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INTRODUCTION

The conception and practice of performance have in recent decades been widely explored by critics, historiography and dramatic theory. From occupying a marginal position, performance studies have become central, and from initially being confined to discussion of the avant-garde they have come to reveal their own specific significance.

But the term performance has very indefinite boundaries. It alludes to a wide range of activities in both the arts and in the fields of social sciences and economic practice. It has therefore given rise to a broad critical reflection that explores it as a highly controversial concept.

It is as well first of all to get to the root of the word through the definitions of scholars, notably John Langshaw Austin and Noam Chomsky, who were among the first to study it in the context of linguistic theory. What points does it enable us to focus on, in relation to the interpretation of theatrical practice and more generally artistic practice today?

If we glance at the entries *performer*, *performance*, *performing* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the entry *performativo/constativo* in the *Dizionario di linguistica e di filologia, metrica, retorica* edited by Gian Luigi Beccaria, we deduce a decisive emphasis on the idea of “*action*”, which modifies the state of the speaker or the listener, or of both. It is an action performed by the speaking subject which is fulfilled as it is described. The utterance entails the performance of the action. Nothing could be more relevant to the theatrical action and event.

We can now proceed to examine the subject in more detail.

Richard Schechner, after long being active in the American avant-garde, was among the first to approach the problem with a series of fundamental studies. Guided by a wide range of interests, he eventually dilated the concept greatly, taking many Western scholars and artists with him. He proposed that performance should be seen as extending well beyond the field of the performing arts into ritual, medicine, sports, popular entertainment, and face-to-face interactions. He made it a centre of observation for understanding historical, social and cultural processes. In fact, in the English language and the culture of the English-speaking world, the term performance exists in technology, management and even finance, where it signifies, profit, a return on investment.

In an extended acceptance, performance therefore signifies all events involving a performer and a viewer (a religious service, an athlete's performance, or performance

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in a political debate). In the most general sense it indicates any activity that includes the presentation of rehearsed or preordained sequences of words and actions.

But to us today (and this is the purpose of these preliminary observations presented in this special issue), the problem is to indicate the boundaries and ask the correct questions in order to identify and understand an extensive and significant phenomenon to assess its scope with regard to the performing arts today, to comprehend the relations of continuity and/or discontinuity with the theatrical art of the twentieth century with its text-based dramaturgy, in order to understand its position in relation to artistic creativity in general.

How can we distinguish *performance* from *artistic performance*? What distinguishes the performing arts and within them performative theatre, which seems to be the dominant mode of the theatre of our time (and which some have termed postmodern or postdramatic, while positing the need to identify a more precisely defined category)?

To come closer to an explanation, we need to be aware of certain polarities that are active in performance.

Apart from that indicated above between the dilatation and circumscription of boundaries, equally important are the polarities of presence and representation, of reality and pretence, of actuality and possibility. And we have to assess the consequences of an imbalance towards one or other of the two poles in each of these pairs.

In the specifics of our concern here with the history of the theatre in the last three decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the new millennium, we register some of the stages in which the prevalence of the first of the two terms has led to a profound crisis in the concept of “representation”, leading in some cases to its rejection. Think in this respect of the reading of Artaud by Derrida, the experience of the Living Theatre, the developments of Grotowski’s Laboratory Theatre and Paratheatre, resulting in extreme deviations and radical breaks.

But if we hold firm to the inscription of the theatre in the horizon of art and return to the foundations of the ontology of art and aesthetics, reprising such basic theories as those of Aristotle, Theodor Adorno, Paul Ricoeur and Virgilio Melchiorre, we will see that it interests us precisely as representation, the locus of the possible, directed towards the world and reality, but not immediately coinciding with them. We will see that it is form, quality and symbolic depth.

In this way the theatre is not removed, sidelined, ousted from interest, but forced to embrace a rigour, a richness adequate to the times through the appeal of performance. In this way the encounter with a strong conception of performativity and the practice of performance existing on the boundaries of art and threatening to move beyond it endows the contemporary theatre with certain qualities, yet without losing the specific characteristics that serve to strengthen its grip on reality, its modernity, the need to be the mirror and conscience of an age and a virtuous and fruitful artistic practice, as in the highest seasons in its history, embedded in the fabric of the community, where it is an instrument for reading the present and planning for the future.

The time of performance in our field of study is embodied in the time of the *performative theatre*. Although it may seem tautological, because all theatre is performative in the strict sense, not as a literary genre but as an event acted on the stage before an audience, this expression has been adopted to define the specific trend of postmodernity.

What are its characteristics?

– In terms of “scoring for the stage” we find a “plateau à habiter”, as the French say, where the arts, languages and materials are woven into a total equivalence in the construction of the signs and meaning, even going so far in some cases as renouncing the “aura” and embodying the humdrum, the ugly, the disgusting, and cheap materials. Stag-

ings oscillate between the utmost simplicity, in accordance with the poetic of reduction in the manner of Beckett and Grotowski, and on the other hand the use of a multiplicity of artistic languages and expressive materials. But there is also an oscillation between presence and representation (“The Artist is Present” reads an incisive title by Mariana Abramovich), between truth and pretence (or fiction).

– In terms of the construction of the stage representation, this often follows the procedures of the laboratory theatre, a collective construct, or the construction of the sign modelled on the concrete reality of the performer. It expresses the loss of the ‘aura’ announced by Benjamin. In the age of performance this aspect is not so much a product of technical replication as of the decline of the Romantic and decadent idea of the artist understood as an extraordinary, irregular presence of life “inimitable” within society.

What is established is the idea of the artist as bard, performer, narrator and voice of the community and its conscience, with which the relationship is horizontal and necessary.

It reminds one of the ancient bards.

And this applies especially to the performing artist who performs in front of an audience, but is also involved with cinema of the young generation, i.e. the ‘cinema of reality’.

– In terms of the audience, which is one of the nodes of this form of theatre, it seeks an intense relationship and searches for various original and often provocative ways of involving the audience in what happens on stage. The audience, together with the actor, is the focus of this drama: “The reception is synaesthetic”.

An important factor in this respect is also the contribution made by expressive research, because live art transcends the barriers of language and particular conventions, reaching different audiences by raising their awareness of urgent issues of shared concern, in line with the orientation of the globalized world and integration between cultures.

– In terms of relations with other media, while discontinuity and rupture remain key characteristics, often controversially expressed, the media, technology and the projected image are accepted for their expressive potential, at times to film and enlarge from different angles the work of the actors on themselves in the act of dramatic creation (revealing details that would be lost in a frontal view alone), and at times used with other artistic languages to construct the image on the stage.

This type of theatre seems to be driven by the polarities indicated above, as well as others that I will add in a dialectical reciprocity that does not sacrifice either of the two poles, but fertilizes and enriches them both: reality/imagination, presence/representation, action/reflection, relation/vision; deconstruction of meaning and form / reconstruction of meaning and form; dissemination of sensations and declining subjectivity/ integrated subjectivities of body and mind; authorship denied because of the abuse of its authority/shared authorship; ephemerality/duration; the event burned out in an instant/accretion of experience.

Fundamental to this point is the focus on the performance of the actor or the author-actor. The performative value of the performance is all the more intense if what is said and done is credible because it is not separated, divorced from his/her person in the flesh. The actor is not only a sign that refers to something else, an allegory, but a presence heavily involved in what is represented and presented. What the actor says and does cannot be separated from who the actor is. This implication makes the actor believable. What he/she says and does gains in power through experience made tangible.

Each of the polarities indicated as values that emerge in the arduous work that theatrical art achieves are at the centre of the reflection of scholars in many academic disciplines today. Think of the studies by Martin Buber, Emmanuel Lévinas and Hans Jonas

on the theme of I-thou, the advances of neuroscience in studies of empathy and mimesis, or the great season of transcendental phenomenology for the theme of corporeality.

This foundational issue is touched on in the first part of the volume.

The second part of the volume is devoted to analyses in the field, which take recent examples of performative theatre in Europe, in various language areas and in accordance with a still limited sampling that will pave the way, I hope, for a broader and deeper exploration.

We explore individual linguistic areas and individual cultures, while bearing in mind that it makes more sense to immediately seek for convergences, especially since the time of performance is that of a globalized world, the interrelations are constant and the forms are shared between audiences and artists who travel, meet at reviews and festivals and on tour.

In addition to reconstructions of the individual performances of the codes analysed, the contributions probe the particular form and relevance acquired by the dominant characters of performative theatre and its problematic nodes.

The hypothesis, to be further verified with a broader range of cultural instruments, is that ours is, for better or worse, the age of performance, in civic and political life, in communications and in the orientation towards which live theatre is now moving.

The privileged interpreter of this development is precisely what we call “performative theatre”. Why?

1) because it is a way of raising of awareness and sounding the alarm on the themes and the positive and negative values of an era;

2) because as a language it is the homologue of the imagery of the artists of our time, trained after the 1960s in a visual, aural, medial culture, and no longer literary, as was that of the twentieth-century masters of text-based dramaturgy;

3) because it is a language that tends to supersede the barriers of speech and translation and is a homologue of the pressures towards globalization;

4) because it is a language open to the recomposition of the segmentation of art in the search for an “*Ars una*”, a “total work of art”;

5) as an artistic and cultural experience coherent not so much with the idea of neoliberal economics, but with the idea of the service economy characteristic of our time and which enables us to realize the importance of the focus on the audience-actor identified above.¹

It is true that we also have to meditate problematically on the risks and gains of

¹ The difference between the economy of material goods (agriculture and industry) and a service economy lies in the relations between producer and consumer. In the former it is mediated by an object with no need, therefore, of a direct relationship between the two; in the latter, on the contrary, the intangible asset (service) is expressed only in the producer-consumer relationship, in their presence: actor and audience, doctor and patient, lawyer and client... This relationship is more problematic in the case of banking services, which try to promote the belief (based as they are on the automatic bureaucracy of new information technologies) in a personal relationship between the bank and its customers, but in most cases they see the intangible asset (profit) rarely going the consumer and almost always to the producer (the bank).

Performative theatre is the artistic expression characteristic of a service civilization, because it is fulfilled not only with the co-presence but with the interaction, and at its culmination, with the relationship between actor and audience. And like any real service (one not based on false pretences), it cannot be short-lived, because the actor and audience emerge altered from each performance, hopefully better and more self-aware. It also expresses the secret of the wise use of time, in which even when we are not working we can improve simply by relating to others. We are not caught up in the logic of information technologies that are no more than that: sources of information. But no information is useful to those who cannot put it to good use, just as no wind is favourable to those who do not know where to go. The theatre is performative-formative through the actor-audience relationship.

this macro tendency in live art. The theatre has benefited greatly from its exploration of the theories and experiences of performance in the summons to authenticity-truth, the concern for reality, in the drive to move away from a tendency towards self-referentiality and closure in idiolects that are barely comprehensible, while promoting collective authorship through the complexity of the expressive codes and materials that make up the machine of meaning that is the stage. It has given rise to a performative theatre that is often very lucid and problematic in the diagnosis of the historical, cultural and anthropological situation in which we live, presenting itself as the critical conscience of an age (in its positive and negative values) and the role of the artist, committed, even when apparently anchored in a strongly autobiographical position, to the search for active culture in the reawakening of a sense of aesthetic and ethical responsibility and the rediscovery of the original vocation of dramaturgy.

However, there does remain a risk lurking in some extreme, borderline experiments: the abandonment of the theatre (and this would be the least of these evils) or the utmost reduction in the boundary between reality and representation and the insertion of the fiction-mask into reality without filters, resulting in serious damage. The imagination does not fertilize reality, but violates it by circumventing and eliminating language, the institutions that are the sedimentation of history and the structure that humanity has built up over time, a deviation that can be glimpsed behind certain political excesses or certain operations which have impacted the Web.

Yet despite the risks, the gains by this tendency in the theatre of what has been called post-modernity can be high and decisive. It expresses the need for an intense engagement, a strong involvement of the performers in what they present and represent. Performance tends to bring out and embody what a person has become or is seeking to become, shedding encrustations and superstructures.

The proposed analyses of performative theatre, which, in the large and undifferentiated landscape of performance, we have circumscribed to the perimeter of art, leads us to conclude that this form rather than being transient and questionable, as is sometimes said of performance, and in line with the so-called neoliberal age, is actually closely attuned to both the trend towards a globalized world and to the quest to rediscover the unity of the arts.

It aspires to create a broadly understood artistic language, not because it is elementary, but by its multiple codes and its depth of significance, through the presence-representation of performers who discover themselves and give their utmost, recounting themselves without pretence, truthfully and authentically.

SUMMARY

The idea and practice of performance in recent decades have been the broad focus of criticism, historiography and the theory of stage art.

Given that the term "performance" is indistinct in its outlines, this introductory note and special issue, which contains the proceedings of the conference "The Time of Performance", held at the Università Cattolica di Milano and which is intended to engage in preliminary reflection on the topic and the method of approaching it, begins by defining the field.

It focuses on what is called "performative theatre", whose characteristics are listed, still hypothetically, on the plane of its scoring for the stage, on the plane of its method of constructing the performance (tending more towards presence), on the plane of audience reception and the plane of the relation to other media.

The work also deals with foundational issues and the importance of this phenomenon in relation to the urgent questions that our age requires culture and art to face.

