

## Psychic Polyphony

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Until relatively modern times, Western theatrical theory has been largely dominated by an orientation toward the dramatic script, and the techniques and procedures developed for the analysis of dramatic structures and phenomena were often essentially the same as those already successfully employed in the analysis of non-dramatic literary texts. Unquestionably such strategies have provided a rich variety of insights, but at the same time, they have obscured important aspects of theatre, especially when these were not readily accessible to the sort of analysis developed for material created for reading rather than for enactment.

In recognition of this, much modern theatrical theory has followed the direction exemplified by Marco de Marinis, who has argued that the performed play cannot be built upon or projected from the "virtual *mise en scene* of the printed text, which has its own semiotic." Instead it must be viewed as a new phenomenon, a "spectacle text" which employs the written text only as one element in a multicode, multidimensional and pluralistic new textual system.<sup>1</sup>

Early in this century Stark Young suggested that the stage performance should be viewed as a "translation" of a text into another artistic "language,"<sup>2</sup> but this metaphor can be misleading unless one acknowledges that the process is not really akin to changing from one linguistic system to another but rather from one expressive system into another which is phenomenologically different. Many semioticians have suggested that the performed play "speaks" not one language but many, emitting what Barthes called "a thickness of signs."<sup>3</sup> Bert States, however, has called attention to an extremely important commonality among the various sign-systems employed by the theatre, suggesting that most of these produce "a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that *are* what they seem to be."<sup>4</sup>

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Nothing is more basic to the theatrical experience than this physical reality. "A play," says Thornton Wilder, "visibly represents pure existing, while a novel is a past reported in the present, what one mind, claiming to omniscience, asserts to have existed."<sup>5</sup> The written text of the play occupies a somewhat uneasy position between these two. The omniscient narrator typical of the novel is not fully manifested here, but even so the drama does not reach us directly, but filtered through a quasi-authorial presence most obviously manifested in the stage directions. With an author like Shaw, the stage directions take us almost into the generic realm of the short story or novel, but even a dramatist as sparing in such indications as Shakespeare provides occasional suggestions for setting or movement, and of course must attribute all lines to the proper speaker. Clearly, reading the printed "Bernardo: Who's there?" is an experience much closer to reading the novelistic "'Who's there?' cried Bernardo" than to seeing and hearing an actor speak this line. The roots of the words "theatre" (from *theatron*, a place for seeing), "spectator" (from *spectare*, to watch), and "auditorium" (from *audire*, to hear) all reflect the necessary physicality and presence of the theatre experience.

Theatrical performance thus occupies a strange, even uncanny position midway between arts of absence such as the novel or the cinema and the experience of presence we have in everyday life. Indeed David Cole sees the essence of the theatre's power as resting precisely in this doubleness, where all elements—actors, scenery, lighting, etc.—exist both in themselves and as part of the mythical *illud tempus*, both as realities and as ideograms.<sup>6</sup>

This element of presence gives to all theatrical signs what States calls an affective corporeality, a certain irreducible "thingness," which may in fact interfere at times with their most efficient use as aesthetic devices. It was precisely this corporeality of theatrical signs which led Charles Lamb to consider all performances of Shakespeare inevitably inferior to reading. The reading of a tragedy he called "a fine abstraction. It presents to the fancy just so much of external appearances as to make us feel that we are among flesh and blood, while by far the greater and better part of our imagination is employed upon the thoughts and internal machinery of the character." In reading, "some dim images of royalty—a crown and sceptre, may float before our eyes" without durability or clear definition, while staging requires "full and cumbersome" coronation robes and the "shiftings and re-shiftings of a Romish priest at mass."<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to see why Lamb prefers the flexibility and artistic control of "externals" offered by the written text. Here precisely as much detail and duration can be given to an object like a crown as the situation requires, from a fleeting image to a richly described artifact, and such an image can be instantly evoked or dismissed. The theatre, however, normally requires a real object with physical substance and permanence which demands the attention of both actors and audience. Unquestionably Lamb has isolated a critical difference between theatre and the written text, but while stressing the advantages gained by the written text through the absence of permanent corporeal objects, he has ignored the compensatory effects available to performance through an artistic utilization of such objects.

It is true that a physical crown provides no "dim image of royalty," but it may be a powerful visual metaphor, the strength of which has been recognized by dramatists in all ages. The triumphant rebel holding at last the physical symbol of power in his hands or the dying despot whose fallen crown has rolled just beyond the reach of his grasping fingers are the sort of powerful images that fix an entire dramatic situation in our imagination and our memory. Indeed Goethe defines the theatrical in terms of just this sort of physical embodiment, "immediately symbolic to the eye," citing as an example the moment when Prince Hal removes the crown from his sleeping father, places it upon his own head, and struts proudly about."<sup>8</sup> Similarly the robbing of the new Pope in Brecht's *Galileo* takes advantage of precisely the ponderous presence which so troubled Lamb to create a powerful and memorable theatrical sequence.

Duration is often combined with presence to create striking effects on the stage completely unrealizable in print. Barthes in *Image, Music, Text* suggests that a text should no longer be regarded as a line of works releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message of an author-God"), but as a multi-dimensional space "in which a variety of meanings, none of them original, blend and clash."<sup>9</sup> This spatial conception of a text as a field in which many voices compete for attention has a distinctly theatrical flavor, since the author-God is much more clearly a *Dieu caché* on the stage than in the written text. Certain voices are given corporeal reality, and the multi-dimensional space is not figurative but real. This Barthean view of a multivocal text has proven enormously fruitful in modern critical analysis, but the form of the written text will always guarantee that such multiplicity cannot be directly realized there, as it can in the theatre. Many voices may indeed be present in a written text, but all must be channeled by the nature of the medium into the single expressive device of the written line. Jindřich Honzl spoke of words, actors, costumes, scenery, and music in the theatre as working in sharp contrast to this single "conductor," as being "different conductors of a single current that either passes from one to another or flows through several at one time."<sup>10</sup>

The single conductive line of the written text presents a serious obstacle to the author who wishes to keep an idea or an image steadily in the reader's mind while speaking of other things. In fact there is no literary device which can guarantee the permanence in the reader's consciousness of anything the words themselves are not at that moment considering. Lamb's "dim images" of crown and sceptre may well drift away as the text focuses on other matters even when the author *wants* them to remain present. The multiple channels of theatrical reception, however, allow simultaneous statements to be made by a variety of presences, often with powerful emotional effect. In Ingmar Bergman's *Kung Lear*, the crown, taken off by Lear in the first scene, remains downstage near the footlights throughout the play (even during the intermission when it is picked out by a soft spotlight) as a constant and moving reminder of the initial disruptive act and of the subsequent leaderless condition of the realm.

Costumes and scenery almost inevitably make some kind of continuing commentary in the theatre. Thus an audience remains constantly aware, whatever else may be happening, of the steady rain and gloom outside the

Alving house in *Ghosts*, of the formidable array of ancestral portraits surrounding poor Johannes Rosmer in *Romersholt*, of the heavy presence of the two great overarching elm trees in *Desire Under the Elms* which, if O'Neill's stage directions are followed, "brood oppressively over the house . . . like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof."<sup>11</sup> When these texts are merely read, it is most difficult, once the opening stage directions are passed, to keep such images visually present in the mind as other matters clamor for attention.

The multiple perception of presences is unquestionably a central feature in the particular power of the theatre. Mukařovský, summarizing the contributions of the Prague linguistic circle in his 1941 article "On the Current State of the Theory of the Theatre," observed that the theatre is essentially "an interplay of forces moving through time and space and pulling the spectator into the interplay which we call a stage production, a performance."<sup>12</sup> Only recently has theatre theory again begun to address this insight and to recognize that a production must in theory and in practice be conceived in time, must be considered from multiple and simultaneous perspectives, and must recognize all the while that every viewing will put together these perspectives in different combinations.

Even more central to the power of theatre than the various "presences" of properties, scenery, and other visual and auditory elements are the living presences of the actors, whose various psychic drives also "blend and clash" in a particularly striking and powerful manner. To this specifically theatrical phenomenon I have assigned the term "psychic polyphony." Some of the workings and implications of this phenomenon will be the central concern of the present essay.

## I

In performance, characters, like crowns, utilize duration and presence to create a complex perceptual web which, thanks to the simultaneous accessibility of different "conductors" in performance, allows the spectator a freedom of response quite different from and more inclusive than that offered by the printed text. Modern reader response theory has stressed the creative role of the reader in engaging a text, but whatever the freedom open to the interpretative process, the arrangement of stimuli upon which this interpretation is based is controlled to a far greater extent on the printed page. It is true that directors, designers, and actors do not *normally* encourage a free play of audience focus about the stage (although certain modern experimental performances have stood out as exceptions to this norm). An important part of theatre art traditionally has been that of guiding the spectators' attention to the proper element of the spectacle. Cultural norms also help to discourage a "free play" of attention across a perceptual field. Nevertheless, all theatre practitioners realize that focus on stage as opposed to focus in print is loosely controlled and that while the average audience may devote the major part of its attention to the central focus of the scene, this will almost invariably be supplemented with selective and personally chosen attention to secondary areas of focus and even to characters and scenic elements not presently stressed at all. The very fact that the stage makes the elms or the portraits of

Rosmer's ancestors accessible whether they are being spoken of or not means that the spectator may at any time give them primary focus according to the free play of his or her desire or predisposition.

This relative freedom of the theatrical spectator to select the object of focus and to create an unique and individual synchronic "reading" as the play moves forward diachronically has particular implications for the way characters are created, sustained, and perceived on the stage. A long-standing rule for actors is to remember that no matter how small their part, whenever they are on stage someone is likely always to be giving them central, even if momentary attention. The theatre has sought, with differing success in different periods, to accommodate this wandering focus by training its minor actors to present a clear contribution to the main action. The inanimate object on stage, so long as it can be initially assimilated into the world of the play, presents no further problem. But the actor, who shares the audience's double awareness of reality and pretence, must continually demonstrate to the spectator that he is "in character" since the fact that he is physically present serves always as a reminder of this "real" existence, an existence that may be foregrounded at any moment by choice, by inattention, or by some mishap.

The indifference of some producers to this matter aroused much protest in the nineteenth century while directors like Saxe-Meiningen, Antoine, and Stanislavski were lauded for their efforts to insure that every character on stage, no matter how insignificant, was at all times a fit subject for audience contemplation. In a memorable passage in Stanislavski's *Creating A Role*, the Stanislavski-like director Tortsov demonstrates something of the attention that went into such an effect by interrogating an extra who is playing a gondolier in *Othello*. Although this extra appears only as part of the crowd aroused by Iago and Roderigo at Brabantio's house at the opening of the play, Tortsov expects him to know his position in the household, his duties, his relation to his fellows and master, so that when he appears on stage it will be as a fully developed individual pursuing an action thought out and motivated in impressive detail.<sup>13</sup> A spectator focussing upon this gondolier should discover an element contributing distinctly to the total flow of the action just as Iago is.

## II

Among the recent strategies for the analysis of the creation and interpretation of dramatic characters have been several showing a clear debt to the narratological structuralist analysis of Propp and Greimas. Although neither of these was primarily interested in the drama, their work has in turn reawakened interest in two hitherto rather neglected dramatic theorists with similar structural concerns, Georges Polti and Etienne Souriau, both of whom proposed dramatic taxonomies based upon "dramatic situations." For Polti these were a somewhat whimsical collection of nouns such as "madness," "adultery," and "disaster" and of phrases such as "all sacrificed for a passion," "falling prey to misfortune," or "necessity of sacrificing loved ones."<sup>14</sup> Souriau developed a more complex analysis based on six "functions"—the "thematic force" which seeks a goal, the goal sought, the receiver of profit from this goal, an opposing force, a helper, and an arbitrator.<sup>15</sup> Greimas' six actantial roles—subject, object, sender, receiver, opponent and

helper—are closely related to Souriau's functions and have been similarly employed for the analysis of dramatic structure.

Critics of this approach have complained of its taxonomic rigidity and its focus upon distribution of roles and relationships in an ultimately reductive manner. Actantial roles may shift rapidly about during a narrative and a character may be simultaneously playing several roles in several different actions—subject in one, opponent, receiver, or helper in yet others. The physical plurality of theatrical performance makes this multiplicity particularly evident. Tortsov's conversation with the actor playing the gondolier reminds us that even the most minor character on the stage may be seen, and according to Stanislavski should be played, as the protagonist in his own life drama, responsible for the action, successful or not, which he attempts to carry out within the dramatic situation. In Stanislavskian terms he must seek the "creative objective at the heart of every motivational unit, an objective which carries in itself the germ of action."<sup>16</sup> The actions thus developed are united in what Stanislavski calls the through line of action leading toward the ultimate goal of the character, the super-objective.

Obviously not all of the proposed actions of the various characters on stage can be fulfilled. As Stanislavski observes:

No movement, striving, action is carried out on the stage, any more than in real life, without obstacles. One runs inevitably into the counter-movements and strivings of other people, or into conflicting events, or into obstacles caused by the elements, or other hinderences. Life is an unremitting *struggle*, one overcomes or one is defeated. Likewise on the stage, side-by-side with the through action there will be a series of counter-through actions on the part of other characters, other circumstances. The collision and conflict of these two opposing through actions constitute the dramatic situation.<sup>17</sup>

For our present purposes, the key concept in this description is "side-by-side," since it is precisely this that characterizes the theatrical as opposed to the novelistic presentation of an actantial web. No matter who is speaking or taking the center focus, we have the option as spectators to place our own focus on any other psychic presence on stage, and thus to interpret the pattern of actions and counter-actions in a great variety of ways at the same theatrical moment. Figure and ground here may be thought of as simultaneous to one another.

An important part of the unique power of the theatre has always derived from this psychic polyphony—the simultaneous expression of a number of different psychic lines of action, allowing the spectator a choice of focus and a variety in the process of combination. The potential power of mere physical and psychic presence, even (and sometimes especially) when a character speaks little or not at all, was clearly recognized from the beginning of Western drama. The silence of Cassandra for almost three hundred lines after her entrance with Agamemnon in the *Oresteia* is a device of enormous power on stage, though in the printed text her presence during the emotion-packed scene between Agamemnon and Clythemnestra may be almost totally forgotten. In the theatre, however, like the crown in Bergman's *Lear*, simply by her presence she brings to our mind, as Kitto observes, "a whole train of

associated ideas, like a remembered scent or tune."<sup>18</sup> At the same time, through our continual realization of the steadily growing emotional investment she has in the scene being enacted, she builds up during this extended period an overwhelming psychic expectation, discharged at last in her unearthly cry to Apollo, one of the most chilling moments in the Greek theatre.

In more normal stage interaction we see a constantly shifting pattern of actions and reactions, contributed to by everyone present and offering a multiple psychic perspective to the observer. The plays of Chekhov, with which, of course, Stanislavski is particularly associated, provide especially clear examples of psychic polyphony, and it is this I would suggest which makes Chekhov notoriously less effective in print than on the stage. It is extremely difficult if not impossible to read a play like *Three Sisters* or *The Cherry Orchard* while keeping a continuously clear idea of the physical presence and psychic plenitude of all of the characters on stage, especially of those with very little to say. It is harder still to focus freely among them to observe their reactions, gestures, and expressions no matter who is speaking, as one may so easily do in the theatre. Yet it is precisely this continuous interplay which lies at the very heart of the Chekhovian theatre.

Certain theatrical scenes seem created almost as if to call attention to this multiple perspective and certainly to capitalize upon it. One of the most famous is the play within a play in *Hamlet*. Here we have the players themselves as one (already multiple) focus of attention. We have the grouping Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius, each watching the play, as we know, with quite different concerns. We have another grouping elsewhere on stage of Ophelia and Hamlet, watching the play, the King, and each other, and finally we have Horatio, stationed by Hamlet in yet another location to provide another perspective on the King's reactions. Horatio, of course, has also his own concerns, and we can be fairly certain that he will also be keeping a watchful eye on his beloved if somewhat erratic friend. To be complete, we should also include other members of the court—guards, ladies and gentlemen, and so on, whose reactions also distinctly contribute to the overall effect of the scene as presented, though they may well be forgotten when it is only read. The spectator has phenomenologically accessible at every instant every one of these perspectives.

An interesting contrast may be seen by comparing this scene as staged with any of its many filmed versions. The film, despite its heavy reliance upon visual and iconic representation, is, in respect to psychic polyphony, much closer to the written text than to the stage performance. This difference was recognized at least as early as Béla Balázs' pioneering study in film theory, which suggested that film became an independent art by creating its own "form-language." This was achieved by discarding the three "basic formal principles" of theatrical art, which, according to Balázs, were:

1. that the spectator sees the enacted scene as a whole in space, always seeing the whole of the space,
2. that the spectator always sees the stage from a fixed, unchanging distance, and
3. that the spectator's angle of vision does not change.

In the film, says Balázs, these principles are replaced by four “new Methods”—varying distance between spectator and scene (and hence varying dimensions of scenes), division of the intergral picture of the scene into sections of “shots,” changing angles, perspectives, and focus of these “shots,” and the assembling of the “shots” in montage.<sup>19</sup>

Most of these “new methods” involved the control of focus and perception, and moved the film from the more open perceptual world of the theatre to a more closely confined sequence like that of the novel. The spectators at Bergman’s *Lear* may look at the crown at any time, but the cutting and montage of the film will govern precisely when that image is visually accessible much as the novel governs when it is narratively accessible.

While the cinema was developing its own “language,” these devices of selection and focus seem to have encountered some resistance from spectators accustomed to the more total picture provided by the stage. Pioneer Robert Peguy told of an early producer who complained that visual focus excluding the legs and feet of actors might lead the audience to think that he was employing cripples, and D. W. Griffiths is reported to have encountered similar literalistic resistance to the first close-ups, with giant, disembodied heads filling the entire screen.<sup>20</sup> Such stories have a somewhat apocryphal feeling, but whatever problems of interpretation the new filmic codes may originally have presented, they have now become culturally accepted, so that film is not only created, but perceived in a quite different way from the theatre. Patrice Pavis has rightly observed that “even if there is no editing after the shooting of the film and if the scenes are shot from one fixed point with no camera change or close-ups, the video film imposes by its own particular framing a limited and *partial* vision. It is not useful for the camera to film the whole stage area even from an unchanging distance.”<sup>21</sup> My own single experience with a full length film shot as a production record of a performance in Salzburg from a single fixed position in the audience and with the entire stage always visible absolutely supported this observation. The performance seemed astonishingly flat, lifeless, and remote, quite unlike the usual experience of either film or theatre.

The theatrical tableau has often been used as a striking device for calling attention to psychic polyphony by holding it, as it were, on a sustained chord. A well-known example is the Screen Scene in Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal*. Robert Scholes has called the moment of revelation in this scene “one of the great moments of pure stagecraft in the history of the theatre,” at which “all the layers of ironic perception are allowed to discharge into laughter and applause.” The silent exchange of looks in the tableau, Scholes continues, “can be sustained as long as the actors can mime and the audience interpret additional nuances of meaning.”<sup>22</sup>

The ironies of this classic scene and the audience’s enjoyment of them depend precisely upon the psychic plurality which is a distinctive feature of theatre art. Each of the participants in this tableau—Joseph and Charles Surface, Lady Teazle and Sir Peter—bring to the scene their own fully developed character and line of action, and in this moment of comic crisis the audience’s perception is free to wander freely among them, relishing the variety of reactions and interrelations simultaneously available. Wherever one

looks there is a new source of delight, and each spectator may choose the order in which he or she reads the scene—focusing upon Joseph's discomforture, Charles' delight, Lady Teazle's embarrassment, or Sir Peter's astonishment—in whatever order or whatever combination proves most attractive. This freedom might be contrasted with a filming of the same scene, where the camera would inevitably make these choice for us, devoting a set number of frames in a set order to close-ups of each of the participants for a totally different phenomenological effect.

Many memorable moments in the theatre are built upon this same device. The discovery of Natasha and Belyev by Rakitin and Arkady in the fourth act of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country* has a dynamic closely analogous to Sheridan's scene and generates a similar prolonged delight in the audience. In each of these examples the psychic interchange continues during the period of physical paralysis, since the characters are reacting not only to the new situation but to each other's reactions.

A somewhat different effect is obtained when everyone on stage reacts simultaneously to a single stimulus but without particular attention to each other. A notable example of such a tableau concludes Gogol's *Inspector General*, and the author describes it in careful detail:

The Mayor stands in the centre, looking like a post, with outspread arms and head thrown back. To his right are his Wife and Daughter, each straining towards him with all her body. Behind them is the Postmaster, who has turned into a living question mark addressed to the spectators. Behind him is the Superintendent of Schools, most guilelessly nonplussed. Behind him, near the very side of the proscenium, are three Lady Guests, leaning together with the most sarcastic expressions on their faces, meant for the Mayor and still more for this Wife and Daughter. To the left of the Mayor is the Director of Charities, with his head somewhat cocked, as though he were listening to something. Behind him is the Judge, with his arms spread wide, squatting almost to the ground, and with his lips puckered as if to whistle, or to say, "Oh, my sainted aunt! This is it, sure enough!" Behind him is Korobkin, turning to the spectators with one eye narrowed and putting over a caustic insinuation concerning the Mayor. Behind him, at the very side of the proscenium, are Dobchinski and Bobchinski, the arrested motion of their hands directed at each other, their mouths gaping and their eyes goggling at each other. The other Guests remain where they are, like so many pillars of salt. All the characters, thus petrified, retain their positions for almost a minute and a half.

(Slow Curtain<sup>23</sup>)

The Gogol tableau stands somewhere between the tableau emphasizing a moment of intense psychic interplay like those in *The School for Scandal* and *A Month in the Country* and another sort of tableau where the primary interest is not psychic but pictorial or emblematic. The psychic tableau attempts to justify itself to some extent realistically—its participants remain frozen in shock or surprise as they might in a similar crisis in real life. Emblematic tableaux are not, of course, devoid of psychological content, but the justification for the "freezing" of the scene is usually not psychological but pictorial,

as in the nineteenth century melodramas where all the actors at a moment of high excitement struck simultaneous "attitudes" to form an applause-attracting "picture," or when stage action is developed so as to lead to a visual "quotation" of a famous painting or sculptural group, and the action freezes not for internal reasons but simply so that the reproduction can be appreciated. Cross-fertilization of narrative paintings and theatre was particularly popular during the nineteenth century, when certain plays were created primarily to provide scenes reproducing famous paintings and when painters often selected as subjects scenes in plays (Shakespeare being particularly favored).<sup>24</sup>

The simultaneous access to elements in the narrative painting seems to provide an opportunity of "reading" similar to that offered by the theatre, but the fact that the theatrical scene is composed of actually existing elements embedded in time creates in truth a quite different totality of impression. In a narrative painting we can consider either pictorial or emotive qualities (at least those that can be deduced from a frozen moment) at our leisure, knowing that every element of the composition "will stay 'til we come."

We can also let our attention play over an emblematic tableau in the theatre without pressure of time, but only so long as we regard it pictorially, seeing the persons in it as inanimate parts of a visual composition. As soon as we allow ourselves to remember, as we invariably must, that they are also living beings, we must take into consideration both their psychic and physical reality, thus exposing the artificiality and arbitrariness of the tableau itself. Their immobility then takes on other meanings and raises other questions. It becomes problematic and we therefore begin to speculate about its purpose. Is the character stunned, frightened, confused? Or, (in a more presentational style of performance) has the actor consciously offered a pose for our contemplation and is continuing to hold it by an act of will? In any case, in the living world of the theatre, such stasis soon registers as alien, and its prolongation arouses an inevitable tension, either pleasurable or disturbing. We may share the delight of Sir David Wilkie, who called a staged tableau vivant "the most beautiful reality I ever saw," but we share also his recognition of the inevitable effect of entropy on this artificially maintained beauty: "so evanescent is the group, that the curtain drops in twenty seconds, the people being unable to remain for any longer period in one precise position."<sup>25</sup> A delightful theatrical illustration of this recognition is offered by *The Fantastics*, which closes its first act on the sort of highly artificial posed tableau beloved by nineteenth century producers (this tableau is often used as a visual emblem for the New York production). The second act opens with the same tableau, but it gradually dissolves and collapses as fatigue and the pressures of changing psychic interests affect its various members. The outstanding recent example of the common nineteenth century practice of developing an entire play around the stage recreation of a well-known portrait is surely Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*, the first act of which concludes with the stage recreation of Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. The second act, like that of *The Fantasticks*, begins with the same tableau, but now that it is continued, our reaction shifts from the visual delight of the recreation to the tension engendered by the enforced immobility

of what we now focus on as living presences. The opening song of this act "It's Hot up Here," sung as the tableau is maintained, expresses the continuing discomfort of those beings trapped in Seurat's "painting." Even frozen in position, however, their psychic interplay continues ("The soldiers have forgotten us"). Gogol's guests may stand "like pillars of salt," but our knowledge that they are not pillars of salt creates a tension which in this case (through the conflict between the living and mechanical discussed by Bergson) is released in laughter. A painting of the same scene might arouse amusement through the guests' expressions or physical appearance, but hardly through their immobility.

The mutability of dramatic sign may, as Bogatyrev and Honzl have observed, result in an actor being treated according to a particular theatrical convention as an abstract quality or even an inanimate object,<sup>26</sup> but it is almost impossible to prevent the psychic presence of the actor from "bleeding through" the convention and thus continuing to affect the reception of the piece. *Sunday in the Park with George* plays amusingly upon the difference between the live actor who becomes an element in a tableau and the tableau representation of an actor without life in the two soldiers from the painting. The productions of Taduesz Kantor have constructed tableaux of mixed living figures and dummies for a much more chilling and grotesque response to this disjuncture. Shakespeare explores the comic potential of life "bleeding through" in his depiction of the laborers of Athens appearing as "Wall" and "Moonshine" in the interlude of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The insistence of psychic presence adds piquancy to the emblematic tableau on stage, but it also adds a certain instability which is not always in the best interests of the desired frozen "effect." The statue of the Commandatore in *Don Giovanni*, for example, is always a bit distracting, since the audience generally (correctly) assumes that the statue is being conterefted by a real actor and is thus highly sensitive not only to any inadvertant movement before the statue "comes to life," but to the psychic presence emanating even from a very rigid figure which they seek to "read into" the psychic polyphony of the scene.

### III

Even dramatists sometimes seem to feel that their lesser characters function like lesser characters in a novel, existing only to the degree that they are created by the author and thus condemned, like Lamb's images of royalty, only to that portion of existence required by the machinery of the action. Thus Strindberg in his preface to *Miss Julie* says that he deliberately portrayed the supporting character of Christine in a "somewhat abstract" manner because "ordinary people are, to a certain degree, abstract in the performance of their daily work—conventional, and showing only one side of themselves—and as long as the spectator feels no need to see their other sides, my abstract portrayal of them will serve will enough."<sup>27</sup> It is true that we learn less about the character Christine during this play than about Jean or Miss Julie, but when portrayed by a real, living actress, she is in no way more abstract than they, and while she is on stage makes just as legitimate a claim to audience attention.

Dramatically speaking, a character may be "unrealized," as the Son claims to be in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, but he can no more project a "dim image" of a person than the stage crown can present Lamb's "dim image of royalty." When such a character appears on the stage, the physical and psychic presence of the actor who embodies him will necessarily provide an unavoidable measure of realization. A character on stage may be unclear or inconsistent, but he will always necessarily participate fully in the diverse structure of presence, and thus in the changeable tensions of the drama's reception. Whether an actor has developed a particular contextual world, like Stanislavski's gondolier, or not, as a living being he possesses always the potential of being viewed as the protagonist of his own drama, entangled with and yet separate from the drama of every other character. Thus the web of competing through-lines of action, which Stanislavski considered the basis of the dramatic situation, is always potentially involved in the theatre. Analysis like his encourages us to recognize at least some of the ways in which the multiplicity of actantial patterns, which I have called psychic polyphony, make a central contribution to the almost endless variety of readings constantly offered by theatrical performance, and beyond that, to the specifically theatrical pleasure offered by this freedom of reading and the simultaneity of multiple perception.

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## Notes

1. Marco de Marinis, "Lo spettacolo come testo 1," *Versus* 21 (Sept.-Dec., 1978) 57. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
2. Stark Young, "Translations," *Immortal Shadows* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, n.d.) 3.
3. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1972) 262. Tadeusz Kowzan analyses thirteen different theatrical sign systems in "The Sign in the Theatre," *Diogenes* 61 (1968) 52-80.
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## Drama, Metadrama, and Perception

RICHARD HORNBY

This book deals with the way in which drama relates to reality, to itself, and to culture generally. The first section is a critique of realism as a theory (rather than a practice) in drama. While realistic theory implies that all elements of drama (including those of performance) can be tested in terms of how "close to" or "far from" life they are, Hornby shows that is never about reality directly. Plays operate within a complex of cultural codes, including that of drama itself, and surrounding that, other cultural systems including those of theatre, literature, and social behavior. Drama is always about the way we *perceive* reality through culture (of which drama itself forms a part).

The middle section deals with metadrama, a topic explored by a number of critics over the past few decades, but which has not generated any systematic overview. Hornby provides one, with a philosophical discussion of each possible type of metadrama, drawing upon theories of psychoanalytic, phenomenological, and deconstructive criticism.

Broadly speaking, metadrama is drama about drama, and all plays are in a sense metadramatic. There are many varieties of metadrama, however, of varying degrees of explicitness, and the more explicit the metadrama, the more it generates a sense of estrangement in the audience, who are forced to realign their perception of the dramatic illusion.

Such estrangement is the ultimate aim of serious drama. In the final section of the book, Hornby looks at six plays from differing periods—*Oedipus the King*, *As You Like It*, *Woyzeck*, *The Father*, *The Master Builder*, *Betrayal*—in which the playwright examines the ways by which his society views reality. A recurrent motif in the plays is the conflict between scientific, objective thinking, and intuitive, subjective thinking, reflecting the "crisis" that Husserl saw in our culture.

**About the Author:** Richard Hornby has degrees from M. I. T. and Tulane, and has taught drama at Bowdoin College, the University of British Columbia, the University of Calgary, and is currently Professor of Theatre at Florida State University. Hornby is the author of numerous articles and books on various aspects of drama. He also has had considerable experience in the practical theatre as a director, playwright, and professional actor.

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