TURNER'S DEFINITION OF RITUAL RECONSIDERED: GROTOWSKI'S EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE AS SECULAR RITUALS OF "SPIRITUAL" HEALING

BOBBY C. ALEXANDER

This article breaks with conventional conceptualizations of ritual, religion, and theater, using Victor Turner's theory of ritual to illuminate the ritual dimensions and uses of the theater experiments of Jerzy Grotowski's "Polish Laboratory Theatre." Turner turns on its head the "structural-functional" understanding of ritual as activity that mirrors established social institutions and values, and in the process reinforces both. He argues that ritual does not simply reflect them back, but transforms them. He sees ritual's fundamental role as transforming the existing social structure, as it stands in dialectical relation to social structure, emerging in response to divisive and alienating aspects of status differentiation, putting social structure in the service of human community.

While this article follows Turner's theory of ritual, it puts aside his definition of ritual. Challenging the conventional definition as belief in supernatural beings and powers, it borrows a more basic definition, as concern to give humans ultimate meaning or significance, and follows Turner's lead in identifying ritual primarily as "liminal" activity: ritual suspends everyday social structure and relaxes obligations to it, creating a communitarian alternative. Turner's insight about ritual liminality's

Copyright © Bobby C. Alexander 1991.
existential thrust calls attention to Grotowski’s theater experiments as emerging, secular rituals of spiritual healing. Grotowski’s experiments break with staged theater by rejecting scripts and by involving participants in activity that encourages them to explore new ways of encountering one another. His experiments are attempts to overcome the alienation that characterizes Western society by breaking out of existentially confining aspects of material and social definitions of, and limitations placed upon, its members. The experiments attempt to create communitas, and with it, authentic, or direct and open, human exchange which promotes the unbounded or spiritual self and opens people to ultimate meaning and significance.

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SOLUTION

In an early text, Turner formulated a definition of ritual that he has maintained virtually unaltered in every subsequent publication. There, he defined ritual in conventional terms as “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers.” Compare this with one of his last attempts: “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in invisible beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects.” But in his late work, attending to ritual within contemporary Western and secular societies, Turner set his definition aside. His focus shifted to a dimension of ritual he first identified while doing field work among tribal peoples in Africa in the 1950s. With the shift, he dropped any reference to the supernatural and the requirement of formalism, or repetition of fixed elements. Moving away from the commonly held assumptions about ritual, he focuses on ritual’s central dynamic, to which he calls attention in his broader theory of ritual as “liminality.”

Ritual is essentially liminal, Turner observes, because it relaxes fixed, everyday social routine, explores alternative social arrangements, and creates a new basis of human interaction within everyday life, namely communitarian exchange. Liminality gives ritual its capacity to transcend or transform everyday life. While maintaining that ritual has a “religious flavour,” he concentrates on liminality. When he contrasts ritual and ceremony, for example, he refers to rituals as “transformative processes.”

---