

Ivan Lozica
(Institute of Folklore Research, Zagreb)

UDC: 398:792.2
Original Scientific Paper

Received: November 5, 1987



CUSTOMS STAGED
AS THEATRICAL
PERFORMANCE

The authenticity of folklore performances depends on the context, not only performance mode. Rituals and customs (weddings, carnivals, etc) appear on stage with the intent of reviving and safeguarding in memory the traditional way of life which is dying out so quickly. The staging and dramatization of rituals and customs is a twofold attempt to preserve through adaptation. The result is a theater performance.

From the very beginning of interest in folklore, during the periods of pre-Romantism and the Enlightenment to the present, folklore is something in people's awareness that belongs to the past and which exists only fragmentarily in the form of threatened surviving remnants that may vanish forever at any moment. Folklore has always been something from 'way back when' and 'we are left to tell the tale'* Folklore *is* what *is no longer*. On the other hand, folklore as it is in our everyday life is not something from 'way back when'. The tendency to take folklore as it is in the human consciousness and establish it, at least in part, in our everyday life, gives birth to dramatization and staging of abandoned rites and customs.

The rapid change in way of life in the city (and in the village, of late, as well) as a consequence of industrialization has meant a romantic idealization of peasant life as something unchangeable, eternal and fixed. The idealized past was understood as the 'authentic' state, and not as a process. Change as an endlessly present factor of life exists

* This article was first published in *Narodna umjetnost*, 22, 1985: 261-271.

everywhere, and therefore in folk creativity: oral literature is subject to endless variation, change; there is no such thing as an authentic costume, or authentic custom. By stressing the authenticity of a state, the vital process of folklore is calcified. A perfect authenticity is meaningless, whether in apparel, instruments, dance steps, techniques for playing music or spoken text - performance, when wrenched from its natural context. Performance which becomes a *performance* given always exactly the same way, such a performance ceases to be true folklore, and is only a more or less faithful testimony to some past moment in the folklore process.

The authenticity of folklore performance is not, then, so much in how it is performed, as much as in the performance context; who performed it and how are not all that is important, but also who is receiving the performance in what way, and experiencing it. This does not depend on the immediate situation, but rather on the broadest historically and economically conditioned social features of the environment in which the performance is taking place. Study of performance in its context is equally an axiom of contemporary ethnology as it is of folklore research. Of course this is not to say that many conclusions and analyses continue to be based on the recordings of others (such as descriptions of rites), just as analysis of folklore music and oral literary works can, to a degree, be conducted using written material, without direct observation of performance. But observation of 'living performance' is certainly a necessity for all in-depth study. 'Living performance' assumes a natural, authentic performance context. What is *authentic* or *natural* in the performance context?

Isn't the answer to the question of authenticity of context at least as difficult as the answer to the question of authentic performance? What do we imply with the term *context*? Is the authentic *immediate context* enough for authenticity of performance, i.e. merely adequate conditions during the performance, or is certain performance authentic only if it has a corresponding *broader context*, i.e. if it is going on in its own age, within a certain sociopolitical situation, conditioned by the degree of development of producing forces, etc? And finally, if something in a context is performed, is not that fact alone guarantee that there are sufficient reasons and conditions for performance? If the context permits performance, isn't that enough for it to be considered authentic (natural, original) for the performance in question?

Every performance has *its* context. Every context is natural (authentic, original) for that performance taking place within it. If we feel that a certain performance is not in its natural context, this means that we are interested in *some other* performance, and not the one going on before us. Therefore, a non-original (non-authentic, unnatural) performance and/or its context happens, in fact, when reality and our expectations (imagined models with performance and context) do not coincide - *inadaequatio intellectus et rei*. The imagined model of folklore performance appears within the same *tradition*, but on the basis of one's own prejudices and the prejudices of others.

When dealing with the overlapping of rite or custom and an imagined model, it seems to me that a natural or original performance context assumes performance on a *ordinary place*, at a *ordinary time*, in which *ordinary performers and (possibly) audience* take part. This again assumes that what is being performed is familiar to everyone, the performers and the audience. A performance in which all take part is possible, where there is no audience. We must not forget that two performances (for example of a rite) are never identical and that the lesser or greater deviations from earlier performances contain relevant connotations. Possible changes in context, if there are any significant ones, may considerably alter the

meaning of a performance. The unusual time and place for performing creates a new audience, which no longer need be acquainted with the content and meaning of what is being performed before them. In an altered context, performance of a rite may grow into presentation of the rite to the public.

In light of the ideas brought forth here, I would like to consider the question of dramatizing customs, i.e. performing customs on stage. Aside from the long since customary dance and music numbers in performances of folk groups and culture and art societies (*kulturnoumjetnička društva*), we can see dramatized customs with increasing frequency, either as part of the program, or even as separate, independent performance.

Of those related to the life cycle, marriage-related customs are often staged (proposal, engagement, wedding), of the annual cycle customs, carnival customs are staged, and of the customs related to work, certain customs of mutual aid (plucking and husking bees) or presentation of old production techniques (clothing, farming tasks, building). Although these customs predominate, there are examples when other customs have been staged, especially if they are characteristic for the native region of the performer. It is interesting to note, though perfectly understandable, that many still living customs, particularly those that are closely tied to religion or death, are not shown on stage. Customs are chosen for presentation which no longer exist in the form in which they will be presented, or those that are representative, in some way (visually or in terms of content), and customs which have an emotionally positive slant, related to the more cheerful side of life. In other words, *scenic* customs are chosen, ones that have an inner dynamics appropriate for the stage and which include music, dance and jokes. The criterion of *the scenic* as a basis of selection for the performance is nothing unusual nor is it new: in the complex of traditional carnival customs there are frequent stagings of weddings, and at traditional weddings there are occasional performances of the sale of cattle or horses. There are even interesting cases of autoreferentiality within folklore: examples of staged weddings during real weddings.

What role do staged customs play in safeguarding local traditions? What do such performances mean for the performers, audience, ethnologists and folklore scholars?

If we take the performance of a wedding custom on stage as an example, in comparison with a real wedding custom, we will note essential differences. On the one hand we have a wedding, while on the other, a performance. Although the true wedding custom is an organized and traditionally conditioned deviation in everyday behavior, with an emphasis on an important event by isolation from the ordinary (using established techniques), with the division of roles in regulated dialogues, all this formalized behavior remains, nonetheless, in the service of a living, and not a theatrical act. Even relatively independent games and scenes in a traditional wedding hold a precisely determined place within the wedding ceremony. In many details a real wedding and the staging of a wedding may have much in common, but while the participants at a wedding take part in the binding event, they are performing this not for an audience, but for themselves, and they feel the emotive impact of the moment. Performances of a staged wedding are given by actors presenting the public with their own projection of someone else's memory of past events. The duration of the wedding is reduced on stage to less than an hour. Only the attractive and key moments have been selected and compacted in new relations on stage. This event, interwoven with the life of the local community, village or even two villages is taken out of context when staged, and placed in the position of presentation, in the relationship between stage and the audience. Unlike a real wedding, usually set by calendar, the stage performance can be held anywhere that is

suitable for a performance, at any time of year. Festive clothing, the dowry, gifts, special food and drink are exchanged on stage for stage costume and props. Relatively varied apparel, differentiated by social status, becomes uniform in the stage reconstruction, and events and dialogues are subject to the laws of the stage. The staged performance, unlike a real wedding which never follows the imagined model in every respect, but is subject to adaptations, influences and changes, usually seems calcified and dead. The staging of a wedding is not given as some specific wedding - it brings us a general model, an idea or paradigm of a wedding in some village or broader region. The lack of specificity and individuality is often a drawback of staged customs. Improvisation and variation are restricted with the fixed text, and the lack of a real situation reinforces the rigidity of the ceremony, while emphasizing the formalized behavior even more.

We could stress many of the other drawbacks of staged customs through a comparison such as this, and in the end we could then pose the question: what good are staged customs for, anyway? Isn't living custom better than a reconstruction? Yes, but old customs vanish, someone will interject. I wouldn't say that they vanish, rather, customs change. There are still weddings today, but few folklorists and ethnologists work on them, if they are not weddings that follow traditional patterns.

On the other hand, a comparison of living custom and staged custom is not quite as simple as the above might lead one to believe. A real wedding also includes presentation, even acting. Aside from the bride and groom and the relatives, others at the wedding party are directly responsible for the entertainment (*čauš, stari svat*) and professional entertainers and performers (musicians) are involved. Z. Rajković, in an interesting text on the dramatic moments in wedding customs (Rajković, 1985), provides an overview of wedding activities, resembling theater. There can be no doubt that wedding customs contain in themselves differing degrees of performance. The wedding has a division of roles (honors, functions), there are changes in language ('high style', imitation of the upper classes) participants are given titles with special titles (also from the upper classes), and we find the use of disguises and the use of superficially non-functional props, there are rigid models of plot and verbal behavior with improvisations within given situations and motifs. The role of a women's chorus in the wedding customs is interesting, it has certain similarities with the chorus in antique theater: the chorus announces and comments on events, along with the interweaving of established monologues and dialogues, with regular music and dance numbers. At weddings there is occasional performance of real short acted scenes and puppet shows. The argument that those involved in a wedding are not acting someone else, but are creating their own character, can easily be questioned with examples where, for instance, certain members of the wedding party represent the bride and the bride's household - resulting in the division of one member of the wedding into several characters (aside from the present bride, we have another character who speaks for her). This is a markedly theatrical technique (see Ubersfeld, 1982: 96).

Depiction of customs on stage is no innovation. At Christmas in 1925, at the Hrvatski glazbeni zavod (Croatian Conservatory), a performance of Bukovec Christmas customs was played before the Minister of Education, the Bishop, Mayor and several generals. The performance was called *Badnja večer* (Christmas Eve), and it was 'arranged' by Stjepan Novosel, a peasant. This performance owes its existence directly to the influence of a campaign conducted by the Zagreb theater and the Peasant Party which introduced to today's Croatian National Theater what they called "*peasant performances*", in fact, performances

for peasants. The consequence of this campaign was that within (and beyond) the branches of the Peasant Party special drama groups were set up in villages. Novosel got involved in the work of *Dilettantski glumački zbor hrvatskih seljačkih sokolova* (An Amateur Actors' Assembly of Croatian Peasant Falcon-Club Members) in Remete, where he produced *Badnje večer* and two other performances as well: *O Jurjevu* (On St. George's Day) and *Prigorska svadba* (Prigorje Wedding). This last performance interests us in particular. It was played on the afternoon of 25 April 1926 at the current Croatian National Theater. From an article by Rudolf Herceg in *Seljačka prosvjeta* (Herceg, 1926), facts are accessible about this theater event. Herceg's text is quite informative, because it includes four newspaper critiques from that period, and photographs, of which two are from the performance (studio 'Tonka'). The performing troupe consisted of 37 members, including two children. The play had five scenes, which corresponded to phases in the wedding custom (1. Proposal, 2. Driving the Dowry Chest, 3. Before Leaving for Church, 4. The Wedding Ceremony, 5. Arrival at the New Home). The performance in the large theater was preceded by a performance in the Falcon Club headquarters on Vlaška Street. I do not know the precise date of the first performance, but critic E. Jurkas from the paper *Hrvat* noted that these two performances differed somewhat: "The performance lasted quite long, although the section 'The hero from Podgora, who knows how to wiggle his ears' was left out, so that it was no longer part of the plot, though it delighted us the first time with its Russian dance' (Herceg 1926: 117). Herceg writes that there weren't many people in the audience - hardly more than three hundred, but 'the ladies and gentlemen present bowed sincerely to the national genius' (Herceg 1926: 116). The author of one of these critiques, Dr. Milutin Cihlar Nehajev, president of the Society of Croatian Writers, writes: "These actors do not speak the precise text. 'Prigorje Wedding' has been printed in a precise recording by the author himself; on stage, filled with peasants, they were free in interpreting, with occasional jibes and improvisations. This is quite an important feature - the acting acquires an even more powerful reflection of liveliness and gaiety which should truly stem from the heart" (Herceg 1926: 113).

The second critic, S. Tomašić, had a more negative opinion of this performance: "One should add straight away that the performance, which had a powerful effect in the small, cosy hall of the Falcon Club with its dynamics and the intimacy of a semi-improvisation, could not, on the 'academic stage' on Wilson Square, in a vast space, achieve the same effects. The more so because the peasant troupe had not held a single rehearsal on that stage. The peasants were entering the space for the first time, themselves. Many of them lost their flexibility, their intimacy, pace and plasticity. They were lost in the immense space. The wedding lost its vitality and spontaneity. It was rigid. The first two scenes were still quite good, but it went downhill from there, grew monotonous, and all activity remained on the best man and the musicians" (Herceg 1926: 114).

The Prigorje Wedding was played at the Varaždin Theater as well, on 28 November 1926, this time before a full hall, with two performances, in the afternoon and evening. The audience included people from Varaždin and peasants from the vicinity (about 150 of them). A report was written on this performance, signed 'Zagorac' (probably R. Herceg once more). The text contains quite a few details from the performance; this note was particularly interesting: "In the third scene, when Father 'Nacek' (domestic pater) leads in the 'Miss Bride' dressed in a nice folk costume, under a wreath, the audience broke out in thundering applause. The onlookers thought that they were not at a performance, but were taking part in the ceremonial act itself, in a peasant home, and greeted the bride from their hearts" (Zagorac 1926: 298).

The information available to us tells us that the staging of Bukovec and Remete customs happened spontaneously, thanks to the effort of peasant Stjepan Novosel. The social and political conditions for this were ripe. The interest of the gentlemen in the Peasant Party and the ideology of the peasant movement between the two world wars aided this process spiritually and materially, but the interest among the peasants was already there. Such interest is there today - it would be wrong to judge recent staging of customs as a surviving remnant of the political ambitions of conservative Rudica Herceg. Novosel's performances initiated a new genre, the peasant play, which aims at being a segment of life. Not of life as it is, but as it 'once was', and sometimes 'as it should have been' if the destructive influence of the city, industrialization, *foreign* culture hadn't interfered. 'The hero from Podgora who could wiggle his ears' which delighted the critic from *Hrvat* at the Vlačka Street Falcon Club performance with its *Russian* dance was left out of Prigorje Wedding, and it couldn't appear on the stage of the great theater, not merely because Novosel's performance lasted over three hours. A real, live peasant from Bukovec or Remete, who had (presumably) been a Russian prisoner-of-war from 1914 to 1918 would have learned the kazachok, but this did not coincide with the model of the Prigorje peasant as the gentlemen of the Peasant Party imagined him.

The peasant play as a staging of customs was not a segment of the performer's real life, as the critic from *Hrvat* thought of *Prigorje Wedding*¹. This is a genre of amateur theater that emerged under the influence of popular theater (i.e. performances for the folk)². The genre has survived, and exists today, although the Croatian Peasant Party that favored it has long since gone. It held on, because it satisfied a certain need of its performers and its audience. *Prigorje Wedding* has its distant echoes today in *Čučerska svadba* (Čučerje Wedding, performed by the Bosiljak Culture and Art Society from Čučerje), *Resnička svadba* (Resnik Wedding, under the guidance of Stjepan Pepeljnjak, university professor), in the play *Stari dečko* (Old Bachelor, in Kašina, on the text of a woman who is not from Prigorje), in the play *Snuboki* (Proposal, a group from Gornje Vrapče, with the help of Mladen Hanzlovski, publicist and film critic³). These are only a few random examples from the Zagreb vicinity in recent times. There are many more peasant plays that stage wedding customs, in other regions as well, as well as plays showing other customs.

¹ E. Jurkas writes: "They give only a *segment* of their life. They do not bring us life as *reflected* in the spirit of a certain writer, which is the pre-requisite for every creative work of art" (Herceg 1926: 117). I disagree with Jurkas - performers do not present a segment of their own life, but of life as it used to be, in their opinion, or as it ought to be.

² Stjepan Radić, Minister of Education, approved of the plan to present "peasant plays" (plays for peasants) at what is now the Croatian National Theater. Of these, *Diogeneš* by Brezovački was given, *Graničari* (Border Guards) by Freudenberg, Šenoa's *Zlatorovo zlato* (Goldsmith's Gold), Bogović's *Matija Gubec*, Gogolj's *Government Inspector*, Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, and Vrtač's *Majka zemlja* (Mother Earth). It is interesting that presentation of performed customs was simultaneous, and not subsequent to these 'peasant plays'. Novosel's *Badnja večer* (Christmas Eve) was given in December, 1925, right after *Diogeneš* (December 6th). *Prigorje Wedding* by S. Novosel was played on 25 April 1926, right after *Government Inspector* (March 7th) and before Vrtač's *Majka zemlje* (Mother Earth, May 2nd). This means that the 'village plays' did not have a far reaching effect on the staging of customs, but were merely an impulse to show these stagings on the Zagreb stage.

³ Current staged customs are also played at the 'major' theaters, and not only in local surroundings. The *Čučerska svadba* was given at the Lisinski Concert Hall, for instance, while *Snuboki* went to Jazavac, *Resnička svadba* was played at many places, including the Intercontinental Hotel. *Čučerska svadba* (along with the *Turopoljska svadba* from Suševac) is also on film, produced by Zagreb Television.

The work *Svoga tela gospodar* (His Body's Master) by S. Kolar, especially its version on film, has also influenced and continues to influence village amateur drama, in as much that the idyllic image of wedding festivities is treated from the other side of the coin - economic interest. The abovementioned performances from the vicinity of Zagreb differ among themselves. Some are the work of individuals, as dramatic texts, while others have come about through joint building of the text on the basis of improvisation. They share the fact that greater improvisation is allowed than in professional plays, and that they change from performance to performance.

The fact that staged customs (not merely wedding customs) are growing in number, that most are not the result of folklore or ethnographic research, rather they emerge spontaneously in the village, in an environment which until yesterday was 'folkloric'. Today's peasants (though not only them) reconstruct and don the apparel of their grandfathers and grandmothers in order to show, up on an elevated stage, their weddings, and they sing old songs and dance old dances. What motivates them to do so?

As far as I know, the only person who has attempted to address this question on these territories is Frank Dubinskas, in his text *Ritual na pozornici* (Ritual on Stage, Dubinskas, 1982). When writing about a Slavonian folklore group that staged 'Filipovčice', Dubinskas examined the past, experience and understanding of folklore in the older and younger subgroups of this ensemble. He saw the performance of customs on stage as a symbolic act in which the older group expressed a twofold nostalgia for the time of their youth and a nostalgia for another world in which young people would not reject the cultural values of the older generation. The pronounced significance of the generational gap in Dubinskas's eyes can be more easily understood if we take into consideration that this class was augmented by the rapid change in the village way of life over the last twenty years.

The nostalgic beauty of the old-fashioned customs is similar to the beauty of abandoned, rejected objects. What is no longer in use, is no longer a part of ordinary life, and it becomes extraordinary, unusual, attracts attention with its forms and acquires a new meaning. Maintenance and protection of customs is perhaps the most thorny task in preserving the folklore legacy. A custom stripped of its context changes its nature, and to safeguard a custom within its context means quite often a desire to freeze the historical process. We can not preserve a custom under the glass of a museum case like a stuffed bird, nor can we create reservations in which people would live in some old way, holding on to old customs. An awareness of the value of traditional culture arises where it has already vanished, not as a desire to protect something that still exists, but as a desire to renovate what has been lost. Hungarian folklorist Janos Honti, in his article on safeguarding national traditions (Honti 1975) writes how we must be careful not to consider dangerous what is natural and what comprises life and that a change in tradition does not mean the death of that tradition, rather that it is alive. Traditional folklore can only survive if it can find new modalities for existence under the changing conditions.

The question of customs on stage merely heightens the problems of folklore on stage in general. Aside from the pronounced social functions, music, song and dance, they have an unquestionably performance character, even in the most authentic imaginable context in which there are no divisions into performers and the audience. This makes their transferal to the stage possible, with minimal treatment and choreographic intervention. Dance, song and music are experienced as the entire event, regardless of context. While in the original context the folklore music and dance were a social act, a form of communication in a small

group, on stage they became independent performances with a dominant aesthetic function, and subsequently with the functions of stressing national or local membership, etc. Customs also contain many elements of presentation, but as a whole they are more powerfully bound to the living context and we are more likely to experience their staging as acting.

A custom which can no longer survive under changed circumstances, in the new reality of the village, retreats into the artificial reality of the play. The staging functions as a limited utopia allowing the performers and the audience to experience and revive, at least in altered and partial form, their lost custom. Regardless of the accuracy of the reconstruction, the play by its very nature remains an imaginary (artificial) world and it can not, nor does it want to touch the real world, but by embracing the fundamental convention of presentation, the participants manage to leave and forget the real world for a short while. The staging of customs is, in fact, a theatrical technique, a cluster of various sign systems (speech, movement, costume, etc). Theater, which originated from rite and custom in antique Greece, is still emerging from rite and custom even today. Just as the new genre of opera was born of an attempt to revive antique tragedy in the 17th century, so the desire to revive abandoned customs in our time has given birth to the theater genre of the village play. Perhaps this is an escape from reality, the escapism of unadapted individuals and a sentimental idealization of the past, but we must keep the spontaneity of this process in mind. The dramatization of customs is a modality of protection for customs which crops up among the very participants in the folklore process, in an environment what was, until recently, traditional. This is a form of maintaining customs in an altered social context, an attempt at safeguarding and adapting them at the same time. Staging is realized as an intensification, a condensation of lost customs into one act, on stage. This isolation produces a new quality: a theater performance.

Folklorists, ethnologists and all who are professionally or emotionally tied to traditional folklore may consider these staged versions awkward or even lacking in taste, but we must embrace them as a need of modern man, as a search for one's roots in the traditional culture of one's native area. The idealization of the past is at the same time a projection of a desired future. The idea of *progress* has its own correlative in the idea of *return*, return to the good old days, to the 'golden age', to the 'lost paradise'.

References

- Dubinskas, Frank, A.
1982 "Ritual na pozornici. Folklorna izvedba kao simbolička akcija", *Narodna umjetnost* 19: 105-118.
- Herceg, Rudolf
1926 "Veliki uspjeh seljačkih predstava u Zagrebu", *Seljačka prosvjeta* 5-8: 110-117.
- Honti, Janos
1975 *On Safeguarding Folk Traditions. Studies in Oral Epic Tradition*, Akademiai Kiado, Budapest.
- Rajković, Zorica
1985 "Dramski momenti u svadbenim običajima": 177-196. In *Dani hvarskog kazališta*, Književni krug, Split.
- Ubersfeld, Anne (Ibersfeld, An)
1982 *Čitanje pozorišta*, Vuk Karadžić, Beograd.
- Zagorac (pseudonym)
1926 "'Prigorska svadba' u varaždinskom kazalištu", *Seljačka prosvjeta* 20-24: 298-299.