An Introduction to Theatricality

A new study of theatricality would perhaps not be necessary if scholars could agree on what the term means and what it might imply. However, as the two opening sections of this Introduction will show, scholars have grappled long and hard with these issues, and I will consider a number of definitions and understandings while also drawing attention to their limitations. In the final section, I will propose my own approach to how one might conceptualize and investigate theatricality.

In the rest of the Element, I will examine nine different playtexts for how they articulate theatricality. These examples may encourage readers to adopt the approaches I have taken and apply them to their own choices in order to discover what an analysis of a playtext's theatricality can reveal about its relationship to itself and to the world beyond the stage. As will become evident, theatricality is often closely associated with performance rather than the plays that give rise to it. However, as the subsequent sections will show, investigating a playtext will help reveal how it negotiates the various facets I define as contributing to its theatricality. With this in mind, I will not be discussing live art in order to ground my ideas in a method best applied to the written word, but which can nonetheless extend beyond it.

And rather than talking about plays, I deliberately use the term 'playtext'. This has two advantages. First, playtext clearly prioritizes the words on the page, how they can identify theatricality, and thus provide a starting point to fathoming its implications. Second, playtext moves beyond an understanding of plays as drama. So, while many playtexts can be considered dramas, more recent examples exhibit qualities associated with postdramatic theatre.[1] The method outlined at the end of this Introduction applies to playtexts as a whole, and indeed, readers will find some postdramatic elements in the plays I have chosen for investigation.

My focus on playtexts, however, does not suggest a return to logocentrism, the belief that, in this case, the printed words hold an ultimate truth as to a play's meaning as a representation of reality. Richard Sheppard offers a useful problematization of this position:

> The signified of any text is not a unifying idea, principle, energy or repertoire, but a meta-textual dialectic out of which that text has been generated and which consists, simultaneously, in a set of problems and a set of responses.[2]

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[1] This is not the place to consider the differences between dramatic and postdramatic playtexts, but interested readers may consult my 'When is a Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 24: 1 (2008), pp. 14–23 for a more detailed discussion.

[2] Richard Sheppard, *Tankred Dorst's 'Toller': A Case Study in Reception* (New Alyth: Lochee, 1989), p. 9.

That is, meaning *only* emerges from complex interactions between the form, content and contexts of the text and those engaging with it. In the case of a playtext, the latter will include not only the readers or audience, but also the creative team and the actors. As will also become clear from this Element's sections, I am more interested in identifying theatrical processes in playtexts. Their meaning will continue to be open to debate.

A Troubled Term

Theatricality has been approached from a number of perspectives, and I will provide a brief survey here and in the following section, both to distinguish the different approaches from each other and to reflect on their utility as analytical tools. A frequent problem with the term is that its meaning is somehow assumed to be a given and so some scholars fail to provide a definition in the first place.[3] In addition, scholarly disagreement has meant that no single definition has ever been agreed upon, as Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. David indicate: 'Such a definition [...] would offer some much-needed clarity to a very confused situation, but the domain of theatricality cannot be located within any single definition, period, or practice.'[4]

Discourse on theatricality starts with Plato and his attacks on theatre[5] and continues off and on thereafter.[6] However, academic engagements with 'theatricality' start to emerge with the establishment of the study of theatre around the turn of the twentieth century. They were pioneered by Nikolai Evreinov, who published a series of works between 1912 and 1924 that were collected in English as *The Theatre in Life* in 1927. I will return to his ideas in the final section of the Introduction.

Around the middle of the twentieth century, it is sociologists rather than theatre scholars who began to probe theatre as a metaphor for the ways that people interact in society, suggesting that they exhibited aspects of theatricality. The best known was Erving Goffman, who wrote *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Here, he uses theatrical metaphors such as 'stage', 'character', and 'audience' to describe social interactions, but, by the end of

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[3] Remarkably, for example, Martin Puchner offers no definition of the term in a section called 'The Invention of Theatricality', the introduction to his book *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality & Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 1–28.

[4] Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis, 'Theatricality: An Introduction', in Davis and Postlewait (eds.), *Theatricality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1–39 (3).

[5] For an excellent discussion and interpretation of Plato's argument, see Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), pp. 3–10.

[6] See Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) for the classic account of the many and various criticisms of 'the theatrical' on stage and beyond.

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the study, notes that 'it should be admitted that this attempt to press a mere analogy so far was in part a rhetoric and a manoeuvre'.[7] In short, Goffman exposes the limitations of his own approach: a metaphor will always break down because it is not an analytical, but an associative category. All the world is clearly not a stage in any literal sense.

Theatricality was confronted head-on in Elizabeth Burns' book of the same name. Here, she introduces some key ideas that will feature in subsequent discussions:

> the understanding of theatricality depends on the perception of the two-way process whereby drama in performance is both formed by and helps to re-form and so conserve or change the values and norms of the society which supports it.[8]

Her approach hinges on the act of performance, but the performance itself has to be a special kind of performance so that theatrical elements can be perceived as such; it must be, in some way, ostentatious. She goes on to offer a non-essentialist understanding of theatricality: 'Behaviour is not [...] theatrical because it is of a certain kind but because the observer recognises certain patterns and sequences which are analogous to those with which he [*sic*] is familiar in the theatre'.[9] That is, as the theatre changes, so do the categories of theatricality in any given culture. This position is historically relative and depends on both the specific contexts in which theatricality is identified and the means through which it is exposed.

While Burns seeks to connect theatre and society in what she calls 'the two-way process', theatre scholars have been more focused on what makes theatre theatrical. Critical theorist Roland Barthes offered a simple formula: 'it is theater-minus-text [...]; it is that ecumenical perception of sensuous artifice'.[10] Two of the most influential international theatre researchers, Patrice Pavis and Hans-Thies Lehmann, agreed with Barthes that theatricality was, as Willmar Sauter puts it, 'mainly the business of directors. Within this definition, theatricality is more or less equivalent to what other scholars call *mise-en-scène*'.[11] Erika Fischer-Lichte elaborates on the four categories

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7 Irving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1969), pp. 9 and 246, respectively.

8 Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality. A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 3–4.

9 Ibid., p. 12.

10 Roland Barthes, 'Baudelaire's Theater', in Barthes, *Critical Essays*, tr. by Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 25–31 (26). Here and elsewhere, I have retained US English spellings.

11 Willmar Sauter, *The Theatrical Event. Dynamics of Performance and Perception* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p. 51.

required for theatricality to be invoked,[12] here neatly summarized by Andreas Kotte: 'The effect of the situation (performance) that develops from interacting bodies (corporality) is also recognized (perception), due to being structured in a particular way (production).'[13] Janelle Reinelt provides further commentary: 'reception is central [to Fischer-Lichte], since she believes that spectators must perceive that the process of using signs as signs prevails over their customary semiotic function in order for the process to be theatrical'.[14] Again, Burns' emphasis on a clear perception of performance finds itself embedded in these ideas.

Fischer-Lichte's attempts to define theatricality also hinge on the ways that the theatre uses signs: 'theatricality may be defined as a particular mode of using signs or as a particular kind of semiotic process in which particular signs (human beings and objects of their environment) are employed as signs of signs'.[15] That is, any given society produces particular signs and distinguishes itself from others in doing so. Theatre then reproduces these signs on stage. However, as Postlewait and Davis note, an attempt to systematize theatricality with reference to signs and their usage failed because the semioticians assumed 'that the dramatic and performance texts, with their thousands and thousands of signs, could be described as if there were one ideal spectator who would (or should) see and read all the signs (in accordance with the semiotician's model)'.[16] As such, this scientistic approach revealed itself to be something of a dead-end.

To conclude, briefly: scholars' engagement with the category of theatricality is broad and varied, to say the least. Some have tried to keep it locked in theatres, others to assay metaphorical connections to our everyday lives. At the heart of the matter is a problem of definition, and I will offer my own in the final section of the Introduction.

However, before moving on and because I am concerned with what playtexts might tell us about theatricality, a consideration of metatheatre may help us understand the connection between the two. Lionel Abel coined the term in 1963, primarily for plays, and Martin Puchner points out, 'Abel observes that

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[12] Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Verwandlung als ästhetische Kategorie. Zur Entwicklung einer neuen Ästhetik des Performativen', in Fischer-Lichte, Friedemann Kreuder and Isabel Pflug (eds.), *Theater seit den 60er Jahren. Grenzgänge der Neo-Avantgarde* (Tübingen: A Franke, 1998), pp. 21–91 (88).

[13] Andreas Kotte, *Studying Theatre. Phenomena, Structures and Functions* (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2010), pp. 231–2.

[14] Janelle Reinelt, 'The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality', *SubStance*, 31: 2&3 (2002), pp. 201–15 (208).

[15] Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Theatricality: A Key Concept in Theatre and Cultural Studies', *Theatre Research International*, 20: 2 (1995), pp. 85–9 (88).

[16] Postlewait and Davis, 'Theatricality: An Introduction', p. 25.

the term *metatheatre* is a subset of what should be called theatricality'.[17]
Richard Hornby offers a clear definition: 'metadrama can be defined as drama
about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some
sense, drama itself'.[18] The implications of this position have been much
debated.

Abel roots his understanding of metaplays in self-consciousness:

> all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized. By this
> I mean that the persons appearing on the stage [. . .] knew they were dramatic
> before the playwright took note of them. What dramatized them originally?
> Myth, legend, past literature, they themselves.[19]

Abel proceeds from an interesting position: that life has already been pervaded by
the theatrical, although he locates its source in literature and self-awareness. He
adds that 'in the metaplay there will always be a fantastic element', suggesting
that theatricality can only manifest itself in the playtext through features not found
in our everyday experiences.[20] I will dispute this idea in the Conclusion.

Hornby takes a more pragmatic approach and lists certain features of
a metadrama: the play within the play; the ceremony within the play; role-
playing within the role; literary and real-life references; and self-reference.[21]
These all point to the play's own constructedness and dispel any sense that the
play is in some way an unproblematic representation of an external reality. They
also draw our attention to how plays might work in that, for example, in a play
within a play, 'the relationship of the inner play to the outer play prefigures the
relationship between the outer play and the reality within which it occurs: life',
as Robert J. Nelson explains.[22]

Mark Ringer suggests three functions of self-consciousness in the metathea-
trical playtext:

> it served to express the depth of the play world; it defined the relationship of
> that world with the reality represented by the audience; and, finally this self-
> referential art allowed members of the audience to recognize the elements of
> illusion present in their daily lives.[23]

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[17] Martin Puchner, 'Introduction', in Lionel Abel, *Tragedy and Metatheatre. Essays on Dramatic
Form*, introduced by Martin Puchner (NY: Holmes and Meyer, 2003), pp. 1–24 (11).

[18] Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (London: Associated Universities Presses,
1986), p. 31.

[19] Lionel Abel, *Tragedy and Metatheatre. Essays on Dramatic Form*, introduced by
Martin Puchner (NY: Holmes and Meyer, 2003), p. 134.

[20] Ibid., p. 153.   [21] Ibid., p. 32.

[22] Robert J. Nelson, *Play within a Play. The Dramatist's Conception of His Art: Shakespeare to
Anouilh* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 10.

[23] Mark Ringer, *Electra and the Empty Urn. Metatheater and Role Playing in Sophocles* (Chapel
Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 12.

A dialogue between stage and auditorium is clear, especially in the final observation. Here, self-consciousness allows spectators to connect theatrical processes with those experienced outside the theatre. Postlewait and Davis add an extra feature, in that the

> metatheatrical condition also served as a counter-challenge to theatre's detractors who condemned the stage for its dissembling inauthenticity, for if it acknowledged its own terms of engagement, denying an expectation of belief, it cut detractors off at the knees.[24]

This openness, showing the workings, as it were, of the theatrical process, is understood as a key moment in a defence against antitheatricality, but also, when coupled with Ringer's final point, gestures towards why I am studying theatricality rather than metatheatre in this Element: theatricality extends beyond the theatre and asks some difficult questions about the nature of our social existence.

A Troubling Term

It may be difficult to find a single term associated with the theatre that does not appear in common English. People are accused of putting on an act; an event may be stage-managed; accidents are called tragedies; the curtain falls on a notable life. As Jonas Barish notes: 'with infrequent exceptions [as are my last two examples], terms borrowed from the theater [. . .] tend to be hostile or belittling'.[25] Our language pays testament to the difficulties of differentiating real life from theatre, and how real life seeks to distance itself from the pretence associated with theatre by disparaging the persistence of the theatre's presence beyond the stage. I suggest that the bridge between the theatre and life is represented by this Element's focus, theatricality.

The question of where theatricality starts and stops is a crucial one. For sociologists interested in the theatrical features of everyday life, metaphors allowed them to explore theatricality's reach without wholeheartedly committing to a too literal implementation of their ideas. Richard Schechner states that while Goffman provided the foundation for the edifice that became Performance Studies, he 'did not propose that "all the world's a stage", a notion which implies a kind of falseness or put on'.[26] The limits of the

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[24] Postlewait and Davis, 'Theatricality: An Introduction', p. 15.

[25] Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, p. 1.

[26] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, revised and expanded edition (London: Routledge, 2003), p. x.

metaphor help Schechner recover a sense of dignity and sincerity in everyday life.

The philosopher Bruce Wilshire also felt threatened by the prospect that the quotidian world was little more than an extended theatre. He is prepared to concede that, in public, the self plays roles and is subject to processes encountered in the theatre. His boundary, however, is what he calls 'offstage', more private moments with, say, loved ones or family, out of the gaze of others. He sets out the terms of the challenge of a pervasive theatricality, in that he seeks to test

> if an independent account of the conditions of identity of self offstage tends to confirm the convictions we hold in the theatre. If these conditions of identity turn out to be *theatre-like* then theatre as metaphor will have an excellent chance to grasp them. Of course, if theatrical metaphor in all its versions and ramifications turns out to be essential, then a strictly independent account of the conditions of identity of self will be impossible.[27]

The possibility that one is always performing undermines Wilshire's individualist position: 'The engrossing pursuit of authenticity lies in advancing and perfecting our individual reality.'[28] The reference to authenticity seeks to differentiate, like Schechner, between theatrical pretence and lived realness. I will revisit the problematic category of authenticity as a political issue in the Conclusion.

Fischer-Lichte is also keen to delimit theatricality by placing it solely within the confines of the theatre. Reinelt, who quotes an unpublished work by the scholar, states:

> Recognizing that theatricality applies to theater and to processes in culture and in everyday life, [Fischer-Lichte] wants to keep from blurring them together: 'For, if everything is "theatre", the concept becomes so wide that it loses any distinctive or cognitive capacity.'[29]

Here, the restriction comes from an anxiety concerning the utility of a term that can entirely permeate both the stage and the society that surrounds it; that it loses all meaning if it is to be found everywhere. I will return to this conundrum, later in this Element.

Another theatre scholar who has made a continued contribution to the study of theatricality is Josette Féral. She develops some interesting ideas that inevitably extend the applicability of theatricality beyond the stage. She begins by asking a fundamental question, a 'which comes first?': does theatricality

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[27] Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 138–9.

[28] Ibid., pp. 221–2.   [29] Reinelt, 'The Politics of Discourse', p. 207.

pervade the world or does it emerge from the theatre?[30] She then notes that a spectator can contemplate a stage set, empty of actors, and realize that it is different from reality, deriving the conclusion that 'space is the vehicle of theatricality'.[31]

William Eggington elucidates this claim in his study of the conditions under which theatricality escaped the trappings of the stage. The argument opens with his approval of the Spanish cultural historian Emilio Orozco Díaz, who 'describes Baroque space as involving a dynamic of profundity and the tendency of the spectacle to penetrate into the space reserved for the audience – he sees it, in other words, as the increased fluidity between spaces, the overflow of theatrical into real space'.[32] So, at this moment of theatre history, the stage is in such an intense dialogue with the auditorium that it is difficult to differentiate between the two. He continues:

> The constitution of a frame separating realities that are nevertheless susceptible to interpenetration and mise en abîme, *precisely because the spaces that comprise them are mimetically related*, is an essential characteristic of theatricality.[33]

As such, attempts to separate the stage from the auditorium and spaces beyond it are doomed to fail, and one has to accept that the representations one sees on stage may overlap with one's encounters elsewhere.

With this fluid sense of space in mind, Féral then observes that a person outside the theatre may observe theatrical qualities in someone who is not consciously exhibiting them,[34] perhaps in a certain way of speaking a sentence or making a gesture. She draws the conclusion:

> theatricality appears to be more than a property; in fact, we might call it a process that recognizes subjects in process; it is a process of looking at or being looked at. It is an act initiated in one of two possible spaces: either that of the actor or that of the spectator.[35]

As it happens, Féral's conclusion agrees with Nikolai Evreinov, the theorist writing in the early twentieth century:

> The art of the theatre is pre-aesthetic, and not aesthetic, for the simple reason that *transformation*, which is after all the essence of all theatrical art, is more

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[30] See Josette Féral, 'Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language', *SubStance*, 31: 2&3 (2002), pp. 94–108 (95).

[31] Ibid., p. 96.

[32] William Eggington, *How the World Became a Stage: Presence, Theatricality and the Question of Modernity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 78–9.

[33] Ibid., p. 79.   [34] Féral, 'Theatricality', p. 97.   [35] Ibid., p. 98.