AGITATED STATES



Anthony Kubiak

Ann Arbor

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS

> Copyright © by the University of Michigan 2002 All rights reserved Published in the United States of America by The University of Michigan Press Manufactured in the United States of America ® Printed on acid-free paper

2005 2004 2003 2002 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kubiak, Anthony, 1951-

Agitated states: performing in the national theaters of cruelty / Anthony Kubiak.

p. cm. — (Theater—theory/text/performance)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-472-09811-X (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-472-06811-3 (pbk. :

alk. paper)

1. Theater and society. 2. Theater—Political aspects. I.

Title. II. Series.

PN2049 .K83 2002

792—dc21 2001008271

For Susan

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

I would like to thank LeAnn Fields, my editor at the University of Michigan Press, for her belief in my work, and for her help and support under sometimes very difficult conditions. She is indisputably one of the most important forces in the growth of performance theory in the past decade. I would also like to thank Lawrence Buell for his early encouragement as I began this project, and for the help and support of others at Harvard during my years there: Werner Sollers, Philip Fisher, Marjorie Garber, and Elaine Scarry were especially kind and helpful to me.

Over the course of years, and especially in recent months, I would like to thank Herbert Blau for his continuing support and encouragement.

Since my coming to the University of South Florida, the support and respect of colleagues and friends has helped see this project to completion. I would like to thank William T. Ross, Sara Deats, Steven J. Rubin, and Philip Sipiora especially, as well as my graduate students, who have had to suffer through many of the ideas presented in this book more times than they deserve.

I would also like to thank all of the people at Inkwood Books, especially Carla Jimenez, Leslie Reiner, and Kamran Mir for their help and

Agitated States: Performance in the American Theater of Cruelty Anthony Kubiak $\begin{array}{ll} \text{Anthony Kubiak} \\ \text{http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=12051} \\ \text{The University of Michigan Press} & A CKNOWLEDGMENTS \\ \end{array}$

support: in the age of Borders and Barnes and Noble, many of us have forgotten the joy and indispensability of the small, committed, community bookstore. And finally, thank you to Susan and Daniel, who, as always, help me find and keep crucial perspective.

Portions of this book have appeared in *Modern Drama* 34, no. 1 (1991): 107–17; *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 12, no. 2 (1998): 15–34; *Drama Review* 42, no. 4 (1998): 91–114; and *Performance Research* "On Memory" (December 2000): 30–36.

CONTENTS

Prologue	xi		
Introduction/Second Manifesto: The American Theater of Cruelty	1		
ACT 1/Warning Signs			
$oldsymbol{1}$ Puritanism and the Early American Theaters of Cruelty	29		
2 The Resistance to Theater in the Conquest of America	53		
ACT 2/Confession			
3 Ripping Good Time: History, Blindsight, and Amnesic Thought	79		
f 4 Excursis: The Thought of an American Theater	109		
ACT 3/Convulsions			
5 What Child Is This? O'Neill, Albee, Shepard, and the Body of the Repressed	131		
6 Splitting the Difference: Performance and Its Double in American Culture	157		

ACT 4/Abdication

7	Nothing Doing	185
3	Epilogue	201
	Notes	205
	Bibliography	227
	Index	235

PROLOGUE

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

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

Agitated States: Performance in the American Theater of Cruelty Anthony Kubiak $\begin{array}{ll} \text{Anthony Kubiak} \\ \text{http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=12051} \\ \text{The University of Michigan Press} \\ \end{array} \begin{array}{ll} PROLOGUE \\ \end{array}$

hend it—by the duplicities of the theatrical: that *any* manifestation of the social (including critical theory) is at once theatrical.

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