IMPOSSIBILITIES AND POSSIBILITIES: THE CHALLENGES OF DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: Surely, performance is a mode of behaviour that characterizes any activity. Yet, placing performance within the broad perspectives of Intercultural Theatre and Sociosemiotics, the proposed paper focuses on theatre and on live performance in order to attempt a reflection on theoretical and procedural provisos and potentials of dramatic performance analysis. With an additional focus on and foregrounding the conceptual "contestedness" of performance, as well as chronicling definitions of performance and dramatic performance analysis, and challenging the received distinction between the notions of performance analysis and historical reconstruction, I argue that these two processes engage in reconstruction, since any live performance is evanescent, and that, strictly speaking, analytical procedures and constraints equally apply and are equally mediated by the analyst.

KEYWORDS: Performance; Performance analysis

RESUMO: Decerto, *performance* configura um comportamento que caracteriza qualquer atividade. No entanto, situando *performance* sob as perspectivas do Teatro Intercultural e da Sócio-semiótica, o presente ensaio focaliza o teatro e a *performance* ao vivo, na tentativa de refletir acerca de limitações e potencialidades da análise da *performance* dramática. Focalizando, também, e topicalizando, o conceito da "controvérsia" em torno da noção de *performance*, além de alinhar definições de *performance* e de análise de *performance* dramática, e, ainda, questionar a distinção geralmente aceita entre as noções de análise da *performance* e reconstrução histórica, o autor argumenta que ambos os processos envolvem reconstrução, visto que toda *performance* ao vivo é evanescente e, a rigor, procedimentos analíticos e suas limitações aplicam-se em ambos os casos, e são igualmente mediados pelo crítico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Performance; Análise de espetáculos dramáticos

Introduction

Attempting to understand and analyse performance is no easy matter. As early as the second paragraph of his *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (1996) Marvin Carlson draws on Strine, Long, and Hopkins, who had previously referred to performance as "an essentially contested concept" (p. 1). Richard Schechner, also as early as the second paragraph of his *Performance Theory* (1994), announces the inclusiveness of the term, and reminds us that, as regards the wide applications of the notion of performance, theatre is

> only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life—greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on—through to play, sports, theatre, dance, ceremonies, rites […]. (xiii)

And although performance analysis (or criticism) has often been geared toward cinema, various audiovisual media, as well as dance, and mime, in this essay I focus on theatre and on live performance in order to assess theoretical and procedural provisos and potentials of the critical analysis of enacted drama.

An initial clarification seems appropriate: performance analysis is an *interpretive* discipline, echoing the way in which Clifford Geertz and James Clifford refer to their work. Geertz, for instance, describes his concept of culture as

> a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber that man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of [culture] to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (1973: 5)

Likewise, the analysis of performance is not an experimental science in search of empirical demonstration, but an interpretive intellectual exercise, in search of construction

of meaning. This non-scientific stance entails, in turn, important leeway in terms of analytical procedures—which I shall get back to.

And an initial adjustment seems helpful: performance analysis has been conceptually distinguished from historical reconstruction, the former allegedly requesting the presence of the analyst, whereas in the latter the investigation is said to depend on reconstruction, based on documentation and accounts (PAVIS, 2003: 2-3). I grant that when experiencing the performance first-hand, the analyst can write about the performance itself, whereas a performance that has not been experienced can only elicit the analysis of the performance records. However, I argue that both processes engage in reconstruction, since any live performance, whether you saw it last night or it happened in Elizabethan England, vanishes; therefore, whether or not having witnessed the performance, the analyst engages in and mediates the critical reconstruction, and the analytical procedures and constraints of the practice equally apply to seen and unseen productions.

The theoretical field of performance analysis is as vast as it is complex. Jane Milling and Graham Ley have argued that the "developing discourse of theorized performance might include semiotics, theatre anthropology and interculturalism, and feminist or sexual politics or identity politics" (2001: 174). Foregrounding context, conception, and reception, the theoretical stance adopted here is one that seeks to move beyond a fragmented vision of performance as fixed signs. Therefore, if pressed, I will place this essay within the scopes of performance theory and sociosemiotics, the latter defined by Patrice Pavis as a semiology "attentive to [. . .] ways in which signs are anchored and constituted in a social, economic, and cultural context" and concerned about a spectator involved in the construction of meanings (2003: 27).

Prior to considering more closely the impossibilities and possibilities of dramatic performance analysis, it pays to contextualize the practice, however briefly. Surely, performance analysis does not start with structuralism and semiology, since any spectator

ever commenting on a performance engages in analysis. But the Western tradition of dramaturgical analysis seems to go back to Diderot and Lessing. Brecht drew on a tradition long established in Germany, that of the *Dramaturg*, the director's literary and theatrical advisor, now called dramaturge, or dramaturgist. In France, critical theorists such as Roland Barthes and Bernard Dort, whose analyses stem from a production's ideological and aesthetic mechanisms, practiced dramaturgical analysis. At the risk of eliding other important names, one can say that, among an array of recent theorists, Raymond Williams, Patrice Pavis, Steven Connor, Richard Schechner, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Marvin Carlson have made concrete contributions to the field of Performance Studies.

But what are the objectives of dramatic performance analysis? If, given the ephemerality of live performance, at the moment of the analysis we can no longer experience the production, we must settle for a mediated and abstract relationship with the analysed object and seek to restore some of its main principles and effects, not ever the event itself. Such a relationship prevents "objective" evaluation; at best, it permits some understanding of processes that allow (or not) the realization of certain thematic, aesthetic, and ideological concerns and of their impact (or not) on a given audience. With acumen, Pavis concludes that, once the principles, possibilities (and I would add, the impossibilities) of performance analysis are clearly established, "the performance text becomes an object of knowledge, a theoretical object substituted for the empirical object the performance itself once was" (2003: 11).

And before looking at specific provisos and potentials, working definitions of performance can be useful. First of all, the already mentioned complexity of the phenomenon makes it an extremely difficult concept to define, and the term can be encountered in a variety of contexts that often seem to share little if any semantic ground. Establishing "performance" as "an all-inclusive term" (1994: xiii), Schechner defines the broad field of performance theory as fundamentally "interdisciplinary and intercultural"

(1994: xv). Carlson introduces the aforementioned book on Performance Theory by posing the question "What is performance?", the answer to which is anything but straightforward. Recognising the complexity and the basic "contestedness of performance" (1996: 2), Carlson attempts to offer an overview, identify major approaches, and sample important manifestations in the field (1996: 2).

Part of the trouble is that, in a sense, performance is a mode of behaviour that may characterise *any* activity. In fact, as Connor reminds us, "to perform is to *do* something, to execute or carry out an action" (1996: 107). Focusing on the performative dimension of ordinary behaviour, the way individuals adopt or enact personae as a means of negotiating interpersonal situations, Erving Goffman arrives at his useful and well-known principle of the "frame": the perceptual mechanism by which actions are recognised as other than functional, or literal–i.e., as "play". In other words, signalising an activity as play or, for our purpose, as performance, or viewing it as such, makes it a performance. More narrowly, for Schechner, "a performance is an activity done by an individual or group in the presence of and for another individual or group" (1994: 30). And Carlson, obviously here disregarding mediatised and animal performance, defines performing arts as requiring "the physical presence of trained or skilled human beings whose demonstration of their skills is the performance" (1996: 3). Applying the term to the theatre, and granting that stage-centered criticism lends itself to various interpretations, Dennis Kennedy proposes that "in general usage the term 'performance criticism' refers to commentary about aspects of performance that sheds light on the meaning of the plays" (2001: 7). Most importantly, performance is to be viewed as distinct from the words of a play, to encompass a far more comprehensive system of signifiers, which Marco de Marinis has called "performance text"

or “spectacle text” (1993: 57).[1] The plethora of definitions no doubt suggest the complexity of the phenomenon.

Impossibilities (provisos)

If defining performance and performance criticism is such a challenging task, it is paramount that the provisos of performance analysis be identified and understood. Pavis has imaged performance analysis as a "minefield", combining contradictory theories and methodological suspicions, and also as a "fallow field" that has so far failed to develop a satisfactory method of application (2003: 1). In fact, as Kennedy aptly notes, the very expression “performance criticism” signals to a difficulty, for it suggests a “cohesive enterprise (criticism) about a unitary cultural activity (performance) and neither of these notions will withstand much scrutiny” (2001: 7).

To be sure, the catalogue of difficulties is extensive. A crucial snag in analysing live performance is, of course, the ephemeral, instantaneous, singular, and unrepeatable nature of each performance. And a pragmatic approach to performance analysis becomes difficult because there are no fixed rules to determine whether a production has been "adequately" described and understood. In addition to the multiplicity of methods and points of view verified in analyses, there is the extreme diversity of contemporary performance. And the facts that each component of performance deserves to be examined both in itself and in relation to others and that each requires its own investigative tools render "a general theory of *mise-en-scène* highly improbable" (PAVIS, "Introduction" 3).[2]

[1] The concept of “performance text” is developed by Marco De Marinis, in *The Semiotics of Performance*, notably in Chapter 2. See References.

[2] I have given preference to the term "performance", over mise-en-scène, because Pavis himself states that "[i]n reality, mise-en-scène is understood as *performance* (in the English sense of the term): the arts of the stage, the media, rituals, and ceremonies, *cultural performances* of all kinds" (2003: 258, italics in original).

Because of such difficulties, critical pitfalls surround the practice of dramatic performance analysis, especially sterile, illusory parameters such as "authenticity" and "essence". Mainly as regards the staging of so-called classic playtexts, performance criticism has too often adopted a partisan or moralistic tone. Many critics, assuming that the objective of theatrical activity is the authentic, faithful realization of playscripts, often condemn a performance of a classic playtext with basis on the analysts' personal conviction that an important aspect, or essence of the text has been violated (KENNEDY, 2003: 8). The problem with such myopic perspective is that it is reductive, ignoring both the rich debate often surrounding the authenticity of classic texts and the wealth of adaptation or appropriation of classic texts by modern theatre practitioners and audiences.[3]

Possibilities

In the face of such constraints, is the theorised analysis of performance viable? How so? Encompassing matters related to conception, production, and reception, the scope of performance analysis, as we have seen, is rather broad. An analysis that expects to get somewhere tries to apprehend aspects that range from the express statements of artistic and thematic conceptions issued by a production team, through the scenic concretization of such conceptions (by way of set design, costume, makeup, light and sound design), through stage business, blocking, subtext delivery, gestures and facial expressions of an actor on stage, and finally getting to the complex socio-cultural network in which the production and theatre at large are embedded.

As regards the analysis of conception, for instance, despite the production team's statements, it is important to bear in mind that a performance in a theatre "has no single intention but rather a complex of vaguely related cultural objectives, ranging from

[3] Admittedly, much of my argument here seems to apply particularly well to classic texts—but not exclusively.

declarations of high art or nationalist propaganda to the personal whim of an actor or the company's need to secure emergency funding" (KENNEDY, 2001: 8-9).

As far as the study of the production, the formal elements of performance leave various traces: the verbal text that was performed, visual and aural codes registered in visual, audiovisual, or digital imaging (videotapes, DVDs, slides, photographs, drawings, CD-ROMs) that illustrate the work of the actor, scenography, costume, makeup, space, movement and blocking, besides music, soundscape, lighting, etc. Moreover, productions often leave behind a promptbook.[4] Still regarding dramatic production, not only the traces but the discourses which can constitute the object of analysis are extremely varied: statements of intent issued by the production team in the show's programme, posters, press releases, interviews (given before, during, or after the season), and publicity materials; the full playtext (in text-based theatre), compared to the "played text", which reveals the dramaturgical impact of the performance on the printed text, an impact that is carried out by way of interpolations, transpositions, cuts[5]; the already mentioned visual and audiovisual records[6]; and spontaneous commentaries by spectators, replies to questionnaires,[7] and specialist critical reviews in the media and in the academy.

However, in analysing dramatic performance, it is necessary to go beyond aesthetic aspects, and to consider the socio-cultural context and reception. The significance of a

[4] Each of these records has its own set of possibilities and impossibilities. The use of videotapes (and by extension DVDs), for instance, has been critically assessed by De Marinis, in "A Faithful Betrayal of Performance" (see References), and Dennis Kennedy has pointed out the limitations and potentials of photographs and drawings as dramatic records (2001: 17-24).

[5] Cuts, for instance, can have fascinating implications, particularly in the case of classic theatre. Obviously, the practice demonstrates how subject the playtext is to theatrical exploitation. How and why cutting occurs is not only of dramatic importance "but of great cultural resonance, offering insights about the theatre as social institution and about the place of classic plays in the world of the present" (KENNEDY, 2001: 9).

[6] Stanley Wells reminds us that if performances until the middle of the nineteenth century are memorialized only by the written word, from then onwards mechanical recordings become available. Still according to Wells, it is possible to hear fragments of Edwin Booth's Othello, Beerbohm Tree's Antony and Falstaff and Ellen Terry's Ophelia, not to mention the silent film segments of Tree as King John (2000: 14).

[7] Questionnaires--to be seen as a reminder or a memo, rather than as a prescriptive way of thinking--have been proposed by André Helbo, and Patrice Pavis (see References below).

performance is in not an essential, immanent value, but is related to reception, since not only the actor, but also the spectator is the object of study; therefore, the socio-cultural inscription is crucial in the construction and interpretation of the performed meanings. The aim here is to understand the nature and extent of a performance's contexts, comprising attention to the national or local historical moment in which the performance takes place, to the audience's socio-cultural composition and supposed expectations, as well as to the concrete circumstances of the performance (e.g., physical location).[8]

In a word, the challenge of the performance analyst (or the theatre historian for that matter) is "to reimagine the moment of past performance and to contextualize it with a narrative about its social meaning" (KENNEDY, 2001: 16). Surely, the theatrical event is much more than the delivery of a script. And in fact, spectators rarely come to the venue with the single-minded purpose of hearing and seeing a play. They often come to see an actor, to meet a friend, or even themselves to be seen. They participate in the spectacle as receptors and generators of a complicated and subjectively comprehended set of signs.

Analysing reception and the "role" of the audience in theatre from a number of recent theoretical perspectives (e.g., semiotics, poststructuralism, and reader response), Susan Bennett has shown that playgoing involves far more than what is seen or heard on stage during a performance. The audience's attitude toward the theatre building and the ludic space, their dress and manners, what they eat and drink at intermissions, whether or when they laugh or cry–all such are social strategies that greatly affect the experience of what is often simplified as "playgoing" (KENNEDY, 2001: 9). In other words, the theatrical event is larger than the artistic/aesthetic intentions that bring it about. Since a performance is directed at and conditioned by an audience, ultimately, more than the

[8] At this point, we need to swing back to the difficulties, as such contexts, in Pavis's own words, "are extremely variable, potentially infinite, and ultimately immeasurable" (2003: 11).

meanings which the artists inscribe in their work, what matters are the meanings the spectator actually realizes.

As soon as one adopts an analytical stance, one takes on the perspective of reception. Thus, the task of performance analysis is to imagine a model combining an aesthetics of production and reception, a model that studies their dialectical interaction, that is, the assessment of a production's anticipated and actual reception (PAVIS, 2003: 27). Still as regards the study of reception, as much as is the case with the study of the production, analysis should take into account an ensemble of factors, not on isolated details.[9] Ultimately, the perspective here contemplated is one that attempts to apprehend the performance as a whole, in which the individual signifiers that the spectator is able to recognize and modify are inserted.

And, to pursue the study of the show's reception, spectators are to be considered participants, reactive beings directly engaged in the rhythms and the construction of the production's meanings. In fact, spectators tend to seek a rationale and assign meaning to dramatic action, so much so that, for the audience, "there is no phenomenological difference between an action performed with great internal justification […] and one merely aleatoric" (KENNEDY, 2001: 14). The habit of decoding is so strong that most viewers will attempt to read messages, even if the message is that there is no message.

Conclusion

These thoughts on performance reception bring me back to the limitations of performance analysis as a critical practice. Certainly, absolute knowledge of the receiver (or of the mechanisms of reception) is unattainable. To be sure, there will always remain some leeway in the understanding of the mechanics of dramatic reception, certain

[9] At the broad base of the exercise lies gestalt theory, establishing that totality is different from the sum of its parts (PAVIS, 2003: 228; TINDEMANS, 1983: 52).

unpredictable elements--otherwise, every show would be a hit. It is true that performance analysis is "subjective", but to entreat such point is not only a futile exercise, it also presupposes the existence of an objectivity on which everyone might finally agree. And there is no final, objective elucidation of the aesthetic object. *Vis-à-vis* the multiplicity and diversity of analytical methods, performance analysis is not a question of finding *the* right method, but rather of seeking a pluralism of procedures and questionings. In fact, I prefer to use the word "procedure", rather than "method" or "methodology", terms that can be misleading in their scientificism; after all, as Mike Pearson's brilliant notion of "theatre archaeology" has demonstrated, performance analysis in itself is a "second-order" performance, a highly intuitive, *creative* process. And performance analysis, as Stanley Wells submits, referring to the work of Leigh Hunt as a Shakespeare critic, "creates in the reader [of the review] a sense, if not of what it was actually like to be witnessing the performance, at least, of what Hunt himself saw, heard, and felt when he did" (2000: 9).

Going back to Carlson, we are reminded of performance as a complex, contested concept, and we can see the futility of seeking *a single* definition to cover seemingly disparate usages of the term. Moreover, the ephemerality and singularity of live performance, strictly speaking, demand that description and critical interpretation pertain to a given theatrical event, on a given *matinée* or *soirée*, in front of a given audience, geographically and historically localised. Carlson concludes his book by reiterating the question raised in the introduction–"What is performance?"–and his conclusion is that "performance by its nature resists conclusions" (1996: 189). But let us not mythicize our object of study. After all, Carlson has written more than two hundred pages about performance, and his book is rather conclusive. If, in the end, procedures of notation, recording, and analysis retain their purely instrumental function, and if in performance analysis what matters, as Wells has argued, "is not the microphone or the camera but the seeing eye and the listening ear, the responsive imagination and the analysing brain" (2000:

15), as well as the power to articulate a critical discourse, what counts is the pursuit and transmission of experience and critical reflection, besides the perception of contexts enabled by the creative reconstruction and re-articulation of a live performance for ourselves and others.

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