

SIGNS OF PERFORMANCE

An Introduction to Twentieth-
Century Theatre

Colin Counsell



London and New York

SIGNS OF PERFORMANCE

Signs of Performance is a lucid and accessible introduction to the study of theatre as a signifying practice, focusing upon a range of key practitioners and movements of the twentieth century from Stanislavski to postmodernism. Colin Counsell addresses live theatre as 'readable', tracing a path from specific ideas and techniques through to the performance signs they produce, in order to examine the ways in which theatrical practices inscribe meaning upon the bodies, space and objects of the stage.

Eschewing traditional, abstract semiotic formulas, Counsell draws upon the work of a variety of theorists – from Saussure and Raymond Williams to Lyotard, Lacan and Patrice Pavis – to address theatre's unique signifying regime, its 'liveness' and the role of the audience. Theatre, Counsell argues, is inextricable from its historical, cultural and discursive contexts.

This straightforward, clear introduction assumes no previous knowledge of the subject or of the theories. It is the ideal starting point for undergraduate students embarking on the study of theatre semiotics.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is twofold, both to examine the theatre of the West in the twentieth century, and to bring to bear upon it the analytical perspectives that have been developed in recent years and which are now central to work in other disciplines.

The notion of 'the West' is, of course, to some degree an artificial one. No insurmountable material barriers separate Europe and North America from the rest of the world, the divisions are political and ideological. This is particularly so in the theatre, since so many seminal theatrical producers have drawn upon the traditions of the Developing World, particularly Asia. But when a Brook or an Artaud borrows from other cultures, the borrowings are always redefined; they are placed alongside indigenous artefacts, used in new ways, and viewed by western audiences from a western cultural perspective. Meaning, whether in the theatre or elsewhere, is always culturally specific. This book will focus upon western theatre because to do otherwise, to operate under the assumption that 'Theatre' is an activity pursued and understood in the same way by all, is both to misconstrue the processes of meaning and to overlook the distinctness of cultures, our own and others'.

'Twentieth-century theatre' is a vast area and no single text can hope to cover the variety of theatrical practices implied. The practitioners addressed are merely a selection, and an orthodox one, being composed largely of canonical figures who might be expected to feature at some point on most courses of theatre study. Each is influential and stands within a broader tendency, so that many of our observations will apply not only to them but also to practitioners who follow similar paths. Equally, each creates a radically different form of theatre. The book seeks not

to be exhaustive, then, but to provide some representative signposts on a wide and diverse terrain.

Being comprised of the better known and more influential figures, the group inevitably features many Dead White Bourgeois Males, since such have historically dominated culture. The purpose of this book, however, is to offer an alternative to the orthodox view of these cultural producers. To counter such an orthodoxy there are broadly two strategies available. The first is to unearth and draw into the centre of enquiry practitioners who have been marginalised, ultimately redrafting the boundaries of the canon to include those who offer different perspectives, or who originate outside of traditional cultural elites. This option has been pursued most successfully by feminist critics, who have done much to reintroduce women until recently written out of theatre history. The second strategy is to view the existing canon critically; that is, to analyse what practitioners have achieved as opposed to what they claim to have achieved, and to view their works and opinions less as the fruits of individual creative genius than as cultural objects, artefacts which inevitably partake of and reproduce the ideas circulating in the societies from which they originate. It is this second course that will be followed here. Of necessity this means concentrating on Dead White Bourgeois Males: to counter an orthodoxy, it is necessary to address it.

This project is not without its difficulties. Theatre is a performing art, a *live* art, and its liveness poses two obstacles to study. First, it leaves us with no recallable text, no convenient and definitive reproduction we can take away and examine at leisure. As an alternative to analysing actual productions, then, we shall examine the theatrical models which inform them. Theatre is a cultural space, and the existing blueprints for theatrical production that circulate within it provide the ideas and parameters within which practitioners knowingly or unknowingly think and work.

But theatre's liveness also impacts upon the way audiences interpret the event, and this is the second obstacle. It is simple to reproduce the conditions in which films, paintings or novels are 'read' since they are very similar for the analyst and the everyday viewer. As a performing art, however, theatre involves the simultaneous presence of both spectator and performer. We must therefore develop a theoretical perspective able to account for the liveness of theatrical performance.

THE THEATRICAL SPACE

How can we describe theatre as an artform, what are its characteristic components? Perhaps the first thing we expect of it is a plot or, more accurately, a *narrative*, a series of events and actions which succeed each other according to a causal or developmental logic. In contrast to, say, film this narrative will be enacted live, by performers who occupy the same physical time/space as the audience. Each performer will use their everyday expressive resources – voice, gesture, movement and so on – to construct a fictional participant in the narrative, a character, which will function as the notional author of the actor's words and actions. Visual and spatial arts – painting, architecture, clothes design – will be employed in sets, props and costume not solely to complement narrative and character but also to establish a fictional time and space conceptually removed from the real site of performance, a hypothetical other-place in which the action will be deemed to have occurred. The whole performance will take place in an agreed venue for representation, in which the spaces and functions of spectators and actors are strictly separated.

This list might accord with most people's conception of theatre. Yet during the course of the twentieth century, with its wealth of formal experiment in all the arts, the indispensability of each of these components has been challenged. It is debatable whether even the first and most conventional of Samuel Beckett's plays, *Waiting for Godot*, has a narrative in the accepted sense, whereas some of his later, more experimental pieces lack plot and development entirely. Beckett's works are built of a predetermined sequence of events and actions, of course, but this cannot be said of Improvisational Theatre. The obvious riposte is that Improvisational Theatre is not real theatre, but it is precisely the parameters of 'real theatre' that are at issue.

In many of Beckett's plays the actor's communicative resources are markedly curtailed. *Happy Days* restricts movement by burying its central character, Winnie, in the earth, while *That Time* limits the expressivity of the voice by having its character's words recorded on tape. In *Not I* all that is visible of the central protagonist is a mouth; not only are the performer's expressive powers minimised, but 'character' itself is called into question. Indeed, the twentieth century has seen our customary notions of

character challenged in a variety of ways. French theatrical visionary Antonin Artaud rejected psychological identity as a basis for character, populating his stage with figures who were fusions of primeval drives. Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre developed towards a form of 'ritual' performance in which the actors themselves were the dramatic protagonists.

Theatre has been performed in bare spaces and with minimal props since Aeschylus, and directors such as Ingmar Bergman have made this practice commonplace on the modern stage. It is questionable whether picket lines and market places, both familiar theatre spaces, constitute 'agreed venues for representation', but even if they do we must still account for the Underground Theatre. There the audience meets the actors at a pre-arranged place and time, and accompanies them as they travel the London subway system and perform eccentric actions. The show itself consists of those actions and the reactions of unsuspecting commuters. The commuters are not aware that it is theatre and as a consequence the necessity for both an *agreed* venue and a hypothetical other-place disappears into a maze of qualifications.

The very separation of audience's and performers' spaces was questioned by experiments with so-called 'Environmental Theatre' in the United States. By staging action in the audience's space, and moving among spectators to get from one site to the next, the Performance Group under director Richard Schechner violated traditional spatial boundaries. Of course, it could be argued that the Performance Group's actors carried the borders of their special space around with them, by virtue of the fact that they were to be 'read' in a different way from members of the audience. Thus with the very distinction between actor and spectator a *perceptual* division of space was effected. However, the later work of Polish director Jerzy Grotowski problematised even this. In his 'paratheatre', participants collaborated to create the event, each effectively acting both as onlooker and actor, and so rejecting the distinction entirely.

It might appear that one distinctive characteristic of theatre, the physical presence of its actors, remains inviolable, but this is not so. Once again Beckett acts as a kind of one-man assault against theatrical norms. The curtain rises on his play *Breath* to reveal a stage filled only with 'miscellaneous rubbish', and the action consists of a light rising and falling, coordinated with

the taped sound of breathing and of a child's birth cry. There is no story, set, hypothetical other-place, character, nor even a live performer. It is therefore perplexing that there are still clear grounds for viewing the piece as theatre.

How is it that, while a play such as *Breath* lacks so many of the features we deem characteristic of theatre, we still view it *as* theatre? The answer is that the event presents us with indications, signs, that it is to be addressed as such. If *Breath* were to be staged on a roadside, and without any further explanation, we would have difficulty knowing how to view it. But performed in a recognised theatrical venue, the circumstances themselves (the stage, curtains and so on, the arrangement of playing and viewing spaces, our foreknowledge of the building's purpose) would signal the identity appropriate to the piece. Indeed, the process of identification, of granting the event a given status, usually begins much earlier. We are likely to have read reviews, seen publicity material or at least have heard of Samuel Beckett before buying our ticket. If we inadvertently come upon a performance in a park or on a picket line, a host of other familiar indicators – the arrangement of actors/spectators, the way performers move and speak, the audience's passivity and so on – would tell us what species of event it was, and consequently how to view it.

Therefore theatre cannot adequately be defined with a checklist of its component parts. In 'recognising' theatre we perform what is essentially an *interpretative* act. We read its elements as 'signs', taking them to first signify the event's general cultural identity. The category 'theatre', then, depends on notions which we as spectators bring to the event, cultural 'frames' that tell us how it is to be addressed. All cultural artefacts are framed in this way. Be it a painting, dance, table or teapot, our recognition of the object/event brings with it socially derived expectations of how it should be read, what kinds of significance we should seek in it and how we should seek them. It is precisely because culture makes such frames available that theatre, like all categories of this kind, proves so malleable, for, once the correct identity, the correct categorisation, has been established, the production itself can interrogate it. This is how *Breath* challenges the category of theatre; it signals its theatrical status and so evokes expectations, only to disrupt them with its notable absence of narrative, performers and so on, subverting our customary conception of theatre *per se*.

The audience's interpretative role, however, goes beyond recognising theatre as a category. The audience is also active in manufacturing the meanings a theatrical event offers, for this too requires the spectator to use their cultural experience. In order to understand how theatre works, the meanings it constructs and the means by which it does so, we must now examine it and the audience's place within culture.

CULTURE AND DISCOURSE

We have described the spectator as a cultural interpreter. In our use of the term, 'culture' refers not solely to 'artistic' objects but also to the entire range of artefacts and activities that characterise a given society. This includes not only poetry and ballet, but also belief systems, language, the design of clothes and cars and consumer products, codes of behaviour and so on. The key characteristic of such products, the quality which makes them cultural, is that they all encode meaning. Cultural objects are readable.

That is not to say we perform a conscious act of interpretation each time we encounter a cultural product. Rather, 'reading' culture is part of the everyday process by which we operate in society. Because so much of that process is automatic, our activities can seem merely 'functional', but they in fact entail scrutinising the human world for meaning and producing meanings for others to read. This is the case with, for example, behavioural codes, those ways of acting that society deems appropriate to given situations. When in the presence of a social superior, say, a whole range of behavioural prescriptions come into play regarding proximity, gesture, posture, tone of voice, mode of eye contact and so on. These are not 'rules' that must be followed but *signs* to be 'written' and 'read', actions with conventionally agreed significance which are legible to both user and reader. Our social superior will use a different but corresponding set of signs, the two comprising a sign system, and with such systems we signify to each other, communicate our acceptance or refusal of given social positions.

Reading theatre involves a comparable process. Theatre proffers meaning not solely in its overt utterances – the character's words and actions, the 'author's message' – but also in the very form in which those utterances are conveyed, and we take

meaning from that form without necessarily acknowledging that we are performing an act of interpretation. Our reading, however, is never entirely free. The example of behavioural codes also makes evident the fact that such 'messages' are not personal to either their author or their reader. They are cultural, re-articulating meanings drawn from the social pool. Just as those codes express existing social relationships, and so offer meanings which parallel those of other cultural objects and activities, so theatre customarily deals in concepts that already hold cultural currency.

The critical term we may use to describe this encoding of social meaning – *discourse* – is usually employed in reference to language alone. When we speak of 'a discourse' we mean both a type of language and a practice of language. It is a *type* of language because it deals with a recognised subject area and, more importantly, because its reservoir of words and concepts already incorporates a view of that subject, of what it is, how it can be spoken of and thought about. Discourse does not describe the world but manufactures it, encodes a view of reality in the very concepts out of which it is made. Moreover, different discourses encode different views; the discourse of microphysics tells us that a chair is made up of atoms, whereas the discourse of common sense allows us to think of it only as solid.

However, discourse is also a *practice* of language because such acts of conceptualisation are never abstract. Discourse is an activity, a process of *making* meaning, and it does so using not ethereal 'ideas' but concrete words, material components of language articulated by real social individuals. These linguistic acts take place in equally material and specific social and historical circumstances. They occur, that is, within given cultural *spaces* – an office, a university physics department, a theatre – sites wherein distinct species of social relationship already operate. Produced and articulated in those real socio-historical situations, discourse is inevitably moulded by, and expressive of, the political relations that feature in them.

Thus it is in discourse that *ideology*, the systems of ideas by which elite social groups maintain their positions of power, is inscribed. We often conceive of ideology as composed of ideas consciously held, and this is to some degree true. But it also consists of ideas adopted unconsciously, ways of understanding our world which may seem entirely 'natural', simply 'common-sense',

but which in fact determine *what* we see and *how* we see it. Discourses do not reflect reality, they create it, each encoding a model of the real in the very terms of which it is composed. By controlling the mental tools with which human beings make sense of the world – by controlling their subjectivity – one effectively controls their ability to act upon the world. Discourse is thereby the medium in which ideology operates, and the means by which individuals in society, *social subjects*, are constructed.

We can best explain this process of construction by referring to the popular usage of the term *subject*. We commonly employ the word in two ways. In grammar the subject of a sentence is the active agent of events; with 'the boy jumps over the wall' it is the boy who does the jumping. In the second sense, the subject as topic – as in 'the subject of discussion' – it is the passive repository of intelligence brought from elsewhere. The critical use of 'subject' combines both these senses. The human subject is simultaneously the pad and the pen of discourse, the passive recipient of the concepts contained in it and their active reproducer in his/her actions and utterances.

Discourse, then, is not *imposed* upon the individual. Each of us requires a set of concepts to make-sense of the world, concepts which are shared and so permit communication. But when discourses are ideological – when they serve the interests of a ruling elite – their very concepts perform a political function, shaping our thoughts and behaviour, the way we view and act upon the world. The French theorist Louis Althusser termed this process 'interpellation' (for an excellent exposition of this issue, see Belsey 1980: 56–63). To employ a discourse – write or read, speak or understand it – the individual must adopt a predetermined position, as it is only from the vantage point of this 'subject position' that the discourse is usable and intelligible. However, in adopting that position, in assuming the guise of the discourse's 'I', the individual takes on the perspective and identity prepared for him or her. For Althusser, subjectivity is built of a matrix of these positions. The individual in society is 'hailed' by a variety of discourses so that one's identity consists of overlapping placements in language/ways of viewing the world. In providing the mental apparatus with which people function socially, discourse becomes not just a way of speaking/writing, but a way of thinking of and experiencing reality, and of conceiving of one's own place within it.

This does not mean that there is only one way of viewing the world. Societies are inherently pluralistic. Each is composed of a variety of social groups, distinguished on lines of class, ethnicity, gender and sexual preference at the very least. Nor is any one group defined by a single set of ideas and beliefs. As Raymond Williams has noted, societies are characterised by at least three ideological systems: the current ruling elites produce the *dominant ideology*, those coming to power adhere to the *emergent*, while the *residual* is held to by those whose formerly dominant position has waned (see Williams 1977). When we multiply these by the various peripheral and alternative world views that proliferate in modern cultures, it becomes apparent that there is no 'discourse', only discourses, and that society incorporates a multiplicity of conflicting ways to make sense of the world. Culture provides a public platform for different social groups and the discourses they champion, and so is the arena in which the political, *ideological* struggle between these takes place.

Discourse proper, then, is a concrete thing, existing as written and spoken language. This makes it a useful concept for the analysis of theatre because on the stage discourses and ideologies are further physicalised. They become aesthetics: styles and genres, techniques and practices, designs for sets, costumes and the hypothetical 'individuals' that are the characters. All these constitute ways of representing the world, and so, like discourse proper, offer positions from which reality is construed. We now need to examine how it is that theatre becomes the bearer of such constructions.

PARITY AND DISPARITY

Theatre, then, encodes meaning not merely in its overt utterances, its content, but also in its form. To understand how theatrical form is able to bear discourse, we require a way of explaining how the objects of the stage signify, function as *signs*. We therefore need a theory of signs, a semiotics.

The theory most often used in the study of theatre is a simplified version of the semiotics of American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914). Peirce distinguishes three kinds of sign: the *Icon*, where the sign resembles the referent, as the actor resembles a person or a stage table resembles the real thing; the

Index, with a causal or contiguous relationship to the referent, as smoke indicates a fire, a soldier's marching stride infers his profession or a knock signifies someone on the other side of the door; the *Symbol*, where the meaning is purely conventional and relies on the agreement of all parties involved, so that when an actor speaks the word *pig* we all understand that the sound refers to a particular four-legged animal despite its lacking any inherent quality of pig-ness (see Elam 1980: 21-7).

This simplified version of Peirce's theory (Peirce's complete semiotics is considerably more complex) is useful in naming the kinds of sign we find in the theatre, but it suffers limitations. In particular, it implicitly considers signs in isolation, focusing on the relationship between the single image and its sole referent. On the stage, however, signs are usually presented *en masse*, and it is *en masse* that we interpret them.

It is for this reason that semiotic paradigms of this kind cannot deal adequately with theatrical form, for *form* consists of different kinds of sign operating in combination, systematically. In the simplified Peircean view the sign stands-in-for an object in the real world, so that the relationship between sign and referent, the stage and reality, is one of simple parity; the stage reproduces the individual objects of the world and the meanings already attached to them. But while a marching stride does in some sense stand-in-for a soldier, realistic, surrealist and expressionistic versions of that stride offer the audience different views of the soldier, construe him in different ways. It does not merely stand-in-for the world but also constructs it.

An alternative semiotic is offered by the work of the French theatre semiotician Patrice Pavis. In his essay 'The Discourse of (the) Mime' (Pavis 1982) Pavis argues that the mime artist's first and most important task is to establish a code or 'key' by which the mime in its entirety may be understood. A pig, for example, cannot be evoked with a single pose or gesture, only when a consistent sequence of such 'attitude-images' cohere into a regime of movement. The first few gestures must therefore map out that movement, the pig's 'gestural universe', signalling to spectators the logic by which all gestures must be read and so enabling them to weave the sequence of signs together in their interpretation. Mime does not work by 'imitation', Pavis argues, but 'musically'; the signs do not relate solely to the referent, do not stand-in-for a pig, but relate to one another to form a

systematic 'language', and it is this integrated whole that evokes the pig.

At the same time there is another effect, for it is this very systematicity which indicates that the mime artist's movements are to be read in a way different from ordinary behaviour. The artist's physical presence onstage, in the same space/time as the audience, brings the world of everyday movements into the spectator's interpretative frame. But when the elements of the mime hang together a 'gap' opens up between that ordinary gestural universe and the gestures of the mime. The very consistency of the gestures signals that they are to be interpreted symbolically, not representative of the mime artist but of something else. When the artist is recognised to be doing something other than simply 'behaving', his or her movements are addressed as signs. This gap is maintained throughout the performance, creating a 'dialogue' between the mime world and the world of everyday movement, with the audience constantly making the comparison and noting the difference.

The performance therefore produces two simultaneous and symbiotic effects. By relating to each other systematically, the pig-like movements signal their difference from ordinary human gesture, while it is this very gap which prompts the spectator to weave them into a symbolic, readable whole. Perhaps the key word of the essay is *coherence*, for in Pavis's use its two senses come together; it is in *cohering*, binding together to form a language, that the mime's individual gestures and movements become intelligible, become *coherent*. The relationship between sign and referent, gesture and pig, is not one of parity, it is one of dis-parity, for the signs must signal their difference from the world of ordinary behaviour in order to cohere together and say something *about* the world.

In emphasising the systematic way in which signs function, Pavis employs not the semiotic model of Peirce but that of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the Swiss theorist whose work provided the basis for structuralism (Saussure 1974). For Saussure, the sign is composed of two parts, a material *signifier* (a spoken or written word, or an image) and a *signified* (a concept). There is no essential relationship between signifier and signified, no similarity or contiguity, only a culturally agreed link. But in culture they are joined inextricably like the two sides of a sheet of paper, so that the signifier immediately invokes the

idea associated with it. The sign, then, does not neutrally mirror reality but offers a conception of reality, for the concrete word/image always carries a socially agreed meaning.

For Saussure, however, signs can only operate as part of a system, for it is from the system as a whole that their meanings derive. Signs function like the colours in a spectrum of light. At one point the waveband of light we call 'orange' ends and at another the waveband 'green' begins, and since there is an area between these, we can confer upon it a name, a signifier, 'yellow'. Yellow does not exist as an objective entity, it is merely a name we give to an area the other signs have conceptually demarcated, so that the process entails both dividing the world into knowable units and granting those units meaning. Similarly each sign in a system ultimately relies on all other signs, both for the segment of reality it represents and for the concept attached to it. As a consequence the sign never functions in isolation, for it keys into, and brings with it, a whole systematic view of reality.

This for Saussure is the way in which human consciousness conceptualises the world. We do not passively perceive reality, we *make-sense* of it using sign systems, and those systems determine the kinds of sense we can make. The sign system operates like a grid held before the eyes; the world is divided up, quantified, into units with meanings attached, and each unit depends for its significance on its relationship with all the others. Thus the world enters the subject's consciousness only in a culturally shaped and mediated form. While the simplified Peircean theory implicitly viewed signification as the communication of *existing* meaning, Saussure views it as the *construction* of meaning.

This view underlies Pavis's analysis of mime, and we can use it to explain signification in theatre *per se*. Theatre, like mime, does not use atomised signs but signs which function together systematically. This systematicity places them in a relationship of *disparity* with the world of ordinary voice, movement, gesture and so on, signals to the audience that they are to be read to elicit symbolic meaning. They 'cohere', forming an integrated whole which is readable.

The principle of disparity explains how live actors on a physically present stage are able to bear meaning; it does not help us to decipher the particular discourses inscribed there, nor explain how they are read. As we saw, culture is composed not of a sign system but of a plurality of conflicting sign systems, a

diversity of discursive positions from which the world may be construed. To understand how a particular discourse is inscribed in theatre and, more importantly, how it is interpreted, we need to position the 'coherent' theatrical production in culture's discursive arena.

THE LAW OF THE TEXT

We do not, of course, view theatrical events in the same way as events that take place in, say, the street. In the theatre the audience customarily assumes that everything on the stage is a meaningful sign. This assumption of meaning is to some degree self-realising. The spectator searches for significance in everything presented and so tends to 'find' it, with the result that even accidental occurrences – a stage thrown into darkness when a fuse blows, an actor dropping a cup – are usually viewed as purposeful parts of the production until proven otherwise. The audience simply weaves such wayward 'signs' back into the fabric of the piece by interpreting them as if they had been created intentionally.

In addition to regarding all signs as meaningful, then, the audience also assumes they are intentional. The stage is viewed as an *interlocutor*, a partner in the exchange of meaning. The spectator therefore addresses the theatrical event not as a disparate collection of words, actions and images with a multitude of authors (playwright, director, actors and so on) but as a semic unity; that is, it is assumed to express one organised meaning and so is viewed as a single *theatrical text*. This is so even in performances which deliberately court schism and fragmentation, for the resulting contradictions and discords are themselves relationships, offering ways of weaving disparate elements together within a single meaning.

How then does the audience read the specific meanings inscribed into the theatrical text? Viewed objectively, the stage presents its audience with a multitude of signs. Each sign has a number of possible meanings available to it, for, as we have seen, societies are inherently pluralistic, composed of a variety of discourses, ideologies, sign systems and so on, each of which is potentially able to construe the signifier in a different way. There will therefore be great potential for contradictory interpretations for any element of a theatrical event.

But the audience addresses the stage as the site of one unified meaning, and there is less potential for diverse interpretations of an entire theatrical text than for any particular part of it. This is due to the sheer scale of the act of sense-making that is required. The decoding of a whole text will require that each of its elements be interpreted according to a single logic. Some shared and consistent potential for meaning must be found for all the parts, a semic 'lowest common denominator' to unify them. We can term this the *Law of the Text*. The Law of the Text is simultaneously the area of potential meaning shared by all or most of the event's elements, and the logic which governs their interpretation. It is this which gives theatre proper its Pavisian coherence, for, being the logic for the interpretation of signs *en masse*, it unifies them *in* that interpretation.

The logic of the Law of the Text, however, is not personal to either author or audience. It is culturally derived, drawn once again from the pool of existing social meanings. This quality, which enables the theatrical text to mobilise extant social meanings, is termed *intertextuality*. In its narrowest sense, intertextuality refers to one text's explicit quotation or inference of another. Thus John Fowles made intertextual reference to the conventions of the Victorian novel in his modern novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and Lawrence Kasdan called upon a whole tradition of *noir* thrillers, especially *Double Indemnity*, in his film *Body Heat*. But the principle of intertextuality has a much broader application. When reading any cultural text – a play, painting or advertising poster – we do not spontaneously create a means of interpreting it but employ the instruments our culture makes available. We call on our experience of other texts; not simply other plays, paintings and posters, but discourses and sign systems, iconographies and ideologies, using their logics to weave the work's parts into a single, coherent whole.

Thus it is not that texts perfectly communicate a theatrical practitioner's intentions. Rather, audiences and 'authors' – directors, actors and designers as well as playwrights – have access to shared discourses, and so can employ shared codes/logics in both 'writing' and reading; or if they do not, we can expect the audience's interpretation to differ markedly from the authors'. The meaning, then, is generated in the meeting of the theatrical text and the 'text' of the audience's culturally derived subjectivity. Just as the subject is 'hailed' by discourse proper, provided

with a position from which that form of language is readable/writable, so a particular form of theatre, with its characteristic repertoire of images and devices, prompts the spectators to draw upon his/her experience of other texts to find the discourse(s) with which it can be read.

This does not mean that every member of an audience will respond to a play in precisely the same way. The Law of the Text defines the terms and parameters of our interpretative activities – not the specific meaning derived but the *kinds* of meaning. In watching a piece of realism on the stage, for example, we may respond to the characters in a variety of ways, viewing each as good or bad or any of a thousand shades between. But if we are experienced with realism and competent in its reading, we will view them as 'fully rounded individuals', for that is one of realism's precepts, one of the assumptions of its Law of the Text. Even in a pluralistic society, where individual signs may be interpreted in very different ways, individuals across the range of social groups possess competency in many of the same cultural forms – are able to recognise a form and employ the appropriate interpretative strategy successfully.

We can illustrate the Law of the Text using the example of Expressionist theatre. The most familiar form of Expressionist theatre has a number of striking features: warped and architecturally impossible sets; lighting that casts deep, atmospheric shadow; little colour, with everything in black, white and grey – or else violent, garish colour; exaggerated and emotionally charged acting, with large, melodramatic gestures and *in extremis* facial expressions; a theme of liberation from parents, state or bourgeois respectability; a drifting, fragmentary narrative that slips from location to location and from one time to another.

Individually each of these elements might be interpreted in a number of ways. However, there is much less potential for diverse interpretation when we address them *en masse*, as parts of a single text. The semic potentials of the different signifiers meet upon the image of an extreme and idiosyncratic subjectivity, a para-logical and grotesquely distorted view of the world as seen by one 'tortured' consciousness. This, broadly, was the view of Expressionism, for it regarded the modern inner self as at war with the 'respectable', stultifying social world. This view was informed by certain of the discourses influential upon early modernism – psychoanalysis, Nietzschean philosophy and so on

– which enabled the spectator to read the theatrical text. If we as modern spectators can derive this meaning from Expressionist theatre it is because such theatre or such ideas are still a part of our cultural subjectivity. If we cannot, it is because those ideas are not available, cannot be mobilised as a Law of the Text, and we will effect a different interpretation or not be able to read the text at all.

THE ABSTRACT AND THE CONCRETE

The Law of the Text enables a theatrical event to function as a symbolic unity. This symbolic register was the focus of work undertaken in the 1930s by the Prague Formalists, who were arguably the first to turn an informed semiotic eye upon the stage. Terming their work 'the semiotization of the object', Keir Elam gives an account of their conclusions:

The very fact of [the object's] appearance onstage suppresses the practical function of phenomena in favour of a symbolic or signifying role. ... A table deployed in dramatic representation will not usually differ in any material or structural fashion from the item of furniture that the members of the audience eat at, and yet it is in some sense transformed: it acquires, as it were, a set of quotation marks. It is tempting to see the stage table as bearing a direct relationship to its dramatic equivalent – the fictional table that it represents – but this is not strictly the case; the material object becomes, rather, a semiotic unit standing not directly for another (imaginary) table but for the intermediary signified 'table', i.e. for the *class of objects* of which it is a member.

(Elam 1980: 8)

This accurately restates the Prague Formalists' view; in Jindrich Honzl's words, 'Everything that makes up reality on the stage ... stands for other things' (see Matejka and Titunik 1976: 74). Nevertheless the explanation is incomplete because it describes only one of theatre's registers.

Pavis points out that mime implicates two kinds of movement, the gestural universe of the mime itself and the world of ordinary gestures that is drawn into the spectator's interpretative consideration as a comparison. In this he describes a situation

unique to live performance. No artform truly constructs an 'illusion', for when reading a novel or watching a film we remain aware that we are experiencing fiction. But this is relative. In reading a novel we engage solely with language, while with a mainstream film our attention, our interpretative activity, is always bounded by the edge of the screen. When we are confronted with the real physical presence of the actor, however, we are reminded of the outside of the fiction. We are reminded of *artifice*; the 'author' is present and the event we see is a product of his or her authorial contrivances. Theatre is an 'uncomfortable' artform because its symbolic register is continually threatened by another, one in which theatre's fictionality, its meaning-making, remains overt.

It is these two registers that Robert Weimann examines in his book *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*. Even in its earliest form, the 'seasonal ceremonial', Weimann argues, theatre functioned in two ways, both as a mimetic representation of reality and as a ritual which was dance-like, offering no such illusion. Theatre continued to employ these two registers even in medieval plays like the mysteries and the moralities, but by that time they had devolved to two separate spaces. Illusionistic performance took place in the *locus*, a platform which was often raised on a scaffold, and which represented a hypothetical location, an other-place/time. This was the space of high-born characters and serious issues, and its mode of signification reflected that. Describing a stage direction that required a character to draw a curtain, Weimann explains,

in the medieval drama it is the symbolic functioning of the various *loca* that tended to distance them from the audience. Herod, sitting atop his scaffold, physically objectified his high rank and manner by means of a spatial distance that also facilitated the kind of representational *mimesis* implicit in the drawing of the curtain because of the illusiory need to 'rest'.

(Weimann 1978: 80)

For Weimann the features of the locus – its symbolic, illusionistic quality, the status of its themes, its real distance from the spectator and also its *conceptual* distance – operate together to effect a specific kind of signification. Raising the stage on a scaffold metaphorically separates the drama from the world of

the audience and its everyday concerns. Being thus 'elevated', the stage is able to deal with the 'higher' issues of religion and morality. Because such issues are abstract they cannot be represented directly, only by symbols; that is, the world is represented not in its everyday form, but in the terms of its theological Law of the Text, the categories and conceptual entities offered by its dominant discourse/sign system. Functioning symbolically in this way, characters, actions and props must therefore be translated into something else, with the result that the whole space becomes 'illusionistic'. Indeed, it is precisely this illusionistic and symbolic status which allows *realistic* depiction to flourish, because it permits one human being to represent another and the drawing of a curtain to indicate a motive. Theatrical 'illusion', therefore, does not involve any hallucination; the event signals that its elements are to be read symbolically, as parts of an other-place, and the audience does so in order to understand, to *interpret*, the text.

But Weimann also describes how a different register of theatrical signification was effected in the *platea*, the undifferentiated 'place' in which comedy was performed. This platea was an entirely 'non-representational' and 'unlocalized' setting, sited down among the onlookers. The platea dealt with the audience's everyday concerns, which could therefore be represented in their ordinary form, requiring no symbolic translation. Like modern stand-up comedy, then, the platea was not concerned to conjure an illusion. In close proximity to spectators and occupying no hypothetical other-place, the fools and clowns who played there did not need to maintain a coherent character. They could therefore step in and out of role and even address the audience directly, for with no illusion of place or character it was not necessary to hide the mechanics of meaning-making, the artifice, of the performance.

Historically the locus, the symbolic space, has often been signified by spatial and architectural arrangements. Raised scaffolds and platforms, picture frames and proscenium arches straddling the playing area, empty zones between spectators and the stage – these serve to indicate that the time/space of the performance should be regarded as separate from the ordinary social space of the audience. Like the plinth on which a statue is placed or the literal frame surrounding a painting, such 'framing signifiers' signal that the event thus isolated is special, the bearer

of symbolic meaning, and therefore to be decoded. Signifiers of this kind are not always necessary, for, as we saw, the Pavisian coherence of a performance is often enough to signal a 'gap' between it and the everyday world. But whether achieved through coherence, framing signifiers, or simply the conceptual 'frames' we bring to the event, the kind of space or register the production employs grants it a status, construing its utterances either as immediate and concrete (*platea*) or abstract and symbolic (*locus*).

Weimann's study ends with the Renaissance but his distinction is useful for conceptualising modern theatre, and we can illustrate this with the work of French playwright Jean Genet. With the 'ritual' form he develops in his plays *The Balcony* (1957) and *The Blacks* (1959), Genet walks an 'uncomfortable' line between the two kinds of theatre. *The Balcony* constructs a locus, an other-place where the plot occurs. This, however, is a brothel where characters act out their sexual fantasies, creating symbolic worlds within the playworld. We see them taking on roles, acting, and this reminds us of the real actors' presence. The play's 'illusion' is periodically punctured by references to how that illusion is created, so the spectators are made conscious of *The Balcony's* own theatrical sleight of hand, the mechanics with which it conjures its illusion. The audience becomes aware of both actors and characters, real place and other-place, and is required to adopt two contradictory postures towards the stage, to view it as both a symbolic locus and a concrete platea.

Theatre, then, operates in two registers. The first we shall call the *Abstract* register. In Elam's words, this 'suppresses the practical function of phenomena in favour of a symbolic or signifying role' and it is therefore bound up with the other-place of the locus. Being conceptually distanced from the audience, it functions on a symbolic level. It deals with abstractions – not the tangible and equivocal social world we experience, but a world already quantified, categorised, by the discourse the locus encodes. Thus it construes reality in terms of that discourse's symbolic entities: the stage table represents a general class of objects, 'Tables', the character of theatrical realism becomes a 'fully rounded individual', and the world of Expressionism is seen through the distorting eye of the repressed, subjective self. It is this very quality of symbolic transposition that enables it to be illusionistic. The stage becomes an other-place and its

objects become things of the playworld – the person is not an actor but King Lear – and this applies not only to realistic theatre but to all forms that foster an illusion, operating primarily in the Abstract register. But to support this illusion the Abstract must efface its own mechanics. The discourse of its Law of the Text must be the only interpretative logic, and the Abstract register must elide or reinterpret all signs that it is a product of artifice, a fiction.

The second we shall call the *Concrete* register. Here the person onstage is recognised as an actor and the table as *that* table. This register does not function symbolically, as its stage is not differentiated from the real, social space/time of the audience. Consequently its utterances have the same status of *provisionality* as any ordinary utterance, a result of our recognition that its meanings have been *made*. Thus it deals not in systematised symbolic categories but in the real material stage and the multiplicity of discourses found there. Its views are not abstract but partisan, told by a discernible teller. Manufacturing no illusion, its mechanics and fictionality can be admitted within the performance. That is, artifice must be accounted for in our interpretation of the text; we must make-sense not merely of the told but also the telling.

In most theatrical forms these two registers function side by side. They are antithetical, however, for the Abstract's illusion is threatened by the Concrete's overt artifice, just as illusion can potentially redefine signs of contrivance, give them other significance, within its Law of the Text. In privileging one or the other, or juxtaposing them as Genet does, a theatrical form determines how we address what it says.

THE DIALOGIC SPACE

All that we have examined makes it apparent that we cannot speak unguardedly of a production's meaning. Meaning in the theatre is always *made*, and one of its makers is the audience. This is true of any artform, but it is especially important in the theatre because there the audience is also in a sense 'created'. In its programme for Trevor Griffiths' play *Real Dreams* staged in the Pit at the Barbican, London, in 1986, Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company made explicit what is usually taken as read:

Please do not smoke or use cameras or tape recorders in the auditorium. And please remember that noise such as coughing, rustling programmes and the bleeping of digital watches can be distracting to performers and also spoil the performances for other members of the audience.

These proscriptions for audience behaviour are part of a larger protocol that most of us know. We are not permitted to eat or drink in the auditorium, particularly during the performance. Talking or making noise generally is frowned upon unless in response to the performers, and then only in sanctioned forms and at sanctioned times: laughter after a joke, applause at the performance's end. Movement is to be minimised, if not entirely eradicated. A particular position is to be adopted, and it is not acceptable, for example, to kneel up in your seat. One must face forward so that the eyes remain more or less fixed on the stage.

There are rules for behaviour in any communal area (and also for private areas, often legally enforced) and some of those listed also pertain elsewhere. There are practical reasons for all of them but, being social, such 'practicality' is always shot through with relations of power. The prohibition of non-theatrical activities, the alignment of the body and the gaze, the eradication of anything that might detract from stage utterance – together these work to determine our relationship with the stage. At the very least they indicate that we must view it as something with considerable cultural prestige, a space which demands uninterrupted interpretative scrutiny.

Such uniformity of behaviour, however, is always to some degree also a uniformity of response. Sitting quietly, still and in darkness, for example, we effectively remove ourselves from the readable whole of the event. That does not mean we overlook our own and our fellows' presence; rather, our behaviour *signifies* that the audience is *non-signifying*, excludes the spectator from the frame of what is interpretable so that the text consists solely of the fiction being enacted on the stage. Thus theatre's decorum of behaviour itself fosters an illusionistic locus, and a reading in the Abstract register. The effect perhaps becomes more obvious when we remember that until the nineteenth century the lights in the auditorium would have remained as bright as those on the stage, and spectators would have talked, walked

around, bought and eaten meals, and greeted friends while the performance was taking place. In adopting the appropriate *literal* 'position' required in the modern theatre, however, we have already performed an interpretative act, one derived from our culture and common to all members of the audience.

This emphatic uniformity of behaviour/response is exclusive to live performance. Viewers at an exhibition of paintings wander around at their own pace and read or overlook works largely as they will, while novel-reading is a solitary activity. Even in a cinema we are not constrained to the same degree because there are only other members of the audience to observe us. But in the theatre are live performers able to discern and judge our responses. The watchers are also watched and social pressure to sit silently, or laugh or applaud at the appropriate points, is very great. Theatre therefore provides a mechanism for group discipline and unified interpretation whose efficacy outstrips that of any other artform. Theatre may not lend itself to detailed consideration – one cannot turn back the page – but it excels at prompting audiences to adopt its viewpoint, because its behavioural decorum brings with it a decorum of interpretation.

The meanings offered by a particular theatrical event, then, are produced in the interaction between auditorium and stage. Theatre governs its own reading by establishing relationships, ways of viewing that enable the audience to make-sense of the theatrical text, and in doing so determine the kinds of sense that can be made. We can now use this and the other analytical instruments we have examined to understand theatre's distinctive signifying regime in total.

The theatrical experience is sometimes conceived as a kind of hallucination, with the audience actually believing that what takes place onstage is real. As we have seen, this is inaccurate. The audience of course remains aware that it is in a theatre, and so is able to appreciate technique, recognise the respected actor, and demonstrate group unity with laughter and applause. Theatre does not deal in 'belief' but in signification, creates not delusions but responses and interpretations. It achieves this by manufacturing relationships between the audience and the stage. The precise terms of any such relationship depend on the form of theatre involved, for each form requires the spectator to

respond with its own juxtaposition of Abstract and Concrete registers, and its own Law of the Text.

The relationship between the stage and the auditorium is one we may term *dialogic*. By this we mean that the roles of both partners in the exchange are defined relative to each other. The nature of the utterance from one dictates its mode of reception, dictates the range of responses appropriate to the other. Despite overstated claims for 'feedback', however, the power to dictate this relationship lies largely in the hands of the stage. In practice, a particular form of theatre signals to its audience how it must be interpreted, the kinds of interpretative strategies that must be used in its own reading, and so 'creates' its audience as interpreter. Different theatrical forms will therefore manufacture different audiences. Each form can be regarded as a distinct *interlocutor*, one partner in an exchange, whose 'identity' automatically offers a complementary role to its audience. The audience's role consists of adopting an interpretative strategy appropriate to that kind of theatre, a logic written into the form itself.

This indicates the *active* role played by the audience in decoding the text. Theatre does not *impose* a reading, any more than discourse imposes its view of the world. Rather, each form 'hails' the spectator, offers a position from which the text is readable. The identity of the stage as discursive partner determines the dialogic relations, and these relations include the appropriate interpretative strategies – collectively comprising the *interpretative posture*. The audience is willing and able to adopt that posture; making-sense of the production is, after all, what we go to the theatre for. It is not that highly illusionistic forms, for example, banish awareness of the actor's presence or of theatre's contrivances. Rather, these questions are outside the posited relations, beyond those reading strategies that have been signalled as appropriate. The audience, then, has to recognise, accept and put into practice the interpretative codes, and in doing so operates within semic parameters encoded in the event itself. Every form of theatre predicts a limited range of audiences as 'answer' to its proposal. To enter into these dialogic relations is to accept those parameters, to act in unison with other spectators, and so to become a member of an audience.

1

STANISLAVSKI'S 'SYSTEM'

SPIRITUAL REALISM

The term 'realistic' is often used as an ordinary adjective, as if the quality it ascribed to the novel, painting and acting performance were unproblematic, purely a matter of their corresponding to reality. Realism is thus seen as the style without a style, simulating what is real without altering it or adding any meaning it does not already possess. This is a misconception. 'Realism' more accurately describes a number of artistic movements that arose at particular points in our cultural history, where they paralleled other kinds of discourse, political, scientific and philosophical. Realism is always material – built of words, paint on a canvas or bodies speaking and moving through space – and so is always a *fabrication* of reality. In any of its historical incarnations, realism reveals a repertoire of themes and images which, far from being neutral, reproduce constructions of the human subject and the world it inhabits. But one thing that all forms of realism share is the misassumption that they demand of their reader/spectator that they merely simulate the real.

Constantin Sergeyevich Alexeyev, known as Stanislavski (1863–1938), is generally considered the founder of modern, realistic acting, not because he was the first to pursue realism on the stage but because he organised his techniques into a coherent, usable system. The international success of his ideas is due in part to their availability in written form. Although his autobiographical work *My Life in Art* (1924) contained descriptions of his theatrecraft, it was in 1936 that the first book designed specifically to teach his theories, *An Actor Prepares*, emerged in print. This was followed by two companion volumes,

Building a Character (1950) and *Creating a Role* (1957), both published posthumously. Together these three texts detail the praxis Stanislavski himself termed 'Spiritual Realism', but which is generally known simply as 'The System'.

Much of Stanislavski's own work as a director and actor differed significantly from the techniques detailed in these texts. Indeed, he ultimately found certain of his published ideas obstructive to the process of acting, and his practice underwent a fundamental change (see Coger 1964). Nevertheless it is the principles described in these three books that have historically proved most influential, doing more to shape realistic acting in Europe and America than any other practice, and it is therefore this written System which we shall focus upon.

Champions of the System tend to be fierce in their defence of its neutrality, asserting that it does not lead to a particular style of performance but is simply a practical means of creating characters suitable to any theatrical form. But while it is true that System-atic acting is varied, its variety is not infinite and it does display consistent characteristics. Behavioural detail, 'plausibility', a sense of profound psychological depth, a marked linearity or smoothness to the performance as a whole – these are the hallmarks of Stanislavskian work, and if we view them as the signs of 'good acting' *per se* it is largely because the System has been at the heart of orthodox western performance training for a substantial part of the twentieth century. Stanislavski's ideas have become the accepted 'common sense' in performance, seeming 'self-evident', so that actors not infrequently employ the Russian's basic concepts without knowing that they do so. Thus for examples of this mode of acting we need not look far. Performances of the classics in national institutions almost invariably employ Stanislavskian ideas at a fundamental level, and so provide accessible examples of his techniques in action.

THE PSYCHO-TECHNIQUE

Near the beginning of his first teaching text, *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski describes the other modes of acting then employed on the Russian stage. 'Mechanical Acting', for instance, uses an existing repertoire of conventional stage gestures, which Stanislavski calls 'stencils' or 'rubber stamps': 'spreading your hand over your heart to express love ... shaking one's fist in