From *Dionysus in 69* to *Imagining O*: discussing nakedness with Richard Schechner

Interview with Richard Schechner

Chloé Lavalette
From *Dionysus in 69* to *Imagining O*: discussing nakedness with Richard Schechner

Interview with Richard Schechner

Chloé Lavalette
Dionysus in 69.

Photograph courtesy of Richard Schechner

Nakedness as a Cultural-Specific Practice

Chloé Lavalette: Let’s agree on words. What do you say: "nakedness" or "nudity"?
Richard Schechner: There is such a thing as nudity, which is more like... when you're naked but you're not supposed to admit it, and within an art context - a different kind of context. I think, when people say "nude", I think that's a defiance against saying "naked". There's two words which have different meanings in English; you could say "the naked truth" which means "really the truth", nothing covering. "Nude"... it has a kind a cover on it.

CL: Like an artistic nude...

Richard Schechner: Yes. It’s just a different tone. In my piece Dionysus, the performers were not “nude”. They were naked.

CL: I am trying to understand if something changed in the use of nakedness since the 60s. How are you thinking the reaction of the audience, their own relationship to the body, to this sexuality that may be suggested by nakedness? Is there another intelligence which developed with the changes of society? We have this kind of cliché of the 60s and 70s, with everybody stripping very easily...

Richard Schechner: Nakedness, like everything else, is cultural-specific. If you were brought up in a traditional Australian Aboriginal way, or in certain places in the upper Amazon, nobody wears clothes. Ever. So that nakedness is not marked. It's not signified. And obviously sex goes on but nakedness is not a marker of sex, it’s a pre-condition, but it’s not a mark of it - like we do with our faces: I can see your face, but it’s not particularly sexual to me, although, we kiss, whatever, because it’s just a condition. If I’m living in... Arabia, where women have their faces covered, and leaving out politics...
and whether it's good or bad, when their faces are uncovered, it becomes highly erotic to them and to the men who may see it, because it's covered. So that nakedness as an erotic thing functions only in relationship to being covered. Even in the imagination. So that, again, in these cultures where people live naked from birth to death, it has no value, it's neutral, and it goes on in a certain sense whenever a part of the body is always covered, it gathers a kind of mystery of what it might be when it's uncovered.

And that kind of mystery or mystery is the wrong word, maybe... "without knowledge"... When you're getting this knowledge, it can have an erotic part to it. In fact, in Hebrew and in English, knowledge means sex, when you say "he knew her" in the old way of using biblically, it means that "they had sex". And that goes back to the myth of Adam and Eve - so that's a very interesting relationship between knowledge, sex and nakedness. Before they eat the apple, they were naked and innocent, they had no children, they were as if they were like pre-sexual children from that point of view, so the serpent gives them the knowledge and the first thing that happens is that they covered their genitals. And that becomes a sign of nakedness in dressed-ness, it's funny, why not cover the face? She doesn't cover her breasts. And you have the famous fig leaf - and shortly thereafter, they're thrown out of Eden and they have children. So they gain knowledge, including sexual knowledge, and they then begin to value clothing and nakedness as night and day, antithesis. I think that story still impacts Western culture, and we still read it that way. But I want to be very specific, it's a specific kind of story. I spent a lot of time in India. In Khajuraho and in Konark there are thousands of erotic sculptures representing many different forms of having sex in hundreds of different ways. It's strangely sexual without being erotic, it's a catalog of possibilities, it's out on a temple wall. The people who go to see it are always Westerners... the people who live there don't want to see this at all, or it doesn't matter to them. For them it doesn't have that kind of artistic pornographic reference as it does for the Western tourists. So these things become... It is really culturally specific.

Dialectics of Ecstasy

CL: So let's be specific. What about nakedness in Dionysus in 69, the first piece you created with the Performing Group in SoHo in 1968? In the film made by Brian de Palma, we can see there is a great participation of the audience, they join you on stage when you invite them, some people also get naked...

Richard Schechner: As I was doing this piece, Dionysus, I wrote an essay called "Politics of Ecstasy". At the end of the essay, I say: if you dance with Dionysus, you're going to finish with your son's head on a dancing stick. In other words, this piece that so many people interpreted as liberation, to me, was a dialectic between a temporary liberation which is a madness, and a kind of fascistic imposition of the power of this crazy god. It's not just a liberation. The birth of Dionysus, at the beginning of the piece, is a liberation, but the death of Pentheus echoes with the American atrocities in Vietnam... Showing pictures in the book Dionysus in 69... Here, they're naked there too, but look at this: this is not liberation, this is dismembering one's own children, it may be beautiful, but it's not liberatory. What I'm saying with this piece is that you can go to this extreme or that extreme, both extremes meet and both are performed naked, but one is going with this god, and the other one is realizing what this god has taken you to. The god himself, Dionysus, was a god of creation and destruction. And we as a species, as a society, are
not able to handle it. Here is the theme of the play. Now, in its own time, the way it was praised by many people was "Wow", you know, part of the sixties. In "Politics of Ecstasy" I talked a lot about that, about this double meaning.

CL: Could we say there was a kind of misunderstanding about the ambiguity of the piece?

Richard Schechner: Well, as an artist you can't always tell people they misunderstand. I intended one thing but it is what it is, so I don't think they misunderstood, I think that people enjoyed it as a liberatory performance, and at the end of it they just kind of shrugged off, they didn't go through, and even when we had the murders and the dismembered bodies, the audience was still very happy.

CL: Although the piece and the acting style were not based on illusion.

Richard Schechner: It was because the piece in itself was in relationship to social laws and norms of the time: it was the first time two men kissed on stage, the first time they was a group of naked people on stage, men and women. There's more a tradition of naked women in the West than of naked men, especially in the modern West. It was also before the gay movement - I mean it was there, but it was not preeminent. So there's a lot of things that were happening for the first time in that piece, and people went to celebrate it. Another new thing is that it did not take place on a stage. It took place in this performing garage which now we call a black box theater, but it was very unusual to have a theater without any stage, without seats. We sat on the floor, on the carpet, upon wooden structures. It was my designer Michael Kirby who made this thing for us...

CL: So it's more like a dialectic between an actual liberation and an unconscious submission to a fascistic power.

Richard Schechner: In nakedness we get the naked truth of the power of Dionysus, which is the power of ecstasy, the power of drunkenness, the power of wine, the power of sexual release; and all these things are both good and bad. Without desire, what would life be like? But with desire, what is life like? The Buddhists would counsel us to give up all our desire... And to some degree I am sympathetic to that, have no desire, want nothing, not just sexual desire but all desire. At the same time life without desire seems like you're taking all the seasoning out of life. And you're taking the danger out of it. If you really have no desire, you are truly enlightened, you are liberated, but so what? If I'd be given the final choice of being liberated and living without any passion or suffering being fully human, I would probably choose suffering being fully human.

Nakedness as a Workshop Practice

CL: In the 1973 edition of Environmental Theater, there is a whole chapter about nakedness. You first reflect on rituals. You describe nakedness as a way to get to a certain state for the performer. It's almost described as a pedagogical tool.

Richard Schechner: I used it a lot in the late 60s and 70s. We did a lot of workshops naked. Especially in the summer. We did our exercises and everything, and we did dances and it's wrong to say that they weren't erotic but the erotic was not the major thing, the major thing was this kind of getting comfortable with the panoply of the senses. I see somebody's energetic dancing, with the sweat. There was some caressing, but there was never any sex, never... But it was erotic in a larger sense, do you know Marcuse's work Eros and civilization? It was erotic in that sense, as life-giving, as
accepting. In that book I also describe exercises like "Crossing", when you slowly get rid of your clothes and you pick up somebody else's clothes and so on. So, there was a certain naïveté about it, I would say, also. Post-knowing innocence, you know, if children are innocent, they don't know, can you bring adults to innocence, after they know? After the Fall, can you become innocent temporarily again? So I think it's part of that thing. I mean, they were naked doing these exercises, it was not for an audience, I was the only one watching, but the work was not highly erotic. It was playfully naked. The men did not have erections, the women did not seem to be excited, it was not about that, but it was about this joy and also this beauty... Visually it was extremely beautiful, ten or twelve well-shaped exercises with naked bodies. I can understand when the Greeks did the Olympics, it was just to watch those athletes perform. And at that point there was only men, but the Greeks were very un-shy with their nakedness and liked the aesthetic of it, and so do I. It's beautiful, it's never totally drained of its erotic content, but it's so much more than just that. My definition of pornography, and I have no real quarrel with pornography, is that pornography's aim is sexual excitement. Nakedness' aim... may include that but goes so far beyond, it's not just that, or it's not mostly that, so, it's also just delight in looking. We are to some degree a voyeuristic species. We like to look at each other. Look how we are made with these two large eyes and stereoscopic vision, we are constructed to look at each other.

CL: But at the same time it was not easy to make the participants accept this kind of exercise. You describe it as a process.

Richard Schechner: I never told anybody they had to get undressed. It's always an invitation. But it's also to some degree a strategy. So I would say "look, if you're gonna cross this room ("Crossing" is a very good exercise) you have to take your clothes off". So if you crossed this line, you knew you took a few a few a few, here you got to be naked and pick up the clothes and you got dressed again. You don't have to do it, you can just cross this far, but if you're going to make the crossing, that's the only way you can make it. That was like: "you don't have to cross the river, but if you cross the river, you're gonna get wet. So I don't care, it's up to you. Stay out and don't get wet, but you're not gonna get to the other side of the river". That makes it seductive in certain way, because people want to go to the other side. They do wanna pick up the other people's clothing. But some people don't and that's okay. In other words, as a director, as well as a workshop leader, I never say you must do anything. You can do as little or as much of the work I offer to you as you want. The more you do, the more you learn, the more fun you'll have, and the better art work you'll do. That's really up to you. I can only be a kind of suggester and guide. Some directors say: "You've got to do what I tell you to do". I say: "Try what I am suggesting, and let's make out of that what we are going to create". But I can be very convincing. 

A Series of Nudities in Schechner’s Work

CL: I see that. Can you tell me more about the following shows...? Did you keep using nakedness?

Richard Schechner: There was some. The next piece we did after Dionysus is called Makbeth, it's a version of Shakespeare, with absolutely no nakedness. The piece after that was called Commune. It was based on Charles Manson and his "Family", the murder of Sharon Tate and the other people. And the parallel was between that and the
Vietnam war. It told the history of America, from the point of view of Charles Manson but also Herman Melville in *Moby Dick* and Thoreau in *Walden* and other American classics. I also involved some of King Lear and some of Marlowe's *Edward II*, and inside this piece, there was a couple of times when people were naked. Especially a man who was playing Edward II: in one scene he has been tortured and he’s bent back, naked. And there’s a swimming pool where they are partially naked. Then in *The Tooth of crime*, which is the next piece I did, which is a play by Sam Shepard, there was never complete nakedness, there was some dancing, bare-breasted dancing – it was a nightclub scene. After that there was *Mother Courage* and there was absolutely no nakedness in that piece, because it was not suitable for that piece, and then I made a piece called the *Marilyn Project*. It was a new play about Marilyn Monroe, and the whole play takes place simultaneously in two spaces, the room has been divided in half, and each half is a mirror image of the other: two Marilyn, two directors, two everything. At one point, Marilyn is undressed and gets a massage, and at the end of it, I had two men do the famous picture of Marilyn in a red blanket, and Marilyn take their pictures with the camera... These men are rolling around naked and they come into the Marilyn pose, but it's really kind of weird because their cock and balls are... you know... Arching back for a woman, it looks differently than for a man in this pose.

There was also nakedness in *Oedipus*. Yokasta was always pregnant, so she bears a body mask of a pregnant belly which we molded on the actress when she was eight months pregnant. It was a masked nudity... And Oedipus, when he finally finds out who he is, he's naked but he's covered with this mud. After that I did a piece called *Prometheus Project*. Do you know who Annie Sprinkle is? I was doing a course, "New expression in New York", including pornography, so I met her there. So we did *Prometheus Project*, and she did the *Nurse Sprinkle Show*, which is a kind of porn show she used to do on Broadway. *Prometheus Project* was about Prometheus and the gift of fire. But, fire, at this point, was the atomic bomb and it was about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and about women who were raped, and about Io, who is pursued by Zeus, and who crosses the Bosphorus as a cow and actually comes to Prometheus to tell him that he is going to be liberated. Annie is pretty well naked for part of it, and some of the other women occasionally.

I don't think I used nakedness for a while after that. When I worked in China, although they wouldn't even allow kissing on stage, and less nakedness, I did a lot with feet because I knew that the Chinese eroticize the feet. They never thought about banning naked feet. I had the lover caressing his lover's feet, it was very erotic to the Chinese audience. To caress and kiss the feet and rub them... That was naked in their sense but it was not naked in the Western sense.

Back to USA, I did a piece called *Yokasta Redux*, a play I co-authored with Romanian playwright Saviana Stanescu, with four different Yokastas. I staged the time when she gives Oedipus a bath the first night, blood-washing off him: they’re naked in that, I mean she has a slight filmy something on and he's completely naked. It's settled in the bath water, and some of that is in film and some of that is alive. There is a little bit of nakedness in *Faust: one thing Faust wanted was a young boy, so this was a naked man and basically we only saw his butt, and Faust was touching it. So obviously I use a lot of it on and on but also... *Laughs* They're so often dressed as well!
CL: When was the last time you used it, then?

Richard Schechner: The last time I used nakedness was in the most recent performance in 2014. The piece is called "Imagining O" and it combines Ophelia from Shakespeare with *Histoire d’O*, the French erotic novel. I play with it because “O” is the letter but also it means water and you know Ophelia drowns, there’s a lot a of water in this play. But they’re all women, only women. There’s one scene between two naked women. It’s very close to the audience, as close as you are to me.

Conceptualizing Nakedness in Theatre, Dance and Performance

CL: The main epistemological difficulty I met, when I began to work on nakedness on stage, is that theater uses nakedness in so many different situations that it escapes conceptualization. Contemporary dance was an easier field for me to approach, even though I come from theater. In dance there was a big evolution in the way they used nakedness. What do you observe with other directors, for example: did it also change? Or is it a kind of tool? What do you think about it?

Richard Schechner: Well, I don't know what you mean by an evolution but... Bill T. Jones did a thing like *Uncle Tom’s cabin* which ended by two hundred naked people on stage. Ordinary people, fat people, not muscular people, and I think most of nakedness in dance is with beautiful people, because they are dancers after all. And this piece was different because it had a wide range of bodies in terms of age and everything else. OK. But in theater... To me, nothing is a tool: in other words, everything is organic to the piece I'm making. So I don't go in and say: "I'm gonna use nakedness now", or "I'm gonna do this" or... anything else. As you're working in a workshop, as you're devising the piece... I invent what I'm going to do as I'm doing it. So that's one of the possibilities. I only eliminate from the range of possibilities something that will do physical harm to the performers. I do have friends who cut themselves and bleed and all that... I don't do that. Some of the thing I've seen have been extraordinary in terms of naked performance. Do you know Franko B.?

CL: No.

Richard Schechner: Franko B is an English performance artist. He cuts himself and bleeds on stage. And Rocío Boliver put herself in gynecological stirrups, and then she inserted crosses with a Jesus image in her outstretched vagina. And then she physically sewed her labia (which is the most painful thing I've seen), with a needle and thread. She did it in my department, she was my guest, she was in my workshops but that's out of my range, I mean I don't do that. But aside from that, anything is available to me. It just is part of the repertoire of possibilities. But not something which I, say, "pick off the shelf".

CL: Maybe that's why it’s so hard to conceptualize... [laughs]

Richard Schechner: Yes.

Biblical Myth and Mythological Presence

CL: Giorgio Agamben's essay on nakedness describes various theological interpretations of the myth of Adam and Eve. At the end of his text, he deplores that nakedness is always defined in a negative way - as the absence of garments – and says that we should de-
theologize our vision of the naked body. I think Agamben formulated a challenge for Western artists with this statement. This essay echoes with an interview in which you were saying that Marina Abramovic presented her body as if saying "I am here", in a "ecce homo" style. There is no alternative statement or any possible criticism to "I am here". There is nothing to say beyond presence taken as a divine fact. Do you think this kind of "ecce homo" dimension is always present when you perform naked? Is it attached to nudity or is it a construction?

Richard Schechner: No, I don't think anything is a priori about anything. As I said, nakedness functions within specific cultural contexts, and specific cultural times. So as to say "ecce homo", "this is the man" all the time, no, not necessarily. And that also gives nakedness a kind of metaphysical privilege, which I don't think it really has. It does have it in that myth, but that myth is not universal. There is no universal myth.

CL: I think especially in the 1970s there were uses of nakedness which were very mythological.

Richard Schechner: Well... The Living Theater used the naked body, as both a political protest - "I'm not allowed to take off my clothes", they used to shout in Paradise Now, and as a kind of paradise, you know. To be naked was to be "free".

CL: Yes.

Richard Schechner: And I thought it was kind of naive. You know, it may be true under certain circumstances but not under other circumstances. If you want to torture somebody you also strip them naked. And... if you want to go back to this biblical myth, Jesus was crucified more or less naked. It doesn't have a priori values.

CL: I was very surprised I when saw the Dionysus in '69 video by Brian de Palma because the performers have a very casual presence. Especially the speaking actors. There's nothing incredible about them being naked. And I didn't expect that, I thought it would be something with everybody in trance... You said it was the first time it was a non "burlesque" nakedness, I wanted to know if you referred to the cabaret or to something else?

Richard Schechner: No, I mean strip-tease shows, like Moulin Rouge, or whatever. There's a long history of women taking off their clothes in Western and American culture. And there's a fairly long history and much more underground, in gay clubs the men took off their clothes, but it was erotic traditions. They would not put it in the service of Greek tragedy, as I did it. So that's what I meant by burlesque, I didn't mean "making fun of", I meant a genre of strip tease.

CL: Can you really assert it was the first time ever in the United states?

Richard Schechner: In this context, I can't say it for sure because I haven't done the research, but I don't know of any other. And I said it several times and nobody's come and said: "Oh, but this one also did it". Because prior to that there was always some kind of fig leaf. In the movie they have a fig leaf, we did that in the movie because we wanted it to have full distribution but before it was completely naked, in the pictures of the book, it would get an X-rating, it would not be distributed. It got an X-rating anyway, so I should have done it completely naked. That was a big mistake. Mine and Brian de Palma's, we made a mistake. Such is life.

Challenging Paradise
CL: You’re talking about the Living Theater, I just realized: this is my cliché of nakedness the 60s. But was it a very specific case or were there other groups with the same kind of discourse about freedom, anarchy and liberation?

Richard Schechner: There must have been other groups, but they were the first, and they made a part of the credo with this piece called Paradise Now. You know my famous thing in it? It was the premiere of it in Brooklyn. There was a thousand people in the theater. I’m sitting next to the critic of the New York Times because I had a press card. And the Living Theater people were running on saying aloud: "I’m not allowed to travel without a passport!", "I’m not allowed to smoke marijuana!", "I’m not allowed to take off my clothes!", you know, and they went crazy about that... And I said “I can take off my clothes!”, so I took off all my clothes, and I did a big bow, and then the audience went crazy and I sat down naked. The next day Life magazine and the entertainment editor told me: "Would you do it again for Life?" I said: "No, but I’ll be interviewed", so they had a story about me called "The Man Who Dared Into Paradise".

CL: It was a way of... challenging them?

Richard Schechner: Yes, I was challenging them, making fun of them, I was saying "look, we can do it". Because Dionysus had already opened, we already had dozens of people getting undressed. So I felt like, you know, "What are you talking about?"

CL: They were proclaiming a freedom that already existed...

Richard Schechner: Right, and we weren't forbidden or, in some places we were and in some places we weren't. Anyway, it was kind of making fun of them, and Judith got angry with me. They were friends of mine, but you know.

CL: It was not a kind of ‘Happening’ for you.

Richard Schechner: It was spontaneous, it was to make fun of them, it was, you know, I’m a bit of an exhibitionist I guess, so, why not!

CL: So maybe the Living Theater has a big part in my cliché.

Richard Schechner: Yes, the Living Theater, they are very serious. Dionysus, if you saw the movie, there’s a lot of laughter in it. There’s a lot of irony. Because if Euripides is a tragedian, he’s almost writing a comedy as well as he’s writing a tragedy. So he’s doing both. The Living Theater for the most part is very serious. They want the anarchist revolution. They want it now, you know, they are outraged by the injustices of the world. But we’re all outraged by the injustices of the world, so I’m also a little bit ironic.

**Conclusion: Interdisciplinarity in the 60s**

CL: I have a question about the different fields: dance, theater and performance. Was there any circulation between them in this period?

Richard Schechner: Yeah, and I still think there is. In Dionysus and my early pieces there’s a lot of music and dance. And performance arose out of happening and they were a lot of friends of mine. I have some things by Allan Kaprow over there in the other side of the room. Michael Kirby and I were very close friends. Site-specific performances, happenings, all of those things were intermixed. I still think performance and theater are very, very close still.
CL: What about the performers: were they moving from one field to the other?

Richard Schechner: Well, they didn't move so much between those fields; they moved between performance and theater and dance and music, but they didn't move from theater to dance or from theater to music, because it took a high skill. So you couldn't just walk into a dance company and dance, no. Now, at a certain point, when they were doing pedestrian dance or ordinary movement, contact-improvisation here in Judson, then some of my people did work in that kind of dance. But not in modern dance and certainly not in ballet.

CL: Of course, I didn't mean that. But, were the fields more linked than today or not?

Richard Schechner: Well, yes and no. I mean, performance had hardly begun, it was still happenings rather than performance. It was less linked in the sense that happening came largely from visual arts. And then it conjoined with John Cage to music. And theater was the last thing they got involved into. I got a little bit involved because they were friends. I would say there's more circulation now because basically happenings, before they were called performances, were things in themselves and the whole group of people who did that looked down on the theater, they thought theater was really old fashioned and didn't know what was going on, and the theater looked up to them because they didn't have narratives, they had really theorized the structure of happenings.

CL: And was nakedness present in this...

Richard Schechner: In performance art it was quite present because it courses the tradition of the nude model and figure stuff, and... I'll show you something.

He shows me a two-foot female nude statue made by his twelve year-old son

We have the idea of the innocence of nakedness, but look, this is much better than the hands or the face, and the behind... Well, the behind is very good too!

Natural end of the interview. RS shows me photos and videos of his shows.

NOTES

4. The full title was Commune Being Several Well-Known Scenes Enacted After Supper By the Youth of Our Nation.
5. Annie Sprinkle is an important figure of the underground culture of the 70s and 80s. A former sex worker and pornographic actress and director, she defines herself a sex educator, positive feminist and ecossexual activist.
6. Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land, by the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company, was created in 1990.

7. Richard Schechner is alluding to the Judson Church Theater, a collective of dancers, composers and visual artists (Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Elaine summers, Deborah Hay, Simone Forti, Carolee Schneemann...) who gathered in the Judson Memorial Church, in Washington Square, in the 1960s, and impused the turn of postmodern dance.

ABSTRACTS

Born in 1934, Richard Schechner is an American theatre director and theorist. The former director of the Performance Group with which he wrote Dionysus in 69, he is also editor of the famous TDR: The Drama Review and cofounder of the Performance Studies Department at the Tish School of the Arts at New York University. The interview was conducted in January 2017 in Richard Schechner’s office in New York, when I was freshly beginning a research about the presence of nudity on stage in the New York avant-gardes of the 60s, and fighting with my inherited clichés of nudity in this period. The main goal of the interview was understanding Schechner’s point of view on nudity as a theatre maker and theorist, but also the different functions it assumed in his theatre works.


INDEX

**Subjects:** Theater

**Mots-clés:** Richard Schechner, théâtre, Dionysus in 69, nudité

AUTHOR

**CHLOÉ LAVALETTE**

École Normale Supérieure de Paris (France)
PhD student at SACRe, Paris Sciences Lettres Research University
chlolavalette@gmail.com