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**Performing the World: The Emergence of Performance Activism**

By Dan Friedman and Lois Holzman

*The Performance Turn in Social Change Activism*

The performance turn is widely acknowledged. The premise that all (or much) of human practices are performed, that humans, through performance, function as the active social constructors of their world is not only embodied in the discipline of performance studies, but has become part of the dialogue in anthropology, linguistics, ethnography, folklore, psychology, sociology, and history.[[1]](#endnote-1) What is generally less recognized, both by scholars and by political activists themselves, is the performance turn in social activism.

The corruption and collapse of the Communist revolutions of the 20th Century have called into question the value of ideology (in particular) and cognition and knowledge (in general) to provide a way out of the developmental dead ends—pervasive poverty, constant warfare and violence, the rapidly expanding gaps in wealth and opportunity—that appear to have trapped humanity. [[2]](#endnote-2) Acknowledging this, a growing number of political and social activists, community and youth organizers, progressive and critical educators and therapists, and others around the globe have been turning to performance as a way of engaging social problems, activating communities, and experimenting with new social and political possibilities. This shift looks different in different cultures and political environments. Whatever the differences, however, the performance shift is allowing social change activists in both modern and traditional cultures to organize not around a set of ideas, an ideology, but to create, through performance, something new with what exists. In our view, the performance turn has the potential to be socially and culturally transformative/revolutionary precisely because performance, consciously practiced in daily life, is, by its nature, a creative social activity that allows human beings to break out of old roles and old rules.[[3]](#endnote-3)

This chapter will focus on one manifestation of the performance turn, Performing the World (PTW), seven conferences that have taken place since 2001. PTW has served as a cross-disciplinary gathering of performance practitioners and scholars from every continent, many of them grassroots community organizers. It not only provides the opportunity for participants to learn from and inspire each other, but also to create informal international networks and collaborations. PTW has brought together a wide range of individuals, organizations, approaches and experiences and thus can provide a useful introduction to and overview of the performance phenomenon emerging around the world. Further, the unique origins of PTW in a radically humanistic, socio-cultural, therapeutic approach to human development and community organizing have given a particular shape to its contribution to the spread of performance activism.

In unpacking the origins and development of PTW and in analyzing the larger performance turn in social activism, the authors draw upon their insider position. Both are leaders of the performance community that initiated and organizes PTW and both have been engaged in performance activism for three decades. Holzman, a developmental psychologist, along with the late Fred Newman, is the founder and remains the key organizer of PTW. Friedman is the artistic director of the Castillo Theatre in New York City, and as such he has interfaced extensively with the theatre world relative to performance activism and scholarship.

Performance activism has a number of distinct, albeit related, origins. Theatre is one vital source—both political and educational theatre. Another source is the performance turn in psychology and the social sciences, part of the larger embrace of performance associated with some versions of postmodernism. A third is to be found in the grassroots community and political organizing led by Fred Newman and his colleagues in New York City beginning in the early 1970s.

*Political and Experimental Theatre*

We begin with political theatre, a term that itself has a myriad of meanings and reference points. Most relevant in regard to the emergence of performance activism, is political theatre as a mass amateur activity which emerged in the years immediately following World War I and the Russian Revolution in both Germany and the Soviet Union with the support and encouragement of the communist movement. Agit-prop troupes (short for agitation and propaganda) were made up of mostly urban workers who created and rehearsed short plays after work. The agit-prop plays were mobile, used few props or costume pieces, and consisted primarily of choral recitation, choreographed mass movement and stock, cartoon-like characters. They were performed primarily at political rallies, union and community meetings and on the streets. They flourished first in Germany and the Soviet Union and eventually in many other countries through the mid-1930s.[[4]](#endnote-4)

While they didn’t survive the repression of the Nazis or Stalin’s shifting cultural policy, the significance of the agit-prop movement in regard to this discussion is that it established that performance and theatre were creative activities that ordinary people could actively participate in. One didn’t need intensive, specialized training to act or to create original theatre that embodied the lives, concerns and politics of its creators.

The political and cultural upheavals of the 1960s saw the re-emergence of amateur political theatre, this time created primarily by college students, again, primarily using public spaces—streets, student unions, and at rallies. One variant of sixties political theatre that pointed most clearly in the direction of what we are here calling performance activism was “guerrilla theatre,” which consisted of staged conversations or actions done in public space in which the audience was unaware that it was watching or involved in a performance (for example, holding a loud performed conversation about the Vietnam War on a crowded subway car). Guerrilla Theatre purposely blurred the line between daily life and theatre/performance. The legacy of guerrilla theatre can be seen most clearly in groups like the Guerrilla Girls, Improv Everywhere and the Yes Men, as well as in the phenomena of flash mobs.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Two developments in the professional avant-garde of the late sixties also contributed to the loosening of the ties that had bound performance for so long to the institutional confines of the theatre.

One was environmental theatre, pioneered by Richard Schechner’s Performance Group (1967-80). Environmental theatre is theatre that works to eliminate the distinction between the audience’s and the actors’ space. The performance takes place in, around, and among the audience in a shared space. Environmental theatre has had an ongoing impact on the aesthetics of mainstream theatre, most obviously in the hundreds of “site specific” theatre projects that take place every year in North America and Europe. The significance of this experimentation, which was influenced by Schechner’s study of performance in tribal and traditional societies, is the expansion of the performance space beyond the stage.[[6]](#endnote-6) Schechner, not surprisingly, went on to help found performance studies.

Another development in the experimental theater of the sixties that helped to lay the groundwork for the performance turn in activism is what might be called the ritualization of theatre. Of course, all theatre, including the most “realist” is, on many levels, ritual. What we’re referring to here are the efforts by the Living Theatre and others to transform the dynamic of the theatre from one in which actors perform a story to a passive audience, into one in which actors and audience both take part (mostly in prescribed ways) in a performed ritual. The performers thus function more as shamans than actors. The challenge here being that shamanism depends on a shared belief structure by all involved, not usually the case in the temporary community that comes into being for a night’s performance in contemporary modern society. These experiments in ritualizing theatre can be traced back theoretically to the writing of Antonin Artaud[[7]](#endnote-7) and experientially to the mass demonstrations of the sixties. These demonstrations, mass performances enacted in streets, engendered a spirit of community among like-minded people through the ritualized performance of chanting, singing, and confronting police authority. Relative to the development of performance activism, these experiments helped to make clear (as agit-prop did a generation earlier) the possibility of performance by non-actors and to tie this conviction to a progressive politic.

Beyond these experiments in the theatre of the sixties, something must be said here about the pervasive and continuing impact of the sixties counter culture, which was profoundly performatory. Young people grew their hair and beards, put flowers in their hair and chose their costumes carefully, usually as a response to the conformism of middle class life. Many even changed their names. People were working to re-create/re-perform themselves and through this daily performance create new possibilities for themselves and the world. Indeed, we would argue that the overall politic of the counter culture was premised on the assumption that creating more growthful and cooperative performances—be that by living in communes or having non-monogamous, non-possessive sexual relationships—would impact on the larger society by example. However naïve that assumption, the lasting impact of trying to change the world by performing differently in daily life was not lost on those who would go on to create the performance activism of the Performing the World community.

*Educational Theatre*

In addition to political and experimental theatre, a second theatrical stream flowing into the emerging river of performance activism has been educational theatre. Like political theatre, educational theatre has many manifestations and meanings. Broadly speaking, it has come to refer to both the use of theatre as an educational tool in schools and the use of theatre to educate an audience outside the frame of formal educational institutions. In this latter sense educational theatre has given birth to Theatre for Development, a termed used primarily in Africa and Asia, to describe explicitly didactic theatre produced to educate communities on subjects ranging from birth control and HIV/AIDS to agricultural techniques to gender violence, etc. Often this theatre work is funded by European based NGOs or religious organizations that see theatre as a tool in the arsenal of helping the poor country to “develop,” hence the label.

Closely related to (and often overlapping with) educational theatre is “theatre for social change,” a label more often used in the wealthy countries, particularly the United States, for theatre functioning at the grassroots level, often outside of formal theater buildings, with the goal of fostering social change. In some ways it is the contemporary manifestation of the agit-prop and street theatre traditions of the 20th Century, although it is usually created by trained theatre artists who bring plays and/or the theatre making process into communities from the outside.

The most influential current within this stream is Theatre of the Oppressed in all its multiplying variations. Much has been written about Theatre of the Oppressed in this volume and elsewhere, and so we will be brief. In our view, Boal’s most radical contribution relative to performance activism is the designation of audience members as “spec-actors,” who are encouraged to intervene in the performance. While the Theatre of the Oppressed does not go as far as bringing performance off the stage into daily life, it does encourage the non-actor to take the stage. According to the Theatre of the Oppressed International Organization there are Theatre of the Oppressed groups active in 61 countries.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Another current in the mix of contemporary theatre for social change is Playback Theatre, founded in 1975 by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas. Playback groups are now active in 50 countries. Playback uses improvisation to bring people’s lived experiences directly onto the stage. Typically, it involves the actors asking audience member to share stories from their lives, sometimes related to trauma, which the actors then “playback,” turning the stories into scenes on the spot. The improvised performances most often then lead to further discussion between the actors and the audience.[[9]](#endnote-9)

In recent years these various tendencies within educational theatre and theatre for social change—Theatre for Development, Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback Theatre and many other variants—have, for the most part, embraced a common identity as “Applied Theatre.” The label refers to the common approach of *applying* theatre as a tool to teach, engage communities, spark conversations, etc. about social, political, educational and cultural issues. Many practitioners who identity with this label, and for whom applied theatre and theatre activism are synonymous, have made PTW their home over the past decade.

*Performative Psychology*

Another source of performance activism is the coming together of on-the-ground community organizing for progressive social change with the emergence of a performance turn within psychology and the other social sciences.

Among academics and practitioners critical of the social-scientific mainstream (on ethical, political and/or scientific grounds) who make a shift from a natural science based and individualistic approach to understanding human life to a more cultural and relational approach, some have come to understand human life as primarily performatory or performative. While these terms have different origins, senses and reference in different disciplines, today both terms broadly connote that people are performers and the world a series of “stages” upon which we create the millions of scripted and improvised scenes of our lives. Contrary to mainstream psychology’s premise that the essential feature of human beings is our cognitive ability (often accompanied by a subordination of our affective ability), performative psychology puts performance “center stage.” To performative theorists, researchers and practitioners, people’s ability to perform—to pretend, to play, to improvise, to be who we are and “other” than who we are—is simultaneously cognitive and emotive. It is seen as an essential human characteristic, essential to our emotional-social-cultural-intellectual lives—but dramatically overlooked by mainstream psychology.

This shift has breathed new life into qualitative research within the social sciences, spawning the methodology known as “performative social science” or “performative inquiry.” The methodology takes two directions: 1) a newly evolving method of inquiry/research (i.e., performative ways of doing social science);[[10]](#endnote-10) and 2) an alternative understanding and practice of relating to human beings (i.e., a practical-critical methodology based in the human capacity to perform).[[11]](#endnote-11)

Performance as a Method of Inquiry: Performing Social Science

The activity of developing alternative modes of communicating psychological concepts, research and practices originated in the work of Ken and Mary Gergen[[12]](#endnote-12) and a few other qualitative researchers.[[13]](#endnote-13) Today, such innovators can be found in more than a dozen countries. Performative inquiry/performative social science involves breaking out of the typical stodgy academic performance of text, graphs, tables and Power Points. As defined by the Gergens, performative social science is “the deployment of different forms of artistic performance in the execution of a scientific project. Such forms may include art, theater, poetry, music, dance, photography, fiction writing, and multi-media applications. Performance-oriented research may be presented in textual form, but also before live audiences, or in various media forms (film, photographs, websites).”[[14]](#endnote-14)

Central to this endeavor is the need to develop awareness among social scientists that making statements about psychological acts doesn’t represent reality but rather is an expressive act. This draws upon the philosopher John Searle’s now classic work, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, in which he highlighted the performative nature of language, i.e., that utterances perform various social functions over and above conveying content.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Performance as a New Ontology: People Perform Their Lives

The other direction performative inquiry takes is relating to people as performers by studying the human activity of performing in its endless varieties and by creating opportunities for people to perform in new ways. For example, there are practitioners who, recognizing the emotional and social growth that occurs when people create together theatrically on stage, use theatrical performance techniques in non-theatrical settings to support the expression of people’s creativity and sociality in all areas of their lives. Included here are various nontraditional therapies, including psychodrama, social constructionist, collaborative and narrative approaches.[[16]](#endnote-16) There are also educators who have made this performance turn, becoming attentive to creativity as *socially performed* and learning itself as a creative activity. Some relate explicitly to teaching and learning as improvisational[[17]](#endnote-17) and develop performatory practices of student-teacher engagement.[[18]](#endnote-18)

It is this direction of performative psychology that was taken by the community we the authors are part of. We became convinced that performing in new ways is key to ongoing human development, and that ongoing human development is a necessary bi-condition of global cultural and political transformation.[[19]](#endnote-19) Our unique brand of performance activism links performance inextricably to human and community growth and development. PTW was born as an organizing tactic of this community, and so we now offer a brief intellectual history of its activities.

This community of activists began by working in the poorest communities of New York City in the 1970s and has gone on to organize middle class and wealthy people to work with us to support poor people to develop and provide leadership to the process of positive social change, free of government, corporate or university dependence. This organizing has led to, among many other things, the development of outside of school youth programs, a theatre, a research and training center, social therapy practices, independent electoral campaigns and organizations on a national, and increasingly, international stage.[[20]](#endnote-20)

In the course of nearly four decades of this work, we have come to an understanding of performance as a transformative, developmental activity. We understand performance to be the universal human capacity to be both who we are and who we are not at the same time. It is this ability, we believe, that allows human beings to develop beyond instinctual and socially patterned behavior. This understanding of performance changes the very nature of social change activism.

In coming to this understanding/practice of performance, our organizing experience was enriched by both Newman’s training in analytical philosophy, the philosophy of science and the foundations of mathematics under the mentorship of Donald Davidson at Stanford University, and Holzman’s training in developmental psychology, psycholinguistics and cultural-historical activity theory (the latter as a post-doc researcher at Michael Cole’s Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition at Rockefeller University)—and by the embrace by Newman, Holzman, et al of the early methodological writings of Marx, the later writings of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky.

From Marx we took his dialectical methodology and insistence that human beings are not isolated individuals: “As society itself produces man as man, so it is produced by him. Activity and mind are social in their content as well as in their origin: they are social activity and social mind.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

Second, we took from Marx that the transformation of the world and of ourselves as human beings is one and the same task: “The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Revolutionary practice, we came to understand from Marx, is not so much the organizing toward a specific goal as it is a new conception of method, a conception of method that involves a unity of human beings and the world we’ve created/are re-creating.[[23]](#endnote-23)

From Wittgenstein, we came to an understanding of the limitations of language, and by extension, of ideology. Wittgenstein, in his later work, created a radically new method of doing philosophy, one without foundations, premises, generalizations or abstractions.[[24]](#endnote-24) His work exposed “the pathology” embedded in language and in accepted conceptions of language, thoughts and emotions. These linguistic/philosophical pathologies permeate everyday life and create intellectual-emotional muddles, as people look for: causes, correspondences, rules, parallels, generalities, theories, interpretations, explanations for our thoughts, words and verbal deeds—even when we are not trying to or trying not to! Getting out of these traps, we gradually concluded, required something other than language. It required performance.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Vygotsky[[26]](#endnote-26) brought Marx to bear on issues of human, particularly childhood, development and learning and formulated Marx’s dialectical method in the following manner:

“The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study.”[[27]](#endnote-27)

Continuing to build on Marx’s dialectical method, Newman and Holzman expanded Vygotsky’s statement of method and posited that human beings not only make and use tools but we also make new kinds of tools—*tool-and-result tools.* In fact, people develop through tool-and-result method. Vygotsky showed how little children become speakers of a language by playing language games with us, and in their pretend play. In both activities the tool or process, and result or product, come into existence together.

Vygotsky said; “In play it is as though a child is a head taller than he is. Play is a leading factor in development.”[[28]](#endnote-28) He is telling us that in play, we are who we are *and* who we are becoming *at the same time*. He noted that children learn by playing with the adults and older children around them, creating performances of learning. Newman and Holzman[[29]](#endnote-29) building on this and looking at the organizing work being done by hundreds of their colleagues—in therapeutics, youth organizing, theatre building, independent politics—came to realize that human development happens, not just with children, but with people of all ages, when we relate to them as “a head taller,” that is, as who they are becoming. Just as a baby and mother perform conversation before the baby speaks correctly, school age children can perform reading or math or science before they know how, and adults can learn how to run their world by performing power.

The babbling baby, the actor on the stage, the student in a school play, the researcher singing her data, and all of us—are capable of creating new performances of ourselves continuously if we choose to. That’s our understanding of how development happens—through the social-cultural activity of people together creating new possibilities and new options for how to be in, relate to, understand and change the world, which, of course, includes ourselves.

Relating to each other “a head taller” than ourselves is what the performance community that created PTW does with thousands of inner-city children and adolescents, with people in emotional distress, with adults who want to learn to be better parents—with each other, with everyone. We all have the capacity to play as children do, to do what we do not yet know how to do, to be who we are and other than who we are at the same time. This is performance. Performing is taking what exists and creating something new out of it. This is our performance activism.

*Our Performance Activism on the Ground*

The theoretical work outlined above has been done under the aegis of the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy (founded by Holzman and Newman) (<http://www.eastsideinstitute.org>), which has functioned as the conduit/interface between the community organizing and the performance turn in psychology and other social sciences. A non-profit education, research and training center located in New York City, the Institute has introduced and organized thousands of educators, mental health and medical workers, scholars and community organizers across the globe to the performance turn in general and the performance approach outlined here, through online and NYC-based courses, study and training programs, international events and scholarly writings. It is through the Institute that PTW was launched.

One key Institute activity is the ongoing research and extension of social therapy, which Newman began practicing and developing in the late 1970s. As the *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* (in press) describes it, “Like other radical therapies of the time in the U.S. and Great Britain, social therapy engaged the authoritarianism, sexism, racism, classism and homophobia of traditional psychotherapy. However, from its beginning, social therapy also rejected the conceptions of explanation, interpretation, the notion of an inner self (that therapists and clients need to delve into) and other dualistic and otherwise problematic foundations of traditional psychology.”[[30]](#endnote-30)

From the beginning, social therapy has been a group therapy, in which building the ensemble, as distinct from analyzing the individual, is considered the curative, development activity. While its language was not, in its early days, performatory, the building of the group was always approached as a creative activity. The social therapist’s task is to lead the group in discovering/creating a method of relating to emotional talk relationally rather than individualistically. Conversation becomes a collective meaning-making activity rather than a representation of “reality” or an expression of inner feelings. In this process people come to appreciate what (and that) they can create, and simultaneously to realize the limitations of trying to learn and grow individually. The traditional therapeutic question, “How are you (each individual) feeling?” transforms to “How well is the group performing its activity?” The parallels to a director leading the devising of a play are clear, and as social therapy advanced, its understanding (and the language) of performance came to the fore.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Out of the experience of social therapy—embracing its group-building activity based on conversation and improvisation—emerged social therapeutics, a methodological approach to organizing for social change and development in which human beings are related to as creators of their culture and ensemble performers of their lives. Increasingly, over the last two decades, social therapeutics has understood the core of its method to be performance and its core activity as that of bringing performance and play into daily life. The social therapeutic approach to learning and development is being used in therapy offices, clinics, hospitals, classrooms, after-school programs, workplaces, and communities worldwide, and it has informed the organizations, projects and productions of our performance community.

The All Stars Project (ASP) (<http://www.allstars.org>) has greatly expanded the social therapeutic performance approach. Founded in 1980 by Newman and developmental psychologist and community and political activist Lenora Fulani, the ASP is a non-profit almost totally funded by individual contributions. Under the leadership of Gabrielle L. Kurlander, who has been its president and CEO since 1990, the ASP has expanded from a local New York City talent show raising money on the streets to one of the leading youth development efforts in the United States. She has built a fund raising operation, based on building strong relationships and the active participation of donors, that has raised some $50 million for its performance based programs, and interfaced with educators and policy makers. Among its activities are three free after-school youth programs, a university-style free school of continuing development for people of all ages, and the Castillo Theatre, an experimental community-based political theatre.

The oldest and largest of the ASP projects is the All Stars Talent Show Network (ASTSN), which is active in New York City, Newark, New Jersey, Chicago, Illinois and the San Francisco Bay Area in California. Starting as a modest event in church basement in the South Bronx in the early 1980s, today the ASTSN involves approximately 10,000 young people aged 5 to 25 each year who produce and perform in talent shows in high school auditoriums. These shows often involve hundreds of performers in scores of acts and audiences of up to 1,500 people from their communities. Each show involves an organizing process of street outreach, auditions (everyone gets in), workshops during which the young people devise skits, or create collective poems, or write and perform letters to historic figures and, in the process, have their understanding of performance deepened—and the show itself. Those who are not interested in performing on stage have the opportunity to perform the roles of stagehand, usher, sound technician and producer.

The Development School for Youth is a year-long training and enrichment program functioning in four U.S. cities in partnership with corporate executives to provide “cosmopolitanizing” business and cultural experiences, leadership training and paid internships to young people ages 16 to 21. The program gives working class youth the experience of trying out the performance of the business world, in the process discovering that they *can* create new performances, all kinds of new performances.

Youth Onstage! is the ASP’s performance school and youth theatre. It provides young people with some of the tools of the theatre—most importantly, we think, improvisation and ensemble building—to make use of in their daily lives.

The most recent organizational project of this community is UX, a free school for adults, where the most popular courses are Improv for Everyone, Acting for Everyone and Public Speaking. In its first two years, it has had nearly 2,000 students, 80% of them overwhelmingly Black and Latino. What all of these programs and activities have in common is encouraging participants to build social ensembles within which they can perform (as distinct from simply behave) in their daily lives.

The Castillo Theatre (<http://www.castillo.org>) was founded in 1983 as a theatre for the activist community being organized in New York. From the beginning it was an attempt to give poor and working people a way of creating performances that reflected their lives and perspectives. Under the leadership of Newman, who served as its artistic director and playwright in residence from 1989 to 2005, Castillo became, more explicitly, a means of liberating performance from the constraints of the institution of the theatre. Newman’s experience at Castillo as an actor, director and playwright also had significant impact on his understanding of performance as a transformative activity.

*A Brief History of Performing the World*

This is the context in which the Performing the World organizing activity and its conferences emerged, initially as a coming together of the academic turn to performance in psychology and other social sciences, represented by the Gergens, and the on-the-ground work of helping people to create new performances off stage, represented by Newman and Holzman.

Their first collaboration was the 1997 conference titled “Unscientific Psychology: Conversations with Other Voices” that the Institute hosted, and which featured the Gergens as well as other postmodern and critical psychologists.[[32]](#endnote-32) The idea was to explore whether and how post-scientific and postmodern psychology could impact on the social and political issues facing the world’s people. About 150 practitioners, academics and community activists from 17 countries attended; most of them were drawn to the topic because they themselves were experimenting with non-traditional approaches or developing critical alternative theories. The format was designed to create new kinds of conversations, mixing the usual academic fare with experimental experiential/performatory activities. On Day One, there were eight formal presentations by the Gergens, Newman, Holzman and other leading postmodern and critical psychologists. Day Two consisted of two kinds of performance: participants broke into three groups to pursue further the topics from Day One and to create performances out of their discussions and display them on the stage; and Newman led a workshop in which participants created and performed an improvised play based on their lives.[[33]](#endnote-33)

At the same time, as part of their experimentation using performance to present postmodern ideas to audiences of psychologists, the Gergens included Newman and Holzman in their Performative Psychology symposia at American Psychological Association (APA) Conventions in the late 1990s. These symposia included plays, several by Newman (ref), poetry, dance, comedy and other performance genre, all addressing topics relevant to psychologists. Newman continued to write plays for presentation at APA conventions over the next few years.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The success of these ventures, coupled with the desire to bring performance activists together with performance scholars, led to the first PTW in 2001, co-sponsored by Newman’s and Holzman’s East Side Institute and the Gergens’ Taos Institute. “Performing the World: Communication, Improvisation and Societal Practice” was held in the seaside village of Montauk, New York. It included theatre artists, dancers, performance studies academics and young people from the All Stars youth programs. Most of the 250 participants came from the US, with about two dozen from other countries. Since then, the Institute has continued organizing an international performance community of activists and scholars, and hosting PTW conferences—joining forces with the All Stars Project in 2008. Since that time, All Stars President Kurlander has served as PTW’s co-executive producer with Holzman.

There has been both continuity and transformation over the seven PTW gatherings that have taken place between 2001 and 2012. The number of participants has doubled, and international presence has increased to more than 50%, with 35-40 countries now represented. The “performance politic” of the activists who launched PTW was there from the beginning, but it was more difficult to showcase when PTW was organized as a retreat in resort areas outside of New York City (in 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007). For one thing, the price of the conference, food and accommodations limited attendance to those who could afford it or had institutional funding, leaving out many activists and scholars from poorer countries, non-affiliated activists and ordinary New Yorkers. For another, the idyllic surroundings had their appeal but, at the same time, were, for the most part inaccessible to many activists and non-academics. In response to these limitations, in 2008 the Institute joined forces with the All Stars Project and moved the international gathering to the All Stars’ headquarters in New York’s theatre district.

In an announcement of the co-sponsorship, the Institute and the All Stars wrote:

“PTW ’08 is bringing the international performance movement to the streets of New York—and introducing the performance movement to the communities of New York City. For the first time, the All Stars Project, an organization recognized for its highly successful performance-based outside-of-school developmental programs for young people and its Castillo Theatre, joins the East Side Institute as a co-sponsor of the conference. PTW ’08 will be based out of the All Stars’ performance and development center on 42nd Street near Times Square, and will be hosted by young people from around the city. Workshops and performances will take place there and at theatres, schools and other venues throughout Manhattan and other boroughs. New Yorkers from virtually every neighborhood will open up their homes to out-of-towners, not only to save on hotel costs, but also to incorporate the diversity of family and neighborhood into the experience of the weekend and to build person-to-person ties between ordinary New Yorkers and performance activists and scholars from around the world.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

By this time, the international community of activist performers had grown substantially. Thousands were working in their communities with creative, performatory and dramaturgical approaches to social change, community empowerment, education, psychology, health and mental health, children’s rights, trauma and violence, and more. The international performance movement that we had worked to nurture and shape since 2001 was poised to enter a much larger arena of international conversation on issues of citizenry, globalization, international poverty, humanitarianism, peace, sustainability, participation, collaboration, social entrepreneurship and cultural creativity. The Institute, All Stars and their broader performance activist community had something important to bring to these dialogues—perspectives and practices created outside of academia yet relevant to and recognized by the most progressive and nontraditional social science scholars, and hands-on experiences in “performing the world” as a necessary part of “transforming the world.”

What made such engagement possible was the overall environment in which these gatherings of 400-500 people from dozens of countries took place. The diverse development community created by the All Stars and the Institute was the real host: nearly 200 volunteers—poor, working class and middle class young people and adults—staffed PTW; another 100+ across the five boroughs of New York City were housing hosts, providing attendees with a place to sleep (often a living room couch) and come home to each night. These experiences—for South African theatre professors, Brazilian teachers, youth workers from Peru, Park Avenue businessmen, unemployed mothers in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, non-profit managers in Manhattan’s East Village, and high school students in Harlem—were not only once in a lifetime developmental moments for individuals, but were recognized as embodying the methodology of the community. As one participant wrote post PTW 2012: “The village of volunteers that you have is the best credit to the work and the philosophy of the organization that you represent.”

In this environment, new kinds of conversations between and among diverse voices could be created, conversations that have continued and developed over the subsequent conferences. One example is a 2006 plenary session, “Ways of Performing Community,” a conversation between grassroots builders and scholars from Brazil, India, South Africa and the U.S. The dialogue between the academy and grassroots activists, as well as between diverse cultures, remains an ongoing and deepening current within PTW.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Another current was first expressed in a public conversation between postmodern Marxist Newman and modernist Marxist Ian Parker, from Manchester Metropolitan University in the U.K., at which they explored their very different views on “What is Revolution?” This question, which touches on the nature of social transformation and the means of achieving it, also continues as a significant thread in the PTW tapestry.

The two major activities from which PTW participants have been drawn over the years—psychology and theatre—have been in dialogue throughout PTW’s history. The plenary, “Theory/Practice: Culture and Psychology, Therapy and Theatre,” in 2010 featured—among others—Woodie King, Jr., founding producing director of the New Federal Theatre, Judith Malina, founder and artistic director of the Living Theatre and Patch Adams, a medical doctor and pioneer of performance as therapeutic for the sick. The 2012 plenary, “The Therapeutic Power of Performance,” featured seven leading play and performance activists and psychologists from Taiwan, France, Colombia and the US who explored with each other and the audience the developmental potential of the therapeutic turn in performance and the performance turn in therapy.

Another ongoing theme of PTWs has been the role of the performance approach to youth development, particularly poor youth and youth of color. PTW 2008 featured a plenary, “Performing Youth: A Conversation Across Borders,” at which Lenora Fulani, a development psychologist and co-founder with Newman of the All Stars Project, led a public conversation with young people from New York, Johannesburg and Juarez. This was followed by an International Youth Talent Show, produced All Stars-style. PTW 2010 explored “The Performance of Blackness” through a mass theatrical performance, songs, raps and conversation involving scores of youth and adults organized and staged by Pam Lewis, the ASP’s vice president of youth programs. In 2012, 78 PTW participants joined 200 hundred young people at their All Stars Talent Show Workshop in Harlem. In addition, youth organizers from nine countries participated in a pre-conference training in how to bring the All Stars Talent Show to their communities.

Perhaps most relevant to this volume has been the ongoing conversation between the academic discipline of Performance Studies and the social change methodology of performance activism. Although this conversation remains in its early stages (this chapter is, in fact, a part of that conversation), as early as 2008 Richard Schechner led a PTW session entitled, “The Performance of Studying Performance: Building Bridges Between the Academy and Performance Communities.” In 2012, Schechner and one of us (Friedman) led a plenary on “What is Performance and How Do We Know It?” which was intended, “to challenge our Performance Studies scholars to study more actively and systematically the performance turn in social change organizing. … and to challenge … performance activists to actively invite that research and pursue what we can learn from it.”[[37]](#endnote-37)

Many other conversations and variations of those touched on here take place at, around and between PTW conferences. Beyond the conferences themselves, they have generated exchanges, connections, and friendships among PTW participants and between housing hosts and participants. For example, as we were writing this, we received news that PTW participants from Johannesburg were planning to get together and talk. While PTW is a part of a much larger performance turn in social change activism, it has emerged as an important activity in helping that movement become aware of itself and is playing a leadership role in challenging the movement to embrace and deepen the transformational power of performance.

All of the PTWs have had titles. In 2010, we made its title the question that underlines performance activism—“Can Performance Change the World?” Two years later, with the world situation appearing even bleaker, we asked, “Can Performance ~~Change~~ Save the World?” Of course, these questions can’t be answered in the abstract; in fact they can’t be answered at all. They can only be performed.

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