From Ritual to Theatre
The Human Seriousness of Play
Victor Turner
GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE PERFORMANCE STUDIES SERIES

What is a performance? A play? Dancers dancing? A concert? What you see on TV? Circus and Carnival? A press conference by whoever is President? The shooting of the Pope as portrayed by media—or the instant replays of Lee Harvey Oswald being shot? And do these events have anything to do with ritual, a week with Grotowski in the woods outside of Wroclaw, or a Topeng masked dance drama as performed in Pelitian, Bali? Performance is no longer easy to define or locate: the concept and structure has spread all over the place. It is ethnic and intercultural, historical and ahistorical, aesthetic and ritual, sociological and political. Performance is a mode of behavior, an approach to experience; it is play, sport, aesthetics, popular entertainments, experimental theatre, and more. But in order for this broad perspective to develop performance must be written about with precision and in full detail. The editors of this series have designed it as a forum for investigating what performance is, how it works, and what its place in post-modern society may be. Performance Studies is not properly theatrical, cinematic, anthropological, historical, or artistic—though any of the monographs in the Series incorporate one or more of these disciplines. Because we are fostering a new approach to the study of performance, we have kept the Series open-ended in order to incorporate new work. The Series, we hope, will measure the depth and breadth of the field—and its fertility: from circus to Mabou Mines, rodeo to healing rites, Black performance in South Africa to the Union City Passion Play. Performance Studies will be valuable for scholars in all areas of performance as well as for theatre workers who want to expand and deepen their notions of performance.

Brooks McNamara
Richard Schechner

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I've long thought that teaching and learning anthropology should be more fun than they often are. Perhaps we should not merely read and comment on ethnographies, but actually perform them. Alienated students spend many tedious hours in library carrels struggling with accounts of alien lives and even more alien anthropological theories about the ordering of those lives. Whereas anthropology should be about, in D.H. Lawrence's phrase, "man alive" and "woman alive," this living quality frequently fails to emerge from our pedagogics, perhaps, to cite Lawrence again, because our "analysis presupposes a corpse."

It is becoming increasingly recognized that the anthropological monograph is itself a rather rigid literary genre which grew out of the notion that in the human sciences reports must be modeled rather abstractly on those of the natural sciences. But such a genre has no privileged position, especially now that we realize that in social life cognitive, affective, and volitional elements are bound up with one another and are alike primary, seldom found in their pure form, often hybridized, and only comprehensible by the investigator as lived experience, his/hers as well as, and in relation to, theirs.

Even the best of ethnographic films fail to communicate much of what it
means to be a member of the society filmed. A selected, often slanted, series of visual images is directed at a passive audience. Discussion in the classroom then centers on the items picked out for attention by the film maker. Though a good teacher will plausibly relate the movie to ethnographic contexts drawn from the literature, much of the sociocultural and psychological complexity of those contexts cannot be related to the film. Anthropological monographs and movies may describe or present the incentives to action characteristic of a given group, but only rarely will these genres catch up their readers or spectators fully into the culture's motivational web.

How, then, may this be done? One possibility may be to turn the more interesting portions of ethnographies into playscripts, then to act them out in class, and finally to turn back to ethnographies armed with the understanding that comes from “getting inside the skin” of members of other cultures, rather than merely “taking the role of the other” in one’s own culture. A whole new set of problems is generated by this apparently simple process. For each of its three stages (ethnography into playscript, script into performance, performance into meta-ethnography) reveals many of the frailties of anthropology, that essentially Western traditional discipline. And the process forces us to look beyond purely anthropological accounts—to literature, history, biography, incidents of travel—for data that may contribute to convincing playscripts. Where social dramas do find their cultural “doubles” (to reverse Antonin Artaud) in aesthetic dramas and other genres of cultural performance, there may well develop, as Richard Schechner has argued, a convergence between them, so that the processual form of social dramas is implicit in aesthetic dramas (even if only by reversal or negation), while the rhetoric of social dramas—and hence the shape of argument—is drawn from cultural performances. There was a lot of Perry Mason in Watergate!

The “playing” of ethnography is a genuinely interdisciplinary enterprise, for if we are to satisfy ourselves of the reliability of our script and our performance of it, we will need advice from various nonanthropological sources. Professionals in the field of drama in our own culture—script-writers, directors, actors, even stagehands—draw on centuries of professional experience in performing plays. Ideally, we need to consult, better still, bring in as part of the cast, members of the culture being enacted. We may, sometimes, be lucky enough to enlist the aid of theatrical or folk professionals from the society we are studying. But, in any case, those who know the business from the inside can help enormously.

I was given an opportunity to test these speculations in practice when, with fellow social scientists Alexander Alland and Erving Goffman, I was invited by Richard Schechner to take part in what was called “an intensive workshop” to “explore the interface between ritual and the theatre... between social and aesthetic drama,” and other limina between the social sciences and performing arts. I had often thought about the relationship between processual forms of social conflict in many societies, described by anthropologists and genres of cultural performance. Several years earlier, mutual friends had made me aware of Schechner’s interest in the same problem from the viewpoint of theatre. The collaboration of Colin Turnbull (The Mountain People, 1972) and Peter Brook which converted Turnbull’s study of the Ik of Uganda into a series of dramatic episodes alerted me to the possibility of turning suitable ethnographic data into playscripts. That experiment persuaded me that cooperation between anthropological and theatrical people was not only possible but also could become a major teaching tool for both sets of partners in a world many of whose components are beginning to want to know one another. If it is true that we learn something about ourselves from taking the role of others, anthropologists, those cultural brokers par excellence, might be challenged to make this an intercultural as well as an intracultural enterprise.

Though many social scientists drown on the terms performance and drama, they seem to be central. Performance, as we have seen, is derived from the Middle English parfournen, later parfournen, which is itself from the Old French parfournir—par (“thoroughly”) plus fournir (“to furnish”)—hence performance does not necessarily have the structuralist implication of manifesting form, but rather the processual sense of “bringing to completion” or “accomplishing.” To perform is thus to complete a more or less involved process rather than to do a single deed or act. To perform ethnography, then, is to bring the data home to us in their fullness, in the plenitude of their action-meaning. Cognitive reductionism has always struck me as a kind of dehydration of social life. Surely, the patterns can be elicited, but the wishes and emotions, the personal and collective goals and strategies, even the situational vulnerabilities, weariness, and mistakes are lost in the attempt to objectify and produce an aseptic theory of human behavior modeled essentially on eighteenth century “scientific” axioms of belief about mechanical causality. Feelings and desires are not a pollution of cognitive pure essence, but close to what we humanly are; if anthropology is to become a true science of human action, it must take them just as seriously as the structures which sometimes perhaps represent the exhausted husks of action bled of its motivations.

The term drama has been criticized (by Max Gluckman and Raymond Firth, for example) as the imposition on observational data of a schema derived from cultural genres, hence “loaded” and not “neutral” enough for scientific use (Gluckman, 1977:227-43; Firth, 1974:1-2). I have to disagree, for my notebooks are filled with descriptions of day-to-day events which, added together, undeniably possess dramatic form, representing a course of action. Let me try to describe what I mean by drama, specifically social drama. (For a fuller account of my theory of the social drama see my
Schism and Continuity in an African Society, 1957, and Chapter Three above.)

I hold that the social drama form occurs on all levels of social organization from state to family. A social drama is initiated when the peaceful tenor of regular, norm-governed social life is interrupted by the breach of a rule controlling one of its salient relationships. This leads swiftly or slowly to a state of crisis, which, if not soon sealed off, may split the community into contending factions and coalitions. To prevent this, redressive means are taken by those who consider themselves or are considered the most legitimate or authoritative representatives of the relevant community. Redress usually involves ritualized action, whether legal (in formal or informal courts), religious (involving beliefs in the retributive action of powerful supernatural entities, and often involving an act of sacrifice), or military (for example, feuding, headhunting, or engaging in organized warfare). If the situation does not regress to crisis (which may remain endemic until some radical restructuring of social relationships, sometimes by revolutionary means, is undertaken), the next phase of social drama comes into play, which involves alternative solutions to the problem. The first is reconciliation of the conflicting parties following judicial, ritual, or military processes; the second, consensual recognition of irreparable breach, usually followed by the spatial separation of the parties. Since social dramas suspend normal everyday role playing, they interrupt the flow of social life and force a group to take cognizance of its own behavior in relation to its own values, even to question at times the value of those values. In other words, dramas induce and contain reflexive processes and generate cultural frames in which reflexivity can find a legitimate place.

With this processual form as a rough guide for our work at Schechner's summer institute, I tried to involve anthropology and drama students in the joint task of writing scripts for and performing ethnographies. It seemed best to choose parts of classical ethnographies that lent themselves to dramatic treatment, such as Malinowski's Crime and Custom, with its young man threatening suicide from a treetop when his father's matrilineal kin urged him to leave their village on his father's death (Crime and Custom, 1926: p. 78). But time being short (we had only two weeks), I had to fall back upon my own ethnography both because I knew it best, and because I had already, to some extent, written a script for a substantial amount of field data in the form I have called social drama. My wife, Edie, and I tried to explain to a group of about a dozen students and teachers, almost equally divided between anthropology and drama, what cultural assumptions lay behind the first two social dramas that I described in my book Schism and Continuity in An African Society (pp. 95, 116). It was not enough to give them a few cognitive models or structural principles. We had to try to create the illusion of what it is to live Ndembu village life. Could this possibly be done with a few bold strokes, with a gesture or two? Of course not, but there may be ways of getting people bodily as well as mentally involved in another (not physically present) culture.

The setting for all this was an upper room in the Performing Garage, a theatre in Soho where Schechner's company, The Performance Group, has given some notable performances, including Dionysus in 69, Maketh, Mother Courage, and, more recently, the Tooth of Crime and Rumstick Road (directed by Elizabeth LeCompte). I knew that Schechner set great store on what he calls the "rehearsal process," which essentially consists of establishing a dynamic relationship, over whatever time it takes, among playtext, actors, director, stage, and props, with no initial assumptions about the primacy of any of these. Sessions often have no time limit; in some, exercises of various kinds, including breathing exercises to loosen up actors, may go on for an hour or so; in others, players may cast themselves rather than be cast by the director. In this complex process, Schechner sees the actor, in taking the role of another—provided by a playtext—as moving, under the intuitive and experienced eye of the director/producer, from the "not-me" (the blueprinted role) to the "not-not-me" (the realized role), and he sees the movement itself as constituting a kind of liminal phase in which all kinds of experiential experiments are possible, indeed mandatory. This is a different style of acting from that which relies on superb professional technique to imitate almost any Western role with verisimilitude. Schechner aims at poiesis, rather than mimesis: making, not faking. The role grows along with the actor, it is truly "created" through the rehearsal process which may sometimes involve painful moments of self-revelation. Such a method is particularly appropriate for anthropological teaching because the "mimetic" method will work only on familiar material (Western models of behavior), whereas the "poietic," since it recreates behavior from within, can handle unfamiliar material.

In an experimental session convoked by Schechner to rehearse Ibsen's Doll House, for example, we came up with four Noras, one of whom actually made a choice contrary to Ibsen's script. It happened that in her personal life she herself was being confronted with a dilemma similar to Nora's: should she separate from her husband, leave her two children with him (he wanted this), and embark upon an independent career? In reliving her own problem through enacting Nora's, she began to wring her hands in a peculiarly poignant, slow, complex way. Eventually, instead of detonating the famous door slam that some critics say ushered in modern theatre, she rushed back to the group, signifying that she was not ready—at least not yet—to give up her children, thus throwing unexpected light on the ethical toughness of Ibsen's Nora. Schechner said that the hand-wringer was "the bit of reality" he would preserve from that particular rehearsal and embody in the Nora-role in subsequent rehearsals. As these succeeded one another, a bricoleage of such gestures, incidents, renderings of not-self into not-not-self would be put together and molded artistically into a processual
unity. Depth, reflexivity, a haunting ambiguity may thus be infused into a series of performances, each a unique event.

 Particularly since I had no skill or experience in direction, the task of communicating to the actors the setting and atmosphere of daily life in a very different culture proved quite formidable. In one's own society an actor tries to realize "individual character," but takes partly for granted the culturally defined roles supposedly played by that character: father, businessman, friend, lover, fiancé, trade union leader, farmer, poet, and so on. These roles are made up of collective representations shared by actors and audience, who are usually members of the same culture. By contrast, an actor who enacts ethnography has to learn the cultural rules behind the roles played by the character he is representing. How is this to be done? Not, I think, by reading monographs in abstraction from performance, then performing the part. There must be a dialectic between performing and learning. One learns through performing, then performs the understandings so gained.

 I decided *faute de mieux* to give a reading performance myself of the first two social dramas, interpolating explanatory comments whenever it seemed necessary. The group had already read the relevant pages from *Schism and Continuity*. The dramas were broadly about Ndembu village politics, competition for headmanship, ambition, jealousy, sorcery, the recruiting of factions, and the stigmatizing of rivals, particularly as these operated within a local group of matrilineally related kin and some of their relations by marriage and neighbors. I had collected a number of accounts of these dramas from participants in them. My family and I had lived in the village that was their "stage" or "arena" for at least fifteen months and knew it well during the whole period of my field work—almost two-and-a-half years.

 When I had finished reading the drama accounts, the actors in the workshop told me at once that they needed to be "put in the right mood"; to "sense the atmospherics" of Ndembu village life. One of them had brought some records of Yoruba music, and, though this is a different musical idiom from Central African music, I led them into a dancing circle, showing them to the best of my limited, arthritic ability, some of the moves of Ndembu dancing. This was fun, but off-center fun. It then occurred to us that we might recreate with the limited props available to us in the theatre the key repressive ritual which was performed in the second social drama, and whose form we knew very well from having taken part in it on several occasions. This ritual, "name inheritance" (*Kuswanika ijina*), was an emotional event, for it marked the temporary end of a power struggle between the stigmatized candidate for headmanship, Sandombu, and Mukanza, the successful candidate, and his immediate matrilineal kin. Sandombu had been driven by public pressure from the village for a year, for it was alleged that he had killed by sorcery Nyamuwaha, a cousin on his mother's side whom he called "mother," a much loved old lady, sister of Mukanza. Sandombu had shed tears on being accused (even his former foes admitted this), but he had been in exile for a year. As time went by, members of the village remembered how, as a foreman, he had helped them find paid labor in the public works department road gang, and how he had always been generous with food and beer to guests. The pretext to invite him back came when a minor epidemic of illness broke out in the village while at the same time many people dreamed frequently of Nyamuwaha. Divination found that her shade was disturbed by the troubles in the village. To appease her, a quickset sapling of *mayomvu* tree, a species for memorializing the lineage dead, was to be planted for her. Sandombu was invited to do the ritual planting. He also paid the village a goat in compensation for his angry behavior the previous year. The ritual marked his reincorporation into the village, even though formally it had to do with the inheritance of Nyamuwaha's name by her oldest daughter, Manyosa (who afterwards became my wife's best friend in the village).

 Stirred by the dancing and recorded drumming, I was moved to try to recreate the name-inheritance rite in Soho. For the *mayomvu* tree, I found as substitute a brush handle. For ritual "white" beer as libation, a cup of water would have to do. There was no white clay to anoint people with, but I found some clear white salt, which I moistened. And to pare the top of the brush handle, as Ndembu shrine trees are pruned to reveal the white wood under the bark (an operation symbolically related to the purification that is circumcision), I found a sharp kitchen knife. Afterwards, I was told by one of the group that she was terrified that I would do something "grisly" with it. But truly there is often some element of risk or danger in the atmosphere of living ritual. And something numinous.

 To translate this very specific Ndembu rite into modern American terms, I took the role of the new village headman, and with my wife's help prepared the surrogate *mayomvu* shrine-tree with knife and salt, and "planted" it in a crack in the floor. The next move was to persuade someone to play Manyosa's role in this situation. Someone whom we shall call Becky, a professional director of drama, volunteered.

 I asked Becky to give me the name of a recently deceased close female relative of an older generation who had meant much in her life. Considerably moved, she mentioned her mother's sister Ruth. I then prayed in Chilunda to "village ancestors." Becky sat beside me before the "shrine," her legs extended in front of her, her head bowed in the Ndembu position of ritual modesty. I then anointed the shrine-tree with the improvised *mpemba*, white clay, symbol of unity with the ancestors and the living community, and drew three lines with it on the ground, from the shrine to myself. I then anointed Becky by the orbits of her eyes, on the brow, and above the navel. I declared her to be "Nswana-Ruth," "successor of Ruth," in a way identified with Ruth, in another replacing her, though not
In the following days, the group began work on the actual staging of the ritual dramas. One suggestion favored a dualistic approach: some events (for example, when Sandombu, the ambitious claimant, having killed an antelope, gave only a small portion of meat to his mother’s brother, the headman) would be treated realistically, naturally; but the world of cultural beliefs, particularly those connected with sorcery and the ancestor cult, would be treated symbolically. For example, it was widely believed, not only by Sandombu’s village opponents but also in Ndembu society at large, that Sandombu had killed the headman by paying a powerful sorcerer to summon up from a stream a familiar spirit in the shape of a human-faced serpent, owned by (and also owning) the headman, and by shooting it with his ‘night-gun,’ a musket carved from a human tibia and primed with graveyard earth. Such snake-familars, or malomba, are thought to have the faces of their owners and to creep about the village at night invisibly, listening, in wiretap fashion, to derogatory remarks made about their owners by rivals. They grow by eating their shadows, or life-principles, of their owners’ foes, who are usually their owners’ kin. They function as a kind of Frazerian “external soul,” but when they are destroyed by magical means, such as the night-gun, their owners are destroyed too. Chiefs and headmen have “strong malomba,” and it takes strong medicine to kill them.

Our class suggested that Sandombu’s ilomba familiar (that is, his quasi-paranoid underside) should be presented as a kind of chorus to the play. Being privy to the political plotting in the situation, the ilomba could tell the audience (in the manner of Shakespeare’s Richard the Third) what was going on under the surface of kinship-norm-governed relationships in the village. One suggestion was that we make a film, to be shown in the background, of an ilomba cynically disclosing the “real” structure of political power relationships, as known to him, while the dramatis personae of the social drama, on stage and in the foreground, behaved with formal restraint towards one another, with an occasional outburst of authentic hostile feeling.

During the discussion, a graduate student in anthropology gave the drama students in the group some cogent instruction in the nature of matrilineal kinship systems and problems, and, later, in the Ndembu system which combined matrilineal descent with virilocal marriage (residence at the husband’s village), and asserted the dominance of succession of brothers to office over the succession of the sister’s son—one of the causes of dispute in Mukanza village where the dramas were set. This invocation of cognitive models proved helpful, but only because the nonanthropologists had been stimulated to want to know them by the enactment of some Ndembu ritual and the witnessing of the dramatic narrative of political struggle in a matrilineal social context.

To give a more personal idea of the values associated by the Ndembu with matrilineal descent, my wife read to the women of the whole class a piece she had written about the girls’ puberty ritual of the Ndembu. I had described this ritual somewhat dryly in the conventional anthropological mode in my book The Drums of Affliction (1968: chaps. VII-VIII). Her account, however, grew from participation in an intersubjective world of women involved in this complex ritual sequence, and communicated vividly the feelings and wishes of women in this rite de passage in a matrilineal society. Trying to capture the affective dimension the reading revealed, the women in the drama section of the workshop attempted a new technique of staging. They began a rehearsal with a ballet, in which women created a kind of frame with their bodies, positioning themselves to form a circle, in which the subsequent male political action could take place. Their idea was to show that action went on within a matrilineal sociocultural space.

Somehow this device didn’t work—there was a covert contemporary political tinge in it which denatured the Ndembu sociocultural process. This feminist mode of staging ethnography assumed and enacted modern ideological notions in a situation in which those ideas are simply irrelevant. The Ndembu struggles were dominated by individual clashes of will and personal and collective emotional responses concerned with assumed or alleged breaches of entitlement. What was dominant was not the general matrilineal structures of inheritance, succession, and social placement in lineages but rather will, ambition, and political goals. The matrilineal structures influenced the tactics used by contestants overwhelmed by their will to obtain temporal power, but politics was mainly in the hands of
males. A script should thus focus on power-struggling rather than matrilineal assumptions if it is to stay true to the ethnography. But perhaps the ethnography itself should be put in question? This was one view some of our female class members raised. And, indeed, such a question is legitimate when one opens ethnographies out to the performative process. Does a male ethnographer, like myself, really understand or take into full analytical account the nature of matrilineal structure and its embodiment, not only in women but also in men, as a powerful factor in all their actions—political, legal, kinship, ritual, economic?

Nevertheless, the fact remained that political office, even in this matrilineal society, was largely a male affair, if not a male monopoly. Hence, the attempt to bring into the foreground the female framing of Ndembu society diverted attention from the fact that these particular dramas were essentially male political struggles—even though conducted in terms of matrilineal descent. The real tragedy of Sandombu was not that he was embedded in a matrilineal structure (whether matrilineal, patrilineal, or bilateral) which played down individual political gifts and played up advantages derived from positions assigned by birth. In capitalistic America, or socialist Russia or China, a political animal like Sandombu might have thrived. In Ndembu village politics, however, a person with ambition, but procreatively sterile and without many matrilineal kin, was almost from the start a doomed man.

The trouble was that time ran out before the group had a chance to portray Sandombu’s situation. But all of us, in anthropology and drama, now had a problem to think about. How could we turn ethnography into script, then enact that script, then think about, then go back to fuller ethnography, then make a new script, then act it again? This interpretive circulation between data, praxis, theory, and more data—a kind of hermeneutical Catherine wheel, if you like—provides a merciless critique of ethnography. There is nothing like acting the part of a member of another culture in a crisis situation characteristic of that culture to detect inauthenticity in the reporting usually made by Westerners and to raise problems undiscussed or unresolved in the ethnographic narrative. However, this very deficiency may have pedagogical merit insofar as it motivates the student/actor to read more widely in the literature on the culture.

It is hard, furthermore, to separate aesthetic and performative problems from anthropological interpretations. The most incisively or plainly reported extended case histories contained in ethnographies still have to be further distilled and abbreviated for the purposes of performance. To do this tellingly and effectively, sound knowledge of the salient sociocultural contexts must combine with presentational skills to produce an effective playscript, one which effectively portrays both individual psychology and social process articulated in terms of the models provided by a particular culture. One advantage of scripting ethnography in this way is that it draws attention to cultural subsystems, such as that constituted by witchcraft/divination/performance of redressive ritual, in a dramatic way. The workshop group’s suggestion that a film or ballet should be performed in the background of the naturalistic drama portraying the ilombe and other creatures of witchcraft (masks and masquerading could be employed) might be an effective device for revealing the hidden, perhaps even unconscious levels of action. It would also act as a vivid set of footnotes on the cultural assumptions of the Ndembu dramatis personae.

Our experience of the theatre workshop suggested a number of guidelines for how collaboration between anthropologists and practitioners of drama and dance, at whatever stage of training, might be undertaken. First of all, anthropologists might present to their drama colleagues a series of ethnographic texts selected for their performative potential. The processed ethnertext would then be transformed into a workable preliminary playscript. Here the know-how of theatre people—their sense of dialogue, understanding of setting and props; ear for a telling, revelatory phrase—could combine with the anthropologist’s understanding of cultural meanings, indigenous rhetoric, and material culture. The playscript, of course, would be subject to continuous modification during the rehearsal process, which would lead up to an actual performance. At this stage, we would need an experienced director, preferably one familiar with anthropology and with non-Western theatre (like Schechner or Peter Brook), and certainly familiar with the social structure and the rules and themes underlying the surface structures of the culture being enacted. There would be a constant back-and-forth movement from anthropological analysis of the ethnography, which provides the details for enactment, to the synthesizing and integrating activity of dramatic composition, which would include sequencing scenes, relating the words and actions of the characters to previous and future events, and rendering actions in appropriate stage settings. For in this kind of ethnographic drama, it is not only the individual characters who have dramatic importance but also the deep processes of social life. From the anthropological viewpoint, there is drama indeed in the working out and mutual confrontation of sociocultural processes. Sometimes, even, the actors on the stage almost seem puppets on plotless strings.

Students of anthropology could also help drama students during rehearsal itself, if not by direct participation, at least in the role of Dramaturg, a position founded by Lessing in eighteenth-century Germany and defined by Richard Hornby as “simply a literary advisor to the theater director” (Script into Performance, 1977:63). Hornby and Schechner envision the Dramaturg as a sort of structuralist literary critic who carries on his research through a production rather than merely in his study (pp. 197-199). But the anthropological Dramaturg or Ethnodramatour is not so much concerned with the structure of the playscript (itself a definite move from ethnography to
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literature) as with the fidelity of that script to both the described facts and the anthropological analysis of the structures and processes of the group. Incidentally, I am not calling for a mandatory exclusion of anthropologists from the acting role! Indeed, I think that participation in this role would significantly enhance anthropologists' "scientific" understanding of the culture being studied in this dynamic fashion, for human science is concerned, as we have said, with "man alive." But I am aware of the evasiveness and voyeurism of my kind—which we rationalize as "objectivity." Perhaps we need a little more of the disciplined abandonment that theatre demands! However, as second best, we can settle for the role of Ethnodramaturg.

The movement from ethnography to performance is a process of pragmatic reflexivity. Not the reflexivity of a narcissistic isolate moving among his or her memories and dreams, but the attempt of representatives of one generic modality of human existence, the Western historical experience, to understand "on the pulses," in Keatsian metaphor, other modes hitherto locked away from it by cognitive chauvinism or cultural snobbery.

Historically, ethnodramatics is emerging just when knowledge is being increased about other cultures, other world views, other life styles; when Westerners, endeavoring to trap non-Western philosophies, dramatics, and poetics in the corrals of their own cognitive constructions, find that they have caught sublime monsters, Eastern dragons who are lords of fructile chaos, whose wisdom makes our cognitive knowledge look somehow shrunken, shabby, and inadequate to our new apprehension of the human condition.

Cartesian dualism has insisted on separating subject from object, us from them. It has, indeed, made voyeurs of Western man, exaggerating sight by macro- and micro-instrumentation, the better to learn the structures of the world with an "eye" to its exploitation. The deep bonds between body and mentality, unconscious and conscious thinking, species and self have been treated without respect, as though irrelevant for analytical purposes.

The reflexivity of performance dissolves these bonds and so creatively democratizes: as we become on earth a single noosphere, the Platonic cleavage between an aristocracy of the spirit and the "lower or foreign orders" can no longer be maintained. To be reflexive is to be at once one's own subject and direct object. The poet, whom Plato rejected from his Republic, subjectivizes the object, or, better, makes intersubjectivity the characteristically postmodern human mode.

It is perhaps perfectly natural that an anthropology of performance should be moving to meet dramatic performers who are seeking some of their theoretical support from anthropology. With the renewed emphasis on society as a process punctuated by performances of various kinds, there has developed the view that such genres as ritual, ceremony, carnival, festival, game, spectacle, parade, and sports event may constitute, on various levels and in various verbal and nonverbal codes, a set of intersecting metalanguages. The group or community does not merely "flow" in unison at these performances, but, more actively, tries to understand itself in order to change itself. This dialectic between "flow" and reflexivity characterizes performative genres: a successful performance in any of the genres transcends the opposition between spontaneous and self-conscious patterns of action.

If anthropologists are ever to take ethnodramatics seriously, our discipline will have to become something more than a cognitive game played in our heads and inscribed in—let's face it—somewhat tedious journals. We will have to become performers ourselves, and bring to human, existential fulfillment what have hitherto been only mentalistic protocols. We must find ways of overcoming the boundaries of both political and cognitive structures by dramatic empathy, sympathy, friendship, even love as we acquire ever deeper structural knowledge in reciprocity with the increasingly self-aware ethnos, barbaroi, goyim, heathens, and marginals in pursuit of common tasks and rare imaginative transcendences of those tasks.

References


