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Cognitive Play of the Theatre: The Core of Theatrical Experience or a Dangerous Game in Life?

Interview with Rhonda Blair and Amy Cook

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová

Rhonda Blair, Professor Emerita of Theatre at Southern Methodist University, USA, has been an influential figure in integrating cognitive science with theatre practices. She authored *The Actor, Image, and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience* (Routledge, 2008), exploring the connections between acting and cognitive neuroscience. Throughout her career, Blair has directed and performed in over 70 productions and has created original solo and devised performance work. She has delivered keynote addresses and presented papers at numerous international conferences, including the Giving Voice conference at the Grotowski Institute, Poland, and the Michael Chekhov Symposium at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. In recognition of her scholarly contributions, Blair received the American Society for Theatre Research Distinguished Scholar Award in 2019.

Amy Cook is a Professor of English at Stony Brook University, USA, Director of The Academy of Civic Life, and Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. Her scholarship integrates cognitive science into theatre and performance, with particular attention to Shakespeare. She has published *Shakespearean Futures: Casting the Bodies of Tomorrow on Shakespeare's Stages Today* (CUP, 2020), *Building Character: The Art and Science of Casting* (University of Michigan Press, 2018), *Shakespearean Neuroplay: Reinvigorating the Study of Dramatic Texts and Performance Through Cognitive Science* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and co-edited with Rhonda Blair, *Theatre, Performance and Cognition: Languages, Bodies and Ecologies* (Bloomsbury, 2016). She has published in outstanding journals and has contributed chapters to many edited volumes, e.g., *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition* (OUP, 2018).

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová is a Czech academician specialising in theatre studies, cognitive science, and opera. She received her PhD in 2010 from Masaryk University in Brno, focusing on *Hastabhinaya. Hand Gestures in Traditional Theatre Art of India*. She published a monograph on the Czech opera director Miloš Wasserbauer, titled *Režisér jako koncept: Tvorba operního režiséra Miloše Wasserbauera v padesátých*

Fig. 1: Rhonda Blair, Professor Emerita at Southern Methodist University. Photo courtesy of Rhonda Blair.

Fig. 2: Amy Cook, Professor at Stony Brook University. Photo courtesy of Amy Cook.

a šedesátých letech 20. století [The Director as a Concept: The Work of Opera Director Miloš Wasserbauer in the 1950s and 1960s] (2019), and a number of articles on the theory of theatre and opera production practice. Currently, she serves as the Vice-Head of the Department of Theatre Studies at Masaryk University and Editor-in-Chief of *Theatralia*. She is developing a school of cognitive approaches to opera analysis in the Czech Republic.

The interview with Rhonda Blair and Amy Cook was conducted via Zoom on 8 January 2025. The text version of the interview was finalised by Šárka Havlíčková Kysová in cooperation with the professors.

[ŠHK] Rhonda and Amy, you both have been amongst the pioneers and proponents of cognitive approaches to theatre. What drew you to Cognitive Theatre Studies (CTS) initially?

[AC] I've always been really curious about the power of theatre, about what it does, how it makes you feel, why audiences seem to understand Shakespeare's poetry in the second half of the play, whereas at the beginning it's clear they don't. How we can be moved and just how we think with theatre, and how we make sense of our lives based on our experiences in theatre, in art in general. Working as a director and assistant director in the New York City in my 20s, I decided to take a neuroscience course at Hunter College just to see if learning more about the recent research on the brain illuminated these questions I kept having in the rehearsal room about why the joke worked that time and not the first time, etc. So, that was, you know, fun and inspiring and I just continue to have the same kind of fundamental questions and the belief that disciplines can enrich each other. It came from working in the rehearsal room and having questions that I didn't get the answers to in traditional theatre scholarship.

[ŠHK] And what about you, Rhonda?

[RB] In 1997, I read Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works*.[1] I know it's a problematic work, but it's what I stumbled onto. I was struck by his saying that consciousness began with the organism having a sense of its environment. This made me think of Stanislavsky's character in given circumstances, and I was kind of off and running. It was reinforcing some things from Stanislavsky but also letting me go more deeply into these. So, my nose took me down this path of reading more in terms of cognitive science and what it means and how it works. It helped me understand acting, which was the main area that I was working in, but also directing in terms of ways of talking with actors and things like that moving forward. That was basically it, and I just kept pursuing that path.

[ŠHK] So, in your view, how has CTS developed since you first started working in this paradigm?

[RB] For me, what began as generally a very simple and sometimes simplistic application has gotten increasingly nuanced and complex, and it's really expanded in terms of applications in terms of acting, text, movement, voice, design, the audience, and so forth. Its tentacles have kind of reached out and extended the influence of the research in the cognitive and neurosciences to solving problems and answering questions as Amy was talking about.

[AC] I think this is a good question. I would say I'm struck and excited by the international reach of this work. There's really terrific work being done outside of the Americas. Some here as well, of course, but I'm happy the field hasn't been dominated by only one way of doing the work, asking the questions. People are using the idea of the relationship between the arts and the sciences to ask and answer questions that are focused on their disciplinary interests rather than thinking that everyone needs to do

1 Steven Pinker is Canadian-American cognitive psychologist. See (PINKER 1997).

their version of Rhonda's work or their version of Bruce McConachie's work.[2] It's all very different, and I think that's great.

[RB] I think that's a really important thing, Amy.

[ŠHK] How do you think the CTS approach to analysing theatrical performance or reflecting on audience participation in the, let's say, autopoietic-feedback-loop differs from older methods? For example, structuralism is still very influential in Europe, and especially Central Europe. What do you see as the main benefits, or do you see any drawbacks?

[RB] I think it's really useful in providing terms and perspectives. Considering the whole ecology of performance, I think about Evelyn Tribble's[3] work in cognitive ecologies. And I find it really wonderful in terms of CTS that you can use it to look at any aspect, grounded in elements of research. I have found it to be more flexible and holistic than many other approaches. A drawback of it is that some folks can kind of scavenge or hydroplane across the research and make unfounded leaps and assumptions, so that's kind of a caveat. One of the drawbacks of it is that people glom onto a thing and take off and go out into 'outer space' without really thinking about the research and really digging in and getting specific with what's actually out there.

[AC] I think the main difference to me – and Rhonda touched on this – is the importance of the body and the environment that has defined one of the paradigm shifts in the sciences. Understanding things beyond narrow scopes, even though you need certain research, requires removing the noise of a lot of things in order to ask specific questions. A lot of the research is putting it back into its context, back in the body, back in the environment. At least the philosophers are helping us do that. I don't think it's possible in something like structuralism or semiotics – these things that presume a different model of how we make sense of the world. There's just not enough richness to that for me. Which is not to say that there hasn't been real use or that really brilliant work hasn't been done using some of these older paradigms of how we think and operate and feel and process. But they're just unsatisfying to me. Certain things need to hold hands. Like if you believe that the body is important, then that needs to influence the way you do your analysis or your work. I think it's important to continue to complicate our understanding of our reactions and our environment. I agree with Rhonda in terms of the drawbacks. I think the main benefit is that by continuing to think with the other disciplines we continue to assess the impact and power of theatre and being able to speak across the disciplines. This is a phenomenon that happens in our world. It's outside of a microscope or a lab, but this happens. We should understand it. And linking arms with the people who are understanding other phenomena makes sense to me. I do think that it's very, very hard to bridge the difference between a performance and a theatre that's live, that doesn't repeat, that's,

2 Bruce McConnachie is a Professor Emeritus who published on American theatre history and theatre historiography.

3 Evelyn Tribble is a Professor of English at the University of Connecticut, USA. She applies a distributed cognition approach to theatrical history.

you know, chaotic and filled with the kind of 'noise' that scientific experiments work to control. I very often find work, to be honest, including my own, that doesn't fully persuade me that one can make an argument connecting the two. I think that is hard. But I think it's generative even when it fails or even when it falls short.

[RB] Yeah, that's got me thinking about a couple of things. This is related to the issues with applications of science and the limitations of the science in terms of the messiness of the studio experience in the theatre event. I often think about using some of that work metaphorically or appropriating it, and kind of consciously acknowledging that I'm not doing science, but I'm using and sometimes appropriating it to solve a problem that's facing me in the studio or in the rehearsal hall and all of that. And this is connected to the other earlier methodologies like structuralism.

I sometimes think of things as being tools: what is the problem I'm trying to solve and which tool helps me to do it best? Sometimes I use other areas, other fields and other approaches because it's the thing that can actually or metaphorically help me solve the thing that I'm trying to work on. For me, it's not an either/or, it's a what am I trying to do in this moment? So again, that takes me back to Stanislavsky. What is the problem that the character is trying to solve. For me it's what the problem I'm trying to solve is and what I need to do to solve that problem.

[ŠHK] What would you recommend to the young scholars who are considering adopting cognitive approaches to start with?

[AC] The first thing that I would say is that the disciplinary question needs to matter more than your disciplinary methods and that sort of goes to what Rhonda said. That it can't be a sort of romanticisation of science. It can't just be like 'I want to do science light'. You have to be really interested in the disciplinary question you're trying to solve and move toward the science based on what can answer the question you have. And then you have to be really humble, I think, and sort of cautious and recognise that no matter what you do, you're not going to be able to read everything. You should be disciplined about setting the parameters and making sure – as much as possible – that there is some ability to connect the methodology you've approached with the problem you're trying to solve.

[RB] That's great because one of the things in the notes that I made was 'be clear about the questions that you're asking'. And more generally, read the current research to get some sense of the standards or the parameters of the science, etc. I also think: find a mentor – someone working in the field that you're interested in, – and attend gatherings, whether it's Cognitive Futures[4] or ASTR[5] working groups when they happen. I think meeting people, talking with people who are interested in some of the

4 It is the title of the conference Cognitive Futures in the Arts and Humanities, which has already been held ten times in different countries. The last Cognitive Futures Conference took place in 2024 in Catania, Italy, and the eleventh year, with the subtitle 'Cognitive Tools in Action', will also be held in Italy – in Messina.

5 The American Society for Theatre Research based in the USA.

same things, that is a really kind of basic, interactive thing that can open up possibilities for you.

[AC] I would say, because it's not like psychoanalysis or Marxism, there isn't one way of doing this. That means that you're not going to plant a flag in your own Moon. There are lots of people who are with you, and it's not necessary to be the first to discover some connection. What's important is to do quality work in your area that serves your audience. That's by way of saying: reach out to the other people who have done this work. I don't just mean the scientists; it's important to find the people who are similarly situated in your disciplinary home. I've found them to be incredibly generous and useful. We're all really invested in the belief that research at the intersection of the cognitive sciences, broadly speaking, and theatre studies is generative and helpful for both. We are all really welcoming of people reaching out. I feel like it's imperative that we serve as mentors when we're called to because we need the new scholarship.

[RB] Right. A phrase occurred to me as we were talking, something like 'find your tribe', find your community. There's the reading group that we've been doing, there's a way of getting connected to that and coming in. But don't work alone. It's not all on the page. It's not all in a book. It's not all in an article. It's the communal interaction I think that generates... It'll take you places that you don't know that turn out to be wonderful.

[ŠHK] In what ways can cognitive science deepen our understanding of dramatic text interpretation? I mean we are interested in analysis, but in the analysis that is intended also to be helpful for the practitioners, not only for the scientists.

[RB] I think that cognitive science can give us a sense of how language works and how language has a relationship to and penetration of the body, then it's what I've been saying and what Amy's been saying, the sort of cognitive ecology is that everything's in an environment and culture. One thing that occurred to me as I was thinking about this question was about the psychophysiological aspects of language and speech. Just the feel of the language in your mouth and the associations that we have with sounds and words, the cultural associations. This made me think about issues of translation, when we're talking about text, which are profoundly important. All we can ever get with translation are specific approximations. I think cognitive science can help us engage issues of translation, variation, difference, and also talking about historical issues of translation, but also cross-cultural issues of translation. What does it mean when we take, say, *Chaika*, the Seagull, from 1898, and we've got a translation, say, by Constance Garnett[6] into English after that and the problems with that and the translations today and pull a play out of its cultural context where we're not familiar with – life in Russia in 1898? That is where this question led my thinking.

6 Constance Clara Garnett (1861–1946) was an English translator of Russian literature of the 19th century.

[AC] It can do a tremendous amount. When you're talking about a dramatic text, the first thing I would say is that sometimes it really helps to help students see the lens that they already have. Nine times out of ten, if not ten times out of ten, students are going to read a play for the psychological interactions, the relationships, and the internal psychology of the characters. But – and I'm definitely speaking mostly about American students because that's my experience with them – we are so steeped in movies and TV that have come out of a deeply psychological perspective. They don't know that the first thing they start talking about is people's relationships and their feelings, and that they talk about them as real characters. And that's completely fine, but it's important to say, there's a different way of reading this. There is a different prism through which you can see – and that can be structuralism, psychoanalysis, or whatever. But teaching students to see that they have a lens to begin with is a pivotal step. To me saying 'What if we were to talk about this play in terms of the metaphors? What are some of the structuring metaphors of this play?' can help students see that there is a different way of essentially consuming or turning the play. I think that is very important, that fundamentally finding a mechanism to alter our masticating of the play.

For example, the work that I did with *Hamlet*:[7] the argument I made is that particular conceptual metaphor structured the play and to demonstrate what is seeable or imaginable or understandable once you see the way the metaphor works. And because of the relationship between language and the body and how we are capable of thinking about other information, I think that that's a powerful tool. Once you can see the structuring metaphor that's operating in a play you can start to understand how certain thoughts are constrained and or guided. And other thoughts are encouraged or afforded because you are fundamentally working with this structuring metaphor. That to me seems like a very powerful, very practical, very useful way of thinking about a play that opens up other doors and leaps ahead of the theatrical performance or the practitioners. For example, in my book on Hamlet, *Shakespearean Neuroplay*,[8] I talk about the text and then I talk about these productions and the ways in which directors can work with these structuring metaphors in a way that will afford greater comprehension of what's going on in the play. This also then speaks to the kinds of gestures that the actors are using because we know that gestures increase comprehension and thinking of the person doing the metaphor, doing the speaking, and the person watching the speaker.

That kind of rigorous deep dive into a text can: (1) show you a different way of consuming a text, (2) lead you to highlight different parts of the text than you might not otherwise have noticed, and (3) provide insights into ways of performing the text that you might not have gotten if you were just thinking about Hamlet's feelings for his mother, or the political implications of the war at the time. It's not to say anything bad about those things. It's just to note that there might be a different way of consuming the play.

7 See (COOK 2010).

8 Refer to (COOK 2010).

[RB] Your question is how CTS can deepen our understanding of dramatic text, and I want to throw in that it gives us a sense of how language works, this is penetration, right. I know practitioners are what I'm looking at. For me, it gave me a more fundamental and embodied way of understanding acting and directing, and that's what got me started. And to echo some of what Amy said, it got me beyond reductively psychological habits of thinking, talking about this bias towards 1950s American realism and all of that. For me, it provided a more integrative way of thinking about the audience. It helps designers think about their work in terms of, again, ecologies as holistic and working on embodied effects on the actor and the audience. That's what the research gave me.

[ŠHK] How can cognitive analysis help audiences or critics better understand a theatrical performance?

[RB] In the moment of performance itself, I'm not sure that understanding in an explicitly conscious way is a goal for the audiences, though it might be for the critics. But afterwards, having a sense of how cognition works might help recipients have a sense of how and why they've been moved or engaged or manipulated. Cognitive analysis provides another framework for seeing, understanding, and meditating on the event.

I know that for me as an audience member slash sometimes critic/scholar, the cognitive science helps me go 'aha, I see what they're doing', 'I see how I'm being manipulated', or 'they're really off there'. It's a really useful tool for the vocabulary and the information. It provides a much richer way of understanding the event.

[AC] I would say that for me, it is actually part of what I bring to the experience of being in the theatre because I'm always assessing: oh, I recognise my responses as part of what is going on. It's relevant that I'm bored. It's relevant that I'm distracted. It's relevant that I'm laughing. It's relevant that I'm tearing up. So I think a lot about what the experience that I'm having is, what's the experience the audience is having around me? I could spend hours talking about how I wish critics spent more time talking about the experience the audience seemed to have because that seems far more relevant than whether they thought the play was good or well done anyway. And then I am thinking and saying: what is it? Why is it that this might be an intentional part of how I'm being made to feel? What might be the benefit of my feeling bored or distracted. Or confused. Am I pleasurably confused or am I being toyed with? I think a lot about that from the perspective of what this experience allows me to think about or stops me from experiencing. That gets me from assuming that there's a platonic ideal of some performance, some play, some experience that things are either hitting or not hitting. Obviously, the kind of interpretive protocols you need to use in watching or experiencing a Robert Wilson play are very different than if you're at the Old Globe or at Steppenwolf or seeing an opera in Berlin. It's important, I think, to let the performance instruct your engagement.

[RB] I want to clarify because I wasn't saying that critics wait till afterwards, but during the piece, absolutely sitting there having a sense of how things are being manipulated, structured, and used to evoke a feeling. There's kind of a doubleness, a double consciousness almost, or an oscillation between being in it and then observing it. That's interesting. And talking about how different works land in different ways made me think about Richard Foreman, whose pieces were always so wild, interesting, and idiosyncratic. I want to put his name out there as somebody who was really an innovator and a genius, frankly.

[ŠHK] The next question concerns my favourite topic, which is memory. What role do you think memory plays in the cognitive experience of the theatre? Or alternatively, what role does memory (of an analyst) play in the analysis of a theatrical performance or event?

[AC] Sometimes, when I talk about working with research from the cognitive sciences to making sense or thinking about theatre performance, a lot of people assume that means that it's not cultural, or it's not situated, or it's not taking into consideration the structures of racism, all those things that were very powerfully and usefully brought to the table by things like structuralism and other theoretical movements of the 20th century. And I say: no, to me this nuance includes that. So, when it comes to memory, we are always consuming or experiencing the present based on our recollections from the past. So, whether it's a wholesale memory of the time when I was 8, and I fell out of a tree, or whether it's my experience with this sound, with this set, or even just my memory of what it's like to listen to Shakespeare. If I have those memories, that's going to drastically change my experience of a Shakespeare play than someone who has no memory of ever hearing Shakespeare. We can't really process the present without the past.

[RB] I think that's absolutely right. We all bring memory, conscious or unconscious, to bear on our reception of an event, and I think about memories that we're aware of, but also patterns and habits, and subconscious, unconscious responses to things that we see that are actually evoking a body and embodied memory – that doesn't yet rise to the level of consciousness. There are real complexities there. We come into a room with our experiences and our lives to that point, and everybody's different. We've got overlaps, and they're also profound differences. I'm thinking that for the analyst or critic we might work more rigorously to understand how our past experiences and memory affect our reception. But memory is always there. If you're alive and you're in the room, memory is operative. I think about memory – the fact that memories are reactivations of patterns, and neural patterns, and embodied experiences, and all of that. A memory is the same but different every single time. To think again about the major metaphors: memory is kind of a box, but it's not really a box.

So how do we deal with the dynamic and changing nature of memory where I remember a thing when I'm watching one performance of Hamlet, but when I'm watching another performance of Hamlet? I might have the same memory, but it's actually different because of the different environment and time in which I'm experiencing the thing.

Fig. 3: At Cognitive Futures in the Arts and Humanities Conference. From left to right: Rhonda Blair, Martina Musilová, Šárka Havlíčková Kysová, Amy Cook, Marie Adamová. Catania, Italy. 2 June 2024. From Šárka Havlíčková Kysová's personal archive.

[ŠHK] Together, we attended the Cognitive Futures in the Arts and Humanities Conference in Catania, Italy, in June 2024. Its main theme was the extension of 'From 4E to 5E cognition' – to include emotions. In your opinion, what are the most urgent research questions that need to be addressed now?

[AC] My instant reaction is that the 4E idea can be problematic because what it suggests is that thinking or cognition is all of those Es, and that's not really the case. It's about a paradigm of cognition. Some people believe that it's embodied, but sort of just embodied; some people believe it's extended, some enacted, or embedded. These are gradations of a way of thinking about thinking. My concern about adding emotion is that none of those other ones exclude emotion.

And I worry that – and I think about this in terms of your question about memory as well – that we're taking this kind of 19th-century idea of how we operate: splitting it into emotion, memory, cognition, and then maybe the body. And I don't know why we think those are the bricks. Those are just the categorisations done in the 19th century based partially on memories of Descartes. I'm not sure if that's the way to cut up the

cat or... Since we've never found an emotion in the wild outside of human beings, how do we know that it's the thing? The brain is not a computer that makes processing. So why do we think it exists independent of all of these things? I worry when we spend too much time thinking about what colour of E we are now.

In theatre, for example, say that I'm interested in the history of Greek theatre: now I want to understand how that playing space operated on those participants. What new thing can I say about Greek theatre based on what we now understand differently about physics, about sound, or even using AI? How can we think anew about our questions? This is not to say those questions about how we slice up the apple aren't important to philosophers and cognitive sciences; to study something you have to separate figure from ground. We need to take care about that because we shouldn't assume that what we've been told is extractable from the ground is actually as extractable as we think it is. Just because our language can give us a name for something doesn't mean that it's a thing.

[RB] I think that's fundamental. Amy, everything you said is just always spot on. Because the language shapes how we think and see a thing, how we understand it, and it limits us. It's a tool, and it can be useful. When I read this question, one thing that I went to immediately was: what are we actually talking about, when we're talking about emotion? Because this will be old news to you folks who've listened. So, are we talking about emotion, feeling, affect? What is that? Then the definition will get us a step forward, but it's still not the thing itself. These are aspects of not just an individual response, but also a response to ecology and history. There's cognition, it's dynamic, and it's fluid. So, how do we use our language as an effective tool rather than something that limits us, and constrains us, and locks us into a not-necessarily useful way of thinking about something?

[ŠHK] When I was 20 or so, I studied generative grammar, Chomsky, and the metaphor of the brain as a hardware and language as a software, if I recollect it correctly. Do you think the 20th-century thinking of that kind also kept encouraging this quite strong division between the brain as the head of everything and the emotions as something divided from it? Is it still with us?

[AC] I definitely think so. First of all, I talk about it like it's settled, but it's not. I was talking to Barbara Dancygier[9].... who reminded me that cognitive linguistics – the kind of compositional, embodied, metaphoric linguistics that came from Lakoff, Fauconnier, Turner, are not the dominant idea in linguistics. Chomsky remains more influential. I think it's important to recognise that. I was profoundly impacted by the research on categories and the idea that categories help us think, and tell us how to think. It tells us what counts as something to pick up, to think, what to think about or to think with, and that is created. And they can be changed.

9 Barbara Dancygier is cognitive linguist and professor in the English Department at the University of British Columbia.

I think a lot about language and how I communicate, how my performance has influenced everything I've done. And in terms of thinking about my profession, in terms of casting, thinking about how I communicate in terms of the metaphors I use. So, it's influenced everything.

[RB] Can I say one thing about what Amy said about the idea of categories? Different cultures have different categories depending on your culture and where you grew up. I think it leads to huge issues in terms of communication and understanding. That is a factor in thinking about how cognition and language work.

[ŠHK] Let me conclude with a typical question: What extra-theatrical activities can CTS bring innovative perspectives to?

[RB] I think it's really important. I'm thinking about the current social and political mess in my country in terms of extra-theatrical activities, and CTS can help us understand it. We are seeing an incredibly skilful manipulation of emotions and perceptions and the use of deception by people with incredible power who are masters of performing and performance. Cognitive Theatre Studies might provide those of us resisting this with new ways of understanding and acting to push back against and persuade others. But at this moment, I'm not optimistic. We're in for a long, hard slog.

As I look at what's going on, I'm aware of my research and my engagement with cognitive studies. It's like I'm watching this manipulation. I'm watching how those people in power are taking advantage of people who are not aware of things in the culture, people who are not aware of how they're being manipulated, or not aware of how the negative and problematic impulses are being taken advantage of by the oligarchy.

I really thought about extra theatrical things that CTS could help with.

[ŠHK] Unfortunately, it's interconnected, and there's a need to have additional or different means of understanding things outside theatre. But I'm not sure if CTS is so strong as to help substantially. Yet, what we can do is to make some effort. It's not a good tune we are ending our interview with, but it appears we are living in a time when it is more crucial than ever to be keenly aware of how meaning is created and constructed. CTS equips us with more precision to grasp communicated events on a deeper level.

Rhonda and Amy, thank you very much for this inspiring conversation.

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