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Performance Theory

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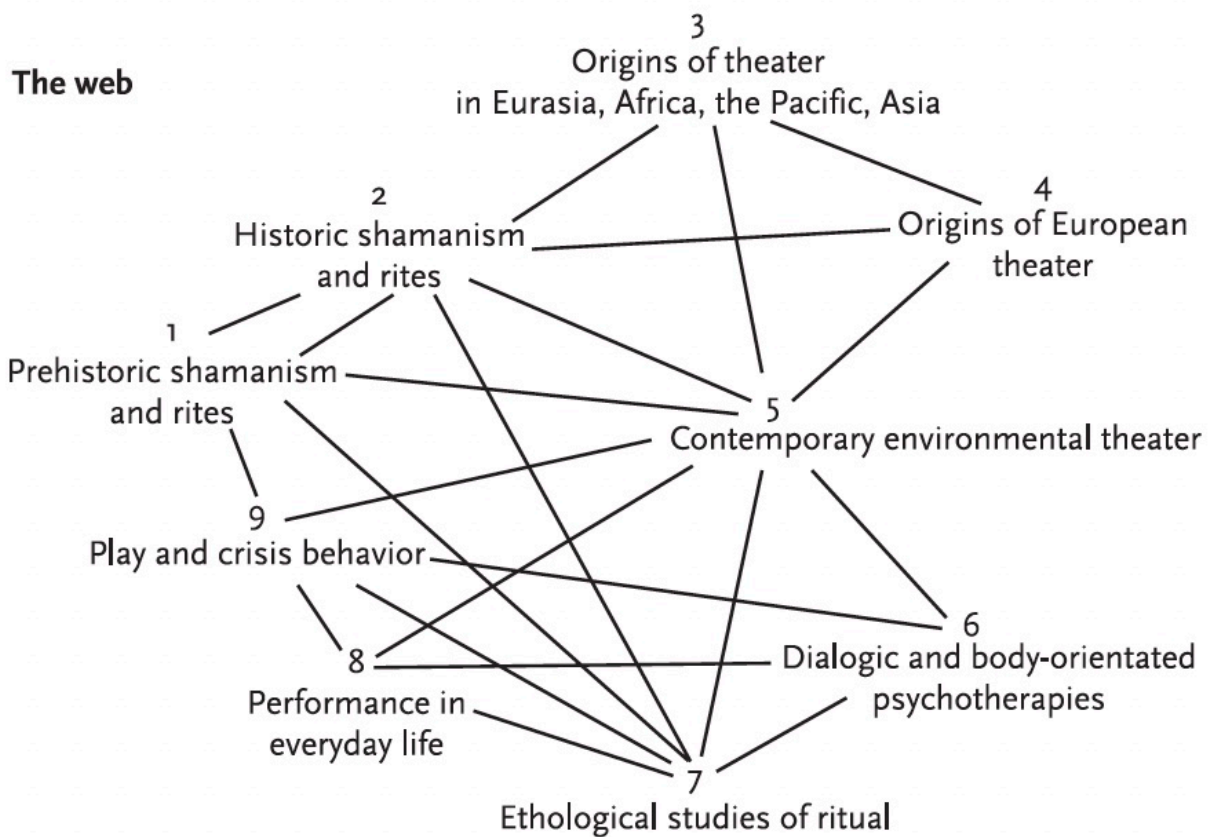
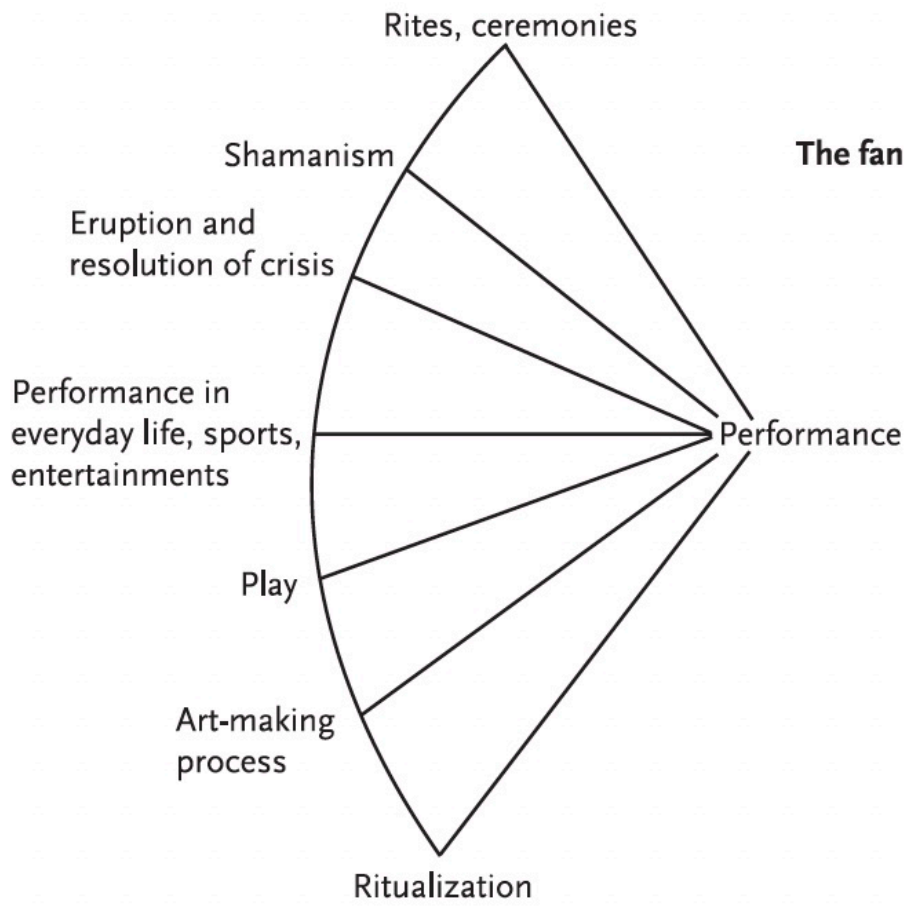
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INTRODUCTION: THE FAN AND THE WEB

This isn't a potluck book. The essays are organized around a system that can be configured as both a fan and a web. This system has occupied me for more than twenty-five years in my practical work and in my theorizing.¹

Performance is an inclusive term. Theater is only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on – through to play, sports, theater, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude.

The web is the same system seen more dynamically. Instead of being spread out along a continuum, each node interacts with the others. It's no accident that I put my own practical theater work – environmental theater – in the center: this position is arbitrary. An ethologist would put herself at the center of another web that includes items that don't figure in my scheme – genetics and evolutionary theory, for example. Also I put historical events side by side with speculative ideas and artistic performances. My method is similar to that of the Aborigines who credit dreams with a reality as powerful and important as events experienced while awake. Or is it the other way round? I know that analyses could be made separating out planes

of reality; but sometimes – especially in the theater – it is necessary to live as if “as if” = “is.”

The web isn't uniform. Connections among items 1 through 4 can be investigated historically and may be linked to performances around the world from Paleolithic times onward. Connections among items 6 through 9 reveal “deep structures” of performance – so that these items actually underlie the first five, thus activating a second plane of “reality.” These deep structures include preparations for performance both by performers (training, workshop, rehearsals, preparations immediately before going on) and spectators (deciding to attend, dressing, going, settling in, waiting) and what happens after a performance. The ways people cool off and the sometimes extended aftermath of performances are less studied but very important. Cooling off includes getting performers and spectators out of, or down from, the performance; putting the performance space and implements to rest; the aftermath includes spreading the news about performances, evaluating them – even writing books about them – and in many ways determining how specific performances feed into ongoing systems of social and aesthetic life.

Also not only the narratives but the bodily actions of drama express crisis, schism, and conflict. As Eugenio Barba noted, performers specialize in putting themselves in disequilibrium and then displaying how they regain their balance, psychophysically, narratively, and socially – only to lose their balance, and regain it, again and again. Theatrical techniques center on these incompletable transformations: how people turn into other people, gods, animals, demons, trees, beings, whatever – either temporarily as in a play or permanently as in some rituals; or how beings of one order inhabit beings of another order as in trance; or how unwanted inhabitants of human beings can be exorcised; or how the sick can be healed. All these systems of performative transformations also include incomplete, unbalanced transformations of time and space: doing a specific “there and then” in this particular “here and now” in such a way that all four dimensions are kept in play.

Performances are make-believe, in play, for fun. Or, as Victor Turner said, in the subjunctive mood, the famous “as if.” Or, as Sanskrit aesthetics would have it, performances are *lilas* – sports, play – and *maya*,

illusory. But, the Sanskrit tradition emphasizes, so is all life *lila* and *maya*. Performance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more “truthful,” more “real” than ordinary experience. This, too, was Aristotle’s opinion in his *Poetics* where theater did not so much reflect living as essentialize it, present paradigms of it. As *lilas*, performances not only play out modes, they play with modes, leaving actions hanging and unfinished, so theatrical events are fundamentally experimental: provisional. Any semiotics of performance must start from, and always stand unsteadily on, these unstable slippery bases, made even more uncertain by the continually shifting receptions of various audiences. Because performances are usually subjunctive, liminal, dangerous, and duplicitous they are often hedged in with conventions and frames: ways of making the places, the participants, and the events somewhat safe. In these relatively safe make-believe precincts, actions can be carried to extremes, even for fun.

RICHARD SCHECHNER
NEW YORK, 1977, 1987

NOTE

- 1 Although this is not the place for an autobiography, a precis is not inappropriate: to let the reader know a little about who s/he is coming in contact with. From 1967 until 1980 I was artistic director of The Performance Group (TPG), a leading experimental theater. With TPG I directed many plays and workshops, including *Dionysus in 69*, *Macbeth*, *Commune*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Marilyn Project*, *The Tooth of Crime*, *Cops*, *Oedipus (Seneca)*, and *The Balcony*. Since leaving TPG I have continued to direct, including *Richard’s Lear*, *Cherry Orchard* (in Hindi with the professional Repertory Company of the National School of Drama, New Delhi), *The Prometheus Project*, and *Don Juan*. Most of these productions were developed during workshops. Before 1967 I was co-director of The New Orleans Group and a producing director of The Free Southern Theater. And in the summer of 1958 and again in 1961 I was artistic director of the East End players of Provincetown, Massachusetts. From the age of 27 I have taught fulltime, first at Tulane University and then, from 1967 to the present, at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. My speciality is performance theory – which for me is rooted in practice and is fundamentally interdisciplinary and intercultural.