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RITUALS — THE CORE OF UR-THEATRE

Abstract — The author proposes the theory that the core of ur-theatre is to be found in rituals. He finds evidence to support his ideas in trance rituals in the Balkans, which still survive in folk tradition. Having subjected them to a scholarly analysis, he discovers in them dramatic analogues as constitutive elements of the theatre.

Scholars' interest in the genesis of the theatre has not yet produced a completely satisfying theory. Discussions of the origins of the theatre and its early days are still trapped within the confines of a late-19th-century myth in the form of the institutionalized and generally accepted Frazerian theory expounded in the twelve volumes of *The Golden Bough*. In his writings, Sir James Frazer offered a wide-ranging survey of primitive vegetation magic, which is identified with some archetypal occurrences believed to have characterised the primordial and worldwide religion of mankind: the sacred marriage, the scapegoat, the killing and resurrection of the god-king as a fertility rite, etc. In all their varieties, these occurrences are vibrant with extraordinary moods and emotions, paradigmatic patterns of behaviour fixed by conditioning and repeated in the same form. They are very close to the patterns of behaviour that Jung calls archetypes.

Frazer's material was used by G. Murray and others to found a theory of the origins of tragedy and comedy. They believed, in brief, that the beginnings of the theatre were to be sought in the struggle between seasons and the death and resurrection of the king, or god, of the solar year. Elements of struggle in folk dances were taken as proof of a global battle of the seasons.¹

¹ G. Murray, 1927.

In his book *The Origin of the Theater*, B. Hunningher too described the genesis of the theatre as proceeding from vegetation magic. »As soon as spring would come«, he wrote, »the entire community would rush to welcome it and fortify it by complex representations of its victory over winter in the form of popular theatre.«² According to Hunningher, the battle between winter and summer was of crucial importance in imbuing the theatre with meaning. The concept of seasonal change includes the idea of death opposing life. This gave rise to the figure of the king or priest of the solar year, known throughout the Balkans and Europe; he defeats death so as to bring life. Ruth Benedict, however, questions the theory of vegetation proposed by Frazer and his followers, a theory that has the Christ-like image of a killed and subsequently resurrected spirit of fertility at its core, and thus raises anew the question of the origins of drama. There is beauty and grandeur in this tragic concept, concedes Benedict without denying the dramatic nature of its content, but she favours a more rational and less prejudiced approach to actual facts.³ E. K. Chambers explicitly states that there is no justification for classifying folk dances as forms of popular theatre where only the resurrection of the year is symbolized.⁴

W. Ridgeway, on the other hand, focused on locating various kinds of folk plays within their cultural context, with particular emphasis on phenomena connected with funerary rites. In his view, theatre was born from the cult of the dead.⁵ Ancestor worship and the tradition of keening are imbued with dramatic action and tension.

This brief survey of the most important theories would be incomplete without a mention of H. Looms and his followers; for them, imitation is inherent in human nature and is a fundamental ingredient of drama and stage representations in general, in which dramatic subjects taken from folklore predominate.⁶ The ritual models proposed by Frazer and claimed to contain dramatic action, conflicts and their resolution, are denied by the theory of N. Frye and S. Lang, who believe that literary content is paramount in folk drama; it structures the rhythm of seasonal change, of human life and behaviour. Oral literary libretti are not inspired by ritual, they are compositions apart, conditioned by models from actual life.

This at times hazy picture of theories, theses, and hypotheses resembles a tension-fraught walk through *Thalia's courtyard*, ending before the entrance to her temple. The famous contemporary theatreologist W. Puchner described this point in metaphorical terms as *Vorfeld* (prefield), thus separating folk drama from institutionalized

² B. Hunningher, 1961, 18.

³ R. Benedikt, 1976.

⁴ E.K. Chambers, 1933.

⁵ W. Ridgeway, 1915.

⁶ H. Looms, 1916.

theatre.⁷ If we want to know where exactly the theatre becomes theatre, it is in this *area of transition* or, in Puchner's words, *pre-field*.

We shall here concentrate on trance-based rituals, more precisely those in the eastern parts of the Balkan peninsula: the *Anasthenaria*, *Rusalje*, and *Kalushari*, in which we have noticed common and important theatrical elements. In them we find the theatre in embryo, turned towards the human being and the existence of man torn between life and death, with a pronounced frenetic trait. Here we come close to the theory of E. Th. Kirby, who sees the origins of theatre in many civilisations the world over in the *trance-dance* of the shamans.⁸ From a scholarly point of view it is no doubt exaggerated to derive the genesis of the theatre from the shamanic ecstatic dances only, as there are few arguments to support this theory in a decisive fashion. Yet, it offers inspiring material to the search for analogues and parallels in the colourful and ecstatic pictures of mediums in a trance. The Balkanic rituals of *Anasthenaria* (Greece), *Rusalje* (Serbia), and *Kalushari* (Romania) are very far from true shamanic seances, but they do involve the presence of specially inspired persons carrying out particular actions, and whose motive is chiefly to cure and heal, but also to entertain; all this by means of trance, a state incorporating many theatrical elements.

These three Balkan examples of trance rituals with a primarily curative purpose, in which the main »actors« find themselves in a frenetic trance — the supreme example of dramatic impressing, develop in their seances an exceptional and unique dramatic dialogue with imaginary supernatural beings; this is the climax of the dramatic seance, which heals the sick, regenerates the healthy, keeps evil and calamity at bay, in brief, brings man into a special state of mind, with catharsis as the grand finale.

Many volumes have been written about theatrical catharsis, beginning from Aristotle, for whom it meant »the effect on the viewer of the representation of passions and desires«. In a ritual trance, during a dialogue with supernatural beings, it has a beneficial effect, freeing those present from evil and awakening, in both individuals and groups, a liberating spontaneity. The imaginary solutions provoked by the ritual trance enable man to perform the task imposed on him as an integral human being.

As a feature of drama, dialogue appears in the trancelike seance at the time when the possessed is conversing with his spirits, or deities, or dead ancestors, etc. Regarding the prophetic abilities of persons in a trance Ridgeway said: »Here is clear proof that the primitive actor is thought to be a medium.« Dialogue appears, therefore, at the point when the spirit enters the possessed, who converses with the spirit as long as the trance lasts. In form, content,

⁷ W. Puchner, 1977, 345.

⁸ E. Th. Kirby, 1975.

and aesthetic traits, this kind of dialogue closely resembles that in shamanic seances; basically, it is a kind of exorcism that leads directly to drama.

The ritual trance dance requires dramatic participation by both actors and observers in a single action whose obvious and concealed content reflects the great problems that excite man: the struggle against compulsion, spontaneity, the discovery of freedom. The observers' enthusiasm is turned into a morbid curiosity about actual things, while a crowd of people (in our personal experience) throng about the Anasthenaria, Rusalje, and Kalushari in order to participate in the performance, their souls in turmoil, their faces contorted into bizarre grimaces. The relationship between performers and observers is a perfect example of direct feedback in communication.⁹ This is known as »contact communication«, where there is interaction between performers and audience. The behaviour of the observers is rather free. It is a special form of participation involving actors and audience alike, of a kind that has been lost in professional theatre. According to J. Huizinga, it started disappearing in Europe from the 18th century, the age of scientific rationalism, and was already dead by the late 19th century.¹⁰ It is a joint feast in which actors and observers both take part, a play-feast, something that the professional theatre has lost but that avantgarde movements are trying to revive by involving the audience in the dramatic act. Performers of trance rituals are inconceivable without the direct participation of an audience. Therefore, there is only moderate distinction between performers and observers, who appear together in a special kind of ritual behaviour, as enlightenment and consolation, as trust in faith renewed or, at times, reaction against scepticism.

Such pressure from the outside provides the performers with a sensation of interior unity and togetherness. The intensity of the common expectation of the trance dance should not be underestimated. Rhythmic music and dancing gradually take hold of every participant in the ritual. When the audience starts to repeat the refrain with the possessed one, a state of mass ecstasy is reached. The audience follows the actions of the possessed, it grows increasingly active, experiences extraordinary psychological and physiological states, and achieves a great satisfaction, much greater than that generated by professional theatrical and musical performances in urban communities. The audience sees the trance as a performance, it identifies with the entranced person, feels the same kind of excitement, grieves for the tragic victim and is indignant at the spirits that have »wronged« it. The entranced, on the other hand, achieves his aim in such an atmosphere, draws attention to himself, causes sympathy and admiration, frightens and subjugates the pe-

⁹ I. Lozica, 1970.

¹⁰ J. Huizinga, 1970.

ople around him. The audience is excited and reaches an affective state that can lead to trancelike hallucinations, a phenomenon the author has himself witnessed in observing trance rituals.

Ritual music, singing, and dancing generate a whirlwind of dramatic images, gradually drawing every participant into the common act whose pace increases all the time until possession by supernatural forces reaches a climax. There we enter the collective unconscious, and man is separated from the world of the profane, the everyday and ordinary, but not from his desires and passions, nor from his need for liberation.

Once the dance is over, the immediate participants recall various details of the performance, in which they had invested a large amount of psychological and physical energy and experienced visual and aural hallucinations. This emotional exaltation of an organized ritual group in a trance is of great importance for the genesis of dramatic forms.

Ritual trance dances have a well-defined dramaturgy of their own, in the form of a logical sequence of actions and events represented. The magic foundations of these rituals are reflected in the dialogue, in motions, dance and sound, in the props, the setting (open-air or indoors, by day or by night), all of which combine to create an effect of spectacle — a fundamental aspect of theatricality in general.

We can take it that the basic magico-religious thread in the trance dances, as a manifestation of the victory of good over evil, represents a compartmentalised structure of archetypal factors in a demonic dance characteristic of a special and very important stage in the evolution of theatre. Thus we approach the familiar theory according to which the role of ritual complexes — trance rituals in this case — in the genesis of the theatre is undeniable, for theatrical actions in them are bearers of rudimentary theatrical content. We believe that the kind of trance found in the rituals of the Anasthenaria, Rusalje, and Kalushari is evidently part of the very foundations of urtheatre.

One might say that every ritual and every ceremony may be theatrical. Yet the theatricality of the rituals under study is in the function of a special kind of treatment. In order for a healing to be effected, belief in what is about to happen must be sustained and reinforced, not just in the patient but in the audience as well, for the experience directly contributes to the effect. They affect the patient's experience, intensifying his own conviction of the holiness of the dramatic scene.

Another factor of prime importance in ritual trance is magical illusionism, which can both induce belief in the supernatural and actually impossible, and contribute to a state of mind in which the real spectacle is enhanced by hallucinatory perceptions. Based on the appearance of supernatural presences, these rituals grow into a

curative seance in which the audience is involved no less than the patient. This complex, in its turn, develops into a performance which, in our view, becomes theatre.¹¹

Rituals are stylised representations with strictly defined repetition of awesome events; they are sacral in content and in ritual value, which is based on the mythic legitimation of a deity. The trance/possession is *sacred theatre* on the one hand, but human on the other — the kind of theatre in which, according to M. Leiris, man acts both for himself and for others. In addition to these two aspects there is also an aesthetic side to the trance. The most important aspect, however, remains communication with oneself and others.

The highly structured nature of ritual as theatre is evident in the degree of organisation of each performance. Anthropologist A. Schaeffner says: »All that can contribute to the actualisation of the performance, the performers, stage direction and props, the co-operation among the various participants, is quite comparable to rituals. Global elements repeated in rituals are also found in theatrical technique.«¹² It follows, then, that a performance based on ritualised repetition in accordance with prescribed rules is also a ritual. Perfect understanding of the fictional nature of the ritual plot to be represented, on the part of both participants in the ritual and observers of it remains of paramount importance. It has been noted that ritual structure is all the more prominent if a theatrical form remains embedded in the value system of a given society or ethnic group and its established behaviour.

A brief survey of the above aspects reveals the twofold nature of ritual as both gauging and controlling social norms. Its function is thus both to instruct and to control. According to functionalist anthropology and teatrology, Greek drama was a social phenomenon similar to churchgoing in modern society. Its beginnings are closely related to rituals which establish order in society. Even at the apex of its development, it dealt with the relationship between the individual and the social group. It seems to us, however, that this too hasty identification between different social phenomena eventually leads to generalization and a blurring of the contours. Perhaps we should hold to Brecht's pithy statement that theatre was a product of the cult and that it became real theatre when it abandoned its content of mystery and its original ritual impulse. This means that the theatre achieved independence by a radical change of function. No matter how great the similarity between the manifestations of theatre and ritual, the fact remains that by progressive emancipation ritual ties lost their compulsory nature and theatre thereby lost its function of controlling.¹³

¹¹ D. Antonljevic, 1987, 550.

¹² A. Schaeffner, 1965, 26.

¹³ J.S.R. Goodlad, 1971, 23.

Finally, it must be underlined that trance rituals in the Balkans, with their highly complex dramatic structure, contain both classical and Byzantine elements. Epistemologically, the connection between such a distant past and dramatic scenes from contemporary trance rituals — expressed through a religious relationship between cult and fertility magic and the healing of the sick by trance and possession — remains hypothetical. Nevertheless, the ritual elements present indicate that it should be taken very seriously. We are here dealing with a long tradition aimed at something very tangible; far from being a rudiment or opposed to the forward movement of human life, it is always alive, and therefore subject to change in the temporal flow of history. Tradition is not out of time but in it, and time is a constitutive and lasting element of human culture.

РИТУАЛИ — ЈЕЗГРА ПРАТЕАТРА

Резиме

У овом прилогу аутор поставља и разрађује тезу да се у ритуалима налази језгро пратеатра. Потврду за овај став превасходно налази у трансним ритуалима на Балканском полуострву, који се још увек изводе у народној традицији Срба, Грка, Бугара, Румуна и др. Аутор је проучавао ритуал непосредно на терену, а у анализи се користио и расположивим писаним изворима. У ритуалима аутор открива драмске елементе који по њему представљају језгро театра.

Ритуалне трансне игре имају тачно одређену драматургију у логичном току радње и поступака који се приказују. Магијска основа ових ритуала садржана је у дијалогу, у покретима игре, у звуку, у реквизитима који подупиру драмску представу било да се одржава на отвореном или затвореном простору, дању или ноћу и сл., а све то чини одређени и утврђени спектакл као темељни аспект театарности уопште.

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