Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting

Acting, like all “simple” Anglo-Saxon words, is ambiguous—it can mean doing things in everyday life, or performing on the stage or in a temple. It can take place in ordinary time or in extraordinary time. It may be a way of working or moving, like a body’s or machine’s “action”; or it may be the art or occupation of performing in plays. It may be the essence of sincerity—the commitment of the self to a line of action for ethical motives perhaps to achieve “personal truth,” or it may be the essence of pretence—when one “plays a part” in order to conceal or dissimulate. The former is the ideal of Jerzy Grotowski’s “Poor Theatre”; the latter happens every day “at work.” A spy, con-man, an agent provocateur—each of these has skill in “acting.” The same person, in different situations, in a single day, can “put on” an act, or “act divinely.” Yet these opposites coincide in our common parlance; we speak of “playing a role,” when we intend a reference to some civically serious activity, such as an advisory role to a president. On the other hand, we talk of “great acting” on the stage as the source of some of our deepest “truest” understandings of the human condition. Acting is therefore both work and play, solemn and ludic, pretence or earnest, our mundane trafficking and commerce and what we do or behold in ritual or theatre. The very word “ambiguity” is derived from the Latin agere to “act” for it comes from the verb ambigere, to “wander,” ambire, “about, around” + agere, “to do,” resulting in the sense of having two or more possible meanings, “moving from side to side,” “of doubtful nature.” In both major senses, doing deeds and performing, it is indispensa-

ble to mental health; as William Blake said: “He who nourishes Desires but Acts not, breeds Pestilence,” a doublet “Proverb of Hell” to, “Expect Poison from the standing Water.” In Western languages, action has also the flavor of contestation. Action is “agonistic.” Act, agen, agony, and agitate are all derived from the same Indo-European base *ag-, “to drive,” from which came the Latin agere, to do, and the Greek agōn (arithexi, άριθμος), to lead. In Western (Euro-American) culture, work and play both have this driving, conflictive character, which long precedes Max Weber’s famed Protestant ethic. In those genres of cultural performance which predated Greek theatre—for example, myth-ritual, ritual, oral epic or saga, and the telling and acting of lays and märchen—wars and feuds between groups of deities or clans and lineages headed by well-armed heroes, as well as competition for position, power, or scarce resources, men’s conflict over women, and divisions between close kin were vividly portrayed, carried out in mimicry.

Phyllis Hartnoll (The Concise History of Theater, n.d.: p.8) writes of the development of Greek tragedy from the dithyramb (or unison hymn) sung around the altar of Dionysus during certain religious feasts. The dithyramb, originally in lyric form, a praise song for Dionysus, came to deal with his life and myths in much the same way as early medieval European liturgical plays about the birth, life, and resurrection of Christ, narratives loaded with conflict, grew from the lyrical portion of the Easter morning mass. The Mass, the Eucharist, itself was, of course, a drama with a scriptural script long before it gave rise to “Passion Plays.” The Greek dithyramb expanded to embrace not only Dionysian tales, but also those of gods, demigods, and heroes, some of whom were regarded as the founding ancestors of the Hellenes and their Mediterranean neighbors. “The deeds of these heroes, good or bad,” writes Hartnoll (ibid: 3-9), “their wars, feuds, marriages and adulteries, and the destinies of their children, who so often suffered for the sins of their parents, are a source of dramatic tension, and gives rise to the essential element of conflict—between man and god, good and evil, child and parent, duty and inclination. This may lead to comprehension and reconciliation between the conflicting elements—since a Greek tragedy need not necessarily end unhappily—or to incomprehension and chaos. The plots of all Greek plays were already well known to the audience. They formed part of its religious and cultural heritage, for many of them dated from Homeric times. The interest for the spectator lay, therefore, not in the novelty of the story, but in seeing how the dramatist had chosen to deal with it, and no doubt, in assessing the quality of the acting, and the work of the chorus, both in singing and dancing, about which unfortunately we know very little.”

Hartnoll’s summary is correct—as far as it goes. But it does not mention the important fact that the plays—Aristophanes’ comedies as much as
Aeschylus' and Sophocles' tragedies—in Geertz's terms are "social metacommentaries" on contemporaneous Greek society, that is, whatever the nature of their plot, whether drawn from myths or reputed historical accounts, they were intensely "reflective." If they were "mirrors held up to nature" (or rather to society and culture) they were active (that propulsive word again!) mirrors, mirrors that probed and analyzed the axioms and assumptions of the social structure, isolated the building blocks of the culture, and sometimes used them to construct novel edifices, Cloud Cuckoolands or Persian courts that never were on land or sea, but were, nevertheless, possible variants based on rules underlying the structures of familiar sociocultural life or experienced social reality.

Theatre is perhaps the most forceful, active, if you like, genre of cultural performance, but there are many others, some of which I have mentioned. No society is without some mode of metacommentary—Geertz's illuminating phrase for a "story a group tells itself about itself" or in the case of theatre, a play a society acts about itself—not only a reading of its experience but an interpretive reenactment of its experience. In the simpler, preindustrial societies, there are often complex systems of ritual—initiatory, seasonal, curative, and divinatory—which act, so to speak, not only as means of "reanimating sentiments of social solidarity" as an older generation of anthropologists would put it, but also as scanning devices whereby the difficulties and conflicts of the present are articulated and given meaning through contextualization in an abiding cosmological scheme. The anger of gods or ancestors may be proposed as the cause of present misfortune, anger aroused by some blatant or persistent transgression of customs handed down from high antiquity and vouched for by revered origin myths. In complex, large-scale societies, in which the sphere of leisure is clearly separated from that of work, innumerable genres of cultural performance arise in accordance with the principle of the division of labor. These may be labeled art, entertainment, sport, play, games, recreation, theatre, light or serious reading, and many more. They may be collective or private, amateur or professional, slight or serious. Not all of them have the reflexive character of many Greek plays. Not all of them have universal reference, for many are limited to specific constituencies (men, women, children, rich, poor, intellectual, middlebrow, and so on). But in this proximity of genres, now given wider scope by the electronic media, some seem more effective than others in giving birth to self-regulatory or self-critical works, which catch the attention, or fire the imagination, of an entire society or even of an epoch, transcending national frontiers. In a complex culture it might be possible to regard the ensemble of performative and narrative genres, active and acting modalities of expressive culture as a hall of mirrors, or better magic mirrors (plane, convex, concave, convex cylinder, saddle or matrix mirrors to borrow metaphors from the study of reflecting surfaces) in which social problems, issues, and crises (from causes a dieores to changing macrosocial categorial relations between the sexes and age groups) are reflected as diverse images, transformed, evaluated, or diagnosed in works typical of each genre, then shifted to another genre better able to scrutinize certain of their aspects, until many facets of the problem have been illuminated and made accessible to conscious remedial action. In this hall of mirrors the reflections are multiple, some magnifying, some diminishing, some distorting the faces peering into them, but in such a way as to provoke not merely thought, but also powerful feelings and the will to modify everyday matters in the minds of the gazers. For no one likes to see himself as ugly, ungenerous, or dwarfish. Mirror distortions of reflection provoke reflectivity. In a fascinating article entitled "Mirror Images," (Scientific American, 1980:206-228) David Emil Thomas discusses how the mirror image is not always a faithful reflection; it can be inverted, reversed in handedness, or distorted in other ways. Thomas analyzes the transformations through a few basic curved mirrors, from which compound matrix mirrors are constructed: "by introducing various curvatures into reflecting surfaces, it is possible to create mirrors that change the shape, size, orientation, and handedness of the objects they reflect in dramatic and disturbing ways" (p. 206).

Theatre is perhaps closer to life than most performative genres, in that, despite its conventions and spatial restraints on physical possibility, it is as Marjorie Boulton wrote, (The Anatomy of Drama, 1971:3) "literature that walks and talks before our eyes, meant to be performed, 'acted' we might say, rather than seen as marks on paper and sights, sounds, and action in our heads." Richard Schechner, in "Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed" published in the Kenyon Review, (1981:84) reminds us, however, that "performance behavior isn't free and easy. Performance behavior is known and/or practiced behavior or 'twice-behaved behavior,' restored behavior—either rehearsed, previously known, learned by osmosis since early childhood, revealed during the performance by masters, guides, gurus, elders, or generated by rules that govern the outcomes as in improvisatory theatre or sports." Performance, then, is always doubled, the doubleness of acting as earlier discussed—it cannot escape reflection and reflectivity. This proximity of theatre to life, while remaining at a mirror distance from it, makes of it the form best fitted to comment or "meta-comment" on conflict, for life is conflict, of which contest is only a species. "Without Contraries is no Progression," as Blake said, if only in the sense that Life and Death, Eros and Thanatos, Yin and Yang, are in Freud's terms, "immortal antagonists"—incidentally another term in the agere, agere, aon family. Even when, in certain kinds of theatre, in different cultures, conflict may appear to be muted or deflected or rendered as a playful or joyous struggle, it is not hard to detect threads of connection between elements of the play and sources of conflict in sociocultural milieus. The very mufflings and evasions of scenes of discord
in some theatrical and natural traditions speak eloquently to their real presence in society, and may perhaps be regarded as a cultural defense-mechanism against conflict rather than a metacommentary upon it.

I might be supposed to have an intellectual vested interest in conflict and in drama as conflict, since I have discussed social conflict as “social drama” in several publications since my first book, Schism and Continuity, written a quarter of a century ago. Indeed, I have had to defend myself against such trenchant critics as my former teachers Sir Raymond Firth and the late Max Gluckman, who have accused me of unwarrantably introducing a model drawn from literature (they did not say Western literature, but clearly they had the Aristotelian mode of tragedy in mind) to throw light on spontaneous social processes, which are not authored or set in conventions, but arise from clashes of interest or incompatible social structural principles in the give and take of everyday life in a social group. Recently, I have taken heart from an article by Geertz, “Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought,” (American Scholar, Spring 1980), which not only suggests “that analogies drawn from the humanities are coming to play the kind of role in sociological understanding that analogies drawn from the crafts and technology have long played in physical understanding” (p. 196), but also gives qualified approval to the “drama analogy for social life” (p. 172). Geertz numbers me among “proponents of the ritual theory of drama”—as against “the symbolic action approach” which stresses “the affinities of theater and rhetoric—drama as persuasion, the platform as stage” (p. 172), associated with Kenneth Burke. His pithy formulation of my position saves me the task of repeating my own. He writes: “For Turner, social dramas occur ‘on all levels of social organization from state to family.’ They arise out of conflict situations—a village falls into factions, a husband beats a wife, a region rises against the state—and proceed to their denouements through publicly performed conventionalized behavior. As the conflict swells to crisis and the excited fluidity of heightened emotion, where people feel at once more enclosed in a common mood and bocuambled from their social moorings, ritualized forms of authority—litigation, feud, sacrifice, prayer—are invoked to contain it and render it orderly. If they succeed, the breach is healed and the status quo, or something resembling it, is restored; if they do not, it is accepted as incapable of remedy and things fall apart into various sorts of unhappy endings: migrations, divorces, or murders in the cathedral. With differing degrees of strictness and detail, Turner and his followers have applied this schema to tribal passage rites, curing ceremonies, and judicial processes; to Mexican insurrections, Icelandic sagas, and Thomas Becket’s difficulties with Henry II; to picaresque narrative, millenarian movements, Caribbean carnivals, and Indian peyote hunts; and to the political upheaval of the Sixties. A form for all seasons.”

This Parthian shaft leaps from Geertz’s insistence in several of his writings that the social drama approach focuses too narrowly on “the general movement of things” (my italics) and neglects the multifarious cultural contents, the symbol systems which embody the ethos and eidos, the sentiments and values of specific cultures. He suggests that the “text analogy” (p. 175) can remediate this, that is, textual analysis attends to “how the inscription of action is brought about, what its vehicles are and how they work, and on what the fixation of meaning from the flow of events—history from what happened, thought from thinking, culture from behavior—implies for sociological interpretation. To see social institutions, social customs, social changes as in some sense ‘readable’ is to alter our whole sense of what such interpretation is towards modes of thought rather more familiar to the translator, the exegete, or the iconographer than to the test giver, the factor analyst, or the pollster” (pp. 175-176).

My answer to Geertz is simply to reiterate certain features of the social drama approach. He mentions “ritualized forms of authority—litigation, feud, sacrifice, prayer” that are used “to contain [crisis] and render it orderly.” Such forms may crystallize any culture’s uniqueness, are forms for particular seasons. For my part I have, indeed, often treated the ritual and juridical symbol systems of the Ndembu of Western Zambia as text analogues. But I have tried to locate these texts in context of performance, rather than to construe them into abstract, dominantly cognitive systems. However, Geertz does in fact concede that many anthropologists today, including himself, use both textual and dramatic approaches, according to problem and context. Some of these misunderstandings and apparent contradictions can be resolved if we examine the relationship between the two modes of acting—in “real life” and “on stage”—as components of a dynamic system of interdependence between social dramas and cultural performances. Both dramatic and textual analogies then fall into place.

Richard Schechner represented this relationship as a bisected figure eight laid on its side (see illus. p. 73 above). The two semicircles above the horizontal dividing line represent the manifest, visible public realm, those below it, the latent, hidden, perhaps even unconscious realm. The left loop or circle represents social drama, divided into its four main phases, breach, crisis, redress, positive or negative denouement. The right loop represents a genre of cultural performance—for our purposes today, a stage of aesthetic drama. Notice that the manifest social drama feeds into the latent realm of stage drama; its characteristic form in a given culture, at a given time and place, unconsciously, or perhaps preconsciously, influences not only the form but also the content of the stage drama of which it is the active or “magic” mirror. The stage drama, when it is meant to do more than entertain—though entertainment is always one of its vital aims—is a metacommentary, explicit or implicit, witty or unwitting, on the major social dramas of its social context (wars, revolutions, scandals, institutional changes). Not only that, but its message and its rhetoric feed back into the
latent processual structure of the social drama and partly account for its ready ritualization. Life itself now becomes a mirror held up to art, and the living now perform their lives, for the protagonists of a social drama, a "drama of living," have been equipped by aesthetic drama with some of their most salient opinions, imageries, tropes, and ideological perspectives. Neither mutual mirroring, life by art, art by life, is exact, for each is not a planar mirror but a matricial mirror; at each exchange something new is added, something old is lost or discarded. Human beings learn through experience, though all too often they repress painful experience, and perhaps the deepest experience is through drama; not through social drama, or stage drama (or its equivalent) alone, but in the circulatory or oscillatory process of their mutual and incessant modification.

If one were to guess at origins, my conjecture would be that all the genres of cultural performance, from tribal rituals to TV "specials," are potentially present in the third phase of the generic social drama (which is like the general mammalian condition that we still have with us throughout all the global radiation of specific mammalian forms to fill special niches), the phase of redressive processes. In a social drama, the first phase occurs when one or more social norms regarded as binding and as sustaining key relationships between persons or sub-groups in a more or less bounded community are broken or all too obviously disregarded. Often there is a symbolic act drawing public attention to the breach. There is an act of civil disobedience; a Boston Tea Party; an African hunter scorns and challenges his village headman by refusing him the joint of meat that is his by hereditary right; and the like. Once this occurs, no group member can turn a blind eye to its implications. In the next phase, crisis, people take sides, supporting either the rule-breaker or the target of his action. Factions, coalitions, cabals are formed, heated language is exchanged, and actual violence may occur. Former allies may be opposed, former foes united. Conflict is usually contagious: old grudges are reanimated, old wounds reopened, buried memories of victory or defeat in former struggles disinterred. For no social drama can ever be finally concluded: the terms of its ending are often the conditions under which a new one will arise. The unity and continuity of the community may be menaced. All this may be "low key" or "high key," the weapons may be stares, gestures, words, fisticuffs, spears, or firearms. When the community's integrity is thus threatened those held responsible for its continuity and for the structural form of its continuity, the polity, in short, move to counteract the contagion of continuing breach, and endeavor first to contain, then dispel the crisis. These agents of redress may be chiefs, elders, lawmen, judges, the military, priests, shamans, diviners, fathers, mothers, Grand Juries, village pan-chayats—often they are the repositories and representatives of legitimacy, of conformity to established rules, standards, or principles.

But it also happens that redressive agents and the instruments they have at command, courts, parliaments, assemblies, councils, armies, police, negotiating tables, divining apparatus, oracles, powers to curse or bless, have lost or are losing their authority, legitimacy, or efficacy in the eyes of the group members. The response to crisis may now emerge from a group intent on altering or restructuring the social order in some decisive way, reformative to revolutionary. Such a clash between conserving and reforming parties may create a new crisis as the representatives of the ancien and nouveau régime confront one another. Redress may then take the form of civil war, insurgency, or revolution. Much depends upon the size and scale of the group and the degree to which its social and economic division of labor has advanced. Such factors determine what modes of redress are applied or devised. In state societies with hierarchical social structures, failure to resolve crisis at the local or regional levels may result in redressive action by the central political or judicial authorities operating through their courts and police. In the simpler, preliterate, stateless societies redressive machinery is often of two kinds, jural or ritual. Jural action may mean informal or formal arbitration by elders, the summoning of a chief's court with councillors and assessors, or recourse to blood vengeance or feud. What is of special interest to us here is ritual action. In many small-scale societies what we distinguish in Western cultural tradition as social, moral, and natural orders are regarded as a single order with visible and invisible components. The term "supernatural," like "nature" itself, is a Western theological-philosophical concept. Thus, illness or bad luck in the community, whether personal or epidemic, may be conceived as resulting from the action of invisible ancestral spirits, offended by covert or overt malicious deeds (witchcraft or quarrelling) among community members descended from them. Or it may be attributed to the hidden malevolence of living witches or sorcerers. If outbreaks of illness or a series of untoward events (plagues, locusts, hurricanes, famine, drought, unexpected raids by outsiders, absence of genre animals) coincide with breaches of rules and relationships within the community, and there appears to be no rational settlement of dispute in terms of customary law, recourse may be had to divination or oracles, procedures to detect the invisible causes of conflict and to prescribe the appropriate type of ritual to propitiate or exorcise the afflicting spirit or witch's familiar. Such rituals, which I called "rituals of affliction" in the Central African contest, are found in many societies, and often develop an elaborate symbolism. Sometimes they are associated with cosmogenic or cosmological myths which explain how death and diseases of various kinds came into the world of men and women. Ritual in such societies is seldom the rigid, obsessional behavior we think of as ritual after Freud. Rather it is an orchestration of symbolic actions and objects in all the sensory codes—visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, gustatory—full of music and dancing and with interludes of play and entertainment. It may involve painting, including body painting, sculpture, wood carving,
instrumental and choral music, systematic medical treatment (patients are given herbal potions and baths, steam inhalation, and so on, as part of the ritual process), dramatic plotting (ritual officiants often enact the roles of gods, cultural heroes, ancestors, or demons as described in myths), festive cuisine (certain kinds of food and drink are reserved for rites dedicated to specific gods or spirits), preaching and homiletic (for rituals of these types allow a good deal of freedom for innovative verbal behavior, often regarded as messages from spirits through possessed mediums or shamans), psychological analysis (diviners seek to probe the hidden tensions and grudges in the community that are believed to be responsible for affliction), dance drama and choreography according to set rules, and many more aesthetic and cognitive modes that later come to be specialized out as para-
ritual, quasi-secular, then fully secularized professions in more complex societies.

Not only rituals of affliction but even life-crisis rituals (birth, puberty, marriage, funerary, and so forth) and seasonal rituals (first-fruits, harvest, solar solstice, and the like) have reference to conflict. Whereas rituals of affliction are sometimes a direct response to misfortune regarded as a manifest symptom of hidden conflict, the other main types may be viewed as prophylactic against conflict, anticipating and averting it vividly demonstrating the blessings of cooperation. In my book, The Forest of Symbols, I have shown, for example, how both the boys’ circumcision ritual (Mukanda) and the girls’ puberty ritual (Nkang’a) among the Ndembu people of Zambia dramatize the characteristic divisions and oppositions between men and women in this matrilineal society, divisions arising from custom itself, where group placement, inheritance and succession are acquired through the mother’s side; while power and authority, village headship and chieftainship, are held by men and women who leave their mothers and siblings to reside in their husbands’ villages after marriage. This structural conflict between female structural continuity and male contemporary authority is “the undying worm” of Ndembu culture, even through ritual, myth, and symbol proliferate to mask it, cloak it, deflect it, or explain it away.

Briefly, I am saying that the performative genres of complex, industrial societies, as well as many of their forensic and judicial institutions, the stage and the law court, have their deep roots in the enduring human social drama, particularly in its repressive phase, the drama that has its direct source in social structural conflict, but behind which perhaps is an endemic evolutionary restlessness; for we seem to be a species that becomes easily bored with even its most advantageous cultural adaptations. Dostoevsky’s Underworld Man despised Utopia, prizes his freedom of will to choose that which is not perfect, was even definable as criminal or sinful. And did not Goethe say: “He who strives unceasingly is not beyond redeeming” of seemingly fallen Faust? From this perspective social dramas keep us alive, give us problems to solve, postpone ennui, guarantee at least the flow of our adrenalin, and provoke us into new, ingenious cultural formulations of our human condition and occasionally into attempts to ameliorate, even beautify it.

However, in the simpler, preindustrial societies the full sequence of stages, breach, crisis, redress, restoration of peace through reconciliation or mutual acceptance of schism, may often run its course, since redress, whether legal or ritual, depends upon wide, even general popular agreement about values and on meaning. In complex, plural, class-, race-, age-, and gender-divided societies stressing competition, change, individualism, inventiveness, and innovation, it is less probable that general consensus on a national or pansocietal scale can be obtained. Nevertheless, for the same reasons, it is highly probable that a multitude of models for social order, utopian or otherwise, and a multiplicity of religious, political, and philosophical systems for assigning meaning to the typical events of the epoch, will be generated and operate through a wide variety of rhetorics and other means of persuasion. And since the individual-in-general rather than the social persona (the bundle of statuses and roles comprising the “social personality”), is both the generator and ultimate audience of these narrated, dramatized, or otherwise aesthetically coded models—the final appellate court, so to speak—there is no surety that in any major crisis full agreement will be reached on the terms on which peace and order will eventually be restored. Hence the contemporary paradox that in a world that respects learning, literacy, argument, negotiation, persuasion, legality, many major social dramas are settled by armed force, “by cutting the Gordian knot,” the quick, simple solution to problems of any complexity or more than average perplexity. That is why so many nations are now under military rule. Where dissent reigns as to meaning, consensus may be replaced by force. Of course, the forceful executors of power and settlers of issues then endeavor to socialize the young in terms of a single, simplified belief system which defines legitimacy in such a way that social dramas will once more have agreed-upon mechanisms of redress, heavily charged with secular ritual. In such societies, the genres of cultural performance that have largely replaced the rituals and jural processes of tribal and feudal societies, in the course of their complexification into industrialized, urbanized polities and international mercantile systems, often fall under heavy political attack. The industrialized modes of retribalization on the scale of nations with which we have become familiar this century, whether Left, Right, or Center in political ideology—the totalitarian or totalistic systems—are united in their opposition to diversity in thought and lifestyle, for diversity leads to the slow resolution of social dramas on whatever level or place they may show up in the social process or national map, and this deferment of crisis-resolution may lead to a critiquing of the basic premises of the polity itself. Retrialization, it may be argued, on the scale
of huge industrialized polities is really in sharp dialectical contradiction to the modern mode of production whose diversity and constant response to new technology (for example, computers, miniaturization, robotization of industry, and the like) demand equal diversity in the sphere of culture, especially in those aspects of culture concerned with the redressal, direct or indirect, of the social dramas constantly erupting from the new relations of production and giving rise to new kinds of social conflicts. Paradoxically, retribalization, “one Law for the Lion and the Ox” as Blake might have put it (which “is oppression”), is being carried on under the aegis of evolution to “a higher stage” of society. Retribalization, whether defined as “fascist,” “socialist,” “communist,” or any other mode of authoritarian or totalitarian control, must seek to control crisis of all types not only by force but also by reterritorialization of the third phase of all social dramas, that of redress—hence elaborately ritualized trials of heretics and renegades, most recently the Gang of Four in China. Thus, as individual human inventiveness and collective traditions of technical know-how penetrate the economic infrastructure, a contradiction arises between manifold and diverse forces and means of production, and monotheistic state structures whose control of the means of production stifles creativity at the level of the forces and relations of production.

Ritual, unlike theatre, does not distinguish between audience and performers. Instead, there is a congregation whose leaders may be priests, party officials, or other religious or secular ritual specialists, but all share formally and substantially the same set of beliefs and accept the same system of practices, the same sets of rituals or liturgical actions. A congregation is there to affirm the theological or cosmological order, explicit or implicit, which all hold in common, to actualize it periodical for themselves and inculcate the basic tenets of that order into their younger members, often in a graded series of life-crisis rituals, passages from birth to death, through puberty, marriage, initiation into prestigious secret societies, measured progress through an educational system which involves cumulative indoctrination, and so on. Theatre—from the Greek theasthai, “to see, to view”—is rather different. Schechner (“From Ritual to Theater and Back” in Essays on Performance Theory, 1977: 79) has recently argued that: “Theater comes into existence when a separation occurs between audience and performers. The paradigmatic theatrical situation is a group of performers soliciting an audience who may or may not respond by attending. The audience is free to attend or stay away—and if they stay away it is the theater that suffers, not its would-be audience. In ritual, stay-away means rejecting the congregation—or being rejected by it, as in excommunication, ostracism, or exile.” One might add, that it is not a mortal sin if one fails to attend a play by Ibsen, Chekhov, Brecht or Ionesco, but that it used to be a mortal sin if one failed to attend Sunday Mass—in this case, one wonders whether the Catholic Church now sees itself as approaching the mode of theatre, even as it calls ironically for greater congregational participation from those who do attend. In totalitarian states, it came to be regarded as sin if one did not attend a local rally for nationally dominant political figures—the non-attender was virtually a dissident.

Now back to my original point that everyday life is intrinsically connected with acting and vice versa. It seems to me that tribalism and would-be retribalization both stress the social structure and with it, the roles, statuses, positions that are its hierarchical components (summing up to the structural persona) at the expense of what social thinkers, from Durkheim to Kenelm Burridge, have called “the individual.” The “person,” Burridge argues, “is content with things as they are, the individual posits an alternative set of moral discriminations” (Someone, No one: An essay on Individuality, 1979:4). “The individual” or the individual-in-general is a concept arising rather late in most complex human cultures. Burridge relates its earlier forms to what I have called, following van Gennep, the liminal period, in rites of passage from one social state and status to another, at birth, puberty, marriage, death, and so on. The liminal period is that time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another. It is when the individ is neither what he has been nor is what he will be. Characteristic of this liminal period is the appearance of marked ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning, and the emergence of liminal demonic and monstrous figures who represent within themselves ambiguities and inconsistencies. As ambiguous figures, they mediate between alternative or opposing contexts, and thus are important in bringing about their transformation. In our society we might see the “Theater of the Absurd” of Ionesco, Arrabal, and Beckett, as “liminal,” though I would prefer the term “liminoid,” however gratingly neologistic, as being at once akin to and perhaps deriving from the liminal of tribal and feudal rituals, and different from the liminal as being more often the creation of individual than of collective inspiration and critical rather than furthering the purposes of the existing social order. The incipient individual, in preliterate societies, does emerge, but often in veiled or restricted form. Burridge makes some interesting speculation about this proto- or ur- individual. He regards what he calls “the self,” not as a static entity, but as a movement, an oscillating energy between the structural persona and the potentially antistructural individual. This enables him to write (ibid.: pp. 146-147): “The liminal period becomes an introduction to, and test of, moral being. Generally re-enacting the transformation from nature to culture, pubertal rites bring the components of being together and confront the cultural faculties with the oppositions and correspondences between animal, moral, and spiritual beings. To use another idiom, the individ is asked to measure communitas and anti-structure—wherein human beings, stripped of their roles, statuses, memberships, and moralities, are in communion as human selves—against the demands of organization and structure.
"In this situation," he continues, "most initiands, responding to past pressures of kinfolk and conformists, yield to the more obvious and overt side of the ritual. Some, intuitively grasping that symbols and symbolic activities contain a mystrium—a latency, a promissory note, an invitation to realize that which lies behind the obvious and overt—may perceive and order a truth which, because they cannot withstand conformist pressures, they will hold in their hearts all the years of their lives. Others lose themselves in the chaos, unable to bring it into order. A few persevere and are led into areas which the overtness of the cultural symbols hide from most. But while the affirmation of a truth discovered calls a halt, one negotiation breeds another and discovery becomes a continuing journey. Truth's center seems to grow more distant with each successive launch from closing peripheries. Each arrival entails a further moral choice if it is to make a new point of departure, and each departure requires a further transformation of the self in relation to otherness." Man grows through antistructure, and conserves through structure. Elsewhere, and evidently thinking of Durkheim's post-Renaissance "individual-in-general," Burridge writes of the individual as "the moral critic who envisages another kind of social or moral order, the creative spark poised and ready to change tradition. Yet if some people are wholly individuals and others are persons, it is a matter of common observation that most people are in some respects and most frequently persons, while in others respects and at other times they can appear as individuals. And this apparent oscillation or movement between person and individual—whether in a particular instance the movement is one-way or a return is made—may be identified as 'individuality'. Or, 'individuality' refers to the opportunity and capacity to move from person to individual and/or vice versa . . ." (ibid.: pp. 5-6).

Burridge presumably means that in a society already characterized by the possibility of making many choices, a biological individual can opt to be a persona in estrema, a "Southern Colonel," a "Madam," a "Great Actor," a "Northern Senator," a "dear old schoolmaster," "a motherly soul," even an "eccentric," or an individual who eschews identification with all available social personas.

Theatre, in Western liberal-capitalist society, is a liminoid process, set in the liminoid time of leisure between the role-playing times of "work." It is, in a way, "play" or "entertainment" (which means, etymologically, "held-in-between," that is, it is a liminal or liminoid phenomenon). Originally, I have supposed it is one of the abstractions from the original pansocietal "ritual" which was part of the "work" as well as the "play" of the whole society before the division of labor and specialization split that great ensemble or gestalt into special professions and vocations. Originally theatre was concerned, among other things, with resolving crises affecting everyone and assigning meaning to the apparently arbitrary and often cruel-seeming sequence of events following personal or social conflicts.

The simple point I am trying to make—and much research is needed to bring in the necessary back-up evidence—is that in the simpler preindustrial societies, acting a role and exemplifying a status was so much a part of everyday life that the ritual playing of a role, even if it was a different role from that played in mundane life, was of the same kind as one played as son, daughter, headman, shaman, mother, chief, or Queen. The difference between ordinary and ritual (or extraordinary) life, was mainly a matter of framing and quantity, not of quality. In ritual, roles were separated from their embodiment in the ongoing flow of social life and singled out for special attention, or else they were seen as points of entry and exit on a continuous process (boy-to-man, girl-to-woman, commoner-to-chief, villager-to-member-of-hunting-cult, ghost-to-ancestor, and so forth) with some interesting transitional symbolism, and the shadowy appearance of the lineaments of the antistructural "individual" at some places and times. But in these societies acting was mainly role-playing; the persona was the dominant criterion of individuality, of identity. Thus, the great collectives which articulated personae in hierarchical or segmentary structures was the real protagonist, both in life and ritual.

Against this symmetry between everyday life and its liminal double, ritual, we find the asymmetry of "life" vis-a-vis "acting" in post-Renaissance, pre-totalitarian Western societies. But now we detect an interesting contrast, even a paradox. For Western theatre has often posited, like Western art generally, a contrast between everyday life, whether work or that part of non-work devoted to institutionalized concerns, membership of family, sports club, charity organizations, union locals, secret societies (Elks, Masons, Knights of Columbus, and so forth), and truly antistructural life (private religion, taking part in the arts as creator or spectator, and the like). The persona "works," the individual "plays"; the former is governed by economic necessity, the latter is "entertained"; the former is in the indicative mood of culture, the latter in the subjunctive or optative moods, the moods of feeling and desire, as opposed to those cognitive attitudes which stress rational choice, full (if reluctant) acceptance of cause-and-effect, repudiation of mystical participation or magical affinities, calculation of probable outcomes of action, and awareness of realistic limitation on action. But theatre, though it has abandoned its former ritual, claims to be a means of communication with invisible powers and ultimate reality, and can still assert, particularly since the rise of depth psychology, that it represents the reality behind the role-playing masks, that even its masks, so to speak, are "negations of the negation." They present the false face in order to portray the possibility of a true face. Great theatre even brings incest and pederasty on stage from behind the masks of kinship.

Theatre has, in fact, become the domain of the individual-in-general, of what post-Renaissance man and woman would call "the real self," or William Blake "the Individual" with his/her "Definite and Determinate
Identity." In modern theatre stage-roles undermined, in fact, everyday-life roles, declaring the latter "inauthentic." From this viewpoint, it is the mundane world that is false, illusory, the home of the persona, and theatre that is real, the world of the individual, and by its very existence representing a standing critique of the hypocrisy of all social structure which shape human beings, often by psychical and even physical mutilation (foot-binding, corsets, indigestible foods), in the image of abstract social status-roles. Of course, theatre, like all cultural forms, once it has become a recognized genre of performance, can be manipulated to support both conformative and subversive social and political positions. I am merely arguing that the rise of modern and postmodern theatre contains within it the seeds of a fundamental critique of all social structures hitherto known. The locus of action, such a view would hold, has shifted from "real life" in the "indicative mood" arenas of economics and politics to what has been hitherto held to be the world of play, fantasy, illusion, entertainment, known as theatre. This has been especially the case as religious ritual has been stripped of its flexible, ludic components, its sacred clowns, masked tricksters, riddling narratives, to make way for rigorous solemnity, serious and official discourse about privileged or transcendental "meanings" or "signifieds," to use the terminology of Saussure. Subjunctive "acting" is now what is "real," "authentic"; indicative "acting," in the so-called "real world" is seen as "hypocritical," "inauthentic," "bourgeois," "debas ing"—though of late things social seem to be taking a reverse turn.

Some modes of "experimental theatre" have recently addressed themselves to the problem of presenting the whole role-playing world of mundane modern society with "acting" as its creative alternative, the stage as the locus of the emergent individual, alienated from himself in a world which insists on men and women masking themselves in a flickering series of shadowy personas. These are not the grand personae of tribal or feudal cultures, where the creation of oneself as a "public man" or "public woman" was a work of art, involving high style in dress, manners, and deeds as Richard Sennet demonstrates, but the picayune personae of office, factory, or classroom underlings, with only vestiges of familial personae left to manipulate at home for the drags of a weary day. Here mundane, indicative-mood acting seems to be the domain of the fictive, the false, the rejection of "definite and determinate identity." It is against this "acting" that such masters of experimental theatre (who see theatre as the counterstroke which annihilates falsehood even when it "puts on plays") as Grotowski, Brook, Schechner, Suzuki, and others, with some ancestry in Stanislavski, Delsarte, Meyerhold, and even Artaud, have "re-acted" or "counter-acted." Take, for example, some recent notions of Grotowski (On the Road to Active Culture. The Activities of Grotowski's Theater Laboratory Institute in the Years 1970-1977, 1978:95-97). He is giving an interview to Trybuna Luda:

Action in the sphere of active culture, such as gives one the feeling of fulfilling one's life, widening its scope, happens to be the need of many, but remains the domain of very few. Active culture is cultivated, for instance, by a writer when writing a book. We cultivated it while we were preparing performances. Passive culture—which is important and rich in aspects not easy to talk about right here—is a relationship to what is a product of active culture, that is to say, reading, watching a performance, film, listening to music. In certain, let us say, laboratory dimensions, we are working on means to extend the sphere of active culture. What is the privilege of the few, can also become the property of others. I am not talking about a mass production of works of art, but of a kind of personal creative experience, which is not indifferent for the life of an individual person, or his life with others. [Grotowski then states explicitly the view that acting is being, not performance.] Working in the sphere of theater, preparing productions for many years, step by step we were approaching such a concept of active man/actor, where the point was not to act someone else, but to be oneself, to be with someone, to be in relationship, as Stanislavski used to call it.

In the past few years Grotowski seems to have abandoned the theatre altogether to set out on what he calls "culture searches" or "paratheatrical experiments" like the 1977 (Summer) pilgrimage to Fire Mountain near Wroclaw in Poland, and the Global Village, a "kind of university of research," dispersed among many countries, "creative centers working alongside of various research and cultural centers in those countries" (ibid. p. 103). The distinctive feature of these projects was the disappearance of the audience, and the development of ritualized experiences which, to my anthropologist's eye, bear a striking resemblance to the instructions and hazards typical of successive phases of boys' and girls' puberty rites in Central Africa. Here are some of the names of these "experiments" in both small and large groups, which may suggest anthropological comparisons to some readers: "Night Vigil," "The Way," "The Area of Fear," "The Circle of Rhythm," "The Circle of Darkness and Voice," "The Cutting" (not, we are relieved to learn, an exact parallel to the operation of circumcision, but a "violent though precise" dance. "Cutting" represents a vegetable cutting, "a seed of Meeting," that is a direct encounter between persons).

I use the word "persons" advisedly, for it seems to me that Grotowski, who is very much persona grata with the Polish Communist party, has abandoned the theatrical tradition in order to create new forms of ritual initiation which inscribe desirable personae on human prima materia, that is, form men and women in a humanistic image which is to replace older forms, especially those carried in the great religious traditions. The Western tradition of theatre kept the audience well in mind and respected
its independent existence as the jury which decided on the rights and wrongs of the case presented by the dramatist, director, and actors. Here I would repeat what I wrote in a recent article called "Frame, Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama in Public Liminality." (In M. Benamou and C. Caramello, Performance in Postmodern Culture, 1977:54): "I relish the separation of an audience from performers and the liberation of scripts from cosmology, ideology, and theology. The concept of individuality has been hard-won, and to surrender it to a new totalizing process of criminalization is a dejecting thought." (I had distinguished "liminal" from "liminoid," by associating the first with obligatory, tribal participation in ritual and the second as characterizing artistic or religious forms voluntarily produced, usually with recognition of individual authorship, and often subversive in intention towards the prevailing structures.) "As a member of an audience I can see the theme and message of play as one among a number of 'subjunctive' possibilities, a variant model for thought or action to be accepted or rejected after careful consideration." [It may be that by paying for a ticket we have "bought" the author's and theatre's production as a "commodity," but we have not thereby been forced to "buy" his ideas or vision of reality.] "Even as audience people can be 'moved' by plays; they need not be 'carried away' by them—into another person's utopia or 'secular sacram,' to use Grotowski's phrase. Leminoid theatre should limit itself to presenting alternatives: it should not be a brainwashing technique." To complete the sentence of William Blake I half-quoted earlier: "One Law for the Lion and the Ox is Oppression."

It is true that one of the aims of the Night Vigil at Grotowski's Laboratory Theater was to enable people to meet "out of their roles." But when one reads accounts of the way the "guides" of the Night Vigil "shepherd" persons towards the undertaking of certain physical acts (dancing, touching) or attaining certain psychological states, in such a way—to cite a psychologist disciple, Janina Dowlasz (op. cit.: p. 115)—"that healthy human emotions could release themselves again," one is uneasily reminded not only of circumcision rites in Central Africa but also of "Triumph of the Will." The role-stripped self is to be remolded by what Grotowski calls "the guides" into . . . what?

Here I would like to return to Burridge's argument for a moment before returning to postmodern theatre. After making the distinction between person and individual, he went on to consider individuality—which is the "apparent oscillation or movement between person and individual (for most people are both), whether in a particular instance the movement is one-way or a return is made. Or individuality may refer to the opportunity and capacity to move from person to individual and/or vice versa (op. cit., pp. 5-6). I have tended to regard the social dimension of the individual as communities, essentially a liminoid, voluntaristic mode of relating, a choosing of one another by total, integral human beings with limpidity of conscioussness and feeling resulting, and sometimes the spontaneous generation of new ways of seeing or being. The social dimension of the person of person is the activated social structure, the public domain of norm- or custom-governed relationships. But of course, nothing is so simple as that. Even Augustine had to admit that in real history the City of God and the Earthly City were hopelessly intermingled, and that compromises had continually to be made by the would-be denizens of the Urbs Coelastis if family life and urban politics were to be at all workable. Individuality seems to be something that has to be won—and one aspect of its winning. Burridge would say, is "an appreciation of own being in relation to traditional or alternative categories" (op. cit.: p. 6). Burridge sees initiation rites as compressed means of posing the person-individual dilemma, especially in their liminal periods, in terms of the given culture's experience and reflection of itself.

My own view is that the experimentalism of Scheckner is directed toward the realization, through theatre, of individuality—somewhat in Burridge's sense—rather than toward the making of a new classless or "unalienated" man, in the zealot Grotowski manner. Scheckner sees himself, in Kierkegaardian language, as a "midwife" rather than a Pygmalion. There was a time, he records, when he did try to mold the actors of his Performance Group in directions he considered "personally liberating."

But there grew a rebellion in the ranks, and Scheckner came to realize that he had become somewhat of a dictator, at any rate more than a director. Both Grotowski and Scheckner—and indeed all directors in postmodern experimental theatre—advocate the supreme importance of "the rehearsal process," which involves very much more than the effectual realization of a playscript and the learning of parts. It involves innumerable workshop sessions, some lasting for hours, others all night, in which breathing exercises, voice workshops, ingenious games, psycho-dramas, dancing, aspects of yoga, and in Grotowski's "paratheater" at least, jumping in mudholes in the woods, represent components. All these disciplines and ordeals are aimed at generating communitas or something like it in the group. Andrzej Gregorcy, who ran a workshop in Wroclaw, (On the Road to Active Culture, 1978:42) stressed that this process also "means reaching to the inner recesses of the actor and back into his past... an attempt to reach him—as a human being—in his undersoil and roots... It is not important whether one creates art, which one gives to people, but it is important that men—beings not indifferent to one another in life and in work—are included in the creative process... I needed Grotowski's theater not as someone connected with theater, or even as a spectator—I needed it as a human being."

Again I would emphasize: the language favored by Grotowski has moved away from that of performing a play to that of self-discovery and unmediated contact with and understanding of others. The rhetoric is religious, even though for Grotowski's disciples traditional religion is re-
jected. One is reminded of Durkheim’s search for “secular substitutes” for both religion and ritual, and De Coubertin’s conviction that he had found these in international athletics—a conviction leading to his successful establishment of the Olympic Games, a Hellenistic, humanistic, post-religious, international, highly ritualized festival celebrating what all humans have in common: a body capable of being disciplined (a kind of profane ascesis) and an agonistic drive (though this Darwinian competitiveness proved to be mainly a feature of Western culture).

One can see the attraction, the lure, of Grotowski’s agenda. Let us create a liminal space-time “pod” or pilgrimage center, he seems to be saying, where human beings may be disciplined and discipline themselves to strip off the false personae stifling the individual within. There must clearly be a great sense of release or release when the man and woman within emerge and are recognized. The idea of a return to nature is clearly connected with this emergence. But it is the experience of anthropologists that there are grave dangers in the initiatory processes. The initiand is usually being initiated into something; he or she may be released from one set of status-roles but only in order to be more firmly imprinted with another. The elders, the gurus, the masters of the circumcision lodge, the “guides,” are there to make indelible marks (not merely in the form of bodily mutilation, circumcision, subincision, tooth-removal, scarification, and so forth, but also in the very psyche itself) on the generic human “prima materia” to which the initiands have been more or less willingly reduced. The subjective dimension of initiation, of all types of passage ritual, indeed, has not been given sufficient attention by anthropological investigators. We can learn a good deal from experimental theatre here. But one can see how a totalitarian or totalitarian polity or regime might find the sophisticated elaboration of new secularized rites of passage, guided by certificated ideologists who understand the ritual process, very much to its taste.

To his credit Schechner has never forgotten that theatre is theatre and that entertainment is a fundamental part of it. Entertainment is liminoid rather than liminal, it is suffused with freedom. It involves profoundly the power of play, and play democratizes. Prospero realized this when he threw away his rod at the end of The Tempest. Schechner, though he has often been chided for taking liberties with an author’s playscript, has never thrown out such a script completely. Rather he regards the script as a vital component in the rehearsal process, though he does not treat it as sacrosanct. It is an essential preliminary frame, to say the least, through which the rehearsal process must flow, though the extent and character of this frame may itself be modified, sometimes quite drastically, by the inner logic of that process. Other components have almost equal weight: the director, the actor, the environment, that is, the stage setting which is created anew for every production. All these, and the playscript, grow together, interact together, as the rehearsal process matures. Schechner is fond of quoting the child psychologist Winnicott’s formulation, “from me to not-me to not-not-me,” to express this process to theatrical maturation. The me, the biological-historical individual, the actor, encounters the role given in the script, the not-me, in the crucible of the rehearsal process a strange fusion or synthesis of me and not-me occurs. Aspects of the actor’s experience surface which tincture the script-role he or she has undertaken, while aspects of the dramatist’s world-view or message embodied in the script and particularly as understood from the perspective of the “character” being played penetrate the essence of the actor as a human being. The director’s role is mainly catalytic, he assists the alchemic or mystical marriage going on as the actor crosses the limen from not-me to not-not-me. The me at this third stage is a richer, if not deeper (I am unhappy about metaphors of “depth” here for they often rest on unconscious Western religious-philosophical assumptions) me than the me of the beginning.

But I am not here to attempt an exposition of Schechner’s rehearsal techniques—he can obviously do this much better than I can. What I am saying, though, is that by keeping in hand the life-line of the playscript, the saving fiction, as it were, Schechner saves his theatre from what Jacques Derrida has called “the monological arrogance of ‘official’ systems of signification.” And by keeping open the possibility of modifying the playscript—which, in a sense, also becomes a not-me and a not-not-me, like the actors themselves, the script itself may be saved from “the monological arrogance of official” interpretations which have tended to ossify poetic inspiration into “classical modes of presentation.” Works of dramatic genius require many ages to be adequately, let alone fully, manifested; it is the task of each theatrical generation to rotate them anew in terms of its own experience. We are back with the loops of the horizontal figure eight again, the relationships of opposition and synthesis between social drama and aesthetic drama.

Entertainment! That’s a key word. Literally, it means “to hold between,” from OEt entre between, and tenir, to hold. That is, it can be construed as the making of liminality, the betwixt and between state. Webster gives it both playful and serious valences, for it can mean (1) “to keep the interest of and give pleasure to; to divert; amuse,” or (2) “to allow oneself to think about; have in mind; consider.” Thus, in confession when the penitent told the priest that he had had lustful thoughts, the latter asked him, “But, son, did you entertain them?” His answer, honest enough, came quickly, “No, Father, but they entertained me.” This ambiguity is the soul of theatre, which is not a mechanism of repression or even of sublimation, but fantasized reality even while it realizes fantasy. It also allows the spectator his human dignity, his right to treat all he sees in an as-if, subjunctive way. Schechner has recently tried to move to a general theory of performance as “a binary,” one term of which is “efficacy-ritual” (with transformative intention, “changing” the partici-
pant), the other being "entertainment-theater." In my nomenclature these
would represent a contrast between "liminal" and "liminoid" modes of
performance. In actuality, they interpenetrate, though Grotowski would
have the former prevail, and much of Broadway the latter.
"Performance," writes Schechner (Ritual, Play and Performance, 1977:
218), "comprehends the impulse to be serious and to entertain; to collect
meanings and to pass the time; to display symbolic behavior that actualizes
'there and then' and to exist only 'here and now'; to be oneself and to play
at being others; to be in a trance and to be conscious; to get results and to
fool around; to focus the action on and for a select group sharing a hermetic
language, and to broadcast to the largest possible audiences of strangers
who buy a ticket."

Back then, in the end, to our title whose ironies have been by no means
dispelled by our peregrinations. When we act in everyday life we do not
merely re-act to indicative stimuli, we act in frames we have wrested from
the genres of cultural performance. And when we act on the stage,
whatever our stage may be, we must now in this reflexive age of psycho-
analysis and semiotics as never before, bring into the symbolic or fictitious
world the urgent problems of our reality. We have to go into the subjunc-
tive world of monsters, demons, and clowns, of cruelty and poetry, in order
to make sense of our daily lives, earning our daily bread. And when we
enter whatever theatre our lives allow us, we have already learned how
strange and many-layered everyday life is, how extraordinary the ordinary.
We then no longer need in Auden's terms the "endless safety" of
ideologies but prize the "needless risk" of acting and interacting.

References


1979.

Dowlas, Janina. "Psychologist at Grotowski's." Zeszyti Literackie, No. 381538, pp. 111-115,
September 18, 1977.

Geertz, Clifford. "Blurred Genres: The Reconfiguration of Social Thought." American Scholar,