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## Theatrical Conventions and Oral Communication

Artistic communication which is directly conveyed by word of mouth without the aid of additional technical devices or systems of signs and not set down in written form, is an important characteristic of folklore. The oral quality of oral literature is not merely a means of transmission different from writing. Oral literature has many important features that result from its being an oral phenomenon (variability, formulaic expression, distinctive genres, creative aspects of performance, etc).<sup>1</sup>

Whether all direct oral artistic communication is folklore or not remains, however, an open question (cf. Lozica 1979: 47), nor is it clear whether folkloric communication is always artistic communication. A formal consideration of the problem reveals that every definition presupposes convertibility of the predicate and the subject. If we wish to define folklore as direct oral artistic communication, we must regard the converse statement, i.e., that direct oral artistic communication is folklore, as true. Few folklorists would accept this, for it is obvious that there are nonfolkloric forms of direct oral artistic communication. In terms of formal logic, a statement that does not permit conversion is not a definition. Yet this does not exclude the possibility of direct oral communication being a partial definition. Ben-Amos has briefly defined folklore as artistic communication in small groups.<sup>2</sup> If we grant that in this case artistic communication is the nearest related concept (*genus proximum*), that means that all folklore forms are also forms of artistic communication, and that they differ from other (nonfolkloric) forms of artistic communication only inasmuch as they occur within small groups. To me this definition seems inadequate. It is too broad, for *all* forms of artistic communication in small groups fall within the scope of a concept of *folklore* thus defined, whereas at least some of them are not folklore. At the same time it may be too restrictive, for it excludes possible

<sup>1</sup> On direct oral artistic communication see: Ben-Amos 1971, Bošković-Stulli 1978, Čistov 1975, Lozica 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ben-Amos 1971: 9, 10.

nonartistic forms. Not even the definition of folklore (oral literature) as natural (contact) artistic communication is adequate, because similarly it allows every oral artistic performance which is performed and viewed simultaneously to be classified as oral literature.

Maja Bošković-Stulli, whose views are similar, considers "all aspects of art which emerge from natural communication in contact" to be folklore (Bošković-Stulli 1978: 14). "In terms of folklore, oral literature can be conceived as artistic folkloric communication, with language as its medium, examined on the textural and textual levels, with attention to the dramatization of texture and context. In terms of literature, oral literature can be conceived as an aesthetic (literary) statement that originated in natural linguistic communication and has been preserved in a text removed from the dramatized texture and context but indirectly testifying to them." (Bošković-Stulli 1978: 18, cf. 1973: 172-173). She views oral literature as "a form of direct oral artistic communication in small groups" (Bošković-Stulli 1978: 7).

The formulations we have cited, though more measured and more acceptable than extreme performance-oriented positions,<sup>3</sup> leave many questions unanswered. If we state that oral literature is a form of oral artistic communication in small groups, that is still not a definition, for we have only given the nearest related term and have not specified what distinguishes it — our statement does not tell us how oral literature differs from other forms of direct oral artistic communication in small groups. What those other forms are is another possible question. Does direct oral artistic communication include the phenomena of music, dance, theater, customs and material art? The formation of oral-literary genres, their characteristics and the devices they employ on the levels of text, texture and dramatization of texture have continually been influenced by their being oral, by the absence of an established text, the simultaneity of their creation and reception, and the special role of the audience in a small community or small group. But this does not seem to determine or fully explain the creation of the cultural and artistic conventions of oral literature. The context, the situation in which a tale, song or whatever is performed, is not restricted to the way of life at the time of the performance. Context embraces a historical dimension, the totality of economic and social processes and their impact on the individual psyche and the life of the community. The role of these contextual processes in folkloric creation must not be ignored, and when we are dealing with the link that binds within so-called traditional culture elements of oral-literature, dance, music, custom, theater and material art into a coherent whole, into folklore, then those contextual factors and processes are crucial and are more significant than direct oral artistic communication. This is not to deny the role of direct oral artistic communication; communicative factors will continue to be important in scrutinizing performances as such of oral literature. However, the distinctive features of oral literature and of folklore in general have developed to this day as a result of complex "contextual" factors, historical, economic and other circumstances. Direct oral artistic communication is only one factor (though a very important one) in the birth and life of folklore and folk literature; it is only one factor, more precisely, in the emergence of the special conventions which distinguish folk literature from nonfolkloric literary forms.

<sup>3</sup> Although the definitions put forth by K.V. Čistov and M. Bošković-Stulli do not explicitly deal with the concept of tradition, their positions do implicitly suggest not only direct oral artistic communication on the synchronic level, but also direct transmission on the diachronic level in the "communicative chain" of oral literature. In a new situation the listener can become the narrator; this does not exclude interweaving with written literature.

### The Oral Quality and Theater

There is no such thing as theater in writing. Although sundry inscriptions can, for example, be incorporated into a play, the written word still functions as a mere ornament, as part of the stage environment or at most as a counter to oral communication. In plays the written word is always a violation of the rules, *stéréstis*, an absence of the oral features which are an inherent part of theatrical expression and likewise a part of life. Oral, living speech, uttered by an actor on the stage, remains the basic characteristic of all theatrical forms that include a verbal component, folkloric and nonfolkloric forms alike.

Folk plays, however, are oral in a different way from professional theater. Although institutionalized theater utilizes the oral medium, the separation of stage and auditorium results in unidirectional oral communication. In a theater building the spectators do not have access to the stage; either they are silent or they applaud; whistling is rare, hecking even rarer. Participants in folk performances on the other hand are not so strictly separated into the actors and the public; communication is freer; the audience is part of the performance. But still, in spite of the different conventions, the fact that the idiom of folk drama is oral is not a suitable distinguishing feature. European theatrical tradition has given rise to the customary distinction between the drama and the performance, i.e. between a text set down in writing and its execution on the stage. This is a result of the imitative, reproductive quality of professional theater, a theater subject to literature, a theater which exists only to prop up the dramatic branch of literature. Distinguishing between the drama as a written text and the play itself as an onstage performance of the text destroys the unity of the theatrical event, reducing it to the interpretation of written models, to the illustration of literature. The drama, contrary to the original significance of the event or action, becomes a paper model. In light of the literary slant in professional theatrical tradition, the absence of written models is taken as a criteria for distinguishing folkloric and nonfolkloric theatrical forms. The assumption is made that the text of a folk play has no written counterpart, that the dialogue issues from more or less free improvisation based on a relatively well-established model, a framework transmitted orally. Although such a model may also include texts which are not subject to alteration and improvisation, it still differs from written dramatic texts in that none of the lines are strictly predetermined. *Canovaccio* allowed similar improvisations in the *commedia dell'arte*, the dialogue and mime developing on the basis of a given story. Besides, the comedy "a soggetto" of 16th century Italy appear to have been an outgrowth in part of popular plays, a response on the part of the actors to the decline of dramatic poetry and the lack of contemporary dramatic texts. The extant *commedia dell'arte* scenarios are definitely unsatisfactory to the refined tastes of the dramatic literature devotee, just as folkloristic records of the texts of folk plays cannot stand on equal ground with the more highly literary creations of oral poetry and prose. But the theater, however, is not a uniquely literary phenomenon; it is more a blend of literature, visual arts, music, dance and above all the intricate craft and deeply human art of the actor. The folk play differs in fiber from the written dramatic text not so much in that it has not been written down (for it too can be written down) as in its more equal treatment of the verbal, visual and musical components. The dramatic text generally ignores visual and other components, giving them parenthetically as instructions, the author's vision of the staging, a tangle of variables that the director and actors can adopt but are not obliged to. Written dialogue, on the other hand, remains the constant of the play. While possible cuts in the text may be acceptable, changes never are.

### Texture, Text and Context of the Folk Play

If we are to examine the relation between the forms of folk theater and direct oral artistic communication, we must first be reminded of the potentials and limitations of this approach to the study of theater. Theatrical communication is not a simple process — the misconception that it is a process where a written text in final form is transmitted to the public by means of a play must not be admitted. Such oversimplification is dangerous, for it views the text of the drama as a constant, a message transmitted to a passive public (the other constant) without alteration, and in this conception the creative act in the performance is looked upon as a normal means of communication. The language of the theater is a complex code, an intertwining of verbal, visual, audio and other systems of signs. On the stage, which signifies life, things can be designated by many indicators without being overly redundant just as in real life. The plenitude of meaning, the theatrical message, is realized only in the performance and can be treated as one with it.

When we speak of the text, the texture and the context of the theater, the text is not the text of a drama, but the performance itself. The very artistic character of the theater consists of insistence on the performance as such, which corresponds approximately to Jakobson's assignment of the poetic function to the message, and not to the sender, receiver, contact or code (cf. Jakobson 1966: 285–324).

The texture of a theatrical performance can be defined as all the material objects involved (the set, costumes, props and make-up), and even more importantly as the acting components (verbal and gestural), the director's interpretation, the music and lighting. The written text is not a part of the performance; as the model for the onstage dialogue it is preliminary to the performance. The written text is not included in the texture of the play at all, then, but in its immediate context, as are the director's methods, the rehearsals and everything leading up to the performance but not embodied in it.

The elements of the performance (textual elements, or signs) function in the total performance and constitute its system. However, a performance is never a completely isolated system, and elements of the performance always have functions beyond it (connotations) in other systems (plays, written works) and also on other levels outside the domain of the theater (cf. Tinjanov 1970: 289). In the instance of the folk play this is particularly pronounced. The textural elements of an institutionalized theater performance retain their theatricality even when isolated from the happenings onstage. The theater building with all its trappings is clearly connected with the theatrical event, even when it is not housing a performance. Costumes, lights, sets, props, scripts, and even professional actors, all testify to their theatrical nature offstage as well as on. In folk plays this is not the case: there is no theater building, and the stage area overlaps with the setting of everyday life (a room, a street, a square or a meadow); rarely are the sets and props specially made, they are accessory to the actors and acting, and they define the time and setting of the action only occasionally; the actors are the spectators' neighbors and relatives, and the play is so closely intertwined with everyday life that awareness of its being a theatrical event may even be lacking. The folk play is not an exclusively aesthetic phenomenon at all; it can serve as a means of social control, for example, or as an indicator of moral norms; it can exhibit standards of social behavior and models of positive and negative sanctions (cf. Schenda 1976: 191–202). Being bound to its context is one of the basic characteristics of folk theater, so basic that it seems perfectly natural to ask: Is there anything at all that can be unequivocally called folk theater?

## Ritual and Theater

If we take the institutionalized urban theater as the only true form of the theater and set out in search of analogous forms in a rural, peasant milieu, we are doomed to failure, to discovering incomplete, obscure fragments. We shall come across dramatic virtuosity subject to nontheatrical purposes, we shall observe extraordinarily interesting masks and (now and then) effective and unfamiliar acting techniques, but we shall constantly be under the impression that all this is not "real" theater.

The Soviet folklorist K.V. Čistov (Čistov 1975) has put forth some interesting thoughts on the relation between folklore and literature. In his view it is beside the point to consider how folklore (i.e. oral literature) differs from written literature; rather, a consideration of how written literature can be distinguished from folklore is more relevant. He bases his argument on the historical primacy of folklore, from which written literature diverged only subsequently.

*Mutatis mutandis*, this applies to the theater also. Thus we should not take the institutionalized urban theater as our point of departure in a search for related phenomena in "folk culture", since this leads directly to a misappraisal, to underrating the "imperfect" art of folk theater, which when compared with "real" theater is lacking in one thing and another, often even in the very stage on which to act.

This somewhat Copernican shift, in which diachrony backs up the primacy assigned to folkloric forms, seems easier to apply in the domain of poetry than of theater, owing simply to the fact that we are used to considering oral literature outside its original context, as poetry that is, and not as part of a ritual, or combined with music, or having some other practical function. In other words, we perceive poetry as poetry whether it is written or oral, whereas with the theater it is not nearly so simple. Performing and acting skills cannot be dissociated in records that would enable us subsequently to recognize their artistic qualities regardless what the performing situation itself was; instead, at the time of the performance they remain subordinate in the spectator's view to ritualistic or dance functions, for example.

The spectator does not perceive the performance as a theatrical event and does not notice the textural elements and their dramatic value. In folklore, according to many, there is no theater, only ritual.<sup>4</sup> Whereas with the methodological shift we have envisaged it follows that the divergence of written literature from folklore can be considered a sort of poetry giving birth to poetry, in the case of the theater the phenomenon that gives birth to the theater, ritual, is seemingly heterogeneous. The problem lies in the lack of a common term embracing all the phenomena included in acting and other performing skills: acting and other theatrical elements are integral parts of various social events, not only of the theater in a narrower sense. Professional theater is only one form of performing, a form in which performing is raised to a professional level and where in a way it has become an end in itself. Thus, while it is easy to bring folk music, oral poetry and oral prose together under the common terms literature and music, it is difficult to

<sup>4</sup> "In folklore, strictly speaking, there is no drama, but there is ritual. [Drama as a phenomenon expressing willful action by the individual in conflict with the community (the gods, fate, and so on) is a professional, 'authorial' branch of art in terms of its poetics and cannot be folk drama.] The dramatic plot arose out of folkloric, ritual action. Professional art, on the other hand, has no entirely ritualistic forms." (Balasov 1977:26).

cover the folk play, which is often embedded in everyday life, with the restrictive and elevated term theater.

To pursue the idea of a shift that Čistov writes about, if we attempt to determine what distinguishes the professional theater from folklore, we may end up indiscriminately treating all forms of nonprofessional performing as folklore. The creation of folk drama has always been more ephemeral in nature than the relatively rigid forms of, say, oral literature; it has always been more receptive to up-dating and influences. In practical terms, all forms of nonprofessional performing should be of interest to the student of folk theater, for today even professional experiments seek (both consciously and unconsciously) inspiration from ritual, folkloric and popular dramatic expression. R. Schenda went a little too far, however, when he applied the term folk theater to all forms of theater that contrast with the theater of the court or the middle classes (cf. Schenda 1975: 191-203). Relatively stable traditional patterns and themes linked with a pre-industrial way of life must nevertheless be differentiated from contemporary experimental theater and performances by wandering troupes for the masses, from amateur plays, popular plays, church pageants and ritual ceremonies. Folk plays display a great variety of techniques, from individual improvisation at an outdoor party, for example, to mass scenes in a gigantic carnival procession. Even within the sphere of traditional culture in a rural milieu, the acting and other performing skills can be more or less pronounced, ancillary to some other extrathatric function, or completely independent. These differences are definitely greater than the differences between the individual dramatic genres of institutionalized theater. The differences between a comedy, a tragedy, a drama, or any of the other dramatic genres or subgenres (however great they may be) are still only differences within one branch of literature (the drama). The acting, plot, characters, language, stage and décor of the tragedy are subject to the laws of the *literary genre*; they are immediately recognizable as dramatic acting, characters, etc. In the folk play this is not the case. The acting of a carnival figure is different from the acting of a wedding attendant, from the acting of a player at a fair or the intentionally "theatrical" acting when oral tales are acted out at village shows, but these differences are not on the level of the way different literary genres or subgenres are staged; they are different types of performing and acting that are dependent on the context of the folk performance. These are not types of theatrical technique; rather, the theater itself is one of these types of performing.<sup>5</sup> If we examine the different types of folk play, we can make out a definite hierarchy of forms,<sup>6</sup> and (I believe) this might lead us astray into underrating the simpler forms and overrating the more complex ones. Today theater experts (and they are not the only ones) are inclined to accept the theory that the foundations and origins of the theater lie in the magico-religious rituals of the past, which naturally does not imply that professional theatrical forms everywhere, including in our country, are a *direct* outgrowth of folk custom. Ritual and folk drama did not die out with the appearance

<sup>5</sup> That both folkloric and nonfolkloric forms are found among the extrathatric types of performance (e.g. the circus) is indisputable.

<sup>6</sup> Nikola Bonifačić Rožin holds that folk theater takes over where the cult has ceased to exist, and in his book he divides dramatic texts into folk acting, folk dance and folk customs and rituals (cf. Bonifačić Rožin 1963:19). V.E. Gusev proposes a similar classification, but he divides the forms up according to whether they are thatric or prethatric. Prethatric forms are not quite theater. Gusev considers the creations of folk drama a special type of dance, and attempts to assign them a position among the other types of dance.

of theater institutions; they continued a parallel existence, not without reciprocal influence. We should not necessarily look upon the whole history of the theater as an evolutionary progression of more perfect and complex techniques replacing simpler and humbler ones. As Antonin Artaud (Artaud 1964) sees it, the whole of Western dramatic tradition is oblivious of the laws of the stage. There is definitely some truth in this. In the authorial theater domination by the written word has imposed *mimesis* as the supreme law of the stage, relegating acting, direction and visual stage effects to a secondary role, to serving the needs of the text. The history of European theater should not be viewed as continually advancing. At any rate, art knows no progress — the styles and forms that replace each other follow different rules. Thus even when we perceive in ritual the origins of professional theater, when in the folk plays of today we see the stages of development, the evolution of theater forms, we must constantly be aware of the fact that all these forms exist contemporaneously, that folk theater is at the same time a developmental stage and a contemporary phenomenon. The hierarchy of forms is not necessarily a hierarchy of artistic merit. From this point of view, classification into pretheater and theater forms loses not only its critical bias, but some of its importance as well. The task before the student of theater and of folk theater as well, is to deal on equal terms with all the elements of dramatic expression and all types of performance, nontheater as well as theater.

#### Theatricality, Theatrability, Theater<sup>7</sup>

Only conditionally can the stage creations of folklore be considered an independent system opposed to the professional, authorial theater. In reality instances of "theatricality", "theatrability" and "theater" intertwine and penetrate each other. Human behavior contains many theatrical elements; the way each individual builds his character is somewhat similar to the way an actor builds his role. *Theatrical* behavior is in fact the lowest grade of acting, but acting oriented to the performer himself, for theatrical behavior serves in this case to direct attention to the individual himself and his aims, not to the character he is portraying. *Theatrability* is to group behavior as theatricality is to the individual. There are several groups of theatrable events we can consider: opening ceremonies, receptions, congresses, sports and political gatherings; also funerals, weddings, religious rituals and other customs; and also various games for children and adults. This sort of formalized group behavior is *theatrable* but it is not *theater*, for its function differs from that of the theater in that it is not acting-oriented. Theatricality, however, easily develops into theatrability when well-received; participants in some theatrable events exhibit theatrical behavior, and some theatrable events are not far from creations of theater art, for the stress on being set apart from everyday life and on participation in the preparations and performance can easily become ends in themselves, regardless of the extratheatric functions of the events. Therein lies the theatrability of theatrable phenomena; in some cases they may develop into an artistic theater event or their characteristics may permit observation and analysis as theater forms.

<sup>7</sup> On theatricality, theatrability and folk theater see this earlier work by the same author: Lozica 1980.

### Functions of the Folk Play

The theater play, like every work of art, has several simultaneous functions, one of which is usually dominant.<sup>8</sup> In the theater the theatric function, distinguishable by its emphasis on performance, is dominant. This emphasis on performance is manifest as the audience's awareness of the performing, of the conscious creation of a stage play. Of course, a theater event can also have extratheatric functions; nonetheless, for a theater play to achieve extratheatric aims and at the same time be considered theater, the textural elements must relate the most directly to the theatric function of creating a coherent play. Only the play as a whole can be effective as political, promotional, or erotic theater, etc. The theater play can successfully fulfill extratheatric aims only if it is a coherent whole.

The dominant function of the folk play is not necessarily its theatric function. The textural elements of the performance function within the play itself, but beyond it as well. When the textural elements have functions outside the system of the performance that are more pronounced than their functions in the performance, we are not actually dealing with a performance but with a happening from everyday life. Such happenings may be merely theatrical, as for example when an individual or group utilizes gestures, words or apparel to try to attract attention. However, it is also possible for textural elements with their functions to create a complete performance of artistic merit, even though the function of the play as a whole in context is not theatric. Thus, for example, to a spectator who is unfamiliar with the religious or magical function of a masked ritual the ritual ceremony may seem like an effective theater performance. The function of a performance in context is crucial in distinguishing between theatric and theatric phenomena. The textural elements in a performance operate like signs in a system, their function within the performance forming a complete system regardless of the function of the performance in context. Changes in context alter the function of the performance, as do the "extraperformance" functions of textural elements, even when no change of any kind can be discerned in the form: in a new context the same whole and the same elements receive a different interpretation, even though they continue to represent a consistent system.<sup>9</sup> This is possible because the signs, the textural elements of the play, are not imaginary. Material, observable segments of signs (signifiers) exist as material objects or human actions in everyday life, and as such they are rich in connotations.<sup>10</sup> Signs are arbitrary, signs are conventions, and no inherent relation exists between the signifier and the signified. Identical formal elements can be parts of different systems. The context imposes itself on the performance like a superordinate system, so that the performance too can have different functions in the different systems. Change in context is a frequent occurrence in the historical process. That which was

<sup>8</sup> Cf. P.G. Bogatyrev's excellent study of Czech and Slovak folk theater (Bogatyrev 1971). See also the author's review of this study (Lozica 1976).

<sup>9</sup> Bogatyrev gives an example of identical messages received differently by different audiences. The sharpening of the knife in "The Merchant of Venice" conveys a tragical effect in Prague, whereas in the country it provokes laughter (cf. Bogatyrev 1971).

<sup>10</sup> In folk theater the textural elements of performances are very often borrowed from everyday life. Clothes, props, the space where the performance is held, and the actors themselves are familiar to the public even before the performance. All these elements partially retain their identities when they are included in the performance, enriching through their numerous connotations the theater message.



ritual in the context of traditional culture loses its magico-religious function and becomes theater. A change in function can result from moving a performance to a different location or from a change in the public.<sup>11</sup> The *zvončarsko kolo*<sup>12</sup> has a theatrical function in the context of the carnival parade in the touristic city of Opatija, but on the traditional processional route somewhere in Halubje it functions within custom.

### The Conventions of Folk Theater<sup>13</sup>

What distinguishes the folk play from the nonfolkloric play are its conventions. By convention I mean every element of the play that has through continued use gained acceptance by the performers and the public. In other words, a convention is a textural element in the function of a play in those cases when it has the same meaning confirmed by continued use (tradition) for both the actors and the public. Conventions constitute a special language of the theater in which all the textural elements function as signs. The conventions of folk theater differ from the conventions of institutionalized theater and form the separate language (or languages) of folk drama. Folk stage creations can be classified by function and by dominant expression. Classification by function does not issue from the formal elements of a play; rather it deals with the role of the play as a whole in its context. The forms classified this way vary in terms of the degree of coherence to custom. Classification by dominant expression proceeds from the prevailing means of expression in the performance (live acting in theater, masks, puppets, shadow play, etc.). The variety of folkloric stage forms calls for research on the specific conventions of folk theater within each of these forms, and this is not an easy task. The student of folk theater must systematically study the stage forms of folklore and examine in this connection the part played by direct oral artistic communication, which is an important though not crucial part of performance and context in folkloric dramatic expression. Artistic devices and special techniques in oral literature develop as a result not only of direct oral artistic communication, but also of complex historical processes that affect our way of life and direct oral communication itself, and that in the past have bestowed upon it a dominant position in satisfying mankind's literary needs. The same processes and way of life have given rise to the special relationship between participants in folk performances (the performers and the public) out of which grew the conventions of folk theater, theater techniques that differ from the techniques of professional theater tradition. What we are dealing with here is not limited to direct oral communication, nor to the verbal component of folk theater. These special conventions can be observed in all the other components of the play as well, from the casting and location selected for the stage to the use of costumes and props. Not enough research has been done on the visual aspects of folkloric dramatic expression, since often the actual performances in their

<sup>11</sup> We can also differentiate the function of the sender (actor) from the function of the receiver (public) in this sense.

<sup>12</sup> *Zvončari* are a special type of masked carnival figure that sometimes wears an animal mask and always wears bells around the waste. Here we are discussing *zvončari* from the environs of the town of Kastav (near Rijeka).

<sup>13</sup> On the conventions of folk theater see Bogatyrev 1971 and Gusev 1980.

natural contexts have not been studied, but information about plays has been gathered on the basis of accounts instead, even when there was no particular reason to use this method. In records of the way informants remember plays, even the dialogues (which are usually simple and unpolished anyway) lose much of the effectiveness of words delivered live and onstage, and the other elements of the play with few exceptions remain outside the sphere of interest and are not included in questionnaires by researchers whose education has been primarily literary. These neglected visual features of folk theater and these conventions are in fact the aspect of folk drama that is the most relevant and probably the most worthy of consideration.

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