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# The Performance of Political Correctness

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*This article is about the power of cultural performances to shape and sometimes coerce public opinion and public behaviours. In the process, I intend to defend a concept which has few supporters these days: 'political correctness'. So prevalent is this concept in our public discourse that its meanings have become habitual, thus ideologically invisible. Beginning with an examination of the term and its history, I situate it in relation to the arts through its relation to censorship, and frame it within the broad field of cultural performances to which it belongs. Concluding with a specific case study taken from theatre, I hope to perform a 'correction' of sorts – to reintroduce the term as a positive value and practice in an artistic milieu which has largely rejected its utility.*

## The concept of political correctness

Political correctness, one of the most maligned social practices in Western democracies, manifests in performances, both cultural and theatrical. Similar to censorship, with which it is often conflated, the rhetorical juxtaposition of 'political correctness' and 'free expression' sets up a binary which can prejudice a nuanced analysis of complex cultural negotiations in and around particular theatrical performances. Having made a similar argument in these pages in 'The Limits of Censorship' (2007),<sup>1</sup> I wish to extend my analysis about the flashpoints of censorship to those of political correctness. In both cases, the pejorative connotation of the label closes down discussion and sometimes forecloses the kind of political struggle necessary for democratic pluralism. Both terms evoke the suppression of robust expression: the Danish cartoon controversy of 2005, for example, occasioned defence of the cartoons by their partisans on the grounds that not publishing them would be a form of censorship, and those Westerners who argued against publication were accused of giving in to political correctness.<sup>2</sup>

This widely rehearsed debate illustrates the relationship between the two terms and the negative valence they share in much Western public discourse. If censorship is suppression of expression by force, political correctness is suppression of expression by cognitive assent or social pressure. In other words, it does not usually refer to the exercise of state power but most often refers to judgements taken about the political and social volatility of expression, and a decision to avoid (or not) sensitive or offensive expressions, or to utilize some expressions rather than others, in light of a competing social 'good'. Chris Balme has developed the concept of 'thresholds of tolerance' to

describe the border between ‘the line demarcated by tradition rather than law’ in his thinking about censorship and the arts, and this comes close to the non-judicial but still powerful arenas of controversy involved with political correctness.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it exhibits the kind of ‘implicit’ power that Judith Butler has claimed is a part of the concept of censorship: a productive power to work inside the subject to produce what comes to be spoken or enacted: ‘By “productive” I do not mean positive or beneficial; but rather, a view of power as formative and constitutive, that is, not conceived exclusively as an external exertion of control or as the deprivation of liberties.’<sup>4</sup> This way of thinking about the potential for productive and thus constitutive determination of the ways things can be said/understood/performed goes some way to explain why censorship and political correctness are often linked at thresholds of tolerance.

That the concept ‘political correctness’ maintains a high level of currency in public discourse is clear. Googling the words ‘political correctness’ retrieves 2,350,000 results. At Amazon.com, 373 related books are advertised.<sup>5</sup> As with most general concepts, and in keeping with Butler’s sense of its implicit possibilities, political correctness is deeply ambiguous and has been applied to a large range of behaviours of different political and cultural dimensions. Art is frequently discussed in its terms: theatre productions, art exhibits and installations, films, dance – all may be said to be politically correct or incorrect. The term has become tangled up with the university as an institution in what is frequently described as the ‘culture wars’, and it has been associated with law through legislation concerning hate speech and other insulting or demeaning acts, gestures or images found to go over some limit case of social acceptability and licence. I will be moving back and forth between political correctness as a concept and as an embodied practice that is the consequence of decisions about how to act in specific cases. Often this will turn on a linguistic analysis, but not always: such performances can be about language, but they are also about gesture and have material consequences, frequently involving the body.

Most of the political correctness links on the Internet are to blogs or websites of radical right-wing groups or individuals decrying political correctness as a terrible thing. However, it is not only the political right that hates political correctness; so too do many progressive artists and intellectuals who perceive it to mean certain censorial restrictions on artistic freedom. Many artists and intellectuals do not want to be associated with the kind of hypercriticism or puritanism usually associated with this term. The ambiguity and paradox surrounding the term calls for an investigation of the genealogy of this concept and its practice.

It has turned out to be surprisingly hard to track. Just as postmodern theory has told us, origins are suspect. According to some accounts, the term emerges from Mao’s Little Red Book and found its apogee at the time of the Cultural Revolution in extreme control and prohibition of language or behaviour deemed not to support the Communist Party. Another suggested origin is the early Soviet International, in Comintern discussions about constituting and disseminating a ‘party line’. For others, it was born in 1920s Germany when thinkers of the Frankfurt school translated economic Marxism into cultural terms, leading in the post-war period to the rebellions of the 1960s and later to the critical-theory explosion. Richard Feldstein, in *Political Correctness: A Response from*

*the Cultural Left*, claims that it started being used as a term in the 1930s and 1940s by ‘left-wing socialist groups’ who criticized members of the Communist Party who sided with Hitler or others who ‘unflinchingly took the official party line without considering the consequences of their actions’.<sup>6</sup> A number of commentators skip all that background, moving to the 1980s and locating it specifically within US culture – seeing it as a right-wing strategy for discrediting liberal and left activism by ridicule and ‘red baiting’ that has spread out to other nations and states.

While the origins are rather murky, they are usually linked to the revolutionary left, and they fit well within the ideology of the Cold War era where notions of limitations on free expression and mind control were among the most potent ideological weapons used to convince Americans and other Westerners of the evils of Marxism. So how could it be the case that leftists or progressives would get involved in using such a term against themselves, as seems to be happening now?

Analysing the phenomenon first in linguistic terms, the phrase can be seen as a prime example of what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (and, following them, Slavoj Žižek) have termed the Master Signifier, the *point de capiton* – the empty signifier capable of organizing whole systems of signification but only through instability – so much so that a term can all but reverse meanings through the habitual repetition with a difference that happens through performance.<sup>7</sup>

Second, in behavioural terms, actions become performative in specific instances that are culturally and historically bound. Following J. L. Austin’s claim that sometimes speech performs an act that can have substantial and material consequences, it still matters who is performing the speech acts, and who is restrained and how. Thus Stalinist purges are not the same events as prosecutions for hate speech or racially motivated crimes, and need to be interpreted according to very different considerations of context and epoch. The sociohistorical situation, the extremity of the events and the purposes governing them are all arguably incommensurable.

Third, it is possible to campaign to make a signifier like ‘political correctness’ carry a desired connotation through performances and discursive acts that repeat particular meanings and proliferate their usage. If a term is unstable, it can be rendered stronger or more certain by monopolizing the representations associated with the desired signification. This is the function of rhetoric, also of advertising, and it is carried out by a wide variety of actors in the public sphere from politicians to theatre companies’ marketing departments, to academics striving to establish their own critical vocabulary – think of Derrida and deconstruction, or, more recently, Rancière and dissensus or Agamben and bare life. My point is that capturing and controlling terminology or concepts is neither inherently good nor bad – it is a means of wielding power, and it is a common tool in the public sphere.

### **Political correctness as cultural performance**

Within the discipline of theatre and performance studies, the term ‘cultural performance’ has come to differentiate among types of performance – usually in a binary with theatrical performance – to indicate an extension of the idea of performance beyond the narrow

confines of actual theatre. Events or processes under study are seen, as Richard Schechner has put it, in a broad spectrum – ‘including at the very least the performing arts, rituals, healing, sports, popular entertainments, and performance in everyday life’.<sup>8</sup> Thus usually ‘cultural performance’ is a shorthand for something not limited to the category of performing arts, but an umbrella term that covers many regimes of sociality and life experience.

‘Cultural performance’ is an expansive concept, pushing our field beyond a focus limited to artistic expression to try to capture the dynamism of cultural transmission and change, the embodiment and experience of culture as lived sequences of repeatable actions, including theatrical performances, which constitute sociality. Marvin Carlson, discussing the evolution of the concept and its rootedness in performance, cites John MacAloon’s model of cultural performances as ‘a kind of crucible for cultural self-examination’ in order to sum up his own view of cultural performances:

The fact that performance is associated not just with doing but with re-doing is also important – its embodiment of the tension between a given form or content from the past and the inevitable adjustments of an everchanging present make it an operation of particular interest at a time of widespread interest in cultural negotiations – how human patterns of activity are reinforced or changed within a culture and how they are adjusted when various different cultures interact.<sup>9</sup>

Cultural performances exist at the intersection of memory, substitution, regulation and the archive, and these insights have come from anthropologists and philosophers, but also from performance scholars such as Peggy Phelan, Joseph Roach and Diana Taylor to name just three of the best-known. These performative events or actions draw on the memories of the community to which they appeal as well as the archival documents and embodied practices that contain the traces of the genealogy of the particular performance. They are passed on through repetition (repetition with a difference), where the measure of differences among them is the evidence of cultural transformations always under way. Restraints through regulation can exist as law, but also as ‘common sense’ or manners, or sometimes as privilege; in other words, as ideology enforced by the power of institutions or the internalization of norms and values as habits.

Political correctness is thus a type of cultural performance. Whether designating attempts to shape discourse and behaviour by law, coercion or persuasion, or more broadly referring to the public demonstration of certain attitudes toward such practices, political correctness participates in the key repetitions with difference and self-reflexive public consciousness that are the hallmark of cultural performance. In the struggle to either champion or, much more likely, condemn, political correctness participates in the construction, modification or destruction of specific cultural practices. Furthermore, like censorship, it is itself such a practice.

Taking inspiration from Joseph Roach’s work on circum-Atlantic performances in *Cities of the Dead*, two of his terms will be particularly useful for understanding political correctness as cultural performance. He looks for ‘vortices of behaviour’ as sites where ‘condensational events’ happen. A vortex of behaviour has the connotation of a magnetic field or whirling centre of attraction and power. It is a district or a

zone, often but not always in a city; it is the ‘gravitational pull of social necessity [that] brings audiences together’ to witness social actions or interactions where they can be “‘brought out into the open”, reinforced, celebrated, or intensified’.<sup>10</sup> These vortices create a hypercharged public sphere in which condensational events can result. According to Roach, ‘the principal characteristic of such events is that they gain a powerful enough hold on collective memory that they will survive the transformation or the relocation of the spaces in which they first flourished’.<sup>11</sup> These terms will help highlight the conditions of the cultural performances of political correctness discussed here, showing where and how power is achieved or undermined, and will call attention to the dynamic iterations of such performances over time and the differences they make.

### **A North American (US) genealogy**

I mentioned that according to some accounts, political correctness as a concept originated in the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. I think that starting here can be a problematic and ahistorical view, tending to ignore the differences within radical movements in other places such as Latin America as well as Europe or Japan. However, one strand of the development of PC (as political correctness came to be known) was particularly apparent in this period in the United States, and it forms a useful case study for this article as long as its specificity is not generalized beyond its context. I start on a note of personal reminiscence, acknowledging that for a time, political correctness had a lighter meaning, sometimes tinged with irony, that requires a short detour in order to understand it.

From first-hand witnessing as well as from the reports of others, I can confirm that feminists in the early 1970s used the term ‘political correctness’ mockingly to correct themselves for being overzealous or, more seriously, to acknowledge some attitude or action that went against their political goals. Shaving one’s legs was considered a cave-in to the beauty industry in some sectors of radical feminism, so it would be ‘politically incorrect’ to do so, and you could be criticized for doing it by your sister activists. It was a highly performative act in an Austinian sense – shaving or not shaving one’s legs was an instant visible alignment with a set of beliefs. In the early days of this debate, if one stopped shaving one’s legs, one looked very odd in comparison to the vast majority of North American women who did shave their legs, but after a while there were enough women not shaving that ‘hairy legs’ could become visible or intelligible as a gesture or statement. This practice never caught on widely enough to become the new norm, and feminists fairly quickly revised their attitudes toward the body to include a number of more nuanced positions on questions of personal grooming and the beauty industry. While there was never any question of legality concerning all this, there was a fairly extensive discussion among women of college age and older about this issue. In the United Kingdom as well, women discussed not only hair on their legs but body hair in general: in November 1983 *Spare Rib* published a number of letters from readers on the subject of excess hair and wrote in their editorial commentary,

Over the past six months we’ve received a spate of letters in response to ones we published on the letters page on the subject of body hair. All these letters reveal just

how much confusion and pain ‘unacceptable’ body hair causes for women, feminist or not.<sup>12</sup>

Women thought about and widely discussed what the best political strategy would be concerning the practice of hair removal, especially from legs. It had to do with trying to marshal political power by demonstrating public opinion, through a performative act or gesture that defied or broke a previously existing cultural code, a culture-specific code, since the display and value of body hair differs significantly across cultures. Of course it is tempting, forty years later, to dismiss or ridicule this practice of hairy legs as PC, and feminists with a sense of humour can share in the fun, including me. However, a story from a few decades later shows a different aspect of political correctness, one that is not very funny.

In 1995, Professor Alice Jardine, of Harvard University, won a famous libel suit against the French newspaper *Le Figaro* for 150,000 francs, at that time the largest amount of damages ever awarded against *Le Figaro*. It involved the paper’s assertion that she and colleague Professor Susan Suleiman had been appointed to their posts only because of American political correctness (*le politiquement correct*). The newspaper charged that Jardine and Suleiman only taught courses on homosexual women of colour, and had no academic qualifications for their positions. Their lawyer, former counsel to Giscard d’Estaing, countered by showing the court their many books and articles and their diplomas, and by showing that in fact they taught no courses on homosexual women of colour.<sup>13</sup> Jardine is still teaching at Harvard in romance language and literatures as well as studies of women, gender, and sexuality. Her vast array of publications covers French and francophone literature, French critical theory, especially but not only feminist, and postmodern theories of culture and society. Suleiman is professor of French civilization and comparative literature at Harvard (she has recently been chair of the Department of Literature and Comparative Literatures), and her latest book is *The Crisis of Memory and the Second World War*. In an appropriate irony, she was decorated by the French government in 1992 as an officer of the Order of Academic Palms (Palmes académiques).

In establishing that Jardine and Suleiman survived this incident of reputation-bashing, I am not denying that Jardine was ‘politically correct’, as indeed I do not see that as a negative. I am rather pointing to the various ways in which the term ‘political correctness’ has played out in relation to feminism over these decades and the way it can be both avowed and disavowed, and transformed into something other than what it previously was. To use the term in the first case, in discussions of body hair, was to develop a concept about political strategy within a public arena of visibility, gesture and personal identity. To use the term as an accusation against women’s political activity or scholarship, in the second case, condemns this kind of development of strategies and tactics, and associates it with only one side of the political spectrum instead of admitting that right-wing think tanks, ideologues and academics also engage in developing strategies and party lines in order to seek power and influence in the public sphere. The repeated negative association, however, of political correctness with its Cold War genealogy and with radical movements such as feminism has enabled a historical shift of its meanings

and limited its potential for being perceived in any way other than negatively – this in spite of Jardine winning her case.

There is another irony in Jardine's libel case, because the price of winning it was to dissociate herself from literature by and about homosexual women of colour rather than to argue that teaching such a course was perfectly justifiable, merited and even 'correct'. The targets of the anti-PC people have been caught in the dilemma of 'damned if you do and damned if you don't': admit to being concerned about political correctness and you are accused of overzealous enforcement of a political line; deny it and you admit that it is something of which to be ashamed or guilty – in other words, the critics of PC captured the high ground and the disorganized left began to believe that indeed PC was a form of censorship or sensitivity gone overboard. Seen as a series of cultural performances, we might cite the appointment of Jardine and Suleiman as a groundbreaking instance of Harvard changing its previously male-dominated patterns of appointment, the libellous newspaper article as an attempt to censure or challenge the acceptability of this change, and the long-term vindication of the women in the repeated practices of their teaching and writing. The public attention to all this made the incident paradigmatic.

At the end of the Reagan presidency in 1989, there was an organized campaign against political correctness lasting through the presidency of George Bush senior, through the late 1980s and early 1990s. Progressive ideas such as gender equity, multiculturalism and civility were denigrated and ridiculed as fascism, as censorship or as puritanism or pornography. Launched through both literary and journalistic organs, conservative intellectuals published such widely read books as Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1989) and William J. Bennett's *The De-valuing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children* (1992), while Richard Bernstein attacked 'The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct' in the *New York Times* (1990), and *Time* magazine ran a large section titled 'Upsidedown in the Groves of Academe' (1991).<sup>14</sup> These attacks and responses to them came to be known as the 'culture wars'. Conservative presidential candidate Pat Buchanan gave a speech to the 1992 Republican convention, broadcast in primetime, that consolidated this right-wing critique of political correctness and declared that to win the culture wars was to restore traditional values.

While the attack focused on the academy during these years, especially the arts and humanities, it also focused on the law, because during this time there were a number of important judicial cases involving the tension between hate speech and the protection of freedom of speech under the constitution. (In my research, I found that many Western countries have stronger prohibitions against hate speech than the US – the UK, France, Germany and Finland, for example).

In the US, the constitutional protection of freedom of expression means that only defamation and incitement to riot are grounds for prosecution, and there are no grounds for prosecuting, for example, Holocaust deniers, as there are in much of Europe. During the time period at the peak of the PC debates, many public universities adopted speech codes for their campuses, and many of these were challenged in the courts. In an example from California, in 1990 Stanford University's Student Council adopted an interpretation of a previous code of conduct dating from 1896 called the 'Fundamental Standard' on free expression and discriminatory harassment 'spelling

out when the face-to-face use of racial epithets or their equivalent would be viewed as harassment by personal vilification, and, therefore, as a violation of the Fundamental Standard'.<sup>15</sup> Nine students brought a lawsuit against this student council modification of the original statement in *Corry v. Stanford University*. The court found that the more explicit prohibition was unconstitutional and the students won their suit. In his opinion on the Stanford case, the local judge referred to a 1992 Supreme Court decision in *R.A.V. v. the City of St Paul (Minnesota)*. In this case, a group of teenagers burned a cross on the front yard of an African American family and were prosecuted and convicted under a city ordinance against bias-oriented crime. The conviction was appealed and went all the way to the Supreme Court, where it was struck down. In his decision, arch-conservative Justice Scalia wrote in the majority opinion, 'The First Amendment does not permit St. Paul to impose special prohibitions on those speakers who express views on disfavored subjects.'<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, burning a cross on a front yard is both a performative act and a cultural performance in any of the senses discussed here: it was an embodied and material gesture as well as an action, it had a history in memory and the archive, and it took on modified meanings through repetition – as such, it is a highly condensed event in Roach's sense. In the history of the United States, this performance was a hallmark of the Ku Klux Klan following slavery and frequently accompanied lynchings and other attacks on African Americans. To repeat this gesture is to invoke the history of slavery and racist persecution in a most virulent mimesis.

Visible in these events were the 'vortices of behaviour' Joseph Roach recommends us to look for in seeking to investigate cultural performances – a magnetic field or whirling centre of attraction and power that produces condensational events. In the US, the intensities whirling around such legal cases at the start of the 1990s, in concert with the extended attack by conservative journalists and academics on PC in the curriculum of universities, and other aspects of the culture wars, produced a powerful number of condensational events that determined, at least for a while, that actions labelled 'PC' were fundamental attacks on free speech. I can see through a number of sources – archival, legal and my own embodied knowledge – how the cultural performance of political correctness became an anathema. Although I have used the US as a case study, each nation and/or community will have its own specific history of struggle over the application of this term. Different vortices of behaviour will be distinguishable in the Netherlands, for example, where turbulent battles over these matters have been ongoing, or in Denmark at the time of the cartoon controversy over representations of Muhammad. Ironically, Denmark prohibits hate speech, and defines it as publicly making statements that threaten, ridicule or hold in contempt a group due to race, skin colour, national or ethnic origin, faith or sexual orientation. This did not stop conservative Danes from calling loudly for freedom of speech in the case of the cartoon controversy and calling reluctance to publish a form of political correctness.

The persistent repetitions of this scenario and the extremity of many of them indicate that political correctness still remains at the centre of a behavioural vortex, although it may manifest differently than it did fifteen years ago. In the US, the recent rise of the Tea Party activists in the wake of the election of Barack Obama has brought forward a

new wave of right-wing populism, frequently expressing fear of Obama's 'socialism', his alleged Muslim heritage (completely apocryphal) and the evils of political correctness.

### To return to the theatre

Almost two decades after the height of the PC critique in the US, the large-scale attempts to discredit political correctness and to use it as a term of abuse seem to have succeeded across the West. Type 'political correctness' into a search engine, and most of the results will yield highly negative accounts of the term. All the first ten hits on Google are overwhelmingly negative, except for Wikipedia. Typical headlines are 'Political Correctness: The Awful Truth'; 'Political Correctness Is Communism in Disguise'; 'Political Correctness Watch', which is subtitled 'The Creeping Dictatorship of the Left'; and so on.<sup>17</sup> The deep penetration of this view of political correctness into the US arts scene was made very clear in the mid-1990s when the *New Yorker* dance critic Arlene Croce accused Bill T. Jones of 'victim art' in his piece *Still/Here*, made by and about people suffering from cancer, including his own HIV-positive status. She refused to review or see the piece and yet condemned it, leading to a firestorm of controversy.<sup>18</sup>

The current performance situation as I see it in the several countries I know well is this: if one does something in public or says something that others find inappropriate, one defence is to throw back on the critics the charge of political correctness – this strategy means that one does not have to respond directly to the criticism. I took a look at British newspapers, one conservative (*Telegraph*) and one left-leaning (*Guardian*), to see how 'political correctness' was appearing when it was linked to theatre or other performing arts. The search words 'political correctness theatre' brought up significant numbers of results for both papers. Commentators of both political stripes used the term, and it was difficult to negotiate the thicket of meanings attached to it. Artists used it in complex gestures: actress Felicity Kendal, appearing in Simon Grey's play *One Last Cigarette*, was quoted in an interview explaining, 'The only reason we don't smoke real cigarettes in the play is because we thought three of us puffing away would be too distracting for the audience. None of this political correctness nonsense.'<sup>19</sup> Here the actress disavows that she would think about smoking onstage as a matter to be examined as a serious political issue. She also makes it clear that she holds the category of political correctness concerns to be nonsense.

*Guardian* theatre reviewer Alfred Hickling commented on his own negative judgement of a play about cab drivers, called *Night Collar*:

I cannot warm to Furlong and Power's play. The structure is too formulaic, the characterisation baldly stereotypical, and much of the humour wouldn't be out of place in the crudest standup routine. Perhaps it is naive to expect political correctness in the back of a cab, but I think I'd rather walk.<sup>20</sup>

Here we find a kind of backhanded defence of political correctness, although the reviewer knows he will be considered naive for his views.

Turning to film, a remake of *The Dambusters*, a Second World War biopic about Wing Commander Guy Gibson, who led the successful 1943 bombing raid on Germany's

Ruhr dams, portrays Gibson's faithful companion and the mascot of his RAF squadron, a black Labrador retriever. The problem is that the dog's name was Nigger. The history of this derogatory term, linked to slavery and racial abuse, especially in the US, makes this name particularly problematic. The filmmaker, New Zealander Peter Jackson, cites the double bind described earlier in this article:

It is not our intention to offend people. But really you are in a no-win, damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't scenario. If you change it, everyone's going to whinge and whine about political correctness. And if you don't change it, obviously you are offending a lot of people inadvertently.<sup>21</sup>

His comment highlights the performativity inherent in making this sort of choice. If you do change it, you are reiterating a behaviour of sanitizing a script which is related, through a chain of previous actions and widespread memories, to histories of censorship and self-censorship that we would all decry. On the other hand, if you do not change or soften the name, you repeat in a large-scale Hollywood film the very kind of racial equation of African Americans with forms of animal life that is at the heart of historical slavery and racism. Either way it is a cultural performance; either way it is problematic. Because the film is naturalistic, there is no way to point or frame it, which could be a solution if the filmmakers were working in other stylistic forms. Nevertheless, the difficult discussion about finding the best solution to this problem is worth having in the public sphere. It could be characterized as a concern with political correctness in a positive sense – what would be the politically strategic and appropriate decision, given that this is 2011 and the film is being made about another era? What are the consequences of various solutions? How will this film contribute to public imaging of race matters? What will it perform with force in the Austinian sense?

Although some of the aspects of political correctness I have discussed have involved legal matters and actual injunctions against some behaviours, many of the examples are about the value of behaviours which, while not being illegal, might be said to be unwise. 'Unwise' is a soft phrase, but it implies that reasoning and reasonable people might come to see that certain behaviours create negative social fallout, even if they are not strictly illegal. In performances and performatives, asking about the effect on the audience is an appropriate question, an ethical and political question as much as it is an artistic one.

Political correctness is especially touchy for people in the performing arts because of the long history of antitheatrical prejudice and puritanical approbation, and because of a modernist history of avant-garde practices designed to shock complacent audiences out of deadly boring responses to predictable and safe theatricals. In the visual arts recently, there is intense discussion about the practice of delegated art. This tendency emerged in the early 1990s and describes a mode of practice in which artists use the bodies of others as their medium and material, paying them to become a spectacle or participate in a spectacle, for example Santiago Sierra or Vanessa Beecroft.<sup>22</sup> In the case of work dealing with the subject of globalization, Claire Bishop has observed that the phrase 'outsourced performance' may be more accurate since projects typically involve artists hiring or collaborating with those located at the thin end of globalization.<sup>23</sup> Christoph Schlingensiefel is another example of an artist whose work has been controversial because

of his 'outsourcing'. Of course, it is possible to approach this work by asking about its political correctness. I must emphasize again we are not talking about forbidding (i.e. censoring) this work – it is certainly not illegal, but is it ethically and politically justifiable? The answers are not easy – these are complex and gifted artists who create deeply ambiguous work. However, concerns about possible exploitation of subjects or performative effects that reify the relationship between powerful and affluent subjects and abject objects cannot be brushed aside by the impatient charge that these are only the concerns of political correctness.

My final example comes from the British theatre and offers a recent example of an artist's dismissal of political correctness in order to diffuse criticism of his work. Richard Bean's *England People Very Nice* opened at the National Theatre in spring 2009 to a mixed critical reception, ranging from praise to outrage. A satire about successive waves of immigration, the play makes fun in turn of the French, the Irish, the Jews, the West Indian and South Indian migrants, and of all religions, reserving its most bitter barbs for the Muslims. Because it stereotypes and demeans many groups, supporters of the play find it funny and harmless, while critics point out that it is still a white Englishman making fun of mostly people of colour, and as Rabina Khan said in a letter to the *Guardian*, 'Reading the script had not prepared me for the sea of white, middle-class people falling about in laughter at silly jokes about minority communities . . . at one point a character in the play used the term "nigger" and everybody burst out laughing.'<sup>24</sup> In the *Independent*, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown wrote,

A number of reviews approve of the un-PC bravura and verve but key critics say the work is full of malevolent caricatures, racial stereotypes and (more seriously) that it lacks humanity . . . Just because we are free to offend doesn't make it a duty for arts establishments to make sure they do, just to raise a laugh or appear brave. Is our National Theatre rehabilitating the words so they re-enter the most polite circles of the nation? There were no jokes about the Holocaust I noticed, and a good thing too.<sup>25</sup>

Hussain Ismail, a theatre director from Bethnal Green, the community depicted in the play, organized a campaign against the play with pickets at the theatre after asking for a public forum with artistic director Nick Hytner and playwright Richard Bean to answer charges that the play was racist. Hytner would not agree. In newspaper interviews, a platform discussion at the National Theatre and a conference held at Warwick University in May 2009 Bean brushed aside this criticism as so much political correctness and countered that playwrights are too scared of causing offense: 'The problem with our playwrights is that they're all so polite. They daren't say anything about anybody, unless they're slagging off America.' He must not have read the plays of Mark Ravenhill,<sup>26</sup> or noticed Caryl Churchill's play for Gaza, *Seven Jewish Children*.

Of course he did notice Caryl Churchill's play. As John Bull has pointed out, Bean's pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian sentiments are worked into the political fabric of his play, and Bean's negative view of what he termed the 'Hampstead Hamas' was iterated during the National platform interview.<sup>27</sup> Bull writes of seeing the play after the platform programme:

Bean's support for Israel over Palestine is unambiguous and it is very hard for him or for an audience to separate it from his treatment of the implications of Muslim immigration into Bethnal Green and into Britain in the play that followed the interview.<sup>28</sup>

This debate about the merits of the play and whether or not it was worthy of being staged by the National Theatre is a public argument about whether or not the play is 'politically correct'. My own view is that it was not – and that director Nicholas Hytner should have shown better judgement in deciding to produce it. However, I would not censor the play after it opened, and there is no law against producing a play of this kind. On the other hand, the criticism it received is healthy in a democracy and raises appropriate questions about the value of the play in the politically charged context of London's multicultural population and its struggles for recognition, justice and equality. The question about political correctness is therefore fitting and timely.

I recognize that it would be very difficult to turn around the sanctions currently condemning the concept of political correctness, especially since it has been taken up by many serious artists and intellectuals as colloquial shorthand for excessive regulation of speech and behaviour. However, I would like to advocate for careful attention to the uses of the concept in the arts, and urge my colleagues and students to refrain from adding to the confusion and negative valences perpetuated by the current uses of the concept. It is not wrong – in fact it is important and right – to ask about strategies and tactics when we are artists and scholars: 'if I perform X, what will it mean? If I say Y in this context, how will it signify?' This weighing and evaluating is what I understand a concern with political correctness to be. Perhaps one thing we could all do is stop using the term as a term of derision. The next time you are tempted to deride some overzealous judgement as politically correct in order to dismiss it, spell out instead why you think the judgement is wrong or coercive. At least among a small community of theatre and performance scholars, perhaps we could stop performatively reinforcing a concept that substitutes name-calling for a considered articulation of engaged argument.

#### NOTES

- 1 Janelle Reinelt, 'The Limits of Censorship', *Theatre Research International*, 32, 1 (2007), pp. 3–15.
- 2 In 2005 the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve cartoon figures, mostly of the prophet Muhammad, which triggered an international storm concerning the images. The original publication was part of a discussion of criticism of Islam and self-censorship in the Danish press arising after the murder of film director Theo van Gough in Amsterdam. Muslim groups filed a complaint against the paper for publishing the cartoons under the Danish criminal code statutes against discrimination and blasphemy (prohibiting ridicule or insult of any recognized religion). This complaint was, however, dismissed by the Danish public prosecutor. The worldwide repercussions of these events are well known.
- 3 'Thresholds of Tolerance: Censorship, Artistic Freedom and the Theatrical Public Sphere' was first presented together with the first version of this essay at the International Federation for Theatre Research conference in Lisbon, 2009. Permission to cite courtesy of Chris Balme.
- 4 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 132.
- 5 Both as of 10 January 2011.
- 6 Richard Feldstein, *A Response from the Cultural Left* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 7.

- 7 See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985); and Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).
- 8 Richard Schechner, 'Performance Studies: The Broad Spectrum Approach', in Henry Bial, ed., *The Performance Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 7–10, here p. 7.
- 9 Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 212.
- 10 Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 28.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 28
- 12 'Excess Hair – You're Not the Only One!', *Spare Rib* (November 1983), pp. 32–3.
- 13 Theresa Brennan, 'Forward', in Feldstein, *A Response from the Cultural Left*, pp. viii–xi, here p. ix.
- 14 28 October 1990, [www.nytimes.com/1990/10/28/weekinreview/ideas-trends-the-rising-hegemony-of-the-politically-correct.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/28/weekinreview/ideas-trends-the-rising-hegemony-of-the-politically-correct.html); William A. Henry III *et al.*, 1 April 1991, [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,972652,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,972652,00.html), accessed 16 January 2011.
- 15 See Casper, President Gerhard, 'Statement to the Faculty Senate, Stanford U, 1995'. See [www.stanford.edu/dept/pres-provost/president/speeches/950309corry.html](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/pres-provost/president/speeches/950309corry.html), accessed 6 June 2009.
- 16 R.A.V. v. *City of St. Paul*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R.\\_A.\\_V.\\_v.\\_City\\_of\\_St.\\_Paul](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R._A._V._v._City_of_St._Paul), accessed 6 June 2009.
- 17 See [www.helium.com/items/734107-political-correctness-is-communism-in-disguise](http://www.helium.com/items/734107-political-correctness-is-communism-in-disguise); [www.politicallyincorrect.me.uk/](http://www.politicallyincorrect.me.uk/); [http://pcwatch.blogspot.com/2009\\_01\\_01\\_archive.html](http://pcwatch.blogspot.com/2009_01_01_archive.html), accessed 18 January 2011.
- 18 For a discussion of this debate as an example of democratic struggle see my essay 'Notes for a Radical Democratic Theater: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminacy', in Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer, eds., *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. 283–300.
- 19 Olga Craig, 'Felicity Kendall: My Good Life', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 May 2009, [www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/5262867/Felicity-Kendal-My-good-life.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/5262867/Felicity-Kendal-My-good-life.html), accessed 17 October 2010.
- 20 Alfred Hickling, review of *Night Collar*, *Guardian*, 9 January 2009, [www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jan/09/night-collar-review-liverpool](http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jan/09/night-collar-review-liverpool), accessed 17 October 2010.
- 21 Paul Chapman, 'Fur Flies over Racist Name of Dambuster's Dog', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 May 2009. See [www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/5281875/Fur-flies-over-racist-name-of-Dambusters-dog.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/5281875/Fur-flies-over-racist-name-of-Dambusters-dog.html), accessed 17 October 2010.
- 22 For example, Santiago Sierra's staging of 'Workers Facing a Wall' (2002) or Vanessa Beecroft's exhibition of African legal and illegal immigrants in a piece called 'Last Supper'. They wore suits and ate chicken with their fingers (2009).
- 23 Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 65–6.
- 24 Rabina Kahn, 'Why I've Withdrawn from National Debate', letter to the *Guardian*, 5 March 2009, [www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/mar/05/rabina-khan-national-theatre](http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/mar/05/rabina-khan-national-theatre), accessed 17 October 2010.
- 25 Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, 'Laughing at *England People Very Nice* Left Me with a Nasty Taste in My Mouth', *Independent*, 5 March 2009, [www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/yasmin-alibhaibrown-laughing-at-england-people-very-nice-left-me-with-a-nasty-taste-in-my-mouth-1637583.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/yasmin-alibhaibrown-laughing-at-england-people-very-nice-left-me-with-a-nasty-taste-in-my-mouth-1637583.html), accessed 17 October 2010.
- 26 Ravenhill, one of the original 'in-yer-facers', wrote *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), and has not pulled back from controversial material, which has included *Mother Clapp's Molly House* (2000), and the solo piece *The Experiment* (2009), which he performed himself at the Soho Theatre.
- 27 I assume that the term means people who live in Hampstead, an affluent London area of the borough of Camden, who are pro-Palestinian, and is an ironic reference to the 'chattering classes' of intellectual and artistic residents who are perceived to be far left in their views.

- 28 John Bull, 'England People Very Nice: Intercultural Confusions at the National Theatre, London', in Werner Huber, Margarete Rubik and Julia Novak, eds., *Contemporary Drama in English, Vol. 17: Staging Interculturality* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2010), pp. 123–44.

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