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Critical Paper

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Tom Stoppard: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

or

How to Perform Performance Theory

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Tom Stoppard: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* or How to Perform Performance Theory?

A year before Peter Greenaway's film "Prospero's Books" had its first showing at the Film Festival in Venice in 1991, another British director, Tom Stoppard, was awarded the Golden Lion for his Hamlet adaptation "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead". Although both films differ considerably in their cinematic realisation, they have more in common than just their British origin, the timely proximity of their production and their place of first showing: both directors use a Shakespearean play to experiment with their "art of origin" within the medium of film. As much as Greenaway, the painter, appears to be interested in converting the Shakespearean text of the "Tempest" into a new "visual experience" (Lanier, p. 194), Tom Stoppard, the playwright, draws the viewers' attention to the characteristics of theatrical performance.

Unlike Greenaway, however, Stoppard does not try to convey a new perspective of the medium of film. Typical filmic techniques are rarely employed, nor further explored. But, on the contrary, many scenes could easily be transferred onto a stage. The only specific cinematic sequence takes place at the very end of the film: the last enactment of "Hamlet", the finale when Gertrude, Laertes, the King and Hamlet die, is depicted by short cuts of synecdochic actions: the ritualised greeting of the fighters, cut, the applause to Hamlet, cut, the goblet falling out of Gertrude's hand, cut, Laertes' wounding Hamlet, cut, etc. etc. As this sequence is the last performance of "Hamlet" after many more "Hamlet" presentations within "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead", Stoppard just acknowledges film as a further development of the dramatic arts¹. Yet what Stoppard does - and in this the film excels - is to demonstrate a whole range of perspectives of the medium theatre. Stoppard points out the differences between film and theatre, depicts the characteristics of live performances and by extending the meta-discourse on theatre which is already embedded in "Hamlet" discusses what theatre is or can be.

¹ After all, before "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" was made a film, the theatre play of the same title marked Stoppard's breakthrough as a playwright in 1966.

For a better understanding of how Stoppard actually achieves this result, the essay "Towards a Poetics of Performance" by Richard Schechner is a helpful device. Schechner's explanations about the ritual character of performance, its two-way communication possibilities, the doubleness of presence, the transformation processes and the embeddedness of theatre in culture are all smartly and highly amusingly exemplified in Stoppard's film.

In the very first encounter between Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and the Player, Stoppard takes us emotionally into the theatre. He refers to the rituals of "theatre going", or what Schechner describes by:

surrounding a show are special observances, practices, and rituals that lead into the performance and away from it (Schechner, p. 169).

In the film, the overloaded cart of the players unfolds to form a stage, the camera eye throws brief shots on details, synecdochic for the transformation of the cart into a stage, interspersed with close shots on Guildenstern's face mirroring well-known feelings of wonder, expectation and excitement about the things to come. All this is accompanied by dimming light and the sound of an orchestra tuning its instruments. Even as a film viewer, one is caught emotionally by this special theatrical atmosphere and is reminded of one's first visit to a big beautiful opera house as a child, or of the feelings just before finally seeing one's favourite artist in a performance.

Stoppard reminds the audience with this scene that the ceremonies prior to a theatre performance (or a concert or any other sort of performance) differ from cinema or TV considerably. In as much as one witnesses the necessary preparations for the performance - for instance the musicians' trickling into the orchestra pit, the noises behind the curtain deriving from last technical preparations etc. - one prepares oneself for the performance. The people gathered in a theatre "transform" into viewers, they become sensually aware of the fact that the play will be enacted for them, that the mood of both performers and spectators influences the performance and that they are expected to give some feedback. Schechner

defines theatre as a "two-way communication system" (Schechner, p. 173), which TV or film is definitely not - one just sits in front of a lifeless screen eventually.²

While in this first encounter with the players the emotional factor of a performance is pointed out, Stoppard exemplifies in many play-within-the-play scenes how performative skills can work to "transform the stage into many different places" (Schechner, p. 165). The film viewer is made aware of the characteristics of theatre: Stoppard juxtaposes the highly imaginary expressiveness of the actor's transformatory bodily skills to the visual capacity of film for a 'realistic' representation. Anyone who thinks that theatre is necessarily something artificial - and many will do so as we have very much grown used to the filmic mode of verisimilitude representation - will be reminded of the illusionary strengths good theatre holds. By the actors' skills, by creative designs and the choice of appropriate indexes the stage can be transformed into whatever environment it is to represent.

To give an example, I will describe just one such scene - the journey to England: the ship is artfully represented by a "living" figurehead - the torso of a scarcely clad actress, lying on the floor on her front, is held upward by ropes on her wrists, which are pulled from behind by fellow actors. By that a strong index is given and the shape of the boat is sketched. The men behind her are at the same time the crew of the boat as well as the masts holding the sail. The representation of a rising storm becomes perfect when these men lean their bodies alternately to both sides, more further each time, simulating the pitches of the ship. A wind machine supplies the right noise. When the storm sets in, two more actors come in rolling from one side of the stage and roll back again as swift as they came in. They seem helplessly driven by a greater force. This is repeated a few times and finally the whole stage seems to sway and no firm hold is possible any longer.

² If we refer to cult films, however, like e.g. "The Rocky Horror Picture Show", we understand that sometimes the audience is able to insinuate a two-way communication even with film. Cult and ritual actually refer to the same phenomenon and apparently the power of imagination in ritual combined with group experiences can become extraordinarily strong.

The film is actually interspersed with a lot more of such highly creative and illusionary scenes. Besides the similarities between traditional and modern theatre practices, which Schechner discovers amongst others in the "ability of one space to be transformed into many places through the skills of the performer" (Schechner, p. 165), Stoppard skilfully illustrates what the doubleness of theatre means: because the scenery is only insinuated and one just believes one sees a 'real' sea, a 'real' boat, a 'real' storm - at the same time one knows that it is only a play, it is illusion. One can approve of the technical skills of the theatre group at the same time as one is taken into the events performed. There is distance and closeness. The spectator is much more aware of the "temporary transformation" (Schechner, p. 171) than in a film with its 'realistic' tricks. The inevitable scenic alienation on the stage allows theatre to "maintain its double or incomplete presence, as a here-and-now performance of there-and-then events", and thus puts the audience into the position "to contemplate the action, and to entertain alternatives" (Schechner, p. 169).

Yet there is still another aspect to theatre: in his essay, Schechner explains the working of this process further by referring to Goffman's and Turner's findings. Turner suggests that any social drama follows a certain pattern of development and solution which can be found in most theatre plays (breach, crisis, redressive action and reintegration). Goffman, on the other hand, understands any social interaction as a role play of individuals - it must be rehearsed, repeated and performed. Thus Turner and Goffman reveal a fundamental link between theatre and real life. On the one hand this may not be astonishing and may hardly be worth mentioning as any art in one way or another tries to deal with human experiences and, it is true, the theatre also takes its input from real life. On the other hand, theatre is "the art that is most like life as it is lived in the real world" (States, p. 5).

Theatre is, in a sense, the quintessential repetition of our self-repetitions, the aesthetic extension of everyday life, a mirror, you might say, that nature holds up to nature. One wouldn't be likely to use the novel or painting as the key metaphor [...] because their imitations of human experience are conducted in a non-human medium. (States, p. 5)

Due to this fundamental similarity between life and theatre, a further dimension becomes essential to make the viewer in a way 'comfortable' and 'open to new experiences' - this is what Schechner's calls the "theatrical frame" or the "nesting" situation:

Conflict is supportable (in the theatre, and perhaps in society too) only inside a nest built from the agreement to gather at a specific time and place, to perform – to do something agreed on – and to disperse once the performance is over. (Schechner, p. 168/169)

This is another precondition to "enjoy deep feelings without feeling compelled either to intervene or to avoid witnessing the actions that arouse those feelings." (Schechner, p. 169). The characteristic doubleness of presence in theatre, thus reinforced, is as such a strong force to allow direct feelings and provoke reflection at the same time.

In regard to the "nesting situation", however, Stoppard starts to enact a double play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who at first appear like spectators, are outside the theatrical frame, their theatre experiences mix with their 'real' lives in the Shakespearean drama as well as with their efforts to act in "Hamlet". Although time and again they behave like spectators - they comment and speculate on what they see in Elsinore, they reveal their ideas about what good theatre is, they discuss theatre with the Player, etc. etc. - they are drawn more and more into the action and become a hybrid form of spectator, performer and character. This shifting of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern between the different levels in this play-within-the-play reminds us of the Brechtian alienation effect. Thus a further dimension is visible in the play: depending on which level the two protagonists are, a self-reflective identification of the actual audience - about their own function or behaviours, with their uncertainties about what to make of the play etc. - is partly provocatively enhanced, but at the next moment destroyed again. The viewer can no longer watch himself perform a ready-made role. Neither does he receive ready-made answers to what is right or wrong. Paradoxically, it is now on another level that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's permanent asking "what does all this mean?" is likely to be repeated in the viewer's consciousness.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in their quest for understanding what happened and what is to be made out of the things happening around them, again offer a parallel to Schechner's ideas on Performance Theory. The notion of "eruption" compares a theatrical performance to that of a street accident: "the event itself is absorbed into the action of reconstructing what took place" (Schechner, p. 158) and Schechner supposes "the questions asked in the crowd are those which Brecht wanted theatre audiences to ask of theatre" (Schechner, p. 158/159). Accordingly, questions play a central role in Stoppard's film, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* are nostalgic for the days when there were only answers and no questions; they play questions like other people play tennis, they rehearse the questioning of Hamlet, they look for the right questions and so on.

And all this is done in a highly amusing manner. Stoppard illustrates the versatility of traditional genres like tragedy, epic drama, comedy, farce, slapstick and pantomime, and produces a decidedly jocular mix. By using comic devices, he also refers to the Shakespearean tradition which even in a tragedy gave people the opportunity for relaxing laughter. Stoppard emphasizes the joy of playing and performing, and excellently intersperses his film with all sorts of jokes - from coarse farce to highly intellectual wittiness.

To summarize, Stoppard intelligently illustrates the richness of theatrical practice on a variety of different levels: sensual experience, technical skills, psychological mechanisms, dramatic structures, genre variety and last but not least references to other playwrights before him - obviously to Shakespeare, but also to Brecht as I have shown above, the Ancient Greeks, 19th-century melodrama, Beckett, Pirandello and so on ³ - are artfully interwoven in Stoppard's film. And although he probably did not read Schechner, as an enthusiast of the theatre Stoppard convincingly conveys Schechner's beliefs that theatre is deeply embedded in human nature and thus inevitably belongs to our culture. Once we

³ cf. notes in Stoppard p. 145-153

understand this, the film "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" becomes an impressive ode to the theatre.

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