Utopia in Performance*

JILL DOLAN

The essay describes ‘utopian performatives’, which are moments of performance in which utopia is ‘done’ in the intensity of exchange between performers and spectators and among the audience. As an example, the essay discusses the performance Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam on Broadway, an evening of slam poetry presented by a multiracial cast for a young, unusually multiethnic audience. It describes a process of feeling together over obvious differences, inspired by an intensely present moment of theatre.

I’m very pleased to be here this morning, under the auspices of a conference dedicated to questions of theatre and social change. I can’t imagine a more apt theme, given the meeting’s location in Washington, which has become over these last many years the proverbial belly of the beast. With Bush approaching his lame-duck moments as our president, I feel more and more the ways in which the United States is in grave ideological and political danger; this is a president, after all, who doesn’t distinguish between theory and practice. This is a president for whom questions of faith outweigh those of ‘reality’; as Ron Suskind wrote in his chilling New York Times Magazine profile of the president last October, Bush won’t brook disagreement or dissension even among his most intimate advisers. He sees himself as a messenger of God, doing God’s will with obedience and his most arrogant brand of humility. Those who want to rationalize global and domestic policies he calls ‘reality-based’, and disparages them (dare I say ‘us’?) for being out of touch with a body politic that prefers his brand of faith-based initiative. Relating a meeting with a senior adviser to Bush, Suskind says,

The aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community,’ which he defined as people who believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality. . . . ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’

* This article was presented as a keynote on 29 June 2005 at the IFTR conference ‘Citizen Artists: Theatre, Culture and Community’, hosted by the University of Maryland.
Given this political climate, I’ve been insisting for the last several years that it’s desperately important for those of us more progressive in our political outlook to harness the power of faith, to wrest it away from its ownership by the fundamentalist Right that’s gained such frightening ascendancy in American culture and politics. While I’m a so-called reality-based intellectual, I’m also committed to the notion that a kind of secular—not religiously based—faith can inspire our politics, that belief in different kinds and structures of reality is imperative to rethinking and revising, through the powerful affective tools of performance, who we are to each other and, most importantly, who we might be. I believe we can resignify ‘faith’ to progressive political ends, and that through the power of performance, we can re-envision our social imaginary so that we might eventually live it as more humane, more loving, and more just. How might we use the affective investments of performance as a methodology for rehearsing political emotions that might enable more progressive versions of how to be human together?

My book, Utopia in Performance, argues that live performance provides a place where people come, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning-making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.2 Utopia in Performance tries to find, at the theatre, a way to reinvest our energies in a different future, one in which hope and a reanimated, more radical humanism imagine social relations as equitable, the planet as habitable, and capitalism as perhaps not the only, most voracious, motor of our dreams. This book investigates the potential of different kinds of performance to inspire moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential. As Judith Butler suggests, ‘Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.’3

In my effort to bring ‘the elsewhere home’ I take my performance examples from a variety of contemporary genres and locations. Today I’ll focus on one of my case studies, Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway, as a performance that addresses audiences as citizens of the world and models political critique and engagement as well as affective and effective feelings and expressions of hope and love not just for a partner, as the domestic scripts of realism so often emphasize, but for other people, for a more abstracted notion of ‘community’, or for an even more intangible idea of ‘humankind’. Let me first set up the critical framework that propels this work.

From the particular slant offered by theatre and performance as practices of social life, this book addresses the cynicism of progressive commentators who believe the Left, especially, has given up on the possibility of a politics of transformation. Academic commentator Russell Jacoby, for example, suggests, ‘Today, socialists and leftists do not dream of a future qualitatively different from the present. To put it differently, radicalism no longer believes in itself.’4 Utopia in Performance answers this claim with my own set of beliefs in the possibility of a better future, one that can be captured and claimed in performance.

Utopia in Performance defines and charts what I call ‘utopian performatives’. Utopian performatives describe small, specific and profound moments in performance
that beckon the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense. As a performative, performance itself becomes a ‘doing’ in J. L. Austin’s sense of the term, something that, when it’s said, acts – that is, performs an action as tangible and effective as saying ‘I do’ in a wedding ceremony. Utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better, were the goals of social justice achieved. Theatre and performance offer a place to scrutinize public meanings, but also to embody and, even if through fantasy, enact the affective possibilities of ‘doings’ that gesture towards a transformed world. The performatives under consideration here allow fleeting contact with a utopia not stabilized by its own finished perfection, not coercive in its contained, self-reliant, self-determined system, not messianic in its zeal for a particular social arrangement, but a utopia always in process, always only partially grasped, as it disappears before us around the corners of narrative and social experience.

My investigation into utopia in performance, then, resists the effort to find representations of a better world; the word ‘utopia’ means, literally, ‘no place’, and this book respects the letter of its sense by refusing to pin it down to proscription. I agree with Marxist philosophers Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse, who ‘see art as an arena in which an alternative world can be expressed – not in a didactic, descriptive way as in traditional ‘utopian’ literature, but through the communication of an alternative experience’. Any fixed, static image or structure would be much too finite and exclusionary for the soaring sense of hope, possibility and desire with which utopian performatives are imbued. Utopian performatives exceed the content of a play or performance; spectators might draw a utopian performative from even the most dystopian theatrical universe. Utopian performatives spring from a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which crystallizes moments of utopia as a doing, as a process, as a never finished gesture towards a potentially better future.

Critic John Rockwell, writing about Anne Bogart’s production bobrauschenbergamerica in the New York Times, says,

> Mesmerizing moments are what those of us addicted to performance live for. Suddenly and unexpectedly we are lifted from our normal detached contemplation into another place, where time stops and our breath catches and we can hardly believe that those responsible for this pleasure can sustain it another second.

He describes a utopian performative: such moments make spectators ache with desire, to capture, somehow, the stunning, nearly pre-articulate insights they illuminate, if only to let them fill us for a second longer with a flash of something tinged with sadness but akin to joy. Bloch calls these examples ‘anticipatory illumination’, and notes that they ‘evade our efforts to apprehend them directly’. That evasion prompts the sadness in our joy. In the utopian performative’s constitution lies the inevitability of its disappearance; its efficacy is premised on its fleetingness. Performance’s poignant ephemerality grounds all our experiences at the theatre. The utopian performative’s evanescence leaves us melancholy yet cheered, because, for however brief a moment, we felt something of what
redemption might be like, of what humanism could really mean, of how powerful might be a world in which our commonalities would hail us over our differences.

Audiences form temporary communities, sites of public discourse that, along with the intense experiences of utopian performatives, can model new investments in and interactions with variously constituted public spheres. Unlike, for instance, religious communities, which gather to enact rituals based on common faith, belief and choice, theatre audiences are more often strangers who cohere in a given moment through serendipity, outside of more prescribed, codified structures of belief. Although they constitute a temporary public sphere, any given audience, like any given performance, can’t be reconstituted in the same way twice. ‘Arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics’, feminist political theorist Nancy Fraser argues, ‘better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public’.8

Considering theatre audiences as such participatory publics might also expand how the communitas they experience through utopian performatives might spark a desire for common feeling in other social interactions. Communitas, a term popularized in performance studies scholarship by anthropologist Victor Turner, describes the moments in a theatre event or a ritual in which audiences or participants feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way; spectators’ individuality becomes finely attuned to those around them, and a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group bathes the audience.9 Attending performance, disparate people constitute these temporary publics; such spectatorship might encourage them to be active in other public spheres, to participate in civic conversations that performance perhaps begins. If, as Fraser theorizes, ‘public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion [but are also] arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities’, then audiences at performance can be seen to be actively forming themselves as participating citizens of a perhaps more radical democracy.10

Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway accrues its social capital by calling into existence a more diverse public than those that usually gather to see theatre on Broadway. The production enters the public sphere as a forum of what could be, discarding political pieties to encapsulate experience in a vivid, present sense of ‘now’. Queer theorist Lauren Berlant says, ‘politicized feeling is a kind of thinking that too often assumes the obviousness of the thought it has, which stymies the production of the thought it might become’.11 On the contrary, instead of being didactic, in Def Poetry Jam the poets unhinge politics and feeling from obviousness to engage the audience imaginatively with what might be. The show’s nine poets create a public audience buoyed by intersubjectivity, one that reciprocates by talking back, by letting the poets know, in the moment of performance, that they are seen and heard.

Def Poetry Jam presents its poets in direct address to an audience filled with young people, many of them people of colour.12 The performance constitutes dialogue by assuming a very specific ‘you’ as its spectators; from that ‘you’ can be constituted what Marxist political theorist Chantal Mouffe calls a ‘political community’, in which ‘what makes us fellow citizens . . . is not a substantive idea of the good, but a set of political principles specific to [liberal democracy]: the principles of freedom and equality for
all’. Staged as part of such a conversation, Def Poetry Jam becomes a vehicle for radical democratic citizenship and the performance itself becomes replete with utopian performatives that allow us to experience its possibilities.

The performers in Def Poetry Jam speak urgently to the audience, with torrents of words that resound like anthems to the necessity for social change, whether they’re describing lives lived in shame or in anger, in glory or in fear. Their love poems are sweet, drenched in the now, and lift their subjects with a kind of reverence into the fullness of hope that outlines the possible. Def Poetry Jam eagerly illuminates how radical democracy might feel, in a celebration of agency that values each individual voice in this panoply of identities and imagines them harmonizing. The performance collectively argues for re-envisioning the nation as fully inclusive, and invites the audience to revel in the power, beauty, compassion and necessity of this speech. Def Poetry Jam gathers people across difference and uses the forum of the stage and the vehicle of performance to actually rehearse speaking to and with each other. As Beau Sia, one of the poets, says about slam in general, ‘it has brought a lot of kids together around the things affecting their world, who might not have even spoken to each other’.14

Performing in a conventional theatre empowers Def Poetry Jam’s performers to make a social statement, to take a public forum and claim it for their own. Def Poetry Jam’s slam poetry and its hip-hop style defamiliarizes the theatre and signals that all its conventions will be suspended. That sense of discarding rules, of spontaneous speaking from the heart, lights the way to the hopeful function of art as ‘anticipatory illumination’. The critical reception of Def Poetry Jam in fact emphasized its rule-breaking, pioneering presence, without always seeing this as positive. Tony Vellela, writing for the Christian Science Monitor, says,

On a street map, it’s a short 10 blocks from hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons’s office on Seventh Avenue to Broadway’s Longacre Theatre. On a cultural map, it can seem like a million miles. His latest vision, Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway, has made that journey, landing like a meteor in the middle of a theatre scene more known for Cats and cartoons than cutting edge. While Broadway has seen other nontraditional offerings in recent years, . . . Def Poetry Jam breaks new ground.15

Mimicking hip-hop ‘attitude’, Ed Siegel, writing in the Boston Globe, begins his review, ‘Yo, dude. Got somethin’ to tell ya. BROADWAY RULES!’ He goes on to say, ‘When was the last time the Great White Way was so welcoming to other skin and hair colors?’16 Elysa Gardner, writing in USA Today, says, ‘To say that Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam isn’t your grandmother’s Broadway show would be an understatement.’17 In Variety, the industry standard, Charles Isherwood says of the show that Broadway has ‘seen nothing like it before’.18 Jon Pareles of the New York Times was one of the few writers in national newspapers to describe the event more neutrally, writing, ‘For the first time on Broadway, poetry with hip-hop roots is at center stage.’ He noted,

While other Broadway theatres are filled with Les Miserables, revivals of old musicals and revues based on familiar songs, Def Poetry Jam is up to the minute. . . . ‘This show
is not going to be engraved in stone,’ Mr. Lathan [the production’s director] said. ‘The poems are constantly being updated.’

Taken together, these comments underline *Def Poetry Jam’s* radical unfamiliarity with its august context, while at the same time they express a certain anxiety about what the production’s arrival on Broadway means. Rather than applauding the show as a milestone, as an important breakthrough for identity groups who haven’t before wielded the power of such a visible public forum, some of these writers try to contain the show’s potential interventions, reassigning it to familiar categories of cultural work that can be more easily dismissed. Gardner, in *USA Today*, for instance, says that the show’s more stringent social commentary tends to strike one note, and it’s a predictable one. However superficially controversial their views, all adhere neatly to the rules on which political correctness is founded: 1) Insults are most acceptable when directed toward your own social or ethnic group or, even better, a group perceived as more empowered. 2) Preaching is easiest when you’re facing the choir.

What Gardner neglects to take into account is that this ‘choir’ is newly constituted at this site; as her own review notes in her lead, this is not ‘your grandmother’s Broadway show’. Implicit in her comment, in the ‘your’ to whom she addresses her review, is the reader’s presumptive whiteness, middle-classness, and his or her comfortable remove from what another critic called ‘another popular injection of “urban” culture into mainstream entertainment’.

These critics’ anxiety, then, comes from their sense of displacement from a center typically held by elite white audiences. This anxiety seeps into some of their writing on the show’s content; Siegel, the *Globe* writer, tries to deflect the importance of the diversity he sees not just by mocking its dialect in his review’s lead, but by declaring, ‘The nine poets follow one another onstage, forming a kind of victimization-on-parade.’ The accusation of ‘victim art’, flung so disdainfully into American culture in the mid-1990s by *New Yorker* dance critic Arlene Croce against gay African American dancer Bill T. Jones, continues to provide a silencing and containment strategy. If the potential radicalism of *Def Poetry Jam* can be neutralized under the terms ‘victim art’ and ‘political correctness’, then perhaps its incursion into territory usually secured for whiteness can momentarily be tolerated and quickly dismissed.

The beginning of *Def Poetry Jam* works explicitly against such disapprobation by making the theatre comfortable for the young, multiracial audience that might not know its conventional rules. The night I saw the production, the DJ warmed up the crowd before he introduced the poets. He taught us to respond to this performance as we would a rock concert or a religious service. By playing music, he helped spectators relax into their occupation of the Great White Way, transforming a theatre not typically associated with hip-hop style into a place where young people could feel comfortable. In many ways, in fact, the most unusual, potentially radical part of the performance wasn’t the multiracial identity of the ensemble, but the generational difference from the median age of the typical Broadway audience that their relative youth, and the youth of the audience they attracted, brought to the theatre.
Once he secured the generationally coherent public community, the DJ asked the audience to sing songs that were obviously familiar to many of them, and most of them did. Their voices rose spontaneously in unison, and at the end of each refrain they laughed at their own commonality, at the cultural markers and lyrics and melodies they knew together, even though most of them didn’t know each other and few of them probably knew the conventionally polite and silent, mostly white, middle-class codes of mainstream theatre-going. I saw the show with my friend Vicki Patraka; we’re both white, both middle-aged, both professors, both Jewish, and both chewed on ginger candies to soothe our stomachs after our pre-theatre dinner. While much of the audience sang, we looked at each other wide-eyed, at once impressed and moved by the singing and at a total loss about the melodies or the lyrics of the songs. The music didn’t hail us; we’re outside its intended generation. (Clearly we’re of the generation and the demographic most of the anxious reviews meant to address – we were the ‘grandmothers’ of the Broadway theatre!)

The DJ spun songs that not only inspired an interactive, pleasurable and appreciative mood, but also established a shared sense of cultural place. He encouraged the audience to make noise, to take control of their evening instead of sinking into reactive passivity. He addressed us generically as ‘New York’, a multiplicitous geography by which everyone in the audience seemed hailed, a gesture reminiscent of touring musicians and comedians who say, ‘We love you, Austin’, or ‘Pittsburgh’, or ‘Washington’, or wherever they happen to be, signalling their acknowledgement of the audience as a specific public constituted by this particular occasion, while also calling forth civic community and perhaps even pride. Such hailing also imported the codes of concert-going to a theatre event, and perhaps reassured spectators less accustomed to attending a Broadway show. After he played a few preparatory songs, the DJ introduced the poets like athletes being announced onto the field which, in addition to the concert-going codes, also emphasized the performance traditions of leisure and sports that might resonate with young audiences. He called out each performer’s name and hometown as they ran out to centre stage, and ended with the triumphant announcement ‘This is Def Poetry Jam’.26

In Def Poetry Jam the poets break through the membrane of convention and the banal, rejecting everyday oppressions and constraints. The poems moved from solo pieces to collective riffs, choral sections that spoke of desires filled in by the specifics of each poet’s experience or dreams. These collective moments, too, raised the performance out of banality into the beautiful. Adding their own verses to the refrain ‘I write America’, they imagined a wider, more spacious notion of citizenship, one in which young people of colour and queers and other marginalized people subvert dominant language by making love with its words, making the ‘master’s tools’ erotic and empowering rather than deadening or oppressive.27 In their performances the poets became social prophets, heralding the possibility of an elsewhere where generosity graces vulnerability, where pride replaces pain, where the stuff of daily life becomes transformative rather than constraining.

Towards the end of the first act, when all the poets were onstage, they witnessed each other’s solo moments from various perches on the garage-like set. They watched each other through complicated gazes of admiration, jealousy and competition; the production, after all, originated in the vernacular of poetry slams, which are like
intramural sports for writers. But the performers also honoured one another’s speech; they modelled an attentive community. Lemon – one of the Latino performers – mouthed the words of most of the others when they spoke, as though he could only remember his words as a part of what for him became a seamless whole.\textsuperscript{28} The intensity of the poets’ listening was as strong as the spotlight that outlined each soloist; their attention brought almost physical support and laid claim, in those moments, to the utopian performative they shared together onstage. I could feel their energy straining towards each other, holding each other up, cheering each other on, picking up the cues, keeping the pace going, because ultimately this show belonged to all of them, and they presented it to the audience not like an offering, not in humility, but as a declaration of their own re-envisioned independence, their own claim to citizenship, as a subaltern national anthem of fierce pride, as oppositional world-building, and as an insistent, cacophonous, hopeful march of dissident sound.

How can such a moving experience of utopia be conveyed or carried into the world outside the theatre? Is the breathtaking moment of potential connection and emotion severed as soon as the house lights go up and the audience returns to its more prosaic, individual arrangements of couples or trios to wade through the crowd to the exit doors? As Bert States says, ‘The return from the play world is like the awakening from the dream: it is always an abrupt fall into the mundane, fraught with the nostalgia of exile.’\textsuperscript{29} Performers, too, often share such melancholic dislocation; singer Nina Simone once said that ‘the saddest part of performing’ was that ‘it didn’t mean anything once you were offstage’.\textsuperscript{30} The utopian performative, by its very nature, can’t translate into a programme for social action, because it’s most effective as a feeling. Perhaps burdening such moments with the necessity that they demonstrate their effectiveness after the performance ends can only collapse the fragile, beautiful potential of what we can hold in our hearts for just a moment. The desire to feel, to be touched, to sense my longing addressed, to share the complexity of hope in the presence of absence and know that those around me, too, are moved, keeps me returning to the theatre, keeps me willing to practise a utopian vision for which, in some tangible way, no direct real-life analogy exists. The politics lie in the desire to feel the potential of elsewhere. The politics lie in our willingness to attend or to create performance at all, to come together in real places to explore in imaginary spaces the potential of the ‘not here’ and the ‘not yet.’

As Stan Garner argues, ‘theater engages the operations of world-constitution . . . as spectator, actor, and character seek to situate themselves in relation to the world, both make-believe and radically actual, that confronts and surrounds them’.\textsuperscript{32} I revel in my own love for theatre and performance, and challenge myself to write from within that feeling, rather than masking that sustaining primary emotion behind a veil of abstraction or obfuscation. I want my writing to translate to readers those moments of intense affective response, to inspire them, too, to reconsider performance as a vital place for human connection and critique, love and respect, for reinvigorating secular faith and belief.\textit{Utopia in Performance} licenses spectators (from the most critically engaged to the most casual) to pay attention to what we feel, to what we think, and to participate in our own hopefully more progressive project of reality-making to replace Bush’s empire-building.
For the artist/critic/citizen challenged to apprehend utopian performatives, to be on the lookout for them requires a readiness, a willingness, to be transported out of the banal into a moment of grace. The materials of such transport can be modest, as they are for instance in *Def Poetry Jam*. Going to see performance at all is an act of social faith, of belief in art as a rehearsal for an example of freedom and justice. Perhaps because our love for theatre propels us to see performance, a precondition is already met for the necessary faith, belief and desire, out of which utopian experiments and imaginings can be forged, however ephemerally.

Utopia is always a metaphor, always a wish, a desire, a no-place that performance can sometimes help us imagine, if not find. But a ‘performative’ is not a metaphor; it’s a doing, and it’s in the performance-based performative that hope adheres, that communitas happens, that the not-yet-conscious is glimpsed and felt and strained toward. Humanism, too, can be a performative, one that needs to be continually re-created, so that we never presume its transparency. Emotion and affect, too, are performatives, stagings done in a moment of feeling that needs to be shown to have effect. Utopian performatives crystallize from our labour to construct a temporary public that constitutes a multiplicity of presence, hoping to be recognized, extended and shared. A utopian performative is a mode of thinking and seeing that relies on the magic of performance practice, on a belief in social justice and a better future, on the impact and import of a wish, and on love for human commonality despite the vagaries of difference.

NOTES
1  Ron Suskind, ‘Without a Doubt’, *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004, p. 51.
2  *Utopia In Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* was published in late December 2005 by the University of Michigan Press.
3  Judith Butler, ‘Global Violence, Sexual Politics’, in *Idem, Queer Ideas* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2003), p. 208.
4  Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 10. See also, among the many commentators on this theme, Sam Ginden and Leo Pantich, ‘Rekindling Socialist Imagination: Utopian Vision and Working-Class Capacities’, *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine*, 51, 10 (March 2000), 36–52. On the deep pessimism within the Left, they say, ‘Overcoming this debilitating political pessimism and keeping some sense of transformative possibilities alive is the most important issue anyone seriously interested in social change must confront’ (Internet version, 1).
5  Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), p. 148.
6  John Rockwell, ‘Reverberations: Living for the Moments when Contemplation Turns to Ecstasy’, *New York Times*, 24 October 2003, p. B4.
7  Quoted in Phillip E. Wegner, ‘Horizons, Figures, and Machines: The Dialectic of Utopia in the Work of Frederic Jameson’, *Utopian Studies*, 9, 2 (1988), 58–74 (cited from the Internet version, 3).
8  Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,’ in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 109–142, here p. 122.
9  On communitas see Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 274. See also *idem, From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1982), pp. 45–51.
10  Fraser, p. 125.
I saw the Broadway production of *Def Poetry Jam* on 29 December 2002 at the Longacre Theatre in New York.

Chantal Mouffe, ‘Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community’, in *idem*, ed., *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 225–239, here p. 213.

FN, Quoted in Danny Simmons, ed. *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway... and More: The Choice Collection*, assisted by M. Raven Rowe, conceived by Stan Lathan and Russell Simmons (New York: Atria Books, 2003), p. 110.

Ed Siegel, ‘A Promising Blend of Pop Art and High Art on Broadway’, *Boston Globe*, 19 January 2003, 3rd ed., p. N5; original emphasis.

Elysa Gardner, *Def Poetry Jam is All Relative*, *USA Today*, 15 November 2002, final ed., p. 7E.

Charles Isherwood, ‘Russell Simmons *Def Poetry Jam*’, *Variety*, 15 November 2002, p. 7.

Jon Parles, “A New Platform for the New Poets,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2003, B1.

Gardner, *Def Poetry Jam is All Relative*.

Isherwood, ‘Russell Simmons *Def Poetry Jam*’.

Siegel, ‘A Promising Blend’.

Arlene Croce, ‘Discussing the Undiscussable’, *New Yorker*, 70, 43 (December 1994), pp. 54–9.

This, in fact, is the audience Simmons intended for this production. For Simmons, ‘Broadway means “long-standing shows that the whole world will see.” Otherwise, he is not exactly in awe of the territory. “I try to watch what they think is hot on Broadway,” he grouses, “and my ass starts to hurt.” Needless to say, Simmons isn’t counting on the average theatre-goer, so he’s already putting to work a number of marketing techniques that have always worked to bring out his traditional audience of music, comedy, and clothes buyers. For example, prior to opening night, a mighty 50% of the ad budget is devoted to radio, with only 5% going to print. Most Broadway producers would reverse those figures. . . . But radio is the obvious choice for African-American-themed stage shows that successfully play the Beacon Theatre’. Robert Hofler, ‘Broadway Spreads “Jam” to New Auds’, *Variety*, 21 October 2002, p. 81. At the same time, Suheir Hammad, one of the poets in the production, spoke to Jon Pareles: “‘We want to open this up to the traditional theatre audience,’ Ms. Hammad said. ‘They may be worried that they don’t relate to the hip-hop generation, but they’re raising the hip-hop generation.’” (Ticket prices after the opening will range from $35 to $65).” Pareles.

After all, plenty of plays and musicals by and about people of colour (although, of course, never enough) have by now been presented on Broadway. See, among other examples, *For Colored Girls Who have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow was Enuf* (1978), to which many commentators compare *Def Poetry Jam*, no doubt because they share a poetic aesthetic; *Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk* (1996), a history of African-American music and performance that George C. Wolfe brought to Broadway from the Public Theatre; Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Top Dog/Underdog* (2002), also a transfer from the Public Theater; the successful 2004 revival of Lorraine Hansberry’s classic *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), starring Sean ‘Puffy’ Combs; and of course the many Broadway productions of August Wilson’s plays.

The JD, Tendaji Lathan (the son of the director, Stan Lathan), created a soundscape underneath the poets’ words throughout the evening. ‘[H]e moved the performances . . . from one scene to another on beats that effortlessly hinge the transitions’ (*Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway*, p. 203).

See, for example, Michael Giltz (‘Getting Raves for her Rants: Chinese-Jamaican Poet Staceyann Chin Brings Her Outraged Eloquence from Broadway to HBO’s Def Poetry’, *The Advocate*, 29 April 2003, 60–2), who interviews Chin about her lesbian, multiracial identity and its relationship with her work and with American-ness. The reference to the master’s tools comes from Audre Lorde, ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, in *idem*, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 110–13.
Lemon is half-Puerto Rican; he grew up in Brooklyn as an ‘outlaw’. His parents were drug addicts who died of AIDS; he went to prison on Rikers Island for armed robbery, where he taught himself to read and write, and on his release he became a member of the Universes, a slam poetry performance troupe. According to his biography in the script, he reports, “‘My stuff is profound,” he brags a little. “I’m speaking for the poor peoples’” (p. 134). Lemon’s performance was virtuosic, although his technique, as witnessed by his tendency to mouth the other performers’ words, was rudimentary. This combination of power and untrained method marked many of the performances, and also lent the production its patina of authenticity, a value stressed repeatedly by the editors of the published script. The pointed references to Lemon’s prison stint also secure his authenticity and positions Def Poetry Jam as redemptive for the artists as well as for the audience.

Bert O. States, ‘Phenomenology of the Curtain Call’, Hudson Review, 34, 3 (Autumn 1981), p. 374.

Quoted in Alice Echols, Scars of Sweet Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), p. 260.

Stanton B. Garner, Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 3.

**JILL DOLAN** holds the Zachary T. Scott Family Chair in Drama in the Department of Theater and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of, most recently, Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance (2001), and Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre (2005). Her research projects include a critical memoir on lesbian feminism in the United States and a critical history of queer theatre in the US since the 1960s. She is the past president of the Women and Theater Program of the Association for Theater in Higher Education (ATHE), and a past president of ATHE itself. Her articles have been published in Theatre Journal, The Drama Review, Modern Drama and Theatre Topics, among other publications. She heads the Performance as Public Practice MA/Ph.D. Program at UT-Austin.