

READER CROSS-REFERENCES

Austin — the originator of the concept of performative speech acts
 Butler — a more expansive and radical notion of the performative
 De Marinis — semiotic interpretation vis-à-vis performance
 Schechner, McKenzie, Jackson — performance studies terminology

THEATER AND ANTHROPOLOGY, THEATRICALITY AND CULTURE¹

Johannes Fabian

I A confession

I am not a theater-goer. There are years between the plays I occasionally take in because friends take me along. In 1997, during a stay in New York, I did have what was for me a busy season: in Brooklyn, I saw a Peter Brook play based on Sacks' *The Man Who Mistook . . .*. Then I went to a triple header, including a Woody Allen piece, in the Village, and finally there was a Shakespeare play, with free admission, by a group of young actors in the basement of Dean and de Luca's coffee shop. I left after the first act. The actors were unable or unwilling to adjust to the intimacy of the room and made a shouting match of the occasion. It was embarrassing. In fact, embarrassment may be the main reason for my apparent lack of interest. I am embarrassed by most institutionalized theater in my own society as I am embarrassed by church services I must attend for a confirmation, a wedding, or a funeral. In German, I would translate embarrassing as *peinlich*, a cognate of painful, something that hurts.

A few years ago, I was thrilled to see my seven-year-old daughter share my feelings. Together with her mother they had decided to attend at least one of three lectures I was invited to present in the Jefferson Rotunda at the University of Virginia. She appeared to enjoy the crowd in this strange, solemn environment until I approached the lectern. When I began to speak she tried to hide under her mother's skirts.

I am not going to analyze this response, but I should make my confession more complete and perhaps more intriguing. I have never known this feeling of embarrassment when, as an ethnographer of contemporary African culture in Zaire/Congo, I attended scores of improvised plays performed by a troupe of popular actors; or when I spent countless hours with members of religious movements engaged in teaching, prayer, and ecstatic experiences. The question of why this is so I shall leave unanswered. I remain unconvinced by the obvious explanation: as an anthropologist, I can maintain a kind of distance I do not have from my own culture. Such a response would run against everything I have tried to accomplish in my field.

II A trajectory

It is safe to assume that something that becomes a consuming interest in one's later professional life had its origin in early dreams and experiences. As to dreams, I don't recall ever wanting to be an actor, or even pretending to be one in the games we played as children. I do have vivid memories of a circus show we once put on in an arena built from the rubble that, three years after the bombs had fallen, still covered much of the street where we lived. I had no act, though; I was the impresario and announcer, or, rather, one of several who claimed that role.

As to early experiences, my memories of acting and pretending go deeper. They are tied to learning to speak a foreign language. My parents were bilingual but I grew up at first speaking German only. We lived in a region that eventually became a part of Poland, a process that had not yet become a fact when I was eight years old. Within what must have been weeks I spoke Polish. Perhaps I was prepared, having heard from early childhood the sound of another Slavic language, a Moravian dialect spoken by the adults in my family; and there must have been some gradual acquisition of linguistic competence. But my memory tells me nothing about acquiring anything and a lot about joining something; hanging out, playing along in an ongoing piece, pretending that there was nothing strange about mustachioed men kissing ladies' hands and young mothers openly nursing their children. I felt proud and excited about being talked to in Polish and being able to respond. (My accomplishment lasted for about a year; then we moved to the West and Polish became the only one of many languages I had to learn during my life of which I retained nothing but fragments – most of them, incidentally, performative bits and pieces such as swear words, proverbs, lines of songs. . . .)

Thus, some of my earliest experiences with theatricality in the sense of pretending, putting on an act, playing a role, I made in extraordinary situations where cultures came in contact, if that describes the political upheavals of the time, and where mastering contact was a matter of survival. Intercultural relations, I must have learned then, however unknowingly, happen in a tension between pride (or "honesty," "identity") and vanity ("make-believe," "showing off"). A lateral thought: What does it mean when Christian traditions in our Western culture declare pride and vanity sinful? Is righteousness worth the price of missed opportunities to learn?

In the trajectory I am trying to trace I took the next step as a student of sociology and social anthropology when I encountered the concepts of actor and role, both central to structuralist-functionalist theory. True, the sociological concept "actor" was derived from action, not from acting; still, a role was a role, to be learned, assumed, and played by actor. I never liked these concepts and terms. At best, they are dead metaphors; at worst, they make a routine of the theatricality of social life. . . . I have been equally distrustful of drama as a root metaphor for society or history. In sociological theory, I felt then, and understand better now, these concepts are most of the time used in a flat, positive, undialectical manner. They deny what they appear to affirm: that social and cultural relations are better understood when tensions, even contradictions, between action and acting, life and theater, are acknowledged.

By the time Victor Turner became known for doing just that (acknowledging tensions), I had decided to avoid theatrical metaphors. Eventually, it was trying to understand matters such as timing and shared time in communicative events that made me discover that much of cultural knowledge is performative rather than informative and that this has consequences for the way we think of ethnography. In the end, I rejoined Turner when I realized that the ethnographer, as he put it, really is an ethnodramaturg. In our fieldwork we are occasions for, sometimes producers of, cultural performances that may range from reciting a set of kinship terms to putting on a full-blown ritual spectacle. It was by fortunate accident rather than design that a troupe of actors helped me to gain and formulate these insights in the performative nature of much of culture.²

III Culture, theatricality, and anthropology

The significance of theater in multicultural situations would seem to depend on the theatricality of the culture. I would like to address this issue as an anthropologist (rather than as someone claiming special expertise in multicultural theater). I will do this with a recent *trouvaille* from readings on the history of exploration and early ethnography of Central Africa. My source is *Sur le Haut-Congo*, by Camille Coquilhat, published in 1888. The author was an officer of the Congo Free State. He took part in campaigns of "pacification" along the Congo River preparatory to occupation. As an observer and student of the populations that were to be colonized, he was more than equal to travelers and writers whom we now count as early anthropologists; as a writer he had moments that make one think of Joseph Conrad. At one point Coquilhat recounts the visit of two explorers and missionary pioneers, George Grenfell and Thomas Comber, to the station he commanded. They claimed to have seen among the "natives"

la preuve d'un certain art dramatique. Ils racontent comme suit une "présentation" qu'ils déclarent fort agréable et qui dura plusieurs heures.

[proof of a certain dramatic art. They, the missionaries, then tell of a "presentation" that, they declare, was quite pleasant and lasted for several hours.]

(156)

This is how, according to Coquilhat, the missionaries described the event:.

Le spectacle commença par des danses agiles auxquelles succéda un acte évoquant dans le style grec; le "choeur" était gracieusement représenté par des petites filles de huit à douze ans. Un brancard d'étrange aspect était porté sur les épaules de quatre hommes. Il supportait, caché sous une couverture en flanelle rouge, un corps ou un objet invisible. Assise à l'une de ses extrémités, une gentille fillette regardait grave et triste. Ce brancard, qui était fait de bambous, fut déposé à terre et entouré par le choeur. Un air plaintif fut chanté, par une femme qui se plaça sur le côté de la civière. Nous ne pûmes comprendre grand'chose à ses paroles, mais

nous saisismes ce fréquent refrain: Kawa-Ka, "Il n'est pas mort." Au bout d'un certain temps, les charmes de l'incantation furent considérés comme ayant opéré et le drap rouge se prit à onduler. On le releva et l'on mit à jour une jeune fille toute tremblante, comme si elle se trouvait dans un état aigu d'épilepsie. Deux personnes s'approchèrent et, la prenant par le bras, ils remirent sur ses pieds. [The missionaries state:] Cette représentation avait été donnée pour être agréable aux blancs.

To which Coquilhat adds:.

Je suis un peu tenté de croire que, dans cette occurrence, les indigènes ont simplement imité une de leurs nombreuses cérémonies de superstition.

[The spectacle began with some agile dances followed by an act evocative of the Greek style; the "chorus" was graciously represented by small girls between eight and twelve years. Four men carried a strange looking stretcher on their shoulders. On it was, hidden under a red flannel blanket, a body or some invisible object. A gentle little girl sat at one end of the bier, looking serious and sad. This stretcher, which was made of bamboo, was put down on the ground and the chorus placed itself around it. A woman took her position alongside the litter and sang a plaintive tune. We did not understand much of what she said but caught an often repeated refrain: "Kawa-Ka, He is not dead." After a certain time, the incantation was considered to have had its effect, and the red cover began to undulate. It was removed and revealed a young girl shaking all over, as if she were in the midst of an epileptic seizure. Two persons approached, took the girl by her arms and put her on her feet. The missionaries add: This representation had been made to please the whites.]

To which Coquilhat adds:.

[I'm a bit tempted to believe that, in this case, the natives simply imitated one of their numerous superstitious ceremonies.]

(156)

Event classified and put aside. What happened? The missionary explorers reported on what they experienced as a theatrical performance. They suspected the intention behind it: what they saw was a self-presentation by this culture, put on to "please" them – to make them feel welcome, to entertain and perhaps enlighten them. When they compared what they saw to Greek tragedy, they built an intercultural bridge. Coquilhat, our protoanthropologist manages, in one sentence, to shore up cultural distance by labeling the event superstition and to deny the Africans creativity when he qualifies the performance as merely imitative of some ritual.

Briefly, I suggest that the text tells us two important things about theatricality and encounters between cultures:³

- If allowed, people will let us get to know them by performing (parts of) their culture. Such knowledge – let us call it performative – demands participation (at least as an audience) and therefore some degree of mutual recognition.
- In a frame of mind I called "informative," that is, one that admits as knowledge only what is based on data first gathered and then controlled by the collector, performances need to be dismissed because they are threatening to any enterprise, project, or institution that depends for its existence on maintaining distance and control. Most nation-states, many religions and academic disciplines are of that kind.

It follows, then, that admitting theater as a source of intercultural knowledge involves recognition, not only of performative next to informative knowledge, but also of anarchic vs. hierarchic conceptions of knowledge. Only then can we begin to gain knowledge of other cultures through participative play and playful mimesis. Given the state of the world, it is safe to expect that such performative commingling would be regarded as subversive by most of the institutions on which our societies are built.

IV Theater and intercultural relations

Can theatricality (performativeness in communication, skills of representation, invention of forms of presentation, actual performances) be a means to achieve the aim of better intercultural relations? Again, it is hard to imagine how the answer to this could be negative. Still, there is a danger that must be avoided, which is to instrumentalize theatricality. That it can be instrumentalized we know from the uses to which it has been put, for instance, by fascist and other totalitarian regimes.

Perhaps the real question – and this was what the preceding scene should have prepared us for – is to find out whether theatricality can be a source as well as a mode of knowledge. Dancers, musicians, and actors may have the answer and be able to perform it. We anthropologists are expected, or doomed, to produce a discourse about it – which I am not going to do here, except to suggest that events like the one reported and commented on by Coquilhat may lead us to progress from a fairly well-understood issue – the role of theatricality and performance in gaining knowledge of other cultures – to pondering the possibility and reality of truly intercultural knowledge. This is a problem that will force us to question the very concept of culture as defining identity. Taking theatricality seriously may lead us to doubt the equation of social existence with cultural identity. We should ponder a thesis that can be put as follows:

If "to be or not to be" is the question, then "to be *and* not to be" – to me the most succinct conception of performance – might be the answer.⁴

V An afterthought on anthropology and theater

That anthropologists have been fascinated by drama as a form of social action, as reflecting the nature of rituals, as illuminating the structure of societal processes is well known. But

what about tragedy and comedy? The history of our discipline suggests that tragedy (drama that ends badly) preceded drama (which never really ends) as the key trope of encounter between Us and Them: early reports of encounters with so-called "savages," even more later inquiries of "natives," convey a sense of doom. Cultures and societies we Westerners study are destined to disappear, a belief supported by many texts. My current favorite quotation comes from Leo Frobenius, who concluded his dirge for *Das sterbende Afrika* (*The Soul of a Continent*) with this appeal to students of Africa's past:

Grabt!
Aber achtet darauf, dass die Scherben nicht euch begraben.
Erlebt!
Unter jenen, die durch uns sterben.
Sterben müssen.
Erlebt es vor ihrem Tode.
Damit ihr die Wiederaufstehung verstehen lernt!

[Keep digging! But see to it that the shards don't bury you.
Experience life.
Among those who die through us.
Must die.
Experience it before they die.
So that you learn to understand resurrection.]

(503)

Though it would take more than one striking text to prove this, I think that anthropological discourse in general, and many accounts specifically, lean to a tragic mode of emplotment. Where is comedy in anthropology? Not in the funny stories anthropologists sometimes tell, nor in a growing number of ethnographies of humor, clowning, and such; a trope helping us to understand the nature of our discipline, comedy must probably be sought as a comedy of intercultural errors, of mistaken identities, that confuse and complicate relations. . . . Any decent fieldworker knows how funny culture can be when bungles because it has lost its certainties, its territory; pidgins and similar transcultural languages often are hilarious. But comedy in relations between cultures is something we are just beginning to explore. It is not a subject that is likely to flourish under conditions of political correctness. Laughter is my final cue here:

Sie lachen über meinen Enthusiasmus für die Wilden beinahe so wie Voltaire über Rousseau, dass ihm das Gehen auf Vieren so wohl gefiele; glauben Sie nicht, dass ich deswegen unsere sittlichen und gesitteten Vorzüge, worin es auch sei, verachte. Das menschliche Geschlecht ist zu einem Fortgange von Szenen, von Bildung, von Sitten bestimmt; wehe dem Menschen, dem die Scene misfällt, in der er auftreten, handeln und sich verleben soll. Wehe aber auch dem Philosophen über

Menschheit und Sitten, dem seine Scene die einzige ist, und der die erste immer auch als die schlechteste verkennet! Wenn alle mit zum Ganzen des fortgehenden Schauspiels gehören, so zeigt sich in jeder eine neue, sehr merkwürdige Seite der Menschheit . . .

[You laugh about my enthusiasm for the savage, almost like Voltaire ridiculed Rousseau saying that he must like walking on all fours; don't believe that I therefore despise our moral and well-behaved advantages, wherever they may be found. Humanity is destined to a progression of scenes, of education, of custom; pity on the person who dislikes the scene in which he must appear, act, and live out his life! Pity also on the philosopher of humanity and customs who has no scene but his own and who mistakes the first one always for the worst. If all of them belong to the whole of the ongoing spectacle, then, in every one of them there reveals itself a new and quite remarkable side of mankind.]

(Herder n.d., 2: 15)

This is not, as some might argue, a plea for cultural relativism. Here Herder asks for a kind of understanding that is based on tolerating oneself as well as others and he envisages the need for tolerance with the help of a theatrical notion: Being part of humanity means acting in a scene that is part of a larger play.

Going beyond what Herder states, but trying to be faithful to the spirit of his thought, let me conclude with another thesis: The greatest challenge for intercultural tolerance is not to accept, on some philosophical or political principle, those deep values and beliefs that are presumed to keep a culture together. That is easy, at least for the liberal-minded. Moral and political multiculturalism are the privilege of the powerful and the protected. Courage, imagination, and practice are needed to meet otherness in its everyday theatrical forms of self-presentation with all its tricks and props, postures and poses, masks and costumes, white-face and black-face. I am not about to argue for an either-or position, but I think that Enlightenment ideals of refinement, rational simplicity, and clarity, and the temptation to equate truth and value with purity and honesty need to be countered by a Romantic appreciation of *Verkleidung*, disguise and dressing up for many roles. If, as a result of such universalized yet practical theatricality, theater "runs the risk of losing its characteristics and essence,"⁵ so be it. I already confessed I am not much of a theater-goer.

NOTES

- 1 First presented as a contribution to a symposium on "Theatre in a multicultural society," organized by the International School of Theatre Anthropology, 3–5 May 1996, Copenhagen. I wish to thank Eugenio Barba and Kirsten Hastrup for inviting me to this memorable event.
- 2 Documented and analyzed in my *Power and Performance*.
- 3 Explored in greater detail in my *Out of Our Minds*.
- 4 I later learned that this thesis has been attributed by some to the painter Francis Bacon.
- 5 This was a fear expressed in a programmatic statement prepared by the organizers of the Copenhagen symposium.

REFERENCES

- Coquilhat, Camille (1888) *Sur le Haut-Congo*, Paris: J. Lebègue.
- Fabian, Johannes (1990) *Power and Performance: Ethnographic Explorations through Proverbial Wisdom and Theater in Shaba, Zaire*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- (2000) *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Frobenius, Leo (1928) *Das sterbende Africa: Die Seele eines Erdteils [Dying Africa: The Soul of a Continent]*, Frankfurt: Societätsdruckerei.
- Herder, J. G. (n.d.) *Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und Lieder alter Völker, Vol. 2: Herders Werke*, Leipzig: Verlag des Bibliographischen Instituts.

READER CROSS-REFERENCES

- Austin, Butler, Parker and Sedgwick – on the meanings of performativity
- Schechner, Geertz, Turner and Turner, Conquergood – performance as a means to facilitate intercultural understanding
- Harding, Okpewho – on performance and performer training in Africa
- Bhabha – intercultural relations in colonized societies

Part VI

PERFORMING

For every kind of performance there is a different kind (and often many kinds) of performing. Performing happens in everyday life, in the home, in the workplace, in sports and games, in the arts, and in sacred and secular ritual. Any time you take on a role, tell a story, or simply enact a bit of restored behavior, you are performing. This does not mean that you are “faking” or being untrue to your “real self.” As the essays in Part II (“What is Performance?”) and Part V (“Performativity”) show, performing often involves the utmost sincerity. Sincere or “believed-in” performing is the basis of virtually all social interaction. Performance studies encompasses all these branches of performing. However, the essays in this section specifically address the theory and practice of performing in theatrical contexts: that is, the theory and practice of acting. If we recognize that virtually all human behavior involves performing, then we can think of the theater as a kind of laboratory where actors and directors stage experiments to help us better understand ourselves. Some of these experiments are described in the following pages.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the German director and playwright Bertolt Brecht became dissatisfied with conventional Western acting, in which the performers attempted to recreate their characters’ emotions and convey them to the audience. Rather than disappear into the role, presenting the character only from the inside, Brecht called on the actor to present the entirety of the character by engaging the role critically, letting the audience see that the actor and the character are not one and the same. Brecht called this technique *Verfremdungseffekt* – a theatrical technique that makes the familiar appear strange and/or the strange appear familiar. The word has also been translated as “alienation” or “estrangement” effect. Many of Brecht’s writings were collected and translated by John Willett as *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1964). One example from that volume, “A dialogue about acting” (1929), is excerpted here. Another leading experimenter of the twentieth-century theater was the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski. “The actor’s technique” (interview in 1967) describes the approach to acting that he developed at the Polish Theatre Laboratory, which he founded and directed from 1959 to 1984. Grotowski’s intensely physical approach to acting is contrasted with the more internalized “method” acting advocated by the American director Lee Strasberg. In “A dream of passion” (1987), Strasberg describes his controversial “emotional-memory” exercise, through which actors draw on their own experience to recreate feelings and sensations on stage. What unites these essays is the intensity with which each