

Theatre Research International, Summer 1995 v20 n2 p85(5)

Introduction: theatricality: a key concept in theatre and cultural studies. Fischer-Lichte, Erika.

Abstract: The meaning of 'theatricality' was an issue at the Theatre Historiography Symposium held at Helsinki in 1993. The word 'theatre' has not only been used in a metaphorical sense but has also been used as a cultural model in different disciplines. Four papers presented at the Helsinki Symposium examines the meaning, function and use of the word 'theatre' in different discourses. The publication of these papers aims to spur a vigorous discussion on theatricality and to intensify the study of theatre history in relation to other disciplines.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 1995 Oxford University Press

At the Theatre Historiography Symposium, held during the 1993 Helsinki IFTR/FIRT Conference, a specific term came into circulation which infiltrated and permeated the discussion to such an extent that it appeared to adopt the position and function of a key term in theatre historiography: 'theatricality'. This was no great surprise, however. For the symposium set out to consider two basic issues: first, to examine the application of analytic strategies from other disciplines to theatre history and, secondly, to identify the distinctive features of theatre history as a single discipline. Both concerns are closely related to the concept of theatricality.

In the search for analytic strategies recently developed in other disciplines, theatre historians and theoreticians find themselves confronted with a puzzling situation. Many studies in philosophy and psychology, in anthropology, ethnology and sociology, in political, historical and communication sciences, in cultural semiotics, in the history of art and literature employ the concept of theatre as a heuristic model to a wide extent. Foucault conceived a 'Theatrum philosophicum'; Lyotard observed 'the philosophical and political stage'; Baudrillard studied 'the stage of the body'. Clifford Geertz explored the 'theatre state Bali'; Paul Zumthor declared the performance of narrators in oral cultures to be 'theatre'; Ferdinand Mount investigated the 'Theatre of Politics'; Hayden White explained 'historical realism as tragedy'; Richard van Dulmen analysed the history of tribunal practice and penal ritual as a 'Theatre of Terror'; culture'. The list can be continued ad infinitum.(1)

Such generally metaphorical usage of the term 'theatre' and other related terms in different disciplines which deal with cultural studies in the broadest sense of the word is not a recent development. It already occurs in the works of Sigmund Freud, Marcel Mauss, Michel Leiris and Henri Lefebvre - to name a few of the most significant - and, from the 1960s onwards, in quite a number of sociological studies, among which the most prominent are Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), *Interaction Ritual* (1967), *Frame-Analysis* (1974) and Guy Debord's *La Societe du spectacle* (1967). From the late 1970s, however, the dissemination of 'theatre' not only as a metaphor, but as a specific cultural model in different disciplines has increased to such an extent that nowadays it seems to be the most widespread heuristic model in cultural studies. Thus theatre historians searching for new analytic tools and strategies in other disciplines are referred back to their own field, which is the second aspect addressed in the symposium.

For, in order to be able to delineate the distinctive features of theatre history as a discipline, a certain consensus regarding the object whose so-called history is being explored and written up must be reached. Yet there is no reason to assume that such a consensus, actually exists.

Historians, in particular, are well aware of the fact that the term 'theatre' is culturally and historically determined and that, within Western culture from the sixteenth century, the concept of theatre has constantly changed. Accordingly, the term 'theatre' has been applied to quite different cultural, social and political events, just as it has been employed as a purely aesthetic term in the narrowest sense of the word. At times, different uses of the term competed with each other.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the avant-garde movements promoted two quite different uses and meanings of the term 'theatre'. On the one hand, they restricted it to a particular art form which, as Craig explained, was defined by its very material as essentially different from the material of any other art form. On the other hand, the same movements claimed to close the gap between art and life and to fuse theatre and reality. This demand resulted in a considerable expansion of the concept 'theatre'. The term was gradually transferred to the most divergent fields. In the end, it was applied to signify any kind of exhibitory, demonstrative, or spectacular event including performance by circus artists, jugglers, clowns, entertainers; dadaist and surrealist 'happenings' which took place in streets, cafes, parliaments, churches

and other public places, May Day celebrations, rallies, meetings, union sport days, Party conventions and so on.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the rediscovery of a so-called 'ritual theatre' as well as a newly developing performance culture resulted in an even wider range of meanings of the term 'theatre'. Wherever a person exhibited her/ himself, someone else, or something to the gaze of others, the term 'theatre' was applied. Not only did this 'enormous activation of the semantic field theatre'(2) blur the boundaries and transitions between the many metaphorical uses of the term; it also caused a considerable expansion of the field of theatre studies.

Thus, the situation in which theatre historians find themselves when facing the challenges of the symposium, resembles a painting by Escher, or something which Hofstadter calls a 'strange loop': setting out on a journey to other disciplines in search for new analytic tools, the theatre historian returns to the home field. In the attempt to delineate the discipline from all the others by clearly defining its object and by drawing strict boundaries around its field, the theatre historian is forced to transgress borderlines to many adjacent fields and ends up dispersed over a vast area whose diverse segments are claimed and occupied by other disciplines.

It would seem wise, therefore, to avoid the trap of such a dilemma right from the start. In this respect, the introduction of the term 'theatricality' appears to be a potentially useful strategy.

The concept of theatricality (theatralite, Theatralitat; teatral'nost) was first developed in the context of manifestos and proclamations made by avant-garde movements at the beginning of this century. In accordance with the twofold principal meanings of the term 'theatre' which they promoted, the concept was articulated and used in two basically different formulations.

Georg Fuchs in *Die Revolution des Theaters* (1909) was the first to advocate a re-theatricalization of theatre (retheatraliser le theatre; Retheatralisierung des Theaters) and he insisted on considering theatre as a specific art form. His aim was to identify clear criteria by which theatre may be distinguished from other art forms. It also interprets theatricality as the sum total of materials or sign systems used in a theatrical performance beyond the literary text of the drama which define the theatrical performance as such: movements, voice, sounds, music, light, colour, and so on. Nikolai Evreinov's formulation in his article *Apologija teatral'nost*(3) (1908; *Apologia of Theatricality*) embraces a broad concept of theatre which defines theatricality outside the frame and scope of theatre as an art form or even theatre as a social institution. In order to be able to construct a precise and comprehensive definition, Evreinov explored highly diverse disciplines such as sociology, ethology, history of criminal justice, political and cultural history and psychology. His aim was to reveal the workings and basic function of theatricality in each of these fields and in this respect, he might be regarded as a precursor to today's scholars of cultural studies. Evreinov's efforts led him to define theatricality as a pre-aesthetic instinct. Although this definition appears too broad and too general to allow any useful application - just as Fuchs' definition seems too narrow - it must be emphasized that Evreinov was the first to recognize and pose the problem of how, in what respect, and to what extent the concept of theatre can be identified and applied as a cultural model beyond a purely metaphorical use of the term.

In the field of theatre studies, it was only in the 1970s that discussion on theatricality was taken up again - without reference to Evreinov, however. In her pioneering study, *Theatricality* (1972), Elisabeth Burns proceeds from the assumption that the concept of theatre is historically and culturally determined. Therefore, she argues, theatricality cannot be defined as a particular mode of behaviour or expression, for it does not depend on 'degrees of demonstrativeness' (p. 2). Instead, Burns suggests, it is 'determined by a particular view point' and, accordingly, she defines it as 'a mode of perception' (p. 13). It is the particular perspective which determines whether a situation will be regarded as theatrical or non-theatrical. By modifying Goffman's concept of framing and referring to Brecht's technique of making gestures quotable, Burns strives to delineate the factors that determine and shape the mode of perception which she locates in social conventions. Insofar as these conventions are not developed within the theatre alone but also in culture in general, she proposes a history of theatre which is to be realized as a history of perception and its social and cultural conditions.

Although today some of her arguments, hypotheses and results may seem outdated or, at least arguable in the light of some recent studies on the history of perception in Western culture, Burns must be given credit for having shown a viable way of explaining theatricality as the common denominator of theatre and culture, or as the focus in which both intersect and coincide, in her definition of it as a mode of perception.

More recent scholars who deal with the question of theatricality agree, in principle, with Burns inasmuch as she insists on the historicity and cultural determination of the concept of theatre. However, they do not all share her conclusions. Joachim Fiebach (1978),(4) for example, refers to Brecht's *Strassenszene* (Street scene) to argue that the definition of

theatricality must be based on the consideration that it is not only a mode of perception but also a mode of behaviour and expression.

In his Arbeitsjournal (6 December 1940) Brecht writes:

As a result of the explorations undertaken in the STREET SCENE, one should describe all other kinds of similar everyday theatre; discover every moment where theatre is part of life, in the world of erotica, business, politics, law, religion, and so on. one should study the theatrical element in customs and rites; I've already worked a little on the fascist theatricalization of politics. but alongside this, one should also study the everyday theatre that the individual performs with no audience, the secret 'play'. in this way, one would encompass the most elemental need for aesthetic expression.(5)

Given the premise that the concept of theatre is historically and culturally determined on the one hand, and taking Brecht's ideas on everyday theatre, on the other, Fiebach concludes that there can be no single criterion for a general definition of theatricality beyond the fact that it is a process of production whose product is 'consumed' and which vanishes within the process of being produced. In order to comprehend and define theatricality as a mode of behaviour and expression, it must be described and analysed in terms of a particular epoch in a given culture. For, obviously, no mode of behaviour and expression can be defined as theatrical per se. Accordingly, in *Die Toten als die Macht der Lebenden* (The Dead as the Power of the Living) (1986), Fiebach embarks on a project to define and analyse theatricality in different epochs of different African cultures as a particular mode of communication which foregrounds the body as the main means of presenting a role and self-presentation.

The concept of theatricality in the 1970s also gained a certain prominence in theatre semiotics, despite its very different contexts and functions. At the risk of over-simplification, two principal directions can be identified which, in a way, can be related to the concepts put forward by Fuchs and Evreinov, although they do not refer to them directly. In his *Dictionnaire du theatre* Patrice Pavis compiles definitions which aim to represent 'les elements indispensables a tout phenomene theatral'. (p. 397). Pavis proceeds from a narrow, purely aesthetic concept of theatre. Consequently, theatricality is defined as 'ce qui, dans la representation ou dans le texte dramatique, est specifiquement theatral' (p. 395) or, approaching Fuchs's understanding, 'la theatralite s'oppose a la litterature, au theatre du texte, aux moyens ecrits, aux dialogues et meme parfois a la narrativite et a la "dramaticite" d'une fable logiquement construite'. (p. 396). Since these definitions are based on the narrow concept of theatre as an art form only, they may, for the purpose of this discussion, be left aside.

In *The Semiotics of Theatre* I have defined theatricality by referring to the particular relationship between the signs brought forth by and the semiotic processes being performed within different cultural systems, on the one hand, and theatrical signs and sign processes, on the other. I have argued that in a certain sense, theatre involves the 'doubling up' of the culture in which it is played: the signs engendered by theatre denote the signs produced by the corresponding cultural systems. Theatrical signs are therefore always signs of signs.

This has two important consequences. First, since theatre produces signs using heterogeneous material which can, in principle, be identical to the material of any cultural system, the human being and its total environment may function as theatrical signs in their specific material quality. Secondly, however, whilst human beings and the objects of their environment in every culture always exist in certain communicative, practical and situative contexts which do not permit a human being to be replaced by another or by an object at random or vice versa, mobility is the prevailing feature in the case of the human body and the objects from its surroundings which they are used as theatrical signs. Here, a human body can indeed be replaced by another body or even an object, and an object can be replaced by another random object or a human body because in their capacity as theatrical signs, they can signify one another. The material existence of the human body is not of interest to the theatre because of its uniqueness nor its specific functionality alone, but foremost in terms of its ability to be used as a sign of sign.

Accordingly, theatricality may be defined as a particular mode of using signs or as a particular kind of semiotic process in which particular signs (human beings and objects of their environment) are employed as signs of signs - by their producers, or their recipients. Thus a shift of the dominance within the semiotic functions determines when theatricality appears. When the semiotic function of using signs as signs of signs in a behavioural, situational or communication process is perceived and received as dominant, the behavioural, situational or communication process may be regarded as theatrical. Moreover, since this shift of the dominant is not an objective given but depends on certain pragmatic conditions, 'theatricality' in the end, appears to be no more than a floating signifier in an endless communication process. This is to say that the term theatricality necessarily remains diffuse; as a concept it becomes indistinct, if not void.

Helmar Schramm has drawn some conclusions which open up new perspectives on the use and function of theatricality at

the intersection of theatre and cultural studies. In Preliminary studies towards a history of the concept of theatre (1990)(6) he sets out to construct three different frames of reference to investigate historical material on the concept of theatre: 1) theatre as a metaphorical model; 2) theatre as a rhetoric medium; 3) theatre as an autonomous art. Schramm underlines that such frames of reference are not to be applied in succession, as for example, 1) the seventeenth century, 2) the eighteenth century and 3) the nineteenth century; rather all three are often found to co-exist, overlap, compete or even contradict each other in writings of the same period, depending on the kind of discourse dealing with theatre. His exploration and evaluation of a huge body of thoroughly diverse and multifaceted historic material leads to the conclusion that theatricality may be understood and defined simply as an element functioning in different discourses within a range of disciplines that are devoted to cultural studies such as sociology, ethnology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, the historical sciences, art history, cultural semiotics and so on, as well as theatre studies. The notion of theatricality depends on the respective discourse as to what kinds of cultural, social, political events and processes are regarded and addressed as theatrical and what kind of arguments are used to show the existence and functioning of theatricality in everyday life.

Therefore, it seems a potentially fruitful approach to examine the use, function and meaning of 'theatre' in different discourses when dealing with the relationship of theatre history (or theatre studies in general) to other disciplines and with the circulation of terms, concepts, theories and methods between them.

The following four papers, which were originally presented at the Helsinki Symposium are a response to this challenge.(7) They proceed, however, from different perspectives. Helmar Schramm focuses on the correlation between the history of theatre and the history of science in Western culture, identifying traces of the theatre model in scientific discourse from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. He seeks to uncover the analogous structure which he identifies working in the conceptualization and stylization of three important cultural factors - perception, movement and language - in the scientific as well as the theatrical discourse. Thus, he proposes a new approach to theatre history, widening its scope considerably.

Marvin Carlson enquires into the use of 'theatre' in philosophical discourse taking, as his example, some writings of Bruce Wilshire. He suggests that the reasons for Wilshire's failure to achieve his aim of establishing a clearly defined field of ethical philosophy is because he uses 'theatre' as a model of activities which are distinct from any activities in 'real life'. Wilshire's argument stems from a very narrow concept of theatre whose historical and cultural limits can easily be demonstrated and challenged by any theatre historian.

In his examination of the function of 'theatre' in the discourse of art historians, Michael Quinn analyses the opposition between 'theatricality' and 'authenticity' as the driving force dominating the discourse. In line with Carlson's conclusions, Quinn argues that either the restricted range, lofty ideological constructions or other shortcomings of the discourse under investigation are caused, at least to a considerable extent, by reference to a very narrow concept of theatre. A wide field opens up for a promising collaboration between theatre history and other disciplines.

My contribution tests the range of theatricality as an interdisciplinary element in the theatrical discourse. With reference to Reinhardt's production of *Sumurun* (1910) and its reception in Berlin and New York, particular theatrical devices are related to some fundamental cultural changes in perception and meaning generating, and this correlation is discussed in the light of radical constructivism, highlighting theatricality as the capacity of constructing reality.

The publication of these four articles is intended to stimulate and intensify a lively debate on theatricality, to encourage and celebrate a fascinating experiment which has brought about an unconventional collaboration of disciplines and the beginning of a fruitful cross-fertilization between the fields of theatre history and other disciplines.

Notes

1. In the seventeenth century, when the metaphorical use of the term theatre was most widespread, a series of books flooded Europe which used the term in very similar ways to those found today in cultural studies as, for example, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570), *Theatrum Europaeum* (1627 ff.), *Theatrum Cometicum* (1681), *Theatrum poenarum, suppliciorum et executorum criminalium* (1693-7).

2. Helmar Schramm, 'Theatralitat und Offentlichkeit. Vorstudien zur Begriffsgeschichte von "Theater"', ed. Karlheinz Barck et al. *Asthetische Grundbegriffe. Studien zu einem historischen Worterbuch* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1990), p. 206.

3. See Tony Pearson articles on Evreinov in *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer 1987), pp. 147-67,

'Evreinov and Pirandello: Twin Apostles of Theatricality' and Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 1992), pp. 26-38, 'Evreinov and Pirandello: Two Theatricalists in Search of the Main Thing'.

4. Joachim Fiebach, 'Brecht's "Strassenszene". Versuch uber die Reichweite eines Theatermodells', Weimarer Beitrage, 1978, 2, pp. 123-47.

5. Bertolt Brecht, Arbeitsjournal. Vol. 1 [Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1973], p. 204.

6. See note 2.

7. With the exception of Schramm's article which was specially written for this issue.

Erika Fischer-Lichte is Professor of Theatre Studies, Johannes Gutenberg- Universitat, Mainz.