SIX

Toward a Pragmatics of Theatrical Communication

All is emotion in performance.

P. Nicole, "Thoughts on Performance"

Blaise: In spite of the play, all this is true, dear lady, since they are pretending to pretend.

P.-C. de Marivaux, *Actors in Good Faith*

6.1. THE PERFORMANCE CONTEXT

Up to this point I have examined the performance text largely from the standpoint of its internal rules (*co-textual aspects*) and its relationship to other aesthetic and nonaesthetic texts within culture (*cultural context*). I will now shift my attention to a more pragmatic consideration of the performance text, studying it in relation to its conditions of production and reception (*performance context*). Therefore, in these two concluding chapters, I will examine the semantic-pragmatic process of theatrical communication, focusing on the complex, classical problems that are raised in the course of its analysis.

To begin, I must return to the definition of theatrical performance (and hence the theatrical text) that I proposed in chapter 2, where I specified the two basic conditions that any theatrical event must fulfill in order to be included in the class /theatrical performance/: (1) physical copresence of sender and receiver, and (2) simultaneity of production and communication. It would be useful to repeat this definition: theatrical performances are performance events that are communicated to a collective receiver, physically present at reception, at the very moment of their production. In order to visualize this, I would like to propose a diagram (figure 3), highlighting additional aspects of the situation that I will deal with in the course of this chapter.[1]

When I first proposed the definition just restated above, I provisionally assumed that communication (the fact that theater communicates) was a given, and postponed a more complex discussion of the subject for the time being. Two precise motives were at the root of my delay in
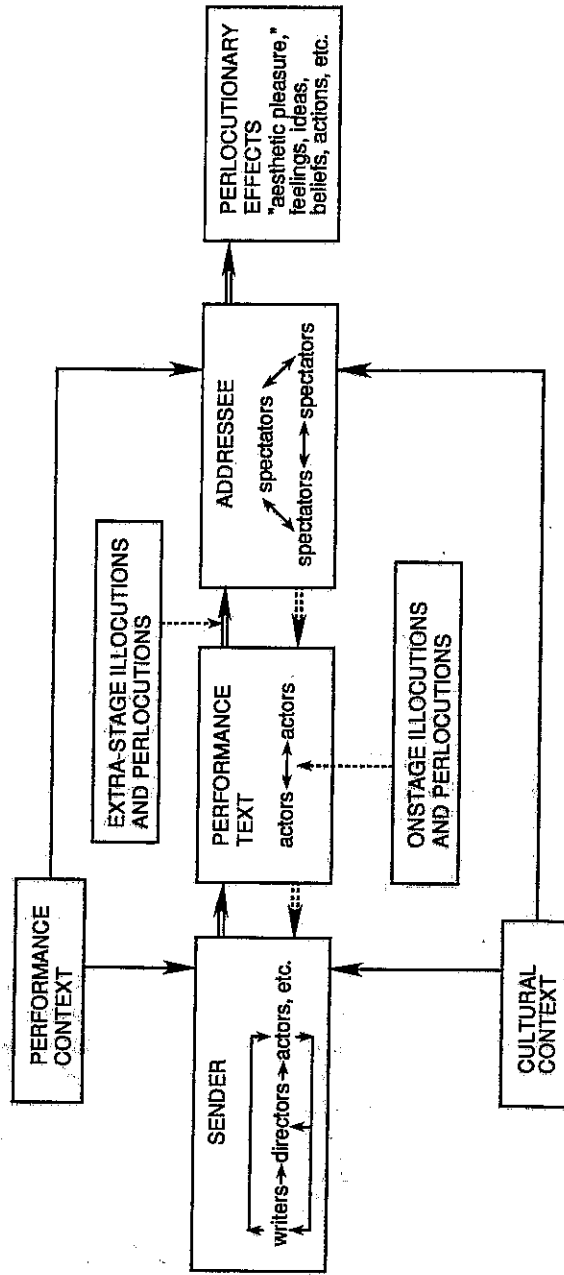
Figure 3. General diagram of theatrical communication.

confronting the vexed question that has already been widely discussed by other scholars (since it is considered basic to all semiotic studies of theater). First, I believe that in spite of the fact that we may ultimately lack positive and final proof that theater constitutes a communicative situation in the strict sense, this does not discredit *a priori* the validity and heuristic usefulness of applying semiotic models of textual analysis, understood as the explanatory study of its signifying mechanisms, to the performance text. Second, as the result of the studies on this issue by Ruffini (1974a, 1978a) and Bettetini (1975)—as well as Prieto's arguments demonstrating that every artistic operation is communicative *at least* on the *connotative* level (1971, 1975)[2]—we can say that it has been sufficiently demonstrated that communicative acts and strategies are *also* present in theatrical performance.

Nevertheless, at this point in my study, it would be useful to undertake a brief review of the entire question, even at the risk of repeating what has already been stated. I will thus have the opportunity to present some theoretical comments that are indispensable to my argument on the foundations of the pragmatics of theater.

6.2. COMMUNICATION IN THE THEATER

As is already well known to everyone interested in these issues, the French linguist Georges Mounin denied the communicative character of theater in a famous study in 1969 which has since become the necessary point of departure for all discussions on theater semiotics. According to Mounin, communication between sender and receiver takes place only if the latter can "respond to the former through the same channel, in the same code (or in a code that can fully translate the messages of the first code)" (1969: 95). Clearly we are dealing with the normal conditions of verbal communication, which Mounin generalizes and elevates to a necessary condition of communication per se, completely succumbing to the logocentric fallacy. Since theatrical representation does not seem to meet the normal requirements,[3] Mounin decides that there is no communication in theater, and he defines the relationship that is established between performers and audience in terms of *stimulation*:

> [Theatrical] representation thus seems to constitute a network of very complex relations between the stage and the audience. The best visual image of this network is the orchestra director's sheet music: at every moment, on different levels, different stimuli are offered, whether linguistic, visual, lighting, gestural, or sculptural (text, acting, lighting, splashes of different colors, costumes against the backdrop, changes, and the like), each stimulus belonging to a different system whose fundamental rules are perhaps capable of explanation. (96)

I do not wish to deny that theatrical performance can *also* bring into play important stimulative processes (which I will deal with later), yet

Mounin's definition of communication—on the basis of which he excludes theater from the communicative domain—seems to me an excessively restrictive one, typical of the "semiology of communication" of which Mounin himself is one of the most rigid spokesmen.[4] In reality, in order for communication to occur, it is sufficient that sender and receiver know each other's code (Ruffini 1974a: 40). To offer some obvious examples, if A replies to B's question with a gesture of denial or consent, we can presume with some certainty that communication has occurred. This is also the case when we send a written message in response to a previously received phone call.

But the problem is even more fundamental. *If the receiver knows the code(s) of the sender*, no kind of *reverse action* is necessary for communication to occur. It is sufficient if the channel through which the message flows is activated, and that there is contact between the two poles of interaction. Going back to Prieto, I would say that it is enough if the receiver transmits a sign communicating to the sender that he has received his "signal of notification" and that he knows that the sender is ready to send him a message (the sound that one hears when someone picks up the receiver on the other end of the line in the case of a phone conversation, for example).[5] According to Prieto:

> If we take a close look, communication by one or other of the two terminals can be limited to the phatic function (Jakobson's term), which usually uses a different code than the code used by the other terminal. (1966: 47)

This phatic function seems fully carried out in the case of theater by linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesic signs which the audience generally transmits before, during, and after the performance: applause, whistling, laughter, whispers, expressions of disapproval, periods of silences, and so on.[6] As we shall see, these signals, many of which can be traced back to precise cultural and socially institutionalized conventions (*applause* and *whistling*, for example)[7] also have the basic function of "regulating" theatrical interaction, expressing "the pulse of the situation," "the temperature of the house." More precisely, they provide a way of assessing *if and to what extent* communication is established and maintained, if and to what extent the audience is receptive and understanding, and whether the spectators are attentive or distracted, interested or bored, approving or alienated. In this way, the audience's responses and interactions, communicated as immediate feedback, are often capable of influencing the actors' "efficiency," in a very palpable way, stimulating them, depressing them, and so on.[8]

Therefore, my first conclusion is that, generally speaking, *communication seems completely independent of the need for reverse action*. As we have seen, in order for communication to take place, it is enough for the receiver to know the code(s) of the sender. Reversibility would mean that the receiver should also *possess*—i.e., *be able to use*—the code(s). Ruffini reminds us that:

While knowing how to use something implies knowing it, knowing something does not imply knowing how to use it. Clearly, in order for reversibility to occur, there must be communication, but the opposite is not true. There can be communication without reversibility, communication that has *some factor of efficiency*, perhaps even communication with a very low factor of efficiency. (1979: 6)

Moreover, everyday experience normally demonstrates that *knowledge* and *use*, *knowing* and *knowing how*, are separate. This is especially the case for such extremely specific and highly technical codes as those proper to the performer's art.[9] My earlier distinction between *active* competence (knowledge + use) and *passive* competence (knowledge alone) is based on this separation, and I will return to it in greater detail in the final chapter (see 7.4.).

To recapitulate, in order for communication to occur it is sufficient (as well as necessary) for the receiver to know the code(s) of the sender, without having to become in turn another sender. Is this what happens in the theater? I would say yes, certainly, at least *in part*, and at least for *part* of the collective receiver. In this case, the multiplicity of codes set in motion by performance is crucial. We could in fact suppose that, thanks to the inevitable effects of redundancy (see Corvin 1978), this *multiplicity of codes* guarantees, at least theoretically, that a certain degree (even a minimal degree) of comprehension (and hence communication) is *always* achieved, even in the case of performances where poor theatrical competence (or some other circumstance) does not allow an adequate awareness of the codes and conventions of the performance text (that particular performance text). According to Ubersfeld:

It is possible to understand an opera without knowing the language, or even without understanding the national or local allusions, or without grasping the complex or outdated cultural code. It is clear that the aristocrats or the lackeys attending performances by Racine did not understand any of the mythological allusions, since both groups were as ignorant as fools. Parisian audiences who saw performances of Goldoni's *Campiello*, staged by Giorgio Strehler, did not understand Venetian dialect. Many were not even capable of reading the reference to Venetian painting, to Guardi's work, in particular. Yet all the other codes still facilitated an adequate reception (*saisie*) of the signs. (1977: 31)

More precisely, it is possible to say that concrete examples of theatrical situations are situated along the degrees of a continuum that extends between the *"comprehension—zero communication"* pole (a case not to exclude in theory, but practically quite improbable, for the reasons expressed above)[10] and the *"comprehension—full communication"* pole (this case is also theoretically impossible).[11] Resorting to a diagram, we could visualize the two extreme poles as well as the intermediary position in the following way (Cs stands for "productive codes of the sender" and Ca for "receptive codes of the addressee"):

(1) zero communication (=0)

(2) partial communication (between 0 and 1)

(3) complete communication (=1)
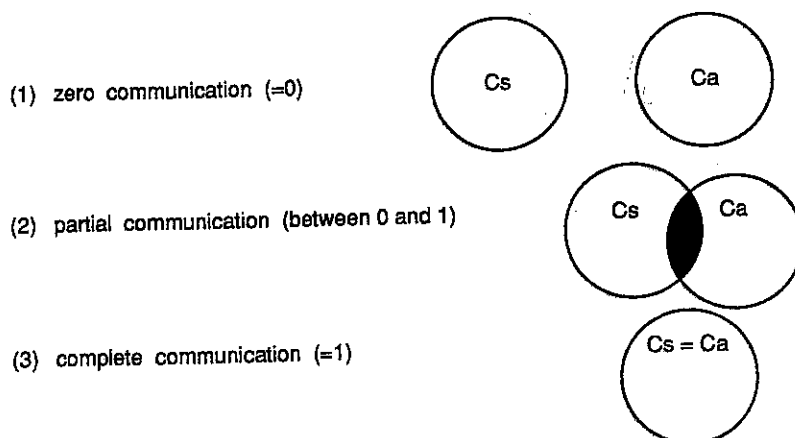
In my opinion, concrete theatrical situations can be relegated mostly to case (2), or partial communication, where the subset Cs also constitutes a subset of Ca. Naturally, the size of the common subset will vary from case to case, causing the degree of communication to move toward 1 or 0.[12]

On the basis of what we have seen up to this point, I can conclude that the performance text's multiplicity of codes usually allows communication to be established in the theater. This communication is, as I have said, partial.[13] The phatic signals used by the spectator, his "responses," which are culturally coded to a greater or lesser degree, allow the level and duration of communication to be noted. A deep silence almost certainly signifies attention and interest if generated by a very formal audience at an opening night in London, but it would have quite a different and less flattering significance if it were the response of a confused, bored audience in a small, provincial playhouse during the staging of a difficult avant-garde play. Broadside whistles would be received very differently depending on whether they came from a European audience, for whom whistling expresses disapproval, or an American audience, where whistling has exactly the opposite function.

6.3. THE KIND AND DEGREE OF COMMUNICATION IN PERFORMANCE

Having established that theatrical performance *can* communicate (in the sense that we cannot find any element that would *a priori* prevent the establishment of communication in the relationship between the performers and the audience, or, at any rate, in the theatrical interaction), the real problem then is to discover *how and to what degree* it communicates, bringing to light the various kinds of speech acts produced in theater, as well the possible presence of factors not related to communication. Clearly, the is-

sue does not only involve the receiver's competence. It also involves, above all, the sender's communicative intentionality, his intending-to-say or his not-intending-to-say, his discursive strategies, as well as the kinds of codes and conventions connected with the production of the performance text.[14] But, above all, as we shall see, what is at stake is the *dynamic* nature of theatrical communication itself, the changing relationship that binds performers and audience in a continual process of restructuring and redefinition which is negotiated by communicative roles and positions (Lotman 1980: 9, 23).[15]

Leaving aside *onstage* communication (i.e., between the characters-actors on the stage),[16] I would like to continue to explore this cluster of issues while focusing on the relationship between performers and audience (the *extra-stage* relationship).[17] As I already mentioned, it is widely believed that in this relationship, in addition to speech acts, *processes of stimulation* also come into play, through which theater, rather than "saying," or communicating something, seems to act on the audience to provoke conditioned reflexes, behavioral responses of an immediate kind. To repeat, I do not rule out the fact that, in the theater, the relationship between the onstage event and the audience can sometimes give rise to "forced circuits between stimulus and response"[18] or bring into play more complex semiotic strategies that are difficult to include within the informational concept of communication. Nevertheless, on the one hand, I realize the necessity of broadening this category which has the capacity to contain many more elements than are usually attributed to it. On the other hand, however (to focus on the problem of stimulation in the strict sense), I think that if we look more closely and analytically at each case, these extra-semiotic margins in theater become narrower than we initially imagined them.

It is quite probable that even when it seems that what is happening is only a matter of deep stimulations that no longer depend on culturally coded semiotic conventions, we can still trace semantic processes and forms of coding (I am thinking of the techniques of physical involvement implemented by experimental theater in the 1960s: Living Theater, Grotowski, Schechner, Chaikin). I will give just one example (see Ruffini 1974a: 41). At a certain point during a performance of *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* by the Living Theater (1964), the actors "fell down dead" on top of the audience. It is possible that some or all of the spectators who were "assaulted" in this way reacted—in accordance with their sociocultural background and the level of their genre competence—by attaching semantic weight to this stimulus (which would normally provoke immediate, instinctive psychophysical reactions). These spectators could have attributed meanings such as "provocation" or "attempt at involvement" to the stimulus, and therefore their reaction should not be described as instinctive, but rather as the result of semantic mediation. This is insofar as we are concerned with the *coding of the stimulus at reception*. But even if the semantic attribution were to fail "at the point of arrival" (because of

the audience's naivete, or because of the particular violence of the stimu-
lus: physical aggression, extreme visual and acoustic intensity provoked
by lighting and sound effects, etc.), it would also be possible to hypothe-
size the existence at the point of transmission of unilateral forms of coding
in which "the code that attributes certain effects to certain stimuli is used
by the sender simply to manipulate specific instinctive reactions in the
receiver" (Eco 1973a: 65). In this second case we are dealing essen-
tially with *planned stimulation*, meaning the production of *"non-semiotic
elements intended to elicit an immediate response in the receiver"* (Eco 1975:
306).[19]

Having said this, I do not wish to claim that *all* performances intend to
communicate *in the same way and to the same degree*, or that *everything* in a
performance is meant to communicate. On this issue, I would like to quote
Bettetini's comment:

> The degree to which the semiotic analysis of a performance text can have com-
> plete and exhaustive results depends on the degree to which the theatrical
> production is oriented toward speech acts (prevalence of literary text or a se-
> ries of powerfully socialized conventions in the entire production) or toward
> stimulus-provoking behaviors (reduction or elimination of conventions, ab-
> sence of onstage rituals, as happens in contemporary avant-garde theater).
> (1975: 128)

But it is not enough to recognize that theatrical communication can in-
volve very different "efficiency factors," ranging from very high to very
low (see Ruffini 1979) and that, therefore, performance can also be oriented
toward predominantly noncommunicative acts and goals. The theoretical
advance that still needs to be made is much more radical. We must in fact
bring the category of communication itself under careful review (in addi-
tion to a reassessment of the minimal conditions of communication, as
mentioned in 6.2.). This category, as it continues to be widely understood,
seems completely incapable of accounting for the complex network of ac-
tions (semiotic or otherwise) that performance brings into play in its dis-
cursive functioning. I will begin this review of the category of communica-
tion in the next section.

6.4. THEATRICAL MANIPULATION

Calling for the necessity to escape the rigid binary choice between of coded
communication and Pavlovian 'stimulation,' " Volli makes the following
assertion:

> *To act* on the audience does not mean simply to "establish a circuit of stimulus-
> response." The players intend *to do* something to their audience, with the
> pretext of *saying* something. This *doing something* that occurs in theater
> responds to diverse needs in the producing subject, in the subject's social
> condition; but, above all, it is organized according to strategies, which are also
> to some extent coded, signifying, communicative strategies. I believe that the-

ater research which still merits the designation of semiotic analysis should make the strategies of theatrical seduction the focus of its inquiry. The decisive issue is the *strategic presence* of theater (especially the actor's presence), its *action*, the apparatuses (with the possible inclusion of apparatuses of communication, of codes) that are brought into play within that strategic presence. (1979: 16)

The already cited article by Volli offers sound insights and observations that deserve further development. As I have said, I believe that his invitation to reject the narrow binary choice of communication/stimulation is to be fully embraced, and my own comments above already tend in that direction.

Equally valid is his claim that not all "acting" and "doing" in performance (especially by the actor) can be explained simply as presemiotic stimulation. In fact, theatrical performance brings into play complex strategies of manipulation and seduction, which have always been recognized, since it is true that classical theories of theater in the West (from Aristotle and even Plato, right up to Artaud and Grotowski) and in Asia (*Natya-Sastra*, the treatises of Zeami) developed mainly as *theories of theatrical passions*, in the double sense of passions represented in the theater (by actors who can more or less really feel them) and passions that are elicited and unleashed by the theater. The case of Aristotle's *catharsis* is too well known to merit further emphasis. Yet it can be interpreted precisely as a theory of how the seduction of the audience takes place in theatrical performance, through specific *means* (the *mimesis* of actions eliciting feelings of *pity* and *terror*), and with certain *goals* (the *purification* of these or similar passions).[20] And even before Aristotle, there were the Sophists, especially Gorgias, whose theory of art and of theater in particular speaks of *hedeia nosos* ("sweet sickness") and *apate* ("deception"), capable of persuading and convincing everyone; the irresistible manipulator (thanks to its psychagogic power and its fascinating magic) or the four principal passions, grief (*lype*), joy (*chara*), terror (*phobos*), and pity (*eleos*) (see *Enkomion Helenes* and Fragment B 23 Diels).[21] Nor should we forget Plato, whose famous condemnation of art in the *Republic* has as its principal indictment the charge that artistic mimesis, particularly theatrical mimesis, is not based on the better, higher part of the human soul, its rational side, but on its opposite, on the soul's lowest, weakest part, the irrational.

> [The mimetic arts create] in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality and by currying favor with the senseless element that cannot distinguish the greater from the less but calls the same thing now one, now the other. (Plato X 605 b-c)

Plato claims that art thus excites in the listener, or audience, all kinds of emotions, from erotic feelings to rage, from pleasure to grief, "and it establishes them as our rulers when they ought to be ruled to the end that we

may be better and happier men instead of worse and more miserable" (606 d).[22]

Even in non-Western theatrical poetics the emotional transformations carried out by performance occupy a central place. Consider, for example, the concept of *yugen* ("subtle spell") and *hana* ("flower") in the Zeami treatises on Noh theater (see Zeami 1400ff.). These treatises dedicate a great deal of attention to pleasure, to the ineffable emotions that an actor is capable of communicating to the audience when, thanks to technique, natural talent, and personal charm, he manages after years of work to reach the highest stages of "supreme elegance: " stages corresponding to the styles known as "deep flower" and "mysterious flower" (Sieffert 1960; Ortolani 1973a).[23] Another important example is the fundamental theory of sentiments (*rasa*) elaborated in the *Natya-Sastra*, the treatise on Indian classical theater, which I have already mentioned in the course of this volume. According to this theory (which has surprising similarities with Aristotle's *Poetics*, as we shall see), humans have forty-one psychological states (*bhava*, or feelings) including: love, mirth, sorrow, anger, energy, terror, disgust, astonishment, (physical) weakness, apprehension, envy, and so on. The first eight of these produce a stable and lasting effect on the human personality,[24] and provide the basis for corresponding sentiments (*rasa*), while the remaining thirty-three emotions have a purely complementary, reinforcing function.[25] According to the author of the treatise, one characteristic of the eight Durable Psychological States is the total involvement of the subject in possession of the emotion, which removes him from reality. While on the one hand this condition offers the subject "a special spiritual freedom," on the other hand it presents some serious drawbacks. Apart from being short-lived, its intensity is especially dangerous and intolerable, and can easily lead to very bad consequences. Nevertheless, people should not have to deprive themselves completely of *bhava* for these reasons. They can in fact experience these emotions again through theater. Indeed, the principal necessity and usefulness of theater can be seen in its power to enable the audience to experience a *bhava* as a real feeling through the vicarious experience of the corresponding *rasa*. Ghosh makes the following comment on this issue:

> If a cultivated spectator witnesses the Durable Psychological State of the hero of a play reproduced on the stage by an able actor . . . *the representation of the Durable Psychological State acts as a stimulus in evoking in the spectator a verisimilitude of such a psychological state*, which is then called a sentiment. The sentiment, being a vicarious experience, does not affect him in any way; and bringing in its wake spiritual freedom, it may be said to *purify* his soul.[26] (xxxvii, emphasis added)

The functional parallels with the Aristotelian theory of catharsis are obvious.[27] As is well known, however, the conception of how to evoke the sentiment, in one case, and a similar cathartic effect in the other, is very

different in the two poetic theories (and especially in the two theatrical traditions that they inspired). This concept is *dramatic imitation*.[28]
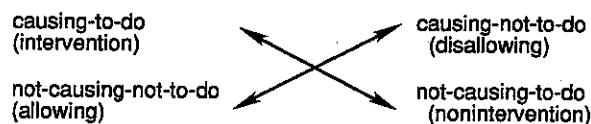
To return to Asian theater, I must add that at other times (since antiquity, if we take, for example, Horace's *miscere utile dulci* and the rhetorical triad *docere-delectare-movere*, as well as the rationalist interpretation of Aristotelian catharsis), theorists of theater have located, or tried to locate, the manipulative power of drama elsewhere than merely on levels of pure feeling or diversion. Piscator and Brecht, for example, viewed theater as an instrument of didactic persuasion and indoctrination that could serve to inspire people to make rational ideological choices and political decisions. The dadaists and surrealists, on the other hand, aimed at premeditated provocation, reveling in disruption and a scandalized response. In the case of emotional seduction, playful involvement, and ideological manipulation, we are actually dealing with functions and levels that cannot be separated in an overly rigid way, as the history of theater itself has proved by demonstrating that these levels often coexist or even reinforce each other, one becoming the vehicle of the other even if unintentionally. The cathartic, consolatory effects of so much contemporary political theater deliberately oriented toward inducing mental habits of critical reflection or lucid political activity are obvious to all and need no further comment.[29] On the other hand, the theory and practice of festivals in Western culture since the sixteenth century reveals in an equally striking way a pattern of extremely varied seductive strategies tending to produce very divergent pragmatic effects on the participants. One could envision a continuum with many intermediate stages extending between the extreme case of a mythological *folk festival* as the joyful, spontaneous self-expression of a community or social group, and the contrasting extreme of a *totalitarian festival*, used as a pedagogic tool for organizing the masses and winning their compliance. We can discern profoundly antithetical goals which nevertheless coexist, although in conflict, both in the ideals of festivity as elaborated by Western thought and in the festive practices of Western civilization. It is enough to recall, for example, the theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which are totally imbued with the painful conflict between the necessity of defending the rights of the individual (*l'homme*) and the unsurmountable needs of a state which can find its justification and legitimacy only by submitting the "individual will" of citizens (*les citoyens*) to its own superior "general will" (see De Marinis 1979b). We could also take the example of the festivals of the French Revolution, which have passed down antithetical (though closely interconnected) images of the frenzied *réjoussiances* of the *sansculottes* on the one hand and the solemn and orderly official liturgies of Robespierre and David on the other (Ozouf 1976).

I believe that my examples make abundantly clear that theatrical performance involves something that goes far beyond the narrow, traditional understanding of communication as a simple conveyance of infor-

mation, i.e., as the objective, aseptic transmission of contents from a sender to a receiver. I would like nevertheless to clarify my conviction that this acting/doing performed by theater, its tendency to be deployed within a complex network of emotional and intellectual transformations, cannot be assessed as a purely extra-semiotic phenomenon, and hence relegated to the ineffable and the unanalyzable. Quite on the contrary, the issue should be taken up by semioticians wishing to attempt a more complex analysis than was hitherto possible (for obvious reasons) of the theory of communication, the phenomena of the production and manipulation of meaning, or their rules and mechanisms. To paraphrase Eco, one could say that although textual analysis is not interested in the seduction performed by theater, it is nonetheless very interested in asking *why* and *how* theater seduces and charms.[30] With this goal in mind, it is first of all necessary to overcome the mechanistic conception of communication that we have inherited from information theorists, so that we can situate this concept within a much wider context, including the two additional concepts proposed by Greimas: "persuasive doing" on the part of the sender and "interpretive doing" on the part of the receiver, in addition to the notion of "informational doing" (the only one considered by the mechanistic model). In this way, communication can be appropriately conceived as "an action performed on other persons, creating the intersubjective relationships that are the foundation of society." This is in fact a concept of *manipulation*:

> In contrast to operation (as an action of human beings upon things) *manipulation* is characterized as an action of humans upon other humans with the goal of having them carry out a given program. In the first instance, what we have is a "causing-to-be," and in the second a "causing-to-do."[31] (Greimas and Courtés 1979: ET 184)

Insofar as manipulation is "causing-to-do," when projected onto the semiotic framework it gives rise to four fundamental *modalities of action*:[32]

causing-to-do
(intervention)   causing-not-to-do
                                                      (disallowing)

not-causing-not-to-do
(allowing)   not-causing-to-do
                                                      (nonintervention)

On the discursive level, communicative manipulation (communication as manipulation) is subtended simultaneously by a contractual structure (proposal/acceptance of contract through *persuasion* of the manipulated receiver)[33] and a modal structure:

> We are actually dealing with a form of communication (oriented toward making-known) where the manipulating sender forces the manipulated addressee toward a loss of freedom (*not being able not to act*) to the point that the addressee is obliged to accept the contract offered. Hence, what is most clearly at stake is

the transformation of the modal competence of the addressee-as-subject. If, for example, the addressee adds *having to act* on top of *not being able not to act*, we have a situation of provocation or intimidation. If *wanting to act* is added instead, however, we are dealing with seduction and temptation.[34] (Ibid. 220-21)

Naturally, in addition to constituting a "causing to do" which "can make the subject capable of acting," manipulation can take the form of "causing to believe" (*persuasion* in the strict sense), that is, as a "procedure that aims only at creating an affective state in the manipulated subject" (faith, belief, and so forth) (Greimas 1977: 12-13).[35]

The particular form of communication-manipulation constituted by theater spans the entire range of transformations in the addressee's modal competence. It is enough to recall the already cited examples of didactic theater and political theater, revolutionary festivals and folk festivals, to become aware of the existence of "a whole set of complex manipulators" where all forms of manipulation come into play, from seduction to intimidation, from temptation to provocation, and so on.

No one will fail to see the interesting typological possibilities that are also inherent in this kind of approach to the performance text. Nevertheless, to understand how, and in what sense, theater can be seen as a complex form of manipulation, as a *making someone act* and a *making someone believe*, I would suggest stepping back in order to ask how theater constitutes a *doing*, as well as a *pretending*, and a doing through the guise of pretending. It should be clear that I am not at the present referring to theater's capacity for presenting real actions and objects (according to the graduated topology that I have often mentioned in this volume) as well as (or instead of) representing fictitious events. The issue here is to understand how theatrical performance—both in the case of a fictitious representation that refers entirely to something other than itself (like a Shakespearian production at Stratford on Avon) and in the case of a self-reflexive presentation of real events (such as the environmental performances of Oldenburg or Kaprow)—can be conceived in terms of an action performed on the audience, a manipulative process that conveys communication acts and produces effects on the spectator, transforming his cognitive and emotional state (beliefs, ideas, feelings, expectations) and provoking responses and reactions.

We are dealing with a fundamental theoretical problem that has barely been explored up to now. In the present context I must also limit myself to some basic comments, taking advantage of some ideas that derive from speech-act theory. I will deal above all with theatrical representation (as the authors I cite also do), but the theoretical picture that evolves may also prove useful, *mutatis mutandis*, for the analysis of extra-representational theatrical phenomena, as I will try to demonstrate in the typological sketch at the conclusion of 6.5. Finally, I would like to point out that the theoretical framework and methodological procedures of speech-act theory, which

are too biased in a linguistic and psychological direction, will be modified and enlarged for my own needs within the scope of a practical semiotics of the performance text. I need to work toward a *theory of theatrical action*, of theater as action (communicative action, sign-action), or rather, as a complex web of sign-actions, which must still be fully analyzed. To this end, it is clear that I must elaborate on the theoretical framework provided by speech-act philosophers, combining it with a *general logic of action* (on Wright, etc.) on the one hand, and a *semiotics of feelings* on the other hand. A semiotics of feeling is perhaps the only kind that can adequately observe illocutionary and perlocutionary phenomena in the theater, and distinguish clearly between them.

6.5. ACTION/FICTION: THE
PERFORMANCE TEXT
AS A MACRO-SPEECH ACT

It is useful to begin with Searle's work on the logic of fictional discourse (1975c). For Searle, what distinguishes the *discourse of fiction* from other types of discourse is the fact that it is composed of *fictitious* narrative statements, whose author feigns or pretends that he is making assertions or performing other illocutionary acts without *really* performing them, and yet has no intention to deceive.[36] But what makes this "fiction," this "pretense," possible without becoming falsehood and deception? According to Searle, it is the existence of a set of *horizontal* (extralinguistic, non-semantic) conventions "that break the connections established by the vertical rules" concerning the correlation between words and statements about the world:

> What distinguishes fiction from lies is the existence of a separate set of conventions which enables the author to go through the motions of making statements which he knows to be not true even though he has no intention to deceive. (326)

Searle's statement on how the author of fictional discourse carries out this "pretense" is also very interesting. In Searle's opinion, one can pretend to perform an act of a *more* complex type, while *in reality* executing an act of a *less* complex type:

> Thus, for example, one can pretend to hit someone by actually making the arm and fist movements that are characteristic of hitting someone. The hitting is pretended, but the movement of the arm and fist is real. Similarly, children pretend to drive a stationary car by actually sitting in the driver's seat, moving the steering wheel, pushing the gearshift lever, and so on. The same principle applies to the writing of fiction. *The author pretends to perform illocutionary acts by way of actually uttering (writing) sentences.* (326, emphasis added)[37]

In these cases, the *illocutionary act* is pretended while the *utterance act* is real. In Austin's terms, we could say that the "author pretends to perform *illocutionary acts* while really performing *phonetic* and *phatic* acts" (327).

Despite its limitations, and the fact that it proposes conclusions that are not completely acceptable for textual semiotics,[38] Searle's approach is interesting and offers useful ideas for the analysis of theatrical fiction. Taking up Searle's lead, we could thus view the performance text (at least the type of performance that accepts the traditional notion of representation) as a text in which there is the fiction, the pretense (particularly on the part of the actors), of making assertions and performing other actions: "the actor pretends to be someone other than he actually is, and he pretends to perform the speech acts and the other acts of that character" (328).[39]

Taking his cue more or less explicitly from Searle's study, Eco (1977a: 115) claims that at the basis and the beginning of the actor's every theatrical utterance, every production of theatrical statements, two fundamental illocutionary acts can be located. The first is constituted by an implicit performative, of the type /I am acting/ executed by the actor: "With this implicit assertion the actor tells the truth while announcing that *from that moment on* he will lie" (Eco 1977a: 115, emphasis added). The second speech act, on the other hand, constitutes a pseudo-assertion (this is what Searle calls a "pretended" speech act), the subject of which is the *character* rather than the actor:

> Because of the first performative act, everything following it becomes referentially opaque. Through the decision of the performer ("I am another man") we enter the possible world of performance, a world of lies in which we are entitled to celebrate the suspension of disbelief. (Eco 1977a: 115)

Leaving aside for the moment the rather prickly issue of the "suspension of disbelief," I will try to determine *how theatrical performance, while carrying out pretended speech acts of various kinds, also transmits serious speech acts.*[40] On the basis of the model of a double level of communication, we can thus distinguish between (1) *onstage* speech acts (internal to the performance) and (2) *extra-stage* speech acts (directed toward the audience). On the first level, we are usually dealing with *symbolic* (or fictional) illocutions and equally *illusory* perlocutions, conveyed by "pseudo-subjects of utterance," or characters (Kemeny 1978: 74).[41] On the extra-stage level we can hypothesize instead that, in addition to "simulated" speech acts, *real* illocutions and/or perlocutions are produced. These are so genuinely effective that they "produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, and actions of the audience. . . ." (Austin 1962: 101). These will be, by nature, *indirect* (their direct receivers being inside the performance) except in cases where the illusion is ruptured (*Parabasis* in the comedies of Aristophanes, and Shakespeare's or Brecht's soliloquies to the audience, for example),[42] or theatrical phenomena of a nonrepresentational type (such as Peter Handke's *Insulting the Audience* [1966], but above all an agitprop performance, a political festival, or a convocation).[43]

But how are the symbolic (fictitious) illocutions in a performance text

articulated with real illocutions? In other words, how does a theatrical performance convey "serious" speech acts? Having conceded that "generally speaking, not all references in a work of fiction are feigned," and having thus distinguished between *a work of fiction* and the *discourse of fiction*, Searle makes the following assertion:

> Serious (i.e., nonfictional) speech acts can be conveyed by fictional texts, even though the conveyed speech act is not represented in the text. Almost any important work of fiction conveys a "message" or "messages" which are conveyed *by* the text but are not *in* the text. Only in such children's stories as contain the concluding "and the moral of the story is . . ." or in tiresomely didactic authors such as Tolstoy do we get an explicit representation of the serious speech acts which it is the point (or the main point) of the fictional text to convey. (332)

These are very schematic observations (apart from the arguable criticism of Tolstoy) and the author himself recognizes that "there is as yet no general theory of the mechanisms by which such serious illocutionary intentions are conveyed by pretended illocutions." Without intending to initiate an analysis of these mechanisms, I will simply point out some of the typological possibilities that can be taken from Searle's approach, while also attempting to transcend the limits of the dramatic performance (to which Searle tends to reduce all theater, as we have seen). The first criterion would be the *explicit* or *implicit* nature of the representation of serious speech acts in the performance text. Genres like "political theater" or "investigative theater" (but especially the Russian and German agitprop theater of the 1920s) undoubtedly belong to the first category (explicit representation), along with the more recent example of the Living Theater's "anarchic" performances. The second category (*implicit* representation) is so vast that it seems futile to cite examples. Nevertheless it seems difficult to hypothesize performance texts that are *completely* devoid of explicitly represented speech acts, just for the reasons explained above: theater consists in communication-manipulation; it always tends toward doing, acting on the receiver, as well as saying (representing, telling) and pretending to do things.

The classificatory possibilities inherent in distinguishing various *kinds of serious speech acts* that the audience transmits (explicitly or implicitly) and consequently the various *kinds of perlocutionary effects and aims* that theatrical senders intend to carry out with these seem more interesting. If we conceive of a performance text as a *macro*-speech *act* (a macro-sign act) in which serious micro-acts of various kinds are placed in a given hierarchy, we can imagine a parallel hierarchy of theatrical goals "on the basis of which the sequences of speech acts are structured" (Manetti and Violi 1979: 126).[44] We are thus capable of attempting a rough typology of performance texts from the following standpoints: (i) Performance texts with a substantial prevalence of *directives*, and frequently with *commissives* also, thus tending on the one hand to induce the audience to do something, and, on the

other, to commit the sender to a certain form of behavior in the future. These performance texts include political or propaganda performances, agitprop theater, political festivals, convocations, etc.[45] (ii) Performance texts with a prevalence of *expressives* (*behabitives* in Austin's terminology), whose illocutionary goal is to express and emphasize the psychological states of the sender, his attitudes and behaviors (Searle 1975a: 351), including "reactions to other people's behavior and welfare" (Austin 1962). Examples abound in "Romantic" theater (de Musset, Büchner, Kleist, Hofmannsthal), expressionist drama, gestural theater of the 1960s, and popular theater (puppets, marionettes, and so on).[46] (iii) Performance texts with a prevalence of *representatives* (Austin's *expositives*), whose dominant illocutionary goal is to "commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something's being the case, and to the truth of the expressed proposition" (Searle 354). Examples are documentary theater and investigative theater. (iv) Performance texts characterized by *declarations* which if properly executed "bring about some alternation in the status or condition of the referred-to object or objects" (358): rituals, official ceremonies, Renaissance festivals with/for the stipulation of treatises, on the occasion of coronations and weddings, and the like.[47]

It should be remembered, however, that just as in the case of microacts, the determination of serious macro-acts is also, in the final analysis, always contextual, that is, linked to the process of a text's production/reception and modalities. In order for the linguistic macro-act of a performance text (i.e., produced by a performance text) to be carried out successfully, certain condtions must be satisfied, particularly the conditions of pragmatic appropriateness, meaning the fitness of a given performance text with respect to genre, to the communicative context, and to the accomplishment of given results. I will offer more detailed observations on this in the next chapter (for the moment, however, I will mention the most obvious examples: political theater for directive performance texts, and ceremonies for declarative performance texts). In a two-way model of speech-act theory (like the one already suggested by Austin, but later frequently discounted in favor of a one-way concept of communicative interaction) the behavior of the receiver (the spectator, in this case)—his cognitive and emotional "responses"—is decisive for the goals of completing the speech acts and their definition, namely their mode of reception. Fabbri and Sbisà observe that:

> [generally speaking, the mode of reception] does not coincide with the form proposed except in extreme cases, and the predictability of this noncoincidence allows space for the maneuvering of strategic interaction, as well as the construction of the discourse as one that requires conversational cooperation, and inferences that complete or modify the apparent meaning. *Understanding is not a mirroring, but a mutual definition.* (1980: 182, emphasis added)

In addition, in order for us to initiate, if not conclude, a typological analysis of theatrical performance from the point of view of the serious speech

acts that are produced *in it* and *through it*, it will of course be necessary to approach, at least in a preliminary way, the thorny problem of the speech acts that are produced, completely or partially, by nonverbal means. This problem was neglected by the Oxford theorists (if we exclude some provocative observations by Austin [1962: 112]), and up to this point it still does not seem to have attracted the attention it deserves.[48] Moreover, I have already spoken in 6.4. of the main processes of integration that speech act theory must necessarily undergo in order to create an adequate basis for a pragmatics of the performance text.

6.6. THEATER BEYOND SIMULATION AND NEGATION

In the previous section I left aside an issue of some importance regarding the status of theatrical fiction (as well as fiction in general), namely the issue of the so-called suspension of disbelief. In opposition to Eco's position in the passage quoted above (and Levin's position on poetry in 1976), many scholars hold that in the case of theater we can never speak of genuine *illusion*, nor therefore of the suspension of disbelief. According to Urmson, the correct interpretation of a theatrical representation by the audience (i.e., the shift from the most basic "historical truth" [e.g., /two actors cross their swords/] to the more specific "dramatic truth" [/Romeo and Mercutio fight a duel/]) is a counterfactual interpretation (Lewis 1973), carried out on the basis of an awareness of theatrical conventions and the context of utterance (the theater building, playbills, and programs). Urmson goes on to make the following claim:

> I do not wish to claim that the members of the audience explicitly enunciate these counterfactual statements to themselves. But the attitude of the theatergoer is a very sophisticated one which one has to learn from long experience. . . . *The spectator who can distinguish drama from reality is constantly aware that his interpretation is counterfactual, though few would express the fact in this technical jargon. But there is no willing suspension of disbelief, even temporarily.* Certainly, we await the stage-murder with horrified fascination; but this would not be our reaction if we had suspended our disbelief; if we had suspended our disbelief we should either dash on the stage and try to stop it or at least go out into the foyer to look for a telephone to call the police. (1972: 339, emphasis added)

In effect, Urmson is using the concept of "naive" or inappropriate theatrical fruition as proof of the fact that, normally (meaning except in blatantly atypical cases), genuine suspension of disbelief is not to be found in the experience of theater, and that for that reason there is no genuine illusion. In his opinion, theatrical competence would at least allow the theatergoer to carry out the counterfactual operations necessary to move from literal (or lexical) meaning to dramatic (or textual) meaning. It is the same line of argument developed in a different methodological sphere by Ertel (1977)

and Ubersfeld (1977), who both refer to the well-known psychoanalytic study by Octave Mannoni (1957) on "comic illusion":

> Everything that happens on the stage (even if closed off within the stage space and defined with little clarity) bears the mark of unreality. And if what takes place is the staging of a real event (as happens in political theater and agitprop performances), this reality, once turned into theater, takes on the status of un-reality, making it seem like a dream. According to Freud, the dreamer knows he is dreaming even when he doesn't believe it or want to believe it. *Theater has the same status as a dream: an imaginary construction that the spectator knows is radically separated from the sphere of everyday existence.* (Ubersfeld 45-47, emphasis added)

The obvious advantage of this position is that it intuitively reflects our common experience as theatergoers, but there are three drawbacks to such a drastically reductive and rationalistic approach to the problem. (a) Its first drawback is that we can identify the (not-so-tacit) concept of theater as mere fiction, representation, and simulation as the basis of this viewpoint. Such a conception does not take into account the rather important fact that I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this volume, namely the existence, past and present, of regular theatrical phenomena of very different kinds, which theater tends, or tended, to present above all as real events, authentic facts. These are productions rather than re-productions, presentations rather than re-presentations of an action, signification *in praesentia* rather than signification *in absentia*. In the face of this "other" vast theatrical universe (which extends from primitive rituals of possession to experiments of the neo-avant-garde in the West and to so-called group theater, from examples of classical and medieval theater to the theater of East Asia, from folk festivals to sports events),[49] the idea of theater as a "negation of reality" (to echo the subtitle of Ubersfeld's 1977 volume) loses pertinence and appropriateness, and simultaneously reveals its ideological bias. (b) We now come to the second objection concerning the more or less willful confusion that besets the champions of "de-negation" when they purvey as a scientific hypothesis (theater *is* the unmasking of fiction and illusion) what is in fact their own aesthetic and ideological prejudice (theater *should be* the unmasking of fiction and illusion), a normative critical prescription disguised as an analytic definition. (c) The third, most basic objection is one that can be made from an ethno-methodological standpoint. Such a neat separation between theater and social life presupposes a fixed, one-dimensional, and immutable definition of entities such as "fiction," "illusion," and "reality" and their respective boundaries. Now we know that such a possibility is contradicted by scientific observation which demonstrates instead the inter-cultural and intra-cultural variability of these entities and their relative internal levels. As Burns reminds us in his study of theatrical conventions (1972), we cannot juxtapose theater with life as we can juxtapose fiction (nonreality) with reality. In everyday life, as well as in various forms of theater, it is possible to define several levels of reality and illusion,

where perception (see Goffman's notion of "definition of the situation") is neither fixed nor uniform but varies from culture to culture and from individual to individual within the same culture. Consequently, even the boundary between theatrical behavior and nontheatrical behavior is (culturally) relative and shifting (Burns 1972: 15-21).[50] Therefore, also on the basis of what I have said in the previous sections, I do not believe that it is possible to articulate general laws of the type /theater is (always) fiction/ or /theater is not (or never) fiction/; /theater is (always) the unmasking of illusion/ or /theater is aways illusion and suspension of disbelief/, and so on. Each of these assertions might be true, if placed on the proper level and in reference to specific kinds of phenomena. In short, it is necessary to distinguish different cases according to genre (in the broad sense), historical period, and geographical or cultural area. This means both in relation to the rules of production of the performance text and in relation to the receptive protocols of the spectators. The comments that I made in 2.2. with regard to the concept of /representation/ must be repeated here for concepts such as /theatrical illusion/, /suspension of disbelief/, and so on. These terms are not capable of discriminating between theatrical facts and nontheatrical facts in a clear, unambiguous way, since the class /performance text/ is implemented by occurrences that display widely differentiated norms for these categories, or combine them in a frequently inextricable way.

The significant enrichment of the concept of "theatrical communication" developed in this chapter will now enable us to define a level of the performance text where the distinctions referred to here undergo an eventual restructuring and lose a large part of their validity. In fact, having gained access to a definition of communication as manipulation, it becomes clear that the performance text—independently of its underlying productive conventions, and frequently of the sender's intentions as well—always (also) presents itself as an *action* (i.e., a seductive action) performed on the audience. By setting up given sign-acts and deliberate stimulations, this *manipulative action* produces certain modifications in the spectators' emotional and intellectual universe, sometimes even influencing their behavior. This holds true when the performance text belongs both to representational theater and to genres that are more or less outside fictional norms, both when the occurrence in question is set up as a realistic (or transposed) reproduction of an "other" or an "elsewhere" or, instead, when it constitutes the production of "real," self-referential events and signifies above all *in praesentia* (this, in fact, is something that *always* occurs to some extent in the theater, as I have already repeatedly stated).

I have thus outlined one of the main problems that a pragmatically oriented textual analysis must confront (by resolving them in relation to concrete examples). We must note the ways in which the performance text successfully succeeds in producing determined illocutions, obtaining specific perlocutionary effects by staging imitations of events (and thus conveying in addition fictional speech acts) or in presenting/producing real events.

One can threaten and shock an audience by producing an actor who inflicts real wounds during his performance (see Hermann Nitzsch's L'Orgien-Mysterien Theater) or by representing a fake duel in a violent way. I can argue persuasively for the ecological return to nature both by displaying real animals and other nontechnological objects, as Joseph Beuys does, or through the fictitious staging of a nuclear catastrophe. The sight of a simulated orgasm can provoke just as much excitement as a real-life sexual demonstration. One could win someone over to the revolutionary cause and persuade him as a result to adopt certain practical choices either with a concrete political argument (during a convocation or a military celebration) or, for example, by representing allegorically the tyranny of capitalism and man's exploitation of his fellow man (Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Slaughter*).

In conclusion, everything leads me to disagree with the conception of theatrical experience that I have criticized in this chapter. Such a conception closes theater off within the excessively narrow boundaries of simulation and fiction, thus choosing the Freudian concept of denial (*Verneinung*) as the founding premise of every relationship between performance and audience. The definition of the performance text as a macro-speech act, usually (but to a different degree each time) conveyed by a battery of pseudo micro-acts, confirms in another way, and finally clarifies what I have been saying throughout this volume, namely that fiction and reality (representation and presence always coexist in performance, understood as a relationship of communication-manipulation between the stage and the audience. *Action* and *the simulation of action* combine and corroborate each other, *feigned actions* are reconciled and interwoven with *real actions*.

Beyond the variety of its underlying conventions and the different practices of its reception, performance always provokes *effects of the real* as well as *theatrical effects*, not only in the sense of simulation and duplication of reality (the aspect emphasized by Grande [1979]), but also in the sense of its real production of meanings, kinds of awareness, events, and lived experiences.