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Understanding Metatheatre*

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Metatheatre is used rather ambiguously because of its loose definition. This paper aims to discuss various definitions and features of metatheatre, traces the history of metatheatre's evolution, and expounds on the five types of metatheatre and its wide application in feminist theatre with examples from Caryl Churchill's and Timberlake Wertenbaker's plays. This facilitates a better understanding of metatheatre and its potentially subversive power.

Keywords: metatheatre, feminist theatre, Lionel Abel, Richard Hornby

Introduction

"Meta" is a Greek word, meaning "after" and "with" or "alongside". It becomes a very active prefix. Like other words that are coined with a prefix "meta", such as metafiction, metahistory, and metanarrative, metatheatre[1], also denoting the concept of self-reflectivity, is a scrutiny of and concern with theatricality and the making of theatre. The practice of metatheatre has a long history; however, the term, both seminal and much-debated, was initially used in 1963 by the critic and playwright Lionel Abel in his work *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, a loose collection of essays on metatheatre. He declared that a new form has succeeded tragedy as the dominant force of modern theatre, which he termed "metatheatre". Abel's discussion has aroused the interest of critics. Since his coinage of the term, other important works on metatheatre have been published, trying to demarcate the domain of metatheatre and attempting at the itematization of the features of metatheatre.

Definitions and Features of Metatheatre

Abel (1963) defined metatheatre as "theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized" (p. 60), a theatre not concerned with the world "outside" the theatre, but only with the theatre itself. His theory of metatheatre rested on two basic postulates: First, the world was a stage; second, life was a dream (Abel, 2003, p. 163).

Abel pointed out the nature of metatheatre—a subset of theatricality, or the glorification of the theatre itself, and he also presented the particulars of metatheatre in a miscellaneous and combined manner[2], but his

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[1] Thomas Rosenmeyer differentiates between "metatheatre" and "metadrama" or "metaplay": "metatheatre" designates the performance; "metadrama" and "metaplay" the playbook. The paper uses "metatheatre" to designate both a staging and a playbook, because nowadays plays turn to be more theatrical. As can be seen from the following illustration of metatheatrical devices, some of them are non-verbal (p. 108, note 1).
[2] The catalog of the particulars of metatheatre can be found in Rosenmeyer's "'Metatheatre': An Essay on Overload" (2002) Rosenmeyer lays out in separate entries nine features of metatheatre which has been dealt with by Abel in combination (p. 88).

definition was loose and sometimes erratic. Later critics redefined the term and expanded the scope of metatheatre.

Calderwook (1971) offered his definition of metatheatre in *Shakespearean Metadrama*: Metatheatre "is a dramatic genre that goes beyond drama (at least drama of a traditional sort), becoming a kind of anti-form in which the boundaries between the play as a work of self-contained art and life are dissolved" (p. 4). Calderwook's understanding of metatheatre does not go beyond the confines established by Abel.

June Schluter in her *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama* (1979) understood metatheatre broadly as a concept focused on identity, a tool for the playwright to mark the distinctions between reality and illusion, art and life. Her study included postmodern dramatists, such as Peter Weiss, Edward Albee, and Tom Stoppard. She concluded that all plays under scrutiny in the book "reflect the modern artist's ongoing awareness of the constantly changing dialectic of reality and illusion" (as cited in Gallagher, 2010, p. 2).

In 1982, Manfred Schmeling in his French monograph on metatheatre defined it as plays that refer to themselves as plays, primarily through the device of the play within the play. For instance, Shakespeare's use of "The Murder of Gonzago" in *Hamlet* becomes a paradigm for such a device. Schmeling brought out the intertextuality in metatheatre and extended his study to certain Romantic plays. (Gallagher, 2010, p. 3) Schmeling was not the first to note the intertexuality in metatheatre. Gentili in *Theatrical Performance in the Ancient World: Hellenistic and Roman Theatre* (1979) observed the intertextuality when remarking "I used the term 'metatheatre' in the sense that played constructed from previously existing plays" (p. 15).

More critics emphasize interxtuality in metatheatre. Anderson in his *Barbarian Play: Plautus's Roman Comedy* (1993) warned us of "this voguish term 'metatheatre'" and remarked that we "must confine its usage" (p. 139). He reserved metatheatre to the changes one play rings upon another, or to its argument with it. Boyle (1997) referred to the process of play making as "The Palimpsestic Code" in *Tragic Seneca*. (ch. 5)

Slawomir Swiontek, a Polish drama theorist and semiotician, in his contribution to the theory of metatheatre in 1986 and 1993, called dramatic dialogue "meta-enunciative" in that it always contains the two theatrical axes of communication, among characters onstage and toward the audience (Gallagher, 2010, p. 2). William Fitzhenry in "The N-Town Plays and the Politics of Metatheatre" (2003) discussed two contrasting theatrical models: the monologic and the dialogic. He thinks:

> The second model posits a more dynamic and interactive form of drama that initiates an open-ended dialogue between stage and audience. In this model, the boundaries between playwright, actor, and audience do not collapse to underwrite a single, overarching idea, but rather remain in tension with one another, multiplying interpretive possibilities rather than reducing them. (p. 23)

Most importantly in 1986, Richard Hornby (1986) published his seminal work *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, giving a clear definition and taxonomy of metatheatre. Metatheatre, in his view, means "drama about drama". It occurs "whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself" (p. 31). It implies self-reflexivity, or a type of literature that is aware of itself as a literary object and concerned with the process of its own making. It is characterized with theatricality, self-awareness, self-reflexivity, and self-knowledge.

The various definitions and features of metatheatre examined here indicate that the understanding of metatheatre is deepened and the confines of it enlarged, as can be further demonstrated in the evolution of metatheatre.

The Evolution of Metatheatre

Baroque metatheatre and modernist metatheatre are generally regarded as the two great eras of metatheatricality. Abel and the critics following him believe that metatheatrical plays first appeared in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. For him, Shakespeare, Calderon, and other baroque playwrights wrote plays "about life seen as already theatricalized" with characters "unlike those in tragedy […] aware of their own theatricality" (as cited in Gallagher, 2010, p. 1). Abel later stresses the differentiation between tragedy and metatheatre in *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form*, a collection of essays published in 2003. For him, tragedy deals "with the real world" and metatheatre "with the world of the imagination" (Abel, 2003, p. v). He regarded *Macbeth* as Shakespeare's only tragedy, while *Hamlet* is a typical metatheatrical play.

Richard Fly (1986) noted that a growing body of scholars is concerned with the self-reflexive themes and techniques in Shakespeare's plays. They find in his plays a preoccupation with "the materials and processes of art-making itself" (p. 124), and intend to view his masterpieces as "'mirrors' reflecting the artist's ongoing struggle to understand and master the expressive potential of his medium" (p. 124). They conclude that

> the drama in the plays becomes dislodged from plot and character and situated instead in the playwright's self-conscious interaction with himself, his medium, and his audience. With this redirection of the creative process, mimesis gives way to self-analysis, and drama is subsumed in "metadrama". (p. 124)

Later playwrights in the 20th-century, such as Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht, Jean Genet, and Samuel Beckett inherited the legacy of the baroque playwrights and represented the illusory and theatrical qualities of both life and theatre. The Theatre of the Absurd is also considered as metatheatre.

In a remarkable introduction to Abel's *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form*, Martin Puchner differentiates between baroque metatheatre and modernist metatheatre. Despite the similarity that both represent and mediate on theatre, baroque playwrights used the form to "celebrate the theatre" and theatricality, while modernist playwrights "view the theatre with mistrust and suspicion", exposing its problematic nature (Abel, 2003, p. 17). Puchner pointed out that German dramatist and director Brecht admitted to being driven by a continual "mistrust of theatre" and attempted to make the theatre less theatrical in his experiment with Epic Theatre (Abel, 2003, p. 17).

Most of Pirandello's plays explore his meditation on reality as a problematic concept, which can be apprehended neither objectively nor scientifically. He produced a group of plays exploring the art of theatre, knowns as "theater in the theatre", which include *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), *Each in His Own Way* (1924), *Tonight We Improvise* (1930), and *The Mountain Giants* (1934). He used ingeniously play-within-the play to tear down the fourth wall, to keep reminding the audience that he is facing not reality and real people but a created work, performed by actors. In this way, he achieved the effect of estrangement and explored the themes of artistic creation, of the relationship between art and the everyday reality. Such a technique influenced Brecht.

Six Characters in Search of an Author is a piece of metatheatre, a play-within-the-play. There are two interwoven plots. The first plot is a sentimental melodrama of a family, composed of six members: father, mother, son, stepdaughter, boy, and girl. These characters are conjured and then abandoned by their author, but have by now life in their own veins; therefore, they seek the means to exhibit their drama. The second plot centers on a company is about to do rehearsals for a new play, Pirandello's *The Game of Role-Playing*. When

the company starts the rehearsal of the second act, the family of the six characters comes on stage, claiming that they are really six most interesting characters and that their story should be acted out. The director agrees to actualize their drama.

The staging of a play and even the process of creation is put on stage. This play is what Pirandello called "the mirror theatre", a play that turns a mirror onto the theatre itself, and exposes and renews the operating principles of the drama. In this way, Pirandello discussed the making of theatre and the nature of artistic creation, expressing his dissatisfaction with and rebellion against the bourgeois theatre of the turn of the 20th century. By attacking the actors' style of performance in the play, Pirandello denunciated the commercial theatre at the turn of the century.

Different from Abel, Hornby holds the view that metatheatre is not a narrow phenomenon limited to certain playwrights or certain periods in the history of drama. In fact, it is always occurring. The evolvement of the theory of metatheatre has seen an extension of the application of its concept to classical Greek comedy and tragedy (Abel denied the theatricality of tragedy in his 1963 study) as well as to non-Western drama and world drama.

Critics observe metatheatre in the tragedies of Greek tragedian Sophocles. Batchelder in his *The Seal of Orestes: Self-reference and Authority in Sophocles's Electra* (1995) read Sophocles's *Electra* as a play about playwriting. He remarked "In its close association with speech and action, falsehood and truth, the [empty] urn also functions as a symbol of the deception of the theatrical situation *per se*. In this respect it is…a 'metatragic' symbol of tragedy…" (p. 35). Ringer's *Electra and the Empty Urn: Metatheatre and Role-Playing in Sophocles* (1998) is another impressive study on metatheatrical devices in Sophocles's plays.

F. J. Lelièvre sees the connection between Aristophanes's use of parody in his old comedies and metafiction (as cited in Zen, 2016, p. 31). Of his 44 plays, critics note that *The Frogs* (405 BC) and *The Thesmophoriazusae* (410 BC) are metadrama, which are concerned with drama itself.

Brian Crow in "African Metatheatre: Criticizing Society, Celebrating the Stage" (2002) claimed that "a notable feature of contemporary African drama is the persistence with which its writers foreground the act of performance itself and seem concerned to investigate its status" (p. 133). He attributed it partly to "a deep-seated pleasure in many African cultures in playful theatricalizing and comic, often satirical observation and parody of different kinds of behavior at the everyday social level" (p. 133), and partly to the fact that it is "a natural offshoot of the intense 'theatricality' of so much African theatre" (p. 134). He then observed that African uses of the theatrical image are strikingly different from "the primarily individualistic, existential, and often introspective quality of many Western examples of metatheatre" (p. 134). For African dramatists, the exploration of the metatheatrical aims to "anatomize oppression and injustice and to celebrate the capacity of theatre and the theatrical to function as modes of survival, resistance, and even, in their more optimistic moments, change in contemporary African societies" (p. 134). Crow also remarked that the ways in which African metatheatricality has been realized are formally varied. Besides setting a play in a theatrical environment or the performance of a play within the play, the less direct ways include the allusion to the oral narrative instead of dramatic and/or the theatrical conventions, establishing intertexuality with well-known African plays, and the use of "scripted 'improvisations' involving role-play and play-acting," etc. (p. 138).

Increasing attention has been given to metatheatricality in Asian drama and drama in other parts of the world as well. This is due to the comprehensive and profound understanding of metatheatre.

Five Types of Metatheatre

As to metatheatricality, Hornby identified five types (devices) of metatheatre in *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*: the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role-playing within the role, literary and real-life reference, and self-reference.

Hornby (1986) held that "the play within the play is projected onto life itself, and becomes a means of gauging it" (p. 45). The play within the play creates two strikingly distinctive layers of performances for the audience to have the experience of seeing double and noting the multiple layers of action. It indirectly reminds the audience of the illusory nature of theatre.

It is a strategy for constructing play texts that contain, within the perimeter of their fictional reality, a second or internal theatrical performance, in which actors appear as actors who play an additional role. It doubles an aesthetic experience of a double reality (Fischer & Greiner, 2007, p. xi).

Hornby (1986) thought that ceremonies within plays are ubiquitous (p. 49). Anthropologists and theatre historians have long posited a generic and historical relationship between ritual and theatre. Drama had an origin in rituals; tragedy originated in ancient Greece. The word tragedy, of Greek origin, means "goat song" and may possibly refer to archaic performances in which dancers either competed for a goat as a prize or were dressed up as goats. Drama competition was enacted at the Great Dionysia, an annual religious and cultural festival held in honor of the god Dionysus, the god of wine. As part of the festival, four plays of each playwright—three thematically connected tragedies and a satyr play were played and judged. When Hornby talked about the ceremony, he meant the play involves a formal spectacle of some kind that is separated from the surrounding action; for instance, the crowning of a king, a wedding or a ritual sacrifice. The ceremony offers a communal pleasure that derives from the understanding of things that would otherwise be confusing or ephemeral.

Margaret Croyden (1974) gave insightful comments on the validity of "ritual":

> Attempts at ritual seem less successful when actors and audience share no common ground. In actual fact, ritual has always had a moral, religious, practical, or psychological significance, and has never existed for its own sake. Rites were a need. (as cited in Graham-White, 1976, p. 319)

William Frost lists numerous rites and ceremonies common to Elizabethan drama, such as prayers, formal curses, funerals, marriages, dances, feasts, banquets, ceremonial arrivals and departure, formal oaths, trials, banishments, royal court scenes, etc. (Stroup, 1977, p. 139). Critics note how Chekhov's plays are built around such ceremonies as arrivals, departures, anniversaries, and parties (Graham-White, 1976, p. 320). Dramatists believe in the immense symbolical, allegorical, and universalizing values of these essentially dramatic phenomena.

Role-playing within the role, in Hornby's (1986) view, is "an excellent means for delineating characters, by showing not only who the character is, but he wants to be" (p. 67). It is an effective revelation of the psychological truth of the character. Hornby further classified it into three broad types: voluntary, involuntary, and allegorical.

Literary and real-life reference stresses the intertextuality of theatre and the importance of understanding a play in its cultural code. Hornby defined literary reference as:

> Direct, conscious allusion to specific works (except for parody, which may be more general) that are recent and popular. The work or works referred to must not yet be part of the drama culture complex, but should preferably be avant-garde, or at least somewhat controversial. (1986, p. 90)

There are four categories of literary reference: citation, allegory, parody, and adaptation. Real-life reference means allusions to real persons, places, events, objects, etc.

Self-reference is the most extreme, intense form of metatheatre, which calls attention to itself as a play, thus producing "alienation effect" and avoiding catharsis.

Though these five varieties of metatheatre have their distinctive effects, they often occur together or blend into one another. They have "no truth in and of themselves, but rather a means of discovering truth" (Hornby 1986, p. 32). Metatheatre criticizes the conventions of realist and naturalist dramas and breaks the illusion onstage by tearing down the "fourth wall", which is an invisible, imagined wall that separates the actors from the audience. Metatheatre discomforts the audience and creates the aesthetic effect of alienation or estrangement, consequently prompting the audience to meditate on life.

Active Use of Metatheatre in Feminist Theatre

Feminist theater has benefited tremendously from the theory of metatheatre. Though it defies easy definition and categorization, feminist theatre is generally believed to develop alongside the feminist movement, flourishing in tandem with the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

Janet Brown (2005) saw feminist theatre in the twentieth century committed to "telling the stories of silenced and marginalized women, celebrating women's community and sense of connection through group protagonists, and expressing the moral concerns and societal criticisms that arise from women's experience" (p. 155). She then noted that

> the eighties and nineties have built on this tradition and added a broadened spectrum of political concerns, a questioning of language and of visual images and icons, and a specific concern with performance itself as an expression of gender and radical identity. (p. 155)

Other critics also attempt to define feminist theatre in terms of form and performance. They think only plays written and performed through improvisation, collective scripting, and avant-garde techniques like non-linear structure, and produced by non-hierarchal companied and troupes can be regarded as feminist theatre (Keyssar, 1984, p. 348).

Contemporary English women playwrights like Caryl Churchill and Timberlake Wertenbaker frequently employ some of the metatheatre devices in their plays, as they see the potentially subversive power of metatheatre in their dramatic creation. For instance, in *Vinegar Tom* and *Cloud Nine*, Churchill makes ingenious use of drag performance and role-playing to subvert the social and cultural construct of gender and race. To have a girl act a boy and a white man act a black man, Churchill criticizes the conventional division of gender and race and discloses the real identities that the boy and the black man want to construct.

Timberlake Wertenbaker in *Our Country's Good* employs play-within-the-play to explore the nature of theatre and its redemptive function. *Our Country's Good* is based on Australian writer Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker*, which is constructed around the English convicts' first production of a play in Australia, *The Recruiting Officer*, by Irish playwright George Farquhar. Timberlake makes several alterations of the original work. One major alteration is the deletion of the subplot in the novel, which centers on the relationship

between the Governor and the aboriginal and the highlighting of the redemptive possibility of drama, which she believed was “the right way to give a forward thrust to the novel” (Greene, 2006, p. 57). Thus, the play focuses on the casting of the characters for *The Recruiting Officer,* the rehearsal of the play, and the effect of staging the play on the convicts. One pivotal scene in the play is the heated discussion about theatre among the officers. This draws the audience’s attention to theatre itself, emphasizing self-reflectivity of the play.

The play shows in detail how gradually the convicts are changed by the staging of the performance. Mary regains her dignity, inspired by the lady she plays; Liz finds her lost voice and clears herself of the crime forced on her; Sideway is enlightened to the injustice they have suffered at home; Wisehammer looks forward to starting a new life with Mary in the colony. Brian Crow (2002) emphasized that Wertenbaker

> presents theatricality as an opportunity for people who have been atrociously brutalized and debased to discover, through the playing of scripted roles and the interactive process of rehearsal, aspects of the self that have been submerged, in some cases well-nigh obliterated. (p. 135)

By stressing the redemptive and transformative power of theatre, Wertenbaker pays homage to the practice in ancient Greece where theatre was considered as an important venue for education and democracy.

Conclusion

Metatheatre has long been practiced, yet it remains ambiguous in terms of its origin, definition, feature, and devices. From what has been discussed above, we can see metatheatre has the diversity of use and function. It is potentially powerful to subvert conventional forms and views and make theatre an effective venue for education and communication.

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