themselves.

This rigorous policing or even widening of the gap turned out to be a canny strategy, which is to say, a genuine contribution to theatre and philosophy (rather than, say, a rejection of the enterprise). Suddenly, all kinds of philosophers came out of the woodwork and seized on Beckett’s work, using it for their own philosophy. Martin Esslin was one of the first to notice, in Beckett, an important contribution to the relation between theatre and philosophy, declaring Beckett the true heir to Sartre and Camus. Sartre and Camus had, themselves, written plays, apparently completing the work of translating their philosophy, across the gap, into theatre. But they had not done so very well, Esslin objected, because, in order to translate their stunningly original philosophy, they had used shop-worn dramatic forms, dressing their new ideas in old clothes. In particular, they had exhibited a naïve trust in language as a communicative device perfectly suited to expressing emotions as well as ideas. Beckett, by contrast, had recognized the radical nature of existentialism and proceeded to invent a new, absurdist form through which to express this philosophical content.

Esslin’s analysis is hampered by the distinction, itself naïve, between form and content, but he is onto something. Transforming his analysis into my terms, I would say that the drama of Sartre and Camus reverted to the traditional figure of the stage philosopher by presenting philosophical chatter onstage as if it were the true thing, perhaps letting the gap slip from their minds temporarily. Beckett knew better and recognized, in these stage philosophers, the danger that they might fuel fantasies of fusing theatre and philosophy.

Esslin was joined by a host of philosophers transfixed by Beckett’s refusal to add anything philosophical to his plays. This trend continues to this day, with Stanley Cavell and Alain Badiou – philosophers who have precious
little in common otherwise – as the most prominent examples. Cavell turned to Beckett to pursue a project in the philosophy of language, while Badiou turned Beckett into an example of the “event” in art. The two philosophers mind the gap in different ways. There has always been, in Cavell’s writing, an ambition to loosen the strictures of philosophical writing, but this loosening should not be misunderstood as an attempt to eliminate the difference between philosophy and theatre. His approach to Beckett is premised on the idea that Beckett experiments with literal meaning in a manner unavailable to a philosopher. This is why Cavell turned to the playwright in the first place.

Badiou has been even more outspoken in his ambition to mind the gap between philosophy and art. He may have created a Beckett in his own image, but his Beckett is not a secret philosopher. Rather, according to Badiou, art is one of four truth procedures (the other being love, politics, and mathematics) from which philosophy is forever banned; it is relegated to the position of observing and tending the four. Even though Badiou, like Sartre and Camus, has written plays, he has never articulated an ambition to overcome the separation between philosophy and theatre.

The philosopher with whom I want to end this excursion on Beckett is also the first to be tantalized by Beckett’s austerity: Theodor Adorno. Adorno is crucial here because, more than any other, Adorno has been a minder of the gap between philosophy and theatre, and it is as such a minder that he, in turn, admired Beckett. He praised Beckett precisely for refusing any philosophical meaning, and it is from this refusal that Adorno proceeded to analyse the particular forms this refusal takes. It is true that Adorno’s Beckett is very much a Beckett created for the purposes of his philosophy. But this purpose can be identified as a minding or defending of the gap between philosophy and theatre. In this sense, Adorno recognized a kinship to Beckett, but it was not a kinship between theatre and philosophy but rather a kinship in the belief that the two needed to be kept absolutely and rigorously apart.

Indeed, it is this belief that has turned Beckett and his philosophical admirers into the most successful case study in theatre and philosophy. The fact that Beckett refused stage philosophers is not a strange problem that needs to be explained away. Rather, it is the very reason why he has provoked so many philosophical responses. He is the best example of the thesis that it is the very gap between theatre and philosophy that has fuelled the whole enterprise of thinking about the relation between them.

All this means that the study of theatre and philosophy should be understood as a practice of minding the gap between them because the gap is not a hindrance to be overcome but the very engine of the inquiry. Minding the gap means, thus, first of all abandoning the suspicion that the gap is the problem. On the contrary, for those of us who are interested in theatre and
philosophy, the gap is our friend. We must respect the gap, tend it, guard it, work on it, and even repair it, if necessary. If the gap goes, we go as well.

Minding the gap means detailing all the various ways in which it has been operative in the history of ideas, the many types of fantasies and projections and rivalries the gap has produced. These include the history of ridiculing philosophers onstage and philosophical anti-theatricalism, neither of which should be rejected as so many problems or prejudices from which we must be cured; rather, both should be accepted as part of the history of minding the gap. Even here, the gap is our friend.

What is not our friend is indifference. It is easy to find accounts of philosophy without an interest in theatre and accounts of theatre without an interest in philosophy. Such endeavours I would describe as ignoring the gap, as being unmindful of it. Against both of these alternatives, I recommend that being mindful of the gap is the principle around which the study of theatre and philosophy should revolve.

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NOTE

1 Unless otherwise specified, translations are the author’s own.

WORKS CITED


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ABSTRACT: The historical gulf and frequent antipathy between the practitioners of theatre and philosophy has been well documented. This article seeks to establish a framework for combining the two subjects that, rather than denying the gap between them, looks to that gap as a productive space. The first part of the article sketches a brief history of the engagement of the two disciplines, from Plato to contemporary academics, while noting that these successful engagements involve, not the erasure of the philosophical–theatrical boundary, but instead the deployment of one as a new lens through which to view the other. The article goes on to illustrate examples of the successful use of theatre in the work of several philosophers, then turns to thespians whose work productively engages philosophy. Each of these is considered, in turn, as an example of the practice of “minding the gap,” and the article calls for a continued interaction between theatre and philosophy that acknowledges their separation rather than trying to erase it.

KEYWORDS: theatre, philosophy, academic disciplines, critical methodologies

MARTIN PUCHNER is the Byron and Anita Wien Professor of Drama and of English and Comparative Literature as well as the founder and director of the Mellon School of Theatre and Performance Research at Harvard University. The general editor of the Norton Anthology of World Literature, his most recent book is The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy (2010), which won the Joe A. Callaway Prize for best book in drama or theatre.