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All the World’s a Stage

The Imaginative Texture of Social Spaces

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In this article, Shakespeare’s theatre provides the point of departure for a discussion of social spaces in general. “The social” itself is a performed space, where notions of place, performance time, and coactors play a crucial role in the shaping of individual actions. Most important, it is argued that meaningful action is always partly based on a sense of the plot in which one participates, and thus in anticipation of what will happen next. This sense of plot is closely related to an illusion of a whole already in place but which becomes real only as individuals act on their perceptions of it. Individual agency is thus firmly based in the collectivity and in the imaginatively envisaged future.

Keywords: theatrical spaces; social action; plots

We have often been presented with references to Shakespeare’s vision of the world as a stage. “All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players,” as Jaques has it in one of the most cited soliloquies in As You Like It (2.7.139-140). In this article, I shall explore this vision with a view to a renewed understanding of the social spaces in which humans act. As will become apparent, Shakespeare’s suggestion is hardly reducible to the platitude of everybody playing roles all the time with which we have become accustomed in the social sciences; it is an ontological proposition implying a fundamental continuity between the world of theatre and the theatricality of the larger world. This continuity has more than a little to do with the imaginative investment in “the social”—of whichever kind and scale.

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My aim here is to think with Shakespeare on the nature of social spaces in general. I suggest that although theatre certainly is a particular place, it is also one among other theatres of action in which people become caught up in their acts, so to speak. Social spaces emerge through a practicing of places (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). This also obtains for the world of Shakespeare's theatre, providing us with a world of condensed social action within a confined space that allows for a better view of practiced places in general.

Lest I be misunderstood, I would like to stress from the outset that I am in no way arguing for an idealist position, let alone a kind of social constructivism. My concern is rather to transcend the dichotomy between materialism and idealism, and between realism and constructivism, and to show that imagination has material consequences.

The Stage: A Poetical Space

To set the frame, I shall initially inquire into the poetical space created by Renaissance theatre, and not least by Shakespeare. By the advent of Renaissance theatre in England, London was in many ways a highly theatrical city (Smith, Strier, & Bevington, 1995). The spectacular was part and parcel of life at court, and annual ceremonies publicly celebrated its theatricality. The emergent theatres were set apart from this and propelled “spectacular society” toward the modern “society of spectacle” (Chaney, 1993). This development was an element in what Bourdieu (1993, 1996) has described as the isolation of art in a separate cultural field. In fact, with Shakespeare's theatre, this was to be taken absolutely literally.

The Elizabethan stage was erected on the margins of London, in the so-called Liberties. This was a threshold, a liminal space between city and country, on one hand, and between order and chaos, on the other hand (Mullaney, 1991, 1995). By being positioned there, Renaissance theatre gave rise to the view of theatre as something in between, a free space outside the reach of the authorities or, as I have argued elsewhere, a site of passage (Hastrup, 1997c). This site embodied an experience of a leap between worlds.

The Liberties, and with them the new theatres, were socially banished places, inhabited also by lepers, prostitutes, dancing bears, and jugglers. In many of Shakespeare's plays there are direct references to this particular space, for example, when Rosalind in As You Like It (1.1.138) describes her flight from the court to the Forest of Arden as a flight to liberty and not to banishment. From its position on the threshold, this theatre could critically explore the contradictions of society, and clearly the actual building of theatres in the Liberties and the creation of a new kind of drama were mutually dependent; if the stage had not been located (actually and mentally) in a liminal space, Shakespeare could not have written his powerful critiques of royalty and power. Both stages and plays occupied a highly ambivalent position in the minds of the city's authorities. As an oft-cited passage from a sermon held by John Stockwood, 2 years after the construction of the first new theatre in 1576, simply called The Theatre, goes:

I know not how I might with the godly learned especially more discommende the gorgeous Playing place erected in the Fieldes, than to terme it, as they please to haue it called, a Theatre, that is, even after the manner of the olde heathenish Theatre at Rome, a shew place of all beastly and filthie matters. (cited in Yates, 1987, p. 94)
Banished or liberated, the theatre was marked by liminality, and like other liminal spaces it reflected back on society as structured. At the threshold of order, theatre engulfed the world. Shakespeare’s own theatre, The Globe, that was built in 1597, aptly points to this by its very name, and it has been convincingly shown how The Globe could be seen as a microcosm reflecting the macrocosm of the time (Tillyard, 1943/1990; Yates, 1987). In this sense, too, the theatre was a site of passage—allowing the experience of worlds of different spatial scales, yet fundamentally alike. Liminality thus was accompanied by inclusiveness.

Part of the power of the stage was, and still is, owed to its being marked off from ordinary space. The marking is not a matter of heavy sets but of the creation of a magic circle, an empty space that gives imagination free play (Brook, 1968). Emptiness, literally, seems to have been a prominent feature of the stage of The Globe and other Elizabethan stages. Whatever props were used in the play had to be moveable. The companies had to play at court or in province guildhalls as well as in their permanent playhouses; hence, adaptability was a key issue (Styan, 1994). Even when they did play at the theatres, the stage was bare; this was not a problem but rather worked in the interest of the drama. As Coleridge said, “The very nakedness of the stage was advantageous—for the drama thence became something between a recitation and a re-presentation” (cited in Styan, 1994, p. 28). For a long time, this simple truth was forgotten, and Shakespeare’s plays were drowned in sets and costumes. In 1968, Peter Brook sighed with relief when he could see that “we have at last become aware that the absence of scenery in Elizabethan theatre was one of its greatest freedoms” (pp. 96-97). The players were never dwarfed by the structure.

Playacting is preeminently social, and although the players have a text and know their parts, communication is everything. The audience is an integral part of any play; a “third point” in the communication between the players, much like society, always forms a third part in any dialogue between you and me, an implicit common denominator and shared moral horizon—possibly even a provider of scripts. Shakespeare’s public was not encouraged to think that they eavesdropped on “real people.” The frequent use of the vocabulary of the theatre and the reference to the playing itself were devices “to remind the audience that it was an audience, a collection of ‘Elizabethans’ at the Globe watching a play: the unreality of the play was thus emphasized, or rather, its special reality, its otherness, its unique ‘world’” (Honigmann, 1963, p. 136). At Shakespeare’s time, then, the stage was bare and as adaptable as any other social space, where agents must also catch the attention of others if they want to make a difference. Everywhere, character must take precedence over location (Thomson, 1992, p. 49). Phrased slightly differently, the scenery must support the characters rather than dominate them; to take an example, the conference room should frame the proceedings of the conference, not divert our attention.

Shakespeare also worked explicitly with the material facts of the stage. There were two doors and a curtain, which were but two doors and a curtain and were brought to bear on the story told in that capacity (Styan, 1994, p. 20). We all know, for instance, how in *Hamlet*, Polonius hides behind the curtain in Gertrude’s chamber and is killed by Hamlet in his hiding. This is very much how real life works, too. People enter and depart through doors, and curtains may conceal them. Whether a theatre audience or other, people witnessing other people’s actions always have to invest their imagination in the act of understanding. There is no way of understanding from the bare facts alone; understanding is an imaginative event. There is always something hidden be-
hind some curtain, always somebody who just departed but left his or her mark on the stage.

By its flexibility and emptiness, Shakespeare’s stage was a place that invited the audience to play with your fancies, as the prologue to Act III of *Henry V* has it. The words spoken provided images onto which the audience could attach its imagination. We know how soliloquies often present sceneries as well as individual reflections; the point about Shakespeare’s plays, as stressed by Granville-Barker (1927), is that “his drama is attached solely to the actors and their acting; that, perhaps puts it in a phrase. *They carry place and time with them as they move*” (p. xxiii).

This is where Shakespeare’s players imitate, or rather mime, real life most subtly. As Aristotle (1987) had it, drama is a mimesis of praxis. On stage as well as in real life, mimesis has less to do with literal imitation than with a practical relation of identification; this is achieved by metaphor and imagination as much as naturalist reason. The Kingdom of Denmark in *Hamlet* may be suggested mainly by way of speaking and acting, yet as far as I am concerned, so is the modern nation-state; its reality is inferred from various characters’ words and deeds. The point is that in both cases, imagination is the key resource to consciousness, and therefore the key to meaningful action.

Action takes place in different spaces, and we play different parts. And this is important: We play different parts, not simply roles, within a whole that demands of us that we invest an imaginative effort to understand and to act on that understanding, whereby we possibly transcend it, or at least challenge it, as all practice challenges its own premises (Sahlins, 1985).

As a site of passage—a passage between worlds and viewpoints, between then and now, between this world and another—drama opens up for a new poetics of space, a poetics that makes us experience the possible rather than the already manifest. The artistry of acting implies that the players know how to turn the stage into a shared space; their acts must resonate with life and distill the basic impulses to action, which is always deeply social by its being motivated by a moral horizon. The artist must work with his audience’s capacities, also in this sense (Geertz, 1983, p. 118). It is not a matter of the players having to pass on a solution to the audience’s existential queries; it is rather the shared notion of the riddle of life that is at stake, or the need for some degree of silence, even secrecy, surrounding individual lives. In this sense, the stage functions like the secret drawers in a cabinet (Bachelard, 1994, p. 81). The stage offers a medium through which one can appraise unknown spaces and imagine other textures of life; on the whole, theatre demonstrates that space can be poetry. As a shelter for the imagination, the stage offers a site of intimacy and immensity.

As intimated already, I suggest that social action in general takes place in comparable spaces. Shakespeare’s stage may be particularly poetic, and of heightened vitality as all true theatre (Turner, 1982), yet human action makes sense only within a particular social space, whether explicitly bounded or not, and the reality of this space is partly filled out by individual agents’ imagination. The social space induces its own motivation for action into people, whose acts in turn are formed in part by an implicit notion of a potential audience, and whose own characters take shape in part by their coactors’ characters and expectations. There is no way to be a king if there are no subjects acknowledging him. Kings and humans belong to the same class of things, people, yet they are differentiated imaginatively within a space that allows for royalty.

In Shakespeare’s play *Henry V*, the king wanders about one night disguised as an ordinary soldier, soliciting his men’s opinion on himself and the pending battle, and
he discovers the extent to which they put blame and responsibility on the king. Afterwards he soliloquizes:

Upon the King! Let us our lives, our souls,  
Our debts, our careful wives,  
Our children, and our sins, lay on the King!  
We must bear all. O, hard condition, 
. . . What infinite heart’s ease  
Must kings neglect that private men enjoy!  
And what have kings that privates have not too,  
Save ceremony—save general ceremony?  
And what art thou, thou idol Ceremony?  
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 
Art thou aught else but place, degree, and form,  
Creating awe and fear in other men?  
Wherein thou art less happy being fear’d  
Than they in fearing.  
(4.1.226-245)

Even though King Henry argues that it is only “ceremony” that separates him from his men, the differentiation has real consequences; the king is feared while the men do the fearing. Any social space engenders a particular horizon of expectation and constitutes a context for any action within it. However imaginatively the context is filled out, ceremony becomes a real force within the social space. It becomes part of the materiality of the place along with the physical realities that—just like the stage with its borders and doors—closely connect action to a set frame.

**Illusion: The Essence of Drama**

If the texture of the empty space is social, it is created in part by way of illusion, to which we shall now turn. Again, we shall start squarely in the world of play, often qualified as mere illusion, in contrast to solid reality. Players of Shakespeare, and other players, have to act convincingly before the audience. It is not enough for the players to retreat into a fantasy world of their own, yet by their own efforts they must create some sort of illusion by which to affect the audience’s world as well. The critic Charles Morgan (1958) states that dramatic art has a double function:

First to still the preoccupied mind, to empty it of triviality, to make it receptive and meditative; then to impregnate it. Illusion is the impregnating power. It is that spiritual force in dramatic art which impregnates the silences of the spectator, enabling him to imagine, to perceive, even to become, what he could not of himself become or perceive or imagine. (p. 97)

Illusion is the essence of drama; in this view of theatre, its first principle and its active force. For the players, the force of illusion is, indeed, dramatic. Embodying “the propitious meeting between history and desire,” as Artaud (1958) saw it, they belong to the site between dream and events (Blau, 1992, p. 7). For the player, this site is a powerful site of transformation between person and character, or between reality and illusion. Actor John Gielgud (1992) writes about his experience of playing Hamlet:
In no other part have I found it so difficult to know whether I became Hamlet or Hamlet became me, for the association of an actor with such a character is an extraordinarily subtle transformation, an almost indefinable mixture of imagination and impersonation. (p. 59)

To the extent that humans are constantly engaged in a kind of essential reflexivity, it is hard to describe the illusion of theatre. As Gombrich (1977) says, “Illusion, we will find, is hard to describe or analyze, for though we may be intellectually aware of the fact that any given experience must be an illusion, we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an illusion” (p. 5). Illusion in drama is a peculiar experience, however, which we may be able to qualify further even if we cannot “watch ourselves having it.” Charles Morgan (1958) again is of help in his definition of illusion as “suspense of form.” The play has no form until it is over; the performance is latent form, and the audience wait in suspense for its anticipated completion:

This suspense of form, by which is meant the incompleteness of a known completion, is to be clearly distinguished from common suspense—suspense of plot—the ignorance of what will happen, and I would insist upon this distinction with all possible emphasis, for suspense of plot is a structural accident, and suspense of form is, as I understand it, essential to the dramatic art itself. (p. 98)

This is significant: Living theatre impregnates the imagination of the audience by an illusion that keeps the audience alert and ready for the final formal release—even if they know the plot by heart.

If theatre provides a representation of action, it is also action itself. As such it is firsthand suspense, and it requires that its illusion be concealed, as it were. Although the subject of the act is artistry as much as the artist, theatre cannot afford to display its own skill. As Arthur Danto (1981) has it for art in general, so also for the specific art of theatre: “If illusion is to occur, the viewer cannot be conscious of any properties that really belong to the medium, for to the degree that we perceive that it is the medium, illusion is effectively aborted” (p. 151). The suspense created in action must make the audience forget time and place and accept the naturalness of the world on stage, however illusionary. This leads to an important epistemological point, which holds for all art, namely that there is no rigid distinction between perception and illusion (Gombrich, 1977, p. 24). What we perceive is what we can know as reality. And for the players, the desire to act drives the play along in a subjunctive mode that is thereby transformed into real passion. Or as Bourdieu (1990) has it in his discussion of bodily habituation in general, “The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief” (p. 73). What must be explained in theatre as in life is not reality but whatever appears to be real (Blau, 1992, p. 16). Theatre transcends the age-old opposition between illusion and reality, between imagination and reason.

What makes the player struggle to act is the desire to become at one with the part and not standing outside it, watching and fearing, like Shakespeare’s “unperfect actor”:

As an unperfect actor on the stage
Who with his fear is put besides his part
(“Sonnet 23,” 1-2)

The player’s actions must be real, not pretence, for them to capture attention and work on the emotions of the audience. The player cannot stand outside the part and fully convince people of the reality of the character. By playing their parts, the players ad-
just to the whole and change themselves. One is reminded of George Herbert Mead, who in 1934 suggested something similar: “As a man adjusts himself to a certain environment he becomes a different individual; but in becoming a different individual he has affected the community in which he lives” (Mead, 1965, pp. 215-217). The resonance between the theatrical stage and the social community once again is striking.

For the players, acting is living—as already recognized by Shakespeare’s contemporaries. What else could it be for the agents of the play, even if the moment of life that they offer for public inspection is framed by an “if,” as Constantin Stanislavski (1936) has it: “If this were true, then that could possibly happen.” This “if acts as a lever to lift us out of the world of actuality into the realm of imagination” (p. 46). The convention of theatre rests within the “if” that recognizes the nature of the play as supposition and suggestion, and which does not force anybody to believe anything:

The secret of the effect of if lies first of all in the fact that is does not use fear or force, or make the artist do anything. On the contrary, it reassures him through its honesty, and encourages him to have confidence in a supposed situation. (p. 47)

Theatrical mimesis is not simply reflecting a surface, a duplication of what already is. There is a fundamental asymmetry between object and mirror image, which is at the root of the theatrical illusion. If theatre is the “mirror of nature,” as Hamlet has it, it does not show us who we are but who we could have been. In other words, theatre reflects the oneness of history and potentiality. To mime is the capacity to “other,” as Taussig (1993, p. 19) has suggested, or to establish a simultaneous relationship of identification and distinction, believing in one’s life as “vocation,” performing, not representing, oneself (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 73).

As I think will be clear by now, if illusion is the essence of drama, it applies to any social drama. As suspense of form, it clearly reflects back on the perception of our own life history; we cannot properly assess our acts until the story is completed—at death. Until then, we are bound to live with a suspense of form, an unfinished play, the full meaning of which will forever escape us. The writing of one’s autobiography implies a symbolic death, a premature consummation of form, as it were, a wasting of the future.’ Conversely, in the course of our lives we are incessantly engaged in shaping our story and becoming true characters through our acts. Characterization is a consequence of our acts, not the other way around—as Aristotle knew.

Stanislavski (1950) has discussed the building of a character at some length. Too often, this notion is taken to imply a mind-body dualism and to reflect an idea of the player’s subject taking control over the object, the body. It is difficult to evince this dualism from the notion of acting because the very rhetoric used to represent the building of a character all too often gives the impression that the character is an object logically constructed in the mind and then put into the body. Yet as was intimiated by John Gielgud in the quotation above, it is not so simple. The question of whether he became Hamlet or Hamlet became him clearly indicated that in finding one’s way “into” the character, mind and body cannot be separated. There is no distinction between “self” and “other,” subject and object, along the lines of mind and body. The fusion of player and character is a precondition for acting convincingly. This relates to the notion of double agency that extends to all social action (Hastrup, 1997c, 2003). We act on a particular perception of self (and society) and emerge as a character in an ever-changing social space.
All social fields, ranging in scale from the global community to villages and families, depend on illusion to be real. To accept the “rules of the game,” an illusion of a whole, ordered by certain conventions, and of a shared interest is a precondition (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66; 1996, p. 166). The point is that by investing their own interests and actions in filling out the form, the social actors make the community happen. Without a sustained (and shared) illusion about the social space in which one participates, no action makes sense. Society rests on a suspense of form that precipitates particular actions, through which the illusion is gradually realized. Society does not exist except in its permanent seeking of form; or, a social space—be it a nation-state, a university conference, or a construction site—has no ontological status as a whole apart from what is collectively attributed to it and made manifest in action. The flip side of this is that social spaces are naturalized and allowed to exert physical force over individual action.

Anticipation: Emplotting the World

It is in the nature of illusion as discussed here that anticipation is inherent in the suspense of form. By presenting the possible, theatre shows us what is not yet. It is a way of introducing newness to the world—as is any act, in fact, in its unique once-occurring nature (Bakhtin, 1993; Hastrup, 2004).

In his reflection on the rehearsal process, actor Simon Callow (1995) says that “work, in the sense of labour, isn’t quite the word: the preparation period is more like dreaming, relevant dreaming” (p. 158). This reflects back on Shakespeare’s notion of the play world as a dream world, which is most forcefully explored in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Dream worlds are imaginative, but in some important sense this applies to all worlds. When Shakespeare claimed that the world was a stage, there was also an element or a vision of the artist transforming and multiplying experiences by imagination, and he “may even come to think that what is true of his art will be true of the world it mirrors” (Granville-Barker, 1927, p. 5). Few will fail to recognize some general truth in this; the world always partly becomes as we fathom it. This does not imply a lack of reality, but it does point to a feature of imagination being part and parcel of realizing particular (visions of) social spaces.

In Shakespeare’s works, the poetical mode of the plays expands on the moment and makes the unknown gradually known. In this way, the acting storyteller corroborates the structural position of the prophet (Ardener, 1989; Hastrup, 1989). Prophecy is not simply a matter of prediction; predictions rest on an assumption of repetition, and they always fail when repetition does not occur. By contrast, the prophetic condition is a matter of being between worlds—as was Cassandra in Homer’s *Iliad* providing the raw material for Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. While living in Troy at war, Cassandra gave voice to the future world of Troy as slain; the defeat was partly apprehended by being implicated in the present state. All prophets are like Cassandra (Ardener, 1989, p. 135). When they first raise their voice, they are discarded as mad, whereas afterwards their prophecies are trivial. This boils down to stating that far from being simple prediction, prophecy is a matter of giving words to a reality that is already felt but not yet conceptualized. It works, therefore, as an expansion on the known by presenting what is not yet known, only dimly apprehended.
Cassandra’s act points to the fact that “telling” may alter the social space; speaking has real consequences. It also points to another feature of the social space, namely that individuals may present discontinuities within it (Ardener, 1989, p. 148). We all know how some individuals are always experimenting with expression or action. They are the first ones to stretch old language to fit new experiences, and vice versa. The social discourse is altered as a matter of course. The important point is that any discourse is in some sense a creative speech, bringing into existence that of which it speaks. Language produces existence by producing the collectively recognized, and thus realized, representation of existence (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 42). Moreover, language has a distinct quality of address that should not be overlooked; the arbitrary signs derive their significance from actually being addressed to a "second person" (Lyotard, 1993, p. 137). Human beings are bound together in a speech community; there can be no sense of self or of worth outside a conversational community by which a moral horizon is established (Taylor, 1989).

What is at stake for Cassandra, and any other social agent acting on anticipation, is the degree to which she can free herself from the social and yet remain anchored in it so as not to be discarded as simply mad. Individuals and societies have often been portrayed as oppositional, but this is untenable; they are mutually defining (Cohen, 1994, p. 54). This also applies to the individual who “steps out” of the self-evident but who remains a challenge from within the social space. Indeed, it is from being part of the social space that individuals may make a difference to that space. As George Herbert Mead (1965) (again) has it:

Persons of great mind and great character have strikingly changed the communities to which they have responded. We call them leaders, as such, but they are simply carrying to the nth power this change in the community by the individual who makes himself part of it [italics added], who belongs to it. (p. 216)

Cassandra not only speaks, while speaking she acts, and through her action the social space is altered: Prophecy is resolved in action.

Again, I think we are at a point where we can see that agency on stage is not set apart from social action in general. Among our actions are speaking and narrating, including the speaking of worlds into existence. It is not an act of conjuring but of realizing, and through the realization to make manifest what so far had been hidden. We discussed that above when dealing with illusion, but we can see now that the efficacy of illusion is closely tied to a notion of plot. Action is never simply a reaction to what has already happened; it is also a mode of acting on anticipation. Agency in this sense, I would argue, is closely tied to a vision of plot, to the anticipation of a story, a line of future development. It is a profound matter of responding; response being made within a moral horizon and within a social context that we interpret and project forward as we go along. Without a sense of plot, meaningful action would be precluded. The sense of plot is what integrates individual actions into a larger vision of the world, filled out imaginatively and acted on. In that sense, any social action is a creation, contributing to a history that outlasts (and outwits) our imagination. Social spaces are plot-spaces in their own right. Individual agents act partly on their vision of the plot-space and their perception of what must come next—and thus they respond to their own prophetic position between a familiar past and a dimly perceived future, falling into place as emplotted and acted on.
We perform a world into being, acting as much on anticipation as on antecedent. We may even speak the world into occurring because all speech is an act; words are thoughts in action (Berry, 1992, p. 17). Words are not simply expressions of the world, they are means of dealing with it—after which it is no longer the same. In that sense, the voice of Cassandra is simply the human voice telling what is in the process of its becoming. All meaning is emergent, as are those social spaces that anthropologists have incorporated (Hastrup, 1994) while studying them.

Studying action implies a study also of that context the action coproduces. In anthropology, it has for a long time been almost a mantra that social phenomena must be seen in context (Dilley, 1999). The context allegedly authenticates ethnographic detail but in actual fact it is always a theoretical by-product of the analysis itself. It is difficult to get beyond this “positivity of context,” however (Fabian, 1999). In the present case, one could argue that the actions on stage must be seen in the context of the play, but as I would argue, the drama as a whole is a result of action, not its pretext.

What we have learned from the world of the players is that to understand a mode of action or a form of life, we must bring figure and ground, or “the passing occasion and the long story,” into coincident view (Geertz, 1995, p. 51). To understand social action, this is important: The unique event of the act and the “long story” of the plot belong together. The “frame” is always part of the event; the larger plot is incorporated into individual agents and realized through their actions. It is not for them to fully comprehend their actions because the descriptions that are available to them from inside their experience cannot at the same time bring the complete story into view.

Contextures: Theatres of Action

As meaningful wholes, social spaces are imaginatively constructed; their reality transpires in the parts played by individual social agents—in their actions and speech, they endorse certain institutional orders and specific interests. Thus, people invest themselves in a whole that they thereby either confirm or change. For a long time, there was an imperceptibility on the part of Western anthropologists to the fact that social spaces are created in practice; they are emergent realities, not predetermined structures.

Individuals, as a matter of course, are no longer seen as simply victims of the social system; nor are they free-floating agents. The sense of social community and of shared (or, indeed, disparate) interests pervades the vision of the field of possible action. The field is always already populated, the sense of self is partly mediated through the eyes of others, and the world is profoundly “dialogic” in that sense (Bakhtin, 1981). As “characters,” people are partly shaped by the frame within which they move and by other characters—including the real or imagined audience. Just like Hamlet’s character cannot take shape independent of his father’s, mother’s, and uncle’s, other social agents are never entirely free to cast “themselves.” Character in this sense is different from personality because it is fundamentally social.

The character dialectic evolves within a larger drama—on stage and elsewhere. The actor Michael Pennington, in his recollections of playing Hamlet, relates,

The play began forming itself in my mind as a brilliant narrative exploding on the one hand into set pieces like the first court scene, the play scene and the duel; and sustained
on the other by a series of essential interviews, duologues that define Hamlet’s relations
with his neighbours—the Ghost, Ophelia and Gertrude above all, but also Polonius,
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Horatio and the Gravediggers: a kind of character dialectic
that is further refined at four crucial moments into Hamlet’s purest and most dis-
tinctive encounters, those with his audience. (quoted in Brockbank, 1989, p. 119)

What I like to highlight here is the way in which the sense of the whole of the drama
and of other characters enter into the individual perception of the plot. The general
point is that in the actions of Shakespeare’s characters there is a latent fusion of his-
torical dynamics and individual passion. The plays incarnate what seems to be a
poignant insight, not only in theatre but also in the world in general, that under cer-
tain circumstances, the individual is not the primum mobile in committing a partic-
ular deed. As Vernant (1992) has said about the world of Aristotle, in this respect the
individual who commits a crime is also its victim:

The action does not emanate from the agent as from its source; rather it envelops him
and carries him away, swallowing him up in a power that must perforce be beyond him
since it extends, both spatially and temporally, far beyond his own person. The agent is
cought in the action. He is not its author; he remains included within it. (p. 44)

This, I would suggest, is also true for Shakespeare’s characters—and for social agents
in general.

Agency, then, has to be divorced from intentionality and from a view of the disen-
gaged self. The former is at best a rationalization, the latter a fallacy. No self can be dis-
engaged from his or her own actions, and not even the most detailed rendering of an
individual’s intention would take us beyond a description of the act and its conse-
quences. To understand agency, we can learn from Shakespeare and his players that all
selves are committed to a plot, of which they are only partly aware because it takes
shape as they go along, and within which they become parties to each other’s fates. In-
dividuals are, in a fundamental way, each of them playing a part within a whole.

The “whole” in relation to which the part makes sense may be called a society or a
culture or something else, but it certainly has a particular contexture, in the sense sug-
gested by Daniel and Peck (1996, p. 1); citing Hobbes, they suggest that it connotes
“both the texture that surrounds and the texture that constitutes.” The usefulness of
this word is owed to its composition and its emphasis on the materiality of the con-
text: its texture. There are no empty spaces in the social because we always project our
imaginative understanding onto the stage. We perform accordingly, and in the process
we qualify the space itself. The aesthetics of theatricality will vary, but the frame of so-
cial activity is always in some sense material. It is a texture, resisting some actions
while favouring others. It is this material quality that gives it its reality.

The “eventness” of being (Bakhtin, 1993) and the uniqueness of actions paradoxi-
cally contribute to the realization of the shared social space; the frame is part of the
event in a very direct sense. Although actions are directed toward the release of the
suspended form, they also contribute to its reformation. Although lesser plots may
come to end, the larger history is never completed—except on stage, where the curtain
signals the end of story. This is, in fact, why theatre provides us with a privileged site
for studying action; the sense of wholeness and completion makes it possible to in-
vestigate the embeddedness and the contribution of the individual action. If drama
works by its creation of a whole, it is noteworthy that we only become aware of it when

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it is gone: “It is only when the drama is over that actions take on their true significance and agents, through what they have in reality accomplished without realizing it, discover their true identity” (Vernant, 1992, p. 36). Theatre allows us the luxury of experiencing a whole story, of seeing action in its total context, and thereby enables us to understand the nature of motivation that our daily lives do not. So far from simply mirroring life at this level, theatre shows us what life is never yet: a whole.

Humans are defined partly by their reflexive awareness of action (Giddens, 1991, p. 35). Action itself is fundamentally reflexive; wherever it takes place, it makes sense only in relation to a particular physical space (the stage), a particular time frame (the performance), and with reference to a more or less well-known plot, without which there would be no sense of direction, no points of orientation. Most important, the individuals can only act “in character” by acknowledging the presence of others.

The social spaces that anthropologists study are of different scales and intensities, and offer different degrees of resistance to particular actions. Yet everywhere, the hard-ness of social facts rests partly on social agreement (Hastrup, 1993), and hence on imaginative investment. In any theatre of action, the agents must act to become who they are—to paraphrase Nietzsche—and in acting subscribe to the illusion of a larger whole existing without or beyond them, but in reality taking shape only in the course of individual action and imaginative investment.

Notes

1. All quotations from Shakespeare are from the edition by Alexander (1994). I follow the convention of giving act, scene, and lines.
2. This article presents only a fragment of a larger research project on human agency in the company of Shakespeare (Hastrup, 2004). Previous articles addressing related issues are Has-trup (1997a, 1997b, 1997c), and the anthropological position I speak from is expanded in Has-trup (1995).
3. The notion of scripts should not be taken too literally, as it sometimes happens in discus-sions of cultural models and social action.
5. The writing of one’s autobiography implies a symbolic death, of which I have had first-hand experience, when my “lifehistory” was transformed into a play and somebody else played me. I have related that experience in Hastrup (1992, 1995).

References


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