



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THE PHILOSOPHER AS STAGE-HAND

THERON SCHMIDT KING'S COLLEGE LONDON /
UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

1. A parable

A friend who works at a major art gallery tells me the following story:

The art gallery is concerned with Art and with Ideas, and so it does not have anything like a Theatre, because Theatre invites the wrong kind of people to look at the wrong kinds of things and in the wrong kinds of ways.

Increasingly, though, artists in the gallery seem to like to make their art out of the actions undertaken by living bodies. And to help those bodies to be seen more easily, sometimes it's helpful to have a specified place for them to be. Also, so that lots of people can see them at the same time, sometimes it's helpful for the bodies on display to be placed higher than others.

So the gallery asks my friend to build them a kind of raised platform for the bodies. Something to lift them off the ground.

Yes, this is helpful.

Sometimes the artists orchestrating the bodies want to focus attention on certain parts of the bodies being shown, or to give the arrangement of bodies a unifying colour or quality of light.

So they ask my friend to come up with some kind of system for controlling the lighting. She makes an arrangement of many different kinds of electric lamps, at various heights and distances from the bodies on display, and capable of casting different colours.

Yes, this helps, too.

Sometimes the artists decide that they want to be able to change the arrangement of bodies without being seen by anyone who might be watching. They want it to be as if, in one image, the bodies are arranged in one way, and then in a later image, they are arranged differently, with no distracting movement of bodies in between.

They ask my friend to come up with a way of concealing these changes so that the images flow directly from one to the other.

My friend suggests that something might be placed temporarily in front of the bodies while they are re-arranging themselves: a big piece of fabric, for example, that might quickly be pulled in and out of place.

Yes, this is also helpful.

My friend tells me that it takes some time, and several specialist workers, to make the kind of structures that she proposes. Then the artwork happens, often just once. The bodies appear how the artist wants them, and an Idea becomes manifest.

And then, before anyone notices them, my friend tells me, the gallery has all the structures removed.

2. Making manifest

If the philosopher has an analogue in the theatre, perhaps it is not with the performer, the one who shows, but with the stage-hand, the one who sets the stage. This is not, as some might argue, because the stage-hand has some special access to what is behind-the-scenes, or because she knows that what is on-stage is only illusion. The stage-hand's work is not hidden. It is exactly the opposite: the work is there for all to see. It is *because* it is there that all can see. It is the work that makes the seeing possible.

But the stage-hand does have a specialist knowledge. The stage-hand has a close familiarity with the properties of things, and with the things called properties. When a chair is called for, she knows which chair you might have in mind. She is the one who brings it forth for your examination: do you mean *this*? Or do you mean *this*? She takes the idea of a thing and matches it with a thing that you can hold, and then places it on a stage so that it might again become an idea. She knows the weight of things, how best to handle them, and where they fit in the order. In the theatre's presentation of things to be seen, their manifestation, she is the one in charge of the manifest.

Before anyone else gets there, the stage-hand is setting up the seats. Trying out the view. Warming up the lights. Opening up the curtain. Sweeping the stage. Tending to the room. You may think whatever you may think of the show, but it is the stage-hand who holds open that space for you to think. It is the stage-hand who is responsible for the conditions that make possible.

3. For example

The job of the stage-hand is to turn things into examples of themselves. These things sit in two worlds at once: the world from which they are drawn, and the story into which they have been placed in order to illustrate an idea.

They might become part of a parable, for example. In becoming part of a parable they become parabolic, their trajectories arcing between two focus points. In their flight they leave something of themselves behind, but it is not only a journey of loss. They also gain something: their visibility; their being-seen-ness. They are no different from how they were before; they have the same weight and properties, but they also have *this*, their *this*-ness, their *did-you-mean-this*-ness. Their *look-at-this*. Their *consider-this*.

To be manifest is to be singled out as an example, to be called forward from the array of possible bodies and put on the page, or on the stage, so as to be clearly visible. It is to stand in for oneself in order to enable *seeing* to happen.

This is also what has happened, here, to the stage-hand. Like the chairs and the lights that they organise, and the actors' bodies that they illuminate, the figure of the stage-hand has become an example used to illustrate an idea. And when you are asked to imagine them working, as you have done here, their work stops.

Yours begins.

Biography

Theron Schmidt is a writer, teacher, and performer. He is one of the co-conveners of Performance Philosophy and an editor of this journal. He has contributed to anthologies and journals such as *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*, *Performance Research*, *Law Text Culture*, the *Live Art Almanac*, and *Contemporary Theatre Review*, where he is an Assistant Editor. In addition to his academic research, he has written widely about contemporary performance and live art for a variety of publications, including magazines and artist books, and also as part of innovative critical writing projects that foster interaction between audiences, artists, and critics. He also makes performance as a solo and collaborative artist.

© 2015 Theron Schmidt



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).