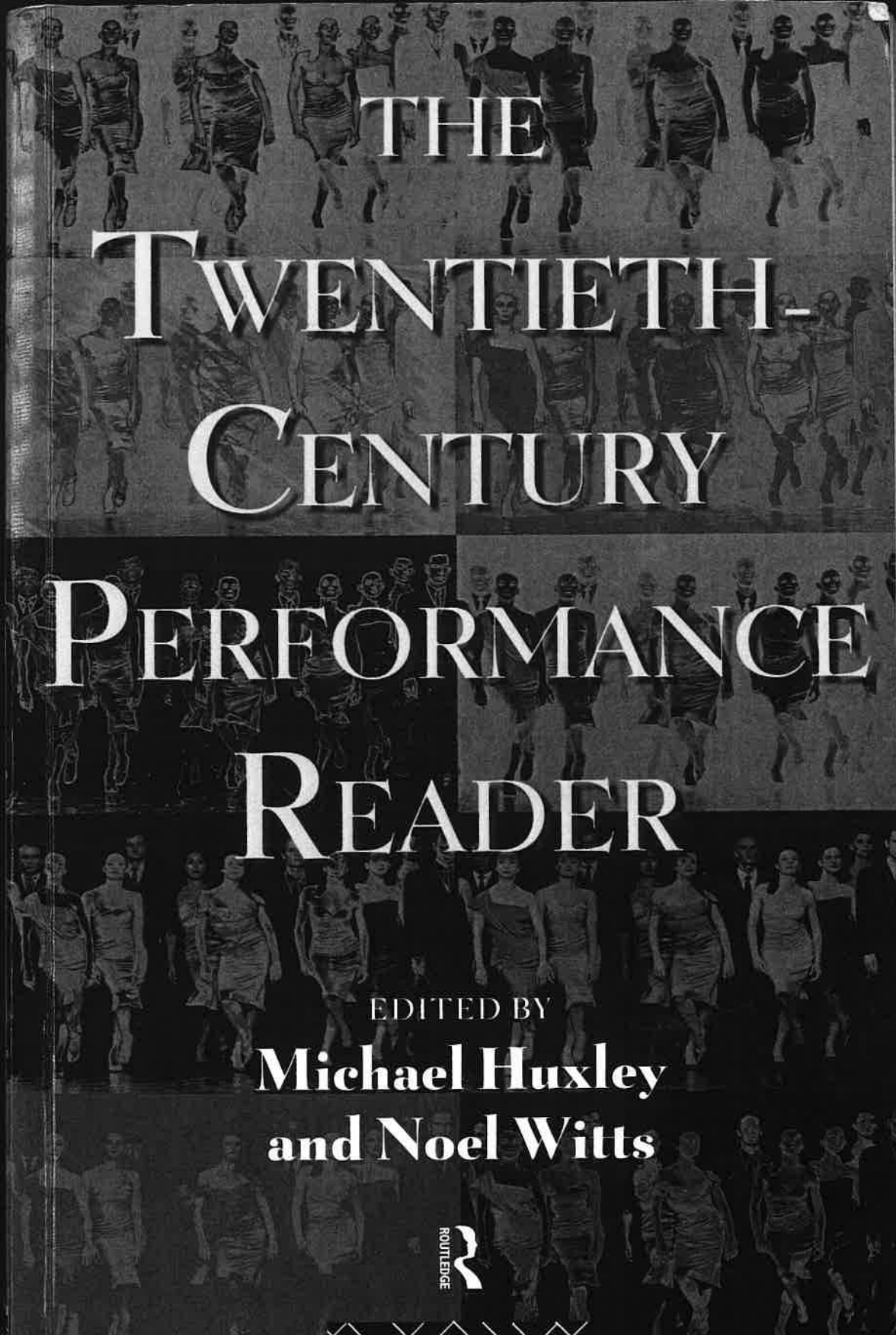




THE TWENTIETH- CENTURY PERFORMANCE READER

EDITED BY

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ROUTLEDGE


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ARGUMENT: TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

THE WORD *drama* is used in two main ways: first, to describe a literary work, the text of a play; and, second, to describe the performance of this work, its production. Thus, the text of *King Lear* is drama, and Shakespeare, as a writer, a dramatist; while a performance of *King Lear* is also drama, its players engaged in a dramatic activity. The acts of writing a play and of performing it are clearly distinct, as are the experiences of reading a play and of watching its performance, yet the word *drama* is equally meaningful when applied to either. Nor is the coincidence of the word accidental: for drama, as a literary form, is a work intended for performance, and, similarly, the great majority of performances are of literary works. It is true that we find, at one extreme, works which are cast in a dramatic form, but which are now very difficult or impossible to perform, and are therefore mainly known to us through reading; and again, at the other extreme, we find some performances which are not based on any written work, or on any complete written work, or which, if so based, are not accompanied by publication, so that we can know the work only in performance. These extremes are both drama; but the normal situation is that there is a work of literature, the play, which is intended to be performed, but can also be read, and which, in either case, we shall properly recognize as drama.

When a dramatist writes a play, he is not writing a story which others can adapt for performance: he is writing a literary work in such a manner that it can be directly performed.

Dramatic action

Drama can be further defined as *action*, which is the meaning of the original Greek word δράμα. *Action*, as a definition, can usefully indicate the method of the literary form, or the process of the theatrical performance. It must not be used, however, as if it were equivalent to a certain kind of performance, or a certain kind of dramatic substance. *Action* refers to the nature of the literary conception; to the method of the literary work; and to the manner of its communication. Further, because of the great variety of the dramatic tradition, it refers, at different times and in different places, to methods which differ, and which have to be distinguished. On the basis of the performances that have been considered, we can distinguish four kinds of dramatic action:

- (a) *Acted Speech*: the kind of action found in the *Antigone*, in the medieval plays, and in parts of the Elizabethan drama. Here, the drama is conceived, and the literary work is written, in such a way that when, in the known conditions of performance, the words are enacted, the whole of the drama is thereby communicated. Further, the literary form – the detailed arrangement of the words – prescribes, in the known conditions, the exact action. There is no important action that is separate from the words – ‘the poetry is the action’. The action is a necessary unity of speech and movement – ‘acted speech’; and where there are minor actions that are separate, these again are prescribed by the form as a whole, which is fully realized in the words, written for known performance conditions.
- (b) *Visual Enactment*: the kind of action developed from the separate minor actions of the previous form. Here, an action exactly prescribed by the literary form, but not directly accompanied by speech, is separately performed. When a performer enacts an emotion, in response to the speech of another, the beginnings of this method are evident. It is taken further, as in the final ascent of *Everyman*, when an action is made necessary by the speech of another. Finally, a situation that has already been defined in speech may be separately enacted, without speech, as in the duel of Hamlet and Laertes; or may be separately enacted, to the accompaniment of the speech of a narrator; or, in the simplest

example, may (be) performance. The various forms of *Well*, the form but the detail is rate enactment on a literary w

- (c) *Activity*: the ki time, is often there is no dir usually arrang dramatic speech them, and to j and so on. It action, but a words.

- (d) *Behaviour*: the movement ha separately, fr stances prese the dramatic speech, as w separate from and ‘setting’ rately inferre

The distinction of on matters of emp than one type, bu that we can under *The Seagull*, althc terms, also, that must be understo

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example, may (as in the early Elizabethan dumb-show) precede the full performance. This kind of action has been separately developed, as in various forms of dance-drama, and of ballet: in Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well*, the form of the hawk's dance is prescribed by the literary work, but the detail is determined by the actual dancer; in ballet, the separate enactment has become a whole art, and does not directly depend on a literary work.

- (c) *Activity*: the kind of action, as in *The Feast at Solhoug*, which, in our time, is often thought to be the *only* kind of dramatic action. Here, there is no direct unity of speech and movement; but the movement, usually arranged in a pattern of exciting events, is primary, and the dramatic speech exists mainly to give the cue for these events, to explain them, and to punctuate them by simple cries of alarm, warning, shock and so on. It is not a verbal design being communicated in a whole action, but a series of events being intermittently accompanied by words.
- (d) *Behaviour*: the kind of action, as in *The Seagull*, where the words and movement have no direct and necessary relation, but derive, as it were separately, from a conception of 'probable behaviour' in the circumstances presented. Words and movements often equally communicate the dramatic experience, but not in a design of 'acted speech'; the speech, as we have seen in the performance of *The Seagull*, is often separate from the 'acting'. The speech is prescribed, but the 'acting', and 'setting', and therefore the action as a whole must often be separately inferred, even where the conditions of performance are known.

The distinction of these four kinds of *action* is, it will be noted, based largely on matters of emphasis. We often find a single play containing action of more than one type, but the range nevertheless remains clear. It is in these terms that we can understand the essential difference between, say, the *Antigone* and *The Seagull*, although both are works of dramatic literature. It is in these terms, also, that the varying relation between text and performance in drama must be understood.

The relation of text and performance

Drama is commonly made of four elements: *speech* (in its most general sense, including, at times, singing and recitative, as well as dialogue and conversation); *movement* (including gesture, dance, physical enactment, and acted

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event); *design* (including scene, scenery, costume and effects of lighting); and *sound* (as distinct from the use of the human voice – e.g. music, ‘sound effects’). All these elements can appear in performance; what is variable is their relation to the literary work, the text. For example, in the categories of action already distinguished:

- (a) *Acted Speech*: when a text of this kind – e.g. the *Antigone* – is set in the known conditions of performance for which the dramatist was writing, the full detail of the performance is seen to be prescribed. Speech and movement are determined by the arrangement of the words, according to the known conventions; design and sound are again conventional, known to the dramatist from the conditions of performance, and controlled by him in these terms. In such a case, the dramatist is not only writing a literary work; he is also, by the use of exact conventions, *writing the performance*. Performance, here, is a physical communication of a work that is, in its text, dramatically complete.
- (b) *Visual Enactment*: here the relation of text and performance will vary according to the degree of convention of what is to be visually enacted. Where this is fully conventional (a precisely known action or pattern of movements) the text exactly prescribes the performance, by stage direction, or by necessary inference from the verbal design. In other cases, the text does no more than prescribe an *effect*, of which the *means* must be worked out in performance.
- (c) *Activity*: here, although the text may in a general way prescribe the action, the effect of the performance will usually be very different from the effect of the text alone. The physical action will take charge, and the words will be subordinate to it. It is unusual for a dramatist writing a play of this type to realize, in his own work, the full dramatic movement; and there will usually be scope for considerable variation in performance; especially since the movements will normally be a representation of events, detailed means of which will be usually left to performance.
- (d) *Behaviour*: here we find the widest separation between text and performance. The prescribed dramatic speech is ‘probable conversation’, and because in this there can be no exact relation between the arrangement of words and the method of speaking them, the performance will inevitably be an ‘interpretation’ of the text, and hence subject to wide variation. Movement and scene will be described in general terms, of which the detail is left to performance; but because they are under-

stood as ‘probable behaviour’ as to further variations of interpretation text of this kind is based less. This type, in fact, is often no performance’ than to the text be fully performed.

On the basis of these distinctions relation between text and performance have always to be understood in writing and playing. As a matter of course; we must always clarify the own time, the normal types of drama the necessary separation of text for granted, and, as a consequence literature and theatre. The separation but we must not allow ourselves drama. At first, we can say that ‘is important, as a counter to dogma express preferences between the the theoretical recognition, but a emphasis will tend to fall on the

We have been looking at method These methods acquire, at a certain in the structures of theatres, but limited in this way sets certain limits of drama. Without this inheritance periods of change the restriction last hundred years, most serious conditions, and many of them have been settled and frustrating establishment of the important new work has

Yet we must not put our view on established structures and conventions negative a way. The only positive focused, an imprecise, creative expression the profound relation between particular views of reality. In e:

stood as 'probable behaviour' and 'probable setting', they will be subject to further variations of interpretation. Indeed, the performance of a text of this kind is based less on the text than on a *response to the text*. This type, in fact, is often nearer to 'a story which others adapt for performance' than to the text which has only to be communicated to be fully performed.

On the basis of these distinctions, it is evident that there is no constant relation between text and performance in drama. Moreover, the variations have always to be understood in terms of changing methods of dramatic writing and playing. As a matter of theory, the variations have to be recognized; we must always clarify the alternative areas of fact. Because, in our own time, the normal types of dramatic action are 'activity' and 'behaviour', the necessary separation of text and performance has often been taken for granted, and, as a consequence, a separation has been assumed between literature and theatre. The separation is real, in much of our own drama; but we must not allow ourselves to be persuaded that it is inherent in all drama. At first, we can say that 'here it is so, and there not so', and this is important, as a counter to dogma. But then, inevitably, we must go on to express preferences between the alternatives. We must make, not only the theoretical recognition, but also a practical criticism; and, in this, the emphasis will tend to fall on the dramatic problems of our own day.

Action and reality

We have been looking at methods of writing and methods of performance. These methods acquire, at a certain point, a material reality: most notably in the structures of theatres, but also in forms of texts. Any reality inherited in this way sets certain limits, indicates certain bearings, for the making of drama. Without this inheritance, the drama could not work at all, but in periods of change the restrictions can be very obvious. In fact, during the last hundred years, most serious dramatists have complained of these restrictions, and many of them have been in active revolt against what seemed a settled and frustrating establishment. Out of the energy of this revolt, most of the important new work has come.

Yet we must not put our whole emphasis on this revolt against established structures and conventions. For if we do, we are describing it in too negative a way. The only positive description we shall be left with is an unfocused, an imprecise, creative energy. What has always to be emphasized is the profound relation between methods of writing and performance and particular views of reality. In each generation, the old methods are called

conventional, but in an art like the drama the successful new method is in itself a convention. The writing and performance of drama depends on that kind of agreement – it need not altogether be prior agreement; it can be reached in the act itself – on the nature of the action being presented. What is called conventional, in the sense of an old routine, is a method or set of methods which presents a different kind of action, and through it a different kind of reality.

An audience is always the most decisive inheritance, in any art. It is the way in which people have learned to see and respond that creates the first essential condition for drama. Thus we often take for granted that any audience will understand the highly conventional nature of any dramatic performance: that the action inhabits its own dimension, and is in that sense different from other kinds of action. Yet it is not only that in some other societies, where there is no effective dramatic tradition, we find that this very particular response – depending on very intricate assumptions, adjustments and restraints, as is obvious when it has to be stated theoretically – can fail to be made. It is also that even in societies with an effective and widespread dramatic tradition, there is great practical variation in the response itself. It is obvious, for example, in our own society, that there is great uncertainty about the reality, and the implications for reality, of certain kinds of dramatic action, and about the criteria, the references, by which the reality of any particular play should be judged. This uncertainty has been much more evident since drama became a true majority form, especially on television. It is easy to respond to this, and to the kinds of complaint it continually generates, with an apparent sophistication, derived from a particular and learned distinction between art and reality: 'it is only, after all, a play', or 'we are not so naïve as to expect a play to reproduce reality exactly'. But this is not much more than a class habit. The responses being argued, the references being made, often in very confused local ways, seem to any historian of the drama the permanent and essential and very difficult questions, with which the long history of the art has always been directly concerned.

The relation between a dramatic action and reality, that is to say, is not to be settled by a formula: by the effective dramatic methods, the conventions, of a particular period. Dramatic actions at once express and test the many versions of reality which are possible, and it is in the end a more serious response to a play to complain that a character 'should not have behaved like that' – since the relation between the action and the reality is then being actively weighed – than to retreat from such questions into some notion of aesthetic propriety, which in ruling out such a question would rule out also the major dramatic interests of the whole European tradition.

When the argument can be seen as an argument about convention, there is a possibility of moving on from what is often an angry and very local

confusion. But then to see the in a more open way, very si relation to reality. For a convoluntary technical choice. It valuations, interests, indiffere drama as part of life. Certain chorus in the Theatre of Di costumed actors on the furnis London. But we have then a depends on a whole set of ot on that selection of interests

This point bears both w tions, about the 'true nature' period. As we have seen, th in performance, is immense range is available to anyone be effectively rooted in expe and responding that are mo interests and possible ways

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The magnificent desi is to say, on an idea of des able. The same is true of i in that way is a critical fe design are widely variabl *Everyman*. The essential de and power, to love and d to go on to recognize that 'representation', in its m change from dramatic pr of a different and more revolution has been very

confusion. But then to see the problem as one of convention is only to raise, in a more open way, very similar questions about dramatic action and its relation to reality. For a convention is not just a method: an arbitrary and voluntary technical choice. It embodies in itself those emphases, omissions, valuations, interests, indifferences, which compose a way of seeing life, and drama as part of life. Certainly we have to insist that the masked actors and chorus in the Theatre of Dionysus at Athens were not less real than the costumed actors on the furnished set of *Caste* at the Prince of Wales's Theatre, London. But we have then also to recognize that the reality, in each case, depends on a whole set of other interests, responses and assumptions; in fact on that selection of interests and values that we call a particular culture.

This point bears both ways. It is useful as a defence against rigid assumptions, about the 'true nature' of drama, or 'effective theatre', in any particular period. As we have seen, the real range of dramatic method, in writing and in performance, is immense. But this does not mean that the whole of this range is available to anyone wishing to use it. On the contrary, a method can be effectively rooted in experience only when it connects with ways of seeing and responding that are more than 'methods'; when it connects with real interests and possible ways of seeing.

One lesson that we then have to draw is that some of the major drama of the past, which we can see to be superbly fashioned for its own purposes, is, while always available as art (the art of another period, to be consciously looked at) not at all available, in the same way, as a basis for new work. In practice, always, an apparent use of some older dramatic method is a substantial change of it, in a new context. Where it is simply transplanted (as in Eliot's drawing-room *Eumenides*) it is neither old nor new, and no effective convention is discoverable. And where, as has happened, an older method is wholly reworked – as in Brecht's reworking of direct address, from what had become localized as exposition, soliloquy and aside – it begins to operate in a new structure of feeling, and to have quite different implications and effects.

The magnificent design of a play like Sophocles' *Antigone* depends, that is to say, on an idea of design which is no longer generally dramatically available. The same is true of *Everyman*, where the willingness to see and respond in that way is a critical feature of the success of the method. Such ideas of design are widely variable, as is already obvious between the *Antigone* and *Everyman*. The essential design of *Antony and Cleopatra* – its responses to space and power, to love and death – is similarly particular. And I think we have to go on to recognize that 'design', in these senses, is radically different from 'representation', in its modern senses. There is a critical and revolutionary change from dramatic production of a design to the dramatic reproduction of a different and more locally human order of experience. The naturalist revolution has been very long; some of its elements appear, already, in the

transition from medieval to Elizabethan drama. But it was only when it was almost complete that we could see its full implications, which, were basically that human experience can be understood in solely human terms, and that what has to be dramatized is this human action, however local it may seem, rather than the setting of this human action in a version of divine or cosmic reality.

Certain essential changes of convention were made necessary by this new emphasis. These were part of the major and irreversible change from feudal to bourgeois societies: a movement away from intrinsic design, hierarchy, and a perspective that reached beyond man. But the bourgeois revolt was itself very complicated. At one obvious level, which seems to culminate in *Caste* and its innumerable successors, the emphasis was on man wholly visible in society, which then allowed a method of dramatic representation, almost literally reproduction, that had its own internal consistencies but also, obviously, its limits. Within this movement, and eventually declaring itself as its enemy, was an emphasis on man, on his private and social experience, which was simultaneously an emphasis on his complexity, on his lack of transparency, and so on the inadequacy of his ordinary external representations. This is the basis of the distinction we have already made between 'the naturalist habit' and 'naturalism', but it is also the basis of a very important connection between naturalism, in this full sense, and its successors, in turn its enemies, which, in expressionism, symbolism and the absurd, created methods which directly rather than indirectly dramatized the complex, the opaque and the internal experience.

This connection further allows us to see a point of great significance in any contemporary consideration of dramatic action: that these later experimental forms shared with high naturalism an unusual fixity and stasis, for which, in the naturalist habit (from the indicated pictures of *The London Merchant* to the picture-frame stage of *Caste*) the theatres were already prepared. The structure of the *Antigone*, it is true, had been built on moments of achieved stasis: the indications, the sculptured scenes, that we noted. But there the design, in the open theatre as in the detailed experience of the writing, referred the audience outwards, to an accessible order. The simpler *Everyman* could build this order, with God on his scaffold, as the dramatic locale. It was only in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and, significantly, in the whole drama of that period, that movement itself, the direct dramatization of historical action, could be made the basis of a dramatic method. And this is above all an action in which men are making their immediate history, rather than reacting to a history which is determined or being made outside them. But in the deadlock of high naturalism, and in the enclosed, static actions of the counter-naturalist forms which succeeded it, there has been, especially in the theatre, a progressive immobility, in most serious work. The stasis of *Waiting*

for *Godot* is in that sense a true the stage as a room: not just conviction that important real houses – to which report was out, but where the central is to society, but to people' – realism, was then largely a series of descriptions, insets, of what room and the stage. The second the room from the stage, but in which, so to say, those men feeling trapped and baffled by a dramatic form in which viewpoint on reality, and what of his world, within which

What is then interesting so radically extended the point for any of these underlying greater subtlety of detail in solve, technically, many of In a majority of cases, they still of the stage as a room beyond it. Or, in a different fully than on the stages of watching and shaping eye, figures within it.

These seem, now, the was that element of the history action was selected for an order to react to: as in medieval, neo-classical and matter, in our kind of writing, open conflict, the action version of reality as a whole

The mind seems to part of the dramatic tradition Solhoug and its many equal direct kind, has been constrained have to ask, I think, is what gated to the less serious action and no experience and enclosed. The fight of

for *Godot* is in that sense a true culmination. The first form of this stasis was the stage as a room: not just the triumph of theatrical carpentry, but the conviction that important reality occurred in rooms – the rooms of private houses – to which report was carried, from which people looked and went out, but where the central interest – what was called ‘what happened, not to society, but to people’ – was played through. Experiment, within naturalism, was then largely a series of indications, by atmosphere, visual devices, descriptions, insets, of what went on and what existed, beyond both the room and the stage. The second form of this stasis was indeed a clearing of the room from the stage, but its replacement by the drama of a single mind, in which, so to say, those men staring from the windows of a naturalist room, feeling trapped and baffled as they looked out at the world, were replaced by a dramatic form in which the stare from the window was the essential viewpoint on reality, and what was seen, in the action, was one man’s version of his world, within which he created figures to enact it.

What is then interesting is that the film and television camera, which so radically extended the possible range of dramatic methods, could be used for any of these underlying conventions. They could look into the room, with greater subtlety of detail in this face, this hand, this object, and they could solve, technically, many of the problems of inset, extension, visual device. In a majority of cases, they have done no more; the essential conventions are still of the stage as a room, with some mechanically extending movements beyond it. Or, in a different convention, the camera could be, more powerfully than on the stages of expressionism, symbolism and the absurd, a watching and shaping eye, which made a version of the world, and composed figures within it.

These seem, now, the serious uses, but we have to remember how deep was that element of the high bourgeois drama in which reaction rather than action was selected for emphasis. It is one thing to react when there is an order to react to: as in the quite different dramatic designs of Greek, medieval, neo-classical and some Renaissance drama. It is quite another matter, in our kind of world, to exclude decisive action – direct intervention, open conflict, the acts of building and destroying – from the dramatic version of reality as a whole.

The mind seems to move, at this point. For it is of course true that in part of the dramatic tradition, from the duel in *Hamlet* to the poisoning at Solihou and its many equivalents and successors, action, of an apparently direct kind, has been constantly dramatized and has been popular. What we have to ask, I think, is why that sort of action has been so commonly relegated to the less serious levels of drama: ‘blood-and-thunder’, ‘epic’, ‘all action and no experience’. It is true that most of it has been self-sufficient and enclosed. The fight or the chase comes up with a predictability, at certain

points in the action, which makes certain that however we respond to it at the time we have usually not seen or learned anything that we would want to remember: that no dramatic experience, in the full sense, as opposed to a temporarily exciting activity, has been created. But it does not follow that the mere exclusion of that kind of action – and so the resolution of all conflicts within the room or within the mind – is any greater guarantee of dramatic seriousness. The assumption that it is so has more to do with certain habits of our culture than with the intrinsic possibilities of drama. What seems to matter, as we begin to look at it in this way, is why that kind of action was separated from serious dramatic experience, until to go beyond the room, or beyond the observing mind, was not to go into the streets, the workplaces, the assemblies, but into what seemed merely noisy, busy and external. In the popular drama, we have stayed with the dramatization of crime, of historical actions, of adventure and exploration: significantly often in other places and other times, from the costume epic to the Western, but often, also, in our own places and times, where the action is visible and where it can be said to be, as in that regular metaphor, dramatic.

Action and writing

The problem of the theatre returns to haunt us. For it is the equation of drama with theatre that is now our most evident difficulty. In many theatres of the past, action of the most open kind could be written and played. But steadily, the walls were built: around the action, and around the whole performance. A moving and open art became relatively static and framed, and a quite different 'art of the theatre' was developed within these voluntary limits. A division occurred, between writing and action, which has become more apparent in each successive phase of this culture. One of the sources of this division was print: the attachment of writing to this static form, away from the human voices and movements to which it stood in a merely abstract relation. Another source, of a deeper kind, was a revaluation of action within the society. Certain 'representative' modes of dramatic writing seem to have developed, hand in hand, with certain 'representative' institutions for political action and decision. Near their most serious interests, most men learned to give up the idea of intervention, participation, direct action, even as a possibility, in favour of indirect, conventional and reacting forms. The desire for action was not lost, but was specialized to certain areas, away from central concerns. It seems paradoxical to say that the drama has lost the secret of action when Drury Lane, in the nineteenth century, could put on its stage a huge tank for a naval battle or lines for a train crash, or when commercial television, in our own period, shows every

night, in careful detail, running battle across a enacted, because they b Other things can be disc ular, any decisive actio condition, is unconsciou resolved by adjustment, or presented in a singu engaged with, strugglee been the source of the theatres, in which the a be seen as its temples. forms, repeated this e marginal spectacle or as after the French Revol but this drama never fo parts of the world som tized direct action, not giant set – but as cont their most serious exp any drama of our cent the streets, in assembl to which the actions r

Drama is always so ce in its methods cannot feelings, essentially, a While action is only i and sensation or in d serving those interest life of the individual, need but as a gener: The important chang say that they will all will come here and t

And it is then v kind of change. At writing actions, in a which the new arts

night, in careful detail, a bank robbery, a murder, a fight between spies, a running battle across a plain. But the truth is that *these* things can be enacted, because they belong in the margins of the society and the mind. Other things can be discussed, reacted to, but only rarely shown. In particular, any decisive action, in which men in general try to change their condition, is unconsciously ruled out. The social like the spiritual crisis is resolved by adjustment, in which the world can be rearranged in the mind, or presented in a singular distortion, but not, in the dramatic action, fully engaged with, struggled against, altered. This deep lack in the society has been the source of the dramatic crisis as of so much else. Our enclosed theatres, in which the acts of adjustment grow constantly in refinement, can be seen as its temples. Film and television, inherently more open and active forms, repeated this essential process, in a majority of cases: whether as marginal spectacle or as enclosed adjustment. Briefly, in the Romantic drama, after the French Revolution, action was forced back into dramatic writing, but this drama never found its adequate theatre. In our own time, as in some parts of the world some deadlocks have been broken, the cinema has dramatized direct action, not just as spectacle – the Drury Lane tank swollen to a giant set – but as contemporary reality, in which men move and decide, on their most serious experiences. Here, undoubtedly, is the point of growth of any drama of our century: to go where reality is being formed, at work, in the streets, in assemblies, and to engage at those points with the human needs to which the actions relate.

Writing a dramatic action

Drama is always so central an element of the life of a society that a change in its methods cannot be isolated from much wider changes. While people's feelings, essentially, are shut up in rooms, the drama will stay with them. While action is only interesting, because distanced and uninvolved, in crime and sensation or in distant places and times, the majority forms will go on serving those interests. While society is generalized, and separated from the life of the individual, drama will pursue contemporary reality not as a human need but as a general report, as in the rise of documentary as a method. The important changes will come together or not at all, but this is not to say that they will all come at once, in some sudden transformation. They will come here and there, as possible new actions and methods.

And it is then worth considering the problems of the dramatist, in this kind of change. At a certain point, as we have seen, dramatists stopped writing actions, in any whole sense, and either wrote a pattern of response, which the new arts of stage-management, naturalist acting and production

built into a performance, or sketched a general action – what is still sometimes called a scenario – which they would punctuate with directions, exclamations and the necessary minimum of information, the real action being staged by someone other than the writer, usually the spectacular producer or director. Plays became scripts: stories which others adapted for performance, whether of a naturalist or spectacular kind. And this convention, now, has been deeply learned; it is what is asked for; what writers exist to provide.

In the enclosed conditions of the theatres, a dramatist who goes in and learns the accepted rules can write a work which goes with the grain, and is in that sense complete. But the major difficulty is still that these rules are not just the facts of performance; they are the expression of a particular structure of feeling, a set of interests, valuations and indifferences. In some ways this is now breaking down, and there is an evident restlessness. Certain kinds of action can still be written there, especially when what is ordinarily an inert and conventional self-consciousness, inherent in recent theatre history, can be actively used, as in some of Brecht, as an experience rather than a method: an awareness of presence, challenge, alternative ways of seeing, participation, breaking the line between audience and stage.

But it is in a different direction from that of the majority forms, in cinema and television. There the drama can move beyond representation and mime, to direct production. For the enclosed sensibility, this is a loss of the meaning of theatre. For the newly open and mobile experience, it is an unparalleled opportunity, and the dramatist can, in new ways, write his action directly. Live performance, of course, is given up, and this is some loss, especially in terms of existing kinds of performance. But what is gained is the possibility of control, in the essential continuity of creation and production. A dramatic action can be composed, in its final form, in a way much more satisfactory than the apparent finality of print, which, as we have seen, turns out, in performance, to need radical reworking to become drama, unless, as in certain situations in the past, the conventions are so settled that the creation and the performance can be essentially written in a single text. Those settled conditions are unlikely to recur; they belonged with particular and now unavailable societies; only permanent companies, in this place and that, can offer, locally, any comparable integrity.

A dramatic action can then be composed, in its final form, by the use of the camera, in television and film. But in practice this is still very difficult, because of the transfer of habits from the theatres, and because of the quite new problems of writing which the dramatist encounters. To write an action, for this means of performance, is not simply to write a report of an action, or even its detailed description; it is also to write the movements as they are to be made, and simultaneously the ways in which the movements

are to be seen. To write action, and of course not is to be seen with the p had been separated, as a in a single form. Speech within this form, and ye in front of a backgrou scene and movement in

The difficulties ar tial notation does not y to 'the story which oth more often in practic figure. The writer who leave the new forms a and the commercial or already made an atmo: to run.

The opportuniti existence of audience: to existing theatrical dramatic experience: ences, of a more ope be done in forms mc – not only local rhyt stills and in actual w has to be consciously fear of 'creation by some actual cases ha form, very similar different from what mance. In these cor

I have taken the ar cism and recommen must always, in the tical details belong texts in performan needs to go, some mind and of begin

are to be seen. To write a 'scene', again, is not to write a general description, and of course not one or two static settings, but to integrate all that is to be seen with the primary writing of movements and viewpoints. What had been separated, as actors' movements and settings, must now be written in a single form. Speech, similarly, and any associated sound, must be written within this form, and yet, in another way, must contain this form: not words in front of a background, nor words accompanying movement, but words, scene and movement in a single dimension of writing.

The difficulties are enormous. As Bergman noted, some of the essential notation does not yet exist. And it is then possible for writers to retreat to 'the story which others adapt for performance', or for the writer-director, more often in practice the director-writer, to emerge as the dominant figure. The writer who is not a technician can then run for the theatres, and leave the new forms alone. The major expense of this kind of production, and the commercial or bureaucratic pressures which can bear so heavily, have already made an atmosphere from which many people involved have wanted to run.

The opportunities, however, remain. Not only in methods, but in the existence of audiences, not simply larger but of a different kind: untrained to existing theatrical conventions, and sometimes surprisingly open to new dramatic experience: to new relations, in fact, between dramatists and audiences, of a more open and public kind. Some of the essential writing has to be done in forms moving away from print: in writing and recording voices – not only local rhythms but more general rhythms and sequences – and in stills and in actual work at the place of production. This co-operative work has to be consciously learned by a writer. It is often avoided because of the fear of 'creation by committee', but it need not be always like this, and in some actual cases has not been like it. In a slowly and consciously assembled form, very similar in that respect to writing, co-operation can be very different from what is possible in a relatively sudden and separate performance. In these conditions the new methods can in practice be made.

Conclusion

I have taken the argument this far, from account and classification to criticism and recommendation, because a serious interest in drama in performance must always, in the end, move to what is now actually happening. The practical details belong to specific work: not methods but experiences: actual texts in performance. What begins, though, as a practical problem in writing needs to go, sometimes, into history and theory: as a way of clearing the mind and of beginning a discussion.

ARGUMENT: TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

What I hope this essay has done, in its several practical examples of plays in performance, and then in argument, is to show, by the facts of variation, not only the rigidity of existing orthodox formulas, but also the openings, the possibilities, and of course the restraints, in the existing situation. For any dramatic writer, the problem of the relation between text and performance is what he takes, repeatedly, to his table; what he has been taking, in such differing circumstances, for more than two thousand years. For any actor, designer and director, the same kind of problem – of moving the writing through to an actual production – is permanent, though in its very permanence, as for the writer, various, experimental, changing. And for readers and audiences, these varying activities and relations, though they may not directly work on them, are there all the time, so that what happens between text and performance is a continuing concern, in all that major area of writing and acting that is our traditional and our living drama.



Source

Williams, R. (1954, 1968, 1972) 'Argument: Text and Performance', *Drama in Performance*, Harmondsworth: Penguin: 170–188.

First published in 1954, revised and 'recast' version published in revised and extended version of *Drama in Performance* (1968) published by C. A. Watts.

Raymond Williams (1921–92)

Probably the major UK cultural theorist of our time, and certainly the first major British critic to consider the practice of performance as a necessary and integral part of the study of theatre. In his early book on *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952; later expanded to include Brecht, 1968), followed by *Modern Tragedy* (1966), he sought to put forward a critical and analytical overview of drama as a major European forum of ideas, but in *Drama and Performance* (1954) he broke new ground with a study of the relation between the script of a play and the physical performance of it. After a series of seminal books on the relationship between culture and society, all of which examined drama as a socio-cultural form, he returned to theatre in some of his last essays and lectures collected together in *The Politics of Modernism* (1989). Even so, it is only in *Drama and Performance* that he examines theatre as practice, and focuses on a series of key examples of dramatic literature from the Greek to the 'experimental', where he creates imaginative reconstructions of historical performances. In this analysis

he departs from both the literary and the rest of his work.

This final essay from the collection is named, namely that there is a chance to challenge the performance of that text, the standing of conventions by it, and ideologically important.

Reader cross-references

Barthes – a semiological, cultural analysis
Benjamin – an earlier, Marxist analysis
Brecht – a view of the importance of the actor
Schechner – for more recent work

Further reading

Williams, R. (1968, 1972) *Drama in Performance*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Williams, R. (1976, 1983) *Modern Tragedy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Williams, R. (1989) *The Politics of Modernism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

he departs from both the literary and the sociological approaches that inform the rest of his work.

This final essay from the book draws together the threads of his argument, namely that there is a changing relationship between what we call a text, and the performance of that text, which depends to a greater degree on the understanding of conventions by the audience. As such the essay is both historically and ideologically important to the development of theatre theory in our time.

Reader cross-references

- Barthes – a semiological, critical approach to text
- Benjamin – an earlier, Marxist approach
- Brecht – a view of the importance of engaging the audience
- Schechner – for more recent ideas on text

Further reading

- Williams, R. (1968, 1969) *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, London: Chatto & Windus.
- Williams, R. (1976, 1983) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised and expanded edition, London: Methuen.
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