

Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance

Volume 18

Article 2

December 2018

Interview with Bryan Reynolds

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Recommended Citation

Kujawińska Courtney, Krystyna (2018) "Interview with Bryan Reynolds," *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*: Vol. 18 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.18778/2083-8530.18.02

Available at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/multishake/vol18/iss33/2>

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Interview with Bryan Reynolds*

The interview has been conducted by
Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney (University of Łódź, Poland)

Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney (later as KKC):

Professor Reynolds, first of all, I would like to thank you for accepting our invitation to deliver your plenary lecture at the conference, “Experiment in Drama, Theatre, Film and Media,” organized at the University in Lodz in October 2017. Your lecture was the conference’s most important event, addressing directly the theory and practice of the current experiments in theatre. Could you, please, say how experimenting influences the idea of modern theater?

Bryan Reynolds (later as BR):

“Theater” means different things to different people, so a commonly-accepted definition would probably be hard to come by. However, we could probably identify elements that would be accepted by most people, even while not committing to a totalizing definition. These might be: 1) a real-time human-driven performance (as opposed to a film or an interactive video game, for instance); 2) the audience is live, experiencing the performance in real time; 3) the audience is aware that they are an audience to a performance; and 4) there is a clear distinction between performers and audience members. I might be able to come up with more elements, but I think these make the point that other than some basic structural elements, theater can be defined or can define a wide range of performance modes. For this reason, experimentation in theater works to broaden the scope of what might be considered theater, perhaps, as a result, presenting a clearer understanding of what theater is or could be. In fact, experimentation in theater emphasizes the drawbacks to trying to define and contain the potentially extraordinary force of theater, specifically what I refer to as theater’s “transversal power.”

For me, transversal power is any force, whether physical, material, ideological, aesthetic, emotional, conceptual, etc., that precipitates and drives deviations—“transversal movements”—from the norms and encodings of subjective and official territories. Reconfigurations of thought, emotion, and

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experience occur when subjectivity transgresses the parameters maintaining subjective territory—the conceptual, emotional, and physical scope through which people relate to the world based on how they’ve been socialized and subjugated. By extension, the surrounding organizational structures may also undergo reconfiguration. Transversal power is a catalyst for such transformations, its presence and influence measured by the transformations themselves.

“Experimentation” necessitates, by definition, deviation from established structures, codes, mechanisms, thought patterns, reasoning, etc. Because of this, experimentation in theater is likely to promote, however temporarily, transversal movements, and because theater itself has the capacity for tremendous transversal power, as seen in the impact of theater in early modern England (see my book, *Becoming Criminal*, for details on this), experimentation in theater has the potential to add layers upon layers of unpredictability, thereby generating a profundity to transversality in and through theater and its bearing on subjectivity, insofar as subjectivity remains transversal to the subject, in other words subjectivity crystallizes in the radicality of its departures from the subjective territory of dominant subjectivation and the official territory that this subjectivation mutually supports.

KKC:

You are a world-known critical theorist and performance theorist who developed a research methodology called “transversal poetics,” based on this idea of transversal power. Has this methodology stimulated your approach to experiments in theater?

BR:

Yes, in fact my development of transversal poetics inspired me to become a professional theater maker. This happened as I acknowledged the transversal power of theater in my research, as well as in my life, and this drove me to engage or tap into more immediately the source of this power with irresistible curiosity and enthusiasm and yet also with a naivety that was, I think, this research’s most valuable asset. At the time, I had no understanding of the remarkable forces I was tapping into. In retrospect, I see that the beginnings of this pursuit had a spiritual quality to it too, and not just artistic-political or critical-theory exploratory, that became ever more apparent in significant as time progressed, even though I was unwilling to acknowledge it back then. To explain this, it would be helpful for me to refer back briefly to the academic roots of transversal poetics, and then go beyond them.

As an undergraduate at UC Berkeley in the late 1980s, I was inspired by psychoanalytic feminism, poststructuralism, cultural materialism, and new historicism—the dominant approaches at Berkeley during that decade and into the 90s as well. Yet, as much as these critical approaches greatly influenced the

directions of my own work, some of their tenets dismayed me because they did not compute with my own life experience, registered untrue, were negative in formulation, disempowering of human agency, delimiting of thought, or offered little in the way of hope for positive changes in the world. The tenets included: 1) The repeated—almost unwavering—discovery by new historicists in their readings of literature and history of the subversion/containment paradigm, that is, the idea that governmental power fosters dissident activity so that it can suppress it in order to further consolidate its authority. This does not allow for any truly subversive accomplishments by minority or oppressed peoples, and therefore does not account for real changes. 2) That much poststructuralist theory denies individual agency and the agential subject. 3) The idea, following Freud, that lack causes desire. 4) The related idea shared by Lacanian post-Marxist psychoanalytic thinkers, like Louis Althusser, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Slavoj Žižek, and their followers, that subjectivity, like Freud's desire, is also predicated on lack and fueled by both desperation and an antagonistic relationship to natural, environmental processes. This negatively defines subjectivity as well as passion and reduces life to compensation. 5) The idea, grounded in Saussure, that we do and should define through negation utterances, words, symbols, signs, events, life, etc., and, by implicitly extension, that we should also define individuals, societies, and cultures through negation. This promotes an exclusionary logic of differentiation that typically is hierarchical and privileges one variable at the expense of the others. And 6) the over-determination placed by literary-cultural scholars on the value of arriving at totalized and reductive conclusions in both their research and pedagogy, such that complexity, emergences, and fugitive elements are commonly overlooked. All this was emphasized, mostly by contrast, as I also explored, while at Berkeley, many of the religious organizations and seminaries that comprise the Holly Hill neighborhood of North Berkeley, as well as other organizations around Berkeley and Oakland, such as the Hare Krishna's (who owned and shared the house I lived in on Hillegass Ave near People's Park), Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Center for Transcendental Meditation. I mention this because my research then was as much personal as academic and political. I've always been fascinated by people's faith in belief systems, endeavors in achieving higher or transcendent consciousness, and by processes of identity-formation and subcultural groupings. A vast array of influences during an intense-extensive period, and not just my desire to resolve the problems I mentioned regarding other critical approaches, contributed to the development of the combined socio-cognitive theory, performance aesthetics, and research methodology of transversal poetics. I began this enterprise, academically, while working on my dissertation in the early and mid-1990s at Harvard, and since then I have collaborated, as you

know, with a number of other scholars to improve upon and expand the range and significance of transversal poetics across several disciplines.¹

A number of philosophical, theoretical, and methodological positions and tactics have enabled transversal poetics to make what I believe are important interventions. These include: 1) That consciousness is emergent, processual, and effected through interactivity with the environment of which it is always already constituent. 2) Like consciousness, subjectivity is also emergent, processual, transversal to the subject, and crystallizes through interactivity with the environments, social and otherwise, through which it moves, relates, and navigates. 3) Individuals, whether or not as subjects or citizens, undergo willful becomings-others and non-willful comings-to-be others insofar as they interact with their environment. 4) The primary object of desire is desire itself, the exuberance of desire that fuels positive vitality. 5) People can harness transversal power, the power of change away from established structures, to realize their own subjective and personal aspirations. 6) State power, which is the power of coherence, can never be totalized or absolute, and is thus always susceptible to transversal power. 7) We can define utterances, words, symbols, signs, events, life, etc., positively through a process of positive differentiation, and thus emphasize emergence, presence, and potential (thereby resisting defining through negation). 8) The non-reductive, non-totalizing investigative-expansive mode of analysis (aka “i.e. mode”) seeks comprehension of the subject matter under analysis’s relationships to its environment as well as its integral qualities, and investigates diachronically, synchronically, and fantastically. It not only contextualizes critically both the researcher and subject matter, but also considers, subjunctively, “as-if” and “what-if” scenarios that might affect the investigation; in other words, it insists that subjunctive movement is crucial to the process. 9) The investigative-expansive mode is a tactic of fugitive explorations, that is, readings of a given text—with “text” understood as anything analyzable—that defy the authorities and authoritative institutions that reduce and contain meanings, both of the readings and of the text itself. And 10) fugitive explorers venture wherever they are drawn, reconstituting parameters accordingly, as they strive to uncover fugitive elements—human, narrative, thematic, semiotic, and so on—of the subject matter being examined and the environments in which it has been contextualized, particularly those that pressurize the authorities and, by extension, the communities necessary for the substantiation of the authorities’

¹ These include: Joseph Fitzpatrick, Donald Hedrick, James Intriligator, Courtney Lehmann, Kristin Keating, Anthony Kubiak, Lisa Starks, Ayanna Thompson, D.J. Hopkins, Catherine Ingman, Janna Segal, Henry Turner, Adam Bryx, Donovan Sherman, Christopher Marshall, George Light, William West, Cipriana Petre, Mark LeVine, Amy Cook, Anna Kłosowska, Sam Kolodezh, Glenn Odom, and Guy Zimmerman.

power. This process often leads fugitive explorers to endow agency where it had been wanting, evacuated, or forbidden.

Altogether, a transversal-poetics perspective invites and generates processual expansiveness of becomings as an ethos, praxis, and spirituality which inspire without limitations and nurture universality, most immediately, in consciousness and through interconnectedness, identification, empathy and compassion, and far, far beyond “consciousness” in everything else, known and unknown, perceived and imagined, and so on. As a poetics of life, there are no limits to what the transversal can generate or achieve. It includes all religions and modalities, but never resolves on any, other than the inclusive, expansive, positive, and creative forces of transversality itself.

KKC:

I must confess that at the beginning of your lecture I wondered where it would go. It was not a typical academic presentation, but a performance in its own right. You repeated certain phrases, stuttered, sat on the table, made funny movements, and all this was illustrated with controversial music and films. Hope you will not be offended, but since I had not had contact with you for a while I became at one point worried that maybe you went crazy. I believe the readers of this interview would appreciate your explanation of the technique you used at the beginning of your lecture?

BR:

Thank you for this question. The best way for me to answer it, is to say that my objective was to “tickle” the audience as foreplay to the remainder of my lecture, and, in the interest of further clarification, for me to repeat here the opening several minutes of my lecture, since they were a script that I had memorized, taken from my intermedial performance work, *Fractalicious!*, that I can easily recite, contextualized here by stage directions as I move along:

(Professor Reynolds waits nervously in a seat by the stage with his host. The theater is starkly lit. At some point, a host settles the audience and the music fades away. In prosaic form, the host introduces the awkward Reynolds.)

BRYAN

Thank you ... I am delight ... I am ... delighted to be ... delighted, here. *(whispering)* Fractalicious. We are here. It is important that we are ... Most important is that ... We are gathered, so that we can stop ... moving, move, slower, and slower ...

(Bryan dashes upstage and back. Electronic music and assorted mechanic sounds punctuate occasionally and then accompany Bryan. Bryan does not notice them. He regroupes.)

It is important that we become close, closer, ... get to know one another ... so close that ... Does the thought, thought ... Does the thought tickle you? Tickle you. Do you want to tickle me (*whispers*) Tickle me. Tickle.

What is tickle? To be close, but not too close. To move slow in anticipation of touch, but not to touch. To touch, but not too much, lightly, gingerly.

Once the touch is felt, firmly, and with duration, the tickle is gone. The thought is gone, the tickling thought, airy and light, and gone with delight.

Tickle: potential, anticipation, generates intensity, sometimes more tickle-intensity than tickling winds, ideas, or fingers have to offer. More intensity, more torture.

Tickle-torture. Can that be? Of course, kids do it all the time. Parents do it to them. So do lovers. But to death? Death by tickle. Tickle fun. Can one laugh—to death?

Ha, ha. Stop, ha ha, stop that, you're killing me.

Are the ticklish weaker or more fun, funner because they are weaker, or just more willing to resist or to surrender?

Surrender creates opportunities for ungoverned pleasure and expansions, for closeness and intimacy ... sweet surrender. (*whispers*) I want to ... sweet surrender. Sweet surrender.

He's so h-h-h-h-h-h-h-hot. So is she. Oh, look at that. Legs, ass, eyes, ears, lips. You make me hot.

Is this a matter of temperature, is it caloric, or about intensity? Heat tickles. Tickling causes heat. Repeat, repeat, repeat. The anticipation of pain is like the anticipation of pickles. When you see that hot guy or girl, and your heart races, do you move slower or faster? Does time slow down or speed up? Does the object get closer or further away? (*whispers*) Come to me. Come on.

Intensity and heat increase with focus. Channeling the sun's rays through a magnifying glass, cooking the object. What's cookin' good lookin'? You're so hot. (*whispers*) I want to eat you.

The potentially tickled relishes in the anticipation, the pre-tickle tickle, the virtual tickle, that is sometimes more intense than the actual tickle, which lingers on no-tickle, when the tickle transitions into touch, plain old touch. No one wants to be plain. (*whispers*) Give me pain. Give me pain. Pain.

Anticipation depends on previous experience with the experience, virtual or actual. If one has not had an orgasm, he cannot anticipate it properly, but he can know when it happens.

The same goes for tickling, and pain, the force of the whip, the burning cigarette against virgin skin. (*whispers*) Don't be shy. Relax. Don't worry, it will hurt a lot.

I repeat myself when I am distressed. I repeat myself when I am distressed. I repeat myself when I am distressed. I repeat ... myself. Distressed.

Repetition reinforces knowledge and memory, but it also causes breakdown, and entropy. We are machines. To subvert the entropic power of repetition is to subvert nature.

To understand repetition as always involving difference is to subvert tautology and boredom. Nothing is identical, nothing, nothing is identical, nothing, nothing, nothing is identical, to itself, to itself, itself, itself, nothing, itself, not, identical to itself, nothing is, not, not, not not in the constant flow, nothing is identical, spacetime, not in spacetime, nothing, nothing is identical, not to itself, itself, not. To understand breakdown and change as creative opportunity, breakdown, change, break, down, breakdown, down break, down, change up, as productive shifts in flows, paths, substances, and connections, is to roll, toooooo roll, roll, roll, is to roll, with roll, roll with, positive differences, is to roll with positive differences. R-r-r-r-r-r-roll. (*whispers*) Roll, roll, roll.

People ignorant to this get bored, more distant, sluggish, both slower and further away, lonely, defeated, and static. They cry.

The intensity to closeness passes them by, their slowness devoid of vibrations and creativity, their speed gone unnoticed. They die.

But what happens when our connections to others, to humans and to things, to the environment, become closer, more intense, slower because of increased intensity, faster because of vibrations?

Is this the tickle or the joy of sex, of happiness, and of pain, of the extreme in extreme sports, in extreme life? Is this what it means to be inspired, passionate, exuberant? Is this not what we all want? Exuberance.

When the wing-suited base jumper jumps and flies, does she anticipate? All eyes. Pure experience, pure affect, no time for anticipation. Speed. Pure proprioception. No needs. Everything happens too fast. No thought, no process. She reacts to the vibrations, syncs with the environment.

When the free skier jets down harrowing cliffs on which no object could rest, movement is mandatory, but not necessarily fast or slow (this is relative to control), she experiences. Pure intensity, all tickle, vibrations, closeness to death, slowness in that the whole world, the universe, is present, death, myopic, streamlined, possibly too fast or too slow to navigate.

The free skier goes viscerallelectric; pushes fractalactic—motored-consciousness.

Does what, goes how?

Hold on, slow down, you're going too fast, too hot, for me to maintain my frames, for me to grasp and control the meanings. It's hot in here.

Please, hose us off with some delicious transversal terms. Cool us down. You shower us with transversal poetics. Now feed us frozen grapes, strawberries, mangos, and kiwis. Let them melt in our mouths. Yes, okay, slow motion, close up, extremely slow, incredibly close. Action.

KKC:

I believe we can say that the theatre you talk about at your lecture and also performed can be classified as post-dramatic. Am I right? Or maybe there is a different name for this kind of experimental theatre?

BR:

It is post-dramatic, insofar as it is predominantly non-dialogic, non-representational, not naturalistic or realistic predominantly, often gives equal value to design elements as much as to the performances by actors on the stage, etc., but it is also, or perhaps predominantly, *intermedial*. It was designed, however successfully, to affect audiences on deep levels—cognitively, neurochemically, emotionally, physically, in other words, viscerally, intellectually, electrically—to be sure, “viscerallelectrically” (visceral+ intellectual+ electric). As I describe in detail, with many examples from contemporary European theater, in my recent book, *Intermedial Theater*, intermedial theater blends consciousnesses, subjectivities, genres, themes, narratives, codes, histories, spacetimes, design elements, and/or performance styles so that no one feature is significantly prioritized throughout, such as the present, naturalistic dialogue, or dance, and each feature has potentially equal value in concert with others, thereby making the performance more of a symphony of features, humans, animals, and objects working together, rather than design elements (props, music, lights) supporting performances by humans on stage. Contrary to arguments often made about realistic or naturalistic theater, in which the performances by actors resemble people interacting in everyday life or on television sitcoms and dramas, intermedial theater might more accurately reflect the way people normally engage the world. This is because all of the variables represented in theater are already blended in our everyday lives, in society, in the world, such that noise reduction, filtering, and synthezation, that is, reductionism is the privileged and most common method by which people identify, distill, or manufacture sense and order. People want to reduce unpredictability and structure experience in this interest, so that improvisation, and the surprises it precipitates, are willfully invited or chosen matters of luxury, rather than coping mechanisms born out of necessity or fear. Therefore, noodling

anything, much less the nodals on which we often teeter affectively as a result of various kinds of dynamic engagements, is systematically avoided, unless regulated and performed within clearly delineated parameters, such as when performing standup comedy, playing soccer or ultimate frisbee, collaboratively sailing a boat, driving a car on state roads, and when giving a speech at a wedding. Throughout the short span of the lecture I gave, just as in my own life, I discourage such avoidance in favor of noodling the nodals emergent within established networks by which subjective and official territories are maintained. An important goal of which is to generate conditions for exuberance.

KKC:

Does your theatre, the Transversal Theatre Company, also present such performances? Could you, please, tell us more about it?

BR:

Yes, producing such performances is the driving force behind the Transversal Theater Company. The Amsterdam-based Transversal Theater Company is an ensemble of adventurous, politically-engaged artists who are committed to developing a transversal praxis of consciousness, subjectivity, alterity, performance, and social change combined with an “investigative-expansive” performance methodology (we often teach workshops on “transversal acting” methods—in fact, we have taught at the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław). Like transversal poetics, Transversal Theater pursues comprehension of the intricate workings of a given society’s or societies’ organizing machinery—and thus the consciousnesses that together comprise it—in the interest of making individuals more aware of the ideational and material means by which their own subjectivity and the subjectivities of others have been formed and are maintained. Transversal Theater encourages conceptual-emotional-physical movements and experiences, even “unexperienceable experiences,” outside of established parameters and therefore against personal and societal constraints. It promotes such alternative thinking, feeling, and performance, which expands subjective territory and consciousness and creates more cognizant individuals with enhanced self-empowerment. By blending, intermedially, typically distinct theatrical styles—from abstract expressionism to musical surrealism—and combining intense dramatic action with rigorous philosophical and spiritual engagement, Transversal Theater tries to motivate audiences and actors to venture investigative-expansively into subjunctive and transversal spacetimes that challenge determination, structures, dispositions, and systems in order to inspire learning, compassion, and evolution. This is what I hoped to accomplish with my lecture. As you know, the Transversal Theater Company has toured several shows to Poland, including *Woof, Daddy* to Szczecin, Poznan, and Warsaw in 2005, *Blue Shade* to Wrocław, Legnica, and Łódź in 2007, and

Lumping in Fargo to Chorzów and the 12th International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk in 2008. We love to bring performances to Poland because Polish audiences are more receptive to experimental theater. Moreover, we love to come to Poland because, in our opinion, Poland, generally speaking, produces the most exciting theater in the world, along with Romania.

KKC:

As your curriculum vitae indicates you are not only an author of many very important academic books, but also a playwright. Are your latest plays written as the experimental pieces?

BR:

In addition to *Fractalicious!*, which is very much experimental, my most recent new play, *Nabi Saleh*, which is a quasi-musical about the occupation of Palestine, specifically the village of Nabi Saleh, is an intermedial work, and therefore experimental in this regard. We produced an initial version of *Nabi Saleh* in March 2015 at the Cinema Jenin Theatre, Palestine, as a workshop collaboration between the Transversal Theater Company and Palestine's Jenin Freedom Theatre.

The idea for the play came from an experience I had in Nabi Saleh at a protest against the occupation. Every Friday afternoon for almost 8 years, since 2010, the weekly protest in Nabi Saleh began, as it did for me, my collaborator Mark LeVine (in my research on political groups in high conflict zones which use performance as a mode of political activism), and a host of journalists on 21 March 2014, in the home of Bilal Tamimi, one of the leaders of the Nabi Saleh Solidarity, a grassroots organization at the heart of Nabi Saleh, a centuries-old village of about six-hundred people that is a frontline community of resistance in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian struggle over territory in the West Bank. The weekly event comprises a tragic, adrenaline-soaked theater—carefully directed by Tamimi—of the seeming absurd yet powerfully political protest against ongoing land seizures, home demolitions, arrests, and other violence suffered by the local community. It is a microcosm not merely or even mostly of the violence, but equally of the positive and even transcendent power of grassroots, inter-, trans- and in many ways post-national resistance. Palestinians, Israeli and international activists, artists, journalists, and ordinary people come to stand against teargas, rubber-coated steel and lead/live bullets, sound grenades, and bulldozers, all of which are often deployed by the Israeli military.

Before and after the protest that day, and the next day, Mark and I interviewed members of the Nabi Saleh community about their relationship to the weekly protests (which is mixed), issues they regularly contend with, and their perspective on the role of children in the protests (many of all ages participate). It is from these interviews that I wrote the play, *Nabi Saleh*, about the struggles of Palestinians in their everyday lives, with much focus on

a character based on Ahd Tamimi, a young villager who is often a leader in the protests. The performance activism in Nabi Saleh on the part of everyone involved in the protests—all sides—is also the subject of a chapter to the book, *Art at the Edge: Creativity and Conflict in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia*, which Mark and I are currently writing for the University of California Press.

KKC:

I am intrigued, as a Shakespeare scholar, with your approach to Shakespeare, especially your adaptations of *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Titus Andronicus*. To what extent do your interventions in the Elizabethan texts reveal your transversal methodology and experiments in theatre and drama?

BR:

It was through studying early modern English drama, especially Shakespeare, that I became aware of the transversal power of theater. In my book, *Becoming Criminal*, as well as in my 1997 *Theatre Journal* article, “The Devil’s House, ‘Or Worse,” which is an earlier version of the fifth chapter to the book, I describe how the transversal power of theater influenced the performative nature of both criminal operations (when people pretended to be different social identities in the interest of perpetrating crimes) and alternative subcultures (such as seen in the fashion of women cross-dressing as men). I don’t think I would have become a professional theater maker, or theorist of subjectivity and consciousness, had I not studied Shakespeare. I’m indebted to my teachers as well, most notably Marjorie Garber and Stephen Greenblatt (I studied with Stephen from undergrad through my PhD), for their guidance and openness to my development of transversal poetics while studying under their tutelage.

KKC:

Thank you again very much for your innovative and impressive lecture. I found it a great privilege to talk with you about your methodology and great theatrical and dramatic achievements.