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‘Diffused Performance and Core Performance of Greek Theatre’

My aim is to introduce some gradations in the application of the word ‘performance’ to the ancient Greek theatrical world, and to clarify some distinctions among current usages that are in danger of being confused or set in false conflict as though incompatible. ‘Performance’ is one of a cluster of terms that have in the last 50 years or so become extended far beyond their original sense in the related scholarly discourse: other examples include complexity, problem, text, authority, and, not least, theatre. Indeed the Basel conference was conceived as an opportunity to think about how far extended and diverse theatre-like and theatre-related activities were in the Greek and Roman world.

What I am calling the ‘diffused performance’ stands at one extreme of a sliding-scale of usages. This concept is not confined by any kind of hierarchy, nor limited to any particular theatrical occasion. The other end-marker, which I shall call ‘core performance’, is an event contained within the time and place of the *theatron*, and differentiated from the ambient world of everyday life. I shall maintain that the core performance, as distinct from wider senses of the word, conjures up for its public a crucially other world in time and place.

First, then, some highly simplified generalisations about the diffused sense of performance. In the last half century or so, there has been a gathering movement towards breaking down boundaries and binaries, presenting itself as a liberation from authoritarian norms and regulations. On a more theoretical level this is related in different ways to, for example, the performance studies developed by Richard Schechner¹ and to the ideas of post-dramatic theatre explored by Hans-Thies Lehmann.² Also in actual theatrical practice we have seen a breaking down of frames and distinctions between players and audience, between verbal and non-verbal, inside and outside the theatre-space, artifice and reality. This is a fact of contemporary theatre practices, and it is not the role of

¹ See Schechner (1977), (1988 [⁴2020]).

² See Lehmann (1999 [⁴2008]).

Notes: This is a revised version of the opening talk that I gave at the Basel conference. I have retained the somewhat colloquial and broad-brush character of that occasion, and have not weighed it down with academic detail and exhaustive bibliography. I am most grateful to Silvia Milanezi, Elodie Paillard and others there for stimulating communication. I further thank Silvia Milanezi for adding some textual and bibliographical references in the footnotes.

the pedantic professor to try to question or interfere in the enterprises of theatre-practitioners.

Retreating to the context of academic theatre history, however, the situation is rather different and open to scrutiny. The claim of the current tendency that I wish to re-consider is whether the broadening and diffusion of ‘performance’ somehow invalidates the notion of a ‘core event’ which has some special claims to attention. Performance in the broadest diffused sense may now be regarded as starting with first creative inklings, continuing through rehearsals, festival rituals, pre-play ceremonies; and then continuing on to responses, discussions, reperformances, and various receptions across genres and time. Within that long perspective any event mounted by players in front of a gathered audience in a designated theatre-space, *theatron*, becomes just one episode within a continuity. Consequently the particular attention claimed for it as somehow especially significant – as ‘core’ – is thrown into question.

Once we try to focus in on the actual practice of theatre-going in Classical Greece, whether the first performance or a subsequent reperformance, our evidence is regrettably thin. It can be agreed that the bulk of the audience gathered in the *theatron* in the morning and dispersed in the evening,³ but we cannot be certain whether or how far there was any kind of passing through a monitored entrance; nor how extensive the *prohedria* was and how controlled;⁴ nor how it was determined who sat where in the larger auditorium (first come, first served?); nor how the audience behaved while they assembled and waited.

And there is further lack of evidence about the exact programming of ‘the play’, in the sense of the pre-rehearsed show mounted by the players. Was it signalled that the play was about to begin, and, if so, how? It is said that there was a blast on the trumpet, but that comes solely from an anecdote in Pollux (4.88) about a comic actor who failed to turn up when summoned – clearly not fifth-century and very probably fictional. Then what happened in between the individual plays? And at the end of the show? How orderly or disorderly was the audience’s departure from the *theatron*? How did they disperse? The lack of attention given to these matters in our surviving sources is no problem for the diffused approach, since that breaks down distinctions between the players’ show and the surrounding societal activities and responses.

There is, however, one standard term encouraging this methodology which I would regard as misleading: that is the application of the very word ‘text’. This

³ On the audience, see Slater, N. (2002); Arnott, P. (2002); Roselli (2011); Csapo and *al.* (2014); Revermann (2017).

⁴ On *prohedria*, see Maass (1972); Gauthier (1985); Moretti (2000), (2014); Chanotis (2007) 61; Csapo (2007) 91–95; 110–115; Goette (2014); Moloney (2014); Le Guen (2014).

has become a standard term for the players' time-bound and place-bound show in the *theatron*, but that is a limiting anachronism which tends to diminish the actuality of the enacted play. For us the play may be a text, in so far as that is how scholars and students mostly encounter it; but 'the text' is only a transcript of the words, and does not encompass the sounds as delivered, let alone the enactment. And the Greek audiences most definitely did not think of the play as a written script.

My main thesis in this chapter is that the diffused usage of 'performance', with the associated downgrading of the show in the *theatron* to 'the text', neglects two important things that we *do* know about the theatre-event in Classical Greece. These are features that were the case both at the first showing and at subsequent showings – that is to say at performances and re-performances in the core sense. Neither of these features is normally the case in our contemporary theatre, and never necessarily so, as they were in Classical Greece.

The first is that every play was competing in an *agon* – or at least we do not know of any that were not. Indeed there was a set of combined *agones*, between *choregoi*, between choruses, and between actors, as well as between playwrights.⁵ An *agon*, if its validity is to be respected by the competitors and spectators, has to have some sort of or agreed guidelines, including the shared location and the distinct time-limits – the marked-out pitch and the referee's starting and closing whistles, so to speak. The competitive event has to be finite and framed off from its surrounding context. Just as all the ritual and other activities at the Olympic games were not part of each particular athletic event, so the pre-play ceremonies, after-play celebrations etc., were not part of the core performance. This means that there must have been a fairly distinct moment when the play began, and another when it ended. That is the core performance that was supposed to be adjudicated for the *agon*.

The importance of the *agon* is confirmed by the institution of the *proagon*, which was held some three days before the festival began.⁶ At this the *choregos*, playwright and actors of the three tragic 'teams', and probably the chorus-members as well, presented themselves in public without costumes and masks, i.e. as citizen individuals. So this was a ceremonial non-competitive event, a kind of shared overture to the *agon* proper. At the Great Dionysia in Athens there were also pre-play rituals and ceremonies held in the *theatron* in front of

⁵ On these topics, see Pickard-Cambridge (1968); Csapo/Slater (1995); Wilson (2000); Csapo *et al.* (2014).

⁶ On *proagon*, see Aeschin. 3.66–67 and Σ *ad* 3.67; Ar. Σ *ad Vesp.* 1109; Pl. *Symp.* 194a–b; *TrGF* V T1 IA 11.39–41.

the assembled audience.⁷ The extent of these ceremonies and the chronology of their introduction are open to much discussion, but, so far as we know, they only took place on the first day of the festival, and were common to all the competitors. In other words they were not part of the actual *agon*, the core performance.

The second distinctive feature of the core plays within the wider diffused span was the masks.⁸ So far as we know, every actor and every chorus-member in every tragedy always wore their mask throughout the whole course of every play. Even in Old Comedy, which is so pervasively metatheatrical, there is nowhere we know of where an actor takes off his mask in mid-play to reveal his 'outside-life' identity. The mask was evidently so essential to the activity of playing theatre that its integrity could not be breached or broken even by comic self-subversion. Some personnel without masks may well have been seen in the *orchestra* before any masked figures came into view – scene-setters, stage-managers and suchlike. They may even have also been visible on-stage sometimes during the course of the plays, but never with a role defined within the world of the play. The *aulos*-player was a special exception – but he was also specifically differentiated by costume and by the *phorbeia*.

Given the distinct signal of the mask, we might be inclined to say that the play began when the first masked figure first spoke; and that it ended with the last words delivered by a masked figure. That would, however, be to put an anachronistic emphasis on the *words*: I suggest that, for both tragedy and comedy, the 'core performance' began when a masked figure was first *seen*, and ended when the last masked figure went out of sight. This would be the case at the start of each play even when there is some kind of assembling or setting up of a tableau before the first lines are spoken. In such cases the players are to be imagined as having been there for a while, such as in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* or Euripides' *Heracles*. When I discussed these openings (more than 40 years ago!), I called them 'cancelled entries', but now I think that term fails to bring out the impact of seeing the first masked figures, even when they don't speak: so I would now prefer to call them something like 'set-up entries'.⁹

Along the same lines, I propose that the ending of the core performance was marked, not by the last spoken word, but by the final disappearance from sight of the last masked figure, nearly always the last members of the chorus. This may throw a different light on the closing lines of our plays. The choral anapaests which conclude nearly every tragedy, and are even identical for several

⁷ On this topic, see Giannotti in this volume, pp. 29–62.

⁸ On this topic, see Easterling/Hall (2002); Taplin/Wyles (2010); Halliwell (1993); Taplin (2018) = [*Scienze dell'Antichità* 24.3 (2018) 1–9.]

⁹ Taplin (1977) 134–136.

plays of Euripides,¹⁰ are usually dismissed as mere banalities, hardly worthy of the great dramatists. Whether or not they are original, as I am inclined to think they were, they have the function of leading into this closing movement of the exit of the last masked figures. It is notable how often these closing anapaests include 'closure words', including verbs as well as nouns, referring to completion or outcome.¹¹

The situation with the framing of comedies is broadly similar. They also were competing in an *agon*; and every participant character was invariably masked. But Old Comedy reveals an interesting, and characteristic, self-consciousness about its openings and closures (New Comedy would call for separate discussion). Several of Aristophanes' surviving plays allude to the audience or address the audience soon after the beginning,¹² setting up an explicit awareness that the world of the players has come into contact with the world of the assembled public. And towards the end of the comedies there are quite often allusions and encouragements towards victory, and even occasionally appeals to the judges, most persistently towards the end of *Ecclesiazusae* (1155–1162). A triumphant end to the comedy, such as in *Birds*, suggests a progress towards triumph in the comic competition.¹³

This leads on to some generalisations about the conjured-up world of the play, or, rather, *within* the play, as distinct from the quotidian world that the audience inhabits. The situation has interesting similarities and differences between comedy and tragedy. The world inside a comedy is not so distant in time and place from that of the audience, unlike that of tragedy: the displacement is more one of decorum, tone and fantasticality. The time in comedy is usually a kind of present, and the setting usually a kind of Athens, and the play enacts a kind of recognisable way of life, at least at the start. So the play enters into, and eventually emerges from, a reshaping of the everyday world of the audience.

Tragedy is very different in both temporality and locality. The moment that the tragedy begins, the conjured time becomes a distant past with all its heroic and epic associations. And the place becomes elsewhere (the Athens of *Eumenides*

¹⁰ See Eur. *Alc.* 1159–1163; *Andr.* 1284–1288; *Bacch.* 1388–1392; *Hel.* 1688–1692. See also *Med.* in which the chorus' first closure line is slightly different, 1415–1419. For another tragic closure, see *IT* 1497–1499; *Or.* 1691–1693; *Phoen.* 1764–1766. On Euripides' tragedies parting words, see Roberts (1987) 51–64; Dunn (1996).

¹¹ See πόρος (Eur. *Alc.* 1163; *Andr.* 1288; *Bacch.* 1391; *Hel.* 1692; *Med.* 1419) κραίνω (*Alc.* 1161; *Andr.* 1285; *Bacch.* 1389; *Hel.* 1689; *Med.* 1416); τέλλω (*Alc.* 1161; *Andr.* 1287; *Bacch.* 1390; *Hel.* 1691; *Med.* 1418) ἀποβαίνω (*Alc.* 1164; *Andr.* 1289; *Bacch.* 1392; *Hel.* 1693; *Med.* 1420).

¹² See Ar. *Eq.* 36; *Vesp.* 54.

¹³ See Ar. *Av.* 1706–1765. See also *Ach.* 1190–1234.

is an exception to some extent). The very ground of the *orchestra* in the tragedy becomes the ground of somewhere else – and it remains so until after the last exit of the last figure. This is one reason why it is crucial that the chorus as well as the characters belong to the time and place of the play, not to that of the audience, and why they too are masked.

Finally there was a concluding framing occasion which was, arguably at least, both an element in the theatrical *agon*, and yet also created a kind of overlap or bridge with the audience's world outside and beyond the play. Importantly, this took place in the *theatron* itself, with the audience still in place (contrast the *proagon*). What I have in mind is that immediately after the end of each 'core' performance, there was the audience's applause (provided the play had not been a failure!). There can be no doubt that this happened, although there is annoyingly little reference to it, even in Aristophanic metatheatricality. We can be pretty certain that the audience's appreciation was expressed by clapping. We do not, however, find the explicit call of 'ἐπικροτήσατε' (Latin *plaudite*) until Menander *Dyskolos* 967 (the same closing lines in fr. 908 K-A).

There remain some significant questions to which we would dearly like to know the answer. Did the players come back on stage to acknowledge the applause? We can't be sure, but it is surely very likely that they did, both actors and chorus. Did the playwright come on as well? And the *choregos*? We simply don't know, but I would wager that they did. This was, after all, a big opportunity for public attention and approbation.

This raises, finally, a question whose importance has not been generally appreciated: when the actors and chorus-members came on for the applause, did they keep their masks on, or had they taken them off? We have no definitive evidence, but I suggested that it is telling that all but one of the eleven members of the chorus included on the celebrated Pronomos Vase have taken off their masks.¹⁴ They are relaxing after their performance, and all of them wear the wreaths which signify their victory in the preceding *agon* (i.e. in the whole tragic tetralogy that has concluded with the satyr play). The other crucial indication is that all but two of them have personal names written by them – anthroponyms, whether they are real or made up. So they still wear their satyr-costumes, but they are clearly not still within the core play(s). They have taken off their masks, and, by revealing their faces, they show that they are back in their citizen-identity, back with their 'real-life' names.

If that argument is right, then it is evidence that the players took off their masks and held them in their hands for the curtain call. This is surely what we

14 Taplin/Wyles (2010) 255 ff.

would suppose even without any such evidence. At the curtain-call the players, actors and chorus, will have taken off their masks to signify that they were no longer inside the conjured world of the play, whether tragedy or comedy, but were back in the world of the audience. They are no longer the grotesquified figures of comedy, or no longer the lofty but often suffering – and sometimes dead! – heroes and victims of tragedy. They are citizens again, showing their ordinary, everyday faces.

By standing in the *orchestra* with their masks off, they also demonstrated that they are no longer inside the temporality and locality of the play-world: they are back in the time and place of the audience in the sanctuary of Dionysos at his festival. If this train of thought is right, it epitomises what I am trying to say about the two senses of ‘performance’. In the diffused sense the curtain-call applause is clearly very much part of it: but in the core sense, it is crucially outside the conjured-up time and place of the play. That world has evaporated – ‘melted into air, into thin air’ – once the masked figures have left the scene. The core performance is over: the diffused performance continues.