

Between Theater and Anthropology

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Intensity of Performance

In all kinds of performances a certain definite threshold is crossed. And if it isn't, the performance fails. When I was directing The Performance Group (1967-80), bad reviews sometimes combined with bad weather and lack of advertising money so that very few people showed up at the theater. On several occasions the members of TPG debated just before a scheduled performance whether indeed the "show must go on." As a rule of thumb, we decided that if the performers outnumbered the audience we'd cancel. Because unless there were enough spectators to animate the theater - an environmental theater, mind you, wherein performers are aware of the audience, where space is shared and brought to life by the interaction between performers and spectators - the show itself would lack living yeast and fail to rise. No theater performance functions detached from its audience. Of course, theater and dance (whether aesthetic or ritual) that need audience participation are more dependent on the audience than events where the spectator's role is that of passive recipient. But even when apparently passive, as at a concert of classical music or a performance of Racine, a full house eager to see this performance, to attend the work of this particular artist, literally lifts a cast of players, propels, and sustains them.

Spectators are very aware of the moment when a performance takes off. A "presence" is manifest, something has "happened." The performers have touched or moved the audience, and some kind of collaboration, collective special theatrical life, is born. This intensity of performance - and I, personally, don't think the same kind of thing can happen in films or television, whose forte is to affect people individually but not to generate collective energies - has been called "flow" by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 35-36).

Performances gather their energies almost as if time and rhythm were concrete, physical, pliable things. Time and rhythm can be used in the same way as text, props, costumes, and the bodies of the performers and audience. A great performance modulates intervals of sound and silence, the increasing and decreasing density of events temporally, spatially, emotionally, and kinesthetically. These elements are woven into a complicated yet apparently inevitable (experienced as simple) pattern. This "flow" occurs even in performances that do not build to a climax the way a Pentecostal church service does or the way a performance of *Death of a Salesman* or *Macbeth* might. For example, the

whirling dervishes of Turkey, or the whirling postmodern dances of Laura Dean, or the excruciatingly slow movements, extruded over a period of hours, of Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance* or *Einstein on the Beach* each develop patterns of accumulating, if not accelerating, intensities. In fact, dancer Trisha Brown calls some of her most powerful works "accumulations." "The accumulation is an additive procedure where movement 1 is presented; start over. Movement 1; 2 is added and start over. 1, 2; 3 is added and start over, etc., until the dance ends" (1975, 29).

Performances like Dean's, Brown's, and the dervishes' do not rise to a climax; the accumulation-repetition lifts performers, and often spectators too, into ecstatic trance. In an accumulation, as in repetitious music such as Philip Glass's, the spectator's mind tunes in to subtle variations that would not be detectable in a structure where attention is directed to narrative or melodic development. Several times I've organized "all-night dances" to show the power of accumulation and repetition.

Understanding "intensity of performance" is finding out how a performance builds, accumulates, or uses monotony; how it draws participants in or intentionally shuts them out; how space is designed or managed; how the scenario or script is used-in short, a detailed examination of the whole performance text. Even more, it is an examination of the experiences and actions of all participants, from the director to the child sleeping in the audience.