

Performance: A Performance script

1. Lecture Notes by PROFESSOR WORDSWORTH

My chosen word for today is performance. A performance is a presentation—usually, but not always—presented to an audience. A performance can be a theatrical presentation, a discursive presentation, and/or a ritual which becomes a performance when the possible positional roles of an audience are acknowledged by the performer or performers. A performance can also refer to an obligation—an obligation to either challenge audience expectations or else simply satisfy or fulfill those obligations. The obligatory meaning of the word performance can also refer to a more intimate performer/audience situation—for example, student and teacher, or, in some cases, prostitute and client. Performance can indeed refer to forms and instances of role—play—sexual, psychological, etcetera, including combinations.

Performance exists on two levels—the functional and the spectacular. Functional refers to a competent or adequate fulfillment of expectations or obligations. Spectacular refers to a presentation in which the intended audience response should be one of wonder or awe, passivity and submission. The performer or performers belong in front of an audience because he/she/they are among an elite who can induce such a state of wonder or even worship among audiences—whether by virtue of these performers' physical artistic skills or by means other access to beyond state-of-the-art technology or by virtue of any combination of the above factors. Execution for its own sake encourages formalistic response or attitude among audiences—the spectacle is an end in itself simply because visually, sonically, whatever—atmospherically, adverbially—the presentation was spectacular. And at this point the functional unites with the spectacular—the audience's intention in paying for or commissioning a particular performance was to witness and experience a spectacle of spectacles.

A formulaic and formalistic confirmation of an audience's expectations is a denial of one of performance's more engaging aspects—namely the notion of "play." Musicians play in performance situations, not only with form, but

also with dynamics of interpretation. The same applies to actors, performance artists, academics, and even clergy-people! Obvious play with form and content should not have the effect of dazzling audiences into submissive roles; on the contrary such obvious play should engage those audiences into active or interpretive roles. But is such an interactive performance/audience relationship in fact possible with proscenium staging—whether that stage be a spectacular sculptural construction or any sort of old-fashioned podium?

(last paragraph needs to be transcribed?)

Professor Wordsworth is a media-artist and an authority figure on language and linguistics. He has recently been concerned (and critical of) the deployment of particular English-language words at variance from the historically grounded meanings of those words. Performance is one word he has resisted reducing to a grounded or essential meaning, if for no other reason that the fact that he himself is a performer.

II: A VIDEO DISCOURSE ON PERFORMANCE

Does performance essentially require a concept or notion of superiority on the part of the performer or performers?

Immersion in a crowd, the sacrifice of individuality, the thrill of belonging—all of these surrenders can be liberating. Freedom can indeed exist in slavery—slavery to a rhythm, to a look, or a uniform. Hostile crowds are usually terrifying: friendly like-minded crowds are variously functional, comfortable, extraordinary, demanding, rigorous, and exhilarating. It is possible to declare one's individuality in the context of the hostile outside world by submerging one's individuality within the context of the safely exciting world.

If you are in an economic position from which you will always have to justify yourself to others, then you have to perform. If you are in an economic position from which you will be above having to justify yourself to others, then you will be free to perform.

Performing in front of people is the grand solution for people who can't relate to other people. You don't have to

communicate to people when you are performing as opposed to conversing. You might have to allude to communication in order to achieve an audience's attention. But in fact, if you are already well established as a performer, then you might be able to avoid communication altogether simply because you are up there and we are down here. You might again have to feign communication in order to maintain an audience's attention but then, honey, that is known as performance.

A performer very frequently has to deal with the fact that audiences may objectify the performer from a different perspective than that from which the performer objectifies his or her self.

Am I "on" today? I feel expected to be "on" today. I am supposed to be performing—that I am expected to perform. Perhaps I'd prefer to observe. There are many for whom the choice is not between performer and spectator; it is go or don't go. Too weak to go, let alone be "on."

I would prefer to sleep. But I have such a convoluted schedule. However, my lover wants to play so then it becomes time for me to become a player or performer. At moments such as these I am grateful to have access to my pornographic imagination. Without it I am quite sure that I would be able to perform satisfactorily.

If you march in the parade then you don't see very much of the parade. If you participate locally do you as a consequence miss the big picture? While not march for a while and then observe perhaps even analyze the big picture.

A belief in performance for its own sake could lead to an individual's having a healthy disrespect for silly, stupid, and seemingly arbitrary rules, regulations, and standards.

Belief in performance for its own sake could lead to an individual's need to belong to a group for the sake of belonging to a group and to a need to be obedient for the sake of obedience.

I really don't understand performers who don't present themselves as being all-around entertainers. I'm aware of specialized markets, but then one tends to get stuck in those. Right? When you want to do something different

you've become fenced in by your limited audience. No, the best strategy is to be all things to all people. Not to be a general all-around entertainer is to be very self-indulgent and rather elitist. I'm personally offended when I walk into a performance forum—whether it be a concert hall, a night club or even an art gallery—and witness either some individual or some small collective indulging in what appears to be a private ritual that is completely incomprehensible to all but a very select or elite audience.

Yet, even though you might not only reject the performance mode of discourse but also eschew in-person appearances while favouring the written word, isn't recognition important to the writer as well as to the habitual or compulsive performer?

As for anybody who sincerely believes that audiences play havoc with performers' expectations or pretensions while cameras in contract confirm those expectations, all I can say is that such a person is a very naive person indeed. Cameras are at least a thousand times crueler to those who are under the delusion than they are immaculate than audiences could ever be!

The printed word requires an audience just as much as the spoken word does—let alone the almightily grand theatrical gesture.

After a while the novelty of being on display wore off. I didn't feel that I had anything to communicate through performance beyond the fact that I am a performer. That might be appealing on an aesthetic level but I need to appeal on more than strictly an aesthetic level. I began to think of performance as a big ego trip—very individualistic. Here I go again—placing myself up on a pedestal. Maybe I've become more communitarian than individualistic.

So. Why don't you engage in collaborative performance then? Just because your "philosophy" has shifted from individualism to communitarianism hardly means you have to give up performance. It could mean that you become a contributor or a collaborator. You're not much of a communitarian if you don't like other people enough to collaborate with them.

There are those who are always looking for something to justify their existence intellectually. Relatively simple emotional exchanges—not to mention extremely lucrative financial exchanges—are apparently not enough. Intellectual respectability is required—perhaps in order to maintain a necessary distance between performer and audience. What could give a performer the right to place his or herself on some sort of podium and charge a hefty admission price other than the fact that the performer is peddling some concept of pretension or superiority—whether it be superiority of looks and/or physical agility, physical and/or technical virtuosity and/or...

Why does it always have to be and/or?

Whatever. Therefore, the entertainment world is always on the lookout not only for academic justification but also for academic presence and/or participation. Academic performers can indeed become very hot commodities. An open space has been created for performers who take on academic camouflage or sell bad academics who hide their shabby research and ludicrous conclusions under the umbrella of "Hey, it's only a performance."

Disco music subverted the performer/audience hierarchy of both classical and rock musics. The audience in effect usurped the role of the performer—the audience became the performer.

The performative mode of discourse can allow paraphrase without fear of false attribution—one can posit something without necessarily having to believe in the position.

Since these jokers are always "on"—they are always performing, they imply without conviction that nothing they proclaim, exclaim, point, or articulate, should necessarily be taken at face value. But, I would counter suggest, that repetition of certain subjects and/or targets does indicate pejorative obsessions. I would suggest that clowns who attempt to manipulate the double standard of apparent theatricality disguising narrative sincerity should not be applauded but rather hissed at and informed that they are not funny but instead very fucked-up.

Are compulsive performers only capable of penetration?

To be a performer is to be open to different possibilities of penetration.

What do you mean you don't perform? You always perform. You never listen.

It's so easy to pretend to be an intellectual when you don't perform. You don't put your body and your soul out there on the firing line; you have the luxury of quote unquote analyzing performance and indeed all oral and visual presentations, except that your "analysis" is nothing more than cheap shots; your criticism is nothing more than a cynical dismissal from the point of view of a terrified voyeur who doesn't have the guts it takes to be a performer. It is just too damn easy to sit in the audience with neatly folded hands pronouncing judgment upon those who at least have something worth presenting to those who wish to be not only entertained but perhaps educated by means of movement, language, and above all, humour.

I have this terrible sneaking suspicion that no matter how much we might claim to disdain performance as being nothing but empty spectacle or performance as inarticulate sadism, it is human nature to admire virtuosity or grace or fluidity or whatever the best performers possess which prompts so many expectations to sit back in awe and exclaim; "What a fantastic performer!." I'm convinced that no matter how much we might intellectually disdain the idea of talent in relation to the idea of concept, people will always be seduced by obvious talent for its own sake. And nothing more and nothing less.

III. IT'S IN MY BLOOD (theme song for a compulsive performer!)

(dirge)

I've spent my last few years
Living in wide open spaces
Traveling at my personal speed
To all those faraway places
But no matter what I'd read
No matter where I'd go
A persistent voice would be beckoning me
ON WITH THE SHOW

(up tempo)

*It's in my blood
I can't deny it
It's in my blood
There's no point trying to hide it
I love the lights
I love the crowd
I love the band
When they strike up loud*

*It's in my blood
That showbiz flame
It's in my blood
I have no shame
I love the stage
I love the cash
I love the cameras
When they make that flash*

*Oh I thought
I'd retire and read some books
Oh I thought
I'd just let go of my looks
Oh I thought
I was so above it all
But now I'm back
And I just love it all*

*It's in my blood
And now I'm back on top
It's in my blood
And how I just can't stop
I love the lights
I love the crowd
I love success
I feel so proud*

It's in my blood (ad lib!)

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