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# A Decade of Performance and Cognition : Moving Towards the Integration of Cultural and Biological Studies.

Interview with Dr. Bruce McConachie.

## Rovie Herrera Medalle

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## Biography of the Interviewee.

- 1 Professor McConachie had published widely in American theatre history and theatre historiography. His books include *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the U.S.* (1985), *Interpreting the Theatrical Past* (with Thomas Postlewait, 1989), and *Melodramatic Formations: Theatre and Society in the U.S. 1820-1870* (1992), for which he won the Barnard Hewitt Award from the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR). *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947-196* in 2003. Along with three other historians, McConachie publishes a world theatre history book in 2006, *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*. This innovative textbook is now (in 2016) in its third edition. From 2000 to 2003 he served as President of ASTR.
- 2 In 2006, McConachie also publishes *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn* (with F. Elizabeth Hart), the first of several books and essays investigating the evolutionary and cognitive basis of theatre and performance studies. Other books in this area of interdisciplinary scholarship are *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (2008), *Theatre & Mind* (2013), and *Evolution, Cognition, and Performance* (2015). During this time, McConachie also put together a Cognitive Science and Theatre Conference at the University of Pittsburgh and joined with Professor Blakey Vermeule to co-edit the “Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance” series

for Palgrave Macmillan Press, which has published a dozen monographs by 2015. In 2011, ASTR awards McConachie the Distinguished Scholar Award.

- 3 During his 18 years at the University of Pittsburgh, McConachie continued to perform theatrical roles and direct plays. He performed regionally with Unseem'd Shakespeare Company, Quantum Theatre, and Theatre by the Grove at IUP and appeared in several supporting roles with students at the University. McConachie directed Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* at Pitt, *American Humbug*, by Theatre Arts Professor Lynn Conner, for the Three Rivers Arts Festival, and *A Streetcar Named Desire* at Queens University in Belfast, UK.
- 4 Bruce McConachie retired as an Emeritus Professor at the end of December in 2015.

## The Interview.

Rovie Herrera Medalle : Dr. McConachie, you have been in the forefront of theatre and cognitive studies for the past ten years. Can you tell us how the field has changed since the publication of your anthology of essays with Elizabeth Hart in 2006 ?

Bruce McConachie : Sure ; it has changed in some ways, but not in others. Those of us doing this work – and that includes theatre critics, acting teachers, performance historians, clinicians, advocates of theatre for social change, and others – continue to look to psychology, evolution, neuroscience, linguistics, anthropology, and other sciences for insights into how and why we perform and what performance can mean and do for spectators. Our reliance on experimentation and logic based in empirical evidence sets us apart from other performance scholars, most of who continue to rely on traditional or poststructuralist approaches that cannot be validated scientifically. This is not to say that we have experimental proof for all of our claims ; experiments with actors and audiences are still in their infancy, although that is starting to change. Because testing under conditions of live performance is very difficult, we have mostly applied scientific insights in related areas of human behavior to the specifics of our field. There is already quite a lot of good science on imagination, role-playing, empathy, emotions, meaning-making, and other areas of acting and spectating that is relevant to our interests and questions.

It's fair to say, though, that these questions have changed in the last ten years, both in response to new scientific discoveries and syntheses and to changes in the general field of theatre and performance studies. When Liz and I were gathering essays for *Performance and Cognition* in 2005, we primarily turned to writers who were influenced by the combination of linguistics, literary criticism, and cognitive science that had shaped the work of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner. Lakoff and Johnson were known for their 1980 classic, *Metaphors We Live By*, plus other individual work on categorization, embodiment, and philosophy, and Turner had recently published his book on conceptual blending with Gilles Fauconnier. (Among other things, blending explains how our minds can comprehend the synthesis of actor and role that goes into playing a character on stage and the compression that allows spectators to combine many small events into one complete performance.)

RHM : What about the substantial cognitive work that had already occurred in other humanistic disciplines by 2006 ? Did the cognitive paradigm shifts in philosophy,

musicology, and film studies, for example, influence the questions you and others were asking about theatre and performance in the early years ?

Bruce McConachie : Yes, but the influence was mostly indirect. The essays by me, John Lutterbie, Lisa Zunshine, Rhonda Blair, and others in *Performance and Cognition* were primarily trying to figure out how cognition and emotion worked in theatre events and what this new approach might mean for our usual ways of understanding performances. I did not venture very far into those other disciplines until my next book, *Engaging Audiences : A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, published in 2008.

RHM : What were the primary humanistic fields and personal experiences that shaped your writing of *Engaging Audiences* ?

Bruce McConachie : In terms of life experiences, I decided I would use plays I had directed or performed in as my primary examples. I discussed historical and contemporary productions of five of them throughout the book – *Oedipus the King*, *Twelfth Night*, *Uncle Vanya*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Top Girls*. I'd been doing a lot of reading in theatre history, philosophy, and film studies when I wrote that book and these influences are evident in the writing. In addition to couching many of my scientific claims in theatrical-historical contexts, I wrote a lengthy Epilogue, "Writing Cognitive Audience Histories," to summarize my general approach to this historiographical problem. In the Epilogue and throughout the book, I argued that a cognitive approach was better than semiotics, the usual way in 2008 for theatre scholars to understand audience response. I also offered a philosophical defense of embodied cognitive science as superior to the poststructuralisms of Lacan, Derrida, Butler, and others. Regarding film studies, I borrowed some insights from film historian David Bordwell and theorist Noel Carroll and, following their lead, investigated audience emotions and the psychology of comedy much more thoroughly than I had before.

RHM : *Engaging Audiences* is a central title part of your series with Palgrave Macmillan Press, right ?

Bruce McConachie : Yes, it was one of the first books that Palgrave published in our series. Blakey Vermeule, an English professor at Stanford, and I started "Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance" in 2007.

RHM : Have you been satisfied with the titles you and Blakey compiled in the series ?

Bruce McConachie : In general, yes ; there are some great monographs in our series. Over the past ten years, we've attracted many of the top scholars working in our field, including Joseph Carroll and Jonathan Gottschall, whose *Graphing Jane Austin* (2012) takes an empirical and evolutionary approach to the response of readers to classic novels. In the area of performance, Amy Cook published a book with us on conceptual blending, Kirsten Uszkalo investigated the centrality of rage in historical performances of witchcraft, Evelyn Tribble explained how Shakespeare's actors negotiated the Globe Theatre stage, and John Lutterbie drew on a range of cognitive science to advance a "general theory" of acting.

We were talking a minute ago about the ways in which cognitive studies in theatre and performance has changed in recent years. These books had a formative effect on our emerging field. All four of them helped to broaden and deepen the reach of cognitive science in studies of theatre and performance. Cook's *Shakespearean Neuroplay*

demonstrated the inevitability of blending for spectator meaning-making among a wide range of *Hamlet* productions and Uszkalo, in *Bewitched and Bedeviled*, showed that the contemporary science of emotions has surprising usefulness in historical investigations. In *Cognition in the Globe*, Tribble drew on “distributed cognition,” our ability to use our immediate environment to remind us of cognitive solutions to immediate tasks – think of the cockpit of an airplane – that gave the first historically credible explanation for how the actors at the Globe knew where to enter and what to say when they got on stage. Finally, Lutterbie deployed dynamic systems theory, long used to predict the action of many biological systems, in his *Toward a General Theory of Acting* to discuss the constraints and satisfactions that all actors work within when they perform. These four books brought recent scientific insights to bear on questions that have puzzled scholars for decades. They also demonstrate some of the several ways our field has broadened since its initial focus on linguistics, criticism, and cognitive science.

RHM : Yes, indeed. Would you include your 2013 book, *Theatre & Mind*, among those that have had a formative influence on extending the field ?

Bruce McConachie : It’s kind of you to ask that question, but I have to say that this little book – it’s only 82 pages long – was not an attempt at innovative scholarship. Palgrave’s “Theatre &” series is addressed primarily to undergraduates and its general goal is to introduce them to “connections between theatre and some aspect of the wider world,” as the Editors’ Introduction explains. I’m happy to admit that I took ideas from several of my colleagues in the field (including a book I have not mentioned, *Embodied Acting*, by Rick Kemp), boiled them down for undergrad consumption, and added some sexy examples. It’s still a pretty reliable read for anyone who wants a brief summary of the most of the main ideas in the field of theatre and cognition. I wouldn’t trust *Theatre & Mind* after about 2020, however ; the field is changing too fast.

RHM : What about *Evolution, Cognition, and Performance*, which you published in 2015 ? From my reading of the book you seem to have broken a lot of new ground.

Bruce McConachie : Yes, maybe too much. Unlike *Theatre & Mind*, I may have stretched to include some ideas that are out of the reach of the general reader. The task I set for myself was to find a general theory based primarily in evolution and cognition that could encompass all of performance studies. In the U.S., scholarship in performance studies includes all aspects of theatre, but also encompasses rituals, games, public speeches, music, film, and, more recently, interactive posts and videos in social media and related digital events. Performance studies seeks to explain the full implications of “performance ;” the field has been – and might become again – a significant platform for social and political critique and action. The field has a conflicted history populated by a variety of theories that draw from among anthropology, psychology, sociology, and linguistics. Although I borrow from some of these theories, especially the social scientific ones, I found that I had to challenge many of them because they were based in assumptions that no longer hold after the cognitive revolution.

RHM : Let’s talk about that. In your introductory chapter of *Evolution, Cognition, and Performance*, you rebut philosopher John Locke’s enlightenment-era belief that a child’s mind is a “blank slate,” awaiting the “writing” that culture and society will inscribe on it. Can you please explain why challenging Locke’s notion is important to your project ?

Bruce McConachie : Locke was the first philosopher to put forward an idea that is still a dominant part of western thinking. Most older schools of sociology and anthropology, along with mainstream theories of performance studies, readily accept what is usually

called “the social construction of reality.” This idea divides biology from culture to assert that human beings have inherited no natural qualities or predilections ; instead, society and culture alone shape how we “construct” the world. Evidence has been piling up for several decades, however, that *Homo sapiens*, like other mammals, do inherit many cognitive capabilities that predispose our bodies and minds to behave in some ways and not others. Society and language are still important, but evidence from around the world demonstrates that the gene pool of our species has structured the same basic stages of human development for all of us, regardless of differences in cultural learning. Our minds are not “blank slates” awaiting the imprint of culture.

RHM : As I recall, Evolution, Cognition, and Performance goes further than that. At one point you make the argument that “biology shaped culture, but culture also shaped some parts of biology.” This statement was particularly revealing to me, since I understand it as a groundbreaking view in terms of performance studies, can you please expand on it ?

Bruce McConachie : Sure, but I’ll need to go back into evolutionary time to do it. According to contemporary evolutionary biologists, several crucial aspects of our social evolution occurred during *Homo erectus* times, from about 2 million to 200 thousand years ago. During this period our ancestors became the most social animals on the planet in order to survive. Living in small bands of 30 to 50 individuals, *Homo erectus* hominins gradually learned how to cooperate in matters of sexual relations, child care, hunting, food sharing, and protection. But not all bands survived. Only those that learned these and other social skills could flourish in the dangerous and sometimes rapidly shifting environments of that time. Evolutionary scientists now believe that some *Homo erectus* bands began to pass on genes to their offspring that predisposed members of these bands to act with heightened levels of socialization. These predilections – which include the capacity for empathy, tribalism, pro-social emotions (such as shame and guilt), and altruism – continue in our own species today ; we inherited them from our *Homo erectus* ancestors. In fact, our heightened ability to behave in these ways is one of the things that set us apart from other mammals. In this sense, the culture of some *Homo erectus* bands gradually shaped their genetic evolution ; only those bands that cooperated could survive. In turn, these genetic predilections shaped the culture of *Homo erectus* offspring and continue to undergird our own cultures today.

RHM : You mentioned empathy as one of the social skills that helped our ancestors to survive. Some theatre theorists – notably Bertolt Brecht – have been critical of empathy. Do you agree with Brecht that empathy can get in the way of understanding ?

Bruce McConachie : Brecht was rejecting a nineteenth-century, romantic conception of empathy. No cognitive scientist today would agree that artists and others can lose themselves in the contemplation of another person or object, which is what the German romantics believed. So Brecht was right to reject that old fashioned notion of empathy. Most scientists today accept a version of empathy as the attempt of one person to put her/himself in the place of another in order to understand that person’s thoughts and feelings. This more modest version of empathy does not involve the loss of self. And it obviously has survival value ; if several people in a *Homo erectus* band are hunting a dangerous animal, it helps if each person can understand the experience of the others so that they can all work more effectively together.

RHM : I can see that. So, do you think that this integration of cultural and biological studies should be an essential part of the teaching in theatre and performance studies programs ?

**Bruce McConachie :** Yes, I believe so. But it will take some textbooks advocating this biocultural approach before that can happen. My next project is a co-edited introductory anthology of essays that we hope will be accessible to undergraduate readers. Rick Kemp and I are editing *The Routledge Companion to Theatre, Performance, and Cognitive Science* ; it will be published in paperback in 2018.

RHM : That sounds fascinating, we will stay tuned. I understand that Cambridge University Press is also bringing out a paperback edition of your *Evolution, Cognition, and Performance* soon.

**Bruce McConachie :** Yes, that will be available later this year.

RHM : Thank you very much for this interview, Dr. McConachie. I appreciate your insights.

**Bruce McConachie :** Thank you, Rovie.

## ABSTRACTS

Interview with Dr. Bruce McConachie. The interview was conducted by emails in December 2016.

Entretien avec Dr. Bruce McConachie. L'entretien, réalisé en décembre 2016, consistait en un échange de courriels.

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**Mots-clés:** antropologie, bioculturel, approche cognitive, emotions, empathie, evolution, esprits, performance, théâtre

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**Keywords:** anthropology, biocultural, cognitive approach, emotions, empathy, evolution, mind, performance, theater

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