

Theater

In the common definition, theater is seen as a particular genre within the broader spectre of human communication and interaction; a genre that has developed internal aesthetic codes and where action follows rules unique to the theater setting. Understood in this sense, activities on stage may be seen as governed by behavioral norms applied in a different manner than what is usually the case off stage, that is, in other areas of life. Traditions of classical drama that employ predefined scripts and fixed roles are illustrations of the kind of norm-boundness that prototypically govern action on stage.

However, other common characteristics of theater or theatrical activities are play, improvisation and subversive action. Despite the sometimes rigorous orchestration of action on stage, behavioral norms associated with arenas outside of the theater are not necessarily identical with those applied or reinforced on stage. Roles and institutions of everyday life tend to be challenged and shifted around within the defining frame of theater.

In all theatrical activity, there is thus a tension between a fixed and a fluid dimension. The fixed may be manifest as part of the components that constitute theater as an institution, and be seen as present in such resources as a given script, predefined roles and in the defining frame of the activity itself, that is, the stage or boundary of the theatrical setting. In more experimental or improvisational theater, the fixed dimension may be moved to the institutions or roles represented in a play, that is, the fixity is projected as an aspect of societal activities off stage. The fluidity is achieved as a result of experimenting with the above-mentioned resources. In the study of theater, the tension between structure and anti-structure, fixedness and fluidity, is explored.

Theater is perhaps the one human activity where we can see most clearly the mimetic quality of social interaction. To take an Other's perspective through the act of presenting or representing someone else, is an integral part of most forms of theatrical activities. This act allows for a perspective

different than the everyday to emerge. In the process, something familiar becomes, at least for a while, something strange. In this way, one or more aspects of the cultural setting of which the play is a part, is objectified. Thus, in this sense, play is inherently reflexive.

In a comparative perspective, cross-culturally and diachronically, how theater is defined, and what forms acting and interpretation may take, vary to a great extent. To illustrate, skits depicting socially significant events are part of most Tokelau (an atoll society in the South Pacific) gatherings. These skits function as a running political commentary, as entertainment, and as part of the local management of relationships. There is no strict boundary between the players and the audience: anyone present may be asked to participate, and the topic of a skit always draws on material familiar to those present. The typical way humor and satire is achieved is through role inversion—for example, in the case where the visiting anthropologist was cast in the role of a native. The person directing the skit asked me to "say some words in my own language," demonstrate some "native dances," and so on. And the whole community joined with great pleasure in the exposure of my unusual role in the everyday life of the village. In this and similar cases we may find that the defining characteristics of theatrical activities vary to a considerable extent from the prototypic classical definition referred to above. The distinction between players and audience may not be relevant, there may be no stage as such, improvisation may be the rule rather than the exception, and so on.

Theater and ritual are frequently described as having common roots. However, there are clear indications that theatrical and ritual activities tend to exist simultaneously in most societies, to some extent feeding into each other. The liminal quality and transformative aspect of theatrical and ritual performance has been stressed, and examined particularly in the tradition following Victor Turner. In the cases where theater and ritual exist in opposition, the distinction tend to be achieved through theatrical activities being linked with deception and immorality, and ritual activities being aligned with religious practice and ontological truth.

When studying the role of language in theater, or in examining how linguistic form may be affected by being used for theatrical purposes, both approach and results are highly dependent on what definitions of theater and language are adhered to. If theater is defined broadly as performance or as the performative aspect of human behavior in general (as Erving Goffman's work may serve as an illustration of), it becomes important to examine relations between genre(s) with an eye to the interplay between form and content, with the purpose of establishing what the significant interpretative frames informing this particular language game may be.

The characteristic of theatrical activities, that is, their constant shifting between fixedness and fluidity, makes it a case where the general challenge confronting theories of language is highlighted to a particular degree. To find models that allow us to describe this shifting quality without ending up in the blind alley of empirical particularism, we may have to abandon a conception of language that identifies it with grammatical or cognitive structure.

One way of doing so is through a perspective that focuses on processes of linguistic structuration. We need then to look at linguistic agency, that is, how causal connections come to be established and are represented grammatically. By this means we find keys to the ontology and lifeworld of the language game under study. The focus on linguistic agency crosscuts the further analysis of voice (who is speaking, to whom), content (what is said) and form (how it is said). We thus get a perspective that allows us to depict the interplay between the fixed (codes, norms, grammar) and the fluid existing in the processes of structuration and inscription.

To question who is speaking, to whom, on whose behalf, and with what kind of authority is to ask questions which bring us to the heart of playacting and which may allow us to reveal the hidden ontology that play carries the potential to expose. To pose such questions is to demonstrate the connection between theater and politics. The intimate relationship between any exegetical practice and the score it serves to interpret also holds true for linguistics and anthropology as areas of study. Theatrical activities make us realize that to read and interpret a script means to have the power to define our social world. In this way, theater serves to remind us of the arbitrary quality of all human institutions, including our conceptions of language and performance.

(See also *codes, dreams, gesture, grammar, humor, improvisation, participation, space, voice*)

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University of Oslo

Department of Linguistics

P.O.Box 1102 Blindern

N-0317 Oslo, Norway

ingjerd.hoem@ilf.uio.no

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