European Review, Vol. 9, No. 3, 277–291 (2001) © Academia Europaea, Printed in the United Kingdom

Reversing the hierarchy between text and performance

ERIKA FISCHER-LICHTE

Institut für Theaterwissenschaft, Freie Universität Berlin, Grunewaldstrasse 35, 12165 Berlin, Germany. E-mail: theater@zedat.fu-berlin.de

This paper deals with the reversal of the hierarchy between text and performance, which can be traced back to the turn of the 20th century. In particular, two possibilities of how to redefine the relationship between text and performance are explored and discussed. Both these possibilities have played a prominent role in German theatre since the 1970s and are modelled after distinct cultural paradigms, namely the paradigm of sacrificial ritual and the paradigm of play/game. The leading questions of the investigation are: what purpose does it serve to take recourse to these paradigms and how has it affected the performance as well as writing for the theatre?

1. From text to performance

The relationship between text and performance in theatre did not become problematic until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Before this, the relationship had been largely uncontroversial. Theatre performance was predominantly defined by its capacity to convey or mediate dramatic texts, i.e. literary works of art, and the status of 'a work of art' was only conferred on a theatrical performance if it fulfilled this function. The converse idea that a theatrical performance might be seen as an autonomous work of art had already been raised, albeit sporadically. For example, Goethe suggested it of opera in *Über Wahrheit und Wahrscheinlichkeit der Kunstwerke* (*On Truth and the Verisimilitude of Works of Art*, 1798) and Richard Wagner pushed the idea even further by defining the performance of a musical drama as the only conceivable and valuable artwork of the future (*Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, 1848). However, the majority of Goethe and Wagner's contemporaries believed that the nature of a theatrical performance as art could only be secured by the performed dramatic text. Even as late as 1918, the theatre critic Alfred Klaar wrote: 'Theatre will only succeed in maintaining a position of great importance when dramatic poetry adds its substance.'[1] The dramatic text was considered of primary importance, which the performance must serve by mediating it to the public – and this meant: to mediate a particular reading of it as part of a recognized canon of texts.

This concept of the relationship between text and performance was sharply attacked by

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theatre avant-gardists as well as by representatives of the newly founded academic discipline of theatre studies. In taking a fundamentally different view of theatre, many argued that theatre is an art of its own. As early as 1905, in *On the Art of Theatre*, Edward Gordon Craig claimed that drama is a work of literature that does not even belong to the art of theatre, still less constitute it:

> The Art of the Theatre is neither acting nor play, it is not scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action which is the very spirit of acting; words which are the body of the play; line and colour which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance.[2]

Similar statements were made by other theatre avant-gardists as, for example, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov, Vassily Kandinsky and Lothar Schreyer. Theatre performance was understood and defined as an autonomous work of art that has its own materials that are essentially different from the materials of any other art form. In that it shares some of its materials with literature, namely words, the literary text of a drama can be regarded as raw material for the performance just as much as line and colour, rhythm or gesture. Theatre performance, accordingly, was held to be a work of art *sui generis*.

Another argument referred to theatre's particular performativity. Max Herrmann, one of the founding fathers of Theatre Studies in Germany, took the fundamental difference between the dramatic texts and theatre performances as a starting point:

> In my view, theatre and drama were … originally opposites, whose differences are so vast that the symptoms continually reappear: a drama is the word-based artistic creation of an individual; theatre is the product of an audience and those who serve it.[3]

Accordingly, he declared: 'The most important aspect of theatre art is the performance'[4] and defined theatre performance as 'a social game – played by all for all. A game in which everyone is a player – participants and spectators … The spectator is involved as co-player. The spectator is, so to speak, the creator of the theatre'.[5] That is to say, the primary focus is given to the performance which constitutes itself as a game through the confrontation between actors and spectators. The dramatic text works as one of the elements and materials with which the game can be played.

Both arguments reverse the hierarchy between text and performance. In the 19th century, the text was thought to have absolute priority and the task of the performance was to mediate or to convey the meanings constituted by the text via theatrical means. The performance was held to *serve* the text and was, accordingly, determined and controlled by it. At the beginning of the 20th century, however, the idea was articulated and propagated that the performance is primary, that it realises itself in a process that takes place between actors and spectators and, thus, provides meanings that are not to be found elsewhere, let alone in the dramatic text, although the performance might take recourse to it as one of its many raw materials.

Of course, this new and truly revolutionary view on theatre and, in particular, the relationship between text and performance, was not shared by everybody. There were, and still are today, many directors, actors, critics, spectators who continue(d) to cling to the old hierarchy between text and performance and who demand(ed) from theatre that it serves the text by conveying its meanings – by which they mean their own reading and interpretation of the text and a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular set of stage conventions. Nonetheless, the new ideas proved strong and convincing enough to found a completely new performance tradition.

In Germany, such a new tradition started with Max Reinhardt. Unfortunately, the critics often overlooked the fundamental tension between text and performance underlying all his productions. They only praised his work highly whenever its outcome seemed to be in line with or, at least not openly contradict, their own ideas on the play being performed. In many cases, however, they criticised Reinhardt for not serving the text, for letting his scenic effects, as they called them, dominate the text and push it into the background, or even contradict it. They strongly opposed all devices that clearly did not serve the purpose of illustrating the text, but instead served the performance by their own effects in the spectators and by constituting their own meanings.

Such a move from text to performance was even further radicalized in the 1920s, in particular by directors such as Leopold Jessner and Erwin Piscator, who both inaugurated new and wholly unknown kinds of political theatre. In Jessner's productions of Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* (1919) and *Don Carlos* (1922) as well as in Piscator's productions of Schiller's *The Robbers* (1926) and Toller's *Hoppla, wir leben!* (*Hurrah, We Live!* 1927) the text was no more than one of the different raw materials employed, such as space, the actors' bodies, light, sound, film etc, in order to create the performance. Here, it became apparent that the old hierarchy of text and performance was completely reversed.

2. New relationships between text and performance

After World War II, directors, actors, critics and audiences in Germany almost unanimously embraced the old idea that the text is an original of which the performance is only its illustration or realization on stage; that it is the authority of the text that controls the performance, even though it was admitted that it is not the text as such that is mediated, but an interpretation, or reading of it. Fritz Kortner's attempts on his return from American exile to revive the performance tradition of the 1920s and early 1930s through his *Don Carlos* (1950) were doomed to failure. His only achievement was the first big theatre scandal in postwar Germany.

It took approximately 15 more years to change the situation. At the end of the 1960s, some young stage directors such as Peter Zadek and Peter Stein, who worked at the Bremen Municipal Theatre, questioned the relationship between text and performance again, and redefined it in a radically different way. They refused to illustrate or even interpret the text. For instance, in their production of *The Robbers* (1966), Zadek and his stage designer, Wilfried Minks, developed the device of confronting the classic text with elements of contemporary culture, such as paintings by Roy Lichtenstein, comic strips, Westerns and horror movies. The production made the fundamental difference between text and performance very obvious. Moreover, it used the text in the same way as the paintings, comic strips etc were used as raw materials for the development of a new performance aesthetics. The critic Werner Kliess wrote about the performance:

> The production lacks any sign of 'heightening' or 'interpretation'. Schiller's text is presented in a direct way, not filtered, not smoothed out, though not undifferentiated either. It is not trivialised, not 'brought closer' through psychology or other arts, it remains unconquerable. That is what is so confusing in this production, the familiar problems of interpretation are not

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> even touched upon … Schiller's text and Minks-Zadek's comic strip quotes run parallel to each other, amplify one another in flashes here and there, underline or relativise each other. The artificiality of the relationship between them is not for one moment veiled. [The production] points the way towards an artistic and acrobatic kind of theatre.[6]

In their production of *Measure for Measure* one year later, Zadek and Minks cleared the stage and turned it into an empty space, framed only by light bulbs. Here, it was the bodies of the actors that confronted the text. The bodies developed their own language, telling a different story from the text and thus, radically contradicting it. In both cases, the text was broken up, even exploded. While, in *The Robbers*, fragments and pieces of text confronted images from comic-strips and the movies, in *Measure for Measure* they were brought together with bodies in pain and agony, tortured bodies, obscene bodies.

Quite the opposite device was developed by Peter Stein in his production of Goethe's *Tasso* (1969). Here, Stein emphasized the artificiality of the world represented on stage, the dramatic figures and their ways of behaviour, by using the device of overt explanations and clarifying exaggerations of evidently paradoxical or even idiotic states. In contrast to Zadek's productions, the performance was 'stylistically unified, and closed in itself in an accentuated way'[7]. It displayed its artificiality and self-containedness in a very emphatic way. It was executed as the self-reflection of theatre on its own position within a late Capitalist society. Botho Strauss commented on it in *Theater heute*:

> The more luxuriously, nobly the theatre drapes itself at the moment, the more openly it reveals its true face. The essence of theatre is a backdrop which a late capitalist society has created for itself, and in the ennui which Stein so craftily captures, a pause for breath is found again as a treat after the daily routine of a profit-seeking theatre. For, in its luxurious ambient, the play 'Tasso' finds a faithful expression of its fortuitous, free existence as work of art which decorates the theatre as Tasso's presence at Belriguardo decorates the reputation of the Duke. The interpretation of the play is fundamentally undertaken as the definition of theatre in our society as a wonderful anachronism. It is this which creates the actual gravity, the strict credibility of the apparently distorted poses and outrageous elements in the production. In fulfilling the bourgeois need for beauty imposed upon it both cynically and in superb aristocratic excess, theatre may also, contrarily, drive the spectator quite mad in his pleasure.[8]

Irrespective of the great differences between Stein's and Zadek's productions, they both took common recourse to the text as a material. A material for the development of either a new performance aesthetics or a critical instrument that would enable producers and spectators alike to scrutinize the ruling social conditions closely as well as their own position and situation within it.

These are just a few particularly striking examples of the new relationships being explored between text and performance. Many other possibilities have been discovered, realized and tried out.

I shall argue that despite this variety, it was mainly two distinct cultural paradigms that were taken as models on which the relationship was conceived, shaped and realized:

- sacrificial ritual, which prevailed until the 1980s
- play/game, which was also introduced in the late 1960s, early 1970s, and became dominant in the 1990s.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. Performance as sacrificial ritual

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the cultural paradigm of sacrificial ritual was much discussed. A number of seminal books on this subject appeared in 1972: René Girard's *La violence et le sacré* and Walter Burkert's *Homo necans* and a year later the English translation of Jan Kott's *The Eating of the Gods. An Interpretation of Greek Tragedy*.[9] Both Girard and Kott offered a new reading of Greek tragedies, most notably of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, in the light of their theory of sacrificial ritual. At that time, *The Bacchae*, had been rather neglected by the theatre and was only rarely performed. It is quite remarkable that, from the late 1960s onwards until the end of the 1970s, there was a sudden increase in the number of productions of the play or of adaptations of it. In 1969, Richard Schechner produced *Dionysus in 69*; in 1973 Hansgünther Heyme in Cologne and Luca Ronconi in Vienna produced productions of *The Bacchae*. In the same year, Wole Soyinka adapted *The Bacchae* for a production by the London National Theatre. In 1974 the Berlin Schaubühne presented its *Antiquity Project*, which included Klaus Michael Grüber's production of *The Bacchae* and, in 1978, Tadashi Suzuki staged his version of *The Bacchae* as the second part of his own antiquity project begun in 1974 with Euripides' *The Trojan Women*.

Thus, it might not come as a surprise to learn that it was one of the productions of *The Bacchae* that not only realized, but also reflected on, the relationship between text and performance as sacrificial ritual, namely, the production by Klaus Michael Grüber that was not shown in the small theatre building of the Schaubühne at the Hallesches Ufer but in an exhibition hall on the Berlin Fairground. The stage designers, Gilles Aillaud and Eduardo Arroyo, had created a very particular space. A huge planked area marked the field of play in the hall, and it was embraced by the spectators on two sides, arranged at right angles to each other. The back wall had four openings: on the left, a road-sweeping machine was parked and manned by figures in yellow plastic suits, in the middle were two doors, one closed, the other open to reveal a man dressed in a tuxedo, drinking a glass of champagne and watching the arena; on the right, two horses stood behind a glass pane. On the ceiling there were a number of ventilators and neon lights that lit the hall brightly. Music from Stravinsky's *Apollon Musagètes* was played. Dionysus (Michael König) was pushed onto the stage on a hospital trolley holding a lady's shoe in his hand. He was naked, except for a G-string, as were all the male figures in the performance. He began the prologue stammering, searching for the word 'I'.

Then the Bacchae made their entrance. They were all dressed differently, highly individually. They inspected the room, fingered the ventilators and the walls of the playing area at the back, turned off the lights, and began to tear up the planks from the floor. Clumps of soil, fruit, lettuce and wool were thrown up. Finally, they unearthed the elderly Cadmus (Peter Fitz) and Teiresias (Otto Sander), thoroughly covered in slime. Then the naked Pentheus (Bruno Ganz) appeared. His first words were passages from Wittgenstein's diaries, i.e. the entries from 31 May 1915 and 8 July 1916 on the problems of describing the world by naming. The first sentence was: 'There are only two deities: the world and my independent self.'[10] As Pentheus spoke, the road sweeping machine drove onto the stage and swept away the 'filth' created by the Bacchae. The yellow figures replaced the boards, and Pentheus ordered the neon lights to be turned on again. The Bacchae who had become immobile, slowly

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

started moving again. They tried to combine the words 'Pentheus' and 'hubris' and they delivered exercises on Greek terms such as *orgiazein* (to perform a sacred act).

As the performance continued, there were many other similarly striking and enigmatic images that were superimposed upon, intersected with, and which cut through the linear succession of the dialogue and the chorus passages. When Dionysus and Pentheus met for the first time, they came very close to each other, greeted each other with an intimate kiss, touched each other, and almost melted into one person. When Dionysus persuaded Pentheus to put on women's clothes so that he could observe the women in Cithaeron safely, Pentheus put on the lady's shoe that Dionysus had been holding at his entrance. The messenger reporting Pentheus' death remained on one and the same spot to give his report as yellow slime dripped down his naked body. He spoke in agony, slowly, in a singing tone of voice, listening to each of the sounds he produced. After Agave (Edith Clever) killed her son, there was no dismembered body lying on the stage. Instead of putting the body of his grandson back together, Cadmus helped Agave to sew together pieces of the suit that the man in the tuxedo had worn: stiff collar, tails, white shirt, and grey patent leather shoes. They sewed and sewed and sewed – and never came to an end.

In this production, Grüber established a very particular relationship between the text and the objects, actions and images on stage. On the one hand, an interpretative relationship between some aspects of the performance and parts of the text may seem obvious. For example, Pentheus appeared at the same moment that the road sweeping machine drove on the stage; this device as well as Pentheus' order to switch on the lights could be taken as an interpretation of Pentheus as a man of law and order. On the other hand, there were objects, actions and images that could scarcely be related to the dramatic text and which triggered associations that went far beyond it, such as the naked, slime-covered bodies, the horses, the sewing together of parts of clothes, the attempts to give various explanations of a Greek term and the insertion of the Wittgenstein text. The associations, memories and imaginations they triggered were certainly very different for different spectators. In this way, the performance predominantly generated ambiguity.

In trying to characterize the particular relationship between text and performance in Grüber's production, I would like to introduce the term *sparagmos* which means, as Burkert explains in his study of the Greek sacrificial meal, the tearing apart of the sacrificial animal. For staging the play meant, here, to tear apart its text. The text body of *The Bacchae*, so to speak, had to be sacrificed in order to give birth to the performance of *The Bacchae*. In this sense, the performance of a Greek tragedy took place as a sacrificial ritual. This sacrifice, however, did not result in the deification of the victim, as Girard describes it, nor in the restoration of the dismembered body. The performance did not come into being by putting together the fragments and pieces of the dismembered text body of the play. Rather, something totally new was emerging that permanently reflected its relationship to a text that, remaining closed, strange, remote and, in the end, indecipherable, had to be sacrificed in order to allow the performance to take shape.

As for the final image of the performance: Cadmus and Agave seemed to be sewing parts of clothes of a contemporary spectator to the very scenes unfolding on the stage. Instead of having Cadmus put the fragments and pieces of Pentheus' dismembered body back together again, Grüber created images of a never-ending process of stitching and re-stitching, which

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was open to several different readings. It could be read as a commentary on the process of staging texts and, in particular, Greek or classic texts. In this process, the text body has to be dismembered, since it is not accessible as a whole but only in its single parts and pieces. Thus, the performance will never be able to convey the text. It may pretend to put together the bits and pieces of the text and to come into being as a restoration, a resurrection on stage, but this is a delusion. It can be no more than sewing together parts of a contemporary spectator's clothes without ever coming to an end. Not even the sacrifice of the text body will redeem us, that is, admit us into the paradise of an unmediated understanding of Greek tragedy. By performing a sacrificial ritual, the production of a Greek tragedy allows us, at best, to reflect on our fundamental distance from it and perhaps to include some fragments of it into our present theatre and into our contemporary culture, as for instance, with the idea of sacrificial ritual as applied to the relationship between text and performance in theatre today.

At the same time, Grüber's production reflected on the typical process of staging a text in the Western tradition in general terms. To stage a text means to perform a *sparagmos* and an *omophageia*, a sacrificial meal. The participants, the actors, musicians, stage director and designer tear the text apart and incorporate it into a performance, piece-by-piece. They proceed somewhat in the manner of a Greek sacrificial meal, as described by Walter Burkert; for they incorporate that which they, a 'priest' or some ruling *Zeitgeist*, have declared to be edible. That which appears to them as 'bones', 'inedible innards' or even 'fatty vapour' is left to the 'Gods', that is, that which will not be considered for the production. In this sense, each and every production that comes into being by the process of staging a text, performs a ritual of sacrifice.

Grüber's production suggests a general idea of the relationship between text and performance. The performance is completely unable to mediate the text, to realize it, or whichever way we choose to describe this relationship between them. Rather, it is only the sacrifice of the text that allows the performance to come into being. It may well be that the tradition that insists on the authority of the text to control the performance sprang from a process of deifying the victim, as Girard describes it. For, without the text being sacrificed, there cannot be a performance of it.

Thus, Grüber's production reflected on a new kind of relationship between text and performance that became prevalent in the 1970s, in particular with regard to performances that used classical texts, namely, a relationship modelled after the cultural pattern of a sacrificial ritual.

Although this model does not prevail any more, it is still employed. Einar Schleef, a stage director totally unlike Grüber, based all his work in the 1990s on it, whether by taking recourse to classical texts such as Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen* or *Faust*, to modern classics such as Hauptmann's *Before Sunrise* or Brecht's *Puntila*, or to contemporary plays such as Elfriede Jelinek's *Sports Play*. While Grüber focused on the specific process of the sacrificial ritual, the *sparagmos* and the *omophageia*, Schleef performs the process in order to create a community – on stage as chorus and between stage and auditorium as a community of performers and spectators created by the chorus. In the chorus, the individual members – quite unlike the chorus of Grüber's *Bacchae* – vanish entirely, they melt into one body – the body of the chorus. By doing so, they provoke the spectator either to let himself be drawn into their community or to exclude himself. In Schleef's production of Jelinek's *Sports Play* (Burgtheater Vienna, 1998), a chorus of male and female actors in sports dress, who appeared over and over

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

again and acted as the actual protagonist, as does the chorus in most of Schleef's productions, performed the same strenuous exercises for 45 minutes in permanent repetition, shouting the same sentences over and over again with sustained energy. The chorus acted as one body and the words produced were like sounds ringing out in the space without any noticeable relationship to the bodies of the performers and mostly not intended to be understood. Some spectators apparently felt tortured by this ordeal as something they could not bear to suffer, even as spectators. They excluded themselves by leaving after the first few minutes. Those who remained and exposed themselves to it until the very end participated in the ritual by undergoing most unusual experiences. They felt, both physically and intensely, the energetic field that was created between the performers and the spectators and which was intensified the longer the exercises lasted. The spectators were not only affected, but through the new experiences offered to them, they were called upon to regard themselves as members of a community that only comes into being and exists for the specific time span of such experiences.

Performances brought forth by a *sparagmos* and an *omophageia* of the text are not to be understood but to be experienced. Language, as well as the bodies of the actors, is freed from serving the purpose of constructing and characterizing actions and dramatic figures; rather, it is accorded a new position that enables it to unfold its performative potential. Language resounds in the space and, as heard by the spectators, works on their bodies as well as on their mental associations, memories, and imagination.

This new relationship between text and performance, established according to the cultural paradigm of sacrificial ritual, also deeply affected the writing process of playwrights and resulted in a new dramaturgy. Heiner Müller's so called 'plays from production' ('Produktionsstücke'), which were created in the 1950s and the early 1960s, explore some of Brecht's ideas on different dramaturgical solutions more deeply. Even in the mid 1960s, those plays which deal with ancient Greece such as *Philoctetes* (1958–64), *Oedipus the Tyrant* (1965) and *The Horatii* (1968) still refer back to Brecht. For, in these plays, Müller both assumed knowledge of and criticised Brecht's theory and practice of the Lehrstück. In the middle of the 1970s, however, Müller finally turned his back on such dramaturgy. In a letter to Reiner Steinweg (4 January 1977) he wrote:

> I think we shall have to take our leave of the LEHRSTÜCK till the next earthquake. The Christian apocalypse of MEASURES to be taken is out of date, history has postponed the process onto the streets, even the learned choirs do not sing any more, humanism only exists as terrorism, the Molotov cocktail is the ultimate bourgeois experience. What remains: lonely texts waiting for history.

In his later plays, such as *Hamletmachine* (1977), *Waterfront Wasteland/, Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts* (1982) and *Description of a Picture* (1985), Müller invented a new dramaturgy that can do without the categories 'action' and 'dramatic figure', which produce enigmatic images 'lonely texts waiting for history'. They are meant as material to be used by performances, they are intended to be 'exploded' by the performance process, to be sacrificed. In 1983, Müller described and determined theatre as ritual practice:

> Mankind will only survive the total crash-test on the human collective in this, perhaps our last, century (if resistance runs dry and its place between the poles crumbles) as a collective. The founding Communist principle, NONE, IF NOT ALL is given its ultimate meaning in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> context of the possible suicide of the species. But the first step in cancelling out the individual in this collective is tearing him apart, death or caesarean the alternative of the NEW MAN. The theatre simulates this step, pleasure-den and torture-chamber of metamorphosis.[11]

Müller intends his texts to be torn apart in this very process in order to bring about the 'change', the transformation of the spectators in and through the performance. For 'the drama does not come into being on stage, does not take place on stage but between stage and auditorium'[12]. Here, the relationship between text and performance modelled according to the cultural paradigm of sacrificial ritual, has had far-reaching consequences in terms of the writing process performed by the playwright according to his new dramaturgy.

4. Performance as play/game

When Peter Zadek confronted the classic text with images from comic strips and Western and horror movies in his production of *The Robbers* in 1966, he created a performance that neither interpreted the text, denounced its weaknesses and failures, nor exposed its strangeness and inaccessibility, but which played with the text as well as with the images, inviting the spectators to do the same. Through this production, he inaugurated a new model of how to relate text and performance to each other, a model that referred to the cultural paradigm of play/game. Since its first realization by Zadek, a similar model was taken up by many stage directors during the 1970s and the 1980s without becoming dominant. In the 1990s, however, it totally prevailed in German theatres.

This seems to be quite in line with some general developments in German society and culture. The sociologist Gerhard Schulze characterises German society of the 1990s as a 'fun and event culture' that allows and even encourages its members to play around.[13] New kinds of events have sprung up, such as the Love-Parade, the Carnival of Cultures, Christopher Street Day. In television, all kinds of game shows are popular; computer games have their addicts, and many other phenomena and processes support the thesis that 'play' is the dominant cultural paradigm of the 1990s.

According to Bateson, play is not marked by particular elements or signs that are used in it, but by a frame that signals: 'What is going on within my boundaries is play'. Thus, to perceive the frame and to recognize that it signals play is a prerequisite of behaving appropriately in a play situation. This suggests that it is possible to separate clearly all kinds of play from other genres of cultural performance as, for instance, from religious rituals, election campaigns, trials, or from everyday life.

I would like to argue that, in the 1990s, theatre took recourse to the cultural paradigm of play when establishing a particular relationship between text and performance in order to question the possibility and the consequences of such separation. Of course, even in the 1990s, it has also served other purposes. Thus, for instance, in Christoph Marthaler's production of *Faust Square Root From 1 and 2* at the Schauspielhaus Hamburg (1994), the actor Sepp Bierbichler executes Faust's famous monologue at the beginning by only pronouncing the vowels: 'a e u a/i o o ie/u i e ei u e i i/u ei e au e o o ie/u au u ie/i ei e e ü …' etc, etc. In fact, Goethe's text was used by the performance as a plaything, as a toy. Playing with it, however, did not challenge the demarcation line between play and other cultural performances

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

or between play and everyday life but rather our attitude towards Goethe's masterpiece and our pretension of knowing it so well that its words have long since ceased to convey any meaning at all, and have deteriorated into mere sounds.

On the other hand, when we consider the productions by Frank Castorf, director of the Berlin Volksbühne, we find sufficient evidence to support my assumption. In his production of Brecht's *Puntila* at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg (1996), for example, the performance started with Puntila's question directed to his driver Matti: 'Who are you?' And although Matti answers 'I am your driver, Herr Puntila', Puntila did not seem satisfied with the answer and repeated his question over and over again. Matti tried to find better, more suitable variations of his answer, which became more and more aggressive, until finally he confessed: 'I am playing the part of Matti, always-in-a-good-humour Matti.' By confessing that he is just playing the part of a dramatic figure, the actor seemed to abandon the part and to speak for himself. But this, of course, is a delusion, for he was taking over another role, namely, that of an actor admitting he is playing a role. The spectators were well aware that this was rehearsed, that the actor (Peter René Lüdicke) did not speak on his own behalf. Indeed, this very particular state of in-between, oscillating between playing a role and being oneself without allowing a clear demarcation of the boundaries separating one from the other was what the audience most enjoyed.

Their pleasure increased when Puntila (Michael Wittenborn) left the stage, strolled through the auditorium and examined the spectators, commentating on their outward appearance. But it turned abruptly into embarrassment, even shock, when he started scrutinising individual spectators too closely. The audience were stunned because they had thought, at least at first, that Puntila's rude addresses were improvised by the actor who was expressing his own views on the individual spectator at whom he was staring. But his words were written by Brecht as speech for the dramatic figure Puntila, albeit for a different situation, namely, for Puntila's inspection of the people on display in the slavemarket. Since the scenes that would have told the audience that Puntila has left for the slavemarket were left out, the spectators took offence at the actor's words, believing that he intended to insult them. Much later they understood that they were trapped again in an oscillating in-between situation, in a state of neither-nor, or one-as-well-as-the-other (regarding Castorf's production of *Puntila*, cf. Jens Roselt[14]). The frames assumed and expected by the spectators and the frames set up by the performance collided with each other, and resulted in a deep uncertainty in the spectators as to which frame to assume and by which rules to abide.

Quite often Castorf uses the device of cross-dressing and cross-casting in order to achieve this effect, as for instance, in the scene when Puntila meets his three brides, or most notably, in his production of Carl Zuckmayer's *The Devil's General* at the Berlin Volksbühne (1996). Here, the part of the General Harras was given to one of the most prominent and very feminine actresses of the Volksbühne, Corinna Harfouch. The play is very well known in Germany, particularly through a film version made by Helmut Käutner, starring Curt Jürgens, the epitome of traditional masculinity and virility, as General Harras. The prototype and model of General Harras was the pilot, Ernst Udet.

On her first entrance, Corinna Harfouch was dressed in the uniform of an air force General from World War II. She had a bald head, though her face was unmistakably a woman's face. She spoke General Harras' very 'manly' language in her natural voice and performed and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

displayed movements and gestures that are traditionally thought of as typically male in a very articulate way. The audience was aware all the time that the part of General Harras was played by a woman. This obstructed their attempts to perceive the performer as the fictional character General Harras, instead, they perceived the actress playing the part of General Harras using certain devices. Thus, the spectators had great difficulty in leaving the 'real' world behind and becoming completely involved in the fictional world of the play. On the contrary, they had to be prepared to waver on the threshold between two worlds, often being uncertain in which one they were participating.

During the course of one scene, General Harras becomes drunk. Corinna Harfouch took off the uniform and appeared to be dressed in feminine underwear. She mounted the lap of her partner, Hartmann (Kurt Naumann), who had just confessed to the General that he is lovesick for Pützchen. Her hands touched his waist and his hips, later moving to his thighs. All the time she spoke General Harras' words and her partner answered with 'Yes, Herr General'. The scene was more than irritating. The outer appearance of the actress bore, with the exception of the bald head, no sign of a male role. She was a woman sitting on the lap of a man. However, she did not seem to act like a woman who tries to seduce a man, but rather like someone who wants to commit rape. The words she then spoke contradicted both ideas. Did she act here as the dramatic figure of General Harras or as the actress Corinna Harfouch or as the actress who plays a part other than that of General Harras? Did a fictional male character try to rape another fictional male character or did Corinna Harfouch try to seduce a fictional male character or her male colleague Kurt Naumann, or did the actress playing another role try to seduce or to rape someone? The spectators were not in a position to make a clear decision. They were partly drawn into the fictional world, and at the same time, filled with doubt as to what kind of fictional world it might be or whether a fictional world was constructed at all on stage.

Playing with the text, the performance thus playfully questioned whether it is possible to draw clear demarcation lines between 'fictional' and 'real' worlds, between playing the role of someone or being someone. By allowing his performance to oscillate between playing the role that is given in the drama (Puntila, Matti, General Harras) and stepping out of it, either by adopting another or by being 'him/herself', the actor/actress refuses to construct a dramatic figure on stage. Instead s/he leaves it to the spectator, either not to construct a dramatic figure at all and rather to follow the transitions between role and person or another role as a reflection on the deeply problematic relationship between the concepts of role-playing and not-role-playing, of real and of fictional worlds, or to construct a dramatic figure of her/his own. Playing with the text, thus, means to play with the frames.

This is what Castorf's theatre shares with performances by Christoph Schlingensief, which do not take recourse, on the one hand, to dramatic texts and with Elfriede Jelinek's texts, and her way of writing for the theatre on the other.

In Schlingensief's performances, frames that indicate particular genres of cultural performance are constantly played with. In his performance, *Election Campaign Circus Chance 2000* produced in election year, 1998, by the Berlin Volksbühne in a circus tent, it was impossible to define the event clearly and properly. Was it a theatre or a circus performance? Was it a freak show or part of an election campaign, a talk show or a coming-out, the foundation of a political party or a sales promotion? The spectators were never in a position to make out distinctly what kind of cultural performance they were participating

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in at any given moment. Usually, spectators assume they can rely on their knowledge of the specific rules that constitute a particular genre of cultural performance and on a certain frame that prescribes which rules to apply. In Schlingensief's performance, however, the frames were played with through permanently displacing them or letting them collide with each other and, ultimately, collapse. This holds true also for the frame that signalled, 'This is a play'. During Schlingensief's performance *Please, Love Austria!* which took place as part of the Vienna Theatre Festival 2000 on the Square in front of the Opera House, the organizers of the Festival felt so frustrated by the event itself as well as by the audience responses that it triggered, such as the politically correct storming of the Portacabin where, for the duration of the Festival, refugees were staying who, it was said, were in danger of being deported from Austria as a result of being voted out by the audience, that they distributed leaflets informing the passers-by 'This is art', thus trying to restore at least one specific frame. Schlingensief counteracted by taking away the leaflets. Such performances challenge the spectator to transgress, to blur or even to dissolve and annul the boundaries separating 'art' neatly from 'life' or 'reality' from 'fiction', and thus challenge such oppositions and separations in principle.

This is also true of Elfriede Jelinek's texts for the theatre since the late 1970s. The texts exist completely without action and dramatic figures. They are like 'monologues' composed of ready-mades drawn from most diverse contexts, fiction and non-fiction, sometimes slightly reworked and modified by the author. In *Stecken, Stab und Stangl* (*Stick, Rod and Stalk*) which premiered in 1996 at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg, in a production by Thirza Bruncken, the ready-mades are taken from the Bible (Stab rod), from the Viennese columnist from the *Kronen Zeitung* who writes under the pseudonym 'Staberl', speeches made by an Austrian commander of a concentration camp, Stangl, headlines on different highly emotional events such as the cancer of a young Austrian girl, Olivia, or the death of the downhill skier Ulli Meier, pieces taken from TV-series or commercials, dreadful puns, truisms and maxims, as well as quotations from *Everyman*, poetry by Paul Celan and from Heidegger's writings. The play was meant as an epitaph for four Romany people who were killed by a bomb in the Austrian village of Oberwart in Burgenland, while trying to remove a board with the racist inscription: 'Romanies back to India' from the front of a Romany settlement.

In *Sports Play*, the linguistic material, drawn from most diverse sources, refers to the enthusiasm for sports in modern mass societies, associating it with the eruption and performance of violence, not only the violence of the hooligans, but also the violence displayed in civil war.

There is no doubt that the author takes a clear moral and political stance in the choice and combination of her material. Nonetheless, the texts do not force this stance upon their readers, let alone on stage directors and actors. They are composed of material taken from 'fictional' as well as 'real' contexts without revealing the origin of each material. Thus, they do not refer to a particular reality; rather, they are performative texts. That is to say, they depend on the contextualization made by the reader or the stage director and actors as to what kind of meanings will be brought forth, and what kind of effects will be caused in the reader or spectator. They are texts that do not claim any authority but instead challenge their users to play with them.

Because they are performative texts, they do not resist being sacrificed by the performance, if they are not understood as material for play but rather as a victim. This was what Einar

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Schleef did when he produced a community on stage as well as one between stage and auditorium, completely ignoring Jelinek's horror at the loss of individuation and individuality in sports which motivated her to write the play.

5. Conclusions

Recourse to the cultural paradigms of sacrificial ritual[†] and play when establishing a new relationship between text and performance has far-reaching consequences regarding the production of performances as well as of texts.

On the one hand, it turns theatre performances into ritual or into play. Their concern is no longer to represent a fictional world although, in contrast to the kind of performances that Artaud envisaged or which Schlingensief is actually producing, they employ texts that may represent fictional worlds. Instead, the aim is to release associations, memories and fantasies in the spectator, or to bring about a community between performers and spectators, or to upset the spectator's expectations in terms of the frames that are established and the rules with which to comply, as well as where the boundaries lie that separate 'fictional' from 'real' worlds. What happens on stage is not meant to represent the fictional world that the drama represents (if indeed it does so), but to have an impact on the spectator, to do something to him and with him. Sacrificing the text or playing with it seem to be potentially rich procedures for triggering such effects. This is also true because theatre performances that relate text and performance to each other by alluding to, or even following, the cultural paradigms of sacrificial ritual and play, have long since incorporated practices and devices that performance and action art developed from the late 1950s and early 1960s, something which, at the time, was sharply distinguished from a theatre that represents fictional worlds by narrating a story and constructing dramatic characters. In this way, theatre's particular performativity could be perfectly underlined and the fact that theatre is a performative art was emphasized par excellence.

On the other hand, writing for the theatre has also changed. It no longer necessarily implies producing a text that is intended to function as a controlling and guiding authority in terms of the production process of the performance. Rather, in many cases, a text is created that is meant to serve as material, as the victim or plaything of, and within, the production process. Heiner Müller's theatre texts from the late 1970s onwards and Elfriede Jelinek's pieces mentioned above are particularly radical examples of this.

Amongst the new generation of much younger playwrights who were born in the 1960s, writing for the theatre is even more diversified. One example is the young novelist and stage director Jenny Erpenbeck. In *Cats Have Seven Lives*, which she staged at the Municipal Theatre in Graz with two actresses, she opens up the opportunity of distributing the dialogue between two voices called A and B in different ways depending on the number and kind of actresses involved. The stage director and the actresses are explicitly encouraged to use the text according to their own needs. To give another example; the writer and performer René Pollesch, who up to now has provided the so-called Free Groups with different kinds of text material, has been commissioned by the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg to write and stage weekly 'soaps' that will later be presented as video productions on the theatre's web site. There are many other examples that show that the reversal of the hierarchy between text and performance does not result in a loss of texts; rather, it has multiplied the possibilities and ways

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of writing for the theatre. Liberated not only from the obligation to construct plots and dramatic characters, but also from the need to write dialogues and to assign particular lines to particular 'figures', the texts themselves have become emphatically performative. They open up the possibility for a performance to give language completely new ways of becoming performative, of being articulated as well as of being heard. As a consequence, language on stage, speaking voices, will not only acquire new functions but an exciting new status and new importance as well.

Note

† It seems to be no accident that approximately at the same time when the hierarchy between text and performance was reversed, the relationship between ritual and myth was also redefined. While, in the 19th century, myth was held to be primary and ritual was only viewed as its illustration, scholars such as William Robertson Smith, James George Frazer, Jane Ellen Harrison and Emile Durkheim reversed this hierarchy. They tried to prove that ritual, as 'not simply a thing done but a thing *re*-done or *pre*-done' came first.[15] They understood and defined ritual in contrast to writing and text as the performative *par excellence*. Rituals do not have an impact on the participants because they represent something – for instance by bringing forth meanings that point back to the myth. Rather, rituals establish a community by way of performative acts, which all participants perform together with their bodies. Such a redefinition of ritual and the reversal of the hierarchy between ritual and myth which follows from it, can be regarded as part and agent of the performative turn that occurred in the late 19th century to early 20th century at the same time as the reversal of the hierarchy between text and performance in theatre.

References

1. A. Klaar (1918) Bühne und Drama. *Vossische Zeitung*, 30 July.
2. E. G. Craig (1911) *On the Art of Theatre* (London: Heinemann 1911) p. 138.
3. M. Herrmann (1918) Bühne und Drama. *Vossische Zeitung*, 30 July.
4. M. Herrmann (1914) *Forschungen zur deutschen Theatergeschichte des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung) part II, p. 118.
5. M. Herrmann, *Über die Aufgaben eines theaterwissenschaftlichen Instituts*, Lecture, 27 June 1920. In: H. Klier (Ed.) (1981) *Theaterwissenschaft im deutschsprachigen Raum* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft) pp. 15–24, p. 19.
6. W. Kliess (1966) *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 March.
7. B. Strauss (1967) Das schöne Umsonst. Peter Stein inszeniert 'Tasso' in Bremen. *Theater heute*, 5, pp. 12–16 and 13.
8. B. Strauss (1969) *Theater heute*, NR, 12.
9. R. Girard (1972) *La violence et le sacre* (Paris: Bernard Grasset); W. Burkert (1972) *Homo necans. Intepretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter 1972); J. Kott (1973), *The Eating of the Gods. An Interpretation of Greek Tragedy* (New York: Random House).
10. L. Wittgenstein (1969) *Schriften 1. Tagebücher 1914–1916* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp) pp. 144 and 166–168.
11. H. Müller (1983) *Herzstück* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag) p. 103.
12. H. Müller (1982) *Rotwelsch* (Berlin: Merve-Verlag) p. 110.
13. G. Schulze (1993) *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus) pp. 751–765.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

14. J. Roselt (1999) *Die Ironie des Theaters* (Wien: Passagen Verlag) pp. 113–144.
15. Jane Ellen Harrison (1962) *Themis. A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books. The World Publishing Company) p. 330. (First published in 1912 by Cambridge University Press.)

About the author

Erika Fischer-Lichte is Professor of Theatre Research and Director of the Department of Theatre Studies at the Free University of Berlin. She was previously Professor of modern German literature, comparative literature and theatre research at the Universities of Frankfurt/Main, Bayreuth and Mainz. From 1995–99 she was President of the International Federation of Theatre Research. She has written and edited more than 20 books and 125 articles, among them *The Semiotics of Theater* (1992) and *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre* (1992).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798701000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press