

“All the world’s a stage”: Revisiting Performance Theories

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People are always performing, as Shakespeare writes in the notorious speech about the seven ages of man in *As You Like It*, “All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players” (2.7). We are used to playing the social roles of parents, sons and daughters, friends, lovers, etc, and most likely we will act differently depending on our audience. Nikolas Evreinoff claims that this habit of playing roles in our social lives is so constant that we even dress up and use make-up in our everyday routine (Carlson 36). For Yi-Fu Tuan, at first children do not perform, but, as they grow older, they learn the roles expected from them, and eventually fall from “innocence into culture—into a life of performance” (157). And, after we become “merely players,” we perform forever, even when no one is watching, even if our only audience is ourselves. In fact, we adults perform even when we go to the bathroom, because we remember the applause or reprimand we got from our parents when we first started using the pot (Tuan 157).

After a while performing becomes so natural that we tend to forget we are performing. Despite leading a lifelong of performance, many of us end up associating performance exclusively to theater. This is a mistake because, according to Richard Schechner, a major name in relating performance to the social sciences, theater is only one of several public ways in which humans perform, the others being ritual, play, games, sports, dance, and music (6). In this article I wish to give an overview of performance, which is not by any means restricted to theater, bearing in mind that, as Marvin Carlson points out, even academic writing is a performance (190).

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But how do we differentiate between an action that is done and one that is performed? Carlson gives an interesting example of what is called “living history” or historical sites for tourists. A woman in California dresses up in costumes representing the nineteenth century, and her scenery imitates the furniture of the time, but she only considers herself performing when she plays the piano (3). Thus, if we display a skill, if we behave a certain way, and most definitely, if we stand on a stage, we are performing, but theorists disagree whether or not performing needs to be a conscious activity. For the celebrated performer John Cage, considering an activity a performance makes it one (Schechner 30). The “sense of an action carried out for someone” and that of consciousness are vital for Carlson (6). He also calls attention to another concept of performance, that of a standard of achievement, as when we talk of sexual or linguistic performance (5). In this case, who is to judge if an action is a performance, and how successful it is, is the observer (Carlson 5). And human beings are not the only “performers”—animals can also perform, and we often refer to the performance of a car, for instance (5). Someone should recognize and validate a performance as such, and this could be done even by the person who is performing (6).

Carlson notes that “[e]ven if an action on stage is identical to one in real life, on stage it is considered ‘performed’ and off stage merely ‘done’” (4). But others go further in affirming that all behavior is a performance. Judith Butler, for example, believes that gender itself is performative. For Schechner, however, “[a]rt is cooked and life is raw” (38), meaning that, on stage, life is rehearsed and then condensed into a performance that takes a few hours.

Although defining performance is notoriously difficult, several scholars, from varied fields, have tried to formulate definitions. Schechner gives his tentative definition: “*Ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play*” (95). Earlier in his

book, he calls performance “make-believe, in play, for fun. Or, as Victor Turner said, in the subjunctive mood, the famous ‘as if’” (xiv). For Roger Abrahams, “performance is a way of persuading through the production of pleasure” (qtd. in Carlson 17). For the ethnolinguist Richard Bauman, a consciousness of doubleness is crucial for performance, that is, an action done is mentally compared to the original idea that generated it (Carlson 5). This original idea or model comes close to reaching a consensus in performance theory, for, according to Carlson, “There is widespread agreement among performance theorists that all performance is based upon some pre-existing model, script, or pattern of action” (15). This is what Richard Schechner calls “restored behavior.” Dell Hymes takes an anthropological approach to performance and contrasts it to behavior—“anything and everything that happens”—and to conduct—behavior “under the aegis of social norms, cultural rules, shared principles of interpretability” (qtd. in Carlson 14). Hence, for him, performance is a kind of conduct, and conduct is part of behavior (15). According to him, in performance people “assume a responsibility to an audience and to tradition as they understand it.” But this “assuming responsibility” itself is problematic, for there is still a lot of debate around how an audience can be responsible for a performance (Carlson 15).

Patrice Pavis also defends the anthropological approach to studying performance, maintaining that it can broaden the horizons of Western theoreticians and performers:

Ultimately, the anthropological perspective, both near and distanced at the same time, on intercultural theater will be of benefit to Western theory and practice. Indeed, it will force them to reconsider existing methods of analysis, to take note of cultural intermixing, and to take their place in a world that is richer and more complex than they ever imagined. (302)

One important question is if performance occurs from what the performer does or as a matter of the context it is situated in. Anthropological, sociological, and

psychological theorists of performance often pay more attention to context and reception than to what the performer does (Carlson 18). For Carlson performance changed its focus in the 1980s, “moving from an almost exclusive preoccupation with the performer and the performative act to a consideration also of who is watching the performance, who is reporting on it, and what the social, political, and cognitive implications of these other transactions are upon the process” (31-2). For William James, an individual “has as many social selves [or masks] as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind” (qtd in Carlson 45). We perform according to our audience.

Not only approaches to performance theory vary, but so do types of artistic performance, and, hence, analysis of these performances. One point most theorists now agree, however, is that the analysis should not focus only on the text. In the case of an analysis of a theater production, we should thrive to escape an obsession with the playtext, because to analyze means breaking into parts, letting go of our textual bias. One way to avoid obsession with the text would be starting the analysis with another component of the performance, like the actor, trying to be less “textocentric.” In a case against logocentrism, theorists such as Pavis claim that the text cannot be seen as the basis of everything that comes after: “Performance analysis takes as its starting point the fully realized, empirical object and does not attempt to go back to what might have generated it” (22). Pavis, who proposes various straightforward, technical procedures to analyze performance, avoiding an impressionist approach, is a major name in performance theory. For him, contexts are much more important than texts. He even favors using terms as *score* and *underscore* rather than *text* and *subtext*, reminding us that a performance is much more than the concretization of a text (96). Underscore can only be concretized in reception (100).

A field that has grown enormously over the last few decades is feminist performance analysis. This has blossomed together with feminist performances themselves. As Lizbeth Goodman explains, the first feminist performances were political demonstrations, not plays (Feminisms 21). Today famous acts from the 1960s like burning bras and disturbing beauty pageants are considered feminist performances, part of feminist guerrilla theater. According to Loren Kruger, women are now, instead of making spectacles of themselves, finally making spectacles themselves (in Goodman, *Feminisms* 21). Citing one example of feminist performance—the theater—Goodman defines feminist theater as one “written and produced by women, with some degree of political intent, in the wake of the modern women’s liberation movement” (22).

If every art work represents the point of view of the individual who created it, (him/herself ingrained in the culture where s/he comes from), we have a lot to lose with a monolithic view of art conceived by white heterosexual middle class males. Although there have been advances over the years, the fact remains that art and art analysis are still dominated by what Ruth Tompsett calls the “malestream” (248). She points out that contemporary dance is the exception to an art still controlled by white men (244) and alerts us: “Everyone stands to gain from the richer experience diversity can offer” (264).

The main point in feminist analysis is that the personal is always political. Feminist theorists dealing with performance often mention Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze in cinema, transposing it to other areas of performance, like the stage, and Judith Butler’s statement that sex is biological, but gender is a social construct and, thus, performative. According to Butler, “In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (75).

Other changes in perspectives opposing the “malestream” include gender studies, queer theory, and analysis written by non-whites. Bell Hooks, for one, shows how the media presents the concept of racial harmony as a performance, a stunt for black spectators to believe that equality exists and that racism is dead, when it is anything but. A good example she gives is that in several American TV shows where there is a trial the judge will be black, transmitting the equivocating message that black people have power (113). For Jatinder Verma, the trend to emphasize multicultural performances can be dangerous, for multiculturalism is non-confrontational and still reproduces a discourse of dominance, because it does not call attention to its racially mixed cast. Whereas multiculturalism seems accommodating, cross-culturalism is oppositional (194). Multiculturalism may be regarded as a melting pot, where the strongest ingredient will still dominate the dish.

For Goodman, the “live dynamics” found in theater is also part of, say, political demonstrations, which can also be considered live performances (Feminisms 34). Live performance is unique in several aspects. In live performance the body is unique because only in this medium does it occupy the same time and space as the spectator (Counsell and Wolf 125). Besides, only in live performance can the performer return our gaze (Pavis 230). Pavis adds the following about the uniqueness of live performance: “Without space, time would be pure duration: music, for instance. Without time, space would resemble that of a painting or architecture. Without time and space, action cannot unfold” (148). In live performance, therefore, space and time unite so action can happen.

Performance is not only related to the traditional arts such as literature and theater but to the circus, sports events, and political debates, for instance. And, when thinking of performance, it is limiting to visualize only traditional theater. Carlson

points out that today *The New York Times* and the *Village Voice* have a category, “performance art,” in which productions are criticized separately from theater, film or dance (3). There is not really a definition for performance art other than “live art by artists,” according to RoseLee Goldberg, the first scholar to dedicate a book to the history of this new art (Carlson 79). Performance art is inevitably linked to postmodernism. Like in postmodernism, in this art process also becomes more important than product. Performance art shares some common traits with avant-garde movements: it is antiestablishment, and against commodification of art; it is fascinated with collage and multimedia, and it uses parody and open-ended forms (Carlson 80).

For Tuan, “[a] critical distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ theater is that whereas the former is a celebration of life, the latter is a criticism—a deconstruction?—of life and a cold look at death” (161). In performance art artists do not really play characters, or at least characters with what Schechner calls *careers* (“a humanly organized plan of action, often blocked by other people, sometimes prematurely ended by natural or other causes” 20). Schechner also recalls other differences between triangular and open forms of theater: triangular forms, more related to traditional theater, focus on plot and are concerned with linear time and resolution, while open forms emphasize rhythms, circular time and no-end (26-7).

Since we are still deeply rooted in text, analyzing dance seems even more difficult than analyzing other types of performance. But scholars like Alexandra Carter propose that we ask general questions such as, in the case of classic ballet, “who lifts, who supports, who leads or guides and who follows, and what is the significance of these actions in terms of notions of dependency and control?”, reminding us that the answers are not easy. After all, we can see the male dancer as controlling the ballerina, but also as a supporter to help her stand out (49). It is indisputable, however, that male

dancers are expected to occupy much more of the stage than female dancers, whose short steps make them stand on a very limited space (Carter 51). This may well be a reflex of the still domestic space women are allowed to occupy in society. Or, stretching the question to racial issues, Tompsett seems to ask if we have seen many black ballerinas lately (251). However, Valerie A. Briginshaw believes that postmodern dance (if not classic ballet), with its deconstructive devices, can resist the status quo (131).

Many African languages do not differentiate between dance and music or even between music and sound, so we can imagine that music is used in their performances in a completely distinct way than in Western theater, where music is often complementary at best (Pavis 142). Sophie Fuller questions why the canon of classical music is devoid of women (70), and why, in an orchestra, there are so few women conductors (73; also Tompsett 249). If music does not have a text, can something without words express gender? But, at the same time, can any art not be autobiographical, showing us the origins of the author? Can music or any other art form be “pure”? (Fuller 75). To answer these questions we might think of how Wagner was utilized by Nazi Germany, clearly expressing a fascist ideology in wordless symphonies. At the same time, it sounds like a bit of a stretch automatically to assume that music composed by women will be different from music by men. After all, we have not yet decided if Helene Cixous’ *écriture féminine* exists in literature, much less in music (Fuller 76).

For Louis Althusser, “Ideology is a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (36). Ideology depends on that we see signs and systems as natural, as “the way things are” (40). Since the material impersonation of ideology is represented on stage, an important question for many scholars remains: does performance confirm or disrupt the status quo? In an

attempt to answer this question, Victor Turner divided activities into liminal (which support the status-quo) and liminoid (which may subvert it). Liminal activities tend to be collective, liminoid are mostly individual; liminal come from the center, liminoid from the periphery: “One *works* at the liminal, one *plays* with the liminoid” (Turner 209). Again, the doubt is whether performance preserves a culture or subverts it. Or, as Baz Kershaw phrases it: “how can performance, in being always already implicated in the dominant, avoid replicating the values of the dominant?” (141).

While Michael Bristol shows how royal processions simply reinforce the status quo, Mikhail Bakhtin says that the opposite of official pageantry, then, is carnival, which can disrupt the dominant culture. For Bakhtin, “While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it” (217). His very positive view of carnival and what it does to people and society may be a good counterargument to, say, those who complain of the alienating effects of carnival and the Soccer World Cup in Brazil. Bakhtin says, “As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated *temporary* liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank [...]. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (218; my emphasis). Our problem with alienation may be this word, *temporary* liberation, while we would like liberation to be permanent. But is that possible?

In order to try to answer if performance disrupts or confirms the status quo, we might have to see what change is. How do people change? How does society? Is any change radical? If we conclude that it is difficult for society to change, we may as well conclude that expecting art to produce change is unfair. And that means any art, be it theater, cinema, dance, music, or even performance art. Schechner is right when he claims that no performance can be pure efficacy or pure entertainment. However, many critics demand art to be efficient in yielding change and condemn art that looks like

entertainment, labeling it escapist. As Bakhtin demonstrates, even escapism like carnival can be a way of disturbing the ruling classes, though it seems, to me, a timid and limited way.

For Erving Goffman performance must produce some influence on the observer, but we can say that the degree of influence varies immensely. And I believe it is safe to state that some performances do not influence the observer in any way. But I agree with MacAloon when he says that cultural performance can make us change in some ways while making us remain the same in others. We cannot escape our cultural background. Even radical performances that wish to disrupt the passive space of the spectator have to locate their culture as a starting point. After all, how can performance disrupt something that is unknown and unfamiliar to the spectator?

If everything we do is a performance, and if performance engulfs every human act, it does not really matter to decide which part—the performer or the observer—is more important. It seems clear that both are equally vital, and so is the context in which this performance will develop. This is one of the reasons why, in a performance like theater, overemphasizing the playtext is a mistake that practitioners and theorists alike can no longer afford to make. In performance analysis today it would seem at least incoherent to ignore the performer, the observer or the context that these two parts share. The context shapes the way in which these two parts will act and interact.

Nevertheless, if these three vertices—performer, observer, and context—are crucial to analysis, we may wonder why women, blacks, gays and other minorities continue to be left out of the mainstream. Thinking of women as a minority is not a possibility anymore, since we constitute more than fifty percent of the population. But, despite the feminist advances over the last decades, we are still far from living in a society where women have so much “presence” as men. I mean *presence* here as we

refer to an actor's presence on stage. Both in academic analysis and newspaper criticism white men still represent the majority. However, Goodman indicates surveys showing that in the U.S. and the U.K., 60% to 70% of theatergoers are women (AIDS 212). Why, then, do so many productions attended by a female public have male protagonists, male directors, male playwrights? Why are feminist performances often either ignored or misunderstood by "malestream" critics? In a lot of cases, even productions that focus on women are written and directed by men. Romantic comedies in the cinema are the best example of this discrepancy. It is time for a change in which women have more space, especially on stage, as in the case of ballerinas.

The idea of the whole world as a stage (in which women could finally occupy center stage) gains force in the concept of kinemes, described by Schechner as facial gestures (261). The *Natyasastra*, an ancient Indian system of acting, emphasizes facial expressions, which leads us to ask whether the expressions for, say, disgust and surprise, are universal (Schechner 266). Are we performing in those milliseconds that we need to twist our mouth in expressing disgust? There seems to be links between mechanical acting and feelings (Schechner 270). Evidences suggest that we fall into a life of performance from an early age onwards, and stay there forever. If this means being "merely players," so be it.

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