PERFORMING THE RENAISSANCE: THEATRE AS METAPHOR IN ART AND SOCIETY

SOUTH-CENTRAL RENAISSANCE CONFERENCE
WILLIAM B. HUNTER LECTURE, 2002

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AT THE RISK OF CLICHÉ, I'd like to set the stage for this essay with a quotation from the best-known exponent of Renaissance theatre—the familiar lines from As You Like It:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.
(2.7.138-42)

Shakespeare wrote it, but he was merely giving eloquent voice to an idea that everyone in his audience already understood and practiced—or, as we say in a revealing metaphor, “acted out” in their daily lives. What the Bard’s contemporaries came to understand, far more consciously and enthusiastically than their medieval forebears, was the exhilarating truth that life is action, and action is performance—which makes each of us an actor in what they called, following the ancients, theatrum mundi, or the “theatre of the world.” Now, as then, the verb “to act” is stuffed with meaningful ambiguity: it signifies both “to do” anything and “to perform” in the narrowly theatrical sense. So the slippages of our language provide a key to understanding how and why, in the Early Modern era, all the other arts, and society itself, were profoundly structured by images, attitudes, and techniques drawn from the theatre.

Any attempt to provide an overview of such a complex and far-flung evolution must sacrifice anecdote and footnotes to broad generalization, particularly at the length dictated by the original opportunity for this essay, which began as the 2001 Ferber Lecture at the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies/SUNY-Binghamton. By the time I delivered a

EIRC 28.2 (Winter 2002): 155–79
revised version at the 2002 South-Central Renaissance Conference, several audiences had lamented the surprising lack of a concise introductory essay to theatre and theatricality in this period and had stressed how valuable it would be to students, teachers, and the educated public. Hoping to fill that gap, I have kept this survey to a modest length, and I sketch here only a conceptual skeleton, fleshed out with a few representative samples of each category. For readers who wish to explore the topic further or trace the sources discussed, a selected bibliography of basic readings is included (see “Suggestions for Further Reading”).

Historians and theoreticians today pay close attention to what is often termed “performativity.” Performance theory elaborates on the insight that both our individual identities and our collective life are socially constructed: that is, they are neither fixed in nature nor ordained by God but continually created and contested by individuals and groups. The metaphor of performance focuses our attention on the mechanics of all that construction. First, it figures all life as a drama, an endless “playing” out of a psychological or collective script: to sociologists, people fill social roles on a public stage. And then it spotlights how that real-life drama has all the same essential elements of theatre as any paid performance in an opera house: actors (every one of us); a stage, or physical space for us to move and speak in; sets, costumes, and props to enhance the appeal and believability of the roles we are playing; and an audience to watch us and confirm that we all accept the common plot. Jacob Burckhardt, to whom we still owe so many insights about Renaissance civilization, coined a phrase for one distinguishing invention of the period: “the state as a work of art” (3). He was speaking generally; I would add that the art form most specifically needed for this self-conscious creation of the body politic, as well as the individual body and soul, was the art of performance, most broadly understood.

Of course the stage was also a physical, not just a social space. At the dawn of the Renaissance, the church still retained the monopoly on dramatic performance it had enjoyed since the closing of the classical theatres in late Roman times, but by the end of the Baroque era theatre had been largely secularized into a public and commercial entertainment. So this period witnessed the rebirth both of secular theatre as an art form and of custom-made building types to house it; and Renaissance writers and designers set the forms for both the building and the event that remain the familiar standard to this day. Hence more slippages or overlaps: “theatre” has come to mean both a physical structure and a staged event. And the term “theatrical” means both an event and the distin-