

The Journal of Religion and Theatre

<http://www.rtjournal.org>

**Published by the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the
Association for Theatre in Higher Education**

The Journal of Religion and Theatre is a peer-reviewed online journal. The journal aims to provide descriptive and analytical articles examining the spirituality of world cultures in all disciplines of the theatre, performance studies in sacred rituals of all cultures, themes of transcendence in text, on stage, in theatre history, the analysis of dramatic literature, and other topics relating to the relationship between religion and theatre. The journal also aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge throughout the theatrical community concerning the relationship between theatre and religion and as an academic research resource for the benefit of all interested scholars and artists.

All rights reserved. Each author retains the copyright of his or her article. Acquiring an article in this pdf format may be used for research or teaching purposes only. No other type of reproduction by any process or technique may be made without the formal, written consent of the author.

Submission Guidelines

- Submit your article in Microsoft Word 1998 format via the internet
- Include a separate title page with the title of the article, your name, address, e-mail address, and phone number, with a 70 to 100 word abstract and a 25 to 50 word biography
- Do not type your name on any page of the article
- MLA style endnotes -- Appendix A.1. (Do not use parenthetical references in the body of the paper/ list of works cited.)
- E-Mail the article and title page via an attachment in Microsoft Word 1998 to Debra Bruch: dlbruch -at- mtu.edu. (Please replace the -at- with @.)
- Or send by regular post with the article on a zip disk, Mac format, in Microsoft Word to:

Debra Bruch, Ph.D.
General Editor, *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*
Department of Fine Arts
Michigan Technological University
1400 Townsend Drive
Houghton, MI 49931

- DEADLINE: May 1st of each year

The Ritual Origin of Theatre - A Scientific Theory or Theatrical Ideology?¹

Written by
Eli Rozik

The theory of the ritual origin of theatre has become a cultural commonplace, even beyond the circles of theatre scholarship. First proposed in its alleged scientific form by the Cambridge School of Anthropology (CSA), it swiftly became a conventional "truth", equally accepted by layman and expert. Although thoroughly refuted later by such excellent scholars as Pickard Cambridge, the influence of the CSA could still be clearly felt in subsequent theories. While alternative arguments and methods have been suggested to replace the refuted ones, the main thesis - that theatre originated in ritual - remains firm. Eventually, this theory was also adopted by leading directors, such as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Arian Mnouchkine, Richard Schechner and Eugenio Barba, who attempted to restore the ritual elements that assumedly had been lost, and that were considered by them to be vital for the rejuvenation of theatre.

In the light of these considerations, and if only for scientific reasons, this theory must be cast under methodological doubt and examined all over again. I intend to show here that the ritual theory of origin was worked out on the grounds of erroneous theories of both ritual and theatre, and reflects an ideological attitude rather than a scientific approach. Moreover, directors invented artificial ritual elements, based on superficial knowledge of real rituals, while the nature of their impact on audiences has never been studied.

In the development of twentieth-century theory of ritual origin of theatre, three major contributions can be discerned. In chronological order, these are: the CSA ritual theory, Kirby's

¹ This article summarizes the main issues dealt with in my book *The Roots of Theatre*, which focuses on the creation of the medium of theatre, University of Iowa Press, forthcoming.

shamanist theory and Turner-Schechner's performance theory. I intend to put them under criticism only after presenting them as fully as possible in their own terms. The same approach will be applied to the theory of recreation of theatre in the Middle Ages by the Church.

If indeed, as we shall see, none of the interchanging arguments stand up to criticism, how can the continued persistence and vitality of the main thesis of ritual origin be explained? How can one account for the readiness to accept it as a true description of the origin of theatre? Why have such outstanding theatre directors, as mentioned above, adopted it? If it conforms more to being a theatrical or cultural ideology than a scientific theory, what is its appeal in the eyes of the theoretical experts, practitioners and laymen alike? I suggest here that this thesis has provided theatre with a numinous aura, which it does not always possess, and probably also satisfies the sense of loneliness and yearning for community belonging, typical of twentieth-century individuality.

My article is based exclusively on the history of Western Theatre. My knowledge of Asian Theatre - for which the Western theory of ritual origin has been quite influential - is insufficient to either support or reject my argument.

The development of ancient theatre

As mentioned above, three different approaches have been suggested for the development of ancient theatre from ritual. In order of appearance, they are: the CSA, shamanist and performance theories. In the following I present these approaches, followed by my own critical remarks.

My criticism is based on the assumption that rituals and dramatic media² - including the medium of theatre - are phenomena in different spheres of human activity. In terms of speech act theory, ritual is a complex macro-"speech/medium act", whose main purpose (perlocutionary effect) is to influence a divine entity (to change a state of affairs) for the benefit of the performer or the community on behalf of which s/he operates.³ In principle, a ritual may be performed by means of either a single medium, such as natural language (e.g., a prayer), or other media, including non-verbal ones (e.g., the sacrifice of an animal). The macro ritual speech/medium-act may feature several media in varying proportions and order. It can thus be conjectured that ancient rituals may well have included components formulated in the medium of theatre, as their building units, even if there is no extant evidence for this.

On a different level, the medium of theatre is a method of signification (categorization) and communication, which affords means for the representation and description of worlds, especially fictional ones. In this capacity the theatre medium may reflect any intention and be employed for any purpose, including purposes that contrast those of ritual. For example, whereas one of the secondary purposes of ritual is to reaffirm the beliefs that nourish the community, theatre can be employed for either reaffirming or refuting them. The latter function cannot even be imagined in the context of ritual.

² "Dramatic media" is used here in the sense of iconic media capable of formulating fictional worlds. These include media such as theatre, cinema, Opera, puppet theatre, comics and photo novel.

³ In particular, see: J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford University Press 1980 [1962]); John R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge University Press, 1985 [1969]); Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge University Press, 1987 [1983]). Vimala Herman, *Dramatic Discourse - Dialogue as Interaction* (London: Routledge, 1995).

The Cambridge School of Anthropology

In its anthropologic scientific guise or, to be more accurate, in what was then thought to be a scientific method, the claim that tragedy and comedy developed from Dionysiac ritual was suggested at the beginning of the twentieth century, by a group of English scholars who published their major works around 1912-14, and are known by the collective name of the Cambridge School of Anthropology (CSA).⁴ The main scholars of this school were Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray and Francis McDonald Cornford. *Inter alia*, their aim was to promote the thesis that Ancient Greek drama originated in ritual, Dionysiac ritual in particular, during the sixth century BC. They supported this thesis by archeological and literary evidence from ancient Greece and surrounding cultures, whether contemporaneous or not. Despite substantial differences, they shared a basic approach and main theses, which made them a unitary and distinct school.

They also shared a serious methodological problem: their object of research was never defined unambiguously. It has never been clear as to whether they were attempting to determine the origin of definite dramatic genres - tragedy and comedy - or the origins of the theatre medium itself. They definitely appear to have preferred dealing with the first question, but elements of the second one were quite often mixed in their deliberations. Unfortunately, this distinction has remained somewhat unclear even in more recent studies, not to mention books of theatre history. The widespread implicit assumption is that these are two aspects of the same issue; in other words, that the creation of both major dramatic genres and the medium of theatre are two aspects of the same process. Nonetheless, in my opinion, the discussion of

⁴ In particular, see Jane Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1927 [1912]); Jane Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (Oxford University Press, 1951 [1913]); Gilbert Murray, "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy" in Jane Harrison, *Themis*; Francis M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1914). All quotations are from these editions.

these should be separated, because genres are defined and distinguished among themselves by the structures of their fictional worlds and moods (e.g., serious/sublime or comic moods), while the medium of theatre is shared by all dramatic genres. For example, in the process of its creation, tragedy could have adopted the already existing medium of theatre employed in popular comedy.⁵

a) The creation of dramatic genres

The crux of the CSA's argument is the assumed existence of a pre-Dionysiac ritual that worshiped the Spring Daimon (*eniautos daemon*). The presupposition of this ur-ritual probably explains the existence of a set of different faiths featuring the very same pattern of death and resurrection of a god - such as Osiris, Tamuz, Adonis, Orpheus and Persephone - that corresponds to the yearly cycle of the seasons. In this sense, the Dionysiac ritual is a specific offspring of the Spring Daimon ur-ritual; i.e., of a divinity that represents the cycle of death and resurrection of nature.

According to this approach, the dithyramb was created within Dionysiac ritual from a ritual dance (*sacer ludus*) that represented the *aition* (mythical narrative) of the divine spirit/god Dionysus.⁶ Dithyramb is a kind of serious and sublime choral storytelling poem, devoted to narratives of gods and/or heroes. The CSA scholars accepted Aristotle's dictum regarding the development of tragedy from dithyrambic poetry.⁷ However, in contrast to Aristotle, who was relatively close to this process and did not mention any connection between dithyramb and

⁵ In particular, see Allardice Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles* (London, Bombay and Sidney: Harrap, 1931) 20 ff.)

⁶ Murray 341.

⁷ Aristotle, *The Poetics*, in S. H. Butcher (trans. and ed.), *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York: Dover, 1951) VI,12. All quotations are from this edition.

Dionysiac ritual, they argued in favor of continuity - mediated by dithyramb - between Dionysiac ritual and tragedy. They also claimed that this ritual source left its traces in the structure of the fictional worlds of both dithyramb and tragedy.

Murray suggested an apparently sophisticated method to detect these traces in a pattern of recurrent narrative elements, appearing in a certain order, which were supposed to reflect the pattern of death and resurrection characteristic of the rituals generated by the ur-ritual of the Spring Daimon, including the Dionysiac ritual. This pattern was assumed to include the following events, in this order: (1) *agon* - the struggle between the Spring Daimon and its enemy (winter); (2) *pathos* - the ritual death of the divinity; (3) *messenger* - the report of the death or display of the corpse; (4) *threnos* or *lamentation* - the expression of grief; (5-6) *anagnorisis* - the recognition of the dead god and *epiphany* or *theophany* - his resurrection and apotheosis.⁸

Already in 1927, Pickard Cambridge - the leading scholar of ancient Greek culture - in his book *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy*, demolished one by one the various arguments of the CSA. He demonstrated that there is no evidence of the presupposed ritual of the Spring Daimon or of any similar one in all ancient Greece.⁹ Harrison herself implicitly acknowledged this fact by supporting her own claim with Egyptian sources concerning the ritual of Osiris, who in her view was the prototype of the gods who die and resurrect.¹⁰ In general, the assumed existence of an ur-ritual can be accepted, but only on condition that it explains something with regard to either ritual or tragedy. However, while this assumption can explain the existence of a set of rituals revealing the same pattern of death and resurrection, and their distribution within a

⁸ Murray 343-344.

⁹ A. W. Pickard Cambridge, *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927). All quotations are from this edition.

¹⁰ Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) 15-23.

relatively delimited area, there is nothing in it to explain the creation of the tragic dramatic genre.

Pickard Cambridge also demonstrated that the traces of the set of narrative components, in their stipulated order, as suggested by Murray, can not be found either in any known form of ritual, including Dionysiac ritual,¹¹ or in any known dithyramb or tragedy. Even in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, the only extant tragedy that dramatizes a central episode of Dionysus' life, the pattern of death and resurrection does not materialize. Pickard Cambridge claims that the application of this model involves an intolerable degree of flexibility in the definition of terms, as illustrated by Murray himself. In principle, the assumption of a mythical pattern shared by ritual, dithyramb and tragedy is obviously absurd, especially because of the reduction of all fictional actions to a single pattern that stresses the narrative elements of death and resurrection. It also contrasts the diversity of fictional characters and actions in both dithyramb and tragedy. Indeed, in many a known tragedy principal characters die, but their death is final, as human death is, and there is no tragic hero who eventually resurrects.

In contrast to the CSA, Pickard Cambridge also argued that the link between dithyramb and Dionysiac ritual was severed in the early stages of the former's development. In fact, there is no known dithyramb, either complete or fragment, that narrates the *aition* of the god. Apart from a short deferential passage in honor of Dionysus, no known dithyramb tells its *aition* or any other narrative connected to his life and death. In contrast, there is ample evidence that dithyrambic poems dealt with narratives of various heroes and gods, typical of the Homeric tradition. If this was the case, the tradition that linked dithyramb with Dionysiac ritual was

¹¹ Pickard Cambridge 198.

severed prior to the advent of tragedy.¹²

Cornford too, in *The Origin of Attic Comedy*,¹³ suggested a theory of ritual origin for Aristophanic comedy, from Dionysiac ritual. In principle, he accepts the Aristotelian account, according to which Attic comedy developed from popular forms of comedy that existed prior to their institutionalization in Athens,¹⁴ which in turn developed from phallic songs.¹⁵ In particular, Cornford mentions the previous existence of Megarean farce, mentioned contemptuously by Aristophanes himself.¹⁶ Cornford's innovation resides in his attempt to link Aristophanic comedy to Dionysiac ritual, as it was understood by the CSA, by mediation of the phallic songs and pre-Aristophanic popular comedy.

Like Murray, Cornford suggested a set of narrative elements, appearing in a strict order, shared by Dionysiac ritual, popular comedy and Attic comedy. This set includes the following components: (1) *prologos* - the exposition scene; (2) *parodos* - the chorus' entrance; (3) *agon* - the struggle between the gods; (4) *parabasis*; (5) *sacrifice* - the display of the vanquished and dead god, who symbolizes the Summer; (6) *feast* - the dismemberment and eating of the god; (7) *marriage* and *comos*.¹⁷ In Cornford's view, only the *parabasis* does not belong in the supposed shared pattern, because of its non-dramatic nature. It is assumed, therefore, to be an innovation of Attic comedy itself. If other formal components, such as *prologos*, *parodos* and *comos*, are

¹² Most known dithyrambs are fragments and there are no extant full poems before those of Bacchylides, from the fifth century BC. - a century after the creation of tragedy. See: Anne Pippin Burnett, *The Art of Bacchylides* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

¹³ Cornford,

¹⁴ Aristotle V, 2

¹⁵ Aristotle IV, 12.

¹⁶ Cornford 178-179.

¹⁷ Cornford 2-3.

discounted, the allegedly essential components of the Dionysiac pattern are: *agon*, which represents the struggle between two principles - or seasons - identified by Cornford as the hero and the villain of the dramatic action ;¹⁸ the **sacrifice**, which represents the slaying of the benevolent god by the malevolent god; the sacred **feast**, which represents the dismemberment (and/or cooking) and eating of the god (i.e., omophagy); and **resurrection**, followed by a ceremony of **marriage**, which represents the return of the god and the union of the powers of fertility that ensure the renewal of nature and the welfare of the community.¹⁹

Against the background of the claim that both dramatic genres developed from the very same ritual, the lack of agreement between Murray's and Cornford's patterns is surprising, to say the least. Among the non-shared elements the oddest one is Cornford's **marriage** (*ieros gamos*), which should have united the representatives of the two spiritual/divine entities in order to bring about nature's fertile renewal.²⁰ Cornford's claim is that "[Aristophanes] plays regularly end with a procession in which the Chorus marches out of the orchestra, conducting the chief character in triumph and singing a song technically known as the *Exodos*. The hero, moreover, is accompanied in this *Kômos* by a person who, perhaps because she is (except in one play) always mute, has attracted less notice than she deserves. This person is sometimes a nameless courtesan, sometime an allegorical figure."²¹ Assumedly, this parade symbolizes the above-mentioned marriage. Cornford is aware that no Aristophanes' comedy features a marriage ceremony in the literal sense of the term, and that he uses "marriage" in a metaphorical sense. He assumes that Aristophanes' comedies preserved the marriage ceremony of two

¹⁸ Cornford 2.

¹⁹ Cornford 99.

²⁰ Cornford 18.

²¹ Cornford 8.

youngsters, which according to tradition used to be performed within the Dionysiac ritual and symbolized the union of nature's powers. Ridgeway comments that the theory of a sacred marriage between the god of the Sky and the goddess of the Earth, which took place at Eleusis, is only based on authors who lived in the Christian era and who described accurately what happened in Eleusis in their own times. "The *Philosophoumena* itself, on which Harrison based her argument, was not written before the second century AD."²² Pickard Cambridge notes that there is no evidence of a Dionysiac ritual - in any of its forms - in which a sacred marriage was performed in the context of a phallic parade.²³

An additional significant difference between the models of Murray and Cornford resides in the narrative element of resurrection, which is a precondition of marriage, and which together complete the alleged mythical pattern of death, resurrection and sacred marriage. Murray admits that tragedy ends in the midst of the pattern, in the phase of sacrifice, without the element of resurrection and marriage, and that the "extreme change of feeling from grief to joy",²⁴ which characterizes the full pattern, is consummated by the satirical play - the fourth play of a typical tetralogy.²⁵ This is, however, a very weak argument, since to the best of our knowledge the satirical play features a fictional world, different from and independent of that of the trilogy.²⁶

²² William Ridgeway, *Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races* (Cambridge: University Press, 1915) 24.; 1.

²³ Pickard Cambridge 334-335.

²⁴ Murray 344.

²⁵ Murray 345.

²⁶ An additional difference resides in the elements of dismemberment, cooking and eating the god (omophagy), although it can be conjectured that these are implicit in the element of pathos in Murray's model, as it transpires from his analysis of Euripides' *The Bacchae*.

Similarly to his criticism of Murray's model, Pickard Cambridge demolished one by one Cornford's arguments, which *inter alia* are supported by analyses of Aristophanes' comedies. However, with regard to these comedies too, the application of his model involves what Pickard Cambridge conceived as an unbearable flexibility in the definition and application of terms.

In principle, if indeed Dionysiac ritual, dithyramb, tragedy and comedy materialized the same narrative pattern and even the same myth, and presented the very same action either to a community of believers or an audience, this would not have posed any problem. If this were the case, the age-old ritual pattern would have been easily recognized in subsequent forms. The problem is that no known fictional world described in dithyramb, tragedy or comedy corresponds to the *aition* of Dionysus.²⁷

b) The creation of the theatre medium

The opinions of the CSA scholars with regard to the creation of the theatre medium are less homogeneous and more vague. In their quest for the origins of the main dramatic genres both Murray and Cornford looked for common traces in the structures of their fictional worlds. Such an approach could not have led to the discovery of the origin of the medium of theatre. Moreover, although they did not make any attempt to reveal the origins of the medium, and professedly dealt with the origins of tragedy and comedy, their argumentation was not altogether free from considerations of medium. These considerations, however, presupposed that the origins of genres and medium were only aspects of the same process, a fallacy that even their followers continued to commit.

²⁷ Another problem that will not be discussed in this context: a set of narrative components in a given order does not constitute a structure of a dramatic action. See my books *Elements of Play-Analysis* (Tel Aviv: Or Am, 1992 (Hebrew)); and *The Roots of Theatre*, see note No. 1.

Even if by sheer coincidence the creation of a given genre had coincided with the creation of the medium, this would have not cancelled the distinction between these processes. Any new genre would at least have benefited from the prior existence of the medium. Parallel creation does not contradict the mutual independence of narrative and medium components. In principle, the same fictional world can be described by different media - such as fiction (by means of natural language) and theatre (by means of a dramatic medium); and the same medium is capable of describing different fictional worlds. The possible use of different media for the description of the same fictional world is clearly demonstrated by the transition from dithyramb (which is a storytelling genre) to tragedy (which is a dramatic genre). On the grounds of the same mythical narratives, the conversion of a member of the dithyrambic chorus into an actor was enough to change a storytelling poem into theatre. Moreover, from a historical viewpoint the parallel creation of genre and medium definitely did not happen. There is clear evidence, from the beginning of the sixth century BC,²⁸ to the fact that Attic comedy was preceded by popular forms of comedy,²⁹ and that these forms also preceded the advent of tragedy. Nonetheless, the CSA did not overlook questions regarding the origin of the theatre medium altogether. Harrison claims that the dramatic form of representation originated in a primitive form of imitation. She stresses the semantic link between the Greek words for ritual, "*dromenon*", and "drama", both from "*dran*", which is the Doric word for "to do".³⁰ Obviously, she uses "drama" in the restricted sense of theatre representation. Her intention was to point at the similarity between medium, which is a method of representation based on doings on stage, and ritual, which is a kind of doing that employs representation. In her view, *dromenon* is a doing

²⁸ Nicoll 20-25.

²⁹ Aristotle V, 2; Cornford 178-9.

³⁰ Harrison, *Themis* (1927) 41.

involving **representation** and imbued with religious meaning; e.g., savages returning victorious from war would commemorate their success by re-doing the acts that brought them victory, and before setting off to war, they would anticipate their victory by pre-doing them. It is thus that Jane Harrison conceives the advent of **mimetic** rites, since "all rites *quâ* rites are mimetic".³¹

For Harrison, since ritual is essentially mimetic, the transition from ritual to theatre is self-understood. In this sense we should conceive her approach as a theory of the creation of the theatre medium, despite the problems that this solution raises in itself; in particular the lack of consideration of the essential difference between ritual and theatre, as suggested above. From this difference we may infer that the medium of theatre can be employed in the framework of ritual, without the former developing from the latter. From the development of tragedy from dithyramb we may also infer that dramatic genres need not develop from previous theatre forms. It is more reasonable to assume, therefore, that the creation of mimetic rituals, if Harrison's scenario did happen at all, derives from an innate propensity of the human brain, which conditions all human activities. Furthermore, in stressing the origins of the dramatic fictional structure, she deviates from her search for the possible origins of the theatre medium.

In his search for the origins of Attic comedy, Cornford is not concerned with the question of origins of the theatre medium at all. He simply presupposes that this medium existed even before the creation of popular comedy (which preceded Attic comedy), claiming that comedy developed from theatre elements already existing in Dionysiac ritual, in particular the representation of a sacred marriage. As mentioned above, the existence of such a representation prior to the sixth century was refuted by Pickard Cambridge and Ridgeway. Nonetheless,

³¹ Harrison, *Themis* (1927) 35.

Cornford assumed that "[i]t is [...] difficult to see how drama can come out of what is not, even in germ, dramatic".³² The logical problem is that this is a kind of regressive argument: if theatre could only develop from a previous theatre form, the problem of its original creation cannot be solved. In addition, it contrasts Murray's acceptance of Aristotle's dictum that tragedy developed from dithyramb, which despite its typical dialogical element is not of the nature of theatre at all. Consequently, it is possible that Cornford's expression "dramatic in germ" refers to these dialogical elements. Still, since storytelling naturally includes dialogical elements, theatre could have developed from a previous non-theatrical form.

In his "excursus" Murray does not address the question of creation of the theatre medium and, as mentioned above, he accepts Aristotle's claim that tragedy developed from dithyramb. Since popular comedy was created not later than the beginning of the sixth century BC, it follows that both Attic comedy and tragedy could have borrowed the theatre medium from this early theatrical form. It can be conjectured, therefore, that Thespis, who "lived" approximately half a century later, figured out the possibility of performing the serious mythical narratives typical of dithyramb in a medium that was already in existence, and that apparently had not been employed for this type of narrative before his time.

If we are to judge the CSA according to the criticism it has attracted, we cannot avoid the conclusion that dithyramb, tragedy and comedy could not have developed from Dionysiac ritual, because there is no evidence of continuity either on the level of genre or on the level of medium. Moreover, even if they had been right on the level of genre, this could not have had any bearing on our quest for the origins of the theatre medium.

³² Cornford 4.

The shamanist theory

The ritual thesis was not dismissed despite the heavy criticism aimed at the CSA. Contrary to expectations, while obsolete arguments were replaced by alternative ones, the main thesis remained firm. Ernest T. Kirby suggested a ritual theory on the grounds of development of theatre from the ecstatic nature of shamanist ritual.³³ From the viewpoint of the creation of the theatre medium, it would appear that Kirby's approach is advantageous. Whereas the CSA focused on shared narrative elements of ritual and dramatic fictional world, Kirby focused on a performer exhibiting an identity other than his own, apparently characteristic of both the shaman in a state of trance and the actor on stage. This alleged common property would appear to be more promising, since enacting characters is essential to acting in all dramatic media.

The term "shaman", of Siberian origin and originally employed in Siberian ethnography, is applied nowadays in the study of different cultures to a variety of medicine men who combine healing, magic and mediumship. The common belief is that the shaman is capable of entering a state of trance, travelling to other worlds, taking control of spirits and compelling them to cure people in the human world. The success of the shaman is measured by his mastery of the upper-worlds and, in this sense, it is a kind of (magic) ritual.

In the state of trance the shaman behaves as if possessed by a spirit, speaking in his voice. The belief is that in order to reveal itself within the human world the spirit is in need of the material body of the shaman. In this sense, he is a medium of this spiritual power. This quality is essential to Kirby's theory, because the shaman is supposed to "enact" an entity other than himself, a denizen of another world; and this is assumed to establish him as the prototype of the

³³ Ernest T. Kirby, *Dionysus: A Study of The Bacchae and the Origins of Drama* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Int., 1982 [1970]); Ernest T. Kirby, *Ur-Drama - The Origins of Theatre* (New York: New York University Press, 1975). All quotations are from these editions.

theatre actor.

Despite its wide appeal, this approach is nevertheless fallacious, since it overlooks the internal viewpoint of the culture within which the shaman performs. The mere thought that the shaman is simply "acting" implies that magical means are not effective and cannot influence the world, in particular its ruling powers. From this internal perspective the shaman is definitely not enacting the character of a spirit, but constitutes a means for its revelation in the human world; i.e., the spirit is not conceived as a fictional entity, but as a real one. He is not describing a spirit, but becomes inhabited by the spirit itself. The shaman performs a ritual macro-act whose purpose is to change a state of affairs in the human world with the assistance of supernatural powers. The shaman believes that he is capable of coercing spirits to speak through his mouth and that he can serve as a medium for them, and so does the community. The spirit is assumed to eventually control the shaman and from this moment on its behavior is his own. The efficacy of the ritual is supposed to depend on these beliefs. If the shaman is suspected of impersonation by the community, his performance is conceived as fraud and the efficacy of the ritual is impaired.

In contrast, an actor genuinely enacts a (fictional) character. By means of performing verbal and non-verbal images, which he imprints on his own body, he creates a text, a description of a character, which reaches existence only in the imagination of the spectator. Throughout his performance on stage he consistently preserves the duality actor/character, which cannot be cancelled without becoming something else. The audience accepts the basic convention of theatre that an actor enacts a character, displaying indexes of action that reflects, not on himself but on the enacted other. Therefore, the nature of his performance cannot be perceived as fraud, but as essential to his art. Whereas the shaman's performance can be conceived in terms of "honest" or "fraudulent", the actors' performance can not.

Even if we do not accept the internal viewpoint of the shamanist believer, and prefer a skeptical scientific approach, the principles of representation do not change. For example, from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, the thesis is that in a situation of trance the shaman reflects potential entities and voices suppressed in his own unconscious. In this sense, from this viewpoint too, he does not enact an "other", but expresses the "other" suppressed in his own soul; he enacts nothing, because this "other" enjoys real existence. Thus trance is assumed to only reflect the non-I of the shaman himself. Consequently, whether the approach to shamanism is internal or external is immaterial: in any case the "other" is conceived as real. In contrast, in creating images on stage, for the sake of describing a character, the theatre actor may draw inspiration from the contents of his own psyche, including suppressed ones, but he cannot transcend the boundaries of his medium: he does not express a character, but describes it. Moreover, an actor can describe the character of a shaman, or even a spirit, but the shaman cannot describe or even express an actor.

The problem resides in conceiving ecstasy as a condition of theatre acting. Even in the state of extreme identification with a character, the basic duality actor/character is not and cannot be abolished. Furthermore, at most, this type of identification can be conceived as a quality of a particular acting style. Indeed, Kirby's approach definitely recalls the naturalistic style, in the vein of Stanislavski, which presupposes that the actor has to get under the skin of his character, as if he were possessed by it. Obviously, this is a metaphorical way of speaking, since, being figments of the imagination, fictional characters have no real skin: their fictional "existence" is conjured up by the very fact of being enacted. Moreover, it is very difficult to imagine and believe that every evening an actor enters a kind of state of trance. This assumption does not suit even naturalism, which is quite a marginal style in the history of theatre. Possession cannot be a necessary condition for theatre acting.

Although the shaman's activity focuses on the cure of an individual patient, the ritual act takes place within a community of believers and inside a well-delimited space, such as a building or enclosed open space. From an external viewpoint, therefore, the impression is that in the state of trance, the shaman "performs" in front of an "audience" in a "theatre". Accordingly, the transition from ritual to theatre is supposed to happen when the belief in the shaman's capability to dominate the spirits weakens and/or the involvement of the community in the ritual act decreases, even if they still respect his art. It is indeed possible that in such a process of decline, shamans mobilize all kinds of gimmicks, what Kirby terms "para-theatrical" acts, for intensifying the effect of their performances. Under such conditions, the community of believers is supposed to gradually change into an audience, while the functional element of the ritual gradually disappears.³⁴ In this sense, this theory is not different from that of the CSA, with the creation of theatre being conceived as the outcome of a process of disintegration of a certain kind of ritual. The question is, therefore, whether or not in the state of deterioration a ritual still preserves its nature, so that it can be said that it generates the art of theatre? This is probably a necessary assumption for any theory of ritual origin of theatre, since it needs a phase in which ritual loses its essential characteristics in order to assume new ones.

Furthermore, in its correct functioning, the ritual community does not participate in the shamanist act in the same way as in a theatre performance. It forms a community of believers on whose faith the efficacy of the ritual act depends. In general, there is "participation" in both shamanist ritual and theatre, but its meaning is completely different in each of these domains. In ritual "participation" means involvement in the communal effort to change a state of affairs on a divine level for the sake of a patient's cure. In the theatre, in contrast, it means involvement

³⁴ Kirby, *Ur-Drama* 2-3.

in sharing a communal form of thinking, and experiencing the potentialities of the human nature.

In his attempt to devise a unitary theory, and in order to assimilate the tradition of theatre originating in pagan Dionysiac ritual, Kirby suggested that the latter was also a particular form of shamanism.³⁵ Although the ecstatic character of Dionysiac faith supported this thesis, the main features of shamanism were missing in it.

In conclusion, Kirby's effortful theoretical attempt infused new life into the basic thesis of the CSA, by merely changing the line of argumentation. The crucial difference between them resides in the addition of the performative element, which transforms Kirby's approach into a genuine theory of creation of the theatre medium. However, as we have shown, this theory too does not stand up to criticism. If this is true, it is indeed a matter of wonder why it still continues to enjoy extreme popularity among contemporary theatre scholars.

Performance theory

A sense of crisis with regard to the validity of the ritual theories of origin probably underlies Richard Schechner's theoretical move, inspired by Victor Turner's anthropological approach. Schechner claims that there is no generative link between ritual and theatre, because these are different reflections of the very same kind of human activity: "performance". This activity is characterised by the combination of two main elements, "entertainment" and "efficacy", which in varying proportions create the continuum of all kinds of performance. This combination cannot be separated, and even in the extremes of the continuum no single element

³⁵ Kirby, *Dionysus* 74-75.

exists in its purity; i.e., there is no absolute entertainment or absolute efficacy.³⁶ When the element of entertainment outbalances the other, the result is what is usually called "theatre"; and when the element of efficacy outbalances the other - it is "ritual". Furthermore, the proportions between these two elements can be changed at will, according to the intention of the performer. The implication is that, in contrast to previous theories, the transition from one extreme to the other is not unidirectional: just as theatre can change into ritual, so too can ritual change into theatre. In Schechner's view, theatre - or what he terms "aesthetic theatre" - achieved its peaks during periods in which the proportion between these two elements was balanced.³⁷ The novelty in his approach resides in that, in contrast to the stiff categories of "ritual" and "theatre" that characterize the theories of ritual origin, he suggests the single comprehensive and dynamic category of "performance".

It is this comprehensive notion of "performance", which includes disparate activities such as ritual, football, concerts and theatre, that compel Schechner to discuss the relationship between two essentially different elements such as "entertainment" and "efficacy". He defines "performance" as "an activity done by an individual or group in the presence of and for the benefit of another individual or group."³⁸ This over-abstract definition bears witness to the problematic nature of this concept, because it creates an artificial set with such a wide common denominator that it can include almost any human activity. Moreover, it is composed of activities so different from each other that its efficacious application is impaired. While the category of "performance" stands in contrast to "work", another comprehensive category, and would appear to apply to any kind of non-instrumental activity, it excludes artistic activities

³⁶ Schechner, 120.

³⁷ Schechner 123.

³⁸ Schechner 30.

akin to theatre, which are not performed in front of another individual or group (spectators), such as painting, making films and writing fiction (with the latter describing similar fictional worlds). Furthermore, this definition of "performance" excludes non-artistic kinds of activity, whose affinity to theatre is clear and amply demonstrated, such as imaginative children's play or day-dreaming; and includes activities without any connection to theatre, such as the efforts of a fire brigade to rescue people from a burning building, performed before of a group of curious bystanders, for the sake of the potential victims. One could go to extremes and claim that even ritual is excluded from this definition, since the participation of the community constitutes an integral part of the activity of the shaman, as part of the collective effort for the benefit of the patient, and not for those watching the performance.

No less important is to understand how Schechner characterizes "entertainment" and "efficacy". For "entertainment" he suggests the following elements: fun, only for those there, emphasis now, performer knows what s/he's doing, audience watches, audience appreciates, criticism flourishes and individual creativity. For "efficacy" he suggests: results, link to an absent other, symbolic time, performer possessed, in trance, audience participates, audience believes, criticism discouraged, collective creativity.³⁹ Close examination reveals that most of these reiterate the antinomies traditionally employed for distinguishing between theatre and ritual. For example, on the level of audience: "watching" vs. "participation", or "appreciation" (or critical attitude) vs. "belief"; and on the level of creativity: "awareness" vs. "trance" and "individual creativity" vs. "collective creativity". The validity of these antinomies is doubtful, because they presuppose that ritual and theatre are activities in the same sphere. Schechner's main innovation resides in the distinction between "fun" (a synonym of "entertainment") and

³⁹ Schechner 120.

"results" (a synonym of "efficacy"); but this antinomy is invalid too, because it creates a contrast between a kind of audience response (delight) and a kind of effect in the divine sphere - the "absent other", which is an addressee additional to those of a community of participants and a theatre audience.

Instead of Schechner solving the problem of the relationship between ritual and theatre, questions multiply. For example, does virtually pure "entertainment" exhaust the nature of aesthetic theatre? Is theatricality enhanced the more it reaches the pole of "entertainment"? Does the category of "entertainment" apply to all dramatic genres? What about subversive kinds of theatre, whose main aim is to baffle and even shock audiences? In fact, by means of the category of "entertainment" Schechner restricts a medium, which can serve any purpose, including contrasting ones, to a single purpose; and reduces its functional ability as a system of collective thinking and experiencing. Moreover, as mentioned above, even at the theatre end of the alleged continuum the element of efficacy is not totally absent. Therefore, we may ask, what is the link to the "absent other" in a play such as Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin*? And the opposite question: whom does the shaman (in his genuine act) entertain and by what means? Is he entertaining the believers participating in the ritual or the patient? The same difficulty arises with the notion of "efficacy": although it can be applied to both ritual and theatre, the meaning will be different in each of these domains. Whereas the efficacy of the shaman refers to the sphere of the spirits (the "absent other") or the cure of the patient, the efficacy of the actor refers to his ability to portray the fictional world and arouse an expected cognitive and affective response in the audience. These are not the only questions.

In understanding the notion of "performance" the term "actual" is of paramount importance. Schechner claims that all kinds of performance are "actuals". The intention is that

what is performed does not represent anything, but is identical with itself, it is here and now; i.e., it is self-referential. In this sense, the term "actual" contrasts the term "mimetic" (and, to be more accurate, "iconic"). It would appear that an activity that involves representation and an activity that avoids it exclude each other. In fact, Schechner too concedes that even aesthetic theatre maintains both the representing function of theatre and its actual character. When considered from the viewpoint of performance the "actual" aspects are: audience **gathering** (before the performance); **performing** (anything that calls the audience's attention to the mechanism of performing the stage text, in particular the actor as performing a description of a character); and audience **dispersing** (after the performance). The implication is that the existence of an element of representation does not contradict "actuality", and that these can be complementary to each other and a matter of perspective. Schechner's contention is also problematic because all known kinds of ritual employ systems of representation, mainly natural language. In principle, therefore, their use of a theatre medium is also possible. I believe, as I have suggested elsewhere, that we should use the category of "actual" for some kinds of art (which do not use a system of representation), including some kinds of what is now called "performance art".⁴⁰ However, although the "actual" elements of theatre can be discerned, it is not those that define this art. The cancellation of the principles of theatre representation would transform the performance into something else.

Consistent with his own approach, Schechner suggests instead of mimetic acting, which is closer in nature to the ritual pole of the continuum, the possibility of "transformational" acting:

⁴⁰ Eli Rozik, "Theatre at One of its Borderlines - Reflections on *Suz/o/Suz* by La Fura dels Baus," *Theatre Annual*, 49, 1996.

Modern western theatre is mimetic. Traditional theater, and again I include the avant-garde in this category, is **transformational**, creating and incarnating in a theater place what cannot take place anywhere else. Just as a farm is a field where edible foods are grown, so a theater is a place where transformations of time, place, and persons (human and nonhuman) are accomplished.⁴¹

Transformations in theater occur in three different places, and at three different levels: 1) in the drama, that is, in the story; 2) in the performers whose special task it is to undergo a temporary **rearrangement** of their body/mind, what I call a 'transportation' [...]; 3) in the audience where changes may either be temporary (entertainment) or permanent (ritual).⁴²

I suggest that if the principle of theatre representation is involved, the so-called "transformational acting" cannot count as a kind of acting. An actor performs a description of a character, mainly by means of iconic (and conventional) signs, which he imprints on his own body, in the capacity of material that enables communication of mental images. Without the actor's body, as a medium, the spectators could not perceive these images because of their immaterial nature. Moreover, this descriptive text, imprinted on the actor's body, refers to a character, a fictional entity. In the absence of a system of representation a performer in front of an audience refers **only** to himself; i.e., he is self referential; he is only an actual. In contrast, an actor refers both to a character and to himself (as a producer of a theatre text, as a person whose profession is being an actor); i.e., he refers **also** to himself. This duality characterizes "aesthetic theatre" in general and is never overlooked by the audience. Applause at the end of a theatre performance offers clear evidence to this: the audience (unless naïve) does not applaud the

⁴¹ Schechner 165-166.

⁴² Schechner 170.

characters, but the quality of the actors' performance.

With regard to the nature of participation, following his own two-directional model, Schechner claims that the transition from theatre to ritual takes place when a group of distinct individuals changes into a community of participants.⁴³ This claim reflects inversely the claim of the CSA on the transition from ritual to theatre. As suggested above, the problem is that "participation" also characterizes all kinds of theatre, while its nature essentially differs from ritual participation. Whereas in ritual participation is a condition for the success of the ritual act, in theatre the audience participates in a process of collective thinking in the concrete terms of the stage. Among other things, in the capacity of medium, theatre can describe a community of participant believers, either in their success or frustration, something that is precluded in ritual. Consequently, since it is a question of participation on different levels, the transition from one kind to another is precluded.

Schechner acknowledges the affinity of its own theory to that of the CSA, despite the latter's theoretical failure. In particular, he mentions its profound influence on the modern (and one should add post-modern) theatre practice and on the manner dramatic works of millennia are now re-considered, especially ancient Greek drama.⁴⁴ In principle, he also accepts elements from the shamanist theory, particularly its conception of the shaman as the prototype of the performer, including the actor.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, in contrast to his own declarations of allegiance, Schechner makes a crucial theoretical move that essentially negates both schools altogether: "I am not going to replace the Cambridge origin theory with my own. Origin theories are

⁴³ Schechner 142.

⁴⁴ Schechner 1-4.

⁴⁵ Schechner 43.

irrelevant to understanding theater. "[...]there is no reason to hunt for 'origins' or 'derivations'."⁴⁶ Schechner's theory thus constitutes a deadly blow to all ritual theories of theatre origin, because, if ritual and theatre are essentially the same, being two expressions of the same combination of elements, no relationship of derivation or generation can exist between them. Schechner's approach reflects the need for an alternative theory. The problem is that he attempts to solve the issue by eliminating the excellent distinction between "ritual" and "theatre", and suggesting the alternative, feeble distinction between "entertainment" and "efficacy", which conforms with neither intuition nor experience. Moreover, in Schechner view (aesthetic) theatre cannot avoid including elements that mainly characterize ritual; therefore, instead of their relationship being diachronic it becomes synchronic; i.e., because ritual and theatre can reflect in different proportions the very same elements, these actually coexist.

In my view, the persistent willingness to see theatre as reflecting the existence of elements that also characterize ritual, despite harsh criticism, is puzzling, to say the least. The question to be asked, therefore, is what is the charm in linking theatre to ritual? Obviously, there is nothing that can be learned about the origin of the theatre medium from all the theories that presuppose such a link; in particular Schechner's theory, since he denies the question itself. However, one can at least perceive his awareness of the inadequacy of all theories of ritual origin, especially their methodological approaches, which also underlie his own theory of relationship between ritual and theatre.

⁴⁶ Schechner 6.

The re-creation of theatre by the Church

The main thesis of this theory is that theatre was recreated in the context of Christian ritual *ex nihilo*, in the tenth century AD, after a prolonged cut-off from the Classical tradition and the disappearance of any trace of early medieval theatre. It would appear that this approach is based on the CSA theory of development of ancient Greek theatre from Dionysiac ritual, while in fact it is of earlier origin.

Seemingly, the almost absolute absence of documentation on any form of theatre towards the tenth century AD, unquestionably supports the recreation thesis, which is endorsed by the vast majority of scholars to this day. Nonetheless, two outstanding scholars, Edmond Chambers and Benjamin Hunningher, claim implicitly or explicitly that recreation within the framework of the Christian Church could not have happened.

Theories of recreation in the context of the Christian Mass are of romantic source. In 1809 Wilhelm von Schlegel declared that drama could not be found in all Europe throughout the Middle Ages.⁴⁷ In 1839 Charles Magnin, in his book *Les Origines du Théâtre Moderne*, claimed that the new theatre was created from the festivals of the Christian Church during the tenth and eleventh centuries, exactly as it was created from the **religious festivals** in ancient Greece during the fifth century BC.⁴⁸ Magnin established thereby an analogy between Christian Europe and ancient Greece on the grounds of a parallel creation of theatre from religious ritual//sources. In 1849 Edélestand du Méril, in his book *Origines Latines du Théâtre Moderne*, adopted this analogy and suggested the Church as the cradle of European theatre.⁴⁹ In 1886,

⁴⁷ August Wilhelm von Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über Dramatische Kunst und Literatur, Sämmtliche Werke*. (Leipzig, 1809) 1846-1847. Quoted by Benjamin Hunningher, in *The Origin of the Theater* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961 [1955]) 4.

⁴⁸ Charles Magnin, *Origines du Théâtre Moderne*. Quoted by Hunningher 5.

⁴⁹ Edélestand du Méril, *Origines Latines du Théâtre Moderne*. Quoted by Hunningher 5.

Leon Gautier, in his book *Histoire de la Poésie Liturgique au Moyen Age*, conjectured - most cautiously - that the origins of European theatre reside in the tropes of Easter,⁵⁰ especially those of the tenth century, and that these developed later into mystery plays and other religious works, until they eventually became plays in the spoken language. Tropes are non-official texts, inserted in the sacred macro-text of the Mass; but only a few of them were adapted to dramatic form. Moreover, even if they were sung in dialogic form, they usually did not feature enacted characters. Thus Gautier set the foundations for conceiving the description of the stage performance of the "Quem Quaeritis" trope as the document that bears witness to the recreation of theatre by the Church. Many years later Karl Young, in his book *The Drama of the Medieval Church*,⁵¹ expressed the view that in itself there is nothing in the tropes that could potentially recreate theatre.⁵² Despite this, the cautious thesis of Gautier swiftly became an accepted truth. Since then the "Quem Quaeritis" is conceived in most books of theatre history as the source of modern European theatre. In 1929 Gustave Cohen, in his book, *Le Théâtre en France au Moyen Age*, made a "dramatic" theoretical move in formulating his "law" that "[a]ll religions generate drama by themselves and all rituals willingly and spontaneously take dramatic and theatrical shape."⁵³ He thereby set the foundations for conceiving the "Quem Quaeritis" as a particular instance of a universal law. Since all the above-mentioned theories presupposed that religious

⁵⁰ Léon Gautier, *Histoire de la Poésie Liturgique au Moyen Age* (Paris: 1886) 1. His definition of "trope": "C'est l'interpolation d'un texte liturgique: interpolation que l'on a principalement l'occasion de constater, depuis le IXe jusqu'au XIIIe siècle, dans certaines livres de chants à l'usage des églises de l'Allemagne, de l'Italie, de la France. C'est l'intercalation d'un texte nouveau et sans autorité dans un texte authentique et officiel; dans ce texte même dont saint Grégoire avait si sagement tracé et fixé toutes les lignes."

⁵¹ Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967 [1933]). Quoted by Hunningher 45.

⁵² This claim also applies to the Christian Mass. I have expanded on this in my book *The Roots of Theatre*, see note No. 1.

theatre eventually developed into secular theatre, Cohen's law bestowed upon it further validity. It is noteworthy that Cohen published his book in France in 1928, a year after Pickard Cambridge had demonstrated the groundless nature of the CSA theories. In addition, it transpires from the early phases of the recreation theory that the idea of development of theatre from Dionysiac religious festivals was suggested prior to the CSA, and that the latter only attempted to lend it scientific/anthropological foundation.

Against the background of Chambers' illuminating research,⁵⁴ Hunningher set out to refute the recreation thesis.⁵⁵ In his book *The Origin of the Theater*, he claims that the Church could not have recreated European theatre for two reasons: a) the supposed discontinuity from the tradition of Classical theatre did not happen and, therefore, there could not have been recreation; and b) there is an essential opposition between the nature of the Christian faith and theatre; therefore, the latter could not have developed from the former.

Indeed, in order to claim in favor of re-creation, a total break in the continuity of the theatre tradition that originated in Classical culture, even if that underwent a process of decay during the Middle Ages, has to be demonstrated. The main methodical problem is that the settling of this historical and theoretical controversy depends on the nature of the evidence we now possess. From the beginning of the third century AD until the tenth century, the only sources on the existence of theatrical activities are the condemnations of Church authorities and councils. Those continuously and consistently denounced the art of the mimes (*mimi*), their

⁵³ Gustave Cohen, *Le Théâtre en France au Moyen Age*. (Paris: Reider, 1928): "toute religion est par elle-même génératrice de drame et que tout culte prend volontiers et spontanément l'aspect dramatique et théâtral" (p. 1). My translation.

⁵⁴ E.K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (Oxford University Press, 1903) 1-41. Hunningher 63-84. All quotations are from these editions.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Hunningher, in *The Origin of the Theater* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961 [1955]). All quotations are from this edition.

followers and successors, and blamed even the clergy for indulging in these "Satanic" activities. From these objections alone it is possible to infer their existence. While the frequency of condemnations reached its peak by the ninth century AD, there is a pronounced decrease in them during the tenth century. It is during this century that the description of the performance of the "Quem Quaeritis", widely considered to be the first evidence on the recreation of theatre by the Church, was composed. The usual explanation is that the relative silence of the Church indicates that theatrical activities had completely disappeared. However, a diametrically opposite interpretation can also be suggested: that this silence offers evidence of the mitigation of hostility within the Church itself toward these activities, and a growing awareness of their potential, if subordinated to the promotion of its own ends. Hunningher assumes that "the Church has always, with wisdom and discretion, adopted and sanctified worldly elements from which the people, the congregation, would not willingly be parted."⁵⁶

It is not at all clear what were the actual professions of the mimes, against whom the Church was so critical. "Mimes" is a collective name for a set of stage artists who performed a program of short items, each belonging in a different art,⁵⁷ similar to a variety show. Such a performance included animal-tamers, rope-walkers, escape artists, ventriloquists, magicians, puppeteers, musicians, singers, dancers, storytellers, and possibly actors too. We may safely conjecture that the objection of the Church focused not on the musical or circus-like performances, but on those who reflected an explicit heretical attitude to matters sacred to it. Probably, those included actors who specialized in comic or even satirical sketches, whether the object of derision was an individual or an institution. Such a performance, if it indeed made use of the theatre medium, in the sense of actors enacting characters, even if their quality was

⁵⁶ Hunningher 75.

extremely low, could explain the hostility of the Church and ensure the minimal continuity required for the revitalization of the art of theatre. In general, it is plausible that the Church was not opposed to theatre in itself, but to its pagan connotations.

With regard to Hunningher's second objection, concerning the essential disagreement between Christianity and theatre, the facts reveal the opposite: Christianity and theatre were excellent partners for quite a long period. Hunningher is aware of that and, therefore, his claim is restricted to the necessary conditions for the recreation of theatre *ex nihilo*. He endorses the widely accepted view that theatre developed from Dionysiac ritual,⁵⁸ because of its ecstatic nature, but he does not accept the thesis of recreation in the context of an essentially symbolical religion.⁵⁹ In his view, following Kirby's approach,⁶⁰ while ecstasy is a necessary condition for the creation of theatre, Christian symbolism precludes it, because the symbolic element of the Mass substitutes for the sacrifice, and the word substitutes for the deed; e.g., prayer replaces trance.⁶¹ For Hunningher, in the context of a non-ecstatic religion, only temporary adoption of theatre, and its eventual rejection can be conceived.

Hunningher also opposes the assumption that the Mass features theatrical elements. On this issue he found support in Carl Young,⁶² who suggested a crucial criterion for the definition of a dramatic medium: "impersonation", in the sense of an actor enacting a character who is not

⁵⁷ Hunningher 66-67.

⁵⁸ Hunningher 41.

⁵⁹ Hunningher 45.

⁶⁰ Kirby, *Dionysus and Ur Drama*

⁶¹ Hunningher 60-61.

⁶² Young

himself.⁶³ In Hunningher's view, this does not characterize the Mass, and acting is essentially contradicted by its nature: its performance can not be conceived as an enactment of the crucifixion, but as the actual thing. From the very beginning, the Christian faith considered the Mass a real sacrifice. Its underlying intention was not to represent or describe the crucifixion, but to reincarnate the experience.⁶⁴ However, it is difficult to accept that there is an essential opposition between a religion and a medium, which can serve any purpose and communicate any message, including diametrically opposite ones. Whereas Hunningher's claim that the church could only have adopted (or rejected) the medium of theatre is acceptable, his line of argumentation is not.

For Hunningher the performance of the "Quem Quaeritis" - whose description appears in the *Concordia Regularis*,⁶⁵ - can only be understood within the context of a continuous dramatic tradition and as bearing witness to the adoption of theatre by the Church. In contrast, Nagler, who published the text in English translation,⁶⁶ claims that "[i]n the *Concordia Regularis*, the birth of medieval drama from the spirit of liturgy lies clearly before us".⁶⁷ In my opinion this document clearly supports Hunningher's thesis. Close analysis of the description of this performance reveals a fairly good acquaintance with all aspects of theatre art and a level of sophistication that contradicts the claim of spontaneous recreation *ex nihilo*. We should

⁶³ Hunningher 81-85.

⁶⁴ Hunningher 84.

⁶⁵ In the tenth century, Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester, composed the *Concordia Regularis*, as a supplement to the Rule of St. Benedict, the regulations of the Benedictine Monasteries, and in it he set down accurate directions for the performance of the "Quem Quaeritis" on the Sunday morning of Easter. A.M. Nagler, *A Source Book in Theatrical History* (New York: Dover, 1959 [1952]) 39-41.

⁶⁶ The English translation in Nagler. The Latin source in Hans-Jürgen Diller, *The Middle English Mystery Play* (Cambridge University Press, 1992 [1973]) 14.

⁶⁷ Nagler 39.

distinguish between being the first theatre performance, which recreated the medium of theatre after a period of total ignorance of the past, and the earliest document in our possession that bears witness to theatrical activity in the Church.

The main theoretical contribution made by Hunningher resides in that he suggests, by implication, a pattern of relationship between ritual and theatre, alternative to that of creation or recreation: adoption or rejection in any possible order. This pattern presupposes an essential difference between ritual and theatre medium and the option of making use of this medium by any ritual. A thousand years of rejection, and a few centuries of co-operation, even if their ways eventually parted, supports the validity of this pattern. The question is, therefore, whether or not this pattern is also valid for rituals that supposedly did generate theatre, in particular ecstatic rituals, such as the Dionysiac one?⁶⁸ I believe that the adoption-rejection (or *vice versa*) pattern better accounts for the relationship between ritual and theatre in the Classical period too, on the grounds of the essential difference between these two domains. This alternative pattern conforms to the conception of theatre as a medium that can serve any theological/philosophical/ideological idea or purpose, even opposing ones. To claim that theatre was created or recreated by a ritual that employed it - just as it employs other media - is as absurd as claiming that natural language, poetry or music originated in ritual.

Hunningher demonstrated that it is extremely difficult to accept Gustave Cohen's "law", that any religion naturally and spontaneously generates theatre, when almost a millennium had passed between the first encounter of the Church with pagan theatre and the establishment of the Church theatre. A similar phenomenon, of lengthy rejection and eventual adoption, is found in the Jewish culture, which managed to sustain its hostility towards theatre for a few

⁶⁸ I have tried to answer this question in *The Roots of Theatre*; see note No. 1.

more centuries.

The charm of ritual theories of origin

Evidence of the influence of the ritual theories of origin on the practice of theatre is reflected in the works of a vast group of theatre directors who advocated the revitalization of theatre by restoring the ritual elements that it had allegedly lost. This trend was/is led by such prominent directors as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Ariane Mnouchkine, Richard Schechner and Eugenio Barba. However, in fact, the elements introduced by them were not genuine ritual elements, but stagecraft inventions inspired by principles thought to underlie ritual behavior in any possible culture. Schechner was aware of the artificial nature of what he himself termed "home-made" rituals:

a contradiction undermines these efforts. [...] When artists, or their audiences, recognize that these staged "rituals" are mostly symbolic activities masquerading as effective acts, a feeling of helplessness overcomes them. So-called "real events" are revealed as metaphors.⁶⁹

This is a wonderful insight. Unfortunately, Schechner was not consistent with it and, in other contexts, he continued to maintain that this tendency to reintroduce and reintegrate ritual elements is characteristic of avant-garde theatre. In my opinion, these "home-made" ritual elements are foreign to both ritual and theatre, because they originate in erroneous conceptions of both ritual and theatre medium. Despite all his staging innovations, Schechner could not have succeeded in reintroducing ritual elements into theatre, because to begin with these were not part of theatre. His innovations could not have transformed a

⁶⁹ Schechner 118.

theatre performance into "an efficacious event upon which the participants depend."⁷⁰

Ritual can **employ** the medium of theatre as one of its components, but theatre cannot employ ritual because **it is** a medium. Theatre can **describe** a given ritual, or parts of it, but a ritual cannot describe a theatre production because **it is not** a medium. All in all, "home-made" ritual elements are no more than formal "ceremonial" stage behavior, which undoubtedly has a specific impact on the audience, and whose nature has yet to be investigated. I believe that these elements deserve specific research.

I have suggested elsewhere an alternative answer to the problem of the theatre medium origin in terms of the necessary psychological, behavioral and institutional conditions that made the creation of the theatre medium possible.⁷¹

I believe that all ritual theories of origin are clearly of an ideological character; i.e., there is no scientific truth in them. They are fallacious and do not stand rational criticism. I also believe that the ritual elements allegedly reintroduced to theatre are obviously spurious. The main question is, therefore, what is the secret of the appeal of claims based on a profound relationship between ritual and theatre, whether in the form of development or shared basic nature? In my view, the only answer is that it is a matter of a metaphorical aura that, for romantic reasons, people wish to attribute to theatre. This metaphorical aura is supposed to lend theatre a numinous quality that not only does it not always radiate, but that perhaps less than anything else defines its nature. Between this aura and theatre historical reality there is nothing. In this respect, Vince's words are illuminating:

However inaccurate as a record of the historical origins of the theatre, the ritual theory appeals on a metaphorical level to unconscious patterns and

⁷⁰ Schechner 126.

⁷¹ Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre*.

longings in our own psyches and we find drama considered in its terms a richer and more satisfying experience than it might otherwise be.⁷²

It is indeed possible that this metaphorical aura reflects a genuine nostalgia for primeval ritual or communal participation, which is so lacking in modern and post-modern society. Whatever the answer, I believe that the true object of research should be not the supposed ritual origins of theatre, but the actual necessity for such a theory and the misguided devotion to the idea of an umbilical link between ritual and theatre, other than the possible use of this medium of theatre for the sake of ritual purposes. Despite this appeal, the medium of theatre could not have originated in ritual.

⁷² Ronald W. Vince, *Ancient and Medieval Theatre* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1984) 16.