

# Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified

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That performance should reject its dependence on theater is certainly a sign that it is not only possible, but without a doubt also legitimate, to compare theater and performance, since no one ever insists upon his distance from something unless he is afraid of resembling it. I shall not attempt, therefore, to point out the similarities between theater and performance, but rather show how the two modes complement each other and stress what theater can learn from performance. Indeed, in its very stripped-down workings, its exploration of the body, and its joining of time and space, performance gives us a kind of theatricality in slow motion: the kind we find at work in today's theater. Performance explores the underside of that theater, giving the audience a glimpse of its inside, its reverse side, its hidden face.

Like performance, theater deals with the imaginary (in the Lacanian sense of the term). In other words, it makes use of a technique of constructing space, allowing subjects to settle there: first the construction of physical space, and then of psychological space. A strange parallel, modeling the shape of stage space on the subject's space and vice versa, can be traced between them. Thus, whenever an actor is expected to ingest the parts he plays so as to become one with them (here we might think of nineteenth-century theater, of naturalist theater, and of Sarah Bernhardt's first parts), the stage asserts its oneness and its totality. It is, and it is one, and the actor, as a unitary subject, belongs to its wholeness.

Closer to us, in experiences of present-day theater (experimental theater, alternative theater)-here we might think of the Living Theaters first experiments, or, more recently, of Bob Wilson's), the way theatrical space is constructed attempts to make tangible and apparent the whole play of the imaginary as it sets subjects (and not a subject) on stage. The processes whereby the theatrical phenomenon is constructed as well as the foundation of that phenomenon-an extensive play of doubling and permutation that is more or less obvious and more or less differentiated depending upon the specific director and aims-thus become apparent: the division between actor and character (a subject that Pirandello dealt with very well); the doubling of the actor (insofar as he survives after the death of the text) and the character; the doubling of the author and the director (cf. Ariane Mnouchkine); and lastly, the doubling of the director and the actor (cf. Schechner in *Clothes*). As a group, these permutations form different: projection spaces, representing different positions of desire by setting clown subjects in process.

Subjects in process: the subject constructed on stage projects himself into objects (characters in classical theater, part-objects in performance) which he can invent, multiply, and eliminate if need be. And these constructed objects, products of his imagination and of its different positions of desire, constitute so many "a"-objects for him to use or abuse according to the needs of his inner economy (as with the use of movie cameras or video screens in many performances). In the theater, these "a"-objects are frozen for the duration of the play. In performance, on the other hand, they move about and reveal an imaginary that has not been alienated in a figure of fixation like characters in the classical theater, or in any other fixed theatrical form. For it is indeed a question of the "subject," and not of characters, in today's theater (Foreman, Wilson) and in performance. Of course, the conventional basis of the actor's "art," inspired by Stanislavski, requires the actor to live his character from within and conceal the duplicity that inhabits him while he is on stage. Brecht rose up against this illusion when he called for a distancing of the actor from his part and a distancing of the spectator from the stage. When he is faced with this problem, the performer's response is original, since it seems to resolve the dilemma by completely renouncing character and putting the artist himself onstage. The artist takes the position of a desiring-a performing-subject, but is nonetheless an anonymous subject playing the part of himself on stage. From then on, since it tells of nothing and imitates no one, performance escapes all illusion and representation. With neither past nor future, performance takes place. It turns the stage into an event from which the subject will emerge transformed until another performance, when it can continue on its way. As long as performance rejects narrativity and representation in this way, it also rejects the symbolic organization dominating theater and exposes the conditions of theatricality as they are. Theatricality is made of this endless play and of these continuous displacements of the position of desire, in other words, of the position of the subject in process within an imaginary constructive space.

It is precisely when it comes to the position of the subject, that performance and theater would seem to be mutually exclusive and that theater would perhaps have something to learn from performance. Indeed, theater cannot do without the subject (a completely assumed subject), and the exercises to which Meyerhold and, later on, Grotowski subjected their students could only consolidate the position of the unitary subject onstage. Performance, however, although beginning with a perfectly assumed subject, brings emotional flows and symbolic objects into a destabilized zone—the body, space—into an infrasympbolic zone. These objects are only incidentally conveyed by a subject (here, the performer), and that subject lends himself only very superficially and partially to his own performance. Broken down into semiotic bundles and drives, he is a pure catalyst. He is what permits the appearance of what should appear. Indeed, he makes transition, movement, and displacement possible.

Performance, therefore, appears as a primary process lacking teleology and unaccompanied by any secondary process, since performance has nothing to represent for anyone. As a result, performance indicates the theater's margin (Schechner would say its "seam"), theater's fringes, something which is never said, but which, although hidden, is necessarily present. Performance demystifies the subject on stage: the subject's being is simultaneously exploded into part-objects and condensed in each of those objects, which have themselves become independent entities, each being simultaneously a margin and a center. Margin does not refer here to that which is excluded. On the contrary, it is used in the Derridian sense of the term to mean the frame, and consequently, what in the subject is most important, most hidden, most repressed, yet most active as well (Derrida would say the "Parergon"). In other words, it refers to the subject's entire store of non-theatricality. Performances can be seen, therefore, as a storehouse for the accessories of the symbolic, a depository of signifiers which are all outside of established discourse and behind the scenes of theatricality. The theater cannot call upon them as such, but, by implication, it is upon these accessories that theater is built.

In contrast to performance, theater cannot keep from setting up, stating, constructing, and giving points of view: the director's point of view, the author's toward the action, the actor's toward the stage, the spectator's toward the actor. There is a multiplicity of viewpoints and gazes, a "density of signs" (to quote Barthes) setting up a thetic multiplicity absent from performance.

Theatricality can therefore be seen as composed of two different parts: one highlights performance and is made up of the realities of the imaginary; and the other highlights the theatrical and is made up of specific symbolic structures. The former originates within the subject and allows his flows of desire to speak; the latter inscribes the subject in the law and in theatrical codes, which is to say, in the symbolic. Theatricality arises from the play between these two realities. From then on it is necessarily a theatricality tied to a desiring subject, a fact which no doubt accounts for our difficulty in defining it. Theatricality cannot be, it must be for someone. In other words, it is for the Other.

The multiplicity of simultaneous structures that can be seen at work in performance seems, in fact, to constitute an authorless, actorless, and directorless infratheatricality. Indeed, performance seems to be attempting to reveal and to stage something that took place before the representation of the subject (even if it does so by using an already constituted subject), in the same way that it is interested more in an action as it is being produced than in finished product. Now, what takes place on stage comprises flows, accumulations, and connections of signifiers that have been organized neither in a code (hence the multiplicity of media and signifying languages that performance makes use of).

bits of representation and narration and bits of meaning), not in structures permitting signification. Performance can therefore be seen as a machine working with serial signifiers: pieces of bodies (cf. the dismemberment and lesionism we have already discussed), as well as pieces of meaning, representation, and libidinal flows, bits of objects joined together in multipolar concatenations (cf. Acconci's Red Tapes and the fragmentary spaces he moves about in: bits of a building, bits of rooms, bits of walls, etc.). And all of this is without narrativity.

The absence of narrativity (continuous narrativity, that is) is one of the dominant characteristics of performance. If the performer should unwittingly give in to the temptation of narrativity, he does so never continuously or consistently, but rather ironically with a certain remove, as if he were quoting, or in order to reveal its inner workings. This absence leads to a certain frustration on the part of the spectator, when he is confronted with performance which takes him away from the experience of theatricality. For there is nothing to say about performance, nothing to tell yourself, nothing to grasp, project, introject, except for flows, networks, and systems. Everything appears and disappears like a galaxy of "transitional objects", representing only the failures of representation. To experience performance, one must simultaneously be there and take part in it, while continuing to be an outsider. Performance not only speaks to the mind, but also speaks to the senses (cf. Angela Ricci Lucchi's and Gianikian's experiments with smell), and it speaks from subject to subject. It attempts not to tell (like theater), but rather to provoke synaesthetic relationships between subjects. In this, it is similar to Wilson's *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* as described by Schechner in *Essays on Performance*.

Performance can therefore be seen as an art form whose primary aim is to undo "competencies" (which are primarily theatrical). Performance readjusts these competencies and redistributes them in a desystematized arrangement. We cannot avoid speaking of "deconstruction" here. We are not, however, dealing with a "linguistico-theoretical" gesture, but rather with a real gesture, a kind of deterritorialized gestuality. As such, performance poses a challenge to the theater and to any reflection that theater might make upon itself. Performance reorients such reflections by forcing them to open up and by compelling them to explore the margins of theater. For this reason, an excursion into performance has seemed not only interesting, but essential to our ultimate concern, which is to come back to the theater after a long detour behind the scenes of theatricality.

Translated by Terese Lyons.