The Resistance to Theatricality

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Probably the most distinctive feature of theoretical speculation concerning the theater during the past twenty years has been the cross-fertilization of this field of study with the social sciences. While traditionally theater theorists have most commonly looked to the work of literary theorists or philosophers for inspiration, concepts, and analytic strategies, today they are much more likely to look to such cultural analysts as anthropologists, ethnographers, psychologists and sociologists. The changes in the investigative fields of both theater and the social sciences as a result of this shift have been enormous—indeed the fields themselves have been significantly reconfigured. Perhaps the most familiar example of this cross-fertilization was the converging interests of anthropologist Victor Turner and theater theorist Richard Schechner, but scarcely less important have been the theatrical metaphors in the influential writings of sociologist Erving Goffman, and the emphasis on the performative aspects of language by linguists John Austin and John Searle. In each of the fields represented by these theorists, their work and the work of others who have been influenced by their approaches have radically altered both critical approaches and critical vocabulary.

So widespread and so productive has been this interpenetration of the formerly fairly discrete fields of theater studies and the social sciences that it is hardly an exaggeration to say that in the study of social phenomena today metaphors of theater and performance are so common that they have become almost transparent, while conversely, in the study of theater, a similar critical dominance is currently held by the metaphors and the *topoi* of social analysis.

Useful and productive as this cross-fertilization has been, it has not been without cost, for of course any new interpretative grid, any new critical paradigm, inevitably brings some distortion along with its clarifications, and when the clarifications have been as stimulating and productive as those resulting from the growing convergence of the analytical methodologies of theater and performance studies and of the social sciences, then the distortions involved are very likely to be overlooked in the general enthusiasm over important new insights.

Thanks to the widespread influence of such theorists as Turner, Schechner, Goffman, Austin, and the many subsequent theorists who have since the 1960s worked in these converging fields, it has become almost impossible to consider the term *performance*, in the many ways that it is used in contemporary critical writings, without the term being conditioned to a greater or lesser extent by the implications of its use as a key critical term in current work in the social sciences.

This new orientation of the term performance has hardly gone unremarked. Indeed it has been celebrated and in fact institutionalized, in large part due to the efforts of Richard Schechner. As early as 1973 Schechner in a special issue of *The Drama Review* called for more study of the "areas where performance theory and the social sciences coincide" (5). Since that time Schechner has devoted much of his career to this study in an influential series of books and articles, and he was instrumental in the establishment of a department of performance studies at New York University.

The high visibility of the term "performance" in recent writings about theater, and its acknowledged relationship to theories and concerns in the social sciences, has obscured the fact that theater theory in general has become more involved in recent years with concepts and strategies related to the social sciences. This affects the way the field is evolving and how its terms are configured, even when the perhaps overdetermined rubric of performance seems not to be directly involved.

A striking example of this may be seen in recent uses of the term *theatricality*, which, like performance, has been very differently configured as a result of the interpenetration of theatrical and social science theory, but which has not gained, as performance has, a higher visibility and a generally more productive and flexible critical usage as a result. On the contrary, I would argue, theatricality has been reduced and constricted as a working term by this process. Indeed, in some cases its decline can, I think, be almost directly correlated to the relative success of performance, where the two have been posited as rhetorically oppositional terms.

A key work in locating the term theatricality within the developing interface of theater and the social sciences was the book by that name published by Elizabeth Burns in 1972. Burns and her husband were pioneers in the modern application of sociological methodology to literary and theatrical studies, and Burns herself described the book *Theatricality* as an attempt to bring together material from three hitherto separate fields— the history of drama and theater (represented by such scholars as Allardyce Nicoll and Glynne Wickham), the Chicago School of sociology (whose best

known exponent was Erving Goffman), and the European, largely French tradition of sociology of the theater, founded by Jean Duvignaud.

Burns, anticipating in some measure the insights of Judith Butler concerning the "performative" in social life, suggests that theater is a vehicle for the "transmission of specific beliefs, attitudes, and feelings in terms of organized social behavior." "Theatricality," occurs when certain behavior seems to be not natural or spontaneous but "composed according to this grammar of rhetorical and authenticating conventions" in order to achieve some particular effect on its viewers (33). In the two decades between Burns and Butler, however, the view of subjectivity has shifted, and with it the attitude toward the functions of structures of "organized social behavior." For Butler, writing in 1990, subjectivity is itself "performatively constituted" precisely by the "ritualized production" of codified social behavior (1993, 95), and thus the question of agency for the subject presents a major critical problem. This is much less the case for Burns, who follows the model of much sociological writing of her time in positing a subjective "self" that stands to some extent outside these structures of behavior and utilizes them in a manner Burns characterizes as "rhetorical"—seeking to create certain effects and impressions upon others.

This separation of "self" from "role" inevitably suggests that the latter is less authentic, more artificial. It is precisely upon these grounds that Jean-Paul Sartre, in an often-quoted passage in *Being and Nothingness*, condemns the sort of social "role-playing" that is explored in far greater detail in Erving Goffman or in Elizabeth Burns. When we make ourselves known to others as a "representation," Sartre argues, then we in effect exist "only in representation," a condition Sartre characterizes as "nothingness" or "bad faith" (59, 60). Burns claims that she is distancing herself somewhat from Sartre on this point by claiming that while theatricality can involve "rigidity or repetitiveness," its "empty rituals" can be avoided if we contribute to them "the novelty of our own experience" (232). In fact, however, this is also Sartre's argument, that the "novel" actions of the self can and indeed must be utilized to overcome the rigidity and emptiness of theatricality.

This opposition between the "authentic" or "meaningful" expression of the self and the "empty rituals" of theatricality, even when it does not appear in precisely these terms, is very widespread in the sociological writings of the past generation, where its fashionable dress in the language of contemporary social science largely obscures the fact that it is in significant measure a modern reworking of a very ancient criticism of theater. From Plato onward one of the most predictable attacks on theater has been precisely

that it provided empty representations that if unchallenged threatened the authenticity of the real self.[1]

The negative association of theatricality with rigidity and empty repetition suggested by Burns and the sociological theorists upon whom she was drawing was reinforced at almost this same time by a quite different group of theorists in the world of art. As minimalism became the fashion, many theater theorists found in the writings of Antonin Artaud a vision of an "essential" or "minimalist" theater which would reject the trappings of theatricality as Artaud saw them, such as discursive writing, narration, and traditional character. Within the art world, minimalist theorists like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried during the 1960s were involved in a search for the "essence" of art, a kind of authentic "self" for each art and each work of art, and for them the "theatrical" was seen as inimical to this project, partly (as with Artaud) because of its associations with pre-determined structure, but even more importantly because of the emphasis it placed upon reception. In Fried's 1980 *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, he contrasts apparently self-sufficient inwardly directed "absorbed" art works with works of "theatricality," consciously opening themselves to the gaze and interpretation of a spectator. If the work of art was indeed to be self-contained, as the modernist project insisted, then it could hardly be held hostage to the reception conditions foregrounded and "authenticated" by theatricality.

Fried's association of the concept of theatricality with a foregrounding of the actor-spectator relationship and the epistemological problems involved in "knowing" something (or someone) consciously "displayed" for a spectator or spectators had wide influence in subsequent theory not only in art history but also in the field of literary and film studies. Stanley Cavell based provocative essays on *Endgame* and *King Lear* on the operations of appearing as a spectacle before spectators (1969) and later extended this analysis to film and philosophy (1 and 2; 1979). David Marshall makes these operations central to his analysis of Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot in his 1986 *The Figure of Theater*. The theatricality that is viewed with suspicion by each of these theorists is specifically concerned, as Marshall puts it, with the "literal or figurative position of appearing as a spectacle before spectators" (5). Theatricality, especially in the works studied by Marshall, is not precisely condemned, but neither is it viewed positively. Rather, it is a problem to be addressed, an inescapable and distorting filter through which the souls and intentions of others must be read. The "dream of sympathy, the desire to transcend the difference and distance that separate

people," can be achieved only by "defeating or negating theatricality" (225). Thus, though far more sophisticated than the simple "self-role" distinction of the Platonic tradition, it derives in fact from the same assumptions concerning the relationship between authenticity and mimesis and in the end uses the metaphor of theatricality to suggest a lack or falseness, even when this lack is perceived as inevitable.

These parallel observations from sociology, art, film, and literary theory, and even certain major theater theorists like Artaud, all contributed to a distinctly restricted and decidedly negative view of theatricality in theoretical writings of the late 1970s and 1980s, a view that associated the term primarily with formal, traditional and formally structured operations, potentially or actually opposed to the unrestricted and more authentic impulses of life itself. The general theoretical reaction to what was now widely seen as the repressiveness of structuralist concerns, also extended, in those critics interested in such matters, to theatricality, which the writings of influential sociological theorists had associated with the establishment and maintainance of structures of social action.

As performance emerged during the early 1980s as a major new critical term in theatrical theory, there was (and still remains) an enormous variety in its application, but very frequently it was developed in a dialectical relationship to theater. When this happened, the opposition was usually based on some variation of theater's association with semiotics and formal structures, and that of performance with the inchoate, still uncodified material of life itself. A major survey of current theory appeared in a special issue of *Modern Drama* in March, 1982, which contained one section provocatively titled *"Performance* or the Subversion of Theatricality." A key article in this section, by Josette Féral, was entitled "Performance and Theatricality: the Subject Demystified." This suggested a more positive and productive view of theatricality than many writings of the period, even though it drew upon the general model of opposing the structuralism of "theater" to the poststructuralism of "performance." Following this model, Féral characterized theater as a narrative, representational structure that inscribes the subject in the symbolic by means of "theatrical codes," while performance was devoted to undoing these "codes and competencies," allowing the subject's "flows of desire to speak." The first builds structures that the second deconstructs. Rather than associating theatricality with the operations of theater, however, and with its shortcomings in a poststructuralist discourse, Féral moves this term to a higher critical level. Theatricality, she suggests, arises from a play between the two realities, the

specific symbolic structures of the theatrical and the realities of the imaginary that make up performance (178).

Féral's ingenious and provocative article does, I think, provide a strategy for recuperating a positive and productive view of theatricality within the framework of the pre-existing discourse established in sociology, modern art, and poststructuralism, most of which worked to place this concept in a distinctly negative light. Féral's location of theatricality in a field of playful tension has strong appeal in a period when theoretical attention has shifted from seeking centers to seeking margins and boundaries, from seeking a fixity of meaning to seeking sites where meaning is continuously fluid and under negotiation, but it also calls attention to a particular quality of theatricality that is by no means grounded in modern critical discourse. There is something profoundly paradoxical about the relationship of theater to human experience that is involved in the process of theatrical mimesis itself as well as in the reception of this mimesis. One can speak of this paradox in terms of a play between codes and flows, as Féral does, but it has historically been spoken of in many other ways, many of which have little directly to do with the particular concerns of poststructuralism. I am thinking for example of the play between the real and the ideal that Friedrich von Schiller and others thought could best be captured within the theater, or of the play between belief and disbelief that Samuel T. Coleridge posited as the proper reception process for mimetic art.

Theatricality, like the closely related (and equally complex) term mimesis, has built into it a doubleness, or a play between two types of reality. In the most familiar articulation of this doubleness—between "life" and its mimetic double, the drama or theater—there has from Plato onward crept into discussions of this phenomenon the operation of what Derrida has called the "metaphysics of presence," which has privileged "life" as the primary and grounding term of this binary, with theater viewed as secondary, derived, and for some, even deceptive and corrupting. Such an approach hardly encourages a strong interest in the field between these terms, and so theatricality has often been associated not with a relationship but with the derived term, and thereby has shared in its frequently negative valence. This, as we have already seen, has been the case with many of the modern sociological theorists who used the term. Even Féral, who restores theatricality to a position of greater importance, retains a suggestion of negativity about the formal codes of theater, which the liberating and life-based activities of performance works to break down.

The decline in the fortunes of the term theatricality in theoretical writing within this tradition (often balanced by a corresponding rise in the fortunes of performance) has doubtless been reinforced by the dominance in this century of realism in the mainstream Western theater. Within the realistic tradition, theatricality also is seen quite negatively, since its appearance or acknowledgement calls into question the basic illusion upon which realism is based, the illusion that seeks at least in principle to deny the operations of the theater.

On the realist stage, to designate a costume, a setting, a lighting effect, or an actor's work as "theatrical" normally suggested a flaw—a note of artificiality that was seen as working at odds to the illusionism of this tradition. Here in a rather different way, theatricality again suffers from a mental grid that priviliges normal, everyday life as the experience of primary interest and validity, and theatrical enhancement of that life as artificial, false, and thus to be avoided insofar as possible. From the 1930s onward this attitude was enshrined in state policy in the Soviet Union, and champions of theatricality, most notably Meyerhold, were silenced or purged. In the West, and especially in America, the major intellectual campaign against theatricalism came not from political but from aesthetic theorists, especially, and ironically, those furthest removed from the engaged art of socialist Russia—the proponents of abstract and miniminalist art, which dominated the Western art world at mid-century. Very little common ground exists between such Soviet ideologues as Andrei Zhdanov, the Secretary of the Soviet Central Committee, or Alfred Kurella, the bitter foe of expressionism, and Western modernists like Greenberg and Fried, but they are united in their determined rejection of theatricalism. In certain respects, then, the current popularity of sociological analysis in theater studies, certain important trends in modern art and literary theory and the dominant ongoing tradition of realistic drama have combined in an unexpected and at first glance rather unlikely reinforcement of an ancient anti-theatrical bias, and the repute of the term theatricality has suffered accordingly. It need not be so, however. Theatricality can be and has been regarded in a far more positive manner if we regard theater not as its detractors from Plato onward have done—as a pale, inadequate, or artificially abstract copy of the life process— but if we view it as a heightened celebration of that process and its possibilities.

A useful recent contribution to such an orientation has been provided by Jean Alter in his 1990 *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theater*. Despite its title, this study owes little to recent sociological criticism. It is "sociosemiotic" rather

in the sense that unlike the majority of semiotic analysts of theater, Alter gives significant attention not only to the production of signs but also to their reception. Alter, like other theorists already mentioned, posits a particular doubleness in the operations of theater and its reception, tellingly characterizing his own as a "binocular view." This correctly suggests that the two contrasting functions that he describes do not operate dialectically, like Féral's theater and performance, each undoing the other and thus establishing a wavering field of reception in the tension between them, but rather as mutually reinforcing to achieve a more powerful total effect.

The first of these two functions Alter calls "referential," the traditional emphasis of semiotic critics. This is concerned with the communication of a narrative or some other discourse, and is achieved by "signs that aim at imparting information." The second Alter terms the "performant function," which "falls outside the operations of semiosis," seeking to please or amaze an audience by a display of exceptional achievement (32). Alter's referential function has something in common with Féral's concept of theater, since both are semiotic, concerned with narratives, information-bearing structures, codes and signs. But his "performant function," despite the confusing similarity of terminology, is quite different from her "performance," which is why his two terms interrelate in such a different way.

Alter's use of performance is equally far from Féral's post-structuralist usage and from the common usage in the modern social sciences, which stresses performance's repetition or "quotation" of already established patterns of action. It draws instead upon a more colloquial use of the term, which involves the public activities of various "performers"—actors, circus members, musicians—whom audiences seek out in order to witness their technical skills. Normally this term is used only to refer to human actions, or in a few cases to the actions of animals, when these also seem to demonstrate a particular skill, so that we may speak of "performing" dogs, bears, elephants, or horses. The well-known circus semiotician Paul Bouissac has argued against even this modest metaphorical extension of the term, on the grounds that such animals are only responding to a stimulus within a frame provided by their trainer, while true "performance" should involve the conscious display of skills (24).

Bouissac's argument emphasizes how closely this use of performance is normally associated with human skills, but in fact Alter suggests that the concept can be productively extended to any of the arts of the theater—to costume, scenery, lighting, directing. So the visual display of dazzling costumes, striking lighting or scenic effects, or the director's particular

manipulation of any or all of these for virtuosic display can, according to Alter, be considered as foregrounding the performant aspect, as much as the technical skill and achievement of the actor. The quality that Alter is describing, especially in reference to the non-acting theater arts, has also—and more commonly—been referred to as "theatricality," providing us with another set of associations for that term, much more positive than those we have so far been discussing.

The response this view of theatricality offers to the misgivings of both realists and Platonists is similar. To both, it answers that the function of theater has never been to provide an exact duplication of everyday life (as realism suggested) nor a pale, secondary, derived imitation of life (as Plato charged), but rather a heightened, intensified variation on life, not so much a mirror as an exploration and celebration of possibility. Aristotle looks in this direction with his observation that the theater presents things not as they are, but as they ought to be. Gerald Else has memorably characterized this shift from Plato as a transition from art as copying to art as creating (322).

One of the central functions of the stage has always been to provide an arena for the display of creativity, achieved by the technical skill not only of actors, but of designers, dancers, musicians, and poets. One might therefore expect that within the theater, and outside the ranks of the realists, the Platonists, and all those who have seen theater as a diminished or inferior imitation of life, this more positive view of theatricality would be generally accepted. But alas, even here, where the power and importance of theatricality have been widely acknowledged, that very power has stimulated significant resistance to accepting theatricality as a positive concept.

Since theater balances the contributions of a number of other arts, there is always the threat that these various arts will become engaged in a struggle for dominance within the theater experience. In the Western theater, the most familiar form of this struggle has been between the competing claims of the literary text, the playscript, and the various other contributing arts. Playwrights and critics oriented toward the written text have for centuries expressed concern about the potential overshadowing of the playscript by the work of other contributors to the total theater experience. Such concern has commonly been expressed in terms of a competition between the "literary" and the "theatrical," with the latter predictably cast as a force for lowering, cheapening, or distracting from the assumed higher values of the former. Once again, theatricality suffers from its placement as the derived

and inferior term in a critical binary, but here theatricality distracts from the purity not of life, but of literature.

In different historical periods, literary artists concerned about the threat of "theatricality" to the autonomy of their texts have focused upon different aspects of the theatrical process. An early and famous statement of this was the tension between Ben Jonson, the leading author of texts for the masques, elaborate court entertainments in England at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and Inigo Jones, the leading creator of the visual spectacle for these entertainments. Jonson complained, doubtless with ample justification, that the masque audiences paid much less attention to his literary texts—in his opinion the ground and essence of the experience—than to the theatricalization of these texts in costumes and scenery created by Jones.

The general and continuing Western bias toward the literary and against the theatrical has supported a restatement of Jonson's complaints in almost every subsequent generation. So for example, John Dryden in a prologue of 1674, concerned by the opening of a rival theater in London with more elaborate possibilities for scenic display, lauded the Spartan virtues of Drury Lane, his own "Plain Built House," where discerning audiences would find literary values maintained, leaving to those of inferior taste the seductions of the Dorset Garden, where "Scenes, Machines, and empty *Opera's* reign/ And for the Pencil You the Pen disdain" (173). Similarly, the Prologue to Richard Steele's 1701 drama *The Funeral* complained that:

> Nature's Deserted and Dramatick Art,
> To Dazle now the Eye, has left the Heart;
> Gay Lights, and Dresses, long extended Scenes,
> Daemons and Angels moving in Machines,
> All that can now or please or fright the Fair
> May be perform'd without a Writer's Care. (Avery, cix)

The famous bare stage of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was based on this same concern, so that one of its most articulate and successful champions, Jacques Copeau, could boast that his *tréteau nu* allowed the presentation of the text without any "theatrical" distraction (248). Even today this literary bias remains strong, even among quite sophisticated theater people. I often hear productions, especially but not exclusively in the modern musical theater, condemned, as Dryden condemned the Covent Garden productions, for being too devoted to "empty spectacle," but it is

rare indeed that I hear of a starkly produced more "literary" drama condemned for inadequate visual effect.

In most of these examples this bias against theatricalization has a certain puritanical edge, suggesting that the "plain built house," the "bare stage" have a natural advantage in virtue over sites of sumptuous display, but the literary distrust of theatricalization goes deeper than that, as can be seen in particular in the writings of many key romantic authors and in most of the symbolists. For such authors as Johann W. von Goethe, Charles Lamb, or Maurice Maeterlinck, the problem was not merely the distraction of elaborate visual display, but indeed the distraction of any theatricalization whatsoever. Thus Goethe advises in *Shäkesper und kein Ende!* that Shakespeare is best enjoyed by reading:

> for then the attention is not distracted either by a too adequate or a too
> inadequate stage setting. There is no higher or purer pleasure than to sit
> with closed eyes and hear a naturally expressive voice recite, not declaim,
> a play of Shakespeare's. (59)

Lamb's famous condemnation of scenery, costume, and acting in the production of Shakespeare as "non-essentials" that are "raised into an importance injurious to the main interest of the play" (111), or Maeterlinck's well known championship of an internal drama that would eschew theatrical spectacle, including the living actor, to reveal the symbol within, provide witness to the continuing importance of this anti-theatrical bias within the artistic community itself.

With the emergence of the director as a significant shaper of theatricalization of the dramatic text, more recent struggles between author and the theatrical apparatus have been in this context. The 1980s saw a number of widely publicized challenges by dramatists to visual and aural interpretations of their texts by leading directors. Particularly striking were the protests raised by Samuel Beckett against productions of his *Endgame* by JoAnne Akalaitis at the American Repertory Theater in 1984, and by Giles Bourdet at the Comédie Française in 1988. In both cases, a compromise was reached that left neither side particularly satisfied, and certainly did little to remove the ongoing tension between the written text and its theatricalization.

The distrust of theatricalization growing from the conflict between literary artists and other theater artists is more unfortunate, it seems to me, than the distrust based upon a Platonic or essentialist bias against theater itself, for two reasons. First and most obviously, because it pits against each other parties that would be more profitably united in a common concern, but second because it obscures a fundamental similarity in the operations

and in the sought reception of the achievements of each party. If, returning to Alter, we see the goal of theatricalization as the display of exceptional achievement, then it seems clear that the literary artist, no less than the actor, the designer, or the director, is engaged precisely in such display, and that an awareness and acknowledgment of this achievement is as central to the enjoyment of the reader as it is to that of the spectator. The ongoing struggle over which of the various contributing artists is to have the upper hand in the final shaping of the theatrical experience has all too often utilised "theatricality" as a weapon against rival claimants—actors, designers, directors—thus obscuring the fact that theatricality is rightly and necessarily involved in every aspect of theatrical production. Perhaps the growing awareness in contemporary theory of the "performative" nature of literature itself may help to overcome the longstanding suspicion of "theatricalization" as a potentially corrupting process of the literary work.

Even the separation of the spectator from the work, the source of so much tension in theorists like Cavell and Marshall, takes on a much more positive and beneficial valence when regarded from the perspective offered by Alter. When one focuses upon pleasure in the display of exceptional ability instead of on emotional identification and sympathy, the valences of identification and distancing reverse. When sympathy is sought, identification is privileged, and distance becomes a barrier. When the goal is display of exceptional ability, identification is useful only to establish a base line, and all the joy arises from the distance (I am a human being like that actor, that gymnast, that circus performer, and yet how great a distance between the achievements they display and what I am presently capable of). Theatricality, viewed from this perspective, can admit to all those qualities that have historically been cited against it—that it is artificial, removed from everyday life, exaggerated, extreme, flamboyant, distracting. Yet despite— indeed because of—these qualities, it can still be recognized as an essential element in the continued vitality and enjoyment of both theater and performance and beyond that, as a positive, indeed celebrative expression of human potential.

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Note

1. The persistence of this concern can be traced in Jonas Barish's excellent review of this subject (1981).

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