

Original citation:

Alonso Recarte, Claudia, Grant, Teresa and Ramos Gay, Ignacio (2018) *Introduction : real animals on the stage*. *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 38 (2). pp. 103-112. doi:[10.1080/14682761.2018.1451941](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2018.1451941)

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Publisher's statement:

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Theatre and Performance on 22/03/2018 available online:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2018.1451941>

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Introduction: Real Animals on the Stage

Animal Performance Studies: Reconstructing the Cultural Equation?

This special issue of *Studies in Theatre and Performance* explores the role particularly of live animals on the stage, from the early modern era to the present time. The contributions deal with visual and textual representations of performing animals, typologies of animals in the theatre, the hybridisation of the drama with the circus, the zoo and the cinema, as well as the semiotic transfer of animal roles from the text to the stage. We seek here to focus on the changing historical fortunes of the four-footed actor and explore the ways that attitudes to the animal affect their dramatic representations and uses. In attempting to relate snapshots of acting animals from their earliest manifestation on the early modern stage, we contextualise and theorise the modern uses of the animal actor which other of the essays explore. The collection keys into current debates in the cutting-edge of animal performance studies while seeking to consider how these theoretical perspectives were formed.

The past decade has seen an important scholarly conversation between performance studies and animal studies and the formation of a new intersectional discipline, ‘animal performance studies’. Una Chaudhuri, amongst others, has watched ‘Theater and Performance Studies join other disciplines in making what has been called “the animal turn” in contemporary thought’ and argues that ‘the animal energies released will surely reconfigure both the genres and the aesthetics that have produced the anthropocentric theater we have known so long’ (2016, 2). Chaudhuri’s own work, and that of other critics such as Laura Cull, Lourdes Orozco and Jennifer Parker-Starbuck (see Parker-Starbuck and Orozco, 2015), exemplifies this new approach and its interests in embodiment, process and event. As part of these critical developments, critics including Alan Read (2000), Una Chaudhuri (2003, 2007, 2014), Nicholas Ridout (2004, 2006) Jennifer Parker-Starbuck (2006), Michael Peterson (2007) and Peta Tait (2011) have all reassessed the meaning of ‘performance’ and

‘actor’ under the conviction that animals ‘are not just objects in performance, but also its active agents’ (Orozco 2013, 39). What better space to reflect on the sameness between the observer and the observed than a live performance? After all the etymology of ‘spectacle’ takes us back to *specere* (to look at, see), where the term *speculum* (mirror) is also rooted. Performers have also attempted to incarnate the animal – what Orozco and Parker-Starbuck (2017) have defined as the transition from the ‘animal turn’ to ‘turning animal.’ In using and actively exercising such forms of performative expression, the theatre emerges as a platform that embraces an illusion of an interspecies fusion, whereupon all sentient subjectivities, immerse in mutuality, explore and articulate a new theatrical language that channels what Castellucci calls the ‘communicable purity of the body’ (2000, 25).

The presence of nonhuman animals on contemporary stages emerges as a space for theoretical and creative contemplation that has, in recent years, attracted huge scholarly interest. The artificial stages that the nonhuman other has been brought to occupy for the sake of creativity and entertainment range from the most typical audio-visual spaces – film, television, the circus, the theatre, dance stages, museum exhibits – to platforms specifically dedicated to the contemplation of their bodies and behaviour (even if manipulated by unnatural conditions), such as aquaria, dog or horse shows, zoos and bioparks, reservations for safaris, or sporting arenas (for rodeos, bullfights, shooting or other forms of animal sacrifice). These highly theatricalized exhibitions and spectacles bring together environmental, ethical, economic, political and legal concerns with those of an aesthetic and philosophical nature, thus exciting an interdisciplinary approach to the live animal in the domain of art. The live animal on the stage is forced to inhabit and challenge the paradox upon which performative arts operate: the contestation between the aesthetic impulse towards the perennial and the ephemeral and evanescent quality of performance. Because we are uncertain of the animal’s consciousness and self-awareness of such artificial spaces, its presence stretches and resets the competing forces between the perpetuity which art

aspires towards and the inevitable impermanence that defines theatricality. The essays in this collection negotiate these challenges in different ways. In some, the tension is expressed and reworked in the co-operation between page and stage (e.g. Grant, Ramos, Parker-Starbuck); in others the 'stage' needs redefining even before the start of the process of analysis (Alonso, Tait, Orozco). But all the essays point to this new scholarly *Weltanschauung* in which the animal is not just the entertainment, but engages its audience in a process which reorders thinking in a fundamental way. As Cull puts it, 'such uses of performance may not be geared towards the production of knowledge about animals at all, so much as an embodied proximity to animals' own ways of thinking and performing that remains resistant to any attempted paraphrase into discourse' (Cull 2015, 25).

The symbolism inherent to the performing animal (e.g. Grant, Ramos, Orozco), its translatability into the more permanent, scripted text (Grant, Parker-Starbuck), the industrial cycle within which it is objectified and aestheticized (Ramos, Tait) and the ethics surrounding such exploitation are all matters that are described in the articles here (Alonso, Orozco). Through a historiographical lens that tends to the semiotics of theatricality in particular cultural and socio-historical contexts, the articles explore the shifting perceptions regarding the condition of animality (and, consequently, that of humanity) as suggested by the different types of 'stages' analysed by the authors, and in which the animal is experienced in multiple ways by the senses. The essays here treat animal performance ranging from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first, and draw attention to how shifting notions of theatricality and performance modify the 'work' done by the animal on stage (see Ridout 2006, 100ff.). Because audience understanding of the conventions of theatricality has changed, the essays throw up interesting theoretical problems: can, Grant asks, Ridout's description of theatre as 'rigorously exclud[ing] nature. It stays where it is, in the city. No natural light comes in' be usefully applied to early modern stages where meta-theatricality demands that 'the cultural equation collapses', or that we are, at least, considering a very different cultural equation

(Ridout 2006, 98)? Erica Fudge and Bruce Boehrer's work on Renaissance animals (and the huge enterprise which was *A Cultural History of Animals* (Kalof and Pohl-Resl, 2007)) has already historicised early modern animal performance to some extent, Boehrer reminding us that it is impossible to say what the early moderns thought about animals (or indeed anything) because they thought differently at different times: he shows us a process of thought rather than historical stasis. The emblematic trajectories that he traces demonstrate the fluidity of animals' figurative denotations. This is a riposte to those who want to think only with dehistoricised animals – in one way a negation of the 'real' which Fudge is seeking in her work – and, as Boehrer points out, an approach which 'fails to do justice to the richness of animal being' (Boehrer 2010, 186). If this holds true even for the relatively short period of time called early modern, the same must be apparent across the longer time-sweep of seventeenth to twenty-first century. It seems, then, that any models that animal performance studies proposes should be tested by the de-historicising and then re-historicising of both the conventions of theatricality and human attitudes to animals.

Economics, Ethics, Exploitation

As the *ludi* in Ancient Rome have shown us, the semiotics of theatricality are strategically orchestrated in accordance with an acute awareness of how space is to be managed: far from limiting themselves to the mere randomized parade of wild species on the arena, the masterminds behind the organization of the imperial games seemed to possess a visual sensibility and acuity not unlike those of today's choreographers or stage directors. Evidence of these aesthetic interests was the cornucopia of species that were exhibited (and the abundant number of specimens per species). In his *Epistulae ad familiares* (62-43 B.C.), Cicero notes that in the Pompeii games that took place in 55 B.C., up to six hundred lions, four hundred leopards, and several hundred other species – including a rhinoceros (2001, 7.1.3.) – were proudly displayed. Far from diluting visual effects into a single animalistic mass, each species embodied a distinct symbolic power, and its vitality was theatricalized through adornments that decorated their bodies or through visual narratives in which they were made to 'play a role.' Martial for instance recounts in *De Spectaculis* (80 A.D.) an execution in which the public arena was devised as the forest in which Orpheus ('played' by none other than the convict) was to be slayed not by Thracian Maenads, as related in the myth, but by a bear (1993, Ep. 24 (21)). In manners such as these do the *ludi* flesh out the staggering magnificence (both at a visual and at an allegorical, narrative level) that is rendered possible through the staging of live animal bodies. Indeed, the animal's theatrical potential and implications (as proven by the elevated number of audience members and actors – be they human or not – and the richness of the scenography and narrative 'scripts') foreshadows the ambitious and spectacular lavishness present in the nineteenth-century and current theatre stage. More than the exhibition of the natural reality of the animal, the Roman games sought to capture it culturally (Boyde 2014), that is, to objectify it through forceful domination and through its projection within a theatricalized environment aimed at entertainment and symbolic of the superiority of man over the natural world (Shelton 2007).

The essays here demonstrate that these issues, current in the first centuries B.C. and A.D, have been a matter for discussion in a historical contiguity ever since the renaissance of classical thought. As Tait and Parker-Starbuck attest, most obvious is the distinct symbolic power of massed animals of one or contrasting species as they ‘play their roles’ on later stages. But Parker-Starbuck’s essay demonstrates the drip-feed of repetition, in a series of shows which demand that the spectator engage with animals massed epistemologically rather than physically. And unlike the expendable beasts of the Roman *ludi*, Tait’s essay exhibits what is, on the face of it, a profit motive but one, crucially, which can also be seen to speak to animal welfare. At this conjunction of the inter-reliant protection of the physical and the financial, we could read Clarke’s New Circus as an allegory for our burgeoning modern sense of the interdependence of human and animal. Economically speaking, the enterprise of animal trade and animal commercialization for circuses developed fruitfully and greatly benefited from the improvement of transportation in land and sea during the expansion of the Roman Empire. Specimens of exotic species were displayed in the arenas as symbols of Roman supremacy, a powerful system of dominion that could apprehend, transport and ‘domesticate’ any creature, fierce as it was, for the sole purpose of public entertainment (Plass 1995, 18). The Roman dominion of its empire is figured both micro and macro-cosmically in the spectacle of humans subjugating animals: the individual circus trainer ‘tames’ his animal performer; the Romans ‘tame’ the barbarians; man (a word we use advisedly) ‘tames’ nature. As Orozco’s contribution makes clear, the parallels between human and animal may be imagined now in narratives of extinction but they are no less speaking. The Roman circuses certainly set the precedent for the exploitation of nonhuman others in the entertainment industry as we know it in contemporary culture, and in which the performing animal (be it in a circus, a theatre, a film, an aquarium, a zoo, a show, etc.) is commodified through a market value, becoming a profitable attraction. Although many of these animals are today bred in captivity (often following the conservationist – but still ethically

questionable – strategy to ensure the survival of the species), a vast number of them are still captured and removed from the wild, only to be placed within artificial settings of which the public eye has become increasingly critical, especially since the emergence of the animal rights movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Acting as Animal?

The classical world provides us with the foundations through which to approach the type of theatricality that the animal presence may foster. Aristotle defined the theatre as an art of imitation (and therefore an art of representation). The abundance of synonyms employed to address Aristotelian mimesis (simulation, reproduction, emulation, exhibition, incarnation, reflection, copy, etc.) evince the extent to which the theatre involves the craft of duplicating singleness, the art of making two out of one. Yet the performing animal dislocates the notion of theatricality as much as the classic understanding of ‘acting.’ Notwithstanding trained animals (whose performativity, nonetheless, remains fundamentally different from that of human actors on account of varying degrees of consciousness and spatial awareness – not to mention aesthetic sensibility), the animal cannot help but *be*; that is, it cannot but express and project its own essence, even if conditioned by spaces that are unnatural to it. There is, therefore, no such thing as a reproduction of the live animal through the live animal on the stage. Such were the conclusions reached by the *metteurs en scène* of the naturalist movement of the end of the nineteenth century, such as André Antoine, and by the conceptualists at the avant-garde of the second half of the twentieth century. Whether materializing as a violation of classical mimesis, or as an instrument through which to denounce and sabotage the omnipresence of technology in contemporary art – which is symptomatic of the capitalist culture of the copy of the copy and falsification that was anticipated by Benjamin and corroborated by Baudrillard – the live animal on the stage appears before audiences as a substantiated, primitive, carnal reality. For the Italian stage

director, artist and designer, Romeo Castellucci, the animal body stands as a materiality of an irreducible nature that texturizes 'a theatre made of surfaces' (2000, 23), once again invalidating the Aristotelian understanding of re-presentation that could traditionally be seen as the foundation of theatre.

Yet for all these behaviours that involve an awareness of immediate space as much as empathy with an external subject, the very ability to act is also challenged by the ethological assertiveness in the belief that animals' 'emotional experiences are transparent' (Bekoff 2007, 13). As such, they 'do not filter their emotions. What they feel is clearly written on their faces, made public by tails, ears and odors, and displayed by their actions' (44). The tension between oneness and duplicity is time and again repeatedly reinstated in the study of animal mimetic behaviour in natural social and spatial contexts. Where current ethologists do seem to find common ground is in the acceptance of the existence of multiple species' emotional lives, which may be more or less complex but which, in any event, have lessened the fear towards the stigma of anthropomorphism. As Bekoff writes, 'the dismissively skeptical line that animals only act "as if" they're feeling joy, grief, anger, or pain is now essentially dead' (10).

The question of the animal as a true 'actor' has, of course, also been of interest to scholars and professionals of the theatre industry. Paul Bouissac asks himself this very question in his significantly titled chapter "In What Sense Is a Circus Animal Performing?" Using structuralism as the basis of his semiotic analysis, he describes animal acting as 'the combination of biologically patterned behavioral sequence and a constructed social situation' (2010, 45). He goes on to add that 'a circus animal performs, i.e., negotiates social situations by relying on the repertory of ritualized behavior that characterizes its species' (53). The animal meticulously trained to perform a role from which it cannot deviate is just as emblematic of the craft of acting as the animal who is merely emplaced there and who can (within safety limits and always in sight) move and behave at its will. The staging of the live animal that is encouraged spontaneously to display itself echoes approaches endorsed

throughout the history of western theatre such as the well-known improvisational techniques of playwrights such as Molière and Marivaux, the *comedia dell'arte* and the conceptual poor theatre of Jerzy Grotowski.

Textualizing the Animal

The animal, a being that is also subjected to – and reminiscent of – the ephemerality of the theatre, continues to importune and problematize other aspects from which the theatre historian cannot escape. Several recent studies collected by Tüür and Tønnessen (2014) search for a semiotic language through which to write and represent the animal in different literary manifestations, but the theatre presents a challenge of its own. How is the live animal *written* and *textualized* for the theatre? Beyond mere indications of what the animal is expected to do to keep the action going, is it even possible to write such presence at all? Discourse analysis has yet a much unexplored terrain before it, as scholars have for the most part neglected an in-depth examination of the animal presence in the more tangible and perennial theatrical text that fuels the performance on the stage. The corpus available is impressive, and a handful of notable attempts have been made in this regard, such as Arnott's (1959) analysis of the descriptions of live animals in the spectacles of antiquity. Indeed, a more formal theorization of how animal kinaesthetic translates onto the theatrical text, how its physical movements, sounds, smell, and overall body language are transcribed into words seems fundamental for a better understanding of the nature of theatricality and performativity. Beyond mere verbal representation, such analyses would lead to a better appreciation of how species are incorporated within the 'syntax' of the play, and of how a particular language for each species is identified and inferred, the better to amalgamate text and animal representation in a type of context that Isabelle Martin (2007, 36) refers to as *zooscénographie*.

We may also find connections to the lexical trap identified by Derrida in “L’animal donc je suis (à suivre)” (1999) – translated into English in 2008 as “The Animal That Therefore I Am” – according to which all nonhuman beings are reductively contained within the noun ‘animal,’ thus discursively colonizing whatever species and individual distinctions they may have. In the same way that human language and nomenclature is held accountable for its unwillingness to culturally look beyond the human-animal hierarchical dichotomy, so does the written play fail to comprehensively describe and reflect that otherness that cohabits the stage alongside human actors. Whether this may be due to the difficulty in supplying an animal for the performance, to the unpredictability of the animal performer, to a widespread lack of interest on the part of playwrights and stage directors, or just plain to the apparent incompatibility between verbal language and the visual powers of animal corporeality, it is hard to say. But the search for alternative languages through which to explore nonhuman otherness is encouraging, both culturally and for the theatre – certainly the term *animot*, which Derrida (1999, 298-299) borrows from Hélène Cixous, points in that direction.

Such defiance of logocentrism sets the study of theatrical animals within the wider critical thought of posthumanism that speaks of the ‘animal turn’ that has marked a theoretical shift at the turn of the twenty-first century. In line with Wolfe (2003), the study of the nonhuman animal today (in this case, within the context of the theatre and the theatrical) implies an aesthetic as much as an ethical vindication that challenges the speciesist hierarchical binarism that pairs the human with the animal. Such stance represents the historic culmination of animal advocates that range from Montaigne, Voltaire, Rousseau and Bentham to Derrida, Cixous, Agamben, Deleuze and Guattari, topped with the undeniable influence of welfarists and rightists such as Singer, Regan, Adams and Francione.

Certainly welfare and rights concerns have increased in recent years as activists’ undercover footage of the mistreatment and abuse that animals in the entertainment industry undergo has been made public. Coupled with ethological findings, such images recuperate

the discourse and terminology of the more moderate utilitarian views and/or the more radical animal liberation positions. Matters such as species-specific physical/emotional/social interests, spatial freedom, pursuit of pleasure and consciousness are central to an understanding of the animal cruelty stories that have brought to the forefront a much needed debate on the moral violation that showcasing or exhibiting a performing animal involves. From the controversy surrounding the capture and captivity of cetaceans for aquaria (poignantly denounced in the 2013 documentary *Blackfish*) to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' campaign against the Ringling Brothers, and from the outcry generated by art exhibits that capitalize on animal suffering (by worldwide artists such as Guillermo Vargas, Marco Evaristi, Huan Yong Ping, Adel Abdessemed and Eduardo Kac) to the recent call to boycott the film *A Dog's Purpose* after footage of a distressed dog-actor went viral, public awareness of animal sentience has become increasingly problematic for an industry that for centuries had managed to preserve its reputation and overcome certain criticism through the adoption of animal protection regulations (see for instance Wilson 2015 and Burt 2002, 85-163). Regarded as insufficient today, particularly when it comes to wild animals, legislation and regulations are being re-explored to assure better conditions for performing nonhuman others (sometimes even leading to prohibiting their use) and to ease audiences. Along with activists, scholars are greatly to thank for this given their cyclical return to the ethical question of 'should an animal *be* there on the stage/set?' While readers may find that the ethical debate is more prominent in some articles (Orozco, Alonso), it should not be lost on them that it is precisely the incursion of the welfare/rights perspective that has destabilized the anthropocentric bias that has for so long been the essence of theatre. Heirs to such innovative views, all the articles propose alternative engagements through which the performing animal, as a visually consumable entity, may be interpreted on its own accord.

Zooësis and a ‘cultural turn’

A fruitful pathway would perhaps be to attempt to reach beyond the common concern about what the animal teaches us about being human – an argumentative trap that frequently leads back to anthropocentric considerations – and to focus instead on the performing animal as an entity that creates meaning in itself (and not in opposition to the human), as a subject that may be approached through the semiotics of ‘zooësis’ (Chaudhuri 2003).¹ To a great extent, this is what the articles collected in this special issue of *Studies in Theatre and Performance* attempt to do. They investigate, as Parker-Starbuck’s description of Bausch’s World Cities puts it, ‘small worlds, bubbles, in which humans, non-human animals, animality and nature shared space and worked together to form new connections and possibilities’. What is striking is that this space for theoretical and creative contemplation reaches across history, is not confined to contemporary stages, and that Uexküll’s ‘Umwelt’ is just as resonant in the seventeenth-century as it is in the twenty-first. Of course, defining the performance ‘stage’ is a factor in these discussions, initially from a physical perspective. Alonso’s vivisection laboratory and Orozco’s hen coop become just as theatrical as spaces as are the Théâtre des Grands Danseurs de Corde, with its dancing monkeys (Ramos), as the multiple purpose-built venues hosting Bausch’s touring productions or as the tented circus arena (Tait). But these are also issues of cultural geography: the Umwelt which becomes *zooësis* encourages also a recollection that mimesis does not operate in the same way on all stages (Grant); that the cleanliness of the modernist stage, as Tait has shown, did not always exist to efface animals

¹ Chaudhuri explains the term thus: ‘The burgeoning field of animal studies offers a new perspective on that overlap of cultural and performance space that we call mimesis. In proposing the neologism “zooësis” for this new perspective, I hope to invoke, as a foundation for my exploration of animal discourses in modern drama, the path-breaking work of Cary Wolfe, whose term “zoontologies” suggests just how much is at stake for literature and the humanities in the “the question of the animal” (2003, 646).

and the natural from performance; that some theatre relied upon ‘spoiling everything’ in its ‘super-artifice’ (Ridout 2006, 98). Indeed, it is in this examination of the interconnections between cultural and performance space, that the collection’s importance resides. Chaudhuri’s *zōoēsis* is here but it is set against, and mutually informs, mimetic conventions as diverse as early modern metatheatricality, eighteenth-century acting, shamanism, and the drama of the operating table.

This special issue was conceived after the University of Valencia 2012 Conference *Four-Footed Actors: Live Animals on the Stage*. The articles presented here are mostly not those given at that conference, but it was instrumental in encouraging the editors to explore more widely across the historical range of the uses of animals in performance, and across types of performance. The editors are seeking to build on the recent parallel (but not always connected) historical recuperations and theoretical reconceptualisations in animal studies by trying to tease out their contradictions, even as we acknowledge their continuities. Paradigms which succeed in theorising the devised stage of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries may not do so on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century stage; but they certainly inform them. More than anything, this special issue seeks to pose questions more normally relevant in one era or arena of performance of contrasting examples, as Grant’s essay does with Ridout’s conception of animals’ place in pre-tragic theatres. Alonso’s essay on vivisection is another case in point: the ramifications of animal performance in the *operating* theatre encourage a reconsideration of human/non-human animals’ embodied actualisation and rights which is taken up again in Orozco’s work on twenty-first-century community theatre. And this is key: for every contrast there are several continuities. Animals may not *mean* the same in every context but the questions they ask, the themes they foreground and their close relational place vis-à-vis humans demonstrate a surprising stability. Economics, ethics, ritual, the instructive apposition of human and animal – be that affective, parodic, mundane – these

topics endure and, as they do, they reconfigure, albeit repeatedly and unstably, not only what but *how* animals mean.

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