

**POSTMODERN LUDERGIES:
Theorizing Participatory Theatre Events as Folk Play**

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PhD Thesis

DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own
The work of other authors and statements of ethnographic informants, wherever used, have
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ABSTRACT

This thesis compares contemporary audience participation theatre events to traditional folk play activities. Within American culture, widespread media literacy and theatrical reflexivity are identified as resources for folk play events such as murder mystery weekends, historical reenactments, and the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Theatre-making in a small town provides a model for understanding folk play in general. Folk/Theatre is defined as a reciprocal relationship between the theatre-making potential of a community, and the community-making potential of its theatre. Pre-modern definitions of folklore generally relate community-making to structural properties of *myth* and *ritual*, secured by shared *beliefs*. A post-modern definition is proposed which relates community-making to the post-structural properties of *literature* (as non-myth), and to the *theatrical event* (as non-ritual), secured by *entertainment* (as non-belief). The *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the historical reenactment weekend are identified as instances of post-modern folk play.

Audience-participation murder mysteries originated among members of a fan-based literary sub-culture in New York City in 1977. These events relate the playability of the mystery game to media literacy, gained either by reading mystery novels, or from viewing film & television adaptations. Literacy is shown to be directly related to perceived folk-group membership. The interactive murder mystery is then related to the phenomenology of audience reception. A film version is analyzed to illustrate how audience members select viewing positions based on their recognition of the actors' identity. A live version is discussed within the context of the American military USO show, which is compared to

traditional Mumming practices. Ethnographic interviews reveal that when actors are recognized as fellow folk members (i.e. fellow Americans), audience members receive them interactively, and the event functions as a *situational* folk-play activity.

The final chapter utilizes Victor Turner's anthropological model to distinguish political-liturgies from playful ludergies in post-modernity. Comparing the popular mock ritual event *Tony and Tina's Wedding* to traditional community-making models, I conclude that the former merely simulates "real community" through *staged authenticity*.

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INTRODUCTION

Reconsidering the Efficacy/Entertainment Dyad

Richard Schechner (1974), in an oft-cited article on *ritual* and *theatre*, *efficacy* and *entertainment* describes complex events marked by activities such as socializing, drinking, joking, speeches welcoming guests, hosting, slaughtering animals for feasting and gift-exchanges, martial arts demonstrations, the trading of goods, communal dancing, singing, and a general collective atmosphere of fun and camaraderie lasting well into the morning hours.¹ Schechner describes the many components of these activities as being fundamental in constituting the event's overall "efficacy." He also emphasizes that these events, with their expanded performance frames and extended aftermaths, are more than just one-offs; they are traditional "cycle" events, repeated on a regular basis, bringing the same people together each time. Each cycle is of decades or centuries-long duration, with the entire cycle lasting from several hours to several years. Although he compares their function with medieval pageants, his primary examples are the *Kaiko* celebration of the Tsembaga people of New Guinea, and the *Engwura* cycle of the Arunta people of Australia. The *Kaiko* is a "year-long festival" during which the Tsembaga have "hosted" as many as "thirteen other local groups on fifteen occasions" (455). Schechner labels these events "ecological rituals"

¹ On *Capitalization* and *Italics* use: I frequently *Capitalize* a word to designate its respective structural (or post-structural) status - as Institutional - within a given society or epoch, along with its corresponding mode of reception. For instance, Pre-modern, Myth, Ritual and Belief are set against Post-modern, Literature, Tradition, and Un-belief (or Entertainment) as stable components of a particular structural Complex. The terms "Community" and "Society" are similarly often capitalized, as are Ideology, Leisure (time), Play, Ludergy and so forth where applicable. In keeping with MHRA style guidelines, I *italicize* certain words to familiarize the reader with the particular nomenclature of this study, and have done so in part because this document frequently shuttles back and forth between the pre-modern application of a familiar term and my own contemporary reworking of that term into its post-modern conceptual equivalent. At other times I have used italics to assist the reader in grasping the stress of my argument, highlighting individual words in a somewhat postmodern *style* of writing.

in terms of their social function in binding groups together and making societies “whole.” “When efficacy dominates,” Schechner tells us, “performances are...ritualized, tied to a stable established order; this kind of theatre persists for a relatively long time” (470).

An interesting feature of Schechner’s examples is that “staged” performances – i.e. *prepared* dances, songs, or speeches – are often reduced to a bare minimum: in one case only four ten-minute dances during what is presumably an all-day affair, with the main event simply being the celebratory activities of the *surrounding social frame, and the hosting practices within it*. If these activities are enough to sustain the event, one might justifiably ask whether something else might have been substituted for the prepared performances - a movie for instance - and still have served the same function. Schechner insists that this is not the case because the function of the speeches/dances etc. is to make the reason for the gathering rhetorically explicit *as crisis intervention*. In the Kaiko example Schechner interprets the total “speech act” as translating into something like: “you are our neighbors, and we promise not to harm you.” Yet, why the event’s efficacy should be grounded only in crisis intervention is not entirely clear, except for Schechner’s own presumption that war is a permanent condition between groups. In other words, it is the status quo, even if the groups are not actually at war. But, if we assume that these neighboring groups actually *were* at war at one time, and assuming that the message of the first Kaiko event actually *did* take hold, and that a lasting peace was achieved, would it then be unnecessary to continue the Kaiko cycle in its current form? Would there be any value in repeating the event under permanently peaceful conditions? If social harmony prevailed thereafter, would showing a movie or even a play still remain an “illegitimate” reason for assembling the surrounding social frame, with all of its other social activities, and its aftermath intact?

Against events like the Kaiko cycle, Schechner posits contemporary popular Theatre as being mere “entertainment.” Given the “traditionalist” nature of the activities constituting the above cycle events – their *longevity, complexity, social substance, and aftermath* - one might agree that most contemporary theatre events *do* fail to fit this model. One might also charge that one-off avant-garde performances are no exception. The only question that remains is whether Schechner’s activist definition of efficacy, by which he excludes Theatre, is the only possible source of efficacy *for* theatre itself to have, or whether some other notion of efficacy might be more suitable to its purpose, in context. If we accept that it is via the totality of the event’s activities - in its movement towards sustainable community - that an event gets its efficacy; and that an expanded social frame, a durable aftermath, and an event of some duration is necessary to its construction, then I would grant that a “traditionalist” deficit currently exists in our notion of Theatre, both at the theoretical level - as it is taught in colleges and universities - and at the practical level in terms of production. As a corrective to this deficit, and in order to achieve the kind of praxis anticipated by the inclusion of traditional practices, I propose that certain features might be added to our current definition of Theatre.

Let us begin with the following definitions of a word taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

First the *noun* form:

Conversation; social behaviour....The reception of a guest; also, the treatment of a person as a guest.... A meal; *esp.* a formal or elegant meal; a feast, banquet....

trans. To hold mutually; to hold intertwined. Also *absol.* With reciprocal

sense”...*concr.* Hospitable provision for the wants of a guest; *esp.* provision for the table.

And now the *verb* form:

To maintain, keep up.... *trans.* To keep (a person, country, etc.) in a certain state or condition; to keep (a person) in a certain frame of mind. *Obs.*....To keep up, to maintain (a state of things; a process); to retain in use (a custom, law, etc.); to maintain, persist in (a course of action, ‘attitude’, state of feeling. *Obs.* In gen. sense; retained (but somewhat arch.) in a few special uses, [as in] **a correspondence, discourse**....4. To maintain (something) in existence; to keep in repair or efficiency. *Obs.*....b. To take (a person) in one’s service; to hire (a servant, etc); to retain as an advocate....6. To maintain; to support, to provide sustenance for (a person)....III. To maintain relations with....7. To deal with, have communication with (a person). *Obs.*....8. To treat in a (specified) manner. *Obs.*....V. To find room for; to give reception to....11. To admit and contain; to ‘accommodate’ 13. To receive as a guest; to show hospitality to.

All of the above definitions are of the same word. They describe something we have been asked to divest from our current definition of theatre. These are all definitions of the word “*entertain.*” In fact, they comprise the bulk of those definitions. Again: hospitality, finding room for, maintaining relations with, holding together, sustaining, receiving guests, feasting.

Performance Studies has suffered from an inadequate definition of Entertainment in relation to Theatre, and vice versa. Two problems have arisen. First, our definition of

entertainment has been too limiting to accommodate “traditional” theatrical forms, the establishment of which requires substantive social structure and long term commitment. Within Performance Studies, and within the context of post-industrial society, Efficacy has been defined in terms of *crisis intervention* hence efficacy equals “change,” not continuity (McKenzie 2001: 30-32; Bottoms 2003: 175). Based upon this crisis-ritual view, “entertainment” – and along with it, Theatre, in its current popular form - has been declared non-efficacious. While there is some validity to this criticism, an adequate definition of how theatre might be amended or repaired has not been forthcoming, except to demand that theatre be made more “Performative” (McKenzie 2001). Those repairs that have been suggested have overemphasized the degree to which theatre – if it can be called a *ritual* – ought to be brought more in line with supposedly “real” Rituals such as rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1974: 37-41; Schechner 1985: 250-51; McKenzie 2001: 36-7).² Yet, these are essentially the *wrong* kinds of rituals for Theatre itself to be modeled after. To make Theatre *useful*, it is often reduced to the status of a janitorial art within the performance of social work, while Theatre Studies is reduced to a paradigm within the social sciences. “Theatre thus provides the human sciences with metaphors and tropes...for analyzing *other* activities” (McKenzie 2001: 35, *emphasis mine*).

Theatre has been linked to non-efficacy via an etiolated definition of *entertainment*. I propose, however, that entertainment, when properly defined and practiced, is a ritualized form of *sustained maintenance*. In other words, it is a *ritual of continuity* rather than “change.” I further suggest that entertainment should be restored - rather than abandoned by performance theorists - as a primary function of theatre, and that a stronger commitment to

² Turner here addresses rituals specifically as crisis interventions in social dramas, while McKenzie says theatre has copied rites of passage in order to instrumentalize theatre, as Performance.

Theatre's entertainment function might even avert the need to resort to "performance" as a last-minute mode of crisis intervention, provided, that is, that performance practitioners are willing to commit themselves to establishing theatrical *traditions* as rituals that would sustain communities over time, rather than promoting what amount to one-off anti-structural performances under the banner of 'revolution.'

Second, in addition to devaluing entertainment as the proper function of theatre, Performance theorists have also rejected "being-entertained" as a proper mode of *reception*. The desire for a deeper relationship to "performance" has caused theorists to falsely characterize theatrical spectatorship as a weakened or misplaced form of religious or political *observance* rather than a manner of consumption appropriate to the kind of event that most popular theatre actually is. Using ritualistic criteria, Performance theorists have defined popular Theatre's mode of reception as a naïve form of misplaced Belief, while simultaneously promising that only a *true* ritual can deliver something worth believing IN.

But, what constitutes a proper mode of reception for theatre? And, what kind of "ritual" can performance practitioners really deliver? Ritual connotes - and therefore promises - something deeper than theatre, something we can *really* invest meaning in; something transformational, even revolutionary. Theatre audiences meanwhile have been accused of *actually* - and therefore erroneously - "Believing" in theatre, when a *lesser* attitude of reception would presumably have been more appropriate to the genre. The result has been that theatre audiences have been characterized as being deluded by Theatre; *taken in* by it, in the same way that "gullible" worshipers are taken in by a false religion. This presumption - of a misplaced or erroneous confidence in the fakery of theatre - has, in fact, become the cornerstone of Performance Studies' main criticism of popular theatre audiences: that they are the Subjects of false consciousness. It has also been the reason

behind PS's own insistence that "Performance" itself is best suited to the project of shifting that "belief" away from theatre and onto Ritual as a more suitable target for the investiture of faith. But what name should be given, then, to what would supposedly be a healthier attitude for theatre audiences to take towards the reception of theatre? I suggest it is the second definition of our word "entertain," also found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "To engage agreeably the attention of (a person); to amuse. In recent use often also *ironical*." Theatre audiences ought to *entertain* a play on its own terms; not *believe-in* it. In this sense, it is the theatre audience that is *doing* the entertaining; "taking in" ideas; perhaps even laughing at it, but certainly not being "taken in" *by* it. Entertainment is therefore both a proper attitude of reception, and a reciprocal step in the flow of communication. Entertainment begets entertaining.

It seems that theatre audiences have all the while been accused of doing what Ritual audiences try to do: Believe in something, in spite of the contrary evidence provided by their senses. Scholars such as Bert O. States (1985), Steve Tillis (1999) and Jacques Ranciere (2009) have utterly rejected the presumption that theatre audiences "Believe" in theatre.³ Bert States, in fact, cites theatre's main hurdle – what may be called its chief *discounting cue* - as being the ever-present clumsiness of the actors' own phenomenal existence qua actor: an artifice which continuously "takes a bite" out of achieving the purely semiotic illusion that "another world" has *really* been manifested "here." Audiences are never unaware of theatre's artifice, nor do they passively absorb its images. Instead, they participate actively and reflexively by acknowledging their role in Theatre's pretense from the moment they buy their tickets. They do so by assuming an attitude of playful make-believe, receiving it artfully and imaginatively, often within a matrix of joking

³ See Bert States (1985), 30-37. See also Steve Tillis (1999), 88; 84-92, and Jacques Ranciere (2009), 16-17.

relationships, accompanied by shared acts of ironic meta-communication. Like fake wrestling fans, they only play at being “believers,” and it is precisely this playfulness that accounts for their lack of gullibility and which inoculates against deception ever taking hold.

Ironically, it is Schechner himself who consistently promotes a mystical view of acting, and privileges a religious definition of efficacy: as the inducement of mystical Beliefs. “In religious rituals *results* are achieved by appealing to a transcendent Other (who puts in an appearance either in person or by surrogate)” (1974: 467). No proof of a result is needed in the material world, of course, because “believing” is itself sufficient to be counted *as* the result. Since it is in relation to a privileging of this religious criterion for efficacy that theatre is being judged deficient, it seems fair to ask whether Theatre, by not trying to induce mystical Beliefs, might not actually be “saving” people from a delusion, thereby making it *more* efficacious. Schechner’s acceptance of a transcendental criterion of efficacy would not be a problem had he confined himself to objective Anthropological descriptions of found cultural artifacts in their native contexts, such as the Ramayana, but when he uses this as the basis for prescriptive criteria for improving Western theatre, this raises serious questions about the cross-cultural suitability and applicability of what he is *counting* as “efficacy.” A belief in “magic” is counted as sufficient even though “magic” is the very term that he applies disparagingly to theatre. He does so, again and again in the context of wanting to disillusion people from “believing” in Theatre’s *false* magic (as opposed to what?). One is struck therefore by the incongruous cross-application of theatrical criteria to justify the efficacy of religion as good fakery, and the use of religious criteria to devalue Theatre as insufficient magic, when either way a Belief in Magic remains the fulcrum of such efficacy.

The two most basic cornerstones of the efficacy/entertainment bias, however, simply dissolve – or rather are resolved - with a proper definition of the role of entertainment, and a proper definition of how theatre audiences actually receive theatre – *as* entertainment rather than church. What is important about this dual-sided distinction is that it raises the question of what good entertainment really is, and whether the bias against theatre as “*mere* entertainment”⁴ should really have been articulated in some other way: on the one hand - to its audience’s credit - as a proper mode of reception, but also on the other hand (and Critically) as a kind of ritual insufficiency - not of the political or religious kind – but insufficiency in terms of Theatre’s own innate potential. In other words: as a failure to *entertain* properly, and in the fullest sense of the word. If theatre has failed, therefore, it is only because theatre has ceased to be at the center of a substantive social ritual. It is my contention that post-modern Dramatic Playing events may be this kind of “ritual.”

At the end of his efficacy/entertainment article, Schechner takes a somewhat surprising turn towards what seems like a different definition of efficacy, based solely on the social dimension of theatre. Discussing Grotowski, he defines the difference between Ritual and Entertainment as a matter of distance; the distance between the audience and the performers. “Rituals,” he says, involve interaction, whereas in theatre, the audience is separated from the performance. The dubious nature of this merely (mechanical) interactive definition of ritual aside, after describing a new theatrical production being staged by the Performance Group, he states:

During intermission supper is sold and the performers mix with the audience... When the drama resumes after supper I think it is experienced

⁴ Steve Bottoms (2003: 173-187) is troubled by this reductive use of “mere” to disqualify theatre, as if theatre is somehow an insubstantial activity.

differently because of the hour of mingling, talking and sharing food and drink...in this way, a theatrical event in SoHo, New York City, is nudged a little way from the entertainment end of the continuum towards efficacy. Without diminishing its theatricality, I hope to enhance its ritual aspects. (480-81)

In the end, however, it turns out to be an expressly *political* theatre event, and its ritual status derives from its political efficacy. In this connection, reducing the distance between the actors and the audience members presumably allows one party to *change* the other more *effectively*. Distance is reduced so that designs on the audience can be better realized, politically. Like a bad marriage, doomed from the get-go, it will last only as long as one of the parties is willing to change for the other, and by *joining* the other in an ideological Cause. Revealingly, in a footnote, Schechner contrasts the productive social interaction around the dinner table to the stalemate reached by the company in an earlier production of *Commune*, in which one or two of the audience members (whom he characterizes as “squares”) refused to go along with the Communal/political symbolism of the piece, by failing to take off their shoes and contributing them to the collective pot of images along with everybody else; consequently the production reached an argumentative impasse and could not go on; not everybody *joined* the *commune*.⁵ Ultimately, however, the event’s efficacy derives from its political content, not merely from its interpersonal dimension or its potential for phatic communication and social *entertainment*. What Schechner’s definition of efficacy seems to lack, in the end, however, is a promise of continuity, as such. Supper, we learn, is *sold* to the patrons in an economic transaction – they do not bring food to share

⁵ See Richard Schechner (1971), 77-83.

with one another - and if the ritual is effective, we must presume, it will not need to be repeated. These people will not need to see each other again; *ideological* task completed.

Dramatic Play events, by contrast, may represent postmodern manifestations of ritual-making – realized as ludergy - within a society striving towards *emergent* community of a different kind. In this connection, however, the term “Ritual” has too many religious and political connotations to be of service in post-modernity. And, “Tradition” likewise lacks precision since it implies the preservation of something ancient which has been handed down from one generation to another, to be *restored*. I proffer instead the phrase *mechanism-in-place* to describe the kinds of events that post-moderns create. What distinguishes a mechanism-in-place from the merely generic concept of a *mechanism* (such as going to the theatre or performing a given political action) is that a mechanism “in-place” implies something that has been substantially adopted by a community as its legitimate means for gathering or re-uniting its own members repeatedly. This mechanism shares Tradition’s most enduring quality, its social custom of “re-visiting.” In a recent article on mumming, Peter Harrop (2012) notes that:

Customary performance is premised on re-visiting...Repeated re-visiting through time is an especially effective mechanism in foregrounding perceptions of change and continuity for performers and audiences who are frequently known to each other...and this present and past knowledge between audiences and performers is a two way process. In their revisiting and return the actors and audiences cannot help but view personal histories alongside individuals and note continuities alongside changes wrought by time and circumstance. To return to Marvin Carlson, this revisiting physicalises the ghostly sense of ‘something coming back in the theatre’,

even when that something is the audience. When we physically go back to a place to re-view performances, we also go to a place in the imagination where we can review an earlier *self*. There is something both celebratory and contemplative in wondering which past point might be recalled or what new view of self might become visible from the vantage point of return. (268, *emphasis mine*)

Since it is through the performance's *return* that a community is re-collected and re-united, I must suggest along with Peter Harrop that it is the act of *re-member-ing*, in both its phenomenological and social sense that underscores the value of tradition and "underpins the efficacy and popularity of calendar customs" (273).

Liturgy and Ludergy in Postmodernity

This thesis began with a desire to investigate techniques for involving audiences in participatory theatre events, but soon expanded to consider theatre's relationship to its audience, as a potential community. Victor Turner (1982) tells us that pre-modern communities were brought together regularly by a continuous cycle of traditional activities, many of them theatrical. These events were of two general types: *liturgies* (revolving around the enactment of serious belief systems), and *ludergies* (consisting of frivolous, often nonsensical folk-play activities, including masking and mumming). Together, these activities maintained a balance in pre-modernity between work and play; praying together and playing together. And, as traditions, they also preserved a quality of social life whereby familiar faces could reunite regularly around customs aimed at "re-visitation." This convergence of *Community, Theatre and Tradition* is the province of *folk drama*, a

relationship that is expressed throughout in the language of both *Performance Studies* and *Folkloristics*.

Richard Schechner worked very closely with Victor Turner, but seems to have taken away only a very serious understanding of Ritual's relationship to Community, along with a structural notion that pre-modern communities were formed around Rituals designed to activate *Belief* systems. Schechner's equivalent to the *Liturgy/Ludergy* binary is the *Efficacy/Entertainment Dyad*, which has subsequently become a cornerstone paradigm within performance studies. Built into Schechner's application of the dyad, however, is a fundamental imbalance, which this thesis seeks to redress. The imbalance occurs on two levels. 1) Effectively, ludergy has been excised, and in its place *efficacy* has been prescribed over *entertainment* as a means of activating community (i.e. *communing* together) in post-modernity. 2) Efficacy has been defined as a kind of range-of-the-moment political expediency, absent from which is any notion of Tradition (i.e. repetition) in terms of ongoing social reunion. This notion of a non-repeated "Ritual" is on some level oxymoronic, and would seem to divest ritual of its most important social quality, *its custom of re-visiting* (Harrop 2012).

Schechner clearly considers ritual to be something one invests Belief in, but extends this presumption, rather dubiously, to conclude that *if* ritual is the enactment of a belief system, then, effectively, *any* belief system – any ideological system – should work to assemble a community around it; in which case Political Ideologies and/or Religious Myths are both equally well suited to that purpose. And, this is exactly what we find in Schechner's work: the enactment of belief systems – and people *communing* together – in relation to quasi-religious/political rituals. What he offers, then, is a vision of Community formed in the image of the pre-modern Myth-Ritual-Belief complex, prescribed as a way of

restoring or reviving “community” in post-modernity. The question, however, is whether this tendency towards a Myth-Ritual-Belief complex even exists today within post-modernity, or whether it is, in fact, a *Myth*?

What causes the imbalance in Schechner’s model is his belief that entire epochs can be dominated exclusively by *either* efficacy *or* entertainment, and that the current epoch is dominated by efficacy. In doing so he has effectively applied the Ritual hypothesis in its *liturgical* form, while ignoring the role played by ludergy in sustaining pre-modern cultures. In preferring efficacy over entertainment Schechner has essentialized liturgy as being the primary source of community-making in pre-modernity, and carried this prescription forth as a model for community-making in post-modernity. Yet, these prescriptions have been made at a time when cultural theorists are identifying post-modernity, indeed the *post-modern turn* (Best and Kellner, 1997) and the *post-modern condition* (Lyotard 1984) as being fundamentally *ludic* in nature; a situation for which Teresa Ebert (1992) has applied the phrase “ludic postmodernity.”⁶

Post-modern people, Lyotard contends, are finished with Grand Narratives, Myths and their attendant Rituals. By relying too heavily on the efficacy hypothesis, however, we (performance theorists) may be developing a theoretical blind spot when it comes to recognizing the presence of ludergy within postmodern society. That postmoderns are generally ludic (i.e. playful) is evidenced by the kinds of interactive theatrical events that have become popular over the last thirty years. Ongoing events include audience

⁶ Ebert takes a negative view of this development, claiming that it lacks political value. For a wider discussion of how playing and gaming have become identifiable aspects of contemporary culture see Jane McGonigal’s recent book *Reality is Broken* (2011). A performance theorist, she documents the growing world of online and real-time gaming communities, including virtual games such as *World of War-craft*, but also games whereby players score points by doing actual household tasks such as cleaning their kitchen, and I-Phone type interactive walking games using actual pedestrian city-spaces as game boards, which allow strangers to meet one another through play.

participation mystery plays like *Shear Madness* (1975-present) and mock ritual events such as *Tony and Tina's Wedding* (1986-present), while recent novelties include (dress-up/play-along) *Zombie Revolution* (2012), *Sing-along* (and dress up) *Sound of Music*, (interactive/play-along) *Office Party* (2010-11), and (play-along/dress-up/re-perform) *Secret Cinema* (2007-present).⁷ The latter are clearly influenced by media literacy and theatrical reflexivity. *Secret Cinema* patrons immerse themselves in classic films, dress up, and “re-perform” key scenes, or else interact with actors who put them through thematic reconstructions of the film’s subject matter.

Other kinds of immersive theatre are more environmental, sensorial and Drama-oriented. Companies such as Shunt, PunchDrunk, DreamThinkSpeak, Sound and Fury, and YouMeBumBumTrain create overwhelming sensory as well as dramatic experiences within artistic installations and/or theatrical environments enhanced by realistic sounds, smells, bubbles, whispers, showers, tastes and so forth. Many also present guests with opportunities to become actors/performers in dynamic scenes. At YouMeBumBumTrain, for instance, patrons can host their own radio show, or participate in a bank robbery. These events tend to be commercially marketed play activities aimed at general audiences.⁸

⁷ For a useful article on *Secret Cinema*, see Nick Curtis (2012).

⁸ The immersive theatre genre has its critics. Sophie Nield (2008) claims immersive theatre does not always provide audience members with clear-cut rules for meaningful engagement. The experience can be “superficial”...patrons often feel that they are “invisible” or else just “getting in [the actor’s] way” (p. 533). Immersive companies have failed to properly re-theorize the role of “audience” in an interactive context. They wind up merely preserving customary divisions between “actor” and “audience” found in proscenium theatre, while nominally re-casting the audience’s role into the specious new role of “spectator.” This new “spectator” is nonetheless side-lined (like the typical audience member was) away from direct involvement with actors. Helen Freshwater (2011) charges that popular immersive theatre events are often too carefully “stage managed” to allow theatre goers any substantial opportunity for meaningful creative involvement. “Performances which seem to be offering audiences the chance to make a creative contribution only give them the choice of option A or option B” (p. 405). Gareth White (2012) stresses the synaesthetic nature of immersive environments that push embodied subjects to multisensory overload, but concludes that such events generally foreclose the option of a truly creative engagement with Art in a way that is ontologically sublime, individually unique or truly self-authenticating.

This thesis, however, takes a very different turn. By measuring events against a standard of community-making it anticipates providing a familiar *social* experience over time. What this thesis seeks to contribute to current scholarship, therefore, is evidence that post-modern people are not only playful (i.e. ludic) but also Ludergical, that is, they demonstrate a desire to play-together *in order to build Community*. Postmodern ludergy is what this study attempts to identify and theorize, along with its own specific kind of *emergent community* (Bauman 1975; Bendix 1997).⁹ Since evidence seems to suggest that many post-moderns have a preference for the ludic, and exhibit a tendency to embrace *ludergy*, this thesis not only aims to identify examples of post-modern ludergies, but to theorize the emergence of community relative to postmodern society and its prevailing cultural conditions. These cultural conditions are informed by *media literacy* and *theatrical reflexivity*, which provide common resources for emergent forms of contemporary folk-play.

This thesis contends that postmodern ludergies are naturally occurring attempts to re-aggregate small communities within a wider - disaggregated - society, by engaging participants in theatrical forms of play. Set against the Myth-Ritual-Belief complex, therefore, I suggest an alternative, albeit parallel, post-structure for community-formation within ludic post-modernity: a *Literature-Tradition-Un-belief* complex (to be explained in chapter two). This alternative complex is inspired by the recent work of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1991; 1993), who observes that the excesses of communitarianism - created when communities are formed in relation to Myth & Ritual - have forced us to reconsider the potential role of the audience in becoming *co-authorial* with the authority of Myths & Rituals. By democratizing the role played by theatre's surrounding social frame, the danger,

⁹ Richard Bauman (1975: 290-311) discusses *emergent cultures* relative to co-constitutive *emergent traditions*. He takes a performance/process oriented view of Tradition, which sees "tradition" as a verb (*to-traditionalize*). For an excellent summary of American *performance* and *process*-oriented approaches to folklore as a *traditionalizing* activity see Regina Bendix (1997), p. 196; (esp. pp. 207-213).

which authoritarianism poses to community, can be ameliorated through audience participation (to be discussed in chapter two), and with the added - and somewhat paradoxical caveat - that this activity proves to be quasi-political simply by dint of its failure to promulgate any particular kind of Belief system or Ideology as such.

In developing the above, this thesis advances a postmodern theory of contemporary folklore commensurate with other *performative* and *process oriented* models, most notably those of Roger Abrahams (1977), Dell Hymes (1975), Richard Bauman (1975), and Henry Jenkins (1992), and also expands insights advanced by Richard Schechner, Henry Glassie (1975), John Blacking (1973) and others relative to the important role played by theatre's *surrounding social frame*; its audience *cum* community. The *Postmodern Condition* effectively no longer requires a Liturgy to form Community, and since the 1970's, in fact, structural conditions within society have precipitated an observable change in the structural basis of theatre and of theatre's relationship to its audience (Lehmann 2006). Interactive dramatic role-playing events are one result. Until performance theorists begin to rethink efficacy's position as the cornerstone of Performance Studies, however, the discipline will continue to be dogged by the Ritual bias, making it difficult to recognize the emergence of alternative forms of culture when they appear.

Above, I proposed a definition of entertainment inclusive of theatre's surrounding social frame, and which takes into account social and existential practices that have historically held community members together – shared dining, dancing, conversation and other festive activities. I charge that performance theorists, in attempting to promote the concept of efficacy in contemporary practice, have often down-played the historical importance of ludurgy in pre-modernity, and, by doing so, have given theatre history an overly liturgical spin. By emphasizing the importance of play, I hope not only to redress the ludergical

imbalance in our historical dialogue, but - by building a bridge between the language of the past and the present - I hope to find a more theoretically appropriate model for describing the presence of ludery within post-modernity itself. “Ludergical” (e.g. “playful”) describes a characteristically dominant attitude in post-modernity. Over the next five chapters, therefore, this thesis will follow the trail of playfulness in relation to community-making within “ludic post-modernity.” Since community making within an American context is of concern throughout, this thesis frequently draws its concepts from scholars in the American school of Folkloristics, particularly with regard to *emergent community* as a contemporary “performative” event.

Chapter Previews

This thesis is divided into five chapters. It draws on the fields of Folklore Studies, Performance Studies and Theatre history. In addition to re-visiting a handful of familiar folk events, it considers the emergence of two significant areas of participatory theatre that have been largely overlooked by scholars: audience participation murder mystery events, and mock ritual activities. These events emerged between 1975 and 1995, approximately the period covered by this study.¹⁰ *Chapter One* begins anecdotally with a description of theatre-making in a small town, and relates this model to an understanding of folk play in general. *Chapter Two* is an engagement with performance theory. It extends the critique of Schechner’s performative efficacy (begun in the Introduction) and challenges pre-modern

¹⁰ There has been little coverage of murder mysteries and mock rituals outside of the popular press. A notable exception is Natalie Crohn Schmidt’s ‘Casting the Audience’ (1993). She discusses both audience participation murder mysteries and *Tony and Tina’s Wedding* in some detail, citing playful bisociation of identity as the draw for audiences. In her 1996 *TDR* article *Salon Theatre: Homemade Bread*, Barbara Carlisle discusses the special phatic quality of theatre events performed in the home and compares these to the phenomenological quality of audience participation murder mysteries, which allow audience members to eat dinner together while solving a puzzle. A brief, paragraph-length description of *Tony and Tina’s Wedding* appears in Felner and Orenstein (2006:44-5). See also Phillip Auslander (1995: 47).

definitions of theatre that relate community-making primarily to structural properties of *Myth and Ritual*, secured by shared *Beliefs*. *Chapter Three* documents the folk-play origins of murder mystery dinner theatre, tracing the event's origin to a fan based literary sub-culture in New York City, in 1977. *Chapter Four* focuses on the audience participation murder mystery and takes a phenomenological approach to understanding how audience members *perceive* actors and therefore *receive* them interactively. *Chapter Five* surveys Victor Turner's (1982) distinction between Liturgy and Ludergy and considers whether the popular mock ritual event *Tony and Tina's Wedding* (1982) fits the ludergical model - as a substantially participatory folk event which gathers members of an actual community - or whether it merely acts as a placebo for "true" community by asking audience members to *pretend* that they share a common history together.

CHAPTER ONE

Theatre-making Community/Community-making Theatre

Chapter Synopsis

This chapter describes theatre-making in a small town and proposes it as a model for understanding folk play in general. Grounding this study in a pragmatic understanding of community gatherings, I describe a certain *quality* that emerges when familiar people gather together repeatedly. Taking community membership as belonging to people who have familiar names and faces for one another, and who share common memories together, I treat the total theatrical event as a *mechanism-in-place* for social reunion, community re-member-ing and customary re-visiting (Harrop 2012). I suggest that the special *quality* of folk theatre is alchemical; it arises from an interaction between the folk (community) and their theatre. Consequently folk/drama is treated as a conceptual hybrid, joining the performance with the surrounding social frame. Where Schechner grounds efficacy in liturgical action (rooted in work/worship), I attempt to recover a discourse rooted in ludery (play) as that which is most suitable for understanding community formation in postmodernity. Surveying a broad range of scholarship within Folkloristics and Theatre Studies, the chapter relates folk drama to a long history of play and game marked by active participation. I end this chapter by proposing that a *qualitative* dynamic is perhaps the essence of all folk/theatre. Informed by the works of anthropologist John Blacking, this dynamic can best be explained in terms of two related concepts: *constitutive reciprocity* and *mutual self-constitution*; otherwise described as *community-making theatre* and the *theatre-making community*.

A Certain Kind of Quality: Theatre-Making in a Small Town

I recently walked into the lobby of a major theatre in London to inquire about tickets to a popular West End musical. I'm not sure why I bothered, though. I went up to one of the employees to ask a question. He began speaking, but then abruptly stopped in mid-sentence and said "Look, I just sell the t-shirts; the ticket booth's over there." He then turned and walked away. I approached the ticket booth to ask about seats, but without even looking at me, the woman behind the glass said in a clipped sentence "Chart's on the wall." Looking up I realized she was referring to the seating chart for the auditorium. But, she had not even taken the time to listen to my question, for that was not what I'd asked. I simply turned and walked away. It's hard to make time for theatre that has no time for you.

The quality that I love in my theatre is one that I learned to appreciate while living in a small town near the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in Northern California - a home-made quality combined with a sense of community. Yet, how this related pragmatically to Theatre Studies was not entirely clear until recently, nor did it seem to be the basis for scholarly work. Like a wooden puzzle, the pieces were large, yet I had no way of fitting them together meaningfully. When I began this project I never imagined that a town would serve as a metaphor for quality theatre, or even that the idea of "quality" itself would take on a meaning so different from the one I had been taught to apply to theatre all my life: technical virtuosity. But in order to articulate this quality, I need to communicate through my own sense of place in the world. I need to go home first, and invite the reader to come with me. My biography is part of what informs this study, and what informs my love of theatre.

When I first arrived in town it was after having lived many years in large, impersonal cities that I'd hated: filled with strip malls, concrete, and traffic congestion. But the town had rivers running through it, and creek beds flanked by vines and willow trees. Oaks and sycamores lined the streets, and in autumn the leaves turned cinnamon and goldenrod and crispy brown, and blew in sheets across the roads, scraping the pavement as they went. The wrap-around wooden porches of the town's old homes were made comfortable with worn out couches, which reminded me of pictures I had seen of old New Orleans or Atlanta. Up and down the streets there were hand-made posters stuck to wooden telephone poles already filled with thousands of rusting staples, advertising everything from local bands to free kittens to rooms for rent. People rode bicycles for transportation, and, it was quiet. It seemed like someone had turned the volume up on quiet. Nature was so pronounced one could smell the seasons as they changed. The scent of pine needles and eucalyptus sap mingled with the dust rising at the beginning of rainstorms. Wood smoke from fireplaces and from local farmers burning piles of sticks and rice straw always signaled the approach of winter.

At night the town turned pitch black. There were no streetlights to drown out the stars. There were classic old-style American diners, and donut shops where the locals would go late night after the bars closed. This was small-town America, with a Main street, and a downtown area consisting of a radius of about six blocks, making it impossible not to see the same faces nearly everyday in the café's and restaurants. But, of all the things to remember about that town, and perhaps sad for what it says about our contemporary society, was that on my first day there, as I walked out of the wooden doors of a small coffee shop, someone simply said "hello" to me, and in that same instant a man passed by the parking meter attendant and greeted her as "Marge." Time suddenly slowed down.

Somehow, in those two small gestures I was cast in a matrix of civility and friendliness that was transformational. Looking around, I realized that “Here – unlike in the city - people have names and faces. They’re not just hurrying past each other in a sea of anonymous strangers trying to get somewhere else.”

The town wasn’t perfect, of course. It had its oddballs and its homeless, but they weren’t destitute like the people one sees in large cities, pushing shopping carts filled with junk and babbling to themselves. These people had names and stories that the locals understood. There was an old woman. She wore colorful petticoat dresses, bright red knee-socks, and men’s shoes; and she applied red rouge to her cheeks in big pancake circles like a doll. She reminded me of a kitchen witch, or an illustration from a children’s book. And her voice was odd, like a cartoon character, as if she had emerged from another world, popped up out of a puppet booth, or peeled off the front of a colorful biscuit tin. Then one day I learned her story. I saw her in the local diner where I had gone to eat dinner with my friend Eric. When she came in, the waitress greeted her by name. She sat “Flo” down in one of the big vinyl-padded booths, and Flo began to order using the term “We.” “We’d like to order the chicken dinner,” Flo said. The waitress *already* understood this, and Eric related the story to me. Flo was married for many years. Locals spoke of seeing the couple together everywhere, until the day her husband died. Flo could not bear to live without him, so she kept him alive within her memory and continued ordering in the same old way. She was part of the community, so people looked out for her. Often, the waitress would give her “extra” food to take home, and as for the bill...Flo was always charged “within her budget.”

This quality of human interconnectedness permeated the town, as the town itself was permeated by nature and its seasons. People made time for each other, often stopping

several times along the same street to hold small conversations as they went about their business; always pausing to say “hi.” Even lining up for a movie at the local 75 seat cinema was a community event. The line was punctuated by friendly conversations, and the voices of people that you knew. The man who sold you your tickets also sold you your popcorn and operated the projector upstairs. It was not like lining up for a film in Los Angeles, surrounded by strangers and assaulted by advertising; where everything vacuous is oversized and screaming for your attention. This was a place where meaning could sink in and relax.

While the nearby university continually recycled a litany of standardized productions from the archived Broadway repertoire – such as *Mame*, *Bus Stop*, and *The Crucible* – shows once meant to say something to people at a particular time and place in American culture – it was the locally produced amateur scripts that fit into the rhythm of the town and its people. There were two brothers who opened up their family home to the community every year for a sketch comedy show in their own back yard. Their generosity reached right into their kitchen and living room where neighbors showed up to socialize, contributing home-made food, or bringing along beer and sodas, and bags of potato chips from the store.

Theatre of a Different Spirit

I have had an affinity for the more “folksy” kinds of theatre ever since. It is theatre with a different spirit. I remember going to watch my local hairdresser, Deryl (a.k.a. Claudette) perform his lip-sync drag show in a local Bohemian tavern, and who afterwards sat at the bar and accepted drinks all night until closing time. I thought it was exactly what theatre should be - a sort of gift exchange, with eye contact and conversation. It wasn't

“professional,” of course, but that was part of its charm, and it came with all of the flaws that make good theatre endearing.

There was another performance space up the street. It was in the basement of somebody’s house. The basement ran the entire length of the property above, and it was insulated from floor to ceiling – even the walls - with materials snatched from a local dumpster behind a carpet store. It looked like a patchwork padded cell, but was completely soundproof to the outside world, and probably also a fire trap. But, between 2:00 *a.m.* and 6:00 *a.m.* on weekends, and during the holiday season, it became a local speakeasy where cabaret style performers would come and do their acts for friends. Anything from puppet shows, to comedy sketches, to crooners, poets, and torch singers showed up just for fun. Old family movies were shown, or slide shows with absurd narrations. One woman played a guitar with strings missing and sang original songs that would never make the charts. Actors performed skits with local references such as “Five Mile” and “One Mile” and “Cedar Grove,” all points along the Big Creek that ran down out of the Sierra Nevada Mountains where certain notorious happenings were known to have occurred, or soon would be occurring if anyone cared to attend.

The basement activity was seasonal and local. The roles of “performer,” “audience member,” and “community member” were interchangeable and consubstantial. The event itself functioned as a site of reunion. Each performer came from the audience, performed for their friends and returned to the audience, only to be replaced by the next performer who, moments earlier, had been an audience member, and so forth. The circularity of these social roles and performance positions confirmed the consubstantial nature of all roles within the wider event-community.

The basement had no continuous sight line. It was broken up by several pillars along the way, which served as supports for the house above. The result was a lively space with an adequate staging area up front, but several smaller cubbyholes along the way, which acted as “private booths.” In these spaces people downed endless amounts of badly mixed drinks, smoked cigarettes & marijuana, chatted, and watched a particular kind of quality emerge. The show was more than just a pretext for the social gathering, though; each act underscored the rhythm of the evening like a good jazz tune. The event itself seemed at home there; organic, not just to a functional space like a theatre building, but to a living environment; a place where people felt comfortable. Nobody asked for money. All of the songs and the acts were gifts. Everyone knew the names of the performers and the audience members first hand. And the evening simply unfolded until it was over, usually determined by the sunrise. It was the best ‘theatre’ I had ever attended.

People became re-acquainted or got to know each other, and in the morning they would have breakfast together at the local diner, Jacks. Whole big plates of sunny eggs, sausages, and hash browns floated into view on the waitresses’ chubby arm, along with coffee and pancakes with maple syrup: the House Special. I like theatre that is connected to a time and a place and a history and a people; it is meaningful to me. Besides, when I know my performers by name, either before the show or afterwards, it solves for the asphyxiating contemporary pre-occupation with being unduly influenced by *invisible* authorship and ideology, especially when one of the “authors” cuts your hair. And it implies that maybe the real problem is that people don’t take the time to get to know their “performers” anymore, or vice versa. We’re too steeped in the language of theatrical mysticism for that, and the rhetoric of divine liminality. But of all the theatre I have ever attended, nothing

beats the midnight basement performance project, with all the flaws that make good theatre endearing.

I have since expanded my vision and begun to explore theatre history with this quality in mind. I see traces of it frequently. I think of the tiny Britannia Music Hall in Glasgow, with its rows of wooden seats dating back to the 1850s, and how neighborhood people must have braved the cold to gather together out of the wet stinging winter, and the grinding poverty and industrial pollution of the Scottish docklands to spend a rowdy evening together in a kind of intimate public living room, to hear songs and sing together and smoke, and watch a variety of acts. After the show, the local pub was right next door. On a recent trip to Death Valley, California I had the privilege of stopping by Death Valley Junction – literally a cross-roads in the middle of the desert, consisting of an abandoned gas station, a tiny roadside motel, and – oddly enough - a small theatre. The hand-painted theatre, now called the Amargosa Opera House, is a refurbished former “recreation room” once used by borax miners out there in the desert at the turn of the nineteenth century. It was a ghost town until a car broke down there in the middle of the 1960s and the driver fell in love with it (Le Duff: 2004; Becket: *n.n.*, *n.d.*). She began painting the faces of an imaginary audience onto the walls and dancing for them, until eventually she acquired a real audience to accompany the ghosts.

On a Saturday night, along with a few others, I sat on a folding chair and watched Marta Becket perform her dance-mime routines as she has done every weekend for the last five decades. I bought a ticket from Tom Willet, the local handyman who sometimes fixes things, sometimes works the motel desk, and – in twenty minutes time - would soon be appearing in the show as both MC and a handful of minor characters, often in music-hall drag. Afterwards, Tom takes the audience next door to show them his colorful collection of

Red Skelton clown paintings. Unlike “qualified” performance artists, trained in the post 60s “sacred” tradition, though, Tom is no demi-priest; he’s just a guy with some paintings to show.

Even now, when I research, I take special note of the conditions under which things flourish and receive their meaning, and the quality that makes them what they really are. Zurich’s famous Cabaret Voltaire, I notice - the home of Dada – was really just a tiny begged-for basement space with fifteen small tables and a seating capacity of only thirty-five people (Kirby 1965: 29; Melzer 1994: 12). I have to ask myself what really filled that empty space. Alternatively, I am struck by the fact that the highly influential Off-Off-Broadway scene that revolutionized commercial theatre in New York City was really only the overflow from the community practices of the largely Gay-influenced Greenwich Village scene (Bottoms 2004). These were small productions personally financed on shoe-string budgets with lots of home-made costumes and cardboard props, and performed originally for friends in small unknown places like the Café Cino, long before they were worth putting into the history books and being called the “Off-Broadway” *movement* (Bottoms 2004: 39-60). Visiting the Inns of Court here in London, I notice the elegant intimacy of the dining room spaces once used for Morality plays in the 1500s, and their close proximity - within walking distance – to related performance locations such as the Rose theatre or the Globe. In 2010, while attending the York Pageant plays, I walked the original medieval route¹¹ from Michelgate Priory, down the hill and across the Ouse Bridge to the finishing spot; it took only ten minutes! What is always striking to me is the tiny human scale of these events, never the “historical” or global scale that is attached afterwards. Each can be charted within the sphere of a few square blocks, or within what

¹¹ See map in Twycross (2008), pp. 28-29.

Mike Pearson (2006) has called the “*square mile*” of one’s community, one’s “*environment, neighborhood or hearth*” (14, *italics in original*).

So, where has this all led me? It has led me on a search for a different kind of theatrical experience; one whose spirit is rarely reflected in our current Performance discourse, which is rife with political cynicism. Theorists waste time playing shell games with words and ideas: i.e. “Theatre is a *performance*, but it doesn’t actually ‘Perform.’” I’m interested in the intersection between Theatre and Life, but not in the way so many theorists are today. I’m not interested in blurring the distinction between Life and Theatre (i.e. theatre *as* life; life *as* theatre). They are different, and everybody already knows that the blur is artificial: “All the world is not a stage...Social life is dubious enough without having to wish it further into unreality” (Goffman 1986: 1-2). What I am interested in, though, is how Theatre, being what it is, enters into Real Life, being what it is, and into the lives of real people and communities, being who and what they are.

I have always loved the idea of the theatrical *visitation*; the theatre group that pulls into town and injects its spirit into that place; fuels people’s imagination for a life less ordinary. The culture of Theatre itself is one that I have always loved because it *is* a life less ordinary. What actors have to offer is not just “escapism” – as so many self-styled “reformers” are apt to slur. It is, in fact, a connection; a direct and forceful engagement with life in a way that is less grave, dour, cynical, and pessimistic. Ever since theatre became politics, however, it has become all of those things to me. Actors, and especially comedians, offer a way of approaching life that is distinctly Theatrical: humorous, imaginative, creative, artistic and healing. Comedians, in particular, do not always ratify everybody else’s complaints, but there is a profound rationality in taking life less seriously,

and in wielding a veto power against misery. And there is a blessing in being paid a visit by what Theatrical culture has to offer.

The Longford Mummers

Mardi Gras and Halloween always seemed the most dynamic and participatory dramatic activities, until I discovered Mumming; now they run neck and neck. Mumming has been called a “dramatic, seasonal, visiting custom” (Hayward 1992: 3). Henry Glassie argued that mumming functions as a heightened and ritualised form of just being a good neighbour, or “ceiling.” Ceiling involves one’s neighbours assembling “regularly at night, without plan or invitation, in a few houses, where they are sure to find entertainment” (Glassie 2006: 171). It involves reciprocal acts of visiting and hosting.

In 2004, while doing research at the University of Glasgow, I was inspired by the writings of Henry Glassie, and contacted a traditional mumming troupe in the village of Longford, Derbyshire, England, with whom I have enjoyed haunting the pubs of the surrounding villages at Christmas time ever since, performing the *Bampton Mummer’s Play*. The Longford Mummers are a relatively new group, but they are reviving an old social and community-making custom, which its founder, Jon Spenser, remembers from his youth in Oxfordshire, and which was passed on to him by an older man in his community.¹² In relating the story of his apprenticeship into mumming, Spenser produces what he and his wife Sue refer to as “the scroll;” a continuous sheet of paper upon which the man, who was then quite old, wrote out the words of the *Bampton Mummers play* by hand, and entirely from memory. The scroll is a beautiful document in itself, and further testifies to the intergenerational mentoring, stewardship and passing on of traditions commonly associated

¹² Jon and Sue Spenser, interviews (2005; 2006; 2008).

with practices such as mumming (Lichman 1982). Mumming is not a recent phenomenon in Derbyshire; it had died out. Many of the Longford area locals themselves have had to be re-introduced to this custom. Some had never heard of it before. Others, I observed, greet it with tears of joy and fond memories from their childhood, positively glowing with excitement when they see the mummers coming.

Seeing the Longford Mummers perform for the first time was a sublime experience; one of the most puzzling things I had ever witnessed. Here was a small group of amateur performers manifesting a true *illud tempus*;¹³ an other-worldly little ghost vision infused with so much local spirit, personal camaraderie and generosity that the charm of it was overwhelming. As I would later learn, however, when asked to participate in the play as the *money man*, its apparent simplicity belied complex years of localized sociality, which served as its preparatory rehearsal period. In short, mumming's substance, which is more relational than technical, is entirely different from that of commercial theatre.

My experience with the Longford Mummers, though, enabled me to glimpse the similarities between these ancient folk practices and their contemporary do-it-yourself cousins, firsthand. Although modern interactive forms have a long way to go before they achieve the same level of depth, there are certain forms that - in the right contexts - are qualitatively analogous, at least on some level. I explore this topic throughout the thesis.

One idea that I have never been able to get out of my head, though, ever since I took my first theatre history course with Dr. Michael Harvey at San Diego State University, was his answer to this question: "What is a theatre?" His answer: "Anyplace you put on a show *becomes* a theatre!" This was an idea I simply could not shake, and it was my goal to make

¹³ David Cole (1975: 7-11) describes the *illud tempus* as the eternal world of the gods, spirits, ghosts, or ancestors; the dream time. The world in *illo tempore* is the place/time where the Myth is always happening in the now. The *Illud Tempus* can be summoned or called forth via the enactment of a Ritual. Theatre is an analogous kind of "ritual."

it a reality. In August 1994 I temporarily left my small town in California behind, together with two friends, and moved to Portland, Oregon in search of paying gigs. Without even realizing it I was walking into the middle of what seemed like a sort of folk revival. By October of 1994 I began acting with Eddie May Murder Mysteries, performing audience participation theatre events both at home, and for the USO, entertaining American troops overseas. By 1997 I had joined the cast of *Tony and Tina's Wedding* (1988) for a two year run of 619 performances.¹⁴ These performances allowed me – as an inter-actor – to meet and play with other members of the local community.

While these were large companies, with brand name shows, they were also doing something different; they were including people, encouraging them to play along; to be theatrical. And this inclusion was being met with a response from audiences that, from an actors' standpoint, was hard to dismiss. In spite of the silliness of its otherwise playful contents, this was meaningful theatre, and seemed to be serving a social function in people's lives. Together, these shows took me to fifteen different countries and introduced me to a new brand of theatre that permanently altered my perception of what "good" popular theatre might become or mean. More precisely, it caused me to question the validity of the criteria by which we currently judge popular theatre to be "successful" or "worthwhile," a criterion that, as I have said, is too often political. While "inclusion" is paid a great deal of lip service today, especially in academia, it is rarely integrated into the engine of theatrical production as anything more than a token acknowledgement of the

¹⁴ *Tony and Tina's Wedding* is an audience participation mock-wedding ceremony and reception. It is now in its thirtieth year Off Broadway. Throughout the evening "guests" are invited to interact, dance, eat, drink and play with the members of its 27 character cast. Actors play everything from members of the wedding party, to clergy, catering staff, photographers, "uninvited" guests, and band members. It is an environmentally staged play-ing "event" rather than a stage play, with numerous "scenes" occurring simultaneously, and many of them involving audience members directly.

audience members' ideological positions, and only if it serves a particular kind of social agenda. If it does not, the audience is often ignored, or else it is attacked.

Of the few scholars who have addressed audience interactive theatre events, Natalie Schmitt (1993) reports “no attempts to make theatre political,” and concludes that forms of Interactive Theatre that she observed, such as murder mysteries “were overtly play” oriented (150). That Critical scholars themselves do not consider audience interactive theatre events to be significantly political, however, goes without saying, as the absence of coverage in our journals inherently testifies. Yet, what interactive theatre's significance actually *is* has eluded definition up to now. Critical scholars such as Phillip Auslander (1999: 47-49; 137) have dismissed interactive events as nothing more than "franchised" popular entertainments, simulacra, and gimmicks, while seeming to miss their more important function – or at least their potential - as community-making events. In addition, Auslander overlooks the self-financed, amateur origins of shows like *Tony and Tina's Wedding*, and the personalized, regionalized, localized, and improvised nature of its subsequent productions, as opposed to *serial re-productions*.

Yet, why critics have been so intent on rejecting interactive events relative to their presumably more “legitimate,” chosen alternative, is not entirely clear. Since 1980, folk-like theatre events have experienced a resurgence. Forms such as audience-participation style murder mysteries, along with a host of similar environmental theatre events have embraced folk-like practices as urgent responses to problems of alienation and fragmentation in the contemporary world. And while it is tempting to label them as “placebos” for social dis-aggregation, in fact, I think they may be signs of a postmodern form of community making.

Popular audience participation theatre blossomed in the late 1970's and should have been hailed as a major breakthrough in performance practices. Instead, it was met with a deafening silence from the academy. Breaking the fourth wall, and discovering new ways of bringing audience members and actors together had been a major goal of 20th century theatre. Democratizing spatial and theatrical practices has been the dominant paradigm, post Brecht (Lehman 2006: 27-33). Yet those who broke the wall most successfully did not fit the ideological presumptions of the historical avant-garde. They had democratized space without reference to politics. Instead, they pursued a gaming metaphor. Shifting their definition of theatrical space - and spatial practices - from competitive political battleground, to cooperative community playground, those who invented audience participation murder mysteries and large scale mock rituals (i.e. *Tony and Tina's Wedding*) made significant and innovative contributions to theatrical staging, acting, and audiencing.

My intention is not to challenge the efficacy of critical theory, or of critical theatre in drawing our attention to important social issues, or of highlighting the cultural constructedness of social "Reality." Critical approaches have more than proved their worth in this regard. But, theories *do* focus our attention on certain features, and away from others. It is the nature of critical theory that in maintaining a socially and politically vigilant and protective attitude, it often directs attention outwardly, attempting to unite audience members by positioning them against a common enemy or cause. I want to suggest, however, that there are also ways of building communities from the inside, and I think we can learn a lot from audience participation theatre events, particularly as they have emerged over the last thirty years, and which are incorporating techniques similar to folk theatre, with invitations for people to play.

Central to my concern over critical theory is the kind of Speech it produces (i.e. the kind of communication it involves). All *events* produce a certain kind of speech, but for critical theorists speech becomes effective only if it produces a rhetorical critique of “the spectacle,” i.e. if it *witnesses* or if it *testifies*. Critical speech aims to produce a certain degree of culpability in the spectator, which Ranciere (2009) refers to as an inducement to react against the “Intolerable Image” (25-29; 83-105). Critical theory therefore privileges the speech of testifying and witnessing (in both the religious and political sense) over the kinds of speech acts involved in conversation, which produce familiar names and faces between people who come to recognize each other interpersonally. Included in this mode of conversation are playful and informal joking relationships, which, although they are forms of significant action, are not countable among the forms of “action” that are required to complete the critical circle of political “engagement.” Testifying, witnessing and criticizing do not sum up the totality of what is possible among speech acts, however, or the totality of what is significant.

Folk Models

Political discourse does not tell the whole story of our nature or way of Being in the world. As Nietzsche long ago reminded us, the universally diligent, sober, even sad man of the past, is a dubious social construction that does not fit what we know of history, and far less what we know of theatre history. The communal impetus to playfully celebrate Life as it is being lived in a particular time and place - together with the people with whom we enjoy that life - is not just an instrumental and ideological need, but also an existential one, inclusive of the need for recreation as well.

In 1965, therefore, Mikhail Bakhtin, opened up an entirely new line of inquiry into folk culture and social history based on a view of man that Huizinga (1950) had called *Homo Ludens*: playful man. As Jean Alter (1990) summarizes the matter, from Huizinga's perspective "all of human social activity originates in the game principle. Theatre, as a cultural institution, belongs in this category of 'higher' forms of play...that antedate even ritual dramatics...It [Theatre] is a natural game" (39). Subsequently, Bakhtin was able to demonstrate a long history of folk culture marked by carnival celebrations and laughter quite unlike the gloomy view of man that had predominated Western historiography and anthropology up to that point.

Bakhtin (1978) also identified a discursive structure marked by dialogue and conversational turn-taking, rather than monologue. Feminist scholars have also picked up on this model as appropriate for understanding women's discursive strategies marked by *double-voiced discourse*, invitations for others to share their stories, and, as Amy Sheldon (1992) notes: by 'reciprocal play,' 'collaborative narrative,' and 'cooperative competition' (99-100).¹⁵ I find this especially significant given that many of the key folk/play innovations in participatory theatre have been the creations of women. Women are especially active, also, in fan-based literary subcultures (Jenkins 1992a: 1). These often take the form of emergent postmodern communities, a topic that will recur throughout this thesis.

At least two anthropologists, Richard Flores (1995), and Henry Glassie (1975), not satisfied with a wholly instrumental view of man, and otherwise unable to account for large portions of folk events in which communal joy seemed to be the only motivating factor,

¹⁵ For "double-voiced discourse," see Melba Cuddy-Kean (1996), pp. 137-161. See also Deborah Tannen (1993), and Ruth Wodak (1997). For *storytelling*, see Barbara Johnstone (1993), pp. 62-77. Also see Jennifer Coates (1997), esp. pp. 247-250. For narrative *cooperation*, see Amy Sheldon (1992), pp. 99-100.

took a turn towards an expanded vision of man - as one who also plays - and of folk theatre as a site of play-ing. The result was a new, ethnographic avenue into theatre history, which included the playful body, and made room for that body within the body politic. Glassie (1975: 104-7; 147-48) has concluded that the Irish mummers play is almost entirely organized by the logic of the neighborhood ceilidh (a home party with music, shared food, conversation, and dancing). Likewise, Flores (1995) finds of the Mexican Shepherd's Play of South Texas that the: "sociability, ludic behavior, drinking, eating, and general festive atmosphere that emerge in each enactment are equally as important as the devotional and ritual aspects of this event" (13). Similar observations have been made regarding Purimspiels as neighborhood gatherings (Shuman 2000; Gimblett 1995), Mardi-Gras parties as annual home-coming reunions (Sawin 2001), Day of the Dead festivities that are productive of "community building" and "imagined community" (Marchi 2009: 58-63), and locally sponsored Wayang events, which comprise audiences of nearby residents and invited guests, who partake in home-cooked food and entertainment (Keeler 1987: 5-11). Natalie Crohn Schmitt (1993) has included contemporary audience interactive theatre in her research, and finds that, like folk theatre, interactive theatre allows audience members to eat and drink together while experiencing festive play. Both Jeff Wirth (1994:2) and Gary Izzo (1997: 1-20) identify *play* as the central feature of contemporary Audience Interactive Theatre. In contrast, however, ritual and political theories continue to dominate the discourse within academia, often justified by appeals to efficacy over entertainment.

Folk Play Scholarship: General Properties of Folk Theatre

“Play” and audience participation have been cited as defining characteristics of folk drama in general, making the genre distinctive in terms of its social function. Roger Abrahams (1972) suggests that the case for associating folk drama exclusively with serious ritual has been overstated, if for no other reason than that *drama* itself is a form of *play and game*, as well as *dance and literature* (351-2).¹⁶ Lawrence Clopper (2001: 12-19) stresses the historically festive quality of dramatic activity within folk culture, and its close association “with a whole range of sports, games and recreations. It is because a drama is recreational, given to delight, that it is called a play” (19). Steve Tillis (1999) following Thomas Green (1978) relates drama of any kind directly to forms of shared “make-believe” (88).¹⁷ While he acknowledges that drama and ritual can be found in close proximity to one another, Tillis attributes this phenomenon to the “non exclusive” event frames in which these activities are likely to occur (92).¹⁸ Meg Twycross (2008) notes that in Medieval usage, the term “play” referred to the entire *time period* in which theatrical pageants were held (29), thus even for Biblical plays the “[performance] area was sometimes called a ‘playing place’ or ‘game place’ and was also used for ball games and shooting at the butts: theatrical ‘games’ or ‘plays’ were only another type of entertainment” (46). A primary goal of this thesis throughout, therefore, will be to expand the implications of the non ritual hypothesis,

¹⁶ Roger Abrahams (1972) rejects making too close of an association between folk drama and “the myth-ritual argument” (351) insisting, instead, that folk drama bears a closer association to *literature* and to *play*, with play being related directly to drama: “Drama, in other words, is primarily recognized as a play activity, and therefore closely related to game” (352).

¹⁷ Steve Tillis (1992: 84-92) clearly defines theatrical spectatorship as “a conceptual frame of make-believe shared by performers and audience alike” (88) and counsels against attempts to connect the origins of folk drama too closely with ritual (131-132). *See also* Thomas Green (1978: 843-50; esp. 846).

¹⁸ Although a non-exclusive event frame can accommodate ritual practice, performances are rendered Theatrical when accompanied by a make-believe frame of reception.

particularly as it relates folk drama to play, game, literature, and contemporary leisure culture.

A. E. Green (1992) observes that often “Folk plays celebrate their community through a ludic representation of its definitions, including the parody of the dominant culture’s institutions” (354-55). Abrahams (1972) states that folk theatre operates from the paradigm of a *village community* or *small group*; its tone is festive, and events are often participatory (354). Dan Ben-Amos (1982) defines the folk as any reference group that is small enough such that its members can communicate with one another *face to face* (13-14). By definition, a folk play ‘event’ will share these social characteristics. Ward Keeler (1987) has stated that one way of thinking about folk events is by “Considering the art form in light of the relationships its performance occasions” (17). Bogatyrev (1976b) argues that this involves the ability of actors to “draw the spectators into the play...for collective participation... [during which] the whole specific social structure of the village modifies the received play in its form and function” (54).

Roger Abrahams (1972) lists among the features of folk drama: its use of non-“theatrical” playing spaces (i.e. homes or community spaces), a performer-audience and audience-audience relationship; a familiar script, played in a familiar community, usually by non-professional actors; and a familiar story with a predictable outcome. Glassie (1975) adds to this the frequent inclusion of home-made costumes (39-40; 78-83; 114-15). Bogatyrev (1976c) describes these as modified versions of everyday clothing, retaining aspects of their original meaning (13-19).

Veltrusky (1987), summarizing Bogatyrev, points to several features that differentiate folk theatre from professional/artistic theatre: Folk theatre utilizes “a different semiotic structure than high art; one based on improvisation and creative applications to established

norms and pre-existing social structures” (146). In performance, therefore, folk drama is filtered through the process of everyday communication; that is, *langue* translated into *parole* (158), thus, “Folk theatre is in much closer touch with everyday life than high art” (143).

Often, folk theatre is seasonal, attached to feast days or community rituals and "repeated from year to year” (145). Folk Theatre's structure may actually arise from its repeatability and familiarity, and its method of audiencing arises from the same. Rehearsals may be few or informal (146). Rehearsals may take longer than they ought to because time is diverted to socializing or drinking (Flores 1995: 23-4). The value of such socializing is never frivolous; it serves as a functional rehearsal period, anticipating future social interactions likely to occur during performances.

Folk texts provide a set, basic structure within which individual improvisation can occur. Bogatyrev and Jakobson (1982) stress the dynamic relationship between oral improvisation (typified as *parole*) and the community's desire to preserve literary tradition (typified as *langue*). Performers “appropriate” traditional material before reintroducing it back into the community for acceptance, whereupon improvised variations will either be ratified or rejected by the community. This acts as a kind of “prophylactic censorship” (37) to reign in excessive deviations.

Jiri Veltrusky (1987) calls the above "preventive censorship" (146), and offers further observations: At folk performances, community members may get highly involved in the action, and “it is part of the fun that spectators keep interfering with the performance, interrupting the actors, criticizing the text they use, arguing with them, invading the playing space, etc.” (146). Veltrusky attributes this practice to the community's “collective

ownership of the work,” (146) preserved both in memory, and by an ongoing tradition of acceptable modes of involvement.

In folk theatre, play between actors and spectators is common, and actors often “incite spectators to take an active part in the play” (148). Because the roles and stories are familiar, interpretation also takes place within an ongoing tradition of such practices. A shared, mutual desire to preserve meaningful traditions is why improvisation to the point of distortion is rare. Pleasure is taken in comparing past performances to the present, in comparing them to the shared repertoire of variations, and in seeing the present generation able to take on the responsibility for continuing a tradition. The ability of the performer to insert novelty into the text may be a metaphor for the ability of the individual to insert himself and his own personality into the familiar fabric of the society or culture of which he is a part.

In folk drama, theatrical space is usually not divided, but shared, thus the stage is merely a continuum of the already shared space of culture. Likewise, lighting is often shared/house lighting, and the action takes place within the ‘here and now’ of culture, thus ‘in folk theatre changes in lighting effect the stage and the auditorium at the same time’ (150-151). Even if the drama’s subject matter is located in the historical past, localization of stage action in the ‘here and now’ is common; it is said to be happening in the present tense, perhaps under the pretense of ghostly visitation. Offstage location of action is rare. Veltrusky concludes:

The absence of off-stage action must, therefore, have another explanation. I believe it might be due to the intense interaction between the stage and the auditorium.

Empirical evidence suggests that the dramatic space can include either the auditorium or the imaginary action space, but not both. (153)

A person taking part in a folk drama may be locally well known. Roger Abrahams (1972) reminds us that in a folk drama, typically “The performers are members of the community and therefore known to most of the audience” (354). Audience members also tend to know each other. By contrast the popular theatre “audience comes from places other than the community in which the players live” (354). But, “Since folk actors appear before members of their own community, a constant juxtaposition of fictive and mundane role is called into being” (Green 1978: 846). Because in folk drama, actors, even in costume, remain recognizable to audience members, *duality* of identity (of the actor-and-character) is often played up, along with a shared acknowledgement that this is occurring. Duality can also be used for serious rhetorical/semiotic effects, but is particularly effective in comedy. Duality involves not the suspension of disbelief, but a winking acknowledgement of the spectator’s complicity in a playful artifice. Masking is often a method of having fun with known identities, such that the disguising of familiarity becomes a comic game of recognition for spectators (Glassie 1975: 25; see also Veltrusky 1987: 157-9).

The comic effect results from the bisociated identity of the stage figure, intentionally foregrounded in folk drama: a man playing a woman, or a person playing an animal. Veltrusky (1987) provides the example of a man wearing an unconvincing dog costume, which instead reveals his real identity:

All the ambiguities are, of course, designed to draw a comic effect from the confrontation and interpenetration of the two aggregate meanings of the stage figure – the “dog” and the “actor.” More generally, the comic effect of such stage figures results from the respective characteristics of the animal and the actor being

continuously compared so as to bring out the contrast between them, and at the same time insinuate that there is more similarity than the actor would be ready to admit...it is a general feature of folk theatre or some of its genres to exploit the dual – or perhaps multiple – aggregate meaning of the stage figure in a variety of ways for aesthetic effect. And there are no examples to my knowledge of folk theatre trying to conceal this duality, by merging the character with the actor's image...[instead] it sets to keep the duality of the stage figure's aggregate meaning alive. (159)

Although Veltrusky perhaps overstates the case when he insists that character immersion is unheard of within folk drama, his point is well taken: familiarity causes the identity of the actor to appear more prominently in the presence of a familiar community whose members can recognize him, and also interact. Significantly, one way of achieving this effect is to make the characters – relative to the actors - overly simplistic and stereotypical from the outset, thus “folk theatre aims to present uncomplicated, clear-cut characters and to reveal them fully at the beginning of the action” (Veltrusky 1987: 159). The consequence of revealing the character as a fiction from the outset is that, simultaneously, what is being revealed is the presence of the actor as a real person outside of his or her character role; hence, paradox. Because this occurs by means of what is ostensibly a visible double-entendre - a visual joke – what is essentially being proposed from the outset is a joking relationship with the audience, effectively authorizing audience participation. The joking relationship is an active relationship, which joins the cast member and the audience member together in a common venture, and whereby the *activity* of spectatorship (Ranciere 2009: 16-7; 22) is rendered demonstrative as playing.

In fact, I would propose that a *festive joking relationship* is the best way to understand the prevailing social conditions that receive folk drama - into play. The joking relationship defines the social contract into which the folk drama enters, and takes part. Put another way, wherever the theatrical activity enters as a game into a preexisting context marked by mutual joking relationships, theatre becomes play. We should avoid, therefore, anthropological definitions of the “Joking Relationship” as an inherently inequitable – or asymmetrical - distribution of power and status relationships marked by dominance and submission (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 195-210).

In post-modernity, play signifies co-operation among friends, in an effort to make people laugh. Postmodernity is marked by voluntary leisure associations (not ritual prescriptions). Within the theatrical convention, also, the relationship of (an actor playing) a character relative to an audience member *pretending* to be somebody who naively accepts that characterization as a ‘real person’ is quite literally to take part in a (theatrically reflexive) *joke-relationship*, which is a second order of joking. The *joke-relationship* is an extension of the joking relationship into the realm of mutual characterization and conduct. What contemporary audience-interactive theatre shares with its folk drama cousins, then, is that it establishes a joking relationship with its audience; the arrival of which it signifies by communicating the event’s ontological status as a playful fiction - through overt theatricality, costume and character play - extended into the realm of the *joke-relationship*. Its audience then ratifies this relationship by responding in a theatrically reflexive manner. The shared condition of theatrical reflexivity is what defines post-modern folk play, including its choice of available topoi, drawn, not from myth, but rather more generally, from popular media images.

The epistemological contract governing these interactions involves conscious participation in a shared imaginary. Fake wrestling matches are an excellent example of the phenomenon. These events are entirely staged. The audience knows it is not a collection of sports fans at a sporting event but rather audience members at a theatrical event. By deliberately pretending to watch the event as if it is a “real” wrestling match, however, audience members are deliberately choosing to *stage* themselves. They do so by performing the role of “outraged fans” every time the referee makes a “bad call” or the wrestlers seem to “cheat the rules.” In dramatizing their own attendance behavior reflexively, however, what they are allowed to become via the joking-relationship are actually performers in the ritual of doing theatre. The “Competition” is being staged with ballet-like precision, while “surprise” and “outrage” are being performed as farcical ring-side side-shows. Theatrical cooperation, not sporting competition, is behind the mask all along.

Musical Reflexivity and Community-Making: Venda Society

Theatrical reflexivity has become a primary resource for emergent community making in Western society. Theatrical events have the power to constitute Community through aesthetically reflexive activities. This is evidenced by the rise of fan-based subcultures restoring their favorite images through Cos(tume)Play, Murder Mysteries, Sci-Fi conventions and Live Action Role-Playing events (LARP) (Pearson 2007). Since the 1970’s cultural theorists have increasingly recognized these events as legitimate ways of forming new social bonds around common interests and shared aesthetic sensibilities within postmodernity (Lewis 1992; Harris 1998). Play of this sort is not limited to Western society, though.

Ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1973) describes a similar phenomenon among the Venda of South Africa, albeit in regard to *musical* reflexivity. Venda children are raised from an early age to be musically self-reflexive and to think of themselves as part of a wider musically-constituted community, in which full participation in Venda society requires a rudimentary grasp of the principles of song and dance (Blacking 1969). Citizens are encouraged, therefore, to participate in social music and dancing. The complex “polyrhythmic and polyphonic” Venda musical event requires a minimum of twenty four players, after which anyone can join in, and within which both group participation and individual improvisations can occur. Just as participation in a theatrically reflexive community requires a rudimentary grasp of the rules of theatre production, so participation in Venda society requires training in music and dance.

Venda children, in ways similar to their theatrically reflexive Western counterparts (playing at Cowboys & Indians, Cops & Robbers, *Star Wars* or *Transformers*), acquire social prestige by learning to play with other children according to the rules of music. Within the musical environment, like that of the theatrical play environment, roles are taken up, chosen or distributed according to the activity’s potential for individual self expression. According to Blacking, participation in the community occurs at the highest level of *self actualization* and personal expression only when the individual is allowed to express his or herself through the medium of the collective activity. Community is literally performed into being as roles are taken up within the production of music. Ensuring that the ensemble plays together at the highest performative level is a byproduct of the event’s allowing for self expression to be experienced through the activity at the highest level of singular satisfaction. Community-making music and the music-making community are reciprocal byproducts of one another.

Supra-cultural Identity Theory and Individuality

Blacking (1969) describes folk music as meaningful only in relation to its social context, a definition applicable to all folk arts. For Blacking the difference between Folk Music and High Art music is not a difference in kind (i.e. type of instruments used, amount of training or technical proficiency), but a difference of Occasion and process. Folk music is music that has value “only in relation to a social situation. Folk music enhances a social situation, and its value lies chiefly in the social situation” (Blacking 1969: 34). The surrounding social frame is therefore included in the definition folk/music. In contrast, “Art music refers to social situations beyond those in which it is performed: for example, a symphony concert [as such] has no value in itself” (Blacking 1969: 34). Blacking defines folk performance, therefore, as “occasional” in the sense that it relates immediately to a community occasion: “If it is simply occasional music, no matter how complex in style, I would call it folk music” (Blacking 1969: 34). The same might be said for folk theatre.

Blacking also considers the *individual* and the *community* to be reciprocal elements of one another. Folk Performance exists “to enhance in some way the quality of individual experience and human relationships” (Blacking 1969: 59). In this connection the individual is not fundamentally motivated by communal altruism, but by a primary desire for “self-actualization.” A folk event, however, occasions the performance of individual self expression within the context of a social gathering. For Blacking, as an ethnomusicologist in particular:

A piece of music therefore has value to the extent that it is an effective expression of individuality in society or, in other words, of diversity within the framework of

unity. The theoretically ideal social situation is that in which the highest degree of individuality is achieved in the largest possible community of human beings. (1969: 62)

Rebecca Sager (2006) relates the above to Blacking's *Supracultural* "identity theory" (147-152) whereby the individual's True identity is his or her spiritual & artistic self - an interiority - which Blacking refers to as the "*Other-self* within."¹⁹ To access this Other-self, one must transcend the bounds of everyday culture. The musical event becomes a vehicle whereby the individual seeks self-actualization within the context of a community because the social activity *enhances* the individual's chances for creativity. The primary beneficiary is the individual who utilizes the artistic medium as a vehicle for self-making; for the making of an artistic self. In turn, society also benefits from the individual's achievement. Although driven by a personal desire for *self* actualization, the creative individual's ability to live "beyond culture" moves society forward by the introduction of evolutionary innovations, which ultimately increase the group's long-term chance of survival. Within the Venda musical event this gets expressed as the optimization of both group participation and individual improvisation. Rebecca Sager explains the event in four parts (147-149), which I will summarize.

1) The *Music* event **2)** creates a *Virtual Time/space* – or *Other World* - in which **3)** one experiences one's self transcendently in the mode of being one's *Other Self* – as artist and spiritual being; and as a Being-in-time-with-other-Beings. After all, "It is the 'pleasure of association with neighbors and kinsfolk' [i.e. one's Others] that was one of the goals of Venda music" (Blacking 1985: 51, quoted in Sager 2006: 147). **4)** Paradoxically, the event

¹⁹ For the Venda, this "other self within" is literally an ancestor spirit placed within each community member as – simultaneously - counselor, repository of cultural memory, and one's creative/artistic side. In the West, we merely speak of self-actualization through expressing - or fulfilling - our creative, "artistic side."

is initially rewarding because it enables self-actualization. But, because it is the traditions and institutions of culture itself that preserves and delivers this event (i.e. traditional culture makes the event possible), eventually one's "motivation and commitment to people and institutions that give you...the musical event" actually *increases* and the individual becomes *more* committed to preserving traditional culture because of the experience of both individuality *and* community, which culture provides (Sager 2006: 149). In the end, one can see in Blacking's concepts the seeds of Foucault's neo-classical philosophy, wherein the goal of authentic postmodern selfhood becomes the making of oneself into an Artist (Sarup 1996: 87-91). In the Venda context, however, the vehicle for transcendence is communal, and becoming one's artistic self is mirrored in relationship to Other-selves also becoming artists. Sager sums up the Venda musical event, and quotes Blacking (1983) directly:

Venda music provides a perfect example of the balance achievable between self-satisfaction and communal concern:

'The polyrhythmic and polyphonic principle of musical performance [characteristic of Venda music] ensured that self-satisfaction could not be gained by self-seeking, but that the best musical results were obtained when all participants combined the maximum of individual skill and fellow-feeling in the realization and elaboration of a basic musical pattern. Pleasing others and pleasing oneself in musical performance were two interrelated aspects of the same activity.'

(Blacking 1983: 61, quoted in Sager 2006: 145, *brackets in original*)

Constitutive Reciprocity as a Definition of Folk/Theatre

I would define what Blacking is describing above as *constitutive reciprocity* at the event level, and on the interpersonal level, as *mutual-self-constitution*. It is widely acknowledged among folklorists that folk drama implies the presence of an interactive event, wherein the surrounding social frame is equally as important as the performance itself, *and* whereby the borders between the performance and the social gathering become porous, *and* the borders *between* individuals become porous in the surrounding frame. Veltrusky (1987: 159) has gone as far as to imply that there are no examples to the contrary. Yet, among theatre scholars I can find no clear conceptual paradigm to describe what is meant by the seemingly “interactive” nature of folk theatre. William H. Jansen (1957) suggested that interactivity could be used to classify a performance as more or less folkloristic, just as Schechner has asserted that audience participation might constitute a performance as more or less ritualistic. Both, however, beg the question by merely presuming each genre to be interactive in advance. Steve Tillis has attempted to clarify the issue, with limited success, by isolating “Folk” and “Theatre” and treating them both as independent variables, which interact. In the end, Tillis arrives at an accurate, but rather list-like description of the components of folk + drama, as well as folklore + drama, but without producing an account of their relational dynamics:

Folkloric drama and dramatic folklore: depending upon one’s perspective, one might emphasize one or the other term, one or the other relationship of modifier and noun. A full definition of folk drama must account for both terms. With the hope of giving equal weight to both folklore and drama, and with the recognition that significant clauses of each of my definitions must be elided (and taken as implied), I

offer the following definition: *folk drama is a theatrical performance, within a frame of make-believe action shared by performers and audience, that is not fixed by authority but is based in living tradition and displays greater or lesser variation in its repetition of this tradition; its performance, enacted over time and space with practices of design, movement, speech, and/or music, engenders and/or enhances a sense of communal identity among those who participate in its delivery and reception.* (Tillis 1999: 140, italics in original)

Again, Tillis does not produce an account of the event's relational dynamics, as such. I believe, however, the answer lies in the interdependence between these variables - in performance. A constitutively reciprocal relationship exists between 1) *the people* and 2) *their event*, and a *mutually-Self-constituting* relationship exists between the people one-to-another, for which the term "interactive" serves as a kind of conceptual shorthand.

If we define all folk theatre events as Folk/Theatre we will have chosen a conspicuously hybridized designation. Throughout this thesis I will employ the phrase *Folk-slash-Theatre* to describe situations in which Performance and Community are mutually constitutive of one another. Community/Theatre (or Folk/Theatre – since "folk" is just another word for "Community") will be used throughout to designate both the community-making potential of theatre, and the theatre-making potential of community, as reciprocally performative acts. Since performative reciprocity between a People and their Art form is potentially the defining feature of all Folk/Art, the presence of the community will *always* be implied in a constitutive definition of "Folk/Lore" regardless of whether "lore" refers to traditional story-telling events, communal dancing, music-making, theatre, game-playing, quilting,

religious rituals, food ways, etc. Folk always refers to a context, and the making of the art will be taken to imply the making of the people.

Just as Venda society performs community into being through the process of making music together, Western man has the potential to perform community into being through the process of making Theatre together. American folklorists in particular have shown a preference for “updating” the definition of folklore to include not only the survivals of ancient cultural Products, but ongoing contemporary *Processes* for the creation and sharing of new “Lore” within postmodernity (Burson 1980). Above, I have referred to this in terms of community members putting a *mechanism-in-place* for social gathering and creative interaction. What folk/theatre might mean in a postmodern context is a major theme of this thesis. It is within the context of American Postmodernity that my own artifacts derive, and within which the current study takes place. My primary question is: *what inspiration, if any, can we take from folk play events?* Personally, these traditions inspire me to consider the value of the surrounding social frame, and its potential – as my mumming friends might say - to *make room* for dancing, music, laughter and conversation. But it remains to be seen, though, whether the substantive presence of community implied in the definition of Folk/Art as constitutive, applies to audience participation events where the audience is composed of random ticket-buyers, and the event is created by professional actors. If folk/music, for instance, as John Blacking defines it, is “music that has value only in relation to a social situation”, then, is the social situation in which Theatre is constituted in the interactive theatre event also constitutive of Community in substantially the same way as the Venda musical event? Or, are these events – as I suspect some might be - merely instances of attaining the *image* of community, over substance? Do people who are *pretending* to be members of a community actually attain Community in the process? How

do we distinguish between a mechanism-in-place for community gathering and a mere mechanism for hire? If an event involves play, or constitutes social interaction within the context of a joking relationship, do these factors automatically constitute the event in its entirety as a Ludergy? These are questions I will address throughout.

Chapter Summary and Preview

This chapter has described theatre-making in a small town, and related this model to an understanding of folk play in general. Richard Schechner's definition of *efficacy*, by which he eschews entertainment in favor of politics and religious ritual, has been challenged. In its place I have offered a broader definition of *entertainment*, as both a set of *social* practices, and as a form of *reception* appropriate to theatre. Finally, following John Blacking's model, Folk/Theatre has been defined as a reciprocal relationship between the theatre-making potential of a community, and the community-making potential of its theatre. All of the above have been related to the concept of Play, and to Huizinga's definition of man, as *Homo Ludens*. In the theatrical context, I have defined folk theatre audiences as existing in a joking relationship with its primary players, the actors. Chapter Two will extend some of the theoretical issues raised above. It questions pre-modern definitions of folklore that relate community-making to structural properties of *myth* and *ritual*, secured by shared *beliefs*. Instead, it proposes a post-modern definition of folklore which relates community-making to the post-structural properties of *literature* (as non-myth), and to the *theatrical event* (as non-ritual), secured by *entertainment* (as non-belief). The *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the Historical Reenactment Weekend are examined as primary instances of post-modern folk play.

CHAPTER TWO

Theorizing Postmodern Community and Ritual

Reconsidering Performance Studies' Ritual Focus

In his 1974 essay 'From Ritual to Theatre and Back' Richard Schechner noted that contemporary society is alienated and disaggregated, and correctly perceived in theatre some means of solving the problem. But, in doing so, he turned to ancient cultures for models to emulate. Conceiving of Ritual as the means of re-aggregation, he attempted to re-introduce Ritual "back" into Theatre, with the aim of creating a hybridized Ritual/Theatre. Most of these efforts at creating a modern Ritual/Theatre *fail*, Schechner noted, because the rituals used lack a structural basis in society. In his words "The rituals created were unstable because they were not attached to actual social structures outside of theatre" (1974: 480). But in looking for a structural basis, Schechner, who is not alone in this regard, has over-ritualized Ritual (with a *serious* capital "R") and leaned too heavily towards the creation of a hybridized Mystical/Theatre rather than embracing an extant theatrical *Tradition* for what it is. There are two reasons for this. First, Schechner's serious ritual focus has been at the expense of acknowledging the degree to which the real social glue may lay in the frivolous cultural elements of folk gatherings. In this connection, adding brief addenda or caveats such as "and it is [also] fun" (1974: 457) to these descriptions has not performed the work of balancing this perspective, and the impression is often given that play does not *do* anything. Second, Schechner (1983) clearly witnesses from the position of a "seeker" from the West, looking for spiritual answers elsewhere; he

acknowledges this (315). Within the expanse of his vision is also an admirable global agenda to save the world from problems being created by the West on a massive scale: potential nuclear annihilation, war, environmental destruction, and so on (309-313). His aim has not been limited to saving small communities or facilitating emergent ones.

In his writings, Schechner longs for the kind of stability that traditional structural “isms” have historically provided, while simultaneously acknowledging that we are in a post-structural world and there is “no way back to a genuine premodernism” (317). In his essay ‘The Crash of Performative Circumstances’ (1983) Schechner notes that the circumstances – that is, the social/folk contexts in which traditions might operate or into which they might enter - have disappeared. He then begins to offer suggestions for making theatre structurally relevant in a post-modern context. In doing so he grasps the promising implications of environmentalism, but consistently returns to themes of religion and politics as the only sources of structuring. At the same time he acknowledges that “Playfulness might be part of the answer” (321) and remains open-minded enough to cast a hopeful eye towards Victor Turner’s suggestion that the way to a better future might lay in the subjunctive imagination and theatre. But, he asks in a backhanded way, “is Turner right in prescribing ‘subjunctive worlds’ – a heavy dose of theatre? Is our moral balance to be found among the clowns and acrobats?” (314). He is clearly doubtful.

Schechner is not alone in this regard. The idea that Theatre’s salvation might lay in restoring its supposedly lost partnership with Ritual became something of a mantra among performance theorists by the 1970’s (Graham-White 1976). Premised on the belief that Rituals had kept pre-industrial societies together, reinvigorating the partnership, often along pseudo Marxist lines, seemed to some theorists a good way of offsetting the destructive

effects on Community brought about by the decline of shared labor and the rise of capitalist consumerism. Peter Chelkowski's (1979) statement is typical of the era:

The advancement of film and television in the post World War II period, together with the decline of religious ritual, has brought about a crisis in the theatre throughout the world. In order to preserve theatre, innovative producers and directors have been trying to break down the barriers which divide the audience from the actors...achieving a purity of interaction between audience and actor that is based on their common humanity. *This is only possible by reinvesting dramatic action with ritual and establishing a common denominator or archetype, such as in Ta'ziyeh, the redemptive martyrdom of Husein at Kerbela.* (11, *emphasis mine*)

Missing from such prescriptions, however, is the obvious structural fact (in a post-structural world) that one would first have to *convert* the entire Western audience to Shia Islam in order to achieve the kind of vociferous audience response that so impressed Western visitors like Peter Brook, when he witnessed the Ta'ziyeh in its native Persian context (Brook 1993: 37-47).²⁰

In his *Empty Space*, Brook shows a deep concern for establishing a vibrant relationship between audience and performer and expresses the belief that although the West yearns for a ritual theatre, it has lost the ability to create such a theatre. In his search for a spiritual tradition which he believed the Western theatre had lost

²⁰ Brook's focus here is theatre's salience relative to *an* audience, in the surrounding frame. He lauds Taziye's social function in relation to its local community or neighborhood. Taziye resonates with its audience because it is *salient*. Insofar as Taziye fits its local community, it is not *deadly* (dull) theatre. Brook is not primarily advocating Taziye's ideological/religious content, therefore, but rather its socio-emotional/spiritual salience to its community, which all theatre should strive to emulate.

Brook turned his attention to the Third world and encountered the Ta'ziyeh tradition of Iran. He discovered that the ritual theatre of Persia contained many elements which he believed essential to all theatre. (Ansary-Pettys 1982: 15)

What Brook was witnessing – and perhaps failing to register – however, was not just a community excited about drama and in love with Theatre, but a religious community reacting emotionally and ideologically to the materialization of its own sectarian dogma, often within the context of a divisive, nationalistic and altogether undemocratic politics in which un-Belief was simply not tolerated.

It is clearly not the restoration of pre-industrial society that we need to achieve today, but the modern creation of a post-industrial folk theatre - and theory - for post-modern people. Folk drama is not an outdated concept even if its definition needs substantial revision in the post-modern era. The very notion of “Community” itself has not been properly re-theorized and updated in a way that sufficiently makes a break either with extant structural presumptions, or the idea of Culture formed from a unifying Ideology (Jean-Luc Nancy 1991; 2000). And this includes pastoral longings within Performance Studies that have not yet resulted in a re-theorization of what Ritual - or the creation of a Theatrical-ritual (small r) - might mean for people in a post-modern, post-industrial, post-structural context.

In over-emphasizing the seriousness of the Rituals he has observed, Schechner has overlooked two of the most obvious structural features of the post-modern era, which might serve as the basis for contemporary ritual. First, he has overlooked the influence of modern Media – mostly literature, theatre, television and film - as purveyors of the Myths of our time. But, more importantly, he has overlooked the development of media viewing habits and post-modern cultural responses and attitudes towards media; what film critic Roger

Ebert has called “the birth of irony” (in Samuels 2005). Stephen Snow (1993) has observed that “The second half of the twentieth century has been characterized by the pronounced effect of media on human consciousness” accompanied by the rise of theatrical reflexivity (192). Theatrical reflexivity is potentially the great untapped resource of post-modern audiences.

Second, Schechner has overlooked Leisure time and Individualism as structural features of post-modern society and identity, along with their equally abundant social byproduct: existential (aesthetic) *communitas*. Rather than viewing these as potential resources for the creation of post-modern rituals aimed at authentic identity formation, however, Schechner has abandoned them as presumably devoid of meaningful *structural* content, and therefore unfulfilling unless *converted* into Ritual reflexivity on quasi-religious or else political terms. But, taken together, mediatized reflexivity combined with increased leisure time and independence has potentially turned post-modernity into a resource for existential Becoming, of which Folk Dramatic Play, and fully developed fan subcultures, are byproducts (Lewis 1992; Jenkins 1992a; Hellekson and Busse 2006).

Myth Interrupted and Community

“And it is to the extent that he defines himself through the loss of community that modern man defines himself through the absence of myth”

- Jean-Luc Nancy (1991: 59)

“The interruption of myth is therefore also, necessarily, the interruption of community”

- Jean-Luc Nancy (1991: 57)

Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) acknowledges that there can be no community without myth, but, paradoxically describes Post-modernity as the recipient of two very positive post-structural developments: 1) The *absence* or *interruption* of Community, and 2) the *interruption* or *absence* of Myth. In doing so Nancy challenges the basic structural presumptions related to each. **Myth**, he argues, forecloses all creative options for sharing imaginative possibilities because it operates what is ostensibly an ideological monopoly that demands acquiescence in one form or another. Additionally, by placing its foundation in the past, it self-justifies its own arguments in true mythic fashion by operating a form of circular argumentative presumption that begs its own questions and fiats any demands for explanations by appealing to the transcendental Past as the ultimate arbiter of truth or Authority. “Essentially, myth’s will to power is totalitarian. It may perhaps even define totalitarianism (or what I have called Immanentism)” (1991: 56). **Community** as *Communitarian-ism*, likewise, operates a social monopoly that destroys the very basis of real community, which is: individuals freely sharing themselves with one another in mutually rewarding ways. The reward can only be preserved to the extent that the “individuals” themselves are preserved as free beings. Ultimately, Communitarian-ism is a dangerous fiction, a mere myth of community, which in practice destroys any real chance of community by sacrificing the Individuals that compose it to the needs of a Structural Ideology.

We know the scene: there is a gathering and someone is telling a story...they were not assembled like this before the story; the recitation has gathered them together. Before, they were dispersed (at least this is what the story tells us at times)...He recounts to them their history, or his own, a story they all know, but he alone has the gift, the right or the duty to tell. It is the story of their origin, of where they come from, or of how they come from the Origin itself – them, or their mates, or their names, or the authority figure among them. And so at the same time it is also the story of the beginning of the world...It is an ancient, immemorial scene, and it does

not take place just once, but repeats itself indefinitely, with regularity, at every gathering of the hordes, who come to learn of their tribal origins, of their origins in brotherhoods, or in peoples, or in cities – gathered around fires burning everywhere in the mist of time. (Nancy 1991: 43-44; italics mine)

The *absence* of Myth and the *interruption* of Communit/y/arianism, together, open the only real space that has ever existed wherein *real* community and *real* myth can form. Postmodernism finds itself presented with this opportunity, while Structuralism flees from this opportunity in search of old paradigms and old myths to recoup. Jean-Luc Nancy begins his analysis of postmodernity by considering the role of the individual, or what he calls the Singular Being. Nancy re-considers the relationship of this Singular Being both to Community and to Myth, and by implication also to Ritual. In starting with the Individual, Nancy is slightly uncomfortable with the Heideggerian split between the *individual self* and the *social self* (2000: 24-27; 66-71). He proposes hyphenating them. Heidegger considers the social “self” to be an alien non-Self, which operates in the realm of the “anyone.” In adopting the social self, one is embracing a self that *anyone* might have; behaving according to what anyone might *think* or *do* or *be* or *believe*. One fulfills a *role* and a *path* in life that anyone might take, without making a truly self-authenticating choice. In contrast, the individual self must reject this alien social self by pursuing “one’s own-most possibilities for becoming;” which is one’s own unique, creative and self-creating potential.

Nancy accepts Heidegger’s proposition at the basic ontological level. Nancy begins with the ontological fact of his being singular and thinking singularly of a Self - an “I” - which One is. But for Nancy, the purist project of Individualized self-becoming must be amended to take into account the fact that the Self is always already a Being formed in relation to a Community. “Being does not pre-exist its singular plural,” (2000: 29). And the fundamental

means of knowing that others share in our condition is not only the observable physical fact of our *mutual* separation (we co-appear to one another as bodily singulars, which Nancy empathetically calls “compearance”), rather it is also our ability to Communicate with one another across this divide, always in terms of our own Singularity (2000: 56-64).

The “Individual’s” ontological experience, therefore, does not *fully* equate with his Being alone, even though his essential being is Cartesian. In the deep interiority of selfhood each person knows with certainty the Cartesian truth; he is a Singular Being that always says “I” - “I think therefore I am.” And he shares this Being human with all other human Beings. So it is *this* Being – this autobiography of his own Being – which he *shares* and holds in common with every other Singular Being. Together they share the condition of *Being Singular Plural*. And that, argues Nancy, is the only basis upon which authentic *sharing* becomes possible.

Because we hold being-together in common, which is the being of Being Singular, no true Community can be formed - nor is it worth forming – if it relies on the Communitarian necessity of sacrificing the individual to the collective. “Fascism was the grotesque or abject resurgence of an obsession with communion” (1991: 17). In his books *Being Singular Plural* (2000) and *The Inoperative Community* (1991) Nancy fears the politics of uni-fying; that is, of subsuming or fraternizing singularities into a collective “generic identity” that inherently excludes singular identities by compressing the many singular-beings into one mythic “community of essence” (2000: 25). Under Communism “Fraternity is supposed to be the solution to equality (or to ‘equiliberty’ [egaliberte] by evoking or invoking a generic identity. What is lacking there is exactly the common origin of the common” (2000: 25), the Singular. The Communitarian ideal “in order to be effective...requires [as its] essentializing procedure: Sacrifice” (2000: 25). And “if one

looks carefully, one can find the place of sacrifice in all political philosophies...the sacrifice of concrete singularity” (2000: 25).

For Nancy, pastoral longing for the “restoration” of a supposedly lost community-of-essence gathered around its collective Myth IS the myth. It is a dangerous myth with fascist implications, rooted in a fundamental ontological error.

Until this day history has been thought on the basis of a lost community – one to be regained or reconstituted. The lost, or broken, community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways, and by all kinds of paradigms: the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods – always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven tight...and which above all, it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols. (Nancy 1991: 9)

But in fact, “*Community has not taken place*” yet (1991: 11 *emphasis in original*) because the individual has been sacrificed to a promising Immanence, which negates the fundamental component of any true community – the Singular and unique selves that compose it.

This is why political or collective enterprises dominated by a will to absolute immanence have as their truth the truth of death. Immanence, communal fusion, contains no other logic than the suicide of the community that is governed by it...the logic of Nazi Germany. (Nancy 1991: 12)

The Communitarian Myth of community lacks the basic ingredient that makes Community worth forming: sharing, exposing, and being exposed to other Singularly interesting, creative, imaginative “individuals,” engaged in projects of self-Becoming, and granted the freedom for becoming; for Being Singular Plural. Within the Structural project, by contrast, one needs no other outlet than work, duty, and structural servitude, which ultimately are the only options that Myth and Communitarian-ism can offer; borrowed selfhood. To prevent this condition from occurring, therefore, Jean-Luc Nancy proposes that the voice of Myth *must be interrupted* in its monologue. And, Communitarian-ism must be fragmented at its social base. Individuals – that is, Singular Beings Plural – must speak with “one” voice of interruption, which is the voice of the *real* Community, which has NO single voice, but is the voice of many singular beings, being Singular, together, plural; Many voices, each freely gifting their singular revelations to one another, in the *play* of voices, which produces its own body of artistic works, its corpus of imagination, its many keen insights into what the myth might be or become...once it is finally *shared* out; once the community is finally allowed *its* share of the Myth, allowed to share *in* it; not as passive consumers, but as active producers of alternative perspectives.

Nancy freely admits: Community is formed out of Myth, and there is no Community outside of Myth (just as the Myth itself proclaims of itself). But insofar as Community also speaks its Myth into being, and insofar as it can only function as Myth - or as Ritual - if it is received by the community, which authorizes it, then postmodern man, Nancy declares along with Bataille, is in a new moment of Myth, which is *the myth of the absence of myth*, which he receives with full abandon – and forms his community rejoicing in the wake of Myth’s demise.

Postmodern man has no Myth; or at least, he has no *One* Myth. But:

Is there a myth for this community of compearance? If myth is always the myth of the reunion and the communion of community, there is not. On the contrary, it is the interruption of myth that reveals the disjunctive or hidden nature of community. (1991: 58, *emphasis mine*)

In other words, the absence suddenly reveals that community has been there all along, hidden; and that it is not just a Mythic proclamation. It is worth quoting Nancy extensively here: “In myth, community was proclaimed: in the interrupted myth, community turns out to be what Blanchot has named ‘*the unavowable community*’” (1991: 58). The unavowable community is a community *not* spoken into existence by a Myth which somehow conjures it, nor which the community itself somehow restores by conjuring.

Does the unavowable have a myth? By definition, it does not. The absence of avowal produces neither speech nor narrative. But if community is inseparable from myth, must there not be, according to a paradoxical law, a myth of the unavowable community? But this is impossible. Let me repeat: the unavowable community, the withdrawal of communion or of communitarian ecstasy, are revealed in the *interruption* of myth. And the interruption is not a myth: ‘It is impossible to contest the absence of myth,’ wrote Bataille. We are thus abandoned to this ‘absence of myth.’ (Nancy 1991: 58)

Nancy admits, along with Bataille, that new Myths and Rituals cannot be created ad hoc, and quoting Bataille (*in italics*), he states:

‘Neither these myths nor these rituals will be true myths or rituals since they will not receive the endorsement of the community.’ This endorsement cannot be obtained if the myth does not already exist in the community...The very idea of inventing a myth in this sense is a contradiction in terms. Neither the community nor, consequently, the individual (the poet, the priest, or one of their listeners) invents the myth: to the contrary, it is they who are invented or who invent themselves in the myth. And it is to the extent that he defines himself through the loss of community that modern man defines himself through the absence of myth. At the same time, Bataille defines the absence of myth as a *‘kind of myth’* in itself.” He explains as follows:

‘If we define ourselves as incapable of arriving at myth and as awaiting its delivery, we define the ground of our existence as an absence of myth. And he finds himself before this absence of myth as one who lives it, and lives it, let us understand, with the passion that in former times animated those who wanted to live...in mythic reality...[and] this absence of myth before him can be infinitely more exalting than had been, in former times, those myths related to everyday life.’ (Bataille, quoted in Nancy 1991: 58-59; italics in original)

What is paradoxically also new about this community, whose membership shares in *the absence of myth* as its Myth, is that it does so as a community of *individuals*.

If the absence of myth marks the *common* condition of present day man, this condition, rather than constituting the [communitarian] community, undoes it. What

assures the functioning of a life led according to myth, here, is the passion and the exaltation with which the content of the myth – here the ‘absence of myth’ can be shared...to the limit – to the limit of being. If being is defined in the singularity of beings...the singular aspect of beings...if it shares the singularities and is itself shared out by them, then passion carries to the limit of singularity: logically, this limit is the place of community. [But community cannot become the point of ‘Fusion,’ otherwise] at this point – at the point of [communitarian] community – there is, precisely, *no* community...The [individual] passion for the absence of myth touches upon the absence of [communitarian] community. And it is in this respect that it can be a passion (something other than the [totalitarian] will to power)...[therefore] the absence of community must be the ground of any possible community. (Nancy 1991: 59-60)

Today, postmodern man rejoices in the Presence of the absence of myth *at his leisure*. And the ritual that corresponds to *this* myth and its mode of myth-ing – at least in part - is the ritual of doing Theatre, and receiving it in the Theatrical mode: as Theatre-goers, without the burdensome Work and weight of dragging Mythic Structuralism into the picture, or into the picture house, or the Theatre. And it is for this reason, too, that we see in the postmodern world the rise of fan based sub-cultures celebrating literature instead of myth, for what it means to receive something in the theatrical mode is to receive it in the mode of theatrical reflexivity, participating in it within what Steve Tillis (1999) refers to as the “shared frame of make-believe” (81-84).

Theatre and Ritual

Schechner's Religion and Politics are but two versions of Structuralism, which is why the very idea of marrying Theatre to Politics and Religion inevitably does not serve Theatre well, but restricts it. The tendency of each is to become totalitarian. In truth, the state of Western Theatre & Drama was never so dire that it required either religious or political structural-isms to rescue it. This was the Myth - of Structuralism's will to power. In fact, the situation was quite the reverse. It was Religion and Politics that had become dire and empty. And so, on a theory, or on a rumor, propagated by Cambridge-style anthropologists, the promise was made that Theatre could be co-opted to restore Structure to society - just like it supposedly 'used to do' - and, additionally, that anthropologically instrumentalized theatre could fill the void for something to really Believe in. Theatre was saddled, therefore, with the job of *acting like* it was a religion and of promising to bring back Myth. And, it delivered on its promises P.T. Barnum style (Cook 2001), with all the fanfare of traveling-salvation-show hucksterism (Bottoms 2004: 238).²¹

Dionysus in 69 arrived with actors posing as shamans. The fact that Dionysus did not put in an appearance did not matter because his myth was only being employed to effect a transposition with a newer Myth. The myth of Dionysus' Imminent return also fit the Marxist Myth of the return of the Immanent Community; the some-day arrival of pre-modern Communitarian-ism.²² The Dionysus Myth was merely the allegorical center-point

²¹ Bottoms writes "Despite being presented in a downtown garage, *Dionysus in 69* was deftly marketed and run as a commercial operation, charging off-Broadway ticket prices of four to ten dollars a head. It was "packaged as a cultural commodity like any other," John Lahr observed of the production's longevity: "There will be a movie and a book" (1969)" (238).

²² Schechner himself was not articulating a Marxist agenda, as such. He was rather adopting the tone of its rhetoric, as a counter-cultural statement of the 1960's, and trying to realize it as *Communing*. But whether a merely tactical gesture or not, in borrowing a discursive formation from the historical Avant-Garde, which was itself enamored by historical Marxism, he is, perhaps guilty by association, of advocating the same brand of Immanentism; certainly, the structure of Immanence, discursive or otherwise.

for a Gathering. Dionysus was never expected to arrive; nudity and political protest were expected to pour out onto the streets on the road to revolution. If the ensuing disenchantment wrought by Dionysus's failure to appear was, by analogy, supposed to effect the transfer of dis-belief onto the Capitalist political system itself, this did not happen. What happened instead was the transference of Belief. The myth of Dionysus was now serving (a performative extension of) the Marxist Myth, *as* political protest and mystical Communion. Nietzsche was correct in stating that the god Dionysus was never anything more than a projection of the community's own desire to Believe in something. When Politics and Religion proved empty after two World Wars and the Holocaust, ritually restructuring theatre seemed, to some, a useful option.

At best, Theatre and Drama are contiguous with Ritual and Politics, or else complimentary. At worst, they are opposites. From an Aristotelian perspective *Imagination and Belief* – and consequently, *Theatre and Ritual* – compose ontologically discrete binaries, whose purposes should not be confused. Each demands its own epistemologically appropriate response. Ritual/Politics demands Belief from its adherents, while Theatre requires a kind of imaginative Unbelief. Within the wider scope of Aristotle's ontology and metaphysics, only *this* world – the physical world – is real; the worlds of religious Myth and Theatre are, by definition, Fake; they are the Imaginary. While Theatre openly admits that it is Fake, and that it employs a set of dramatic and symbolic techniques, Religion posits a direct connection to a transcendental Reality, and demands Belief accordingly.²³ What proves to be the case, therefore, is that *The* (official) *Imaginary* and the (unofficial) *Imagination* are not equivalents of one another.

²³ See Richard F. Hardin (1983), 846-862, (esp. p. 851). See Victor Turner (1967), p. 19. Also see David Cole (1975), esp. pp. 7-9, and 12-57.

In terms of creativity, Religion does something quite different from Theatre. Religion is an attempt to structure society (as are Political myths) while Theatre is an attempt to fuel the creative imagination. These are frequently at odds with one another, not least because religion posits Creation (above creativity) as an already settled fact, requiring as its only appropriate response, acquiescence. Religion inevitably anchors Belief to a structural narrative and to a set of doctrines that authoritatively restrict the range of allowable responses. It anchors Belief to a True/False interpretation. One *must* take the Myth seriously, thus Religious Ritual requires the Believer to enact his Belief openly. Ta'ziyeh offers a poignant example. Shia Believers must demonstrate they are worthy of salvation by producing outward signs of mourning and suffering: loud wailing, chest pounding, bleeding, self flagellation, and measurable amounts of tears are produced, while Imam's collect them in glass vials (Chelkowski 1985: 21; Ansary-Pettys 1991: 23). Additionally, the Text is often made physically present throughout the event, both as a reminder of its Mythic status, and to dissociate the event from Theatre (Chelkowski 1977: 34).

Textually, Ritual drama is limited to ritually repeating the same core narrative over and over, albeit with some variation (The Ramayana, the Bible, The Book of Esther, the foundational Myth of Shia Islam). By contrast, Theatre's creative potential is open ended. It uses not a Narrative, as such, but narrative's *form*. Considered as the product of a *discourse community*, or as a body of works, Theatre's trajectory is eccentric rather than concentric. Theatre frees the imagination to endlessly proliferate the number of narratives and structures that are possible. The history of the theatrical art form is one of boundlessly imaginative creativity. People therefore go to the theatre to experience the human imagination at its extreme, surreal, campy, futurist, Dadaist, realist, expressionist, impressionistic, melodramatic, sci-fi, black & white, 3D, Technicolor best.

Theatre's open-endedness can be attributed to its status as a semiotic event of inherently post-structural potential. A drama is a play of signifiers upon a semiotic stage, which accommodates the Artist's imagination by allowing unlimited referential poaching of both primary and secondary symbolic resources. Language, dance, customs, books, films, myths, music, gender codes, etc. can all be sent into play, collision, contrast or cooperation. It is by these means that, for example, Mr. Spock suddenly appears in the Manger scene as one of the Three Wise Men, while an old gingham couch plays the part of the Manger. Theatre is a semiotic event whose script is inclusive of everything that happens on the stage to be witnessed. Ultimately, *reception* determines meaning, and the spectator's interpretive actions concretize the dramatic event into make-believe images in the mind. These make-believe responses are, in fact, demanded by extant cultural conventions (Goffman 1986: 127-128; Fischer-Lichte 2002: 1-10).

It is hard to imagine a theatre event without an audience. Erika Fischer-Lichte (1992: 7-9) identifies theatre as a *relational* "cultural system" (between actor and audience) rooted in audience *reception*: "A theater performance that does not take place before an audience, i.e., cannot be received, is not a theatre performance" (7). Peter Brook considers the audience to be theatre's defining feature (1978: 127). Stuart Blackburn (1996), however, has written of a ritual performance of the Ramayana at which nobody other than the performers actually attends the event. Not only is the Myth already known, but the shadow play is a Ritual that can be performed for its sponsors in absentia; they sponsor it to affect their personal commitment to the deity who is its only necessary audience member. Sponsors may attend briefly, but this is ritual duty. They do not stay long, and the play continues without them.

The debate over whether folk events function as Ritual or Theatre can easily be settled on Structural questions related to Belief, Repetition and Myth. (Sacred) Ritual, by definition, demands Belief - repetitively - in relation to a stable repetitive Myth. Steve Tillis (1999) acknowledges that although performance frames, as such, are never mutually exclusive relative to *efficacy or entertainment, religiosity or secularity*, the difference remains this: “A shared frame of make-believe would indicate drama, while a similar frame of true belief would pertain to ritual” (98). The ritual that Theatre is – if it can be called a ritual at all, rather than a *tradition* – dispels Belief in favor of imaginative engagement. The ritual that Theatre offers, therefore, and that religion can *never* be a substitute for – and in the absence of which, offering religious or political structural ideologies *as* substitutes for Theatre are but placebos – is the ritual of proliferating Imaginative Creativity and Discourse *beyond* the realm of Structural Belief. Neither religion nor politics can substitute, therefore, for what Theatre *actually* provides: Flying saucers, Triffids, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, *Cat Women of the Moon*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Freaks*, *Oklahoma*, *Casablanca*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Importance of Being Ernest*, *True West*, *Othello*, *War Horse*, *Life is a Dream* – these are but a few examples. And all are ongoing allegories or parables or metaphors for particular kinds of insights that are possible for human beings to have. I will return to this argument below, but for now I merely wish to state by way of a preview that Theatre – as a body of discursive practices - *explodes* the concept of a single structural Myth, exposes it, undoes it, interrupts, de-centers, and hyperbolically disperses Myth’s own fragmented contents in a trajectory quite Other than Religion (Nancy 1991). Because of this, and because our myth is *the absence of myth*, the kind of ritual that Theatre is, is actually better suited to becoming a Tradition within a postmodern context, than the Structural Myths of either Religion or Politics.

The Potential Folk Community

Pre-industrial constructions of folk community emphasized the role of shared religious beliefs. Doing-together involved participation in religious ritual. “Folk Drama,” likewise, often underscored a hidden ritual presumption in reference to structural grand narratives. As a historically conditioned term, “Folk” is somewhat clumsy in a post-modern context. In 19th century scholarship it was used exclusively to nominate people *of* the past, in pre-industrial rural agrarian societies. It carries these connotations into the present. I use the terms “Folk” and “Community” interchangeably. But each connotes something different depending on whether it is used in reference to people in a Pre or Post industrial society. Contemporary scholarship recognizes Folk and folk performance as also being *emergent* phenomena. Folk is an ongoing and therefore contemporary *processes* of creation, not just one of pastoral restoration. New folk forms are emerging all the time, with the Community and their Performance continuing to be reciprocally constitutive products of one another. Again, to quote John Blacking (1969) with regard to community-building “If the terms ‘folk’ and ‘art’ are to be used at all, they should refer to *processes*, to ways of expressing the experience of individuals *in society*” (34, *italics mine*). Choosing a text/event/ritual to restore willy-nilly, however – such as Captain Cook’s Voyage – remains the choice of postmodernists, at their leisure. Nevertheless Jean-Luc Nancy’s formulation - in relation to the Community of post-moderns - may be applicable to the formulation of a folk model in a contemporary context.

Nancy describes this new community as a community that *interrupts* Myth artistically, creatively and imaginatively, and does so by passionately producing and proliferating new textual expositions and transpositions. Generically, he calls this project

“literature,” which is the collective name for art, writing, music, speech, voice, dance, painting, and so forth (Nancy 1991: 63-66). Once anything enters the popular Imaginary, it is given over to endlessly fluid media and discourse permutations. The *Bible*, *The Ramayana*, the American Civil War, and *Dracula*, for example, all began as History and Lore and have all been porously rendered in paintings, stage plays, films, operas, documentaries, dolls, Halloween costumes, comic books, cartoons, TV shows, theme-park attractions and so on. *Dr. Zhivago*, *Jaws*, *The Exorcist*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Harry Potter* all went from book to film; while *The Producers*, *Hairspray*, *Shrek*, *Singing in the Rain*, *The Bodyguard*, *Legally Blond* and *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* all went from film to stage-Musical.

A name has been given to this voice of interruption – literature...as the myth of the mythless society....But literature's revelation, unlike Myth's does not reveal a completed reality, nor the reality of completion. It does not reveal in a general way *some thing* – it reveals rather the unrevealable: namely, that it is itself, as a work, that reveals and gives access to a vision, and to the communion of a vision, *essentially interrupted*. (Nancy 1991: 63)

Interruption becomes a common theme because the community of speakers, writers, producers collectively shares in the voicing and authoring of new expositions, which collectively has no final Word or Structure, even if, at times, it produces works according to an established generative Formula (Burson 1980). Instead it has only the openness of communication “between finite beings,” one to another, sharing at the very limits of their own singular creativity. Each new work or effort at speech “has something inaugural about it. Each writer, each new work inaugurates a community” (Nancy 1991: 68) but never does

so dogmatically: “anyone who writes (or reads) or tries to write (or read) [does so] *by exposing himself – not by imposing himself*” (Nancy 1991: 68).

What takes place on this limit requires interruption of myth. It requires that it no longer be said that a word, a discourse, or a fable gathers us together beyond (or on the near side) of the limit. But it requires equally that the interruption itself make itself heard, with its singular voice. (Nancy 1991: 67)

Nancy is here describing nothing less than the community of creative artists.

It is difficult to describe the structure of sharing... Myth is interrupted by literature precisely to the extent that *literature does not come to an end*... It does not come to an end at the place where the work passes from an author to a reader, and from this reader to another reader or to another author. It does not come to an end at the place where the work passes on to another work by the same author or in the place where it passes into other works of other authors. It does not come to an end at the place where its narrative passes into other narratives, its poem into other poems, its thought into other thoughts, or into the inevitable suspension of the thought or the poem. It is unended and unending – in the active sense – that it is literature. And it is literature if it is speech (a language, an idiom, a writing) - whatever kind of speech it may be, written or not, fictive or discursive, literature or not - that puts into play nothing other than being *in common*... the interruption of myth merely puts into play, sets to work, and destines to unworking, nothing but communication itself, the passage from one to another, the sharing of one by the other... in this it is unlike Myth, which communicates only itself. (Nancy 1991: 64-65, *italics mine*)

If we are looking for an Event that would satisfy Nancy's criteria for an ongoing Literary *process*, with its own body of literature, and an audience of Singulars-Plural, then one obvious conclusion is that Western Theatre already IS this tradition. And, it is a tradition as opposed to a Ritual because *art* – postmodern art in particular - is in-subordinate to the service of Myth. Theatre exists apart from Ritual precisely because it serves a *different* function, which is that it does NOT structure society based on Belief, but reconfigures it in *novel* and artistic ways, injecting Community with a creative, analytical, visionary process that keeps the social Imagination moving existentially *forward*. Life, including life in a community, moves itself in that direction.

Nancy's model (above) can be recognized as a description of how folklore develops over time and space. It is essentially a *folkloristic* model of literary development, whereby a favorite text or theme might serve as a starting point (a favorite recipe) for future creation. This literature may then be handed over (or poached) - passed from one speaker to another or from one author to another - with some elements preserved and others modified (Veltrusky 1987: 146). Nancy's model quite easily also describes our *other* favorite recipe; that is, our recipe for giving these stories *presence*: Theatre. Lore produces the subject matter - its dramatic literature - and Theatre produces the *medium* by which this literature can be made *physically present* to a consciousness (Cole 1975: 6). The community members who receive the event into their midst, do so, not as dumb-struck Believers in awe of Ritual, but as dynamic agents of their own creativity. In the interactive play context, these community members often write themselves into the text's margins - as jokers, readers, re-readers, or players. In post-modernity, this literature quite literally takes the form of sub-cultural *marginalia* through the production of collectively authored/performed *fantexts* (Stein 2006: 247-8), to be discussed below.

Existential v. Political Community: Singular Authenticity and Plural Inauthenticity

Today, Theatre is a component in Postmodernity's ongoing literary process, lending substantial presence to Myth's collective postscript on an ongoing creative basis. Theatre is capable of doing this because Creativity and Imagination are not just its sources of fuel, but aspects of its very Subject matter. Imagination is the mirror of an indeterminate reflexivity, which is the projection of our own existential project of becoming. Theatre does not just involve the imagination *in* creativity; the Creative Imagination has become its main topic, with our selves as its imaginative Subjects. Mythlessness requires therefore that Imagination be answered by ongoing Creative Production, which is Interruption and Unworking. *This is a post-modern vision of community life, as an ongoing existential project.*

Building a society without Myth is, by definition, a *future* project. Without a Mythic Past that must be dutifully restored, options arise. A society without Myth becomes Existential by default. The absence of a Mythic past authorizes the construction of a narrative future, which offers two existential options: either mourn the past in "bad faith" or else, in "good faith," accept one's freedom and embrace this future project in light of what Heidegger calls one's "ownmost potentiality for becoming" (Solomon 2005: 136). This project is both Singular and Plural. Communities, like the individuals that compose them, lead existential lives requiring ever new "projects of becoming." Theatre – as a means by which Imagination is made physically *present* to consciousness (Cole 1975: 87-90) – therefore reflects Postmodernity's project as an ongoing series of presentable options. Singularly we are existential beings never finished, living in Communities that are never finalized. Theatre is particularly suited to this experience because the phenomenal fact of

the Actor's living presence ensures that narrative is injected into life in the living mode, both animated and attended by living beings in shared space-time.

At the Plural level the existential project is endangered not by everyday entanglement with others, but by entanglements in collective isms. Politics is not a substitute for what Art's relationship to Individuals provides, which is why the pursuit of politics over art so often smacks of what Sartre calls "bad faith" – a deliberate flight from freedom (Streller 1960: 52-53; Barnes 1953: 153-202). If postmodernism is a project of the existential community, not just the political community, then the Marxist desire for collectivism cannot be viewed solely from a political perspective. There are too many existential implications involved in communitarianism, not the least of which is its flight from individual being, and its purposeful *entanglement* with Others. Heidegger describes the willingness to realize "one's ownmost possibility" as a form of "authenticity" (Solomon 2005: 129; 136). But he contrasts this with the other freely pursued project of Self evasion. Inauthenticity is manifested as the flight from one's freedom, pursued collectively through *everyday entanglements with others* (Solomon 2005: 130-134). "Politics" serves everyday Entanglement well, because - *as a project of inauthenticity* - it is an entanglement that potentially never ends. Dangerously, it can always be *imposed* on others, and on oneself, as the ongoing "busyness" of everyday "politics."

In the final analysis, Nancy's reinterpretation of Heidegger stresses the presence of *multiple singular articulations* of community, and therefore a community that *differs constantly from itself* (Fynsk 1991: x). Christopher Fynsk (1991) therefore states that "Anyone seeking an immediate political application of this thought of community risks frustration" (x). Nancy's definition of community is consubstantial with a process view of communication.

One can, however, attempt to *communicate* what Nancy calls ‘community’ (though we have to do here with an entirely different sense of communication from the one that is called upon in theories of consensus); [Additionally] one can attempt to engage in a critique of ideologies that dissimulate what Nancy calls the absence of community (or the fact of the impossibility of communion or immanence as it appears to us today, after the closure of metaphysics). (Fynsk, 1991: x-xi)

What is necessarily left after the rejection of communitarian politics and the metaphysics of religion is the acceptance of the *metaphysics of subjectivity*. As Fynsk explains:

Nancy is attempting to *expose* what still speaks in a term like “community” when we [erroneously] assume the closure of the metaphysics of subjectivity – any communion of the subject with itself, any accomplished self-presence – and with it, the closure of representation or signification (a signifying order assumed by and for the subject). (Fynsk 1991: xi)

Accepting a metaphysics of the signifying subject, Nancy rejects both politics and religion as equally inimical to authentic being insofar as each is given over to Myth, which, in turn, gives the individual subject over to a communitarian definition of Being-in-common. Because communitarian-being is a project doomed to failure, communitarian politics and metaphysics are impossible. But, a problem still persists.

The Persistence of Surplus Belief

“The final annoyance is that the modern world insists that God is dead, but instead of enjoying the liberation, worries about filling the void”

- Arnold Hinchliffe (1969: 91)

The age of Myth has passed; this has been well acknowledged. But we have not yet settled the issue of Myth’s underlying cause: *the persistence of Belief* (e.g. Faith). Belief persists *as a surplus* in the absence of having anything to actually Believe IN. Belief expresses the *desire* for Myth. But, bravely “facing up to a universe that has lost its [Given and Ultimate] meaning and purpose” however, has not been well received by everybody (Hinchliffe 1969: 11). The postwar years were marked by a sense of loss and “existential” despair, which rightly or wrongly came to be identified as aspects of the Postmodern Condition. In short, there was nothing left to believe in, and so two options arose: 1) Give positive existential value to postmodern Literary projects, as aspects of Singular-Becoming, shared out and entertained “Plurally” as Community, or else 2) Flee from existential projects into new forms of pre-modern Myth-making, Communitarian Politics and collective Belief Structures.

“Belief” is Myth’s corresponding mode of reception. Or, at least, this is how we have categorized it up to now. But in fact: surplus Belief is the very precondition of Myth’s formulation. Surplus Belief prefigures the *demand*, for which Myth’s manufacture becomes necessary, to supply the need. It is a consumer-driven phenomenon in which Belief’s desire *generates* Myth. But, neither Schechner (as Ritualist) nor the Marxists (as political myth makers and communitarian structuralists) ever came to terms with the underlying reason for *why* the time for Myth had passed, before proceeding blindly towards finding its

replacement. It was because – at least for some - *the time for Belief had passed*; consequently, there was nothing *there* to prefigure the necessity of Myth’s revival. Modernists had already rejected the *desire* to Believe. The desire for Belief had been replaced by a readiness for (my second definition of the word) *entertainment: a willingness to imaginatively consider ideas* (see thesis Intro.). If “Belief” is Myth’s corresponding mode of reception, then “Entertainment” is Literature’s corresponding mode of reception, as well as its precondition for production.

The post-modern symbolic economy follows the law of Literature’s supply and Entertainment’s demand. *We are now in the age of Entertainment*. And, this is not a vacuous moment. Entertainment is an intellectual, existential and aesthetic turn in man’s development. The age of Entertainment prefigures the arrival of Literature as its intellectual fulfillment in the same way that Myth had previously fulfilled Belief’s desire. Theatre’s imagination, creativity, wit, and irony have become essential components in postmodern man’s existential project of becoming auteur. The postmodern audience member prefers to position himself in relation to theatre as the product of an inventiveness he also wants to share in. Postmodernists want to be likewise inventive, witty, creative and Artistic. For this reason they prefer a *process* over a product; which is to say, they don’t just want *a* play to watch; they want *to* play. Play has become an essential component within the wider post-modern Project.

Chiefly, this project is existential, and realized in the manner of becoming Artistic. It is what Madan Sarup (1996: 87-91), in his article on Foucault, has described as an increased “aestheticization” of one’s own life, a way of living one’s life closer to artistic self-realization than does one *ordinarily*. It brings one closer to beauty, to creativity, humor, play and spirituality. This project is articulated within “Foucault’s Ethics of the Self...[as]

the self's relationship to itself" (Sarup 1996: 87). The artistic responsibility one bares to oneself (perhaps also to one's Other's) is actualized - within the practical Discipline of Selfhood - as a new ethics of Self-production, and as a new project of living art-fully. This project is conducted, if not in direct opposition to being in the manner of a mere-Subject, then certainly, at least, as a way of being *abject* to that subject-ed position.

The self-forming activity, Foucault says, is a form of aestheticism...It is possible that, finally, Foucault committed himself to a conception of the good life as a kind of self-making. He argued that an ethics of the self was the only way in which an individual could resist the normalizing effects of disciplinary power...This reinvention of the self is primarily an aesthetic experience, an 'aesthetics of existence,' the principal aim of which is to make of one's life 'a work of art.' (Sarup 1996: 88)

If this project is a "politics," it is the politics of withdrawing one's permission from those who would present one with a long list of errands to run in *their* service; that is, in the service of *their* endless political projects during one's leisure time.

Theatricality has become one of Postmodernity's chief performance modalities. The substantive nature of Postmodernity's moral project is reflected, paradoxically, in the frivolity of its aesthetic means. Postmodernity has rejected *false-belief's* sense of Gravity, which is why it inoculates itself through frivolity. And this rejection of the Grave can be seen in its adoption of the Nietzschean preference for metaphorical thinking, which manifests itself in the form of intellectual Irony. In part, "The cultural climate conducive to such experiences has been fostered by television. This kind of simultaneous cognition of

contradictory categories is a mark of the postmodern; it is in essence the pleasure of postmodern consciousness” (Snow 1993: 193). The age of Irony has set in because irony shares its structure with several other forms of comparative thought such as allegory, analogy, postmodern parody, double-coding (Carlson 2004: 145-50), metaphor, metonymy and paradox (States 1988). And, it is no mere coincidence that Theatre also happens to share this same kind of allegorical relationship to “Everyday Life.” Art works when it is viewed side by side, in complimentary opposition to Reality, as a form of contrast, not when all ontological and metaphysical distinctions are collapsed into one mythic essence and transcendence.

Together, these forms add up to a *tolerance* for comparative thinking. If there are no longer any Myths, then Surplus Belief’s *desire* has been correctly recognized by Postmoderns as improper. Since Belief’s excess also prefigures each new incidence of Hegemony’s arrival, ironic un-belief has the additional benefit of foreclosing Hegemony’s next success by dispersing its potential followers into responsibly thinking Singulars. Post-modernists are not awaiting the next Messiah, the next Ideology, or the next replacement for the last great Mistake. They are willing to entertain ideas on rational, even irrational and playfully ironic terms. Putting ideas into reciprocal play – as contrast - is healthy. This requires the weighing of alternative ideas in the balance, rather than the settling of contradictions via unifying source-Myths. After two disastrous World Wars, this lack-of-Belief has settled in as a sensible option; not from any collapse of optimism, but from the delivery of an ultra clear proof: that Belief’s capacity for excess and folly has been demonstrated conclusively, twice over!

But post mythic (existential) depression in the post war years still needed to be reckoned with. It was answered, in part, by Absurdism. Absurdism delivered *Nothing-to-Believe-in*.

Rather than providing answers, it posed elegant *questions* instead. In response, this Absence required an enlightened Indifference from its audience, in the form of a bemused Irony. Absurdism presented post-modernity with a clear-cut choice: flee, yet again, into the next round of Mythmaking – of Hegemony and counter Hegemony - or else seize the opportunity - *in the age of unbelief* – for a Literature that would take part in Postmodernity’s differential Project of ongoing Existential Becoming. Martin Esslin (1980) concludes that Absurdism’s timely confrontation required only that Mankind face up to the realization – at once poetic, artistic, philosophical and scientific - that totalizing answers and systematic solutions are not forthcoming (424-428). Absurdism’s tolerance for ambiguity, analogy, irony and play therefore stand “in basic contradiction to systems of thought, religious or ideological (i.e. Marxism), that claim to provide complete answers to all questions of ultimate purpose and day-to-day conduct” (Esslin 1980: 428). In this way, Absurdism was one expression of postmodernism.

The Irony of Instrumentalism and the Paradox of Play

Within the language of Performance *and* Folkloristics combined we reach an impasse that leaves us no way to talk about folk play in terms of post-modernity. Play confronts us with paradox as soon as we attempt to theorize it on Performative terms (as social Work), and Marxist Folkloristics foreclose non-Performative options by anticipating a revolutionary social structure as its Imminent possibility. If post-modern community has not yet been thought, therefore, it is due to the *irony of instrumentalism* and the *paradox of play*. I will explain.

Since the 1960's the desire to secure *Belief* has made a merely horizontal shift from (religious) Traditionalism to (political) Activism. Post-war, the task became simply that of finding *something else* to Believe-in, in a fundamentally "Committed" way. Within the rhetoric of *securing Belief*, what became un-thinkable was a folk/community of un-Believers. And, perhaps even more unthinkable: Un-belief as the *marker* of a Community. Conceptualizing the *means* by which such a community might be formed proved difficult. It involves the paradox - and irony - of the fact that *play doesn't work*, even though the theory of the Performative *wants* it to; and wants it to in order to render play *efficacious*. The paradox, of course, is that the efficacy of play is precisely that it doesn't *work*, and that any attempt to turn play into work achieves the opposite result. Play resists instrumentality. Ironically, *only* in its not working is play *constitutive* of a playful community. Again: the paradox of Entertainment, but also the reason why play *constitutes* community in post-modern society.

Paradox belies any attempt to define play on instrumental terms. Huizinga (1955) sensed very early on that the attempt was oxymoronic; play is not *for* anything (2); "Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be a forcible imitation of it" (7). The paradox - that *play doesn't work*, however, is nothing compared to the *performative contradiction* of trying to prove that it does. Irony! A performative contradiction is brought about by the very instrumentality of *theorizing* itself; a dilemma that similarly confronts the production of this thesis in an academic context. It is tempting to want to package Play as its own kind of seriousness, in order to demonstrate that it exists *for* something else. Within the logic of the work ethic, play is not allowed to waste potentially harnessable energy claimed by the body-politic. To be Performative, then, Play should presumably Perform *social-work*. And it is for this reason also that, in order to be "academic," *theorizing* is likewise tempted to

perform the contradiction of characterizing play as an instrumentality of the kind that does not exist as *an end in itself*, but rather as the means to some other end. Yet, this thesis takes the *opposite* view: that the instrumentalist denunciation of Play on social structuring terms is counterproductive to understanding the motives of those who engage in play in pursuit of its *non-instrumentality*. “Play” coincidentally, however, also describes the semiotic process by which community is constituted in postmodernity. Insofar as it is *not* being put to work in the service of structural ideologies, the leisurely play of *signifiers* - both *words* and *people* - accounts for the structure of postmodern theatre and community alike.

The Pre/Modernist Diagnosis of Postmodernity

Performance theorists have been mistaken in seeking pre-modern structural solutions to post-modern problems. Although strange bedfellows, Religious ritualists and Marxist communitarians have mutually diagnosed postmodern culture as “empty” and suffering from a certain “lack,” which manifests itself in the dissolution of Community (Dunn 1998: 31). Both camps defined “lack” as the absence of a structural totality for Belief, and shared the same basic presumption; namely, that what was needed to remedy the situation of *lack* within postmodernity - at once political, personal, spiritual and social - was the restoration of a structural totality - effectively, a Myth-Ritual-Belief complex - which Jean-Luc Nancy might call a longing for the “Imminent”.

In this connection, Being Singular was identified as the sign of an underlying problem. In his book *Identity Crisis: a Social Critique of Post-Modernity* (1998) Robert Dunn explains how excessive unit-izing of “individual” community members resulted in the “seriality” (Sartre) of their collective isolation,

...in which, paradoxically, people are connected only by the commonness of their isolated activities, as illustrated by moviegoers standing in line to purchase tickets, followed by their subsequent collective/isolated consumption of filmic images inside a darkened theatre. The commodity system, it can be argued, conspires – in the name of social and personal fulfillment – to weaken and displace the collectivity. (Dunn 1998: 114; esp.107-174)

In order to effect a reorganization of the social structure, a unified Political, but inherently Communitarian, solution was called for from the Left.

Capitalism, they suggested, had emptied the Individual of his/her Community and created the social Isolate who was then left to seek fulfillment in the ongoing consumption of new acquisitions; each one a placebo for the community he/she lacked. Among these placebos were *commodity-fetishes* (Marx) of “community” itself, in the form of *images-of-community-gatherings* acted out on film, but inaccessible to the viewer who could only watch and imagine a social gathering in the distant future (Dunn 1998: 64-80; see also Nancy 2000: 49-55). This represented a “substitution of spectacle for authentic experience” (Dunn 1998: 52). While many of these readings of the postmodern condition were, in fact, quite accurate, both Marxist and Religious structural solutions alike required commitment to the realization of a future Ideological Immanence (Nancy 1991:12; 34-36) – a total politics – a Belief system or Ideology - even though theorists of postmodern *community-making* (Agamben 1993; Jean-Luc Nancy 1991; Vattimo 1992) were seeking answers in - and diagnosing the postmodern condition *as* - the “Politics of Oscillation” (Chang, 1993).²⁴

²⁴ See Giorgio Agamben (1993) and Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) or Gianni Vattimo (1992). Heesok Chang (1993: 1-16) compared the works of Agamben, Nancy and Vattimo, and found in them a similar desire for communities composed of plural *individuals* who share *difference* in common.

Western Marxism and Folklore

In search of a cure, classical Marxists had entertained the possibilities inherent in folklore, believing that folklore participation could have a role to play in community-making. Yet, Marxist scholarship continued to be dogged by the anticipation that folklore would eventually arrive as - or *at* – Myth. The result would have meant a nationalized and politicized Folk/Theatre. In his 1983 article ‘Western Marxism and Folklore,’ Jose Limon surveyed a number of classical Marxist theorists, and identified - as their collective excess - a desire for totalizing solutions bound up with Myth-Ritual-Belief complexes. In effect, classical Marxism wanted to structure entire Societies, not just any particular Community within a Society. Each theorist seemed to anticipate the establishment of an imminent communitarian system, which folklore would help to deliver. The overriding metaphor was that of Folklore *as the seed* of a future Myth of State. The collective rationale offered to justify folklore’s instrumentalization in this way, however, was quite clear. Western Marxists collectively posited Capitalism as a totalizing hegemonic system, against which they sought to establish their own – supposedly counter-hegemonic system. Within this counter-hegemonic rationale, the project could only be deemed successful if it realized a merely “contrary” but still *totalizing Social structure tied directly to a unified Political economy*. The incipient Communitarian dangers in such a project, however, should have been obvious from the beginning. For, what they were in fact offering was only a false dichotomy between two different poles of hegemony: Right or Left, which easily slipped into Totalitarianism in either direction, whether Fascism or Communism.²⁵

²⁵ Limon, himself, questions classical Marxist views on several counts: 1. Hegemony is never *total*; rather, it is a *dominant* position, but one among *many* potential dis-positions vying for our attention. (46) 2. “Emergent cultures” *can* manifest themselves performatively in many new and substantially alternative versions of what

The American School of Folkloristics

American folklorists, however, avoided this communitarian trap by re-contextualizing folklore within the free-market economy, and re-conceptualizing Society as a system of *difference* rather than of Fusion. Within this framework, folk “lores” (plural) became products of separate discourse economies. So conceived, folklore was not the surviving traditional *product* of an extant community (merely to be *restored* and *consumed*), but rather a potentially novel *process* for literary invention (Dorson 1968: 166-86).

Communities were conceived as networks within which private transactions, driven by local and voluntary associations, could be conducted among people sharing at least one similarity – “one common factor” between them: i.e. Lumberjacks, Sci-Fi fans, Christians, Girl Scouts and so forth (Dundes 1965: 2). Finally, American folklorists contextualized their understanding of community/folk within a non-communitarian notion of the political economy, to arrive, in total, at a sense of community as a potentially entrepreneurial venture: *emergent community*. In the same way that Jean-Luc Nancy had conceived Individuality as “Being-Singular-Plural,” American folklorists, we might say, began to think of (sub-cultural) Communities as singular beings within Society’s wider system of difference: as sub-cultural individuals that merely *compear* together. With Society being the plural of these individual communities, what each one came to represent, from a political as well as symbolic standpoint, was the voice of interruption: the *interruption or absence* of Community and the *interruption or absence* of Myth. In the place of Myth,

Raymond Williams called “structures of feeling” (Limon, 1983 p.46). In other words, emergent cultures can create their own aesthetic events. 3. The wider artistic domain called Folklore is *not* just a past phenomenon of pre-industrial society, but an ongoing *process*, and not limited to any one class of people; anyone can create folklore.

therefore, could be found each community's literature, its lore-creation, exemplified by the emergent communities of postmodernity, and recognized by cultural theorists as the products of "a true folk group" (Jenkins 1992a: 268). Indeed, "Fan culture conforms to all of the traits Fiske (1989) has identified as characteristic of traditional folk culture" (Jenkins 1992a: 273).

Media Fandom and Postmodern Folk

Jean-Luc Nancy's progeny can be found among the emergent fan sub-cultures of postmodernity; not the communes of old whose Believers were attendant upon Myth, but the *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins 1992a) and raiders from a media-saturated generation, whose unbelief leads them to continually deconstruct what they consume, and to redeploy what they have deconstructed; as new forms of art, literature and theatrical performance. As Henry Jenkins notes, "Media fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate" (Jenkins 1992b: 208). Key to understanding their desire to produce, write, and participate is our acknowledgement of what Fans are actually fans *of*. Fans are not ordinary "consumers," and, in fact, tend to mock "the superficial relationships and shoddy values of consumer culture" (Jenkins 1992a: 282-83). Within Fandom, it is not *products* that are admired, but rather the *creativity* behind their invention, including the Artist's skill. Fans are fans of the kind of *creative imagination* that they find lacking in ordinary - "mundane" - society (Jenkins 1992b: 226). Fans seek out what inspires their own creativity, and for this reason fans respond - and even communicate with each other - through artistic production. One finds within fandom individuals who desire to form social networks - community - around an aesthetic genre, by collectively elaborating on a

narrative source-text. While a few basic features of the source text are preserved by community agreement, elaborations are often wildly divergent, and take many creative forms, including costumes, fan fiction, and theatrical performances. What makes fan activity a decidedly literary as opposed to Mythic phenomenon is that the members of the fan community feel free to elaborate on the original text, placing existing characters into new situations, expanding their sexual/gender identities and so forth.

Jenkin's Four Part Model of Fandom

Henry Jenkins characterizes fan communities as creative *audiences*, compulsive *rereaders*, and *textual poachers*. In his 1992 article 'Strangers No More We Sing,' Jenkins proposes a four-tiered "model of fandom," whereby fans appropriate a chosen text and creatively rework it, playfully and artistically, within a social context productive of Community (1992b: 209-213; *all italics in original*).

1. "*Fans adopt a distinctive mode of reception.*" They are readers who "often reread repeatedly...not simply to absorb the text but to translate it into other types of social activity" and into other media (209-10). Reception always occurs in conversation with other fans.

2. "*Fandom constitutes a particular interpretive community.*" Fans interpret texts individually and negotiate meanings with other readers.

"Fans join fan organizations...attend conventions...discussions...exchange letters...chat on computer nets...trade tapes...writing new stories, composing songs, making videos, painting pictures...Fan reception can not and does not exist in isolation, but is always shaped through input from other fans" (210).

3. “*Fandom constitutes a particular Art-World*” with its own aesthetic values and unique sub-cultural creations.

“Fans write short stories, poems, novels, which use the characters and situations of the primary text as a starting point for their own fiction...Fans take found footage...and edit them to construct their own videos, which comment sometimes with irony, sometimes in celebration, on the programs which gave them birth...Fan artists paint pictures, construct sculptures, or fashion elaborate costumes. Fan musicians record and market tapes of their own performances” (212).

4. “*Fandom constitutes an alternative social community:*”

“The fans’ appropriation of media texts provides a ready body of common references that facilitates communication with others...The collapse of traditional forms of cultural solidarity and community within an increasingly atomistic society has not destroyed a felt need to participate within a cultural community...What fandom offers is not a community defined in traditional terms of race, religion, gender, region, politics, or profession, but rather a community of consumers defined through their common relationship with shared texts” (213).

Fan cultures, as literary communities, seem to fit Jean-Luc Nancy’s definition of communities that *interrupt* Myth. Before continuing, however, it will be useful to summarize some of the key points made thus far. In this chapter I have argued that *Myth-Ritual-Belief complexes*, while suitable to community-making in pre-modernity, may not be suitable in post-modernity. Even in pre-modernity, one half of the ritual year was structured

by ludergies, while in (ludic) postmodernity a continued emphasis on liturgy not only seems untenable, but fails to meet our mode of receiving theatrical events, which I have defined as *entertainment*. Next, we turned to Jean-Luc Nancy's observations regarding the interruption of Myth. Nancy defined interruption as a step towards *Literature*, and defined the literary audience as one that is co-authorial, hence, a collection of *Speakers* and *Writers*. Citing Henry Jenkins and others, I equated postmodern fan culture with folk culture, and fan writing with folk lore. I will now turn to identify what fandom – as a folkloristic community - produces by way of its Literature and/or Speech commensurate with Jean-Luc Nancy's definition of a *Myth Interrupted*. The expressive products of fandom take many forms, but fall into five basic categories of fan activity: *Music*, *Costume-play*, *Literature*, *Fan Videos*, and *Rituals*. It is worth surveying the scholarship in these areas - and noting their similarity to what Jean-Luc Nancy has heretofore referred to as Literature, available-for re-writing and re-reading.

A Scholarly Survey of Fan-Cultural Expression

Filk Music (or “Filk-song”) is a species of fan/folk music sung to a familiar tune. “Filkers borrow their subject matter from contemporary mass media and their tunes from either folk music traditions or from the repertoire of showtunes and pop hits” (Jenkins 1992a: 268).²⁶ In this way “Filk turns commercial culture back into folk culture...Its raw material come from the commercial culture; its logic is from folk culture” (Jenkins, 1992a: 270).

Costume Play - “cosplay” - began at American Sci-Fi and Comic book conventions during

²⁶ The *filk-sing* is a collective Fan sing-along, usually at a convention. Filk musicians compose their music offsite, printing song sheets to distribute among other fans. Filkmusic is heavy with fan slang, in-group references, and requires fan literacy.

the Nineteen Sixties and was later adopted by Japanese anime/manga fans (Winge 2006: 65-66).²⁷

Fan Literature is wide ranging, and involves poaching original texts. Jenkins (1992a: 24) observes that fan writing takes place outside of what Michel de Certeau called the “scriptural economy;” that is, outside of an authoritarian context that would forbid potentially new authors from “scribbling in the margins” (Jenkins 1992a: 152) of the “closed” source text or borrowing its characters. John Fiske (1992) claims that “Fan texts, then, have to be ‘producerly’ in that they have to be open, to contain gaps, irresolutions, contradictions, which both allow and invite fan productivity” via creative insertions (Fiske 1992: 42). Because alterations to the original text occur “within a face-to-face or oral culture they take a public form that may be called *enunciative productivity*” (Fiske 1992: 37). Lawrence Grossberg (1992) identifies *comic book* readers, in particular, as those “who actively appropriate the texts of specific popular cultures, and give them new and original significance” (52). Franscesa Coppa (2006b) has argued that because popular media fans are more influenced by television and film, not literature “Fan fiction develops in response to dramatic, not literary, modes of storytelling and therefore can be seen to fulfill performative rather than literary criteria” (225). Fans therefore do not author new texts, but new *productions* of previous texts that place already *embodied* characters into different *dramatic* contexts. Louisa Stein (2006) describes how online fan communities create collaborative narratives in the form of fictional (avatar) diary-entries. Stein concludes that because fan-created meta-texts (or *fantexts*) allow their authors to assume *fictional characters* while writing, the activity amounts to a species of Role Playing Game (Stein

²⁷ Fans study their favorite comic book characters and create detailed costumes, often at great personal expense, dressing for masquerades, themed parties, costume contests and dramatic skits, usually performed at fan conventions. *Cosplay* can be quite elaborate including make-up, hair, weapons and other accessories (p. 67). Additionally, *Crossplay* is a trans-gender version of *Cosplay* (Winge 2006: 69-70).

2006: 250-252). Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2006) describe fan fiction *Novels* as book-length compositions using the original characters; poaching in a distinctly postmodern way, to produce innovative literary *palimpsests* (26-27). *Fanzines* additionally provide valuable information to the fan community and also serve to connect its members socially by advertising upcoming events.

Fan Videos are produced by editing together found material, poached from popular media. These videos are sub-culturally coded to be traded among friends, thereby fostering “the construction of an alternative cultural community” (Jenkins, 1992a: 223). Because fans poach copyrighted materials, however, these products are of no commercial value. *Fan Conventions* (Cons) serve as semi-annual ritual venues or pilgrimage sites for members of the fan community, and are popular sites for dramatic performances (Coppa 2006a: 42-43). Conventions constitute “traditional” activities that allow fans to *re-visit* one another (Harrop 2012). In their strictly playful function, *Cons* can be compared to *ludergies* in traditional cultures (Turner 1982). As components of a postmodern leisure society, however, convention participation is voluntary rather than mandatory, and may occur even more frequently. Fan-cons also accommodate “panel rooms, art galleries, gaming rooms for role-playing games and computer games, masquerade halls; screening rooms for cult movies, television episodes, Japanese animation, and fan-produced films and videos” (Jenkins 1992b: 217-218).

“The Cultural Economy of Fandom”

The production and distribution of art within the fan community serves a strictly *intra-cultural* function, and operates within an alternative value system. John Fiske describes the “Cultural Economy of Fandom” as a “shadow cultural economy” in which forms of

“popular cultural capital,” in this case media products, are poached and reshaped to serve the social needs of an emerging subculture within which fans gain their own form of social capital (Fiske 1992: 30-31). What is produced by the members of the fan community – its folk songs, folk art, and folk plays - tends to be of value only to other members of that same community. Fan culture operates outside the economic logic of the dominant culture by producing products that are of no marketable value to outsiders, and which are distributed at great personal expense. “Fan culture makes no attempt to circulate its texts outside of the fan community. They are ‘narrowcast’; not broadcast, texts” (Fisk 1992: 39).

Within the “Cultural Economy of Fandom” an alternative – *not-for-profit* - value system operates. Because play resists *instrumentality*, and social values often resist commodification, fandom and its attendant social and recreational activities pose something of an enigma within the logic of the dominant culture. Fan conventions, like other folk events that serve an intra-cultural function, are not outwardly directed. Folk events are essentially worthless to outsiders, but are of supreme value to insiders, whose interests are meant to be served by them. Folk arts are often presented and received as gifts between community members, and reciprocated accordingly. Members are not mere consumers but co-producers, who, instead of generating a product for sale, collectively symbolize a value system that is declaratively not-for-sale.

Borrowing John Blacking’s terminology once again, the best explanation for the above may lay in a definition of the event as a manifestation of an “occasional” value-economy. “Filk song,” for example, engenders music that has value “*only in relation to a social situation. Folk music enhances a social situation, and its value lies chiefly in the social situation*” (Blacking 1969: 34 *emphasis mine*). Its value is *intrinsic* and “can be seen as an experience of the ‘*other self*’ *within*, shared out, in relation to Other-selves (Sager 2006:

143). This transcendental experience manifests immaterial values (defying the logic of the market place) and uses non-instrumental - play-like - means. Again, John Blacking suggests that on some level, *work* fails to meet the conditions for *self-actualization*, which music and art provide. Although Play can be more time-consuming and more labor-intensive than work, by contrast, play rejuvenates the player and establishes a connection with a higher state of being. Deep Play (Csikszentmihalyi 1974) in fact produces “intrinsic rewards” and can be so absorbing that it borders on the transcendental or spiritual. For this reason alone the withdrawal of that energy from the body-politic – and its redirection towards Self-fulfillment – registers as a negative within the instrumental logic of the marketplace; hence the paradox that arises whenever we try to explain play on instrumental terms, but why play alternatively registers as immensely valuable to the folk members themselves.

What fandom ultimately provides for its members is a *vehicle* for artistic Self-expression wholly lacking in ordinary society. Fandom is not a frivolous form of “community-making.” Rather, an alternative “higher value system” operates within the cultural economy of fandom relating its creative acts directly to individual projects of Self-making. It is fandom’s status - as a vehicle for the expression of an *artistic* Self - that fulfills Foucault’s existential desire for projects of *Self-Becoming* (Sarup 1996: 87). Paradoxically, these acts of artistic-Self-making, shared-out, and conducted within the reciprocity of Fandom’s means, ultimately result in the making of an artistic Community as its byproduct.

Synopsis

Below I offer two extended examples of folk dramatic play events in post-modern society: 1. the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and 2. Historical Reenactment weekends. In a later chapter I will discuss audience participation Murder Mystery events. These examples

demonstrate how groups with quite different aesthetic tastes, backgrounds and personalities have founded activities around shared interests, and adapted urban and rural spaces to fit their own social needs and recreational purposes. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* “community” could be called a latent folk group that finally found a way to be together. They established a play frame within a public, second-run movie house; established their own game rules, authored their own folkloristic texts, developed rituals, and engaged in dramatic play in relation to a shared aesthetic Imaginary. This imaginary was rooted in both musical theatre and film. Its members formed an Identity around a common socio-political and sexual status. By adapting the space to their own social needs, they formed an alternative, non-mainstream fan-based leisure community with its own ongoing set of dramatic folk play traditions.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show as Myth Interrupted – a Postmodern Folk Tradition

New York’s Greenwich Village is a neighborhood of small café’s, bars, parks, and meeting places. People live there year-round. Although it is contiguous with other neighborhoods, it is really only a few square blocks. It is also a pedestrian space where people pass each other frequently. Dozens of little streets and alley-ways converge on one another and crisscross continuously; names like Bleecker Street and Hudson Street and Stonewall Place have become famously associated with “bohemian” subculture, artists and gays. Stumbling out of the bar at 11:55 P.M. it is possible to amble one’s way along Christopher Street, just a couple of hundred yards, in high heels, past the bagel shop and the tattoo parlor and the small, family-owned grocers market, to Sixth Avenue, and arrive at the Waverly Theatre at Midnight, in full drag, just in time for a trashy underground film called the *Rocky Horror*

Picture Show (Nesbitt 2007). It is 1976, and lining up outside are Village people: “older members of various alternative sub-cultures: gay men in consciously campy drag, transvestites of both sexes, and a general assortment of punks, bikers, hippies, and ‘freaks’” (Minor 1995: 74).

When it arrived, the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (RHPS) was a relative late-comer to the Midnight Movie scene. Film and Theatre events with midnight starting times were already an established counter-cultural phenomenon in New York City at venues such as the Elgin Cinema and The Playhouse of the Ridiculous (Berenholtz 2005; Bottoms 2004: 234). In Manhattan, the transition “from underground film to underground stage” occurred in the 1960’s (Bottoms 2004: 216-236). Camp spoofs of popular “B” grade movies were becoming commonplace. And, it should be recalled that the original stage version of *Rocky Horror* was itself paying homage to the “B” movie genre when *as Theatre* it premiered “in an old London Biograph cinema, just off the King’s Road” (Richard Obrien, in Samuels, 2005). Later, it would re-open at the Royal Court Theatre.

Nationally, the way for the *Rocky Horror* participation phenomenon was being paved by other hybrid Theatre-Film Events at venues like San Francisco’s Palace Theatre, where prior to screenings of (then) new (underground) movies by John Waters and others, the countercultural, psychedelic/hippy/drag/theatre-commune – The Cockettes – were already performing sing-along pastiches of well known Broadway musicals, under hybrid titles such as “*Gone With the Showboat to Oklahoma,*” which contained “costumes and songs from all three” (Rumi qtd. in Weissman and Weber 2002). Each show paid homage to the musical genre, and was an innovative recycling of previously digested products of cultural consumption. At the Palace Theatre, audience participation of the kind that would later manifest itself at RHPS was already catching on in the form of audience members taking to

the stage to sing and dance with actors, as early as 1969. At many of these venues open marijuana use was also a staple feature, and helped unite the audience as a community of fellow “deviants.”

In relation to *Rocky Horror*, the Greenwich Village audience was also drawing on its own local tradition of Drag performers at Gay venues, lip syncing to popular music on stage. These Drag performances in fact restored - as camp versions – promotional videos of popular female singers such as the Supremes, lip syncing to their own records on television in order to insure that their vocal performance did not deviate from recordings being sold on the market. These performances were never perfectly in sync, and revealed their own artifice. The *Rocky Horror* soundtrack was similarly out of sync with the film. When lip syncing appeared at the Waverly, it was a logically self-reflexive next step. With the exception of various sub and counter-cultures, group singing, which eventually occurred during *Rocky Horror*, has never been an established tradition in America in the same way that it has been in Britain. But, the Broadway musical soundtrack, often derived from popular film versions of Broadway stage plays, at least provided a common point of reference for cueing spontaneous, musical-influenced sing-alongs when they happened.

Rocky Horror was already a stage musical and a soundtrack album before being converted into a film. It retained its musical dance numbers such as the *Time Warp*, along with onscreen instructions for how to perform the steps. Its spontaneous reversion back to a theatrical event was, in hindsight, not surprising given its reception by Villagers in Gay-influenced Greenwich on the outskirts of Broadway (after the stage play had been rejected the previous year by main-stream audiences uptown). The film itself internally references its own theatricality, and concludes with a “Floor-show” in which cross-dressing mad-scientist Frank-n-Furter forces his victims to sing and dance. The film ends with Frank-n-

Furter singing “Don’t dream it, Be it” (referring to expressing one’s sexuality) while lost in a reverie about himself having been the star of his own life’s play, and applauded by an audience of fantastic admirers who slowly disappear.

Framing and Keying Conventions: Myth Interrupted

Communication takes place on the common limits where we are exposed and where it exposes us. What takes place on this limit requires the interruption of myth. It requires that it no longer be said that a word, a discourse, or a fable gathers us together beyond (or on the near side) of the limit. But it requires equally that the interruption itself makes itself heard, with its singular voice.

- Jean-Luc Nancy (1991: 67)

Perhaps more important than the film’s innate theatricality was the fact that the Waverly theatre, where the interactive phenomenon first began, was already a gathering place for a particular audience demographic, thereby establishing a rudimentary folk context for the film’s eventual reception as a property of that emergent community. The film’s Mythos could easily be transferred into a celebration of the Greenwich Village ethos. The *Rocky Horror* audience violated the normative – *framing* and *keying* - conventions for attending a public cinema event (Goffman 1974). By making jokes during the film, attendees engaged in behaviors that would normally have threatened to disturb the “viewing” experience of other “paying customers.” But they did so along predictable lines when considered within the context of a folk environment. They did not just stage a mutiny among strangers; they formed a players’ confederacy among fellow folk members. Erving Goffman notes a similar situation with regard to familiars talking back to films or television shows *within the context of their own social group and surroundings*, which he calls “up-keying.” Up-keying amounts to the reflexive *upstaging* of an established dramatic frame.

Of course, with neither [live] actors present *nor an audience of strangers*, license to upkey can be considerable, and it is to be expected that for example, *private film showings* and TV plays will be vulnerable to an upkeying response from various quarters. (Goffman 1974: 367, *italics mine*).

Goffman goes on to quote the findings of Alan F. Blum (1964) regarding his observations of an African American family of television viewers at their home in Chicago. What surprised him was:

...the jocular quality of the interaction with the medium's performer, with the accompanying fact that they seemed to carry on a continuous joking dialogue with the television persona....[The viewer] inject[s] himself actively into the ongoing interaction between media performers, either as a third party or as an actual interacting participant. The kinds of repartee developed in these relationships – the spectator would chide the performer, cajole him, answer his questions directly, warn him of impending dangers, compliment him, and so on – were executed lightly, humorously and freely, in a highly personal manner...Although...he responds to the medium and its presentation, he does not seem to take it seriously - he is 'putting the medium on' and he seems to believe that the medium is reciprocally 'putting him on' (Blum quoted in Goffman 1974: 367-368).

Blum concluded that the experience of Black Americans viewing "what is predominantly a white cosmos, and not easily accessible to Negroes" caused them to mock – in entertainment of each other - what they could neither identify with nor realistically gain

access to (Blum 1964: 433). While a more extensive treatment of this topic might consider the influence of African American culture on the viewing habits of other ethnic groups within the second-run movie houses of New York City, which regularly featured Black exploitation movies, it is beyond the scope of the present study.

If one searches back a few years prior to the emergence of RHPS as a certified folk phenomenon, one finds a latent folk identity taking shape in terms of the Waverly Theatre's emergence as a local gathering place where regular faces and names were already attending the same venue repeatedly (Whittaker 1998: 180; Michaels and Evans, 2002: 331-332). Goffman's observation that upkeying behavior is only possible among friends and families – and, we might add folk group members - seems to ring true here. A formal byproduct of these interactions was the communally generated “second script.” Bogatyrev (1976: 54), Bogatyrev and Jacobson (1982: 37), and Bauman (1992: 32) have all noted the tendency of folk events to take their shape from everyday communication practices exchanged between audience members and event. RHPS generated a folkloristic record of those accumulated practices over time. The eventual “call & response” script was passed on by word of mouth, and eventually in writing, and made its way across the country, along with regional variations (Henkin 1979; Whittaker 1998: 184). Only when a collection of people from different parts of the country were all present at the same viewing did their responses come into conflict, sometimes canceling each other out (Minor 1995: 25). In less diffuse suburban and local contexts these response-scripts became, instead, more synchronized (Whittaker 1998: 184).

In addition to its cultural context of reception, up-keying arose from the structure of the film's text. Citing reception theorist Wolfgang Iser, Marco De Marinis (1993) states:

Iser sees the literary text as a *structure* that allows the reader to *generate* meanings, not as a vehicle through which a predetermined meaning can be ‘discovered’ through interpretation. [rather] Reading...produces meanings. It is above all through the ‘gaps’ (*leerstellen*), its points of *indeterminacy* (the implied, the unsaid) that the text fulfills its own ‘offer of participation’ to the reader...He can offer different ‘perspectives’ to fill up the *leerstellen* in the text. (164, *italics in original*)

The RHPS film-text unintentionally provides plenty of *leerstellen* in the form of vocal pauses so prominent that even the show’s creator, Richard O’Brien, has acknowledged “People frequently ask me ‘Did you leave the gaps in on purpose so that we could fill them in?’ I wish I’d have been that clever” (in Samuels 2005). In fact, the pauses were left over from the stage version’s ‘unsuccessful’ adaptation to the medium of film. Theatre automatically fills-in these gaps with the *stage presence* of gestures, music and other business. But the film medium’s close-up capacity merely exaggerates the pauses, making them seem interminable. After repeat viewings, these gaps seem to cry out for a response.

The *Rocky Horror Picture Show* has been recognized both as a folk event (Minor 1995) and a product of postmodern media reflexivity (Kinkade and Katovitch 1992). But, since “The film and its use by the Rocky Horror folk group has not been the subject of sustained scholarly research” (Minor 1995: 34), the phenomenon remains a fruitful area for contemplation. It is not the film itself I want to scrutinize, but rather our *paradigm* for viewing it. The popular press and academics both have often described it as a “cult” phenomenon. But, while Mary Minor (1995) is actually in the ethnographic majority when she describes RHPS as a mere *festive celebration*, a *secular ritual* and an altogether *traditional* expression of community (Minor 1995: 14), the religious connotations of the

term “cult” persist in distorting perceptions. While “cult” seems sexier than either “culture” or “folk” it is also problematic. Cult has been used as a way of comparing the kind of ‘ritual’ event that *Rocky Horror* actually is, and that its participants actually experience, to a devotional religious activity, which it is clearly not (see Jensen 1992; Jenkins 1992a).²⁸ Nevertheless, the comparison remains useful in explaining *why* it is not. By extending the implications of *Rocky Horror*’s status as an exception to the Ritual paradigm, I hope to shed more light on what Folk Dramatic Play actually is, and why a different approach to performance theory is needed to account for it.

In a postmodern context it is difficult to talk about RHPS attendees as a “folk” community, rather than a variegated *demographic* of people brought together by a set of shared sensibilities: at once aesthetic, social, political and ironic. Mary Minor (1995: 64-66) has pointed out that a certain demographic and political *median* can be identified in relation to its function for gay participants (as a means of coming out, protesting and forming a Gay-friendly community); a fact that I also observed to be true. I first began attending the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in 1980. I went regularly but not religiously for over a year and a half. In addition to its guaranteed aftermath of going to local diners in San Diego where I lived – Topsy’s Diner, the Flamingo café, or Denny’s – there was the guarantee that a certain social network would be aggregated and reunited there weekly. The event itself was festive and ridiculous as well as political and critical, dominated by an ironic kitsch-loving sensibility; in a word: *levity*.

²⁸ Joli Jensen (1992) strongly rejects the pathologized view of fandom on the grounds that it mischaracterizes the motives of fans, and reveals, instead, the critic’s own desire to distance him/herself from the abject cultural other, whose tastes he/she does not share or understand. Henry Jenkins (1992) likewise rejects equating “fan” with “fanatic” on the grounds that it confuses creative and artistic passions with “*religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness, connotations that seem to be at the heart of many of the representations of fans in contemporary discourse*” (Jenkins, 1992a, pp. 12-13).

Political Ritual and Theatrical Tradition

I position my analysis of the RHPS Event in relation to two primary articles: Kincaid and Katovich's (1992) discussion of the "Sociology of Cult films," and Thomas Leitch's (1987) "Theory of Re-reading." I take the position that RHPS fits well within Schechner's definition of a Political ritual, but reveals a fundamental difference between *religious* Ritual activity and Theatrical activity at the level of audience reception. An accurate understanding of RHPS must take into account how theatrical audiences differ from religious/ritual audiences in terms of how they *read* the film as a text. Their behavior ought to be regarded as Theatrical rather than Ritualistic because their reading behavior - and their language for responding back to the film - is Theatrical rather than Religious. Though participation in the restoration of a narrative/lore is central to what many have argued identifies group members as Folk, the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* is both symptomatic of Postmodernity's disregard for grand narratives, and paradigmatic insofar as it illustrates that a postmodern theatrical Tradition can be rooted in play, which may serve both Politics and Entertainment.

Cult Film Hypothesis

Kincaid and Katovich (1992) premise their "sociological approach" to *Rocky Horror* on the explicitly stated structural, ritual, and heteronormative assumption that repeated *Rocky Horror Picture Show* attendance can be equated with Cult behavior and deviance: "Cult films are documents elevated to sacred status in a secular context" (203). Throughout their analysis, in comparing what is, in my opinion, a theatrical event, to a religious event, Kincaid and Katovich have positioned RHPS in opposition to their own Belief system: as a

contrary system of Belief. The basic presumption is that the RHPS Event expresses a discernable desire to Believe-in-something that is a religious replacement. The authors, both from Texas Christian University, write in a religious idiom, and with a clear set of terminological binaries structuring their discourse. These include constant references to: *secular v. sacred, profane v. wholesome, traditional v. postmodern, homosexual v. heterosexual, procreation v. fun, work v. play, conformity v. deviance, playful v. serious, normative order v. protest*. In arriving at their conclusion that the *Rocky Horror Show* participants can be classified as Cult film-goers – “devotees who symbolically transform a cult film into a sacred document...in the context of a stable form of arcane consumerism” (203) - the criterion that they put forth relies on the use of terms such as *devotee, fanatic, convert, habitué, follower, or look-alike*; and attitudinal labels such as *believe, revere, follow, commitment, obsession, and frenzied*. Postmodernists are additionally characterized throughout using familiar tropes referring to (spiritual) emptiness, which in turn leads to excessive *consumerism* (to fill the void left in the wake of traditional religion’s demise). Overall, it is a familiar diagnosis of postmodern ills projected onto the RHPS experience, presumably to be cured with a restorative religious prescription, which ultimately begs the question whether attending *Rocky Horror* really is a worthy *substitute* for religion. After all: “cult films represent one of the many secular *replacements* for religious symbols in the postmodern age of electronic imagery” (191, *emphasis mine*).

A Theory of Re-reading

Thomas M. Leitch (1987) follows in the tradition of Roland Barthes and others in viewing the text as a product of the reader’s interpretation. Leitch’s *Theory of Re-reading*, which he applies to both literature and film viewing, offers a better way for understanding

the RHPS community: as a discourse community of repetitive re-readers. Rereaders are discourse communities that, after repeatedly engaging with the same text, begin to see the text in greater and greater detail, and then begin to produce both a discourse-*about-the*-details, AND a discourse-*about-rereading*. They do so in a way that continually divorces those details from the original “storyness” (498) of the linear narrative itself, and which then begins to produce an altogether second, but related, text. The second text is a record of the discourse *surrounding* the original text; *minutes* from the proceedings of collective interpretations, *transcripts* from interpretive conferences about the text, *literary histories* of textual reception by successive interpretive communities. Leitch notes that in the college classroom, the aim of the discourse community when it repeatedly rereads the same text is to *generate discourse* about possible re-readings and interpretations by appreciating the text beyond its surface structure, thereby bypassing the mere linear narrative - its plot and characters - to look at the finer points of detail related to style, author intent, and the minutiae of its signs: “Each new exposure to a story brings us the possibility of noticing features of the discourse that had escaped us before” (492). After repeated re-readings the ongoing discourse *about* rereading begins to overtake the initial act of reading itself and to create its own body of rather extensive second-order texts, which is the history of the negotiations of the discourse community itself with regard to how the primary text can be, has been, might be, or ought to be read.

What an examination of this second-order discourse reveals about the RHPS discourse community and its relationship to the primary text – the film – is that they did not read it religiously, but ironically, and in a post-modern way. And this ironic rereading led them subsequently to treat the event not as a Ritual, but as a theatre event, and to respond appropriately (and appropriate-ively) in kind, and in the language of Theatre. Applied to the

reading of a film text, Leitch fails to make the transition from the kind of text that a book is, to the kind of text that a film is. For this reason he eventually discards the possibility of endlessly novel rereadings of films. Although rereading applies to film, film is also a visual experience. With subsequent viewings, therefore, we begin to *see behind* the artifact's own constructedness in a way similar to appreciating authorial presence in literature. We begin to see *through* it, to *watch* the background, to see its put-together quality, how it has been made *by somebody*; including its mistakes. In a book, printing errors are simply obtrusive, not just because they speak of the book's printing, but because they speak *mundanely* of the book's printer and of the editor's oversight. In film viewing, mistakes present opportunities for deconstruction.

In both media, second-order rereadings produce their own texts, which serve as a record of what individual members of the discourse community have noticed while looking into the text. Leitch notices that readers differ from one another; some people are more perceptive than others (492). Leitch regards this however as one obvious *limitation* on film, as opposed to literature. In films, pictures ground the narrative in ways that the double meanings, endless permutations and transpositions of words in novels do not. A film can only be viewed so many times before its yield of new readings significantly deteriorates, and along with it, the yield of presumably enlightening second-order discourse. Leitch states, "Audiences who have watched a *Nightmare on Elm Street* repeatedly observe that eventually the most gruesome episodes, just because they are so completely expected, become ritualistic and farcical" (498) thus we begin to recognize irony instead of being surprised. Surprise and horror, which provide so much delight for first time readers, become "unavailable to us upon rereading." But what Leitch overlooks in his dismissal of a film's re-readability, is that when the notion of a "correct" meaning is discarded, and a

different kind of surrounding discourse is permitted, AND when it is considered in relation to the ascendancy of ironic discursive practices *surrounding* the film, what emerges in the sphere of the ironic is the potential dominance of a reading game based on the rules of visual perception related to the film's deconstruction, and populated by a community of live players.

Application of the Theory of Rereading

The actual difference between *Rocky Horror* attendance and Cult behavior can be compared to a difference in approaches to reading. Broadly speaking, devotional reading is characterized by reverence and respect for the text, not irony. There is a clear difference between how & why a Believer reads the Bible, for instance, and how a Fan reads a comic book, and what he or she reads it for. The two modes of reception: Reading, on the one hand; and Viewing, on the other; are clearly mixed together on some level in Kincaid and Katovich's generic assessment of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* Fans as Cult members at a Ritual. And it is this cross-over that needs to be addressed.

On our first reading of a text, Leitch explains, we are just trying to follow the basic plot and characters. We may not notice the background, or read it to find the mistakes – i.e. the *punctum* (Barthes, 1993).²⁹ We do not notice at first that, in the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the character *Eddie* is not really riding his motorcycle; it's attached to a dolly. Or, that the boom-microphone suddenly appears in the upper left hand corner of the frame, thereby giving away the fact of the film's *filming*. Or, that if you look very closely during a

²⁹ Roland Barthes (1993: 42-60) defines the *punctum* as that little 'something' in a photograph that reveals the moment of its having been taken; a small 'detail', that 'sting, speck, cut, little hole...that accident which pricks me' (27) to reveal the photo as an artifact. In one photo it is a group of nuns who just "'happened to be there,' passing in the background'" while the photographer was taking a picture (42). The *punctum* is not an intentionally *coded* feature of the picture, but a detail selected/found by the viewer (51).

certain episode of Star Trek, for instance, the cameraman suddenly appears reflected in Mr. Sulu's monitor. We do not read to destroy the illusion, but to follow it the first time through. After the tenth or the one hundredth rereading this begins to change, and in this way "repetition adds a new element to compensate for the loss of novelty" (Leitch 1987: 493). We start to look more closely at the details, and a new potential for novelty emerges. Perception becomes a game of deconstruction, and part of the game is looking for things to Undo, while its payoff is actually *finding* them.

This is not the case, however, when one reads earnestly in order to Believe in a work *regardless* of apparent contradictions; in which case, one does not read in order to *highlight* those contradictions, but to *resolve* them: as *absolute* non-contradictions. One does so in order to make them go away, for Structural or hermeneutic purposes. And this makes reading-something-in-order-to-Believe-in-its-absolute-divinity something quite different than reading to be entertained by a work's fictionality or cleverness, or even by its absurdity and imperfections. It is my position that Theatrical plays inherently invite the latter form of reception, and that Ritual requires *the work* of the former. There is therefore a clear difference between how a Believer reads and responds to a Ritual event and how a Theatre-goer reads and responds to a Theatrical event. And it is this difference that explains why RHPS fans responded in kind; in an overtly Theatrical manner. But the bottom line here is that the kind of *reading* involved in theatre is directly related to the kind of reception it requires of audience members, and to the kind of event it is said to be.

Rocky Horror Picture Show fans did not read the text in order to Believe *in* it, but rather to *dis-believe* in it, in a more *appreciative* way, as an artistic construction. As such, their approach to the text was closer to comic book reading than to Bible reading, and to destructuring than Structuring. The two forms of reading set in motion two *opposite* ways

of approaching the event: seriously or humorously. The comic book reader appreciates a certain Artistic sensibility, and identifies with the author's imagination and creativity. One who approached the Bible in this way, appreciating it as a fanciful and imaginative work of human creation, would certainly not be counted as a true Believer. Since we clearly make these distinctions in regard to Believers, why should these same distinctions not also apply to Un-believers in terms of properly designating either a Cult from a non cult, or a ritual from a non-ritual within Performance Studies? I will return to this at the end of the chapter.

The Discursive Community: a Second Order of Discourse

The *Rocky Horror Picture Show* is intentionally ironic, and invites a comic book sensibility because the comic book aesthetic is quite *literally* built into its design.³⁰ The film is also decorated with Gay iconography, which Kincaid & Katovitch seem unable to read. Frank-n-Furter wears a pink triangle on his smock. There are Rainbow flags & party hats and a rainbow over the Castle itself; and Rocky Horror is brought to life in a tank by adding rainbow colors to the water. That RHPS fans read the text ironically and cleverly (as insiders), can easily be discerned from the record left behind of the discourse *surrounding* the event, which became a second text in its own rite. *Rocky Horror's* second "script" – the one we know today - is really a *folk transcript*, an anthropological record of the responses produced by a living event community over time, through oral tradition. It is an historic record of symbolic activity which records the once *live* and inventive contributions of people repeatedly gathering at a particular time and place, trying to make each other laugh. Because it records people being cleverly mutinous in the dark, it is a community script

³⁰ In interviews for the documentary film *Rocky Horror Double Feature Video Show* (1995) both the film's director, Jim Sharman, and its set designer, Brian Thompson, acknowledge that the film's aesthetic derives from cartoons, comic books, B-movies, Gay iconography, kitsch, and various permutations of postmodern eclecticism.

produced by unknown authors. The fact that there is a second script at all is evidence of the kind of social frame surrounding the event. The script is urban folklore of a sort, only instead of being “the narrative,” it is a record of the responses *to* a narrative – perhaps of its auteur; yet it tells its own story nonetheless. The responses are timed and fitted each to a particular moment within the primary script. Timing became important because it was *live* comedy, intended for an *immediate* audience, not the film itself. That these became *choral* responses was only possible because of repeat attendance, coaching, rehearsing, and the collective sharing of snappy comeback lines between attendees. All of this worked because it was anchored in reference to a commonly shared and understood narrative; a narrative which *restored itself* at the touch of a button, but which was not a Myth.

Over time, responses became stabilized, standardized, preserved and *formal-ized*. Standardization did not equate with the stabilization of an orthodox ideological Belief. It became stabilized into an improvisational game - with rules - for many Players. This occurred in order to prevent the game from becoming unplayable - and to maximize playability. To do so, some degree of coordination was necessary to prevent the activity from devolving into a shouting match (Whittaker 1998: 184) in which the “best” responses got lost. As Bogatyrev and Jakobson (1982) have observed, “In folklore, only those forms will be preserved that prove functional for a given community” (36). Consequently, community members imposed improvisational rules on one another. Within its original folk context, the game emerged slowly among players who implicitly understood the rules they were developing, and who were, in fact, dovetailing off of extant framing and keying conventions within that group. Rules reigned in excess, in the form of “prophylactic censorship” (Bogatyrev and Jakobson 1982: 37). Being familiars who might potentially get ostracized for failing to play the game correctly, participants were also bound to comply. If

I may leap right to the point here: *rules enhance play*. And in maximizing playability, one also enhances the game's existential function. This is one reason why, as Veltrusky (1987) notes, the folk community often coaches and referees its players from the sidelines; the audience "takes on the function of the stage director in folk theatre" (160). Otherwise, there will be no game to play the next time around.

The Economy of Unpaid Labor

Kincaid and Katovich equate Cult behavior with Deviance. The cultists are those participants whose "identification with subversive characters" leads them to "fervently act out the ritual" by dressing up every weekend in "conformity" to its central 'charismatic' leader, and to act out their playful but nonetheless "deviant" behavior, at an event akin to a 'midnight mass' (194). The pivot of what the RHPS fans are supposedly deviating *from* is a work-ethic, which the authors explicitly position against a postmodern "fun ethic." The cultists Produce only fun, which is a deviation from work. In the binary of work and play Kincaid and Katovich give the impression that a leisure micro-economy based on having fun and celebrating homosexuality is un-productive (as opposed to *successfully* Counter-Productive). Here homosexual *Production* is explicitly set against the normativity of heterosexual re-production – "procreation" - without asking what other kind of reproduction is involved in the continual maintenance of the normative ideology itself. The ideology can be reproduced efficiently only if the RHPS celebrants refrain from their play activities and chip in to help keep the myth alive. The kind of actual work involved in the labor of self-erasure and dis-appearance is not counted as unpaid-labor-necessary-to-maintain-an-oppressive-ideological-system, nor is it counted as successful self-closeting,

because Kincaid and Katovich are already busy counting the absence as normal and expected.

Within the heteronormative binary system and its dialectics of deviance, very successful Counter-Production is counted only as a *lack* of normative re-production. Since deviation is, by definition, an absence, the RHPS event's *presence* is counted as an *absence*. But, what does the event, by its very presence, fail to reproduce? It fails to reproduce hegemony. Hegemony relies on the unpaid labor of "workers" who can usually be counted on to successfully affect an absence in the form of their own dis-appearance. Hegemony operates a parasitic economy in which it only counts free labor when it no longer receives it. Maintaining the normative order requires hard work, which the RHPS "cult" fails to perform. It therefore transgresses because of its play behavior. Play can be directly related to its political function as a refusal. The socially productive nature of play in building the RHPS community is clear. Play constitutes community: a community of deviants. Gay play successfully "fails" to meet the work demands of the heteronormative system. Myth and Communit/y/arian-ism are *interrupted*. But the interruption comes from a new and therefore "illegitimate" authorial Community, playfully writing its own Literature in the margins of the text and at the margins of society.

With regard to *Rocky Horror*, it is clearly the criterion of unpaid-labor-demands-not-met that leads Kincaid and Katovich to characterize the RHPS folk community, within the work/fun, heterosexual/homosexual, procreative/unprocreative binary system, as having failed to do what they *ought* to do, hence they are deviants because play is unworkable. But in the end, the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* event does not even fit within Kincaid and Katovich's definition of a Ritual, either. And it fails, NOT because it is an *opposite* religious ritual, as the authors claim; but because it *fails* to be one - by being *play* instead of

work, and *theatre* instead of *ritual*. It fails because it is received and read as Theatre, and responded to with dramatic folk *play*. Folk play therefore proves to be altogether anarchic. It does not participate in its own commodification. It resists performing unpaid labor in the field of hegemony. It is a lazy good-for-nothing Inversion ceremony.

The reason why it is additionally NOT a Ritual is because RHPS also proves to be an instance of the *interruption* of Myth (Nancy), which by definition is not an attempt to establish a new Myth. The myth that is being interrupted is the Myth of the status quo's inevitability. RHPS is counter-hegemonic without becoming an instance of a Counter-Hegemon. Rather, it is merely a manifestation of that which now appears in the absence of Myth: literature. Literature is added-to in post-mythic, postmodern, post-structural fashion, in the vein of Nancy's discourse community of creative voices co-authoring their collective replies, until eventually the game's own playability simply wears out.

And when the game eventually did run out, two things happened. Its original community handed the event over to a new generation, many of whom still use it, authentically, in the same way. But, it was also commodified and marketed as the "authentic" *Rocky Horror Picture Show* experience – outside of its originally self-authenticating discourse community, and its historical moment. It is now marketed to ostensibly touristic audiences in search of authentic tribal behavior (inter-cultural voyeurs/rubes). The Freaks are put on display, P.T. Barnum style.

What are we to conclude? Clearly, RHPS is not devoid of political effects. Yet, in the end, these effects are a byproduct of the event's entertainment function; it gathers together the "wrong" people to celebrate the "wrong" thing. But, where is politics to be located in this equation? Is it to be found in entertainment? Or is it not rather *produced* by the very *prohibition* "Thou shalt not entertain one another because *your* energies are required for

our hegemonic/myth-making purposes”? This theme will be addressed again below in relation to Historical Reenactment’s “correct” calling, and whether the activity should be defined in relation to *play*, or else to academic *labor*. Ironically, both involve doing the *time warp*, again.

Living History and Historical Reenactment: a Deeper Meaning of “Authenticity”

Historical Reenactors and Living Historians both share common *Narratives*, yet they pursue different goals. *Living Historians* engage in academic “field-work” in an effort to experience life as it was performed in past cultures. They conduct ethnographic investigations and/or act as first person narrators in educational settings (Snow 1993: 39-48; 121-152).³¹ The activity is Work related and its aim is to produce peer-reviewed research within the knowledge economy of academia. *Historical Reenactment* is pursued largely for *leisure* purposes, as a Play activity and “a hobby among self-trained amateur historians.” Historians may establish the core narrative, but the narrative is used by Reenactors to stabilize a set of Rules, which makes playing a game (using those rules) possible. Rules enhance play by stabilizing a definition of “authenticity” that can be agreed upon, and Players enact “authentic impressions” of historical personages to affect for themselves and others a better and more realistic experience. Participants strive for deep play phenomena, which in the reenactment context are referred to as “Time Warps.”

³¹ Stephen Eddy Snow describes how ethnomethodologically-informed character depiction emerged from simple third-person narration to first-person-singular embodiment in the context of the Plimoth Plantation historical site. Snow also describes how performer/actors make sense of their performative/informative/demonstrative educational activities as work (121-152).

“The height of the reenactment experience is a sense of time travel, called a ‘time warp’ or ‘period rush’ – a state of complete absorption in the reenacted event - followed by difficulty transitioning out of the past - and back into the present” (Agnew 2005: 330).

Of special concern is the relationship between the time warp and what it means to be “historically authentic.” For Living Historians authenticity is related to academic knowledge, while for Historical Reenactors authenticity becomes a matter of existential knowledge (R. Turner 1990; Handler and Saxton, 1988); “Provisionally, we will characterize that authenticity which living historians and reenactors seek as *self realization*” (Handler and Saxton, 1988: 248). The subject of this section is the meaning and value of the “time warp” in relation to the pursuit of existential authenticity among Reenactors. In pursuing a line of inquiry already begun by Handler and Saxton (1988), Vanessa Agnew (2005), Rory Turner (1990) and others, I hope merely to deepen our understanding of reenactment in relation to the topic of *play* by providing an alternative reading of the activity. I conclude that applying the Work-related criteria of Living History to the Play-related phenomenon of Historical Reenactment, ultimately results in a *performative contradiction* at the level of *theorizing* itself.³²

Of historical reenactment Jay Anderson (1984) writes:

Folklorists would classify living history as an interesting form of expressive culture...it can also serve as a medium for acting out in a socially acceptable way behavior not commonly encountered in the contemporary world; for example, dressing up in armor and fighting with swords and shields...or most commonly for living history buffs, getting together for a weekend bivouac or rendezvous with

³² Regarding the concept of the *performative contradiction* see my explanation above under the sub-heading: *The Irony of Instrumentalism and the Paradox of Play*.

fellow militiamen, regulars, voyagers, or buckskinners....It is obviously theatrical with its use of costume (period clothing), props (artifacts), sets (historic sites), role playing (identifying with historical characters), and the designation of time and space as special and somehow not part of our ordinary everyday world. (Anderson 1984: 291)

They are many forms of reenactment. The most common are military-related.

Reenactment weekends consist of extracurricular social encampments, culminating in major events such as simulated battles. By the 1970s Battle Reenactment had become an established folk subculture, with participants investing large percentages of their income on equipment. Reenactors:

...collect or make their own authentic reproductions of Civil War uniforms and equipment in order that they may portray any of a number of characters found in a camp or battle scene: soldier, sutler, surgeon, musician, vivandiere, chaplain, camp follower, photographer, undertaker, or soldier's wife... (Allred 2002: 964)

Reenactors value Realism and Naturalism (McCalman and Pickering 2010: 3-5). They make every effort to create a believable "impression" by meticulously assembling costumes and by adopting "period mannerisms and grooming" (Gapps 2010: 52). Reenactors pursue techniques for total character-immersion and "engage in the equivalent of 'method acting'" (Schneider 2011: 55). Players are able to inspect each other close up. The goal, therefore, is to erase all anachronistic discrepancies between costume and wearer, between prop and user, performers and interlocutors. Authenticity of material substance is important, not only for a player's individual experience, but for the sake of other players who may be upset by

an item's lack of historical fidelity. Events are governed by a gentleman's agreement to maintain accurate historical standards. Inaccurate performances are, to paraphrase Stephen Gapps (2010), *aesthetically disturbing* (53).

A 'farb' is a reenactor who is not authentic; that is, there is something about his or her 'impression' that is too modern or otherwise anachronistic and that would identify him or her as a twenty first century person, such as a jacket of the wrong color or fabric or a model rifle that was not in military use during the Civil War. (Allred 2002: 964)

Historical knowledge is important to historiographers and re-enactors alike. But, debates have arisen among academics concerning the *use* being made of historical knowledge within reenactment communities. Vanessa Agnew (2005) devotes an entire article to this subject, and I will summarize her arguments below before continuing my analysis. Historiographers are concerned with *producing* knowledge about history. Historical reenactors study history, but they are concerned with *utilizing* historical knowledge to achieve a believable performance. "Authenticity" is important only insofar as it figures into achieving such a performance. The relationship that historical reenactors bear to *knowledge* and *authenticity* is therefore different from the relationship that historiographers bear to the same.

In writing history, Agnew observes, Historiographers may wish to experiment with using an authentic tool – a gun or a plow – in order to understand what is involved in doing so, but in the end, their goal is either demonstrative or academic. If they wish to interrogate their method for arriving at knowledge, they invite an epistemological critique of that method. Knowledge is validated when it proves intersubjectively verifiable in separate

experiments (Agnew 2005: 330-32). Applying the instrumental criterion of knowledge *production* to historical reenactment, however, has left Historiographers with several criticisms of the activity and raised red flags with regard to the methods and motives of its participants. To paraphrase Agnew (2005):

“Why,” they ask, are reenactors ambivalent about “bookish Historiography,” preferring the “authenticity” of the reenactment *experience* instead, but simultaneously recommend that potential reenactors study-up on their history before attending a reenactment weekend? Also, if the true test of experiential knowledge is inter-subjectivity, why is *status* given to individuals within the reenactment community based on their attainment of purely intra-subjective and “*intensely introspective*” experiences called time warps?. (Agnew 2005: 331-32)

These questions, I believe, can be partly resolved by simply coming to terms with reenactment as an extra-curricular social activity in which historicity becomes the basis of a game with rising phenomenological stakes for participants. Knowledge literally comes into play in historical reenactment. This knowledge is applied to the manufacture of a believable simulacrum. Knowledge is required for authentic expression. It is required not just for a competent performance, but for the demonstration of competence *in* performance. Mastery of knowledge acquisition can be displayed in restored conversations. “After all, reenactors take their history seriously – their credibility is measured by their conversancy with period minutiae and their fidelity to the ‘authentic’...” (Agnew 2004: 330). The simulation must take place before an audience of trained experts, and the attribution that a performance is *believable* must come from the same. Pulling it off well requires that one be conversant in

the deployment of time-consistent referencing. Time consistent referencing is necessary in maintaining the chronological frame inversion. A consistent volley of responses, which keeps the metaphorical ‘ball in the air,’ may result in a good time warp. What motivates the pursuit of time warps, then, is something other than a merely academic desire to *know* what the use of a particular plow might have meant in operation. A fantasy character is not needed for academic inquiry. But wherever the playing out of a fantasy character dominates, or where playing *well* becomes the primary motivation for the quest of acquiring historical knowledge and authentic/authenticating equipment, Folk Dramatic Play can be said to dominate.

Performing objects also dominate these experiences because an environment must be furnished. Reenactors who choose their props wisely also display skill. Reenactors pride themselves on their historical knowledge, not just because they are historians, but because historical knowledge is necessary for correctly playing the game of creating an authentic environment. In the end, if an “authentic” reenactment experience is created, the payoff is an even deeper dimension of Deep Play (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). The irony of the event, of course, is that while there is a debate surrounding the “authenticity” of battle reenactment, there is no authentic battle; quite the opposite, there is cooperation and choreography on a massive scale. Choreography ensures that no-one is injured or killed. The competition – or rather the co-opetition – is an orchestrated simulation, which offers the chance for worthy opponents to outdo one another in *providing* for others a sense of dramatic realism through the accuracy of their own individual portrayals. And since not manufacturing an *authentic* “impression” ruins other people’s experiences, much is at stake in terms of phenomenology.

Of course, both Objects and Characterization also serve a deeper “transcendental” function beyond dramatic play. This occurs at the level of personal experience with regard to objects functioning *across* time. Objects in reenactments operate as *signs* of the original. They allow for an experiential kind of reading, as though the object came – transported – from another time. But its simultaneous occupancy of “our” world – and its ability to serve a use-*function* in our world – collapses the difference between *sign* and *function* (in both worlds) and traverses the distance between past and present. A *sign* of the past – a tin coffee cup – operates in the Now in the same way that it operated in the Past’s *own* now. Thus what is ultimately restored is a kind of Hegelian re-positioning of historical actors’ (not re-enactor’s) consciousness of their own future, which the configurational positioning of historiography – looking *backwards* at the past as narrative – cannot duplicate. The battle reenactor, however, is placed experientially *behind* time, prior to the battle. What reenactors try to duplicate on some level is the *existential position* of being-towards-death-in-the-future, which is what historical actors in the past also experienced. The fact that a 21st century reenactor knows his objects to be *signs* is what he tries to forget. It is the temporary forgetting of the object’s sign function and its replacement or merger with its contemporaneous use function that creates the “time warp.” Historical reenactment is about weaving in and out of Time. But the strange thing about these worlds is that the point where they collide or collapse into one another is the User’s own Now. What the reenactor is, ironically, seeking as the true test of having an authentic experience is existential Being-in-the-NOW as past historical figures once were.

Standing in the way is the fact that Post-moderns possess historical knowledge that historical personages could not have had. This means that post-moderns, and well read scholars especially, can engage in a second order of critical discourse that was not only

unavailable to historical personages, but which they must forget in order to have an authentic phenomenological experience. How does one omit the flood of what Thomas Leitch (1987) calls “second order discourse” (497-98), about historiography? Surely *this* is not authentic – remembering? So, ironically, the goal is forgetting *that* knowledge in order to arrive at the experience of one’s own Being in the now, which is the only way to encounter NOT knowing what you know – namely, how the battle turned out, and if you died. What also cannot be forgotten by the act of taking-on a “role,” of course, is one’s own personal memory of being a Self. For, “A person or individual is...a selfsame object perduring over time and possessing an accumulating memory of the voyage. He has a biography” (Goffman 1986: 128-29) and this biography cannot volitionally be *dis-remembered*. What *can* be accomplished, though, is the deep *immersion* of one’s Self within the immediacy of an existential experience.

Rory Turner’s (1990) nuanced and phenomenological ethnographic description offers one of the best explanations for the draw of battlefield reenactment, for why reenactors pay such attention to detail, and for their desire to immerse themselves in the activity. It offers the chance to experience camaraderie, shared meals, drinking, “musical instruments will be produced; songs launched into...” (130):

But let us return to the camps. What appealed to me, and probably to other reenactors? The smell and the color of hay. Horses snorting in the quiet early morning...a country dark nighttime lit by the flame and the embers of campfires or the cheery light of oil lanterns. Playing a game of poker on an original period chest with authentic old cards and real money. The smell of smoke. The view across the camp... (R. Turner 1990: 130).

He concludes that these are authentic phenomenological experiences, which also involve a prolonged meditation on the meaning of the past and moments when involvement becomes so deep – Now - that reenactors experience “time warps.”

The identity is a ‘play’ identity, but in the curious inversion of leisure culture, play identity can count more than ‘real’ identity. The play identity transforms the reenactor into someone else – a Civil War – period personage – but at the same time someone more fully himself: a creative individual freely engaging in a personally meaningful activity. In a world where even the most stimulating economic roles can fail to respond to what Marx called ‘species being,’ our human capacity for engaged experience, it remains for us to use leisure to pick up the slack. Reenacting is a fruitful response to this problem – the problem of boredom. (R. Turner, 1990: 126)

Handler and Saxton (1988), in their essay on Living History, propose that such events offer existential opportunities for authentic acts of self-becoming through the ability to bow out of everyday life (which threatens to render one’s Being in-authentic):

Heidegger offered a hermeneutic of authenticity where the self – the benchmark of authentic existence – is...an achievement of individual ‘being in the world.’...For Heidegger, authentic existence is a modification of, not a severance from, inauthentic, everyday existence – the prevalent mode of one’s comportment in the world where the individual is given over to the instrumental, social, and historical context. So construed, inauthentic existence constitutes a forfeiture of individuation to the instrumental canons

and social conventions of the public domain (what Heidegger calls the world of ‘anyone’) and is distinguished by three features:

1. Typicality: Consumed by its engagement with the instrumental world, inauthentic existence finds its possibilities to be everyone’s possibilities...leveled down and standardized, the inauthentic life may be instantiated by anyone.
2. Diffusion: A consequence of typicality, diffusion represents the compartmentalization of one’s tasks and the episodicity and discontinuity of one’s experiences in the world of the Anyone.
3. Routinization: Likewise traceable to typicality, routinization reflects the reduction of one’s instrumental relations to algorithmic procedures and of social relations to accepted conventions....inauthentic existence involves an ongoing habituation...of one’s existential possibilities. (Handler and Saxton, 1988: 249-50)

The authors imply that a double meaning of authenticity may be operating within the reenactment context. “Isomorphic” authenticity is related to historical accuracy; accurate reenactment is *isomorphic with the original* (243), while “existential authenticity” is related to *self-realization* and self-authorship (242-243). Handler and Saxton link the potential for existential authenticity with the potential for narrative activity in the form of self-authorship and autobiography, which writ large, is “...a life as a readable first-person narrative, operationally read in the process of its composition, a life individuated in its authorship, integrated through its emplotment, and creative by dint of its invention” (250).

Although originally written in the future tense, when looking back on a life that has been authentically well-lived, one should see in that life an intentional or purposive “plot,” which in hindsight reads as a “configurational unity” (250-51). The authors then state:

The relationship between Heideggerian authenticity to living history is this: *Living Historians share with other moderns the notion that an authentic life is a storied or emplotted life...* We suggest that living historians seek to re-experience history because they expect thereby to gain access to lives and experiences characterized by the wholeness that historical narratives can provide. (Handler and Saxton 1988: 251, *italics in original*)

But, argue the authors, this unity is actually being read *into* the past by historians; it was not experienced that way at the time. And, because Living Historians attempt to derive authenticity – vicariously - by using somebody else’s narrative-wholeness, the effort to acquire authenticity - for themselves - through Living History is doomed to failure by “dyssimulation” (dis-simulation); that is, by the attempt to fake an authentic life’s (presumed) configurational unity (252). For, what Living Historians would most likely arrive at, were they actually able to achieve a perfect isomorphic simulation, would be the sudden realization that the clothes worn by the original historical personages, as well as the duties being performed by them, were as mundane, routine and *leveled-down* to the standards of the Anyone in their day, as are our own.

What is eccentric in the extreme, however, is wearing the clothing of historical personages anachronistically, and re-staging their mundane activities in the present, and as play - within a leisure society. Handler and Saxton do not adequately distinguish between Historical Reenactment (play) and Living History (work) in their discussion of

authenticity. After posing the hypothesis that “reenactment” may serve an authenticating existential function within a postmodern context, they negate that presumption by applying the hypothesis primarily to forms of Living History, which are (museum/academic) *work*, not *play* (as weekend reenactments are), and which do not allow for the kind of freedom necessary for participants to self-authorize authenticating forms of phenomenal experience from the inside: *workers are deprived of self-directed creative play*. They conclude therefore with the idea that Living History does not produce authentic self-knowledge because it is Other-directed work (carefully controlled and routinized), and may not produce isomorphic knowledge because it merely reads configurational unity - erroneously - *into* history. They end by negating the practice on both counts. This dismissal, however, may be premature.

Academic Work v. Existential Play: Two Different Discourse Economies

Discourse among academics often confuses the motivations of Historical Rennactors with those of Historiographers. Living Historians impose on Reenactors the instrumental standard of knowledge production (within the academic economy). In doing so, they effectively supplant the logic of self-making, which operates within the sphere of play & leisure-time pursuits, and which motivates players within the domain of Reenactment. This results in a performative contradiction. In both contexts *Time* becomes an issue; not merely the paradoxical *play-of-time* whereby the Past AND Present both seem to be simultaneously *present in the now*, but rather, Time as a second-order Framing device used by academics to frame the activity *within the present* as Work rather than Leisure time. But it is this

framing device that on some level is responsible for rendering existential knowledge suddenly “in-authentic”.

Because framing the activity *as* Work employs a frame related to the production of knowledge within the knowledge economy of academia, the real discrepancy between the academics and players is a Frame discrepancy, about whether the activity *should* be framed as Work or Play. Players do not necessarily pursue the same type of knowledge as Academics. The kinds of reasons people give for engaging in play emerge on the order of self-fashioning, and as self-authenticating acts of *being-present-in-the-moment*. John Blacking (1969) might even say – being at Work and being at Play *constitute* two different and potentially irreconcilable modes of Being (and Being-together) in the world. At work, one is not entirely free to be oneself, and being in the mode of one’s workaday self is antagonistic to Being the “other self” *within*,” experienced through Play.³³

In Heidegger’s sense, therefore, we might say that being one’s self in the Instrumental mode of the Everyday, means being (in-authentically) in the mode of the Anyone; or, in the case of knowledge-verification, in the mode of Any academic – because *any Academic* should be able to verify one’s claims to knowledge (within the discursive economy of academia). Objectively speaking, it should be Anyone’s knowledge. Academics are confronted with the *impossibility* of Intra-subjective knowledge being Anyone’s knowledge. If, as Blacking might say, what is actually produced in play is the subjective knowledge of being-one’s-self-in-the-mode-of-being-one’s “Other self” *within*, AND it is precisely at *that* point where inter-subjective verifiability becomes impossible, then, in trying to verify Self-knowledge in ways satisfying to the Anyone – to any Academic - what

³³ For a complete explanation *see* Rebecca Sager (2006: 147-52). Also *see* my summary of her explanation of Blacking in Chapter One under sub-heading: “*Supra-Cultural Identity Theory and Individuality*.”

is undone *is* precisely the Self. Stated differently, in the performative contradiction of *trying* to produce Knowledge (for others) within the logic of the knowledge economy - and of thereby trying to be one's self on Other's terms – the Self is undone. One is immediately subjected to the Heideggerian trap of trying to be one's Self in terms of the Anyone.

It is helpful to think of Historical Reenactment, as Rebecca Schneider does, merely as the enjoyment of the paradox of having one foot in the *here & now*, and the other one in the *there & then*, for it allows us to ask 'who is the Being in whose *presence* these two appear'? Is it not the existential Self? And if it is, then three types of "Time" are operating simultaneously within Historical Reenactment: 1) The Past, 2) The Present, and 3) *Presence*. And it is *presence* that shifts us into the phenomenal mode of understanding; a different moment of Being present, which is: Being-one's-self-at-Play rather than at work. A different mode of Being-in-time operates. It is where Past and Present intersect through *Presence* that transcendence occurs as a "time-warp." The experience of Being in relation to two irreconcilable *concepts* of time forces the realization of a second paradox: it must be Being that is standing at the juncture of this Eternal Now; a spiritual Self- realization, which Bataille relates only to *non*-instrumental activities, including play. Bataille's position is consistent with Rory Turner's description of reenactment: "Reenactment is...a pleasure structure, a voluntary creation...a complex and intriguing game, an opportunity to go camping and get drunk with friends, an alternative to a dreary existence, a 'thing to do' in a social set, or a fascination window on the world" (130).

Live Action Role Playing (LARP) and the Self Authoring Community

Live Action Role Playing events create opportunities for social play and self authoring within a non-instrumental “literary” framework, and are to be found at the far end of the reenactment spectrum. Above, we have seen that within the historical role-playing community there are gradations of involvement, from 1) scholarly activities claiming to produce knowledge within the knowledge economy, framed by the work ethic, to 2) leisure time activities aiming at existential self-authentication within the sphere of play, and which use historical authenticity only as a play vehicle. Both of the above examples are directly related to claims surrounding Authorship in relation to forms of authenticating knowledge, which I have expressed as a discrepancy between types: authentic existential self-authoring versus authoritarian knowledge-claims surrounding the authentication of Historical research.

At the far end of this continuum, however, are those who define historical “authenticity” merely at the level of theatrical signs and gaming tokens deployed within the gaming environment. Live Action Role Players mix historical “authenticity” and “existential self-authentication” within fantasy role-playing scenarios scripted to accommodate the role-playing interests of participants. Role Playing Games (RPG’s) and Live Action Role Play (LARP) events are collaborative forms of storytelling in which an open-ended narrative unfolds over an indefinite period of time. Participants authorize themselves into the activity. Recalling Jean-Luc Nancy’s position once again, we might say that its members are part of an inventive community of *sharing*, whose members mutually ensure that the group’s literature “does not come to an end.” Again:

It is difficult to describe the structure of sharing...Myth is interrupted by literature precisely to the extent that *literature does not come to an end*...It does not come to an end at the place where the work passes from an author to a reader, and from this reader to another reader or to another author...It is unended and unending – in the active sense – that it is literature. (Nancy 1991: 64)

LARPing, in which costumed character-players physically enact improvised scenes, is closely related to Fantasy RPG's of the table-top variety (i.e. *Dungeons and Dragons*). Participants move easily between these two genres. For most Live Action Role Players, the question of authenticity merely figures into the shared fantasy scenario as a suitable approximation of period costuming and kit, while the true aim of the activity is its potential for social play and collaborative storytelling. Players maintain a range of costumes, which they make themselves, cannibalizing between various costumes to outfit different characters they want to play. These characters are then fitted into the narrative in as much as the character's author is fitted into the narrative community, as one of its members. LARP events are typically held out of doors, usually in suitably rural or wooded areas, which double as the narrative's fantasy terrain. In no sense is the question of authenticity related to the sphere of Knowledge production.

James Wood is in his early thirties and has been role-playing for nearly fifteen years. He prefers table-top gaming because it re-assembles a familiar group of people on a regular basis. The activity is conducted mostly through dialogue, and requires a committed team of regular players, usually numbering less than ten people. Each author-player is responsible for extending the narrative into new terrain. Wood plays three weekly games (Wednesday, Thursday and Friday) and one fortnightly game, which has so-far lasted ten years. Players

meet in a fixed location - which is always someone's home. Because these games are ongoing, and narrative scenarios take time to design, to research and prepare for, the time between sessions is important. During the interim, players may fashion "potions," spells, scrolls, weapons or other character-related accessories or props. Wood describes himself as "the oldest member of the Thursday night group, the second oldest member of my Friday night group, and the youngest member of the fortnightly group." In each group there are players whom he has known for over a decade. In place of a genuine historical past to be re-created (rooted in historiography) however, Fantasy RPG's are supplemented by complex literary mythologies, which players elaborate on. Narratives can involve characters such as Priests, Dwarfs, Wizards, Warriors, Doctors, Lawyers, Magi, etc., each endowed with their own various skills and powers. Costuming and characterization are used emblematically in table-top gaming, mostly as a means of immersing players in the spirit of the game.

In addition to table-top gaming, Wood is involved in the Southampton, UK based Live Action Role Playing group, The Rising of Chaos; "chaos" referring – within fan communities - to *improvisational* play (Jenkins 1992b: 219). The group totals about 150 players, and maintains a small group of Refs responsible for developing narrative and interactive scenarios. LARPing is an interesting take on the battle reenactment weekend, because as ongoing games (or campaigns), battle scenarios are tailor made to fit the interests of players, while at the same time being designed to test the characters - and therefore the player's skills – on something of an equal footing with other players. LARPing is character-driven improvisation. Players become familiar with each other's characters, and participants propose characters they'd like to play. One of Wood's characters is Sir Basil, a holy warrior devoted to law, who "dresses in heavy armor, and

carries a mace and shield.” For Wood, deep play is valued, but the time warp experience is not an issue.

I don’t think I’ve ever had a problem switching on and off. I had a friend who did, but that was only after a table-top session that went on for something like 48 hours.” For historical characters, he believes, authenticity matters “only insofar as it doesn’t detract, then it’s not too bad, but people who wear watches and things are getting unreasonable....basically, things that look modern. So, jeans get complained about. I don’t know if trainers get complained about, but usually as a matter of practicality, boots are better. Some people complain about cigarettes. Things like that. Basically just things that are obviously modern, but as I said, because it’s a fantasy setting, it’s a bit more loose than the rest.

At the end of the day players are scored on costumes, characters, battle techniques, and skillful deployment of rules and powers related to their characters. Disputes between players must be adjudicated by the referees designing the events who further manipulate scenarios, which test the player’s skill at resolving problems within the event’s narrative structure. Rising of Chaos’ Games usually last about six hours, along with an aftermath and cool down period lasting about the same time. James Wood explains:

At the end of the LARP it’s a continuation of that story line, so it’s a matter of working together to figure out when we can do it again, liaising with each other, contacting each other by email...it’s a lot of work organizing. Afterwards we go down to the pub, and there’ll be a de-briefing, and more character discussions. Usually we’re there for most of the evening because that includes having dinner,

[and] getting scored. Due to how the system works, the characters - the players - are scored for their characters based on their costumes, their role-play, their [rules] system-awareness and so forth. And that also [serves as the preparatory period] for the following event. There's down-time action as well, and research. Some people with the relevant skills will make potions or scrolls. [my character] Volcanz would normally make stuff and investigate various things that he's got a vague interest in. [My other character] would normally pledge himself to demons. Sir Basil would spend most of his down time actually working as a holy warrior and lawman. The Baron [another character] would spend it doing research into various items, be they plot related or of personal interest...So basically the down time is accounted for in the character.

Wood is preparing to start his own Live Action Role Playing group. Characters will be structured into a game in which each belongs to a Guild. In this connection the structure of authentic Medieval Guilds will be used as a template, albeit placed in the service of the fantasy scenario. These fantasy scenarios are indeed provided with the "satisfying configurational unity" of a narrative super-structure or plot. But, as open-ended games, they are additionally structured by a set of rules defining the parameters of narrative and interactive play. Wood refers to these play rules as the game's overall "system."

At the moment we're working on creating the setting and the system. The *setting* is a post-magical-apocalypse world...The *system* we're going to cannibalize from a couple of other systems, with our own basic twists added. So, for example were basing everything around a system of laws, so that to learn a given skill, you have to have the right level of knowledge in the relevant ability. So that to learn to disarm

somebody you'd have to have the right level of knowledge, perhaps more skill with weapons...or agility...or strength or finesse at disarming. Finesse would show a higher level of skill than just having strength. And we're going to have guilds, which you have to belong to, which guard the secrets of their trade specialties.... players will have to be admitted to different levels of knowledge, which strengthen their character. So, these are based on the real historical Guilds.

Discussion and Analysis

For role-play gamers like James Wood, who occupy the play end of the work-play spectrum, reenactment is a purely social and recreational activity in which “authenticity” can only figure into the event as an existential, social, and we might say, literary achievement. For these players, I would suggest that an alternative reading of historical reenactment is in order, on the order of play as a mode of self-authenticating, and “*re-visiting*” as a mode of social authentication (Harrop 2012: 268). Insofar as what is being sought is a personal, privatized moment of self-authoring, outside of the de-individuating and in-authenticating encumbrances of the world of instrumentalities and run-of-the-mill expectations, the activity of play in-itself also offers the possibility of self-achievement by withdrawing itself into a world that is personally authored and socially ratified, *beyond utility*. What historical reenactments do – precisely, and in meticulous detail - is that they do *NOT* re-enact the past. They are flagrantly and utterly useless. Being play, *labor* has withdrawn itself - and its own energies - entirely from the possibility of commodification within the sphere of work by exhausting those energies within a self-indulgent instance of pure waste. Simultaneously, play withdraws permission from those who would commodify

human-energy-as-harnessable-labor by already having spent those “possibilities” in advance, and on the Self. In doing so, *play* forecloses even the prospect of bidding or negotiating for the *hire* of that potential labor. It has already been spent on existential luxuriating, and the instrumental is exhausted in witnessing the savoring of self-directed energy called “play.” This, I would suggest, is also the reason why certain categories of “plays” have been excised from the catalogue of what is today considered “legitimate Performance,” and likewise excised from the category of *authentic* knowledge; namely those theatrical forms than cannot be said to “serve” our current mode of socially-instrumental theorizing.

Subversive Negativity

George Bataille has offered similar arguments in discussing the relation between performance and self-becoming. For Bataille, spirituality is related to non-instrumental activities, beyond the sphere of work and workaday modes of being. In relation to the workaday - or *restricted* - economy of daily life (Richman 1982: 61-99), non-instrumental activities represented for Bataille “a radical, *subversive negativity*, which he called the sacred” (Gill 1995: xv). Violating everyday utility demands, Bataille proffered an alternative, “*general economy*, as an affirmation of *loss*” (Richman 1982: 61).³⁴ Seeking to

³⁴ George Bataille puts this into economic terms, with respect to what he calls *Restricted* and *General economies*. Articulated on Heideggerian terms we might say that the *restricted* – purely utilitarian - economy of taking-care-of-things-in-the-everyday-world is counterbalanced, within Bataille’s project, by the more *general economy* of existential and spiritual possibilities-for-Becoming; a project that requires – and eventually acquires – a sense of play and open-endedness. Existing, as it does, for spiritual Self-Becoming’s sake, the *general economy* operates as an end-in-itself-and-for-itself, which is commensurate with the logic of play. Within the project of becoming Other – e.g. one’s “other-self-within” – resources are spent symbolically within that transfiguration. Resource expenditure, however – counts only as wasteful extravagance and loss (i.e., as Lack) within the logic of the *restricted* economy and its standard of mundane utility. Defined as “material goods” wasted, the things used-up are viewed as harness-able resources spent on nothing-of-economic-value. The alternative value system operating within the *general* economy, however, constitutes the

release the fullness of Being into the general economy, “Bataille sought after human experiences that reveal the limits of thought: ‘other’ experiences beyond representation in language – the burst of laughter, erotic love, potlatch, sacrifice, mystical union” (Auslander 2008: 52). Bataille sought to disintegrate what might be called the Heideggerian social “self,” and saw this disintegration as the only true means of “self-transcendence...which opens one to the possibility of communion with others” (52). In disintegrating this social “self,” what is being denied is its everyday “use-value.” To accomplish this, Bataille proposes: “[a] program [of] **heterology**, defined as the science of what is completely other...that which is useless in a world driven by use-value and that which is wasteful in a world driven by production” (52). What, after all, could be more useless than a Hoplite warrior, a Civil War General, or a Viking in the 21st Century?

The simulated play worlds of historical reenactments and live action role playing games, I would argue, mirror Bataille’s notion of entering *sacred* worlds as a means of accomplishing this transcendence. He contrasts the “sacred world” - or the “order of intimacy” - with the everyday world – or “order of things.” The former is also the realm of religion, as well as what Huizinga calls “the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court...[which] are all, in form and function, play-grounds...all temporary worlds within the ordinary world” (Huizinga, 1955: 19; 9; 10; 19; 25; 12).³⁵

ground of Identity’s own Alterity (Becoming-Other). It is therefore useful in a different sense. From the perspective of the *restricted* economy, however, the *general* economy is one of waste, not divine Sacrifice.
³⁵ Huizinga (1955: 9-19) also links play with sacred activity through the following observations: 1. “Play is distinct from ordinary life” (9). 2. “Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the playground” (10). 3. “We found that one of the most important characteristics of play was its spatial separation from ordinary life. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Now, the marking out of some sacred spot is also the primary characteristic of every sacred act” (19). 4. “The Platonic identification of play with holiness does not defile the latter by calling it play rather it exalts the concept of play to the highest regions of the spirit” (19). 5. “The concept of play merges quite naturally with holiness” (25). 6. In play as in sacred ritual one experiences “the feeling of being apart together in an exceptional situation, of sharing

For Bataille, religion is a field of activity and experience that could not be reduced to social utility or moral values. It does not simply make good workers and good citizens. There is within religion an impulse toward excess and extravagance that belies its potential towards otherness and reveals its potential for subversion of the social order. (Auslander 2008: 52)

As part of this sacred world “useful things” are sacrificed through ritual.

Rituals take something of use value within the order of things (a domestic animal, a person, a bushel of grain), removes it from that order and passes it over to the order of intimacy – that is, the realm of the sacred – through an act of wasteful consumption...sacrifice is about wasting something that has use-value within the order of things, thereby sending it over to the other side, to the sacred realm. (Auslander 2008: 53-54)

I would suggest that human labor/energy can similarly be sacrilized through consumption channeled as extravagant expenditure, or Play. Bataille, similarly, interprets the communal potlatch not as an act of reciprocity within an economy of social relations (i.e. valuation and gift exchange), but as an act of consumptive trans-valuation through carnival excess. In short, divine waste. The weekend murder mystery (below) likewise begins with a symbolic human sacrifice which sets in motion a game (solving a puzzle). The battle reenactment arduously prepares for the war that will NOT happen; bodies of no-use-value absorbed into play - “mock war” - which becomes, in Austin’s terminology, a

something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms...” (12).

constative accomplishment: the carnival of non-carnage. Similarly, the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* celebrates sexuality *as sensuality* not aimed at re-production, while simultaneously deconstructing the configurational unity of the (hegemonic) narrative-taken-as-Myth, and these same wasteful excesses have been observed in the gift-giving and drinking practices among Purim participants (Shuman 2000; Epstein 1994) and other - traditional - folk-play forms. All display the same “subversive commitment to anti-productivity” (Auslander 2008: 55).

To conclude, Historical Reenactment may be a component of postmodern personal and social Authenticity. In a postmodern context authenticity of self can be gained by ironic simulation rather than devoted restoration; from play rather than work, from theatre rather than ritual, and from literature rather than Myth. Leisure time permits self realization, but irony permits non-attachment. Irony, insofar as it is a Theatrical attitude, does not require Belief, only imaginative free play. Where pre-modern man derived authenticity from fitting into the structural features of a traditional Myth or Ritual, post-modern man requires Self-realization by extraction, but must construct and deconstruct his own narrative in order to have it meaningfully. Because, in the end, postmoderns do this within a social context, however, John Blacking might even conclude that because these events are produced by the collective efforts of a subculture and its members – all cooperatively playing together – then the net result should be a deeper commitment to the members of the group who helped to provide the experience.

Summary and Preview

The above chapter questioned the application of pre-modern definitions of folklore to postmodernity; in particular, the idea of community-making as it relates to *myth*, *ritual*, and

shared *beliefs* in a postmodern context. Rejecting these as “communitarian” values potentially inimical to the formation of real community, I offered a post-modern definition of folk play, relating community-making to the post-structural properties of *literature* (as non-myth), to the *theatrical event* (as non-ritual), and secured by *entertainment* (as non-belief). The *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the Historical Reenactment Weekend were offered as instances of postmodern folk play. The following chapter will detail the history of the audience participation Murder Mystery Weekend among members of a fan-based literary sub-culture in New York City (c. 1977). The event began as a sub-cultural folk play activity but later turned into a commercial venture. It relates the playability of the mystery game to media literacy and to theatrical reflexivity gained both by reading mystery novels and from viewing film & television adaptations of murder mysteries. I conclude that the original event counts as an instance of postmodern folk play, but that differing degrees of literacy, identification and involvement in Murder Mystery ‘culture’ may be used to differentiate folk players from popular players.

CHAPTER THREE

Mohonk: The Folk-Play Origins of Murder Mystery Dinner Theatre

Synopsis

Nearly everyone is familiar with these activities. The actors play the suspects; there is a murder, and the audience has to solve the crime. The Audience participation murder mystery event is now a mainstay throughout the Western world, yet few people know where it began. The phenomenon has received scant attention within academia, and is known to most people only from its later incarnation, as a form of popular dinner theatre. From its inception it was covered widely in the popular press, but for understandable reasons was never treated as a “legitimate” form of drama. It began as a form of folk play among a small group of devoted mystery readers in New York City, and soon spread from a fan-based sub-cultural activity to a popular theatre event. The phenomenon itself is fascinating from a cultural perspective, and its history is related here for the first time. Wherever possible I have sought ethnographic data and included the voices of its original participants and witnesses.

This chapter relates the murder mystery event to literary culture, fandom and folk play. Media fandom, and the *emergent communities* that result from fans interacting around a common source-text or selected literary genre, has become a growing topic of interest among cultural theorists, folklorists, and performance scholars alike.³⁶ Indeed, fan-based media sub-cultures are recognized as postmodern instances of folk culture; its members

³⁶ For a complete discussion of *emergent* community & traditions see Regina Bendix 1997: 196-97; 207-13. Also see Chapter five of this thesis, sub-heading: “Emergent Tradition/Community.”

being the purveyors of emergent folklore and community, and the creators of new forms of folk play. In her introduction to the book *Theorizing Fandom* (1998) Cheryl Harris notes the specific importance of literature to fandom, both in terms of consumption and production. Indeed, “Fan culture and the production of literature are frequently inseparable” (p. 6). Henry Jenkins, in his 1992 book of the same name describes *Textual Poachers* as fans who first *consume* literature and then, in response, *produce* everything from literary (maga) Zines, to “filk” (i.e. folk) songs, artwork, costumes, and “scripts” for interactive games and play events.³⁷

These products reflect a postmodern desire to establish *Literary* - as opposed to Myth-based – communities & traditions, rooted in shared aesthetic interests rather than belief systems and ideologies. “Fan culture is made by a new type of cultural community, where affiliation is based on common patterns of consumption, common ways of reading and relating to popular texts, yet, one serving many of the traditional functions of folk culture” (Jenkins 1992a: 272). In addition to personal interaction with the literature, fan groups also regularly communicate *through* the literature, as members of *interpretive communities* (Jenkins 1992b; Leitch 1987).³⁸ Taking the Murder Mystery Weekend as a contemporary example, this chapter relates the event specifically to its status as a literary/lore activity and measures its ludergical status in relation to the event’s function as a Tradition - or ritual - for re-uniting community.

³⁷ Jenkins refers to fandom as “A subculture that exists in the ‘borderlands’ between mass culture and everyday life...*Textual Poachers* describes a social group struggling to define its own culture and to construct its own community within the context of what many observers have described as a postmodern era” (3). Jenkins devotes his entire book to discussing how fans read and interpret texts, and several chapters to describing what fans produce in response. For comprehensive overviews of fan culture and its explicit relationship to folkloric production see Jenkin’s *Textual Poachers* (1992a), pp. 1-50; 250-81.

³⁸ Commensurate with other folklore users, whose members engage the literature for social purposes, fans share a common interest in both preserving and elaborating upon the chosen source-text, and in establishing ground rules for social interaction and literary interpretation (see Sandvoss 2007; Jenkins 1992b: 44-49).

Murder Ink

In January of 1977, two ingenious women named Dilys Winn and Carol Brener put on, at a huge and magnificently rustic mountaintop hotel ninety miles north of New York City, the world's first mystery weekend, in which the guests were invited to observe and then solve a murder...and the idea was so successful it became an annual affair, and has bred imitators by now from California to the British Isles.

- Donald Westlake (1987: 7)

During the 1970s Dilys Winn ran a small bookshop in New York City. It was a specialty business on the Upper West Side of Manhattan devoted to murder mysteries, and the people who loved them. From its inception in 1972 Murder Ink was more than just a bookstore; it was a gathering place for murder mystery buffs, and the first of its kind in the nation. For Winn it was also the fulfillment of something personal. At the age of 31 she had left behind an eight year long career in advertising to finally do what she loved best: reveling in mysteries and escapism (*New York Times*, 16 July, 1972: 40). Winn had found her niche, and as the *Guardian* reporter Barry Coleman subsequently observed, murder fans had “spun something of a cult around Murder Ink” (Coleman 1976: 7).

Murder Ink also had atmosphere. It measured only sixteen feet by sixteen feet across (Fraser 1977: 40), and Winn left the storefront unmarked, preferring it to be as “stealthy as possible” (*New York Times*, 16 July, 1972: 40).

The store was only open in the evening (which gives it an interesting setting on a dark siren-wailing night) and Dilys would sit with her dog, Watson, and her cats, surrounded floor to ceiling with mysteries, and make sales between chatting and sipping sherry with her customers. (Coleman 1976: 7)

Winn went out of her way to promote mystery reading as an art form, and amateur sleuthing as a pastime. Within a year of opening the shop she began offering a lecture series called Sinister Sundays. “The speakers were all in the trade. Pathologists, policemen, lawyers, crime writers, and criminals. They were witty, cultured people, and droll performers, very much at ease in their own particular backyard of blood and guts” (Coleman 1976: 7). The goal of these lectures was to better acquaint readers with the real business of solving crime. In 1975, for instance, a sign reading “Meet me at the morgue” appeared in the shop window, and mystery “Buffs came flocking” to New York City’s morgue museum to examine skulls and hear forensic experts discuss the science of examining dental evidence and piecing together the cadavers of crash victims; anything to make the experience of reveling in mysteries more exciting (Shenker 1975: 37).

Winn herself had always preferred the English murder mysteries; the “tea cake” *cosies* (Arnold 1976: 26). They were more elegant, less brazenly violent, more cerebral than their American cousins, and besides, the puzzles were better. “‘American crime can be very dreary’ explains Dilys Winn, ‘No class. No finesse’” (Coleman 1976: 7). In 1976 Winn organized two international “Mystery Reader’s Tours of Great Britain for Americans” specifically for her Murder Ink customers (Coleman 1976: 7). An announcement in *The Times* stated that it was intended to take mystery fans to:

Places they have read about in Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dick Francis and others...Miss Winn has taken great trouble to think up thrills for the trips. There will be lunches with mystery writers, trips to the Old Bailey, and the Tower of London, and a short course on firearms at the Imperial War Museum. There will be

a trip to Edinburgh to see where the Burke and Hare murders took place and to look at a plaque to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. (PHS 1976: 14)

Along the way, on a nighttime train journey to Edinburgh via the Scotsman, the atmosphere began to take hold. Sue Arnold, writing for the *Observer Magazine*, recalled how she became caught up as Winn and her guests amused themselves by running:

Up and down the train, scribbling ‘Help! Help’ on the steamed up windows. Miss Winn and the male lecturer, called Jim, wrote anonymous notes which they slipped under the doors of passengers’ sleeping compartments to terrify them. The notes bore messages like, ‘Beware the poisoned cigarette’ or ‘Someone in a red coat is going to get you.’ By Nuneaton the excitement of the party reached fever pitch. Miss Winn thought up a clever plan to imprison someone in the guard’s van and then report them missing...Your helpless reporter found herself bound and gagged with British Rail roller towels and bundled into the darkened guard’s van...After a half an hour, and it wasn’t all *that* funny, I was rescued by the guard. (1976: 26)

Back home in New York City, Murder Ink continued to draw the usual suspects to its social events. In a personal interview Karen Palmer (2007) recalls how Dilys, and later on, Carol Brener, would hold parties in the garage adjoining the small store, “We’d spill into the garage and they would do things like Saint Valentine’s Day murder parties. And my husband was a bartender; he would bartend there...So we got to meet people.” In 1977, then in its fifth year of business, Murder Ink would host a birthday party for itself and its customers, replete with a birthday cake and live music (Fraser 1977: 40). For Winn, however, this was to be her last. By the following year Dilys Winn had sold the bookshop

to Carol Brener to pursue her own dream of becoming a full time writer, and Brener would later move the business to a storefront property to attract a more general body of clientele.

By January of 1978 Winn's book *Murder Ink: the Mystery Reader's Companion* would be number eight on the *New York Times* best seller list. It read like a scrapbook of brief essays and insights from the lectures and tours. That same year, as Peter Lovesey recalls, "Dilys was given a special Edgar award by the Mystery Writers of America...and I was at the event in New York. She gave one of the pithiest acceptance speeches I've ever heard: 'Thanks. I deserve it.' It got a huge laugh and applause" (email, 2006). Eventually in 1991 the Dilys award, offered annually by the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association, would be founded in her honor.

Mohonk Mystery Weekends

In the meantime, however, Winn had begun organizing another kind of literary event: an annual mystery weekend whose consequences would be far more widespread than anything she could have imagined. It was meant to be a convocation of "whodunit" fans amidst the gothic setting of Mohonk Mountain House, nestled among the trees and lakes of New Paltz, NY (Butwin 1978: 22). Started by two Quaker brothers (the Smiley's) in 1869, Mohonk was now an "antique-filled Victorian mansion" and listed as an historic landmark (Mohonk publication c. 1987). It, too, had atmosphere, and true to its Quaker origins, Mohonk was a 'dry' (non-alcoholic) get-away (Palmer 2007). Although originally intended to be an out-of-the-way place for healing and rehabilitation - where guests "were obliged neither to smoke, dance, play cards, or arrive or depart on the Sabbath" (Sutton 1979: 19) - Winn and Brener would soon make it the site of murders, and would eventually give "*departing on the Sabbath*" a whole new meaning.

The first Mohonk Murder Mystery weekend took place 27-30 January, 1977, and was called “The Dead of Winter” (La Chance 2005: email). It featured talks by recognized crime experts, as well as speakers such as Phylis Whitney and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, who had recently turned to writing mysteries, and had even used Mohonk for inspiration (Levine 1977: 1).

Carolyn Fiske, director of development for the [then] 108 year old motel, welcomed the event primarily as a smart business opportunity, and entered into the joint venture...with Murder Ink...Following the dollar-wise concept of filling up slow winter days with special interest weekends. (*Huguenot Herald*, 18 January, 1978)

This marketing strategy soon paid off as headliners such as Isaac Asimov, Stephen King, Amanda Cross, Maxwell Grant, and Martin Cruz Smith generated media attention, resulting in feature articles appearing in the *New York Times*, as well as local papers such as the *Huguenot Herald*.

Soon, despite its rather high price-tag of \$250 per room (Olafson 1982: 22), the Mohonk mystery weekend would gain a reputation for being the hottest ticket in town among mystery fans, eventually appearing in the 1984 Neiman-Marcus Christmas Catalogue as that “year’s exciting ‘getaway’ gift idea” (*New Paltz News*, 26 December, 1984), and ultimately being expanded from a one-time annual event in December, to two consecutive weekends in March:

The first Thursday of each December, the hotel switchboard would be opened at nine a.m. to accept Mystery reservations for the following March. Before noon on that day the weekend would be filled (that’s more than three hundred people), with a one hundred name waiting list. The competition is so intense that there have been

as many as fifty people staying at Mohonk on the Wednesday night before the reservation Thursday, simply to be at the desk in the morning to be sure of a place. (Westlake 1987: 7-8)

The same people often returned year after year, and Karen Palmer recalls how in the early days, responsibility for making reservations for her group fell on one particular woman because “she was the only one whose phone had ‘speed dialing’” (2007).

What was causing the sensation, however, were not just the scheduled talks on falconry, counterfeiting, bloodstain removal, poisonous plants, and beekeeping (Allan 1981: 1), nor its lectures by actual police detectives (Olafson 1982: 22), its “non-stop mystery movies” (McLellan 1981: B1), its “Friday night ghost hunts,” (Severro 1977: 31), nor its eventual partnership with Doubleday Books to supply some of its “best mystery authors” as speakers to the event (Hartford 1995: 51). What was causing the stir were the dead bodies, the grainy film footage and slides of the crime scene, the clues that kept showing up around the hotel all weekend, the live suspects to be interrogated, the “message-decoding contests” (McLellan 1981: B1), the puzzles, games, and old radio shows (Palmer, 2007), the dinner parties, the costume balls, the transportation in time of Mohonk Mountain House itself back to the 1920s and its imaginative transformation into a passenger liner (the SS Mohonkia) crossing the Atlantic; or its transformation into a snowbound World War Two era Swiss chalet (the Hotel Kuckkuckuhr), or a Transylvanian village (Jaynes 1985: 12). It was that eventually the Mohonk weekend “resembled nothing so much as a large, successful house party, with many guests making new, fast friends that they have remained in touch with during the year” (*Huguenot Herald*, 18 January, 1978: 1-2). And it was, in fact, the very reason given by Isaac Asimov for his own love of mysteries during his lecture at the first

Mohonk event in 1977: *the “game” of solving the mystery* (Levine 1977: 1; Severro 1977: 31). This game kept Asimov returning to Mohonk year after year.

A Gaming Retreat

Dilys Winn and Carol Brener had turned the weekend into a gaming retreat. Mohonk was always intended to be a literary event, but it was about solving puzzles, too. Murder mystery literature frequently required readers to decipher things like cryptograms in order to crack the case (Horsely 2005: 14-15; Knight 2004: 29). Subsequent years saw puzzle experts such as Will Shortz (of the *New York Times* and *Games Magazine*) among its featured participants. As a way of bringing these two elements together directly with guests, Winn and Brener had created a play-like format in which professional mystery writers and puzzlers could not only act as experts at the “convention,” but could also pose as live suspects in a murder mystery, ready to match wits directly with whodunit fans trying to find the solution. Mohonk had become a Happening; not just a world apart, but a fantasy environment and a playground; part convention, part holiday camp and parlor game.

The weekend began with three hundred or more guests arriving at the hotel, usually on a Thursday afternoon. They were sorted into teams of twenty to twenty-five people, with sometimes as many as sixteen teams, total. Each team would be given a name corresponding with the theme of the event, such as the Big Al Capone’s or the Lucky Luciano’s, for a 1920s gangster weekend (Mckeon and O’Conner 1989: 1). In later years, entire teams returned intact.

Originally they would assign you to teams. Like, one year they had these photographs and they broke them up into pieces like jigsaw puzzles. And you had to

find the other people who were the pieces, and that was your team. But after the first year when we got our team together, we refused to do that. We were our own team every year after that. We were 'Freddy the Pig.' It's an old mystery series from the 1930s. But we just kept that name...and we won almost every single year. (Palmer 2007)

In the evening, following dinner, guests would be confronted by a baffling murder case. The mystery was originally presented by Dilys Winn as a slide show, with live narration to explain the murder scene, the characters, and their relationships (Westlake 2005; Palmer 2007). Donald Westlake, who in 1983 would eventually accept the invitation to take over the job of designing and hosting the weekends, retained the original format but changed the slideshow to "a silent film, about fifteen minutes long, over which I would narrate" (e-mail, 2005). The film laid out the murder scenario. "Here they see the murder victim's last day, the people he/she meets, the [historical] period, the [literary/aesthetic] style. The murder victim's last day will include encounters with ten or twelve other people: the suspects in the story" (Westlake 1987: 9)

Westlake continues in an email:

I would then explain to the group that we wanted more than a simple 'He did it;' we wanted as much of our story back as possible. Alternatively, the teams could make up their own story using the materials we'd given them. We had two prizes. One for the most *accurate*, and one for the most *imaginative*. I always said 'If you're going for most accurate and win for most imaginative, just take it. (31 Oct., 2005)

After being presented with the crime, “self-appointed private eyes spent the next three days stalking the murder scene for clues, searching the Victorian style hotel’s labyrinthine footpaths, exploring its drafty corridors and poking their noses into grandfather clocks, galleyways and gazebos” (Kleiman 1981: B1).

Other activities unrelated to the mystery, such as games and puzzles, also punctuated the weekend:

The place itself was wonderful. They did things where, in the sub-basement they would have a tour where you’d go through, and you’d get clues to different things, from weird things that would be there, or people. Like there’d be a headless corpse and stuff. It wasn’t directly linked to the solution of the weekend mystery, but it was part of the whole thing. It was linked to something else that they did. But it was wildly fun, you know. (Palmer 2007)

In the evenings, there were always several social events planned; usually films, but also a themed costume party on Saturday night.

A friend of ours who was the programmer for Channel 9, WOR - he’d bring these old black and white films from the Nineteen Thirties and Forties. He’d bring stuff up that you just couldn’t get anywhere else, like gems; things like old *Ellery Queen*’s from the nineteen thirties. There was nowhere else *to* see them otherwise.....and one year we actually acted out an old radio show. (Palmer 2007)

For the Saturday evening activities people brought home-made costumes with them:

We weren't in costumes the whole weekend, but in the evening, at the event, we wore costumes. One year the theme was the roaring 1920s so people showed up with violin cases and the flapper dresses. And at the dance they gave us all masks to hold, with the feathers and stuff. And they had a speakeasy set up, and they played Twenties music. They made it *look* like a speakeasy. (Palmer 2007)

Throughout the weekend, because of their insatiable appetite for mystery and fun, team members could often be found still searching the hotel for clues and debating possible solutions at four and five a.m. The competition to solve the mystery became fierce.

We'd sometimes hide in our rooms with a guard posted at the door so no one would hear us trying to solve the mystery...It was wildly fun. You know, we'd stay up all night. It would be Thursday through Sunday. And on Sunday you had to get up and act out the solutions, so the whole team would play different parts and act it out, and it was just so much fun, it really was. Nobody got any sleep because you'd be up with your team trying to figure it out all night. And then Saturday night you'd be up *again* with your team writing out the solution so you could *act* it out [the next morning]. And it was basically, as I said, die-hard mystery fans; Sherlockians. (Palmer 2007)

It was a rule that the suspects were never played by professional actors. Donald Westlake recalls "We always had mystery writers or other people from the mystery or puzzle field to give our talks, and they were among the suspects, plus friends, hotel staff and members of our family" (e-mail, 31 Oct., 2005). Each character was assigned a biography, which described the background of that character, and how that character was

related to all of the other characters in the story. It also included information related to each character's potential motive for committing the murder. Biographies were compact and densely written, "about 2,000 words saying what the character knew. No more" (e-mail, 31 Oct., 2005).

There was no time for rehearsal, however. Martin Cruz Smith, in his introduction to one of Westlake's eventually published Mohonk scripts, recounts how Westlake kept the identities of the characters they would play at Mohonk a secret until the very last minute.

For months I begged Donald to give me some idea of the character I would play in the upcoming *High Jinx* so I could gather information and wallow in character...At last a letter dropped like a limp body through my mail slot. It said 'You are Leopold Schmendrick, a ship's architect from Kiel. In three pages, Westlake limned my new Schmendreckian persona...evoked the Nazi era our drama was taking place in...reviewed the other dozen suspects and delivered a plot no less complicated than a schematic for the Hindenberg. I had, by my digital watch, about 12 hours...[to prepare]. (Cruz-Smith in Westlake 1987: 15-16)

Each biography was laid out to provide details of that character's own story, alibi, and motives. These provided the parameters within which characters were to interact with guests. Peter Lovesey recalls that characters received a briefing, but not the full story hence nobody knew who the killer was until they were arrested. Only when each of the stories was fitted together like a puzzle did the full picture emerge. The 'briefings' formed a network of interpersonal associations and possible motives for rivalries between characters. Take, for example, the description of "Leopold Schmendrick:"

I am a ship's architect from Kiel... Three years ago I designed and oversaw the construction of a yacht, The Nilpferd, for Herr Kurt Krauss, at the Elb River shipyard in Hamburg. I was never paid... I commenced legal action, suddenly the Gestapo was after me... I fled. I made my way to the Hotel Kuckkuchuhr, where I knew Hama Tartas would give me shelter. He had been a seaman in Kiel and I helped him find work on occasion and he was grateful. I have been here for a week... That policeman, Captain Wilhelm Trehn, has his eye on me... He used to be a policeman in Kiel where he was involved in an ugly scandal about a protection racket... When I came into the dining room tonight and saw my enemy Kurt Krauss, I was so startled I stumbled against his chair, spilling his beer... I met Gelda Pourboire several years ago when she was Kurt Krauss's mistress... (Westlake 1987: 61-63).

Together, this and several other biographical stories (i.e. that of Wilhelm Tren, Hama Tartas, Gelda Pourboise, and so forth) were woven together into one seamless but overlapping history for guests to unravel; that is, once Kurt Krauss had slumped over dead into his poisoned pudding.

Guests were able to interact with suspects in a question & answer format in order to gather clues. "On Friday, for one hour in the morning, and one hour in the afternoon, the suspects, in costume, would be available here and there in the hotel, for the guests to interrogate" (Westlake 2005, e-mail). Karen Palmer recalls,

They stayed in character a lot of the time; most of the weekend. Some were better than others. But most of them were pretty good at it. They stayed in character

except when they were doing their talks, and afterwards there would be [book] signings, and they'd be themselves. And at dinner they were themselves... We became friends with a lot of authors that way (2007).

The team members would, as a matter of strategy, often split up to cover all twelve suspects, who would then be confronted by tricky questions, ready pens, and large notepads as each team member went looking for answers to share with their teammates (Palmer 2007).

From a literary standpoint what the teams were trying to do was write a cohesive plot or back-story. The element of literary puzzle reconstruction is implied in some of the early photos of these events, which depict most of the guests (referred to as "quests" by Westlake) surrounding seated suspects, and conscientiously trying to piece together the story on paper. The impression given off is less like that of characters being interrogated, however, than authors holding court with fans. As suspects, though, the authors were not allowed to embellish their stories, but could only repeat what was laid down for them.

The rule of the game is that the suspects *must always* tell the truth" with the obvious exception "that the murderer will lie about the murder. (Not about the motive; even the murderer will tell the truth about that)... On Friday night, or some time on Saturday, there's usually some other event that moves the story along. Sometimes it's a second murder, sometimes something else. (Westlake 1987: 9)

Palmer states that physical clues and actual crime scenes only became a feature of the events in later years. Generally, no bodies of victims ever appeared, but often, if there was a second murder, there would be a corresponding crime scene to investigate (2007).

In 1981 the solution required “visits to the victims’ rooms” and “a search down one of the resort’s hiking trails” (Kleiman 1981: B1). In postmodern, self-reflexive style, the mystery that year involved the killing of the owner of a New York City murder mystery bookstore, *Murder EST*, by the owner of a rival bookstore, *Murder Angst*. In the victim’s room could be found:

...a smoldering love note, a crumpled Kleenex, a clock mysteriously stopped, a pocket calculator, a mail pouch slung out the window, a subway token, tea for two, an overturned desk chair, several Styrofoam chips, a handful of mystery books, several bank deposit slips, a loose typewriter key and – of all things - a red plastic herring...[while outside] was a blood-smeared typewriter, discovered in the woods during the course of the ‘blunt instrument hunt,’ that began to focus attention on the loose ‘H’ key in the room as an important clue. (Kleiman 1981: B1)

The event ends on Sunday morning when each of the teams is given five minutes to present their solutions, which by the 1980s had become quite elaborate. No longer just speeches, but audio taped messages, David Letterman style Top Ten Lists, skits and musicals appeared (Hartford 1995: 52). Originally, only one prize was given, but by the third year, two first-prize trophies were being given; one for creativity, and one for accuracy. The prize for first place winners was a guaranteed reservation for the following year, which by that time were not easy to come by (Palmer 2007; Mohonk publication c. 1987). In an email, Will Shortz recalls that prizes for “most creative” were being given not necessarily for *literary* creativity, but rather to “the team with the most amusing playlet” (email, 26 October, 2005), hence a more theatrical criterion.

The next morning the jig was up. All the teams met in the parlor and presented their solutions by re-enacting the crime in vaudeville fashion. Mohonk spokeswoman Fair Harte said, 'It's like an off-Broadway show. They really go all out. People get into it and wear great costumes. (McKeon and O'Conner 1989: 2)

Following group presentations the host would then provide the actual solution to the puzzle, and awards would be handed out accordingly. On rare occasions, however, none of the teams actually solved the puzzle (Allan 1981: 1). Karen Palmer describes un-solvability as a problem of the latter years when Westlake took over the mysteries and they became too difficult.

I only went to one. They were not really *play-fair*. That was the beauty of the first ten years; they were totally Agatha Christie style *play-fair* whodunits...But Don doesn't write *play-fair* whodunits; he writes *capers*. So that's when it started changing. The earlier ones were *play-fair*. You followed the clues, you asked the right questions; you got it, you figured it out. [She becomes indignant] But he gave us *one* clue - of a mark on a hand - and we were supposed to know it was a wheelchair that rolled over somebody. Almost nobody got it right. It just wasn't the same. (Palmer 2007)

In describing the event as "not really play-fair," Palmer is referring to more than just the game at hand; she is embedding the Mohonk event within a sub-cultural discourse used to describe a contract between murder mystery writers and their readers. Westlake violated the rules of an established *literary* genre, whose grammar for solving and constructing murder

mysteries - as “clue-puzzles” (Knight 2004) – had been well established. Lee Horsley (2005) in the book *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* defines the *play-fair* contract as an implicitly understood and agreed upon set of “game” or “puzzle” rules operating within the *cosy* genre of crime literature. Relating the literature directly to the “English puzzle tradition” Horsley insists that, as “a battle of wits between the clue-setter and the solver,” a good puzzle must consist of both a recognizable formula and “a clever but satisfying twist.” A story that has been constructed too cryptically will inevitably lead to “allegations that one famous detective story writer or another has not ‘played fair’” with the reader (Horsley 2005: 15). Horsley insists, after all, that “writers of classic detective fiction address us, above all as *readers*” (13) along with the implicit suggestion that one will be able “to put a fictional world in order by the act of being, simply, a ‘good reader’” (14). An overly obscure puzzle violates this contract because it is unreadable. Ultimately, “The values implicit in this game are associated with such quintessentially English qualities as fair play and the sporting spirit, adjusted to the smaller playing field of the armchair” (14).

It is here, therefore, that we must introduce a sub-cultural caveat. Dilys Winn’s primary interest was not theatre; it was literature, puzzles, and having a good time. The game-like format she developed was intended to utilize the familiar rules of a well-known “ritual” to provide a pastime for a particular community of people, whom Karen Palmer describes as “die-hard mystery fans.” This, after all, was a genre being developed by book lovers and hoteliers, serving the interests of a cult-like following within mystery fandom. There was a general sense that mystery fans were a mostly solitary but insatiable breed. In a very early interview with a staff reporter at the *New York Times* (16 July, 1972), Winn referred to sleuthing as “something between a sport and a religion” for isolated people. She described murder mystery readers as,

‘An underground of fanatic fans around the country – mostly college professors – who exchange rare mysteries... We’re highly competitive people who have non-competitive jobs,’ she said of her fellow mystery addicts. ‘Mystery gives you a chance to go one-on-one against somebody, to prove you’re a little smarter than the author by coming up with who did it before the last page.’ (48)

By 1981, in fact, Carol Brener would state that “mystery readers have ‘come out of the closet’ in the past several years” (McLellan 1981: B1). At Mohonk these fans found something they could do, *together*; they could act as a team.

In truth, Mohonk got off to a rocky start for failing to meet literary expectations:

We went to all the weekends. We didn’t go to the first one, which was just Dilys. Dilys did that one herself. But she didn’t have a solution. She just decided she was going to let everybody vote [for who they thought the killer was]. They almost strung her up at the end of that. But people had fun. But the following year Carol came in. Carol was very good at organizing. Dilys had the ideas and Carol put it together and said ‘we have to have an ending.’ She eventually bought Murder Ink from Dilys. We started doing it the second year when Carol came in with Dilys. After Carol took over, the weekends just kept growing and growing and growing and growing and she flew in authors from all over the world who would do talks and play parts. (Palmer 2007)

Mystery readers constituted an emerging community at Mohonk. The social and sub-cultural event, revolving around common intellectual interests, was a primary motive for

people attending Mohonk. It was a means of being with kindred souls, and people made life-long friends there. Karen Palmer emphasizes:

We are *still* friends NOW. When I first went, a lot of the people were customers from Murder Ink...and we [Karen and Bill Palmer] both worked there at some point, so we knew a lot of the customers, but a lot of people we met up there [at Mohonk]. Some of my best friends now I met at the first Mohonk. Some we knew slightly from the store and *became* very good friends. A lot of great friendships started there. So that was nice. And we're still friends. We all still keep in touch. Our team – when we started off originally, I think it was like twelve people. I think we knew three when we started - Now, of the people who are still around and still alive, we're all still good friends. It was really nice. It was a lot of camaraderie. I mean when you stay up all night with people, you really get to know them. And if you didn't like them, they weren't on your team the next year. Or if you *did* like them, they *were* on your team after that...It was three days: Thursday through Sunday. We'd go up there actually on a bus. A lot of us would go on the same bus. So you'd meet people on the bus – an hour and a half trip – so you'd get to know people. And they'd do games on the bus, and sometimes you'd have old radio shows playing. And then you'd get up there, usually about three hundred and fifty people. (2007)

What Palmer describes above is a community composed of advanced-level readers of a particular literary genre. Winn and Brener's event was designed to enter into that community by referencing things its members already knew about. Winn and Brener did not invent the Game being played at Mohonk, as such. Nor did they invent the Literary

canon it indexed. They merely redeployed these cultural raw materials within a community able to activate them. Its members had achieved literacy. This meant they were able to *read* a crime scene within the literary conventions and canons of Western detective fiction. After all, it was this advanced literacy that Dilys Winn hoped to instill in her customers via the lectures and tours she sponsored. Mohonk itself was drawing on the semiotics and event grammars of a genre developed in successive stages via Literature, Entertainment media (radio/theatre/film/television) and Games. Full participation at Mohonk required literacy in all three areas. It is important to familiarize ourselves with the kind of information people were utilizing before going on to discuss how deficiencies in these areas would later result in a schism between Mohonk attendees.

Literacy at Mohonk: Literature, Puzzles and Games

The primary knowledge component was a familiarity with detective fiction. Detective fiction began as literature, and via several incarnations into other media, the basic rules and event-grammar of the crime genre were established. Detective fiction directly influenced the entertainment industry by providing script writers with an established structural formula. This grammar also provided the “ritual” literacy necessary for making interactive participation possible.

Its initial form was the Gothic horror story (Blair 2002). It featured the reclusive amoral genius – Count Dracula, Dr. Jekyll, Dr. Frankenstein, or Sweeney Todd – who dabbled in the dark arts and became possessed by an unfathomable evil. Sweeney Todd, in fact, was already a favorite in both the “penny dreadfuls” and on stage during the 1840’s (Collins 2005: vi). Sweeney Todd had gone from being a fictional folk devil to a seemingly real personage, in part because he fit so plausibly into his surroundings. Necessary to the killer’s

construction was a corresponding habitat: often the secluded mansion with its secret passageways, dark corridors, vaults, and hidden chambers. This was the architecture of his twisted mind, “A kind of folk psychology set in stone, the Gothic house is readily legible to our post-Freudian culture, so we can recognize in its structure the crypts and cellars of repressed desire, the attics and belfries of neurosis...the allegory of a madman’s head” (Baldick 1993: xx). Alternatively, he occupied an external environment of this same construction, stealing corpses or souls away in the middle of the night. The Frankenstein and Mr. Hyde versions – each in their hidden laboratory - were reincarnations of the Dr. Faustus persona who sold his soul to the devil for knowledge, now *science*. Jack the Ripper was a more public version. He inhabited the midnight alleyways and closes of Victorian London, becoming a celebrity of dark psychotic consciousness in the emerging age of criminal psychology.

But the Victorians became equally fascinated by his nemesis: the criminologist of the macabre who followed in his shadow. It was he who gave himself over – sometimes dangerously - to thinking darkly - like the killer; like Jack – trying to inhabit his twisted mind without completely crossing over. This, of course, was the danger, and the thrill of entering Gothic literature: sneaking into the devil’s house to spy and eventually escaping; not *into* it, but back out again, alive and un-possessed. Perhaps *this* is also the “escape” that murder mystery readers enjoy so much. It was certainly part of the fun of Mohonk.

Crime literature began with actual detective autobiographies or diaries created during the early 19th century, which quickly became sensationalized (Knight 2004: 22-26). These diaries involved fascinating crimes, but not always murders, and focused the reader’s attention on the rational, empirical methods by which the detective solved the crime. Symbolically, these methods were intended to allay the fears of an earlier – Gothic horror –

generation, by introducing rationality into the picture, as a superior force against savage emotions. In his book *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present* (1998) Martin Priestman credits Edgar Allen Poe with being the father of the crime fiction novel. His character Auguste Dupin appears in such books as *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841). Poe instituted the analytical school of mystery writing, requiring close analysis of evidence. The author himself did not always provide adequate clues, yet, mirroring the experience of mystery readers, in more than one story Dupin's deductive skills are so acute that he "cracks the case entirely through an armchair analysis of newspaper reports," a feat tantamount to that of mystery readers themselves (Priestman 1998: 9).

Other features of detective fiction also stand out as aspects at Mohonk, and many are detailed by contributing authors in Dilys Winn's book (surveyed below). The design of Mohonk seems to parallel Winn's "editorial" decisions, revealing a conscious effort on her part to fit the live event to literary conventions. First is the centrality of the puzzle element, and the often amateur or hobbying nature of the sleuth. The "outsider" image resulted in further sub-genres including "Hard Boiled" American detective novels, noted for their tough-guy protagonists; "private-eye" novels, and the English "cosies" of the 1920s-1930s. The vigilante nature of the amateur criminologist invites the reader to identify with the sleuth as someone who must solve a crime on their own. Cosies often involved large country houses and multiple false suspects as well as real ones. This would later prove wonderfully adaptable for staging audience-participation theatre versions in found environments (*see* Swift 2005, *below*). Agatha Christie is perhaps the best known writer of cosies, which get their name not just from the genre's aesthetic quality, but from the fact that the sleuth actually solves the mystery-puzzle at the end.

Another subgenre with its own environment and species of sleuth is what Lawrence Frost calls “The House Dick” or hotel detective (in Winn 1977: 140-143). On the subject of the “Homicide Hotel” Frost names Hugh Pentecost, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler, and J.F. Burke as “noted writers who have checked their victims into imaginary hotels” (142) and never checked them back out again, at least not the easy way. Peter Blake (in Winn 1977) in his essay on “The Gothic House” in murder mystery literature notes that it is a preferred site because of its aesthetic architecture and ghostly appeal to readers (267-68). Carlotta Ogelthorpe (in Winn 1977) has also commented on the centrality of food, and the dinner table as a site for literary murder:

If I had an enemy and that enemy were fond of reading English murder mysteries vintage 1920-1930, I wouldn't wait for Monday. I'd start my diet today. I'd turn down all invitations to lunch, brunch, tea, high tea, supper, dinner, and between-meal snacks – especially if that enemy were planning on preparing them personally. You see, of the many conventions established during the “Golden Age” of detective fiction, the one most rigorously followed was, if you had to eliminate someone the table was as good a place as any to have a go at it...the dinner plate became the poisoners playground. (192)

The Mohonk weekend referenced and utilized *all* of these literary features.

Mohonk also borrowed heavily from parlor games. Parlor gaming was a social pastime of the Victorian era. It was home entertainment for members of “polite society” (Arnold 1858: 2) in the days before television. The accumulation of games in ones' hosting repertoire became a form of social capital. Influenced by literary culture and popular theatre, parlor games included such things as the recitation of poetry, stories, and famous

speeches; the staging of group theatricals (i.e. short plays), tableaux vivant, and charades; illusions and magic tricks, as well as the solving of puzzles, riddles, tests of memory, and other games (Bellew 1870).

One parlor game, which eventually became a board game, was originally called “Murder.” Cluedo was subsequently based on it and patented in 1943 by a British law clerk and fire warden named Anthony Pratt (d. 1994): “‘Between the wars,’ he said, ‘all the bright young things would congregate in each other’s homes for parties at weekends. We’d play a stupid game called Murder, where guests crept up on each other in corridors and the victim would shriek and fall on the floor’” (Thomas 1996: 1). By 1946 he’d struck a marketing deal with Waddington games in the UK, and Parker Brothers in the US, who eventually marketed it under the name “Clue.” John Watson, the marketing director of Waddingtons, points out that “the game did not become an instant craze” and sales did not begin to pick up steam until the late 1960s (1977: 120).

Because “Murder” is based on the premise of gathering in a real house, the Cluedo board retains the idea of moving through architectural space. The board was designed by Pratt’s wife. It is set in a nine room English country mansion with its own library, parlor, billiard room, etc. During the game, its virtual guests are progressively bumped off in each of the different rooms using various weapons throughout the evening, until - by process of elimination - the identity of the murderer is eventually discovered.

Cluedo did not require much analytical ability, and was mostly a game of chance and simple deduction. Players rolled dice, and were given a checklist to cross off. They had several chances to guess the identity of the killer, the weapon used, and the room in which the crime occurred, each of which was represented on cards - one from each category - chosen at random and inserted together into an envelope. There were “324 possible

combinations of 6 suspects, 6 weapons, and 9 rooms” (Thomas 1996: 1). What Cluedo did not involve, however, was establishing a *motive* for the crime. The killer did not kill for any reason that needed to be reconstructed. Cluedo dealt only with the *opportunity* and *means* of the killer and therefore involved no *story* or *plot*. It was literary in theme, but not in substance.

Mohonk also required crime scene literacy. During the early 1930s Lawrence Treat devised visual puzzles of crime scenes for readers to decode. Treat (in Winn 1977: 72-5) says that many older games were becoming “passé, but a whole new type was developing. It was competitive, and it rested on knowledge and “intelligence” (72). Treat’s drawings tested a kind of visual/cultural literacy and were marketed under the names *Bringing Sherlock Home* (1935), and eventually *Pictorial Mysteries*. In one crime scene entitled ‘The Lunch Room Murder, Case Number 4,’ (in Winn 1977: 74) a body is pictured lying on the floor of a diner, surrounded by footprints, which lead into and out of the room. There is a handprint on the wall, an open cash register, a bucket and a mop, and spilled water everywhere. Overlaid on this scene are things like a map of the surrounding area, and enlarged images of the “checks” for diner-patrons seated at various stools at the lunch counter. Out the window (or is it a reflection in the mirror?) we see the location of the Delicatessen and Drug stores across the street. The basic question is essentially “What happened here?” It is the search for a story. Informing Treat’s logic, however, a whole host of prior cultural knowledge is being indexed; for instance, the custom of friends “picking up the check” for coffee; or how to “correctly” set a table (with cups and glasses on the right). Inevitably, the solution requires that the scene be examined as a debris-trail of individually motivated actions occurring within a cultural context.

The True Culprits

Dennis Wheatly and J.G. Links are, for all practical purposes, the inventors of the murder mystery game being played at Mohonk. Wheatley was not only a crime fiction writer he was also actively involved in British Intelligence during World War Two. What Wheatley invented in 1936 – the Crime Dossier - was a thoroughly original and unique literary puzzle. Dilys Winn was merely referencing its form, creating original versions of the game, and then staging it in an interactive way. It was the *staging* of the literary puzzle as a live game that was Winn’s unique contribution to the genre.

Between 1936 and 1939 Wheatley and Links produced four Crime Dossiers. Wheatley devised the mystery and Links designed the layout. These were not presented as books in a typical binding or cover. Each dossier consisted of a cardboard folder, which contained everything one would need to solve the mystery. The puzzle/book/game included actual physical clues, which made the concept of solving the mysteries three dimensional. Unlike *Cluedo*, however, the dossiers required readers to reconstruct a plausible narrative to explain the killer’s motive. The dossiers were not marketed as a game for popular audiences, but sold in bookstores as interactive literature for mystery readers.

The British Library retains several original copies of these “books” along with their physical contents. The first Dossier, *Murder Off Miami*, takes place aboard a boat in Florida. Miami Police have been stumped, and the Dossier itself is designed to look like an authentic unsolved case file. It contains five narrative reports written by the detective previously assigned to the case. Along with his handwritten notes the file includes cablegrams, descriptions and photos of suspects and their motives; officially stamped police memos, interviews with witnesses, diagrams of the boat and the cabins where each suspect

was staying; inventories of the contents of the victims' luggage, and physical evidence such as matches, hair, and pieces of a bloodstained curtain. The solution is in a separate envelope at the end of the Dossier, presumably having been solved by the Chief Inspector simply by rereading its contents.

The final Dossier entitled *Herewith the Clues* begins with a letter, which addresses the reader as the privileged recipient of a top secret document from Scotland Yard. It uses the topography of London as the scene for an IRA terror plot. But, the clock is ticking. If the mystery is not solved in time, the suspects currently being held in custody will have to be released. The memo begins:

“To

The Assistant Commissioner

i/c Anti-Terrorist Operations

Sir,

I have to report that at 11:45 p.m. last night Detective Sergeant P.M.

Flanagan, who has been loaned to us by the Free State Police, recognized the terrorist Sean Connolly entering the Milky Way Club, Curzon Street, Mayfair. It was not previously known that Connolly was in the country, but...”

The narrative goes on to explain the scenario in full detail, which eventually includes a murder. Thumbing through the Dossier one also finds pictures of the crime scene, maps, cigarette butts, samples of hair, plant fibers, bits of wood, shell casings, hair pins, and other recovered items. For each suspect there are accompanying photos and a fact sheet with biographical information. Among the suspects, of course, all dressed in formal attire for a

night at a fancy club, are real photos of Dennis Wheatley and J.G. Links; *the authors themselves, playing the parts of the suspects*.

What is striking is that Wheatley and Links' creations are almost identical to the scripts used by murder mystery theatre companies today. In both cases, there are no lines of dialogue, only character descriptions and an off-stage scenario for sleuths to reconstruct from the evidence that is made available to them. Although the form itself had essentially existed since the 1930s, it had existed outside of an historical period during which theatrical conventions and widespread genre literacy would have allowed participatory competence to be actuated among members of the general public. Improvisational dramatic interaction of the kind used today was not possible at the time. Additionally, it is doubtful whether most people during the 1930s would have possessed the cultural literacy and performative capacity necessary to enter the game competently in its dramatized form. Widespread exposure to the murder mystery genre, specifically in its dramatized form is, arguably, a product of a later – post-television - era.

Ironically, it appears that Winn and Brener might have been beaten to the punch had circumstances been different. An official Dennis Wheatley website offers up the following, rather amusing addendum to its own discussion of the dossiers.³⁹ Wheatley mentions in his memoirs that sometime in 1940 he received an offer from Billy Butlin, the owner of a chain of semi-Spartan English holiday camps for working class Britons and their families. Apparently Butlin had in mind the notion of including a murder mystery game among his many weekend activities, along with scavenger hunts and bingo.

³⁹ See www.denniswheatley.com.info/crimesdossiers. The website offers a useful history of these and subsequent crime dossiers, and includes images of the re-issued versions of the dossiers, which came out during the 1980's.

As yet the war had not seriously interfered with many peacetime activities and Billy Butlin approached me to write a Crime Dossier with one of his Holiday Camps as its background; but, from the beginning I had always believed that the vast majority of my readers wanted to read about people of wealth or beauty, such as they never meet in their own lives; and I did not see as Sir Pellinore Gwaine-Cust or the Princess Marie Lou disporting themselves in a Butlin Holiday Camp. So, although the fee offered was high, I turned it down. (Wheatley 1979: 176-177)

Whether the Butlin camp activity would ever have become populated - with Butlin staff members playing the parts of suspects - is purely speculative, but the prospect is tempting, in hindsight.

The Schism of Literacies at Mohonk

The ability to participate in a Mohonk weekend was the result of prior cultural literacies, discussed above. In the latter years of Mohonk a schism began to develop. It might be called the clash between the “Sherlockians” and the “drunken Texans.” The schism was further exacerbated by a clash of cultures and discourse capabilities. The original draw of Mohonk was its fan-based sub-culture, which could be classified as an “interpretive community” or a “community of readers.” Reading communities interpret texts through ongoing discourse, and arrive both at norms for interpreting the text, and rules and regulations for conducting the process of interpretation itself (Leitch 1987: 491-508). Early Mohonk events were not for novices. Novices were people who were essentially illiterate or semi-literate in the canons and conventions of detective fiction. It was within these rules, after all, that the solution to the mystery would have to be discussed and debated all

weekend, and then eventually re-articulated. Being a sub-cultural discourse event, very few outsiders would have been able to sustain discourse at the level required to attain *social* proficiency within that community of speakers.

By 1984, however, the event was becoming popular beyond its original community, and was being sold on the open market. Novices gained entry, but they had not obtained their primary literacy through books, but only second hand, from popular television and film. Additionally, they were not all that interested in literature, authors, or literary culture. While Mohonk referenced popular media all along, it did so only thematically, mostly as entertainment, but not as a way of solving the mystery or of conducting social discourse. Yet the ubiquity of murder mystery images in the popular media gave novices, outsiders, and semi-literate people a kind of easy access to Mohonk. It also fostered the impression that Mohonk was like a live game of Clue, which as we have seen, was never a game of skill to begin with. Clue was merely the better known and more popular “mystery” game among general audiences, when, in fact, Mohonk was actually a live Crime Dossier.

What complicated the matter was that people had attained a general literacy in *playing with*, or perhaps *through* television and film imagery as a whole. Neal Gabler (2007) considers that the performative intercourse between media and daily reality during the Twentieth Century resulted in a hybridized existential paradigm, which he called “Life The Movie.” In short, people wanted to enter “movie-land,” a theme which had become the basis for the Michael Crichton film, *Westworld*, in 1973 (Canby 1973: 51). Mohonk required more than this, though; it required the indexing of knowledge, and the application of analytical skills. But by the 1970s America was already in its second generation of being a society raised on television and film imagery. It is safe to say that at no time in human

history had more people been exposed to more plots, characters, voices, and actors on a daily basis than our own.

Media exposure directly affected how people played together. Kids played “Cowboys and Indians” according to films they had seen. People were able to do the voices of cartoon characters or mobster dons while seated around the dinner table. High school kids throughout the nineteen seventies and eighties could recreate entire scenes from Monty Python sketches with their friends. When unintentionally fed the right cue-line, co-workers quipped catch-phrases like “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” It affected the way people fantasized about themselves. There were few people who didn’t dream of becoming an actor, who didn’t fantasize about winning the Oscar, about meeting a famous movie star, or even walking right into the movie itself. Comic “Impressionists” became some of our most popular entertainers merely by mimicking the voices and mannerisms of famous people – usually actors or politicians – recognizable to us *only* because of television and film. In essence, we had become a theatrically literate and well-rehearsed culture; well-schooled in the art of impersonation and improvisation. All that was needed was a vehicle for everyday people to discharge their vast theatrical wealth.

Many of the most popular television shows and films of the 1970s were, in fact, detective dramas and murder mysteries. While Sherlock Holmes and Sam Spade movies from the 1930s and ‘40s were common fare on late night television, *Ellery Queen*, *Nancy Drew*, and the *Hardy Boys* were all currently running prime-time network television shows during the 1975-6 television season. Others included *Columbo*, *Kojak*, *MacMillin and Wife*, *Charlies’ Angels*, *Policewoman*, *The Rockford Files*, *Cannon*, *Starsky & Hutch*, *Baretta*, *Mannix*, *Streets of San Francisco*, and *Kolchak*, to name but a few (*New York Times Index 1975-76*). In the popular cinema, Agatha Christie’s film *Murder on the Orient Express* had been a

major hit only a couple of years earlier, in 1974; and by 1976, Neil Simon's *Murder by Death* was one of the top grossing films that year, and nominated for a Golden Globe Award (<http://www.imdb.com/>). It spoofed literary detectives like Sam Spade (Sam Diamond), Miss Marple (Marbles) and Hercule Poirot (Milo Perrier), and heavily referenced Agatha Christie throughout. In fact, "The basic situation is borrowed from *Ten Little Indians*" (Gary Arnold 1976: B1). It is also set in an English country mansion with all of its predictable murder mystery accoutrements. The very fact that the genre was spoofable – or what Gary Arnold called a "parody of selected clichés" (1976) - implied that the mystery aesthetic had firmly entered the popular consciousness. Not surprisingly, throughout the 1970s the board-game Clue continued to see a rise in retail sales. The most popular question of the 1980-81 television season, however, was "Who shot J.R.?" (McLellan 1981: B1). He was from *Dallas*.⁴⁰

Karen Palmer explains how things began to dissolve once the event was opened to outsiders, namely rich Texans.

The first ten years it was die-hard mystery fans. *We* went to go meet the authors and to hear them give talks and to get books signed, and to solve the mystery. It was like a mystery lovers' paradise. And the funny thing is, when I first went, my husband was the mystery fan. I read more science fiction. And he kind of dragged me along, and we had *such* fun. But it got to the point after about ten years where it got written up in a very fancy – (pause) - Neiman Marcus put it into their brochure and started

⁴⁰ *Dallas* was a popular "prime-time" television soap-opera. At the end of the 1980 television season, one episode ended with the mysterious shooting of the show's villain, J.R. Ewing (played by actor Larry Hagman). "Who Shot J.R.?" became a catch-phrase within American popular culture. It appeared on bumper stickers, buttons, tabloid headlines, and TV talk shows as viewers speculated on who the shooter might be. There was no puzzle to solve, however, only a plot line, which the show's writers had yet to decide.

selling weekends. And then we'd get bus-loads of Texans who didn't really care about the mystery. Mohonk was started by Quakers so it was non-alcoholic. But they [the Texans] would bring shopping bags of booze and get drunk, and we stopped going. That was the end of it for us because they ruined it all. You know, we were trying to sit and listen to the authors and they were rowdy and drunk, and it just kind of went down [hill]. It was wonderful until Neiman Marcus got involved; then it wasn't the die-hard mystery fans anymore. We were pushed out by the drunken Texans basically. So I don't know of any of us who started there and went through the first ten years who are still going there...It was the highlight of the year until the drunken Texans pushed us out. (2007)

At this same time the quality of the authors also changed to accommodate the new customers.

Carol would fly people in from England. She would fly in Simon Brett. She would fly in Peter Walker. She would fly people in from all over the world. That was part of the draw. You couldn't see these authors and meet them otherwise. It was a mystery-writers' heaven. But [later, when Westlake took over] Don would bring in a couple of local mystery writers and have his kids play parts [in the mystery]. Actually, *we* played parts at one point, my husband and I, because I think he thought he could – I don't want to say he pocketed the money - but he didn't pay out the money in air fares and stuff that Carol did, and so the weekends started going down hill. And then when the drunken Texans came in, that was the end of it for most of us. So, none of us go anymore.

Karen Palmer notes that even the hotel itself has changed since then.

The place itself was fantastic. It's something like 26 acres, on the mountain. We'd get snowed in there. It was wonderful. They had a lake. They had a green-house..." [Her tone suddenly changes]...Now they're very upscale. They go in for the corporate market. They have a spa (2007).

The difference between the TV viewers and the Readers was quite real. Their respective depths of involvement in the media also clashed. Readers had plunged themselves into the secret and forbidden pleasure of the original literature: its grim, eerie, demonic, thrilling darkness; the aesthetic of the Grand Guignol. Television never demanded this, nor did it require weeks of analytical involvement. Viewers were casually predisposed to root for authority figures who would make things right at the end of an hour. Its detectives – mostly male - were also socially well-adjusted people who wanted to instill that in others. The literary detectives, on the other hand, had entered the Darkness. They often became schizoid figures caught between polarities of good and evil within themselves. No such ambiguity ever existed in the TV detective; he was basically good. Sometimes he became frustrated by an inability to enforce correct behavior in "citizens" and shoved somebody against the hood of a car, but only to be reminded by his partner that he had to "play it by the book." But in the real book, Sherlock Holmes was a drug addict! He was a complex figure. The "Jekyll and Hyde" psyche was a thematic of the crime-fighters' soul. Some detective figures bordered on the homicidally vengeful. Yet, by no weird act of demonic possession or psychological transference did television detectives ever beat someone half to death trying to rid *themselves* of that same darkness; this was only in the literature. Moral

ambiguity, though, would have sent “mixed messages” to the viewing public, thus TV presented only the sanitized and simple version as a corrective. The bottom line, though, is that simple television discourse would have no place among the advanced literary dialectics at Mohonk, other than to act as a kind of thinning agent.

But there also appears to have been an adaptation to circumstances involved when outsiders were confronted with the difficulty of solving a literary puzzle. Shifting from literature to television & film grammar served a useful purpose for novice players weighing their chances for survival within a highly competitive literary environment in which they were fated to lose. Reframing the event as Theatre allowed novices to “play” the game by cheating the literary rules that inevitably favored their opponents. Among the novices, no doubt, there was a sense that if the puzzle was too hard to solve, or if the conversations were too sub-cultural for their tastes, then all they really had to do get their money’s worth was to *re-frame* the event as an inherently theatrical and therefore comical activity, to the annoyance of their literary counterparts. This allowed them to joke triumphantly about *achieving* theatrical reflexivity as their solution. It was a joke that did not sit well with serious players at Mohonk, but which would eventually carry the event into new, popular terrain later on, as a type of improvisational comedy event; a mystery framed *as theatre*.

Reframing the Mohonk activity was a byproduct of the differing ways in which the two discourse communities were able to read the event. In the transition from literature to television grammars, *substance* and *image* were inverted. All along, die-hard mystery readers had attended Mohonk looking for a certain kind of literary *substance* to appear behind the character’s *image*. Substance and Image obtained a *figure/ground* relationship relative to the *Readers’* expectations that they were coming to see authors giving lectures. Literary fans wanted to see *writers* appearing behind the characters. They came wanting to

interact with these authors, as literary fans. But increasingly, the TV viewers *didn't* look for these people to be substantially related to the field of literature at all. In fact, they ignored the authors altogether. They came expecting a dramatic-game, and they wanted to see good actors. In the end, therefore, the Authors' role diminished, and increasingly the authors came to be replaced by *anybody* willing to take a part in the mystery; that is, *by actors/players*. The event was no longer *substantially* or even *exclusively* about maintaining its relationship to the literary field - neither to authors nor to fandom - but rather, was becoming substantially more related to theatrical play or drama via the other – more popular – media that incoming audience members were referencing. In short, TV viewers came to solve a TV drama, and wanted to see actors (especially comedians) playing the characters.

There are several features of Winn & Brener's original format which differed from the versions that came afterward, and all point *away* from theatricality, and towards a primary interest in literature, play, and literary subculture. First of all, actors were never used, or even encouraged to take part; only mystery authors, and only later on, their friends, family, and occasional hotel staff members. "They said they didn't want 'professionals' to do the weekends!" (Palmer email, 21 July, 2005). This would apparently become a point of contention during Westlake's stewardship. The format was beginning to reveal itself as a marketable theatrical product, and though there were individuals hoping to be hired, no real attempt was being made to pursue it outside of its original context (Palmer, e-mail 1996). Karen and Bill Palmer, in fact, would eventually accept an outside offer from a "travel agent" to produce an event aboard a cruise-ship (email, 21 July, 2005).

I guess it was the March of '82 somebody approached us at the weekend and said 'I would love to have this, but I don't need a weekend. I need a company that could come and do a cruise,' so we said 'Oh we could do that,' you know, because we had learned so much. That's how we got started. So our first job was a five day cruise to Bermuda. We started big. [laughing] It was all down hill from there (Palmer 2007).

Unlike some of its later, more dramatic incarnations, no "Detective" character was ever introduced to further the plot. As Palmer states "*We* were the detective. The teams were the detective" (Palmer 2007). Additionally, the Master of Ceremonies remained a neutral narrator who merely provided instruction. Westlake, however, would often use his position to remind team members both of the rules - and for the more serious personalities - that the point was to have fun, not just to win (Jaynes 1985: 12). While Mohonk Mountain House was increasingly used environmentally as a setting for the murder mystery itself, the "suspects" did not remain in character continuously throughout the weekend, but only appeared at designated times in between making appearances as lecturers, indicating a continuation of their cult status, rather than their character role. The aim of their assuming a role was duplexity. It also meant, however, that the Mohonk Weekend slipped in and out of theatricality, and most importantly, that it would have made it difficult for guests themselves to remain immersed in a character continuously had they been included in the theatrical reality. Because the suspects were clearly delineated from the outset, there was no chance for guests to enter the mystery as potential suspects, something that later – theatre-oriented companies – eventually allowed to happen.⁴¹ Also, there was no "dead body" at Mohonk.

⁴¹ See Joy Swift's Original Murder Mystery Company, discussed below.

Mostly they did it in the films. But one year they had a ‘body’ they dumped into the lake. It wasn’t a real body but it was something in a body bag. They never actually had people die in front of you there. We do [at Bogies Murder Mysteries] but they would do it in the film. You’d see all the background and a little about the people, and then you’d see the death (Palmer 2007).

The attempt was to intellectualize the mystery rather than to portray the drama. The *play world* was a cultural fantasy environment. The fact that there were no other guests present at the hotel on those weekends made the cultural environment totalizing. Like any successful game, it could involve the players in complete immersion. The *author* became a playwright, not so much in the theatrical sense of a scriptwriter, but in the design sense, as an inventor of pastimes. The *script* was a schematic; not a theatre script, but a game script, a play-ing script. There was no character *dialogue*. There were no *lines* to memorize, only details and facts to commit to memory, and time frames and relationships to get correct. There were no *actors*, only co-participants, or agents of information transfer. *Audiencing*, likewise, did not involve watching a show. It involved acquiring information, assembling facts, hypothesizing, theorizing, re-constructing, outwitting, debating, teaming up, and investigating. *Costumes* were used by suspects only, and were emblematic framing devices, which also served to designate a particular moment in time - in which characters were *now available*, and questions could be asked. Insofar as costumes were worn by guests, they coincided with theme-party dances, rather than character portrayal. There was no *rehearsal* period; only enough time to read and memorize an alibi. Overall, the *event* was differently nuanced than theatre. The people playing the characters got their aura from being great writers or puzzlers, or else for being *good sports* about taking part in the fun, not for being

good actors, even though as Palmer notes “most of them were pretty good at it.” There was no *blocking*; only places around the hotel where people could find the characters in a given time frame, or places designated for team members to meet. All of this would soon change, however.

By the early nineteen eighties fledgling murder mystery companies were springing up throughout North America and Europe, and began moving into the theatrical realm. Karen and Bill Palmer’s own *Bogie’s Murder Mysteries* and theme restaurant was among the first. But, except for one or two events the name Dilys Winn was not associated with any of them. In 1980 Winn was approached by the Norwegian American Cruise Line and asked to host the first ever Mohonk style mystery event at sea (Dougherty 1980: D13). Stanley Carr reported in the *New York Times* on February tenth, 1980 that it would be departing from Port Everglades, Florida on the nineteenth of April, bound for Genoa, Italy. Aimed specifically at “mystery enthusiasts” it was called, literally, “The First Floating Whodunit” (Carr 1980: XX10). On board the mystery cruise there would be two murders to solve, a “policeman’s ball” in which passengers could come dressed as their favorite sleuth, ongoing mystery films; and seminars, lectures and panels by speakers discussing such topics as how to track a suspect, how to poison someone’s tea, and the crimes of Jack The Ripper. Again, the focus was literary, and the topics were actually sections from her book. She enhanced the event by including former FBI and CIA agents among the speakers (Carr 1980: XX10). Reporting on that same cruise, Christopher Tyner of the *Sunday Intelligencer* (April 20, 1980: C3) wrote that the ship was scheduled to pass through the Bermuda Triangle, where one of the members aboard ship was scheduled to “disappear.” It was intended, however, only as an ice breaker, and each of the passengers would be asked to interview one another in an effort to solve the mystery, with prizes given for the most

creative response (Tyner 1980: C3). In March of the following year the *Los Angeles Times* reporter Dennis McLellan (1981: B1) reported on another Norwegian American mystery cruise departing in April, to be hosted by Dilys Winn, possibly in association with Dell Publishing, and again involving expert guest lecturers.

It is unclear why Winn failed to further capitalize on the marketing and theatrical potential of these events. She simply may not have been interested in organizing entertainment for popular audiences. It was only a year later, in fact, that the Palmers accepted a similar offer to produce a murder mystery event aboard a cruise ship; this time *as actors*. It appears that the cruise ship operators had spotted the marketing potential of the mystery *game* on its own, quite apart from the lectures, and that Winn was losing ground to her competitors. Perhaps there were clues all along, however. Winn had always referred to the world of books, and even to her own store, as “my escape” - hence a store without a sign - and to mystery fans as an underground, secret culture whose members were “highly competitive” at play, but not at work (*New York Times*, 16 July, 1972). She had always tried to surround herself with like-minded mystery readers, not just everyday people.

But social organizing was not her forte, either: “I have an untidy mind,” Winn wrote, “It confuses dates, misspells names, amalgamates plots, and mangles facts. And it does it unrepentantly” (Winn 1977: 3). From the very beginning at Mohonk:

She needed help. She was very creative, but not very good at planning things out.

She was all creativity, but not ‘What’s the schedule; whose supposed to be where, when?’ you know, so Carol was that part of it. So the second year is when it really took off, and they did it together for a couple of years and then Dilys sold the store to Carol...and moved to Florida. (Karen Palmer 2007)

Whether it was, indeed, a sign of her poor organizational skills, or just bad luck, Peter Lovesey adds “In Key West she opened another bookstore. Unfortunately it didn’t last long.” (email, 24 April, 2006).

It is also possible that Winn’s familiarity with the mystery genre may have led her to conclude that her live game was not really all that novel. As we have seen, there had been murder mystery parlor games as far back as the 1800’s, and mystery board games starting in the 1930’s. She was merely copying the idea in a different format. As a literary genre, detective fiction dated back to the 1800’s, and detective films and television shows were ubiquitous on prime time television throughout the 1970s. And by 1970, also, murder “mystery” literature was already in decline, assuming a kind of ‘retro’ status as ‘classic’ crime fiction (Horsley 2005: 13). Whatever the reason, she left the event behind without *patenting* it. This created a virtual blood bath among ‘theatre’ companies scrambling to carve out territories in later years, each claiming to have originated it. But it also allowed the genre to proliferate along *folkloristic* lines, passed down by word-of-mouth to countless individuals, with some aspects preserved and others altered along the way. It is probable that Winn may have already conceded the genre to be in the de facto “public domain.” After all, its very playability relied on the game’s construction as a confluence of everyday influences and restored knowledge; a sort of general inventory of popular consciousness. The truth is that we may never know the answer, but it spawned an unusual theatrical craze. Dilys Winn remains as stealthy as ever. Carol Brener died in 2006. Murder Ink closed its doors in 2007. Subsequent to my correspondence with him in 2005, Donald Westlake has also passed away (in 2009).

Murder Mystery Companies - 1980s and 90s

By the mid-1980s murder mystery theatre companies began springing up everywhere (Thornton 1986: 66). What was different, though, was that they all theatricalized the event and hired improvisational actors to play parts. Because the genre could not be patented, and was not considered “proper” theatre eligible for arts funding, it expanded entrepreneurially. Most murder mystery companies elected to perform dinner theatre, which gave the industry and its actors a major boost. Dining with the actors became part of the draw, and savvy producers played up their performers’ *celebrity* credentials, both as a marketing strategy *and* because guests seemed to gain a sense of personal, creative fulfillment from interacting (Rachel Paul 2007).

Different styles then emerged. Eddie May Murder Mysteries of Canada scaled back the puzzle element. It became a simplified two hour event, light on evidence, but heavy on comic interaction and characterization (Rachel Paul 2007). The characters were more cartoonish than real, and interrogations by audience members became more playful. Many of the jokes, as well as the character types and plots directly referenced popular television and film. It was easily accessible humor, which allowed audience members to quickly catch on and respond in kind. Following the TV formula and its implied contract, although most people didn’t seem to follow the mystery very well (*see* L. Smith 2007; D. Olson 2007), the detective quickly wrapped things up at the end of the night. The Chicago based companies like King’s Manor and Amundson Enterprises playfully cast audience members as impromptu suspects or witnesses, coaching them briefly on the side regarding what to say during their interrogations (Schmitt 1991: 144). Again, these mysteries were mostly a pretext for comic performances by actors, and did not significantly involve audience

members in solving the puzzle; they merely created a bridge for heightened audience interaction. These companies are typical examples of simplified shows.⁴²

Joy Swift's Original Murder Mystery Company

Other companies aimed for realism and more complicated plots. Joy Swift's *Original Murder Mystery Weekends* was an early innovator, and is worth exploring further. In 1981 Swift was the 24 year old marketing director for the Prince of Wales Hotel chain in England. By 2003 Joy Swift would be called to Buckingham Palace to receive an MBE award for her contributions - not to theatre - but to English *tourism*. Her vehicle was the weekend murder mystery. She was not a theatre person; her job was "to get bodies into beds" (Swift 2005). At Swift's disposal was a stunning array of what *New York Times* reporter Vera Frankl called "English country mansions" (1983: XX39). While the hotel had tried *activity* weekends in the past, the crowds they drew tended to be elderly groups such as gardening clubs; not everybody's cup of tea. When she came up with the idea to stage an Agatha Christie style murder mystery, Joy Swift claims to have had no prior knowledge of the Mohonk Weekends. Instead she says she thought of it after hearing a news story on the car radio about a shooting in a hotel lobby. Coincidentally, that lobby happened to be somewhere in New York.

I thought 'Oh my god wouldn't it be awful if somebody was shot in one of our hotels?' and then I thought actually it would be quite exciting for the people who witnessed it because the police would come in; nobody would be allowed to leave;

⁴² For a useful survey of "Do-It-Yourself Sleuthing" activities, including a discussion of Joy Swift's company (p. 185), and a survey of board games, which includes Dennis Wheatly's Crime Dossiers, etc. I have recently also discovered John Kennedy Melling's book *Murder Done to Death: Parody and Pastiche in Detective Fiction* (1996), esp. pp. 184-209.

the bar spends would be good because everybody would be in the bar drinking with the shock of it, and then suddenly I thought ‘actually wouldn’t it be great to be dropped into an Agatha Christie type scenario where you witnessed it, but then you also started sleuthing it.’ (Joy Swift, personal interview, 15 August, 2005)

Swift’s version of the Mystery Weekend brought things to a whole new level. She fully theatricalized the event. Her actors portrayed realistic characters. The movie/slideshow with narration was now gone. From the first act to the last, everything was performed in real time. Actors remained in character for seventy two hours. The first formal “act” that evening was an intimate affair staged around dinner tables, featuring food and conversation. The actors “anonymously” blended in. This was not typical theatre; not even typical dinner theatre. The death scenes were made to look as realistic as possible. A detective character was introduced to moderate the weekend. Swift even hired a regular ambulance crew to take away the bodies (Swift 2007: 104).

Perhaps the most important innovation was that audience members themselves were invited to take on a persona, to dress in costume, and to enter the permeably scripted event. A few weeks prior, guests were sent a two page letter describing the *theme* for the weekend. Guests were collectively *cast* as anything from old classmates, fans of the same band, members of an extended family, co-workers, or even babies born to the same midwife. Swift raised the level of the event to a form of theatrical gamesmanship bordering on good poker. By inviting guests to adopt a character persona and play along, it was not immediately clear who were the actors and who were the guests. From the moment they checked into the hotel the lines were blurred. The event became a shared fantasy role playing game.

The weekend murder mystery was an entirely unique forum for interaction, with its own style of prolonged improvisation. Inter-Acting also required new - *interpersonal* - skills from performers. The very nature of "acting" became a face-to-face phenomenon rooted in dialogue. In casting her shows, Swift soon found that good stage actors did not always make good inter-actors. They needed very particular social skills; especially the ability to play and hold casual conversation. She began looking for a different type of performer, sometimes hired friends, and even began hiring repeat guests who were good at character play to join her company. The longest standing member of her company is Marilyn Cattaral - a trained psychologist who views the murder mystery weekend as a "highly therapeutic form of adult play" (Cattaral, personal interview, 15 Aug., 2005).

By expanding the performance frame and duration of the event to encompass the entire weekend, its environment, and the audience, Swift had evolved the form as a role playing event. Interactions with characters sometimes lasted well into the early hours of the morning. Guests interacted throughout the hotel, gathering in each other's rooms, around fire places, in lounges, or anywhere else they happened to meet. This allowed potential "murderers" to blend in with the crowd, but it also meant that particularly good participants frequently became real life red-herrings, suspected of being actors. Guests would follow *each other*, sometimes never knowing until the very end, whether the person was an actor or a guest.

Interacting also meant that actors were not allowed to drop their character for three solid days. They could not be caught anywhere outside their hotel room - even in a nearby shop - using their own identity, their own credit cards, or dropping their assumed persona or accent. Sleuths followed them at every opportunity. In one instance, a terrorist bomb threat at a seaside hotel initiated a fire alarm shortly after one of the actors had been "murdered."

She could not leave her hotel room without the risk of destroying the illusion. Fellow actors disguised her as an old woman and led her onto a nearby pier where she waited until it was safe to return (Catterall, personal interview, 15 Aug., 2005).

Swift readily acknowledges her event as a social playground, and schedules additional activities throughout the day. Like Mohonk - or the Butlin Holiday Camp - she offers games, trivia quizzes, charades, puzzles and contests all weekend long. On Saturday night there is always a costume party/dance, which fits the weekend's theme, and guests are encouraged to bring homemade costumes. Unseen hands slip clues, fact sheets and checklists under guests' doors at regular intervals to aid them in solving the mystery. Although "crimes scenes" are inevitably cleared away, crime photos, pieces of evidence – "clippings from old newspapers, used bus and train tickets, letters and love notes from one character to another, and the all-important autopsy report" (Frankl 1983: XX39) - continually make their way to a designated "situation room." Swift's scripts are complex, and the murders highly realistic. The socio-cultural scenarios she creates reflect contemporary society. In order to make the puzzles challenging, Swift often plays with taken-for-granted cultural assumptions. To borrow Stephen Knight's description of a good murder mystery, she "present[s] a set of enigmas that consistently shake certainties about rank, gender, class, body, even consciousness" (2004: 40). But, while these – at least on some level - work against the reification of prior cultural certainties, it would be false to infer a critical intention on her part, to destabilize normative or oppressive cultural categories. Her aim is to enhance the game.

Swift (2007) concludes, however, that these events are not trivial. She attributes significance to the event's recreational and interpersonal dimensions. At the end of a mystery weekend, she writes, people are often:

...amazed at how sociable the whole event has been – how they can sit down to dinner with total strangers on the Friday night, talk to them as equals (whatever their age, sex, race, or creed) and end up, by Sunday lunchtime, feeling like they've known each other for years. (88)

Swift attributes this effect directly to *role playing*, and cites as an example of its success, two people who came together across huge social and class divides, having transcended their supposed differences:

Murder weekends had brought them together and made them the same; because they'd role-played the whole weekend neither knew the other's real status. They'd chatted and laughed together as equals. If only we could translate that magic to world politics and religion. (Swift 2007: 88)

Whether these relationships translate further is up to individual audience members to decide. Tracking the potential development of such relationships is beyond the scope of this study. Yet, what can be stated with a high degree of certainty is that the weekend murder mystery fosters a very different kind of relationship between its attendees than do other forms of theatre. Its surrounding social frame is active, dynamic and highly convivial. Additionally, a high percentage of those attending Joy Swift's murder mystery are repeat customers, as many as fifty percent at the event I observed. Among returning customers, many brought friends and family members along, so that, for them, the event did function as a kind of reunion or ongoing practice of community-gathering.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by discussing the folk play origins of murder mystery dinner theatre. In doing so, we observed an essentially literary genre that weaves its way in and out of various media; via books, radio plays, films, theatre, and finally audience participation murder mystery events. Additionally, we have observed the murder mystery genre itself continually weaving its way into and out of *fan subculture* and *popular culture*, respectively. We observed that *literary* fans attended the Mohonk event initially as a subculture of *readers*, and that in their reception practices (as readers) what they came to see were *writers* or *authors* appearing behind the characters in the live mystery event. Fans had come to see these authors and interact with them. We saw also, that as *television* and film *viewers* subsequently began to patronize the event, the promised appearance of authors or writers behind the characters increasingly became less important, until eventually these authors were replaced by *actors* and, increasingly also, by *improvisational comic* actors with whom the TV and film generation wanted to inter-act. Throughout the 1980s, these improv comedy companies continued to flourish. The result was a playful, less literary, more theatrical version of the audience participation murder mystery event, but one that responded to the *reception practices* and tastes of popular culture. In the next chapter we will look at how audience reception practices continue to receive the murder mystery event into various social contexts, and the ways in which these reception practices continue to order the murder mystery event as either popular or folk-like, throughout its various media incarnations.

CHAPTER FOUR

Interactive Murder Mysteries and the Phenomenon of Audience Reception

“Keep your eye on the Actor. When you look behind the character in the murder mystery, what do you see? You see a person there that you can potentially interact with. In murder mystery dinner theatre you can watch the character the entire time, but you’re really watching the actor behind the character - doing Improv, being clever, making choices, being tactical; and people are fascinated by that because they’re asking themselves ‘which one of these people do I want to play with?’”

- Ted Smith (Eddie May Murder Mysteries)

Synopsis

In dramatic theatre the actor is a constantly visible sign in relation to the character he or she portrays. The two always appear together. This chapter is about audience participation murder mysteries and the phenomenon of actor recognition (Carlson 2004: 46-50; 86-7; 150-151). It concerns what happens when different kinds of audience members recognize and/or receive the Actor as a person, outside of his or her theatrical role. In the previous chapter we discussed the Mohonk murder mystery event. We saw that attendees approached the event deliberately looking to see authors or writers appearing *behind* the characters within the murder mystery. In popular murder mystery events this soon gave way to a desire to see improvisational comic actors playing the parts of characters. The simultaneous perception of both the actor and the character is what Bert O. States (1985) refers to as *bisociated* identity.⁴³ Within the wider field of performance studies, the relative

⁴³ Bert O. States (1985) employs “bisociation” to refer to the perceptual clash of identities or “double vision” that occurs when audience members try to reconcile the difference between the *phenomenological* reality of the Actor’s own identity and the semiotic fiction of the Character he/she portrays within the story world. Veltrusky (1987: 158-9) coins it the actor/character *antinomy*. Brecht (cited below) employed *verfremdungseffekt* (or *alienation*) to refer positively to a separation between the role of the actor and the role of the character. Otaker Zich (*see* Quinn, 1995: 60-65) referred to this as the difference between the material

merits of either preserving or else resolving this actor/character “antinomy” (Veltrusky 1987: 158-9) have been hotly debated by theorists, at least since the time of Brecht. Yet, within the audience participation murder mystery genre bisociation of identity remains a staple feature of the event; a situation directly attributable to its folk-play origins. From its inception, audience members - in order to interact - were invited to view the actor-character as a bisociated identity. In every subsequent manifestation of the event, regardless of the medium, the genre has retained traces of its original viewing paradigm.

Below, I relate the phenomenon of *actor-recognition* within the audience participation murder mystery to three different types of audience reception, all of which involve seeing the actor as a bisociated identity. The first example considers the *perceptual* effects of actor-recognition within the context of a film. The film positions the viewer in relation to an actor/character participating in a live murder mystery event. I argue that our experience of the Actor as a celebrity performer associated with improvisational techniques of live theatre, invites a split-response from viewers when asked to associate those techniques with a Character (being played by the actor) encountered as an improvisational performer within the film. The second example employs the notion of *reception as hospitality*. Taking Henry Glassie’s (1975) paradigm of the neighborhood *Ceili* and its domestic hosting practices, I draw an analogy between the Murder Mystery play - received as ‘a visit from Home’ within an (American military) USO context – and the Mummung event, received as a visit from the neighbors in a local context. The third example considers reception in terms of *mutual recognition* between actors and audience members. It is a series of ethnographic interviews with USO actors, and is informed by Bogatyrev’s observation that, in a folk context, actor

technical apparatus of stage figures (props, costumes, actors, painted sets, and so forth) and the purely *imaginary* story-world which they signify.

recognition increases the spectator's involvement and identification with the players (1976b: 51-56). I conclude that the USO sponsored murder mystery constitutes a *situational folk event*.

Watching Actors on film

Michael Quinn, in his article 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting' (1990) has identified the presence of celebrity, both on stage and in film, as a special case of actor recognition. The celebrity is "someone that we seem to know" (155). This statement, of course, is highly problematic given that celebrity also prevents us from getting to know the *person* behind the actor. Celebrity is a fictive *ostentation* (Carlson 2004: 36-7; Quinn 1995: 60-65), which always precedes the actor's true identity; it stands out in front as an *image* we must get past, but cannot. Even if Johnny Depp, for instance, steps off the screen or stage and changes out of his costume to go home, the follow-spot seems to fall on him wherever he goes. He is lit up by the aura of celebrity. Quinn problematizes celebrity within the acting context on the grounds that celebrity aura interferes with our ability to view the character as a distinct personage on stage. Indeed, Herbert Blau (1982) describes all performances as potentially "ghosted" by our memory of the actor in previous roles (195-274).⁴⁴ Quinn writes "The performer's personal contribution to the acting sign is called the *expressive function*; and in the case of celebrity, this function is often dominant" (1990: 154). Whenever the expressive function is foregrounded, the actor's status threatens to upstage the character; a situation that Bert States says is appropriate only during the curtain call, when the actor comes out of character for a "necessary self disclosure of the

⁴⁴ "Ghosting" is a very broad theme in Blau's writing. It describes the constant play of appearances and disappearances in theatre; its residual trail of phantoms, its presences and absences, hauntings, vanishings, memories, re-appearances, dream-images, all of which describe the intangible quality of theatre itself.

illusion” (States 1981: 376). Quinn notes the potential for “a conceptual wedge to be driven between celebrity” and the audience’s perception of a character:

Celebrity threatens to subvert this traditional structure in a number of ways... There is something about every real object that resists its use in signification... the personal, individual qualities of the performer always resist, to some degree the transformation of the actor into the stage figure required for the communication of a particular fiction. (Quinn 1990: 155)

Quinn also notes that this situation is magnified by the focused quality of the film medium, the *close-up* especially, which seems to communicate “the heaviness of individual objects on film” (1990: 155). When the presence of celebrity is magnified in relation to the *stage-figure* that the actor portrays, it “splits the acting sign much like the sign is split by Brecht in his *verfremdungseffekt*” (156).

Richard Schechner (1985: 110) describes our awareness of the actor-and-character simultaneously *not-being-one-another* (while *not-not* being one another) as a persistent state of “double-negativity” whereby each contradicts the other’s ‘reality.’ Double-negativity is the origin of bisociation. In some instances, however, the *iconicity* of the actor – “on loan” to the character - *can* have a positive effect if the actor’s personal qualities are somehow seen to complement those of the character (Alter 1990: 81-86). In such a case, maintaining the actor-character’s “doubleness” can positively effect our enjoyment of a role, that is, when both the actor’s and the character’s performative goals are seen to parallel one another. When they do, semiotic possibilities for interpretation are often multiplied with comic effect (Quinn 1990: 155; Veltrusky 1987: 157-9). We might refer to this situation therefore as one of *double positivity*. To borrow one of Jean Alter’s examples,

double positivity might occur when, for instance, Sir Laurence Olivier's own king-like qualities are seen to compliment those of the King he is portraying on stage, or vice versa (Alter 1990: 85-86).

Another such example can be found in Bill Murray's portrayal of the character *Wallace Ritchie* in the film *The Man Who Knew Too Little*. In this film, double positivity occurs when information possessed by the viewer - *about* Bill Murray - enables us to recall his *pre-celebrity* status, as a live - jobbing - improvisational comic actor. After all, as Quinn has noted:

Celebrities come equipped with an *intertext* that includes several levels, only the most obvious of which is the conjunction of art and life in a particular role. The intertext is an accrual based on similar art/life connections in earlier roles, and also on the connections the celebrity provides between the roles themselves...To a certain extent the celebrity provides viewers with a constructive principle, a context for evaluation. When celebrity and role merge in an art work that both validates the performer's identity and fulfills general aesthetic principles...the work is good art. (1990: 158)

Contrary to Quinn's overall negative hypothesis, an actor's notoriety may offer useful information to the viewer, which allows us to appreciate the actor's technical skill. In the present instance, seeing *behind* the character; and indeed, seeing *behind* the actor himself, and *into* the techniques he employs in making his character come to life, allows us to appreciate the self-same performance that *his character* must deliver within the context of the film.

***The Man Who Knew Too Little* - Film Synopsis**

The Man Who Knew Too Little is a film about a man who mistakenly believes he is playing a character in an audience participation theatre event when, in fact, he is interacting with people in real life. It stars Bill Murray in the role of Wallace Ritchie; an Iowa video store clerk who decides to give himself a “birthday present” by flying to London and unexpectedly dropping in on his ex-patriot brother, James. Unfortunately, however, Wallace arrives at an inopportune time. James is entertaining important business clients at home that evening, so he decides to get Wallace out of the way by buying him a ticket for an improvisational murder mystery event entitled *The Theatre of Life*.

Although apprehensive about the idea of participating in such an event, Wallace acquiesces, and proceeds, that evening, to a pre-designated phone booth where he waits to receive a call from the *Theatre of Life* troupe, and where he anticipates receiving instructions on where to go next. We learn how these events are initiated in our first encounter with the *Theatre Of Life* troupe, which opens the film. The patrons waiting by the phone booth are literally waiting for their first invitation to play.

The first player we see is an older man whom the *Theatre Of Life* actors refer to (i.e. “cast” in the role) as “John,” with the implicit invitation for the man to take on that role, and to act like “John” for the rest of the evening. Following the instructions given him, the man enters a nearby house to find a “hostage scenario” being staged. The *Theatre of Life* actress who is supposedly being “held captive” by a dangerous “thug,” pleads with “John” to help free her. She then suggests to her co-actor “kidnapper” that John “knows karate,” and says to John: “Tell him [“the kidnapper”] that he can’t talk to me that way. Tell him to go to hell.” Of course, before it escalates and “John” is forced to prove his newly revealed

“karate” skills in hand-to-hand combat, the other actors, dressed in police uniforms, suddenly rush in to save the day. A re-play of this same scene is clearly what awaits Wallace Ritchie.

When Wallace’s turn comes around, however, he takes the *wrong* phone call. Wallace “intercepts a message intended for a real spy whose next assignment is to find a call girl blackmailing a government official, kill her, and retrieve the love letters she’s been threatening to make public” (Strickler 1997). The spy’s code-name is “Spenser,” which Wallace immediately assumes to be his own “assigned” character-name for the evening. Instead of entering the nearby house - and the audience participation theatre game, which is going on across the street - Wallace winds up heading off down the darkened road and entering into a real-life game of international espionage and terrorism, replete with thugs who are trying to revive the Cold War.

Response

From the very first moments of this film, one is confronted with a dilemma regarding how to select a viewing paradigm with which to follow the narrative, for the film opens up a number of different reading positions depending on how one identifies its players. Bill Murray is a well known improvisational character actor in America. Murray’s character seems a recognizable *ostentation* of the actor’s own persona, accompanied by what seems like a further ostentation of the actor’s *style* of performance: comic improvisation. It is here that the film effects its first perceptual turn-around in terms of the ambiguity between whether Murray is *Performing* or *Acting*. Performance is often defined in terms of live *presence* and skillful display, while dramatic Acting is usually defined as make-believe

action “on a presumption of its fakery, its false representation” (Reinelt 2002: 206). The film finds its duplexity, however, in the ambiguity between whether Murray is performing himself doing improv, or acting as a character in a drama. Watching Bill Murray (the actor) playing the part of Wallace Ritchie (the character) *improvising* the role of an actor, playing a character (Spenser) in a play (*The Theater of Life*), all within the context of the film – cleverly plays with the viewer’s potential to bisociate identities across genres. In mixing the genres of *theatre* and *film* within the context of a story that already blurs the distinctions between *theater* and *life*, *The Man Who Knew Too Little* raises interesting questions regarding how the initial selection of a viewing paradigm (whether *cinematic* or *theatrical*) effects how one follows the narrative. The two genres do not simply collapse into one another to create *a play-within-a-movie*, or a *movie about a play*. Rather, each genre remains ostensibly separate while offering audience members successive glimpses of viewing possibilities belonging each to its own genre.

The Cinematic and the Theatrical

Whether the *Cinematic* and the *Theatrical* are truly separate and distinct genres has been the topic of some debate. Susan Sontag, in a classic essay concludes: “The big question is whether there is an unbridgeable division, even opposition between the two arts...Almost all opinion holds that there is” (Sontag 1966: 24). One feature, however, that is consistently claimed to be the province of one genre alone is that “Theatre is conceived as an *exchange* with an audience - something that films can never be” (Sontag 1966: 29). In the present instance I would suggest that *Cinematic* viewing and *Theatrical* viewing are sufficiently different from one another that audience members, in choosing one over the other, *involve*

themselves differently: relating to actors (and characters) in a play differently than they do to characters (and actors) in a film. Furthermore, I would suggest that the presence of the two paradigms (*theater* and *film*) within *The Man Who Knew Too Little* combine with States' Phenomenal/Semiotic model to open up *four* possibilities for selecting a "reading" position (perhaps also an "empathetic" position) with which to follow the protagonist: 1) as *a character in a film*, 2) as *an actor in a play*, 3) as *a character in a play*, 4) or as *an actor in a film*. Chiefly, these positions affect the way in which audience members assign *agency* - or lack thereof - to the protagonist. And along with that sense of agency, viewers gain a sense either of protagonistic aimlessness, possibly leading to a lack of enjoyment, or a plot driven by a strong protagonist, leading to a sense of purposive action. I would like to suggest that even though it is a film, the real fun in watching *The Man Who Knew Too Little* comes from viewing it using a theatre-going, rather than just a film-watching paradigm. The two paradigms slide off of one another constantly, but with enjoyable effect.

Character Empathy and Actor Empathy

Chiefly, I have in mind a certain type of *empathetic involvement* which comes into play whenever audience members observe an actor performing in live theatre. It is a very particular kind of reflexivity, shared between stage actors (who know they are being watched) and audience members (who not only *are* watching, but *know* that the actors know it). This produces two kinds of empathy: *actor-empathy* (empathy for the actor within the performance frame), and additionally *character-empathy* (empathy for the character within the story frame). While the two forms always co-exist side by side, at least to some degree, regardless of the genre, I would suggest that Actor-empathy can be found

to a greater degree in live theatre where it is implicitly understood throughout the performance that at any given moment *something can go wrong*, whether forgetting lines, missing cues, or simply by actors making unpredictable *choices*. This also renders the nature of our own empathetic decisions tentative, knowing that “real life” might intrude on the performance at any time. Regarding actor-empathy Bert O. States has written:

The inevitable starting point of any discussion of the actors’ presence on the stage is the fact that we see him as both character and performer. One of the reasons that it may be easier to become lost in a film than in a play is that the film removes the *actual* aspect of performance and leaves us with the record of an actuality into which we can safely sink. But in the theater our sympathetic involvement with the characters is attended by a secondary, and largely subliminal, line of empathy born of the possibility that the illusion may at any moment be shattered by a mistake or an accident. For the most part this is a low-risk investment, but it is a crucial aspect of the phenomenal quality of stage performance. It is our *creatural* bond with the actor, who stands before us in a vulnerable place. (119-120)

States observes, however, that when the actor fails, although actor-empathy may come to the fore, our sense of empathy for the *character* suffers: “On this level, empathy disappears when beauty disappears, when the play makes a mistake, when the acting is bad, or when an accident occurs on stage, and we come back prematurely to ourselves” (104).

Improvisational Acting

Because the potential for unpredictability is expanded even further in theatre relying on *improvisational* acting, one might expect an expansion of actor-empathy along with it. Simply put, watching the actor himself - *playing* the role - becomes part of the fun. Our level of empathy, therefore, concerns not only an “oops” factor, but expands to include our delight in a given actors’ spontaneous performance: his ability to think quickly, to react appropriately, and to display wits and mental agility. Again, States (1985) writes:

When we applaud the actor at the end of the play we imply that he ‘became’ his character well. But we also applaud him for successfully passing through the pitfalls of his role. Virtuosity, in the theatre, as in athletics, is not simply skill, but skill displayed against odds which, when mastered, become beautiful passages. (119-120)

While this dimension of empathy is always present in live theatre, it is wholly absent from film, where the pre-recorded (and carefully edited) nature of the genre makes it unnecessary: “To round out the comparison, one might liken the film actor to the aerialist who works with a net. But the theater offers the actor no net: the play is one long danger” (States 1985: 120). And again, “the actor-character teeters constantly on the verge of catastrophe” (States 1981: 377). What makes *The Man Who Knew Too Little* different, however, is that this film is able to cue an Improvisational Theatre-watching paradigm - along with its attendant level of actor-empathy and psychological involvement - even though it is a film, and that makes it worth noting.

The Actor in the Film

“The inevitable starting point of any discussion of the actors’ presence on the stage is the fact that we see him as both character and performer” (States 1985: 119). This statement is especially true in *The Man Who Knew Too Little* due to the casting of Bill Murray in the role of Wallace Ritchie. Murray was, and continues to be, a very skillful improvisational stage actor. He began with Chicago’s *Second City* comedy troupe, and later moved on to television’s *Saturday Night Live*, thus his appearance in this film - playing himself playing a character playing a character in a play in a film - reads like the Russian (matrushka) dolls that appear so prominently throughout the movie: a series of containers within containers, each revealing a different identity. The effect is that the film becomes as much a *demonstration* by Murray (of how to DO improvisational comedy) as it is a *performance* by Murray of a character within a story world. Indeed, he demonstrates to the audience how to deal with a world homicidally and suicidally obsessed with its own seriousness. The logic of Improvisational acting may also explain why the movie - as Peter Stack (1997), of the San Francisco Chronicle noted - “...is filmed almost entirely in close-ups” for it *features* Murray himself, and seems to offer us a choice from the very beginning, of whether to follow Murray or his character. I believe that the decision to feature Murray through close-ups is essential to the film’s *theatrical* logic, primarily because the close-up seems to emphasize the actor (Murray/Wallace) as a *decisive* agent of action.

The Character within the Play

In a typical movie, audience members utilize mainly character-empathy to enter the story world. In *The Man Who Knew Too Little* it is character-empathy that allows us to

follow Wallace within the world of the film. But because this film also places Murray's *character*, Wallace Ritchie (playing Spencer) into an improvisational theatre context, it inherently invites actor-empathy *for the character* as well. This is unusual. What is significant about our empathizing with Wallace, however, is the level of investment, anticipation, and appreciation for the "acting choices" he then makes. For instance, shortly after receiving his initial instructions Wallace enters an alley-way to be confronted by knife-wielding thugs, demanding his wallet. Believing that the two men are *Theatre Of Life* actors initiating a game, Wallace launches into a shifting repertoire of possible character responses taken from old movies, including crying and whining ("Don't hurt me, please don't hurt me"), pleading for his life ("I don't wanna die"), begging for mercy ("Please, I've got a family"); and after saying "wait, wait, let me try one more" he even tries on the role of the tough-guy cop: "It's getting so that decent people can't even walk the streets anymore because of SCUM like you...." This performative-response theme is played out for the rest of the film, through a series of different encounters and obstacles.

While much of the comedy arguably involves our investment in the character's naivete (within the story world, using character-empathy) this is only one part of the equation, for the logic of *acting* still predominates. Unlike characters such as Peter Sellers' Inspector Clousseau, for instance, whose bumbling ineptitude alone introduces the element of chance into the plans of his opponents, Wallace does not win by chance alone, but by actively pursuing a different set of rules. They are rules, however, that his opponents cannot discern, but which have the same devastating effect nonetheless, for eventually it is the utter confusion introduced by Wallace into the best laid plans of his adversaries that ultimately renders their plans for war impossible, and saves the world from destruction. In this case,

the logic of what Wallace is doing is supplied by the rules of Improvisational Comedy (albeit, in the midst of well planned tragedy).

The Rules of Improvisational Comedy

Much of the comedy in this film can be viewed as deriving from a theatre-game paradigm. That is, not from Wallace's credulity, but from his *theatrical determination* to play along, and also to remain in character no matter what comes his way. This "player's contract" is foundational to both interactive theatre and improvisational comedy. For professional inter-actors "breaking character" is grounds for termination; and improvisational comedy adds to this formula something called the "Yes-And" Rule (Libera 2004: 9-11). Put simply, no matter what your playing partner says to you, you must *never* deny the reality of the situation being proposed, and must not only say "Yes" to it, but must add to it by saying "And." This game, known as *the Harold*, is one that Bill Murray was instrumental in pioneering during his days with the *Second City* comedy group in Chicago. If your partner says, for instance, "I'm a cockroach," your response must never be to say "No, you're not." It must, instead, be something like "YES, I thought you looked a little different this morning, AND I couldn't help noticing that you're carrying an enormous breadcrumb." In this way, whatever possibilities are inherent in the *game-proposal* can be played out until its potential has been fully mined and exhausted. The attendant delight in watching this game being played out comes from the audience's awareness that the mental agility of the performer is being demonstrated live. In Bert States words, the player displays "virtuosity" (1981: 377).

Improvisational comedy's use of the Yes/And response is an inventive technology for responding to unfavorable, if not impossible circumstances. The ability to "negate" - or say "no" to X (i.e. to a propositional statement made by others) - is an essential component in negotiating meaning-contracts in everyday communication situations. Without it, however, improvisational comedians find themselves in situations very similar to Batesons' "double bind" (1972; *also in* Gibney 2006) requiring "players" to develop an inventive set of strategies for escaping the "regulatory" functions of messages sent by others (i.e. the expectation to agree), without saying "No. Improvisational comics, therefore, are relegated only to clever forms of affirmative negation. If an actor has to say "yes" to everything, even in order to negate, then he or she must develop an ability to negate cleverly: 1) through the affirmation of contrasts, 2) by affirming non-obvious metaphorical relationships, or 3) by extending the implications of statements to the point of logical absurdity. This usually involves the use of clever *irony* rather than blank counter-statements such as "That's not true." In order to demonstrate that something is "not true," one has to begin by agreeing with the other players' proposition, and then play it out in such a way as to demonstrate that its implications are absurd. "That's not true" therefore becomes "YES! *That is SO* absolutely VERY true that it is, in fact, TRUE to an absurdly unimaginable degree..." This technique is the logical equivalent of stretching a rubber band until it snaps. Alternatively, there is a fourth option of last resort, seldom used because it borders on denial of the situation. As in the schizophrenic "double bind," because the individual must cope with a situation in which the power of negation is denied to them (or else the individual faces the possibility of being punished), individuals may adapt by switching the identity of the character purported to be *doing* the speaking - resulting in the equivalent of

what Austin might call an “insincere” speech act, using a realigned role or status relationship (Keith Johnstone 2007; Rokeach 1981).⁴⁵

This technique of disagreement through over-agreement is, perhaps, why comedy has long been described as a means for dealing with inequitable power relationships, and as a tool of dissembling and satire among the lower classes. It is no surprise, therefore, that Murray’s opening scene - in which he meets the demands of an airport immigration official, to describe what he will be doing while in London - should begin with such a clever demonstration of this technique. Not only does he comply with the official’s demands, he “voluntarily” and “happily” tells the man *absolutely everything* he intends to do while in London - visit the Tower, have a suit made, see Buckingham Palace, ride on a double-decker bus, etc. - and he does so for what appears to be many hours...until the sun has gone down! Stephanie Zacharek (1997) therefore, has described Murray’s opening scene as being “so aggressively ingratiating that it’s almost hostile.” This technique of over-agreement brings to mind a classic vaudeville routine (replayed in countless films) in which a bumbling waiter in a fancy restaurant spills food on a rich man’s coat; and after being berated by the man as an “idiot,” the waiter effusively attempts to rectify the situation by rubbing away the spot, with a filthy rag.

⁴⁵ Realigned *status* and *role relationships* are cornerstones of Keith Johnstone’s (2007) rules of improvisational comedy (*see esp.* pp. 33-74). The pompous (high status) individual who slips on a banana peel is the essence of comedy; his lofty pretensions being *undermined* by a slimy *thing* that brings him *back down to earth* in a sudden reversal of fortune (p. 39). Experimental psychologist Milton Rokeach offers a poignant example of role/status/identity realignment in real-life circumstances. In the 1950’s Rokeach conducted an unusual study at Ypsilanti State Mental Hospital in Michigan. He located several individuals, each of whom claimed to have the same delusional identity - Jesus Christ - and he housed them together in the same ward. He hypothesized that when confronted with the impossibility of somebody else having the same identity, the subjects would be motivated to resolve the conflict by *abandoning* their delusional identities and owning up to their own biographies, thus beginning the healing process. The book’s *introduction* explains that the experiment was prompted by a case involving two women each claiming to be the Virgin Mary. When the younger woman introduced herself to the older one, as “Mary,” the mother of Jesus, the older of the two women simply resolved the situation by declaring that she must then be “Anne,” Mary’s mother; whereupon the two women embraced. The women effectively resolved their dilemma by a kind of improvisational realignment strategy, involving a Yes/And technique. The men, however, fought each other for *status* and each remained stuck in his delusion.

The Question of Agency, Intentionality and Enjoyment

What the Yes/And rule also implies is that credulity is always purposive and intentional, for within the improvisational play frame it is *the* essential vehicle by which the action is driven forward. Outcomes are *never* the result of pure chance. If one watches the *Man Who Knew Too Little* as a case of credulity = bumbling passivity = accident, one is tempted to view the character as being *without* a sense of agency, and as a hapless victim of circumstances beyond his control. This reading of the film makes for a weak protagonist, and to the extent that a strong protagonist - driven by a desire to win - makes for a good film, it is understandable that those who read it only *cinematically* might be less impressed. Their mistake, in my opinion, was in viewing the character as moronic rather than tenacious, within the *Theatre of Life*'s improvisational scenario.

Reviews falling within this range called it a "one joke" movie based on a "mistaken identity" plot involving a "clueless dolt" (Steve Rhodes 1997; Chris Wright 1997; Lawrence Van Gelder 1997; James Berardinelli 1997; Rita Kempley 1997). Peter Stack of the San Francisco Chronicle (not assigning the locus of Wallace's agency to his compliance with the rules of the game) emphasized the repetitiveness of the plot and Wallace Ritchie's naivete and one-dimensionality in the service of the story:

The movie has some amusing moments, but its dense premise and double meaning plot dull any comic sparkle....the film plays with the illusion of theater, a more complex subject....Viewers may even get puzzled about what's going on...The man who knew too little tries a little too desperately to ride the clueless-guy theme...The audience has to accept Wallace as a funny dolt who never realizes that something's

wrong.....his character never develops.....also annoying about the film is the way it is shot almost all in close-ups. (Stack 1997)

In Stack's reading, neither the movement of the plot, nor Wallace's destiny, were seen to be the result of his own agency as Improv Actor, but were, instead viewed only as the subordinate byproducts of a Scene that he did not control; another reason, perhaps, why the reliance on close-ups seemed to make no sense. The Austin Chronicle's Mark Savlov likewise stated that the film was not up to Murray's usual display of "smarminess" and "wry wit" because the character he played was merely a "bumbling naif...who stumbles blithely along;" and, attributing the movement of the plot to pure chance, concluded: "There are only so many variations of the mistaken identity theme that you can pull out of material like this." In light of a theatrical reading, however, these comments seem very odd, especially given that the development of Murray's character is *precisely* that he wins the game by overcoming each successive obstacle standing in the way of maintaining his character. Furthermore, he does so without denying the reality of the *theatrical* situation, hence: according to the rules of the game being played within the *Theatre of Life* scenario. Todd McCarthy of *Variety* magazine was one of few critics to describe Wallace's actions on theatrical terms, and he gave the film a more favorable review. He depicts Wallace as "Treating every threat and dramatic situation as a joke, a posture that creates the impetus for nearly all the humor." This reading led McCarthy to describe Murray's *Wallace* as "a highly engaging and low-key jokester."

I will end this section simply by stating that those who view the film, and read it as the story of a man who enters into a live theatre event, and who intentionally *commits himself* to active audience participation, may have a thoroughly enjoyable time watching it. The

theatrical paradigm allows us to attribute the movement of the plot to aspects related to Wallace's assumed character: implying agency, intentionality, playfulness - or even divine innocence - as the reason for the story's eventual outcome; for, the outcome is that *he never drops his character*, and the byproduct of his commitment is that he also saves the world from its pathological and suicidal commitment to seriousness.

Reception as Hospitality: Actors as Folk

Michael Quinn (1995: 86-89) has referred to the visible presence of the actor-in-the-character as an unavoidable byproduct of acting's *expressive function*, which foregrounds the contribution made by the actor to the otherwise *semiotic* or *referential* event of telling a story. In popular theatre, he observes "The whole cultural machinery of actor promotion, of celebrity worship, exists to strengthen the audience's appreciation of the *expressive function in performance*" (Quinn 1995: 86). The author goes on to note, however, that the situation is not limited to popular theatre, "some situations, such as traditional folk theatre...exploit the expressive function less elaborately but with equivalent effect" (Quinn 1995: 87) to foreground the actor's identity *as a local person*, thereby producing some degree of empathy for the actor on personal grounds (Quinn 1995: 88-89). According to Veltrusky, the net result can be an awareness of a shared identity existing between actors and audience members alike. Audience members have different reasons for wanting to feel a sense of connection with performers, and for recognizing the actor. When the actor's identity is intentionally foregrounded, however, Quinn calls this technique *expressive*.

Expressive acting has many arenas: the school play, the folk drama, even 'someone I know on TV'. The personal qualities of the individual actor dominate the

perception of the actor's reference to the fictional events. Celebrities, almost by definition, substitute for this 'someone' that we seem to know apart from the play. (Quinn 1990: 155)

While celebrity culture has been rightly criticized as a placebo connection to the familiar - indeed, even an unsatisfying replacement for desired interpersonal contact - other kinds of actor recognition can be more substantial.

Folk activities potentially translate recognition into interpersonal contact with others who share a similar identity. Folk activity can be explained in terms of the kinds of social gatherings the activity produces, or in the case of folk drama, "in light of the relationships its performance occasions" (Ward Keeler 1987: 17). Many theorists have described the reception of folk performers within cultural matrices of hospitality and social customs related to the reception of guests in the home. Seasonal events such as mummings, purimspiels, mardi gras and pastorellas can all be described as *rituals of continuity and incorporation* involving various modes of activity specific to the domestic contexts in which these performance traditions are received. The recognition of the actors as fellow folk members – and as neighbors - therefore, brings into play a host of customary reception practices related to the context of reception itself (i.e. a neighborhood center, a local pub, private home, or synagogue). The rest of this chapter will discuss the effects of receiving the Audience Participation Murder Mystery event within the folk-like context of the American USO visit, and of recognizing its performers as fellow community members.⁴⁶ The result can be called a *situational folk event*.

⁴⁶ This section was previously published in *Folklore* 118, 1 (April, 2007), 100-105.

A Modern Mumming Analogue: United Services Organization's (USO) Shows'

Introduction

It was December 1996, and only two days before Christmas an unusually strong winter storm had blanketed much of Eastern Europe in snow. Even the American military had grounded most of its planes because of severe weather conditions. Overnight and throughout the day the snow got worse and it is now Christmas Eve. We are snowed in with the American military, and the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders are also snowed in, and a magician from Connecticut. We are given our orders; we are told to put on a show!

Suddenly there is an invasion. Out of nowhere they simply appear: a group of six civilians, from back home—from America—dressed in eccentric costumes. The characters push their way in. They begin introducing themselves, shaking hands, talking to service members who have now become audience members. The mess tent is as big as a football field, and tonight it is charged with energy. Some of the characters clearly do not like each other. They have conflicting accounts of how they got on base. One claims to have walked across a nearby minefield; another says he parachuted in. But after several minutes of weaving their collective and confusing story, an argument erupts. The characters chase each other out, but when they reappear, one stumbles in with a knife in his back, and dies. Somebody calls for a doctor ... but instead they get a detective, and while no miraculous healing will follow, the audience will help to restore the balance of justice by helping to solve the crime. This is not mumming, of course; it is a USO sponsored audience-participation “murder mystery” event, but, as we shall see, bears many similarities, in both form and practice, to the logic that informs a mumming event.

Contemporary Mumming Scholarship

Mumming has been called a “dramatic, seasonal, visiting custom” (Hayward, 1992), yet prior to the 1970’s scholarship had concentrated on mumming as an historical and textual artifact, rather than as a living event. Since that time mumming scholarship has taken a *performative* and *ethnographic* turn. Although theorizing about its origins and textual variations did not abate altogether (Helm, 1980; Morgan, 1989: 84-87), ethnographic research continues to demonstrate the timeless relevance and vitality of mumming and its ability to fulfill needs within contemporary social contexts. Melvin Firestone (1978: 92-113) found that mumming utilized symbolic interactions to manage perceptions of social roles within communities in Newfoundland. Simon Lichman (1982: 105-11) argues that the lore *around* mumming functions to build notions of an archetypal community member who keeps cultural stories alive through oral transmission. Ray Cashman (2000: 73-84) found that mumming in Northern Ireland serves primarily as an enjoyable socializing activity that distributes both hospitality and playful roles around it. Gerald W. Creed (2004: 56-70) describes how mumming works in communal microcosm to demonstrate that diversity without forced conformity is possible at a national level in Bulgaria.

The Traditional Drama Research Group (based at Sheffield University, Center for English Cultural Tradition) also continues to promote participation in contemporary mumming performances through its website (www.folkplay.info). In short, the use of ethnography has been no mere experiment. It was specifically chosen because of its responsiveness to real world conditions, and has consistently proven to be the right scholarly tool with which to reveal that *whatever* accounts for the longevity of mumming continues to be relevant today.

Ceiling Paradigm

Henry Glassie (1975: esp. 104-7; 147-48) argued that mumming functions as a heightened and ritualized form of just being a good neighbor, or “Ceiling.” In this connection, both *visiting* and *hospitality* are key elements. Ceiling involves one’s neighbors assembling regularly “at night, without plan or invitation, in a few houses, where they are sure to find entertainment” (Glassie 2006: 171). They gather in the kitchen or around a fireplace in winter, for conversation, warmth, food, music and song; all before they leave again with a blessing. The ceili was the original home-entertainment system; bound up with a social ethic that is fast disappearing. Mummers bring with them not only a chance for neighbors to witness their performance, but a chance for others to *become* the “Host” of the gifts they have to offer, and they are a reminder that one can transform oneself by being *receptive* to all that the season and the coming year might bring: not just death, but resurrection, visitation, conversation, and pleasant surprises. Glassie’s “Ceiling” paradigm is revolutionary, if only in terms of its simplicity, and its implications are well worth exploring in other contexts (Glassie, 1975: esp. 104-7; 147-48). In some places mumming *does* have a remarkably close modern analogue. During the bleakest, coldest, darkest - and for some people, the most alienating and lonely time of the year - there are still “neighbors” who visit and put on shows.

USO Shows: Context and Function

The USO and DOD (Department of Defense) Overseas Shows provide for the United States Military the equivalent of the show from “back home.” American military bases are often virtual US cities, using American currency, postage stamps, and retail products, but to most

service members abroad, the base itself never fully represents “Home.” In fact, bases may be tent cities in the middle of what is otherwise a field or a desert, and are often points of isolation and alienation to troops away from friends and family. USO visits are intended to boost morale by providing a concrete and familiar connection to America, especially during the holiday season.

Despite their ludic content, USO shows are not merely entertainment, however. Performers in USO shows are also expected to interact with their American neighbours after the show is over, and essentially, to *ceili* with them. The expectation of post-show interaction is so much a part of the USO’s mission, in fact, that it is made explicit in the printed “orders” that USO entertainers receive from the Department of Defense. While the show itself is not merely an “excuse” to interact, the official expansion of the performance frame to include an ethic of neighbourly interaction certainly means that stepping out of character for beer and conversation is part of the logic that informs a USO event. Between 1994 and 1997 I had the honour of performing audience-participation murder mysteries for the USO at bases around the world, mainly throughout Asia and Europe. The show was actually selected *because* of its interactive potential both during and after the performance. Murder mystery events are fully interactive, and arranged by notions of game playing. Thus, audience members are in direct conversation and contact with actors throughout the show, and are even able to search through the character’s belongings in search of clues.

Visiting the Neighbours

The performance principles that undergird USO shows are intentionally different from those that inform most professional entertainments today, and are more closely related to

the values of folk theatre. For audience members and actors to hang out together after a show is simply not the norm in professional entertainment circles. Professional theatrical culture typically promotes an in-group identity among actors, and accords an out-group status to audience members. This is reinforced by the divisions existing between the *backstage* and the *house* in the conventional proscenium theatre. This separation usually continues after the show is over, with troupe members “escaping” the crowd, often through a back door, to meet at a local gathering place. In USO, however, this division is *meant* to be violated, and the status of both entertainer and audience member is meant to be subsumed under their common *national* identity as “fellow Americans,” fighting for the same cause, and sometimes quite literally standing “in the same boat.” All participants are only considered to be “doing their part for their country.” By subsuming individual identities beneath an identification with a common cause and country, both audience members and performers become consubstantial.

Shared Geography: Place v. Space

Although they will not move from house to house, or pub to pub like mummings do, USO performers will travel from base to base within the geography of a specified military “neighbourhood.” Each base within the country is likely to be visited by USO performers only for that reason. Like houses within a district, bases will appear (on the map) within a country as large dots, and USO performers will travel only by official vehicles, and only to that series of bases within the cultural network. Performances outside of that area, that is, within the territory of the foreign nation, are strictly prohibited. Sometimes performances involve paying a visit to every quadrant of a large base, or to every base on an entire island. At other times it involves visiting a series of bases within a country, or within a specific

“theatre” of military conflict. In this sense USO shows do bear an important similarity to the neighbourly visits and performance geography of mumming teams. Like mumming also, the typical performance space is *not* a theatre, but a bar, mess tent, or other community place. This is a typical feature of folk theatre in general (Brandon 1967). And although many performances are preceded by advance publicity, it is not at all uncommon for the visit to be an unscheduled surprise, particularly since USO troupes are often rerouted due to changes in the weather, or because of military conflict patterns on the ground.

Sharing Values

It is no coincidence that audience-participation murder mystery events fit so well within the USO context, for, like many kinds of folk theatre, the community authorises the performance event. The American military represents a very specific culture unto itself. The USO is *intended* to promote American values, and to provide a sense of cultural connection with Home for service members. It is an ambassadorial slice of “apple pie” served anywhere in the world. The USO has always imported the staples of American culture abroad. From Bob Hope to the latest country music superstar or rock band, performers find themselves—no matter what country they are sent to—entertaining only the US military, in community spaces on base. USO members are both representatives from home, and visitors. Officially they perform as patriotic volunteers—civilians—without pay, receiving only a *per diem* living expense. Unless they have been “in” the military previously, USO members never transcend their status as civilians. Essentially, USO members are always “folks from home,” visiting service members in their camp away from home.

Both USO performers and contemporary mummers seem satisfied with the social and personal, rather than monetary, rewards for their efforts. In the past, mumming performances were followed by a *quête*, a request for money which, according to Eddie Cass, was the main purpose of the performance (Cass 2001:16; 72). Alan Gailey (1969) takes a different view, stating that mumming functioned as a *luck bringing* visit: “The collection of money is really a reversal of the original reason for the custom. In fact, one may still find traditions that the mummers went out to take luck around the houses of the community, and that it was incidental if they were rewarded with money or food” (Gailey 1969: 14). Although contemporary mummers engage in vestigial forms of the *quête*, usually on behalf of a chosen charity, the *quête* is not the primary motivation today. Similarly, USO members are not motivated by financial gain. The *per diem* received by USO members is mainly designed to offset the cost of being on the tour itself, although it is possible for frugal performers to return with some cash. The *per diem* can vary depending on what branch of Armed Forces Entertainment is sponsoring the tour (USO, DOD), and the location of the tour itself. Without a *per diem*, only the wealthiest entertainers would be able to subsidize the effort, and in order to be on a USO tour, performers often sacrifice a great deal. Performers travel long distances. They give up their normal jobs, as well as non-military comforts, and holiday celebrations with family and friends.

USO acts are also carefully selected to reinforce and participate in the values of military culture itself. The selection of an audience-participation “murder mystery” directly utilises the military value system. By reinforcing notions of delivering justice, and restoring social balance, the murder mystery is a perfect theatrical choice. While the show’s detective may not raise the victim from the dead like the doctor of the mummers play, he always helps the “victim” to an “ambulance,” and enlists the audience’s help in delivering justice to the

perpetrator. This also involves an audience member helping the detective to place the suspect in handcuffs...although, in the spirit of play, the audience member is then handcuffed to the killer “just in case he tries to escape.”

Ceiling Re-visited

The performance itself is only the first half of the USO event. The second half, as with mumming, emerges informally. Almost uniformly it begins with all parties introducing themselves and asking what State the other is from. People then begin to carve out shared geographies and local references, and become situated. The conversation often continues over drinks or food, sometimes extending into formal social invitations. It was not uncommon for a base commander to invite the troupe to lunch, or a group of Navy Pilots to their clubhouse/bar. Some interactions continued into the next day. In Okinawa, in 1996 the troupe was invited to a post-show party, receiving not only drinks, but complimentary tattoos from an artist Marine, and a cab ride all the way back to the other side of the island, some 60 miles away. In 1997 we spent a Thanksgiving with a Navy couple in Iceland, watching Woody Allan movies, and eating a traditional turkey dinner. In Macedonia in 1995, a young soldier named Cary Buchanon found my comic routine so amusing that he showed up at my quarters the next day grinning from ear to ear, offering to act as my tour guide around the city of Scopjia. Events like these were common.

Addendum

Some folklorists have lamented the demise of traditional forms such as mumming. But folk-like theatres such as the USO sponsored murder mystery event are experiencing resurgence. Since 1980, in fact, audience-participation style murder mysteries, along with a

host of similar environmental theatre events (i.e. *Tony and Tina's Wedding*) have embraced folk-like practices as urgent responses to problems of alienation and fragmentation in the contemporary world. Folk communities are constitutive of folk theatre; that we know, but whether folk theatre can be constitutive of community is, perhaps, a question we ought to entertain. It is my contention that it can. Theatre practitioners have a moral duty to ask how their practices affect society. In my experience both as a traditional mummer, and as an inter-actor, the effect of these theatrical forms is similar. They represent more than just performances; they are social performatives, reinvigorating communities in new and meaningful ways by expanding communication networks and instituting acts of play between people. That these new folk-like genres show a family resemblance to the social networks and seasonal logic underpinning the mummer's play is no coincidence. We gather together at particular times, and for a reason.

In Comes I: The Player/Co-Player relationship and Reception as Folk Recognition

Folk drama has a different semiotic structure and a different *phenomenological substance* than popular theatre (Veltrusky 1987: 146). Folk actors are visible beyond their costumes, and other folk members tend to recognize them. Bisociation of identity is therefore as important to USO performances as it is to traditional folk play activities such as mumming, and for the same reason. Bisociation cues a co-player response from spectators in the surrounding social frame, which supports a mutual joking relationship between them.

The USO intentionally foregrounds the identity of *its* performers as visiting Americans, visiting *other* Americans. For this to happen, performers must be seen to exist outside of their dramatic roles.

In foregrounding what is ostensibly theatre's *expressive function* over and against its *referential function*, however, the USO intentionally violates the standards by which most "professional" theatre in the West is judged to be "good art" (Quinn 1990: 155). The majority of Western theatre makers agree that good Theatre – and "good Acting" – achieves a balance between the expressive function fulfilled by the actor and the referential function required by the script; to manifest a Story. When this balance has been achieved, the actor blends seamlessly into the character and vice versa; and, to paraphrase Bert States: "Olivier *becomes* Hamlet and Hamlet *becomes* Olivier" (States 1985: 200-201; States 1981: 371-74). When the actor does not disappear into the character, for whatever reason, the expressive/referential balance is thrown off, and we are unable to fully enter into the story owing to the obtrusiveness of the actor's continual *presence*.

Among the earliest theorists to recognize a different aesthetic standard operating was Prague School semiotician Pet'r Bogatyrev, who noted a special appreciation for what he termed "plurisignation" or "duplexity" among folk audiences (Bogatyrev 1976a: 43-48; 1976b: 51-2). In his writings on folk theater Bogatyrev describes situations wherein a local actor – in this case, the village actor – makes *no attempt to conceal his identity*, but instead *heightens* this contrast for comic effect, most noticeably by wearing a *costume* visibly at odds with his own identity (Bogatyrev 1976b: 52). The expressive/referential split is thereby magnified. To quote Bogatyrev directly: "In folk theater actors deliberately disguise themselves as various animals in such a way that the spectators will easily recognize that they see before them not a real horse, goat, bear but only an actor dressed as

such” (52). Consequently, Veltrusky (1987) adds that when the actor attempts to portray the animal-character in this way, what the spectator sees is not a man that has become convincingly dog-like, but instead a Man wearing a silly Dog suit (158). Bert States (1985: 32-33) refers to this effect as comic “bisociation of identity,” whereby the reality of the Actor as a *phenomenal* being is played off against the pretence of the Character as a *semiotic* fiction. Veltrusky (1987) explains that in folk theatre this comic tension is sustained because the dog costume clearly reveals the actor’s humanness. This brings into collision “two different signifying chains,” playfully resulting in “ambiguities of aggregation” (Veltrusky 1987: 158). Veltrusky adds that a sustained collision of identity – between the actor and character – is commonplace:

It is a general feature of folk theatre....to exploit the dual - or perhaps multiple – aggregate meaning of the stage figure in a variety of ways for aesthetic effect. There are no examples, to my knowledge, of folk theatre trying to conceal this duality by merging the character with the actor’s image. To sum up, the relations between the stage figure and the character in folk theatre seem to be largely determined by two distinct but complimentary antinomies...it sets to keep the duality of the aggregate meaning alive, sometimes by elaborately concealing the actors [already known] identity, sometimes by a sophisticated confrontation of actor and character.

(Veltrusky 1987: 158-9)

The audience participation murder mystery event, even when performed professionally, betrays its folk-play origins. The logic of the murder mystery is that it brings its audience a Game to play. In this connection, obtrusive costuming provides an immediate visual clue

that play has arrived, seriousness has been inverted, and participation is being requested. In order to clearly signify the arrival of a game from the outset, actors blatantly force a perceptual contrast between their Real selves and their Character-selves, using obviously theatrical costumes that weigh heavily upon their true identities, as falsehoods. By contrast, the costume highlights the actual identity of the Player beneath. It separates her from her character, turning her into a self-conscious joke. With the ironic immediacy of a “paradox” made present, for a moment it becomes possible to see the actor - as a real person – in a silly costume – Playing. Or else it becomes possible to see - an American – *outside* of the Character – Costumed ludicrously. This again is Veltrusky’s dog-actor. Costuming presents an immediate visual parody realized as a play-of-identities. Absurd costuming also activates the spectator’s perception of the event as an explicitly *theatrical* activity.

Recognition is extended to Theatre’s overall fictive quality, as species of play and game.

In the USO sponsored Murder Mystery, as in mumming, the side by side appearance of the Actor and Character serves to communicate the arrival of a playful activity by immediately establishing a *joking relationship* between actors and spectators. Each event’s absurdity enfranchises the spectator to be playful, and in both murder mysteries and mumming there is an uptake of the permission to play, which sometimes exceeds the ability of the players to contain it (*see below* Mclellan, 2007). In both forms, one can see this relationship in the workings of a shared frame of dramatic reflexivity. There is nothing serious about mumming or murder mysteries. Mumming is so blatantly ludicrous, on sight, that it effectively deprives its audience of a means of taking it seriously. The audience, however, in pretending to do so, actively jokes with the players. Mummies wear ridiculous costumes. They fight each other with wooden swords and die in a comical manner.

When the audience gets involved in booing the villain, or cheering the doctor, they are playing their part in a joking relationship, by pretending to be witnessing something they supposedly “do not *really* notice” is absurd. Mummers initiate this game and spectators ratify the proposal by pretending to believe in it. Where the actors perform theatre, therefore, the audience performs meta-theatre in a distinctly *Theatrical* way.

Foregrounding the identity of USO performers by dressing them up ridiculously is partially explained by the functional relationship between actor-recognition and audience-reception in a folk context. Nominally speaking, *recognition* and *reception* become related forces in folk drama, often played up for participatory effect. *Recognition* involves *perception*. It pertains to the expressive function’s *foregrounding* of the performer in a deliberate way (perhaps as decided by the show’s promoter), or else by a deliberate choice made by the receiver, to view the performer in a way that enhances his or her own enjoyment. *Reception*, on the other hand, applies to the *active* mode in which audience members receive the Players into a native context. In the USO sponsored Murder Mystery, a great deal of overlap exists between these two areas; and can be explained by Bogatyrev’s (1976b) findings that the reception of a play into a folk context fundamentally alters the event’s *form and function*, through participation. This is true even of high art:

[Even] When artistic drama enters the village, it becomes a component of another structure different from the structure determined by the ‘higher strata.’ In particular, the village community, with its taste different from the city and with its tendency towards collective participation in the creation and interpretation of folk art, profoundly influences the reception of drama and can easily change its form and function. As soon as the play comes to the village, it necessarily changes because

the development of the plot as well as the method of acting depends on two basic theatrical factors: on the actors and on the spectators...the whole specific social structure of the village modifies the received play in form and function. In folk theatre, for example, the actors draw the spectators into the play, often directly provoking them, laughing at them and their environment (Bogatyrev 1976b: 53-54).

While the murder mystery is interactive by design, even in folk plays where interaction is not built into the show's design, interaction can be anticipated from reception practices found in folk contexts, which overtake the show; and, again, by joking relationships visually cued by costumes within it. That the folk context of reception, and not the actual play, can, by itself, render folk drama interactive, can be seen in the case of mumming. The lively reception contexts of homes and pubs seem to force interaction and mutual joking relationships onto the players. These conditions also meet in the USO context as well, making it impossible to draw a clear dividing line between what has been built into the USO Murder Mystery in advance, and what results from its reception in a folk context. The show certainly works on both levels, and actors simply work *with* these conditions.

A second factor also produces interaction. Like mummers, Murder Mystery Characters are not strictly "Theatrical." They do not try to inhabit a different *time/space* reality than their "audience." They neither *dramatize* nor *tell* a Story the events of which purport to be happening somewhere else, at another time and place. Veltrusky cites contiguous space as a classic feature of folk drama (1987: 150-153). The audience is not asked to imaginatively leave the place they are at, but to accept that the actors-in-character have, instead, entered into the audience's own here and now, by *visiting* them. Performers may appear at the doorstep, or in the same pub. When they arrive, both Mummers and Murder Mystery actors

offer a rapid change of “frame” designed to be instantly recognizable as both a Play frame and a Dramatic frame. The terms “Audience” and “Actor” cease to be appropriate when describing the relationship between the performers and those who receive them within the play frame. As performers who declaim their own presence, a player/co-player relationship is established. Play is coordinated through shared acts of meta-communication, which far exceed what is necessary to maintain a conventional Actor-Audience relationship in a proscenium Theatre (Alter 1990: 4-12). In interactive theatre one can talk to the Character and the Actor simultaneously because, essentially, both are visiting; and one cannot accept one without accepting the other. The (actor) Player is fated to communicate *out* of character even while *in* character because the game requires it. In the end, what is preserved in this relationship is the duality, of the actor-in-character, and the audience members’ ability to recognize and respond to it. Two identities and two communication channels are made available between all participants throughout the event; one a channel for inter-Personal dialogue, and the other a channel for inter-Acting and joking.

Ethnographic Interviews: USO Performers

In the USO context, actors are *recognized* as fellow Americans, and *received* accordingly. The actor – as an identifiable fellow American – stands recognizably apart from his or her costume, just as Military personnel – as fellow Americans – are suddenly perceived as standing apart from *their* uniforms also. In this mutual recognition of the difference between substance and image, *both* become co-players licensed to play together in the same theatrical game. Through shared theatrical reflexivity, a mutual joking relationship is established.

The American USO event acts as a *situational* folk context, transforming popular murder mysteries into folk play events. Shared identity emerges among participants in an entertainment context that features interpersonal interaction. But, placing this interaction center stage also subverts the purely semiotic event that most (popular) theatre is intended to be, and by which it is usually judged to be “good theatre.” In 2007 I traveled back to Portland, Oregon to interview ten former murder mystery/USO actors. Interactive entertainers tended to evaluate performances as holistic events, which included the quality of pre and post-show interaction in the surrounding frame. Most agree that whatever makes the event successful simultaneously undermines it as “good theatre” by semiotic standards. A different definition of quality emerges, which actors struggle to identify, but which might be defined as Play or Entertainment. Wherever possible I have let the actors speak for themselves.

Most performers judged murder mystery performances to be narrative disasters in which the story often fell apart in relation to the volume of interaction, such that there was no conceivable way that audience members could accurately reconstruct the narrative in order to solve the mystery. As playing gathered momentum, it often overtook the event entirely. Playing was often so enjoyable, however, that the mystery simply ceased to matter.

I can remember so many shows, especially when we’d get on the tours where the soldiers... They couldn’t give a crap what the story was. They just wanted to have me sit on their lap, and have their picture taken with me and talk to you... The story just didn’t matter after a certain point, and it could be a complete cluster fuck and it was fine! Seriously, the whole story could go completely down the toilet and they had an *amazing* time because they got to sit there and touch you and talk to you and

go through your stuff and be an intricate part of it and make their own funny jokes, and it seemed to fulfill something in them, which I think is tremendously interesting. (Laura Smith)

John Paul Mclellan often played the detective on tour, a stand-up comic character who moderates the event using a microphone. His role was to assist the audience in fitting the clues together, and it is the only role that demands a central focus from audience members. All of the other characters interact simultaneously on a person by person basis.

In Okinawa, Japan in a couple of places the audiences were so loud that from the minute you got on stage they just started screaming, and so you'd just plow through the show, and you'd get done with it, and you'd go 'I can't believe that anybody heard anything!' But everybody afterwards was like: 'We love you. We love you. We want to buy you drinks!' But I was like: 'How did you hear anything about what the show was about? I could barely hear *myself* on stage talking.'

Chris Herman attributes the events' quality to the level of pure excitement it generated:

If you compare it to live Theatre, I would have to say it's not "good theatre," but in the military context...if you compare it to a rock concert or something where people just come and have a great time, then I would say it's excellent.

Daryl Olsen is a former USO performer, and founder of Brainwaves Improvisational Comedy. He believes that semiotic/narrative integrity is at the heart of good theatre. Comparing the murder mystery genre with long-form improvisational theatre in which cast members cooperate to build a single narrative from scratch, he describes the murder

mystery genre as an artless free-for-all: eight simultaneous stand-up routines, with each actor simply pulling focus. He acknowledges that audiences like having actors come to their “tables” to play, but considers it to be the moment when the event ceases to be artistic:

Murder mystery dinner theatre is the *bottom* of theatre. There’s no where else to go from there. It’s a way for actors to make money when they need work. And it can be fun as long as you don’t go in there thinking it’s going to be great theatre; that it’s just going to be cheesy and big, then there’s nothing wrong with it. But it’s not good theatre.

Kaycherie Rappaport objects to the *simplicity* of the genre. But her description could equally well apply to folk theatre:

Part of us [as actors] was very contemptuous of the murder mysteries. [We’d say] ‘We’re real actors and here we are being cartoons.’ It’s the lowest of the low. The scripts are garbage. They’re pathetic. The characters themselves are all *stock characters*; they’re reprehensible.

Ted Smith attributes the value of the genre, both in the USO and in domestic performance contexts, to what is generated *between* participants *within* the performance event. Smith does not even consider murder mystery to be a form of Theatre, but rather “entertainment,” which he defines in terms of sociability and humor.

Entertainment is if you go to a party, and even if you don’t know people, after a while when everyone has like minds and the party gets going and you’re having a good time, that’s entertainment. That’s when people are connecting. That’s when,

even if I don't know you, we can laugh and joke about something similar because we've either both experienced it or we find this funny and so we've connected. Then, I find that it spreads. So it's almost Zen-like when an audience connects. That's entertainment. I've seen Broadway shows that did not connect, and that therefore did not entertain. They're not there to entertain you; they are there to perform a drama that creates an *emotion* in you. When I'm *entertaining* someone, I'm not looking for a specific emotion. I'm going for the *likeness*, for lack of a better word; that *human connectedness*: that connection that we all have, and that we can all feel.

Kaycherie Rappaport emphasizes the importance of giving personal attention to audience members on socio emotional terms:

Lots of times, especially overseas because not everybody was happy - they were homesick or whatever - there were times when I really stepped out of character and became more compassionate than that character would ever be. I mean "Grimella" was a total bitch, but I remember a couple of times when I just became a human being because there was such a hunger for that, which is not something the director would appreciate a whole bunch. It's rare that you have the opportunity to really connect with somebody, but that, to me, is really the best part of interactive theatre; that you're *really connecting*, and not like in dramatic Theatre where [the audience] might say "Oh yeah, I can 'identify' with that character." But, this is a *true* connection.

In domestic shows, audiences are slightly more engaged in solving the actual mystery. They question characters to learn their story. Rappaport describes how she would utilize conversational turn-taking as a way of swapping stories, and of getting audience members to tell their own story so that she could *listen*:

I'm here on this planet to make things a little better for people, not worse. So whatever character I portrayed, I found a way to make people still feel good about themselves. That's my own personal stuff. It isn't necessarily the ideal of the company or of Theatre, but that's me. And I was able to do that. For instance, whatever character I was, I could still talk to somebody and ask "how many kids do you have?" "What's your life like?" And people love to talk about themselves....they get totally involved. And what I found out was that they were so hungry for somebody who would care about them. In regular theatre the actor never knows, but in this kind of theatre *you know* if someone is dying of cancer. You find out. You find out their story. What comes to my mind was when we were on the USO and DOD tours and these guys, and women, were so lonely and they were so hungry for news from home...there were some really dramatic events [happening around them and to them]. On tour I really felt like they were very appreciative of us because it was so different from their usual time.

Christopher Herman attributes the value of the USO visit to its humanizing function, by which it reacquaints audience members with a civilian self outside of the military:

I think it [the genre] was more essential in those [USO] shows because they were desperately in need of a different kind of interaction. They are in a world where they

are constantly under stress and pressure to behave a certain way, and there's the law and the authority of whatever part of the service they're in. So, to be *normal* again and to be able to just cut loose, I think, was vital for them to do that. I mean, that was the biggest thing I learned about the audiences there – the people that appreciated it more - was that they desperately loved you. They wanted you there. They just wanted to sit and talk with somebody different. *I think it helped them remember that they were human beings and not just automatons*, in their military service. [The USO visit] really brings a humanity back to whatever base you were at sometimes. For example when we went into Croatia, we went into Zagreb where we were entering into a place where they were in lockdown for six months! They were on alert for six months! For Six months of your life, every day you're afraid that you're going to be attacked. That leaves a mark on people. And here's something you've got to understand: even though they are military people, they are *people* people. They're also human beings, and that kind of stress makes people crazy.

USO Performers identify service people as belonging to a category by which they also identify themselves. This causes performers to attribute a much deeper level of meaning to their own involvement and to feel a special sense of duty to continue their involvement after the show is over. On some level, an interpersonal communication channel is necessary as a way of negotiating play, which also opens up the possibility for person to person dialogue. At times, playing together allows real friendships to develop on both sides. Levels of identity are expanded along with opportunities to activate that Identification. But it also creates the potential for confusion and misunderstanding. Here, an example from a different show might be useful. Mark Fredericks played the role of Tina's ex boyfriend,

Michael Just, in the Portland production of *Tony and Tina's Wedding*; he experienced misunderstandings frequently. In real life, Fredericks was also an attractive model. In T&T the jilted *Michael* went around trying to pick up women in order to get back at Tina for marrying Tony. From time to time, Fredericks was confronted by an angry husband or boyfriend who accused him of being unprofessional *at work* for trying to pick up women during *the show*. From a distance, the stage manager would often have to judge whether or not the audience member was *playing*, and then intercede appropriately. Laura Smith describes a similar phenomenon, but in a much more complex way. The USO context widened the scope of identities and levels of social commitments she had to manage at work, because it expanded the number of identity categories that seemed to come into play. Interactive theatre, therefore, becomes complex in terms of managing perceived intentions. Laura Smith recalls:

On the tour we were told we were ambassadors as well as being in that show, so there was a certain responsibility to go drink with the audience after the show and be social; not to go back to your room, or go do your own thing. But when you finished a show, you hung out and you connected with those people, because technically you build relationships with these people. Whether you feel you're building it or not, they're experience is that you have built a relationship with them. Maybe it's in character, but they feel connected to *you* – even though *you* know you do this [show] every night. It's a little like being a whore, right? You may sleep with a lot of people, and it doesn't mean anything to you, but to the person on the receiving end, they might feel something special there. So it's *that* kind of a level of interaction. So, even though - for you - that interaction was "meaningless," I don't

think it's meaningless for other people. I can tell you from the number of times I got flowers from people - from men I flirted with in the show [in character] - and who didn't [properly] take it *out* of the context of the show, and who thought "yeah she really is interested; she's flirting with me;" they were not [correctly] making that distinction. Or the people who just suddenly thought you were their best friends. I remember some guy on the second tour, the last night in Macedonia. I remember literally staying up all night talking to this guy, and he kept saying "I hope you don't think I'm hitting on you. I just don't get to talk to very many women any more." And I don't think he was. He didn't try anything. He just wanted to talk to a woman because that base was primarily men. And I was older than him, and we just stayed up and talked all night, in the dining hall. We stepped into the dining hall, a period of time went by, and the next thing you knew they were setting up breakfast. And it happened all the time where we would form these connections with people and hang out and they would become part of our posse. Even [our bus driver] Mike, I think fell into that, although he was a driver, so I could see that happening. But he loved our show. He dressed [in costume] as Father Guido that one time and came to our show and pulled himself into the show and became a part of it. But I remember it happening with audiences, that they wanted to take us out to drink [afterwards] and show us the Island and the sights, and they bonded with us, and it was because we'd been drinking and talking and eating and sharing a meal with them all night, so it was like: to stop that would have seemed really cold! It would have been like "Oh, no, no, no, no, I was being *paid* for that! No, that was the show, bitch! Now I'm going to go drink with my friends!" I think that would have been, for them, just

really jarring; to have that friendship you had set up in terms of the show just melt all of a sudden because it was over.

When there is a mutual degree of care being taken between players, things go well, but Laura Smith describes how in domestic shows guests sometimes got so caught up in the theatrical game, they forget to treat the actors as real people:

A lot of times people are drunk and I have had so many inappropriate sexual things happen. I had a guy [physically] pick me up one night and try to carry me up the stairs to his hotel room right in the middle of the show. Probably to be funny, but I remember playing along until I turned around and went ‘Alright, you need to put me down now;’ like ‘where are you going?’ And I had so many guys’ hotel keys put into my purse. I used to carry a purse [in character], and at the end of the night I’d have their hotel keys in my purse...I was grabbed a lot really inappropriately. Grabbed and fondled. And then women trying to be funny would say “Don’t you hit on my man!’ and of course they were drunk, so sometimes they were really physically aggressive with me. I remember some guy wanted to steal my [character’s] purse one time, and I was in a chair, and the chair was tipped up on one of its legs and I was holding on to the purse because it [the clue inside the purse] wasn’t supposed to get out yet. And I remember finally just yelling for the Detective, who came over, and he pulled the [prop] gun on the guy and told him to stop, but he just had no thought that I was *a person*, in a body. There was an actor who I went to college with. He was in Wild Bill’s [murder mystery company] up here [in Portland] and I remember him telling me about some woman grabbing him. He played dual characters in the show - one was old and one was young - and so he

had a mask on, and a scarf to hide the seam in the mask. And I guess the woman got him down on the floor and was choking him with the scarf and banging his head on the floor, and he was like “you stupid fucking bitch. I AM alive! I am not a DOLL! You ARE hurting me. You are banging my head on the floor and choking me with the scarf, and you have no cognizance right now that *that’s* not o.k., that you can’t do that with people (Laura Smith).

The comic murder mystery inherently invites the audience to participate in improvisational comedy. The role of the Detective is a specialized one. His interaction with audience members recalls a Stand-Up Comedy routine, and tends to cue audience behaviors related to the reception of a night-club act. People shout things out, heckle and cajole the detective, whose clever come-back lines are expected to make them laugh. But, even professional comedians can be caught off guard by some people’s sense of humor, and by their definition of Play. At times, audience members compete with the actors to make their friends laugh. When audience members use the murder mystery in this way, it can be a real challenge for performers to play along. Christopher Herman recalls:

I remember in Okinawa doing that show in the bar for those guys who were all *drill sergeants*; really huge guys in combat boots, drinking and yelling at us. They were not interested in solving the murder; just making fun of it and making jokes. And [when the detective asked for help in solving the murder] they just kept yelling “*Who cares? A kill’s a kill! It doesn’t matter who did it. A kill’s a kill!*” And I remember that one guy, literally falling out of his chair onto the floor because he was choking from laughing and still trying to chug his beer. And I was just thinking “Oh my god! This guy’s going to die!” But the other guys were still yelling: *Who*

cares? A kill's a kill! Literally, they were chanting it. And the detective wanted to carry the victim away, and they were like *NO! Don't take the body away till we carve 'a trophy' off of it!* And they were moving the “knife” around to make sure the victim was *really* dead and stuff....and offering to finish him off. And for them that was hilarious, but for us, I just remember when we left the room [after there was a second murder] and went back there we debated about whether we should even finish the show or not because it was like being thrown into a shark tank. They were really abusive.

Most performers recognize that the genre is accessible as something other than traditional Theatre. John Paul Mclellan describes it as an approachable event for “people that aren’t accustomed to going to Theatre, or who might be intimidated by its formality.” For these people, he believes “The only real theatre experience they’ll ever get is the interactive dinner theatre.” Laura Smith also states:

Many people in the military [that I encountered] had probably never been exposed to any kind of theater at all, so their thought of ‘theatre’ was probably like ‘Oh, Shakespeare; it’s boring. I won’t understand it.’ To this day I’ll never forget the time we were jammed into this little teeny tiny back coat closet [for a show in a bar]. And I remember stacks of tables, and the whole cast standing back there, where we were put like cattle before the friggin show started. And I remember someone outside the door: she said, “What’s goin’ on tonight; do we got a band?” and someone else was like “Naw, it’s a theatre group” and she was like “TheeAyter?! You caint drink to TheeAyter!” And I just remember thinking “Well, this is the kind of theatre you CAN drink to, lady.” And they had a ball. They loved

it. They had a great time. But she thought it would be like: “Sit quietly; Watch people on the stage. You gotta be quiet. You gotta pay attention. You gotta be smart.’ But suddenly it’s like this free for all.

Laura Smith reports that, on tour, a higher degree of creativity and free play was also possible among the actors themselves, and this increased their own level of enjoyment. Daryl Olson believes that simply watching the actors having fun is a fundamental component of the audience member’s enjoyment of any kind of improvisational theatre. Laura Smith explains that on tour, the show was entirely in the hands of the actors who made it their own by restructuring the show to fit the military audience:

We completely re-wrote the show. I mean completely! We changed all of the interrogations [semi-improvised stand-up routines between a character, the detective and the audience]. We changed the jokes...and it just grew and grew and grew as we went, and it got funnier and funnier. Well, then we came back, and it was hard to do the show back in the States because we had to adapt...to a family-friendly environment. But the first thing we did was – on every tour - we re-wrote the show because we knew the audience. For Marines it became raw-er and ruder and grosser. I mean it became a pissing contest! But we understood the audience. We were there living with them. We knew it had to be sexual. We knew that it had to have a lot of innuendo. And I was traveling with such a smart group of people who really GOT comedy, who really got timing, and who got what that audience really wanted and needed, to make them laugh. And I always remember the first three or four shows were rough, and then we’d find it, and it would just fly. And by the time we came

off that tour, it was funnier than hell. And then we'd come back after the tour and it was just really hard to integrate back into the States.

Daryl Olsen attributes the show's success in the USO context to its being a form of "escape" from a regimented lifestyle that reduces human beings to roles. The murder mystery show, on the other hand, offered them a chance for unregulated free play with non-military people.

I think its purpose was served better in the USO context. They appreciated it more.... There isn't anything improvisational about the military. Maybe there should be, but there isn't. From the time you get up until the time you hit the bunk, you do it the way they want you to do it. It's like from [the film] "A Few Good Men," Jack Nicholson: "we follow orders or people die." That's the mentality, and that's where the regimen comes in and the rigidity. And I think that's the kind of thing they were escaping just a bit with our show. The show allowed that to be broken by the *actors playing with each other*. But also they were given permission to take part in the production, to say whatever they wanted. Nobody was telling them they couldn't say something. If they wanted to hoot at one of the women or pick a fake fight with one of the actors, they could do that. Or if they just wanted to put in their two cents, they could do that. Or we'd get people on stage sometimes and they were possibly even [implicated as] one of the suspects, so they got involved in something where they didn't know what was going to happen next, so that was part of the escapism for them... These are men and women who are in a

tough place and doing a tough job and don't really want to be there, and they get to have some fun and interact a little bit and do something really silly and escape.

Ted Smith further defines the merits of the genre as the degree of personal *attention* that is paid to individual audience members by actors, whether through dialogue or through object-play using props. Audience members, he believes, enjoy having access to actors. If they see an actor playing with people at a nearby table, he observes, they become “envious, listening and waiting for actors to direct [their] attention at them...They love having that connection.” He also recalls how fellow actress Lyn Sager engaged audience members using props; in this case a large handbag that was supposed to be the ‘personal property’ of her character, but which potentially contained vital clues:

Lyn Sager was great with the way she went about it on tour, with that bag. She was strategic in the way she laid the thing down, and walked away. She was baiting people. And when they grabbed it, she'd scold them and slap them, and grab it back, and go around gathering up the objects they took out and start putting them back in. And then she'd deliberately take it to somebody else's table for ‘safe keeping,’ asking them to watch over it and “don't let *these* people touch it; they're thieves.” And they'd all make promises to her, and of course, as soon as her back was turned, they'd all pounce on it like jackals and tear things out. And again the good entertainer – because they're not actors – uses that as a tool to get them to laugh.

Ted Smith emphasizes the importance of the actor's reaction in making the gag work for audience members in terms of play:

They like that because it gives them something to do. But what makes it GREAT is when the character *reacts* to you taking their bag. They [the audience members] don't care if the bag is laying there and they walk up and grab the bag if the actor doesn't notice! [Then] It pretty much ends up [just being laid down again] anywhere. But when the actor says "Hey!" and sees the bag, and responds to it, then they [audience members] giggle. They run with the bag, and they're going through it, and they're excited. And the actors don't even really have to give chase. All they have to do is make them *know* that they've noticed them taking the bag, and then the actor can go anywhere else and the people just *swear* that they're doing something *BAD: They're going through - the bag!!* And they're having a great time. *They want to be recognized*, and they've got the bag and they're running. And, that's when props are *really* good; that's really what they're for.

Performers often define the genre as a form of play *for themselves*. And one clear sign that they perceive a phenomenological difference between acting and playing is that players often describe what they do in terms of stress *release* and personal escape, as opposed to the stressfulness and stage fright that often accompanies trying to maintain a fragile semiotic illusion on a proscenium stage. Murder mystery performers also assume wide latitude in invention and creative autonomy, coming up with characters and costumes that will enhance their own enjoyment of the role-playing experience. Kaycherie Rappaport performed murder mysteries for 15 years:

Personally, I *loved* doing the murder mysteries because I could play. I could be totally outrageous. There were no boundaries. I think interactive theatre allows for a tremendous amount of creativity. We made our own costumes. And I love that. My

top price to buy a costume would be 30 dollars. Of course, we really created our characters, whereas in a standard play the characters have already been created. But we could take things and make it our own, make it bigger, and that goes into the costumes too. And a lot of times we would make up games to play during the show [between actors] like that game “monkey,” where you have a word for the night that you keep saying to each other to make them laugh. You can’t do that in regular theatre because you can’t make up dialogue. It expands creativity.

Nicole Turley performs murder mysteries on board a train in Portland, Oregon and enjoys the opportunity to engage in costume-play and to make her own costumes:

Usually I [use clothes] out of my own closet. I have a lot of whacky clothes because I like to have that. I love messing with make-up and changing my appearance so that’s really nice because usually [in Theatre] you don’t get to costume yourself. You basically create the whole character. They give you a name and a scenario, but you have a lot of ownership. The [news] Reporter characters usually tend to be the straight men in the play, and I got really bored with them...so I worked in this nerd type character with glasses into the scenario...and it’s funny because if you just put on a piece of costume, it actually makes you feel different. It’s like ‘Wow, costumes are really powerful!’ [Showing a photo] This is my Goth character, and I decided that my character had this little quirk, which I gave her...and I have this fake nose ring I put in, and it’s a lot of fun. Some people are really simple with their characters, but I figure if I’m going to be a character, I might as well go all out. I feel like I can be quirkier. I feel a little more myself. I feel a sense of ownership.

Finally, Marylin is an actor in *Joy Swift's Original Murder Mystery Company* in Liverpool, England. Yet, she echoes a view shared by USO performers as well. A psychologist by profession, Mal describes the murder mystery weekend as her own form of personal therapy, recreation and escape; a chance to play. "It's an adult game. You get to play for two days solid." She especially loves being able to take on the roles of people so unlike her regular self, and considers it a "holiday" away from her ordinary routine. She believes that audience members take just as much satisfaction from the role-playing event as she does.

I like playing slightly dippy characters. But also tramps, whores, prostitutes. Jerry, the lesbian prostitute, was a very nasty piece of work. She was an abuser as well as being abused. At one point I pushed Joy around and wrestled her to the floor. I slapped her and pulled her hair. Later that evening, I was standing at the bar in my fancy dress costume by myself. A little old lady from Wales came up to me. She said 'Jerry, It's not your lifestyle I object to, but the way you conduct yourself. It's absolutely disgusting! You're aggressive, you're nasty, you're...' *this, you're that.* She went up and down the bars. And I just *looked* at her, and I let her rant and rave at me, and when she finally got finished I said: '*You seem to be confusing me with somebody who gives a damn!*' And I just turned and ordered my drink. It was exquisite! It was something you'd just NEVER do in real life. I'd be far too embarrassed. And I've been that way when I'm supposed to have given away my children, and had abortions, and had fifty five different relationships with all sorts of people and never told my husband. But I just say '*What's it got to do with you? Talk to the hand!*' [Laughter].

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter and the last we traced the audience participation murder mystery in and out of contexts that render it folk-like. We have seen that cultural literacy combines with a recognizable event-grammar to render the event playful and accessible to folk and popular audiences alike. In this chapter we observed that central to the activity's playfulness is the notion of a bisociated identity, which can be activated. In the case of film viewing, recognition occurs as an enjoyable one-way phenomenon related to the recognition of Celebrity. The film medium, however, forecloses the option of the viewer activating an interpersonal relationship/dialogue between the actor and the Self. *Absent* is the immediacy of an available and open *illocutionary* channel for conducting meaningful interpersonal dialogue: an I-Thou channel. The event fails to produce *inter-personal* Speech. The viewer remains anonymous in the presence of the celebrity Image.

But, what the folk context makes available, by contrast, is a bi-directional illocutionary channel, providing mutual opportunities to recognize one-another. In the USO context, bisociation allows the audience member to recognize the actor behind the character as a potentially accessible and familiar person. This relationship is reciprocal. Actors also identify themselves with audience members. A shared sense of identity allows the event to expand beyond the borders of the theatrical activity, and into the social realm, as an *aftermath*, marked by drinking and conversation. For this reason, I conclude that the activity behaves like a folk event, even in a context in which the event occurs one time only and is not repeated. In essence, it can be classified as a *situational folk event*.

The event's situational status cannot be attributed to any one factor, but rather to a *dynamic* that comes into play only when the event enters into the proper context and is

received by people who *identify* with it and through it. In the USO context, because its audience constitutes an existing community - with an already shared identity - who receive the actors as members of that same community, the actors are effectively recognized as already belonging to that group, as latent folk members. Two other factors come to mind as being relevant. Because the murder mystery game is recognizable to those who receive it – and they are already culturally literate in the basic grammar of the activity – they are able to seize upon the event, and claim it as their own. *Constitutive reciprocity* therefore occurs between the event and the people receiving it. Further, *reciprocal self-constitution* occurs, both between the players and the audience members, *and* between the audience members one to another. Community is made through the activity of making theatre together. There is, therefore, a palpable sense in which - as members of a culture raised on theatrical forms of play – the murder mystery is an ideal event for its audience, achieving a kind of perfect fit. This raises questions to be answered in the following chapter. Do other kinds of one-off audience participation events function similarly, as situational folk events? And, can the mere accessibility and playability of an event, constitute its audience as a community, through merely participating in the activity itself?

CHAPTER FIVE

Postmodern Ludergies

Chapter Synopsis

In this chapter I consider Victor Turner's idea that pre-industrial societies were structurally held together by rituals, which consisted of (devotional) liturgies and (playful) ludergies. We are now in the post-industrial era. Post-modern society is essentially post-liturgical. Yet, even though post-moderns are suited to ludergical (play) events, performance theorists continue to prescribe liturgical solutions to postmodern problems of community-making. I ask whether popular mock-ritual events such as *Tony and Tina's Wedding* fit the bill for a post-modern ludergy, or whether they are merely ludic. I conclude that although postmodern people are theatrically self-reflexive and able to participate in ludic events, these do not substantially constitute actual rituals on the same order as Turner's examples.

Pre-modern Rituals: Liturgy and Ludergy

The term "audience," as it relates to popular theatre, denotes the temporary status of individuals gathered for a particular event. The term "folk" (or "community") denotes a more permanent group status, and also suggests a set of *traditions* by which the community establishes a sense of continuity. Unlike "community," which endures over time, an "audience" exists only for an event's duration and then disbands. It is essentially "unable to survive the performance" (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 256). As such, an "audience" leads what Gay McAuley describes as a "fragile existence" and disappears along with the theatrical fiction itself (McAuley 1999: 249-50). The difference between audience and community, as Herbert Blau puts it, is that "[The audience] does not exist before the play, but is *initiated*

or *precipitated* by it” (quoted in McAuley 1999: 250, *emphasis in original*). Conversely, in folk theatre, the community not only precedes the event, it survives the event, *on a recurring basis*. Wherever and whenever community and audience converge with one another regularly, this is where one finds folk theatre, traditional drama, ritual theatre, or folk play. Folk Drama has the durability of community and the cyclical quality of ritual, and denotes a mechanism in place, adopted by a community, to effect its member’s own social re-aggregation on a regular basis.

In his book *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play* (1982) Victor Turner describes pre-modern European society as structurally held together by rituals and traditions. He defines two types: *liturgy* and *ludergy* (20-60). In the strictest sense, both are “Rituals” (of continuity) because each has a structural *basis* (i.e. social origin) and serves a structural *function* in society. Broadly speaking, liturgical rituals are serious, sacred or religious; ludergical traditions are playful and largely secular. The former is governed by the priest; the latter by the clowns, actors or players. Often, entire communities take on the status of becoming players within the ludergy. Liturgies can be repetitive, inflexible and conformist, while ludergy grants the freedom to be creative, imaginative, and individually self-expressive. The former joins people in a Mass; the latter *entertains* them together. Liturgy and Ludergy roughly correspond, also, to two different kinds of authorship, text and authorial power; the former to Myth, and the latter to what Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) generically calls “Literature” (64-72).⁴⁷ Insofar as each corresponds to a type of speaking or writing, ludergy – as literature or art or song or speech, is democratically shared out. It is typified by the democratic play of signifiers and signification, a general opening up of the

⁴⁷ Generically, “literature” is the collective name given for art, writing, music, speech, voice, dance, painting; or anything else that interrupts Myth with newer forms of creative authorial power exercised by individual speakers who, collectively, can be called a “community” of speakers (plural) (*see* Nancy, 1991: 63-66).

authorial voice to the entire community and its individual members. Liturgy, by contrast, operates within the sphere of the closed text, which is the Myth, and privileges authoritarian individuals who create it and/or interpret it.

Both liturgy and ludergy aggregate members of the same community on a regular basis. Insofar as rituals & traditions have been rendered calendrically recurrent, they function structurally as mechanisms-in-place for social reunion and community re-aggregation. Liturgies and ludergies also immerse participants in a kind of transcendental experience, which allows them to go beyond the ordinary conditions of everyday life: liturgy by spiritual ecstasy, and ludergy through intense moments of *deep play* (Csikszentmihalyi 1974). Deep Play therefore becomes the embodied ludergical equivalent of liturgy's spiritual mode of transcendence.

Both liturgy and ludergy create a liminal sphere that transcends everyday time and space. Set apart from the workaday world, it provides a means for community members to realize their own *alterity* - as spiritual beings within the liturgy or as players within the ludergy. In traditional societies liturgy and ludergy are twin halves of the same social structure. The work/play cycle ensures the community's constant transition from *liturgy* to *ludergy*; from the *liminal* to the *liminoid*. Each year, together, "The *whole* community goes through the *entire* ritual round" (Turner 1982: 31, *emphasis in original*), thus society's continual rebirth - from mundane exertions within the sphere of the workaday world, to spirited rejuvenations within the context of either "devotion or diversion" is assured (Flores 1995: 171-76). Liturgy and ludergy are complimentary opposites, roughly calculated to achieve a structural balance between work & play, spiritual & recreational activity, and individual & community needs.

In traditional societies, participation in both is *obligatory*, not voluntary. Even within the playful context of ludergy, work is required of participants. “The main distinction” explains Turner, “is between sacred and profane *work*, not between work and leisure” (31, *original emphasis*). Strictly speaking, liturgy and ludergy are both mandatory Rituals. Where festive activity is a recurring and patterned feature of community life, preserving the traditional artistic *means* becomes necessary. Festive practices are handed down from one generation to another. Training received in the traditional arts empowers community members *as individuals*, and provides members with a means of self-expression for artistic self-actualization (Sager 2006: 146-49). By a kind of conservative paradox, clear rules and procedures for conducting festive activities maximizes the Play experience via competence gained through repeated practice. Players become proficient enough to pleurably relax, immerse or loose themselves entirely in the activity.

Turner (55-59) relates the submersion experience to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1974) concept of “Flow,” and applies the phenomenon to both religious rituals and ludic traditions: “You can ‘throw yourself’ into the cultural design of the game or art and know whether you have done well or not when you have finished the round of culturally predetermined acts” (57). Turner compares Csikszentmihalyi’s fully-absorbed loss of “Ego” in Flow to the social experience of *Communitas*, which he calls a sense of “unmediated communion with another” (58). Turner’s caveat, though:

What I call *communitas* has something of a ‘flow’ quality, but it may arise spontaneously – it does not need rules to trigger it off...even though severe subscription to rules is the frame in which communion may possibly be induced...

[The difference is that] flow is experienced within the individual, whereas

communitas at its inception is evidently between or among many individuals.

(Turner 1982: 58)

Therefore,

In societies before the Industrial Revolution, ritual could always have a flow quality for total communities (tribes, moieties, clans, lineages, families, etc.); [whereas] in post-industrial societies, when ritual gave way to individualism and rationalism, the flow experience was pushed mainly into the leisure genres of art, sport, games, pastimes, etc. (Turner 1982: 58).

Leisure time is a product of the modern era, and is not the same as ludergical time in pre-modernity. *Leisure* describes an Individual's personal allotment of discretionary time outside of work, but without necessarily obligating him or her socially or structurally to engage a wider community. To designate the type of activity occurring during leisure time, therefore, Turner chooses a different term, *liminoid*. As Hardin (1983) explains: "Liminoid events are not necessarily collective; they are usually produced by known, named individuals...[and] unrelated to 'calendrical or social structural cycles'" (852). Liminoid activities can be engaged by individuals in isolation, in the absence of community.

Turner implies that *flow* has been separated from *communitas* in post-industrial society. The kind of *communitas* that rituals and traditions once delivered has disappeared. Turner holds Capitalism responsible. In place of communalized work, play, and aesthetic activities, capitalist industry hired individual workers *away* from their communities. Each was employed as a separate laborer, paid for singular man hours, and dismissed for "time off" as an individual isolate. An individuated work cycle - the daily clock-hour - replaced the

community cycle - the liturgical calendar-year – and its promised rounds of artistic and spiritual activities, which had previously been conducted within the context of community. Instead, “leisure time” arrived simply as an individuated moment of non-work, and separate persons were left to seek entertainment on their own. Loss of community was ultimately repackaged as “*personal* freedom.”

Without opportunities for artistic self-expression within a stable social environment, individuals pursue isolated opportunities to experience *flow*, as a kind of deep interiority of personal selfhood. The *deep play* experience became the maximal existential allotment granted to the monad of post industrial “leisure time” society, living without community. Within the ludic context of theatre, “audience member” did not converge with “community member.” Because “audience” cannot pre-exist the event (like “community” does) and will not survive it continuously either (like “community” will), this monad has no hope of preserving a continuous quality of life with others, and instead must take what he can get from the *immediate* experience of being an audience member only.

But, the question now arises in the post-modern era of post industrialism, whether a potential opportunity might exist for recovering the communal experience, by *locating* it within post-modernity, in some mixture of *flow* (deep play) *individualism* and (emergent) *communitas* within the *leisure-time* sphere. My working hypothesis is that if Rituals have their structural *basis* in society and serve a structural *function* in society, then the structural and social conditions of post modernity seem to favor the ascendance of *ludergy* (over liturgy) as a way of forming community, and do so even though the weight of Critical theory within Performance Studies acts prescriptively – albeit well out of season - to favor the latter.

Defining Post-modernity

Postmodern society is post-liturgical. A name has been given to this contemporary phenomenon: *ludic postmodernism* (Ebert 1996).⁴⁸ Post-moderns display a generalized incredulity towards grand narratives (Lyotard 1984). Ludic post moderns deconstruct these narratives through new acts of writing, revealing a society of individual interpreters and authors whom Henry Jenkins describes as *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins 1992). Steven Best and Douglas Kellner in their 1997 book *The Postmodern Turn*, stress the need for a clear and systematic definition of the “postmodern.” They describe the postmodern turn not as a break with modernism, but an extension and intensification of its basic sensibilities “to a degree that generates genuine discontinuities and novelties” (26) in relation to textual consumption. They insist that post modernity does not designate a time period or an era. But rather, it describes the outlook, politics and aesthetics of particular kinds of individuals who fall into two basic categories, *oppositional* and *ludic* postmodernists (Ebert 1996). Oppositional postmodernists are Critical and political, while “ludic postmodernism, by contrast, is highly ironic, playful, and eclectic” (Best and Kellner 2006: 27). Broadly speaking, I contend that theatrical activities arising from these two interests can be likened to the categories of liturgy and ludergy.

Performance theorists have yet to fully capitalize on the advantages of *leisure time* and its potential to become *ludergical time* by promoting opportunities for building voluntary personal communities around shared ludic interests. Post-moderns actually require ludergy, but have instead been prescribed - and even force fed, like geese - a steady diet of quasi

⁴⁸ Ebert acknowledges ludic postmodernity, but does not view the “ludic” as a positive development. She casts doubt on its potential for political efficacy and views the ludic attitude taken by theorists such as Judith Butler as a failure to take a more critical/political/oppositional stance on feminist issues. Merely violating gender norms assigned to clothing (via drag performances), she argues, does little to challenge institutionally structured inequalities.

liturgical practices under such aggressively suggestive titles as *forced entertainment*, compulsory *rites of passage*, and “in-yer-face theatre” events, which presume the right to launch an ‘*attack on the spectator*’ in order to *force* her to participate “for her own good” (Lehmann, 2006, unnumbered Preface). Jacques Ranciere (2009) contends that these forced attempts to incorporate the spectator into the spectacle betray “the logic of the stultifying pedagogue,” the “schoolmaster’s” attitude toward the “ignoramus” whom he presumes is incapable of thinking independently (8-10). But additionally, it betrays the fiction that the Theatre must inherently be a “place of *communion*...that it is in itself *communitarian*,” or that it must be manifested “not [in merely theatrical] spectacles but community *ceremonies*; and even today, despite all the postmodern skepticism ...[theatrical] spectacles transformed into *religious mysteries*...” (Ranciere 2009: 22-23, *italics mine*). These liturgical prescriptions are out of place in post-modernity, despite the fact that the majority of Theorizing continues to privilege *oppositional* postmodern Performances.

Oppositional Postmodernism

Oppositional Postmodernists are political activists, also described as “resistant” postmodernists (Ebert 1996: 12). They define themselves in opposition to a world dominated by Capitalism and its hegemony of signs, images and “false” truth claims; claims by which its inventors assume the authority to control public perception and consciousness. Whether it is attributed to capitalism or some other accumulation of power, these activists oppose the producers of ‘the spectacle’ for their manipulation of the masses via images; images by which their creators also invoke the right to define the *norms* of the established order. Instead, these activists critically deconstruct the images to reveal their inherently invented normative status, as well as the merely presumptuous nature of their

producers' own authority to declare what is "respectable," "normal," or "worthwhile" for society. At the extreme end of the spectrum, argue Best and Kellner, are critics such as Debord, who views the spectacle as a manipulative order of absolute political and economic control; and Baudrillard, who views it as a cumulative but totalizing illusion (79-121). For these critics, *the hegemony of the spectacle* is totalizing, making the spectacle itself equivalent to a new kind of Myth. Instead of reflecting reality, as it ought to, "The world of the spectacle is thus the world of capital, of commodities and consumer and media fantasies...the super-reification of image objects as a massive unreality, an inversion of reality and illusion" (Best and Kellner 1997: 91). Ultimately, a revolutionary re-ordering of society and our relationship to the spectacle is the activist's stated objective.

Diagnosis of Post-modern Dis-aggregation

Postmodern society has been described as dis-aggregated due to the loss of rituals and traditions that once held pre-industrial societies together. Often this is described as a lost *liturgy*, which must be restored. In place of the Mythic visions that once provided pre-modern communities with a clear sense of shared identity and a point of communion, post-modernity finds streaming Images and contradictory advertisements that provide no unified vision of Society or its shared values. Strangely, this non-unifying dispersal has been re-Mythified by Critical scholars into a totalizing hegemonic system, reified as the Capitalist Myth. In retrospectively re-constructing the source of pre-modernity's cohesion, however, the scales have been tipped overwhelmingly in favor of *liturgy's* weighty brand of *efficacy* and, with it, either Religion's or else Politics's kind of belief structures and promised degrees of ideological commitment and cohesion.

The latter arises from the need not only to critique capitalism, but to oppose it through ceremonies of protest that unite members in collective action; hence *political liturgies* often organized using ritual forms such as *rites of passage* resulting in “communion.” This Critical discourse, which is today framed also within the logic of the work ethic, all but ignores play (and the ludic impulse) as having been important structural features of pre-modernity; hence post-modernity is viewed as radically different from, rather than continuous with the ludergical past. A rather serious rhetoric of political *commitment* has therefore arisen, which prioritizes the need to protest in order to forge community.

Oppositional Postmodernism: Theatre as Political Liturgy

In organizing collective deconstructions of the spectacle, the oppositional event repositions passive spectators so that they become active participants in a collective rite aimed at securing political and ideological commitment, as well as personal and social transformation. While Grotowski, for example, used theatre ritualistically for socio-political and psycho-spiritual purposes in the late 1950s (Barba and Sanzenbach 1965), the fusion of theatre-as-ritual with overt political agendas reaches its height during the late 1960s. In New York City, oppositional postmodern theatre was realized on the order of serious political liturgies modeled on religious forms. The Living Theatre and The Performance Group clearly mixed these political *and* religious motives together in their own participatory events, which overtly attempted to involve spectators *communally*.

In works such as the *Cain Cycle*, *Six Public Acts*, and *Turning the Earth: a Ceremony for Spring Planting in Five Ritual Acts* the Living Theatre combined religious texts, pilgrimages, Hindu mantras, native-American planting rituals, shamanism and political

protests against the Vietnam War. Similarly, the Performance Group combined ritual with political protest in its *Dionysus in 69*. After having involved the audience previously in a quasi religious ecstasy, the play concludes when the actor playing the god-figure (Pentheus) announces that he is, in fact, a politician, and then invites the audience/mass to follow him into the streets to march in political protest. More recent examples can be found in Karen Jurs-Munby's introduction to Hans Lehmann's book, *Postdramatic Theatre*, where she describes contemporary companies utilizing similar rituals to effect audience "confrontation" (Lehmann 2006: 1-15).

It is the *serious* tone of these events - their political and/or sacred status - which lends them their liturgical quality, as well as their propensity to borrow or quote from ritual forms. As Richard Schechner has explained, "In this way, activist political theatre is a religious and ritual theatre, a theatre of 'witnesses' in the Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu sense. Indeed the strategies of Gandhi live in the work of political theatres everywhere" (Schechner 2002: 346). Additionally, it is clear from Schechner's description that the liturgical quality also derives from the event's status as a vehicle with which to create a particular kind of *communitarian* experience; as *Witnesses*. In sum, what Schechner is describing is a theatre of politics-as-liturgy. To clearly illustrate the workings of this fusion, it is worth taking a look at a representative theatre company.

The Living Theatre

Julian Beck and Judith Malina viewed Theatre as a potentially critical tool for interrogating coercive laws, ideologies and institutions within capitalist society. They sought freedom *from* unnecessary government control over the body, including drug laws,

laws against nudity, homo-eroticism, and free expression. They also opposed “enslavement” via unfair working conditions or military conscription. They considered many conventional rituals - including contemporary Theatre practice - to be the coercive “ceremonies of repressed people” (Beck 1986: 111) and sought to develop new ceremonies for spiritual/political re-awakening.⁴⁹ Using ritual both as a symbol for mindless obedience and as a novel tool for re-awakening audience members to new ways of seeing and doing, the Living’s encouraged their audiences to participate bodily in anarchic liberties of concrete physical/political/religious rebellion. In doing so, they *demonstrated* what their vision of a truly free society might look like in practice, and which, in practice, turned out to be explicitly *communal*.

Their most ambitious and overtly ‘ritualistic’ project was the *Cain Cycle*, which eclectically borrowed influences from many spiritual traditions. Claudio Vicentini (1975) writing in TDR describes this event in detail. Its prolog, *Six Public Acts* consisted of a series of rituals “whose intent would be to reverse consciousness” towards spiritual and political awareness (1975: 83). It was performed as a series of ceremonial acts, accompanied by political messages and songs. Taking its theme from the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, it explored the role of violence in a master-slave society. Echoing themes of pilgrimage, protest marches, medieval cycle dramas, and funeral processions, it consisted of perambulations (five to fifteen minutes each) to six different sites of performance: representing the Houses of: Death, State, Money, Property, War, and Love. The performance involved a mapping of readable meaning onto a particular “political” terrain.

⁴⁹ Beck uses the phrase “Ceremonies of repressed people” to refer to the ‘Theatre of Sexual Liberation’, the potential, that is, for critical-theatre to liberate people or un-do repression through resistance. But the phrase could well be used, as I have done here, to describe the reverse also, that is, the normative conventions of Theatre prior to the 1960s, which upheld rather than challenged the repressive norms of society.

Variable actors playing a “Time Shaman” presided over the event (1975: 82). Between locations and during acts, performers engaged audience members in serious critical dialogue regarding the political themes being explored. At the House of State (a flagpole), the “ritual” consisted of performers and audience members pricking their fingers with a pin and smearing a flagpole with blood in mock worship of the state: “performers rose one by one to chant personal liturgies. The worship lasted fifteen minutes” (1975: 86). Religious imagery at the House of Money (a local bank) included a mock Golden Calf, and fake currency representing Mammon. At the House of War (ROTC offices) “actors performed military exercises” (90) symbolizing the state-controlled body, and placed “offerings” of bread on the steps of the building. At the House of Love, sado-masochism was performed to illustrate that even “the way in which we make love is a fundamental image of a master and a slave” (92). The event ends when audience members help to untie the victims: “They smiled, embraced their rescuers, and seemed to come to life again as though a spell had been broken” (92).

In *Turning the Earth: a ceremony for spring planting in five ritual acts*, each ritual involved consecrating local land as sacred ground, rather than capitalist property. Julian Beck and Judith Malina (1975) recount:

“The play was first performed on the Vernal Equinox, 1975, on the occasion of Earth Day (March 21) and...deals in its practical aspect with property, that is, with land, and its reclamation by the people of a community to be used for growing vegetables. The intention of the play is to stimulate a fresh relationship in the community towards the earth, towards land, towards the questions of property” (94).

The event is presided over by an actor playing a Shaman, and it borrows spiritual symbols, texts, and practices from multiple traditions, including Greek, Hebrew, and the North American Indian ceremonies as collected by Jerome Rothenberg (1986). Performers are encouraged to personalize their own interpretations of ritual activities. The performance space is decorated with “a large mandala of the birth of the earth” (94). At each phase of the fertility rite, digging tools are handed off to actors who are given new communal names. Incantations, dances, and blessings are performed alongside political reminders to protect the earth from greed, pollution and destruction. The ceremony ends by involving people in digging the soil to create a communal garden during which “we manage to arrive at intimate conversations” with local people (Beck and Malina 1975: 94).

Anthony Graham-White

Anthony Graham-White (1976) questions the use of the term “Ritual” as it has been applied to avant-garde theatre, for its lack of structural grounding. Claiming that these are not *true* rituals, he states that “one cannot simply create a ritual in today’s America...[in] the absence of...a precondition for its success” (319). Ritual, by definition, requires an established community and tradition to ratify its claims to efficacy. Yet,

Ritual continues to be a fashionable term among experimental theatre groups...those who are influenced by the example of the Becks and Schechner or Artaud and Grotowski...may mislead themselves if they take the avant-garde use of the term ‘ritual’ too literally—and will not, incidentally, be taking the concept of ritual itself seriously enough. The Living Theatre’s *Paradise Now* and The Performance Group’s *Dionysus in 69* are rituals only to the degree that Strindberg’s

Ghost Sonata is a sonata or Anouilh's *Waltz of the Toreadors* a waltz: by analogy. By using the term that belongs to a different cultural form the artist alerts his audience that he is borrowing formal elements and at the same time implicitly invites his audience to feel in the presence of his work as they might in the presence of the analogous cultural form. (318)

Graham-White considers the function of the events cited above to be merely *representational*: "as it is appealed to in the theatre of the avant-garde – *it stands for a richness of experience lacking or greatly attenuated in our society. Indeed, the emphasis upon 'ritual' in the avant-garde is a criticism of our society's values,*" (Graham-White 1976: 318, *emphasis mine*).

He concludes by stating that (secular) "ceremony" might be a more appropriate term of description for its use by the avant-garde, which he describes as the attainment of a purely *emotive community* similar to what Turner has called "existential communitas." Graham-White argues that loosely applying terminology signifies an attempt to "evade" the fact that something is merely *ritual-istic* without actually being ritual (319-321).

Richard Schechner

Richard Schechner has advocated theatre's use as a political tool or "ritual." He is aware also, of the conflicting nature of his terms. On the one hand, he has acknowledged "This move from theatre to ritual marks Grotowski's work and that of the Living theatre. *But the rituals created were unstable because they were not attached to actual social structures outside theatre*" (Schechner 1974: 480, *emphasis mine*). Yet, he also claims an exemption from traditional structures insofar as a work can be deemed to possess *political efficacy*: as

a Critical form of protest. It is in terms of his very specific definition of efficacy, therefore, that again “political theatre is a religious and ritual theatre...[in the vein of] Gandhi” (Schechner 2002: 346).

Schechner’s definition of ritual serves a very particular political function. As a *liturgy of oppositional politics* it challenges – in a resistant and postmodern way – the idea that only certain authorities have the power or the right to create rituals that define what is normative within a given society. This kind of critique therefore “denaturalizes dominant meanings” (Ebert 1996: 16). For Schechner, “rituals” are not the province merely of establishment figures to dictate, thus he aims to democratize ritual. Anyone, he proposes, can create a ritual that celebrates their own normative concept of *true* marriage, *right* religion, *meaningful* spirituality, or even *true* theatre. Schechner even advocates borrowing from existing ritual forms. Since rituals are functional and man-made, they can either be invented in response to a particular situation or borrowed from existing rituals and mined to create more meaningful symbolic acts:

To recycle, to reuse, archive and recall...even to plunder religious experiences, expressions, practices, and liturgies to make art (as Grotowski and other are doing) is to ritualize; not just in terms of subject matter and theme, but also structurally, as form...This understanding of ritual, as a process applying to a great range of human activities rather than as something tethered to religion, is a very important development [in theatre]. (Schechner 2002: 355)

But Schechner’s “rituals” also operated as meta-theatrical criticism. That is, they served in a theatrical way to “*dissemble* the dominant cultural policy” (Ebert 1993: 18) *as a*

theatre of politics in its own right. On the whole, Schechner's perspective is refreshing and liberating in terms of its democratization of ritual acts. What makes Schechner's definition of ritual so different from Graham-White's, as well as my own, however, is that on some level Schechner's is an inherently *anti*-structural or perhaps merely provisional definition of 'ritual' – a ritual of *change* not continuity, which does not aim to *form* community, but to *challenge* society. On quite another level also, Schechner seems to assume that Theatre is an inherently *communitarian* medium (its participants *Commune* together). This is clearly another aspect of Schechner's definition of "ritual efficacy;" - that audience members participate emotionally and physically in a collectively shared experience. Fischer-Lichte's (2005) definition of "temporary community" is equally as troubling, however, for the same reasons. She settles on a purely emotive definition of community: as the members of a crowd collectively engrossed in a public spectacle (256-7). But, to my mind these authors want to have it both ways, and fail on both accounts. In the process, they merely substitute the temporary experience of being an audience member for the permanent condition of being a community member.

Yet, insofar as the point of pursuing something called a postmodern "Ritual" is that it might lead to the recuperation of Community through the re-establishment of ongoing Traditions – traditions which, once having been lost (to pre-modernity), pre-figured Community's demise - then it would seem counter-productive for us, if not confusing, to apply the term 'Ritual' rather than "ceremony of protest" or "public spectacle" to one-off events that never assumed the function of becoming structural Traditions within a stable community. It is Turner's association of ritual specifically with the notion of a stable *community* that Richard F. Hardin (1983) finds attractive:

Besides its clarity and precision, [Turner's] theory has the advantage of recognizing the social foundation of ritual, a characteristic that critics have often overlooked. Rites cannot exist in an aesthetic vacuum; they require the context of community...the intense experience of community that is their chief reason for being. (847)

Emergent Tradition/Community

Community and Tradition reciprocally constitute one another. Regina Bendix (1997) explains that, in an American context, by 1970, a *performative* and *process-oriented turn* developed within Folkloristics whereby “tradition” came to be recognized as a requisite feature of an emergent community’s wider goal of social cohesion. American folklorists rejected the long-held (largely European) idea that *ethnicity* conferred authenticity on “community,” instead proffering the libertarian notion that *individual agency* and *shared values* created authentic community as an *emergent* phenomenon, henceforth articulated within Roger Abraham’s “enactment-centered theory” of folklore as a mode of cultural *performance* (Bendix 1997: 196; esp. 207-213). In *performative* theories of folklore, community came to be based not on the restoration of a “residual culture” (Raymond Williams, 1973: 10-11) but rather on the *performance* of an *emergent culture* (Bauman 1975: 306). Abrahams saw community life as held together by stabilizing processes in the form of emerging performance traditions. Conceptually, *enactment* included:

Any cultural event in which community members come together to participate, employ the deepest and most complex multivocal and polyvalent signs and symbols

of their repertoire of expression and thus to enter into a potentially significant experience. (Abrahams 1977: 80 qtd. in Bendix 1997: 196-7)

Performance centered approaches emphasized the performative *process* in relation to a “universal need” to “traditionalize” (Bendix 1997: 211-213). American folklorists concluded that shared ethno-poetic activities, subsequently defined as “new” or *invented traditions*, could lead, as a consequence, to the formation of *emergent (folk) communities*. Recognizing that emergent communities formed only in tandem with emergent traditions, folklorists defined “tradition” performatively as a reciprocally constitutive product of social life. Regina Bendix explains that “tradition” has now become a verb, and performance centered scholars have “*rendered ‘tradition’ a need based construction...[thereby]introducing the verb “to traditionalize”* (212, *italics mine*). In this connection Bendix quotes Dell Hymes (1975):

Let us root the notion [of tradition] not in time, but in social life. Let us postulate that *the traditional is a functional prerequisite of social life*...it seems that every person and group makes some effort to “traditionalize” aspects of experience. To “traditionalize” would seem to be a universal need. Groups and persons differ, then, not in presence or absence of the traditional – there are none which do not “traditionalize” – but in the degree and the form, of success in satisfying this universal need. (Hymes 1975: 353 qtd. in Bendix 1997: 211-212)

Distinctions made above between *Audiences* (temporary) and *Communities* (lasting) also hold between *Audiences* and *Fandom* in contemporary society. Fan audiences frequently

also constitute sub-cultural communities. Cheryl Harris, in her introduction to *Theorizing Fandom* (1998) writes:

Mass media, popular culture, and its artifacts (such as recordings, books, magazines, merchandise, TV shows, movies, and stars) increasingly define western post-industrial society. Arguably, individuals and social groupings form relationships with mediated content...[yet] within the notion of audience, how do we explain and understand the surprisingly intensified relationships created by a special category of audience – ‘fans’?. (Harris 1998: 3)

In short, fandom transcends the notion of audience. Writing in the same book, Lindlof, Coyle and Grodin (1998) state: “Recently, the field of communication has reappraised the notion of audience as a way to describe what audiences *do* with media” (219). Because fans use the object of their fandom as “*the basis for social participation*” (Lindlof, et al, 1998: 225), cultural theorists now regard fan sub-cultures as forms of *emergent community*.

Fandom has become a set of social practices. Specifically, Fans can be defined as *interpretive communities* (Fish, 1980; Lindlof, et al, 1998) grounded in collective readership and deployment of texts, as well as *authorial communities* who subsequently participate in the production of new works through acts of *textual poaching* (Jenkins 1992). “Jenkins shows how fan culture and the production of literature are frequently inseparable...Fan writings seem to be central to the practice of fandom: newsletters, fanzines, ‘slash’ fiction, and songs are some of the communications produced (Harris 1998:6). In the present context we can include participation in live performance, as a form of textual production. Yet, whether or not the participation of audience members in popular interactive theatre events constitutes similarly emergent fan behavior remains to be seen.

Avant-garde political events, in particular, however, were never repeated *as such* hence they attained the somewhat dubious and oxymoronic status of being called “rituals” without ever being traditions. In post-modernity, the point is debatable, of course, but whether I or Graham-White or anyone else considers *Dionysus in 69* or *Turning the Earth* to be *true* (or effective) “rituals” is beside the point. What *is* clear is that their creators *intended* them to function as quasi political-liturgies in relation to committed Belief systems regardless of their status as *traditions*. And it is for this reason, too, that their advocates continued to prescribe them as “efficacious,” regardless of whether they served a community-making/social re-aggregation function or not. For them, it was enough that these events were “political.” In fact, what was achieved was not community, but “audience members,” and perhaps even Community’s ideological substitute, *communitarian-ism*.

Communitarianism *seems* to fit the liturgical model by affecting a gathering of self-styled “committed believers.” But, with regard to the issues discussed above, however, one must consider that these one-off events can fulfill the efficacy requirement of politics quite easily - and even deliver a satisfying *flow* experience to the individual - *with or without Community*. And this simply throws us back to the original condition of Marx’s or else Turner’s individuated leisure-time being: the monad, seeking “entertainment” willy-nilly, in the absence of a stable community or its rituals. And again, also, it throws us back to the condition of Herbert Blau’s “audience” member, whose communal status and experience of togetherness is *temporary* and will not survive the event’s duration. Nor will an enduring social entity – a *community* - precede the event “next time.” There will not actually be a “next time.” When the event ends, the “audience” will disappear, and the merely *imaginary* “community” will vanish along with it.

The Post-Liturgical Turn: Mock Rituals and Ludic Postmodernism

In theory and art, ludic postmodernism involves a renunciation of the seriousness of modern theory and modernist art in favor of a more playful attitude with cultural forms that is more experimental, ironic, and fragmentary.

- Best and Kellner (1997: 257)

Postmodern culture is recognizably ludic, and marked by humor, play, games and theatrical reflexivity. What has been called “Ludic Post-modernity” should therefore favor the establishment of ludergical traditions. Mock ritual events may, I believe, be one result. Mock rituals included fake Weddings, Funerals, Wakes, Bar Mitvahs, high school Proms, and Birthday Parties, and became some of the most popular American Theatre events of the 1980s and 90s. These were marked by joking relationships, games, and playful participation between audience members and cast members, all within a theatrical framework suitable to postmodern cultural conditions. Some of the poached events constituted *liturgies*, others were *ludergies*, but all constituted *rituals* in their original form, which, as interactive events, were explicitly *re-framed - as Theatre*. Audience members participated by playing corresponding roles – as fake mourners, wedding guests, fellow high school students, office mates, and so forth.

Inter-active mock rituals mark a turn also towards post-Dramatic Theatre (Lehmann 2006). Consistent with Modernism’s strictly *formal* experiments, mock rituals re-formulate the role of the audience. Following the work of Peter Szondi, Hans Thies Lehmann has noted that the structural conditions of society are reflected in structural changes made to theatrical forms. When a crisis of social structure arises, theatrical forms evolve dialectically to meet the social conditions of a given historical moment. As Karen Jurs-Munby summates:

This crisis according to Szondi, manifested itself in an increasing tension between the formal requirements of Aristotelian drama and the demands of modern epic social themes which could no longer be contained by this form. Arguing against traditional normative Aristotelian dramatic theory, which conceived of dramatic form as timeless, 'as existing outside history,' Szondi theorized the history of drama in terms of historical dialectic of form and content. 'Drama,' he argued, was a 'time bound concept'. (3)

Recent changes in society have, to borrow Szondi's phrasing, resulted in a new tension, between the formal requirements of dramatic theatre (for seated critical audiences) and the desire of audience members to play. Today, structural changes to theatrical forms arise from the historical conditions of ludic post-modernity. Post-moderns are theatrically saturated and dramatically reflexive. The demands of ludic post modernity involve a shift towards a generalized incredulity, and therefore toward a new and playful relationship to images and media which no longer produce Belief and can no longer command seriousness. Having made a decidedly ludic turn, postmodern theatre has come to reflect these changes, structurally, as interactive theatre. The "*historical dialectic of form and content*" is analogous to what I have described above in relation to rituals, as having a structural *basis* in society and serving a structural *function*. Today the formal characteristics of ludic post-modern theatre have arisen to meet the structural demands of ludic postmodern culture, to arrive at mock rituals, as a way of *getting behind* the mystery; that is to say, backstage, as it were, at the ritual's own constructed-ness framed as theatre, or more exactly, *as meta-theatre*.

Post modernity is not only post-liturgical it is post Mythic, resisting both the closed author and the closed text. Teresa Ebert defines ludic postmodernism as a playful attitude taken – specifically - towards *textual* deconstruction, and as the playful byproduct of a media saturated society, which no longer takes Images seriously, nor invests them with deep meaning. Considering all texts to be open-ended, ludic post-modernists - among whom Ebert (1976) cites: Butler, Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, and Deleuze & Guattari - assume an authorial right both to poach existing texts and to re-inscribe past narratives with new writings, thereby re-claiming all narratives for post-modernity as common literary property, and legitimating all speakers, democratically, as potential authors. This practice of writing – and writing-over – palimpsestuously - is what Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) refers to as “Literature” or “Speech”; a process which, when democratically “shared out,” replaces Myth with Literature, and - from the standpoint of *reception* – I suggest, replaces Belief with Entertainment (as defined in my Introduction).

The Ludic Character of Postmodern Art

The ludic character of postmodern art and culture is widely accepted (Carlson 2004: 146-50). Unlike oppositional postmodernism which treats the abundance of signs as a totalizing and deterministic Myth to be opposed (by de-construction) - ludic postmodernism treats these images as semiotic resources to be mined, poached, and redeployed (as reconstructions). As infinite resources, these symbols are put into endless play with other signifiers to produce new possibilities, unintended meanings, sudden realizations, collisions, ironies, or paradoxes. Shunning grand narratives, postmodern literature celebrates the proliferation of purely imaginary-re-combinations, “turning to more ironic,

sportive modes that simply appropriate, quote, and play with tradition” (Best and Kellner 1997: 256).

Postmodern writers draw on past forms, which are ironically quoted and eclectically combined. Instead of deep content, grand themes, and moral lessons, ludic postmodernists...are primarily concerned with the form and play of language and adopt sportive, ironic, self-reflexive, ‘meta-fictional’ techniques that flaunt artifice and emphasize the act of writing over the written word. (Best & Kellner 1997: 132)

Ludic postmodernists also engage in the act of writing-*over* the written word, thereby acknowledging their own authorial power to re-inscribe past narratives with new meanings. Writing-*over* also engages a work in discourse, which in postmodern media fan culture is often a way of paying homage to the creators of previous works. The fan genre is called “slash fiction” (Harris 1998: 6-8; Lindlof, et al, 1998: 219-226; H. Jenkins 1992; Sandvoss 2007: 19-32). Examples of slash fiction novels include *Pride & Prejudice and Zombies* or *Sense & Sensibility and Sea Monsters* which take the classic novels and re-inscribe them...with many more zombies and/or sea monsters than the originals actually had. Similarly, the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* exemplified a live writing-over event in relation to the spirit of the film; fans looked for insertion points to add their own dialogue. The Slash-fiction fanzine K/S similarly appropriated the *Star Trek* genre to celebrate the (meta-*fictional*) homoerotic relationship between Kirk and Spock, recovering the medium for gay/ludic fans (Teresa Ebert 1993: 8; Green, Jenkins and Jenkins 1998: 9-14). These techniques resemble, also, Andy Warhol’s paintings, which involved writing-over photographs in a style resembling the excessive application of make-up products over celebrity human products.

Ludic postmodern Art plays an open-ended signifying game similar to the *yes/and* game of improvisational comedy (Libera 2004: 9-11). Its purely *additive* strategy results in the perpetuation of unforeseen possibilities. In the case of postmodern writing, the gesture of multi-texting involves taking a previous text and re-writing it, or writing over it, or along side it – in the margins – palimpsestuously – while also expanding the original domain of its authorship into a collective text, and with each addition of newly authored materials into a composite textual *event* involving new people as authors and, ultimately, new works as texts. Postmodern interactive theatre events can be said to share in this process, bringing many new authors into the works, and treating the entire event as a writing event or a playing event.

Ludic Postmodernism rejects the authoritative power of Myth, but affirms the authorial power of literature, and of authorship as a shared and democratized phenomenon. In this connection, ludic postmodernism amounts to a kind of serial de-myth-ification of the storying process; a restoration of language to its status as an instrument in the writing of literature, and literature to its status as a human authorial project. Whereas Myth begets liturgy, singular Authorship and the “final Word,” (Nancy 1991: 67-8) Literature begets more authorship and multiple literatures. In this way, the death of Myth is *enunciated* in post-modern art. In giving language back to the people, everybody becomes an author, and what gets authored is a merely human literature; not a Myth. As an exercise in literature, “taking part” becomes an exercise in speaking. As a signification process, this project amounts to a breaking down of writing into its individual signifying units; its individual speaking subjects. After all, each new instance of “writing” that is *authentic* always “has something inaugural about it.” (Nancy 1991: 68)

Postmodern Ludic Play

Postmodern theatre audiences increasingly bear a co-authorial/literary relationship to Theatre treated as a Textual event. Additionally, audience members also enjoy a joking relationship with its cast members, and with each other, throughout the event. So improvised - or at least extemporized – have post-dramatic theatre events become that increasingly, over the last fifty years, the very notion of what is a theatrical script has had to be rethought (Cole 1975: 6).⁵⁰ Interactive post-moderns increasingly adopt a poacher's relationship to the performance event and its text. Postmodern theatre, likewise, poaches from a virtual ocean of available media imagery accessible and immediately recognizable *only to post-nineteenth century people*.

In a media saturated society, these media images have been reclaimed. Using live actors, classic films are re-performed in front of the originals, which also double as theatrical lighting. In 2011, London's Punchdrunk (immersive) theatre company held a screening of the 1980s American film *Top Gun* at which fans were not only encouraged to dress up like characters from the film, but asked to help re-stage one of its more iconic scenes for the camera. Viewing the world through a lens, and/or reframing it through its mediations on television and in film, in history books, in comic books, or what have you, has led to a flowering of re-constructed situations, which people can enter into, as if walking into a movie, or a play, or video game. Increasingly, the playful character of ludic postmodernists is realized in forms of dramatic play. Postmodern media fans have begun to borrow from

⁵⁰ Cole defines a “script’ [as] any more or less detailed set of instructions for putting on a performance, whether written by a playwright, imparted by a director, or evolved by a group of actors from their rehearsal probings,” (p. 6). Cole offers a particularly open-ended re-definition of “script,” as well as actor, author, and performance space (pp. 3-11).

media culture to foment dramatic role-playing events in the promise of securing entry into recurring social contexts, as ludergies.

Tony and Tina's Wedding: Popular Dramatic Play Events and the Making of Temporary Community

Throughout the 1980s and '90s American popular theatre audiences flocked to churches, reception halls, 'hired rooms' in neighborhood restaurants, makeshift funeral parlors, fake TV studios, classrooms, and cheaply festooned high school gymnasias to play their part as "mourners" "invited guests," "co-workers," "unruly students" "old friends," "fans" and "family members" at fake weddings, fake funerals, wakes, bar mitzvahs, catechism classes, TV-show tapings, birthday parties, bachelor parties, high school proms and more. London's 2011-2012 theatre season recently paid host, also, to *Office Party*, an "immersive theatre" event in which audience members assumed the role of "office-mates" at a company's annual Christmas party. Gary Izzo, writing in the 1990s, labeled these activities part of the "new genre of Interactive Theatre," and concluded that all were centered on *recognized rituals* (1997: 49-50).

Of the kinds of rituals selected for these events, some were liturgies, others were ludergies, but all were *framed* (Goffman 1986; Bauman 1975) explicitly as theatrical performances. Since framing any kind of ritual - *as theatre* - inherently *etiolates* the ritual into a form of joke, play or game activity (Austin 1975), these events became inherently *ludic*. As interactive events also, in which actors and audience members enjoy a joking relationship with one another, the fictional nature of each enactment *as theatre* is explicitly acknowledged throughout. Given the ludic nature of post-modernity - as a theatrically reflexive and dramatically saturated media society - the question arises, therefore, whether

mock ritual events effectively function as ludergies, corresponding to the cultural conditions of ludic post-modernity. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to answering this question using *Tony and Tina's Wedding* as the primary artifact. The show itself is recognized by subsequent producers of interactive events as “the granddaddy” of the genre (Davenport 2007). My own experience with the show comes from being a cast member in the touring company of *Tony and Tina's Wedding* for over two years, accruing a total of six hundred and nineteen performances.

Environmental Mock Rituals – Tony and Tina's Wedding

The premier company innovating the mock ritual genre throughout the 1980s was Artificial Intelligence, the creators of *Tony and Tina's Wedding*. After forming in 1985, other companies soon copied their successful formula, which combined “environmental” theatre, improvisational comedy, and familiar rituals that audience members could easily participate in. “Rather than set routines or sketches, the company chooses to create an event and elaborate on it in terms of a whole environmental theatre piece, in which rituals are satirized, with a tone ranging from nostalgia to savagery” (Klein 1987). In partnership with Joe Corcoran Productions, former *T&T* cast members subsequently also produced or wrote *Finnegan's Farewell* (Alexander, 2001), *Birdie's Bachelorette Party* (Nassar, 2006), *Late Night Catechism* (Donovan, n.p.), and *Grandma Sylvia's Funeral* (Wein and Blumsack, 1998).

Artificial Intelligence created elaborate postmodern narrative texts for scenes to be performed by multiple actors simultaneously, and distributed these scenes throughout a large post-structural playing space. In the rehearsal and development phase, each actor created an interactive character with a fully developed life history. All characters were

interconnected under the umbrella of a shared meta-narrative, which cast members co-created. There was no scripted dialogue; merely an improvisational timeline. Through the vehicle of the ritual they imported several of its related structural and social features including dancing, eating, drinking, gifting, joking, and spontaneous conversation. Less cerebral than its murder mystery cousin, mock rituals were oriented towards physical activity within a highly realistic setting. Extending the performance frame into the audience additionally allowed the narrative to expand post-structurally as guests and actors moved to different parts of the building.

Within the ritual's logic, audience members were "cast" as fellow *community members* or *kin*. Since these were everyday roles with corresponding social scripts (Goffman 1972: 75-85) "Guests" could easily draw on their cultural capacity to improvise "restored behaviors" (Schechner 2002) from memory.⁵¹ With performance rights extended to the audience, "guests" could initiate or respond to *improvisational* scenes with actors (Fuchs 1993: 22). Most mock rituals also referenced accessible cultural stereotypes (i.e. Italian, Jewish, Irish) as well as individual character types partly derived from popular media images, which implicitly cued patrons to frame the encounter as a dramatically *mediated* activity. The result was a broadly holistic, easily readable, and comic social *event*.⁵²

⁵¹ Erving Goffman, (1972) describes "performing a role" in terms of responding to others in a *typical* way (p. 82). Goffman (1959: 252-3) distinguishes between an inner self, and a self-performed-as-character/role (i.e. an *image* presented to others either successfully or unsuccessfully). Only to the extent that the performed 'character-self' fits an already established social role/template, will it be deemed a successful performance by others. Richard Schechner (2002) calls these role performances *restored behaviors* or *twice-behaved behaviors* (34-36).

⁵² In personal interviews all admit integrating media imagery. Kevin Alexander, who created the role of Vinnie Black for the original New York production of *Tony and Tina's Wedding* admits that his Vinnie character was a composite of a real New York area caterer named Joe Black, Alexander's own father, and *Tony Clifton*: an obnoxious, fictional character developed by the American comedian Andy Kaufman. Ken Davenport, creator of the *Awesome Eighties Prom*, joined Net-Flicks both to study popular media character-types (as seen in the 1980's brat-pack movie genre) and to create an event that was readable and accessible to a media-influenced generation. Nancy Cassaro drew on media personalities and mediated situations for her characters (i.e. Judy Garland Christmas specials).

Tony and Tina's Wedding became an environmental simulation of a real wedding ceremony and reception. Throughout the evening “guests” were invited to interact, dance, eat, drink and play with the members of its 30 character cast. Actors played everything from members of the wedding party, to clergy, catering staff, photographers, “uninvited” guests (i.e. Tina’s ex boyfriend), and band members. It was an environmentally staged play-ing “event” rather than a stage play, with numerous “scenes” occurring simultaneously, and many of them involving audience members directly (dancing the Conga, posing for photos, toasting, catching the bride’s bouquet, the groom’s garter, etc.).

T&T dramatized the story of two dysfunctional rival families, the Nunzio’s and the Vitale’s. Tony Nunzio and Tina Vitale were getting married. Their circle of acquaintances represented a tightly knit kinship group. Friendships on both sides were formed within the same neighbourhood. Alliances among elders reached back four generations. Younger members had attended the same high school together. They shared the same ethnicity, religion, and cultural heritage; all were Catholic New York Italians. All attended the same church. The members of the Nunzio Clan included several “adopted” members from the neighbourhood who were additionally co-workers at Anthony Nunzio’s Senior’s strip club, *The Animal Kingdom*. Members of the clergy fit within this tribal/community model. Father Mark had attended high school with Tony & Tina and their friends, and Sister Albert Maria was otherwise known as Cousin Terry on the Vitale side. The bride & groom’s parents, Anthony Nunzio Sr. and Josephine Vitale (now widowed), had once dated briefly in high school, and would seem to rekindle their flame at the wedding reception. The caterer, Vinnie Black, was an old friend, and his children – who now worked for Vinnie – all attended high school with their peers in the wedding party. The band members were

similarly interconnected, as was the photographer, Sal Antonucci. Everybody was part of the extended family.

All of the members of the extended “family” shared the same mythic geography. The wedding was said to be taking place near where they lived. In the original New York production this became the Italian neighbourhood around Greenwich Village. In subsequent productions a local equivalent was found. The mythic geography became the local geography, thus the meta-narrative’s relationship between the characters was coordinated to reflect this reality. The setting matrixed audience members within the Characters’ own physical environment, which was the surrounding City that theatre patrons also inhabited, and whereby the fiction was mapped onto reality. The production was both site-specific and environmental. Its Acts took place in three contexts. The first was the wedding ceremony, which occurred in an actual church, decorated for the occasion. The second was an outdoor perambulation on the streets of New York City, going from the church to the reception. The third was the reception/dinner/dance, which occurred either in a local restaurant or an environmentally festooned hall. Subsequent productions in other cities adapted the meta-narrative and character biographies to suit the local performance geography.

Each location involved its own site-specific performances. Within the church setting, as soon as audience members arrived, they were greeted as if they were old friends, and seated by one of the groomsmen, either on the bride’s side or the groom’s side. Actors performed real or realistic activities such as smoking on the steps of the church, holding “mundane” conversations, or making last minute preparations before the ceremony. Wedding pictures and videos were taken. There were many authentic clowning performances which included things like decorations falling down, or a bridesmaid frantically trying to wash a “spot” off of her dress in time for the ceremony.

During the perambulation phase, the environment of the city added its own realism. In places where the show ran for several years, neighbourhood people regularly played along. Passers-by frequently yelled their congratulations to Tony & Tina, and cars often honked their horns in celebration. Guests walked to what was supposed to be *Vinnie Black's Coliseum* (restaurant). Along the way, Vinnie's children (his catering staff) performed comic scenes that were also functional to the safety of audience members as they moved between locations. Performers directed real traffic and herded audience members by screaming at them to keep on the sidewalk, using stock phrases like "You wanna get yourself run over, huh? Either follow directions or you'll get no food!" The wedding reception itself was the most elaborately "scripted" part of the show, and shifted between prepared scenes and improvisations. Each character enacted his or her unique story, scripted by the actors themselves, which unfolded throughout the night. It was possible to attend several times and follow a different character each time. The context of the dinner/dance celebration became a fully post-structural event as guests moved around the performance space, danced, talked or interacted.

Fake TV Show: Vicki

For their next show Artificial Intelligence acquired The Ballroom, a restaurant-cabaret on West 28th street in New York City, and turned the space "into a make-believe television studio" (Holden, Feb. 1987). The premise for the event was the taping of a one hour long, live, nineteen sixties era variety show entitled *Vicki's Valentine Thing*. Like *Tony and Tina's Wedding*, "every character, right down to the last technician, has a fictitious personal history" (Holden, Feb. 1987). The star of the show was called Vicki Oberjeune. "Vicki was a drunk, pill-popping hybrid of Judy Garland and Peggy Lee, with a little Connie Stevens

thrown in” (Cassaro, Telephone Interview, 2008). Vicki’s on-camera image, replete with a happy family life, however, did not match what was happening behind the scenes.

The Vicki Oberjuene Review begins with the crew setting the stage for a television show. An ‘applause’ sign lights up, getting the live audience prepared to act as a television audience. The frenetic goings on include a tipsy star ‘the incomparable Vicky’ teetering about, making off-camera advances to the camera man. (Klein 1987)

And again,

The audience, which is encouraged to participate with an applause sign, gets to glimpse two worlds – the heartwarming scenes of familial togetherness enacted before the camera and the frantic behind the scenes chaos in which everyone’s personal life, and indeed the show itself, is on the verge of collapse. But the show goes on. (Holden, Feb. 1987)

Not long after, Artificial Intelligence created a prequel. It was a Christmas show.

Now the same troupe has returned to the ballroom with television cameras, microphones and a flashing audience applause sign to present another imaginary variety show featuring many of the same characters. ‘A Very Vicki Christmas,’ set two years earlier than the valentine extravaganza, is a savagely funny takeoff of familial television gatherings at holiday time. The format spoofs such silly Christmas show conventions as when famous guests, covered with snow, unexpectedly pop in to visit the star in her living room. At the same time, it allows

audience members to witness nasty behind-the-camera drama that reach a crescendo of chaos during the commercial breaks. (Holden, Dec. 1987)

According to Cassaro, the Vicki shows were participatory, but not fully interactive, and merely framed the performance to create an active viewing perspective. “In Vicki it was a more passive interactive role, I mean they applaud when they’re told to applaud, they watch, they laugh, but they get to have sort of that behind-the-scenes experience” (tel. interview). The act of framing ritual events as Theatre was motivated by a comic sensibility derived from a purely theatrical aesthetic. In the end, the events were critical only to the extent that they de-mystified the rituals. Rituals were portrayed not as magically efficacious, but rather, as populated - by highly flawed individuals who, behind the scenes, were little more than buffoons whose real life social affairs threatened to unravel the entire production.

Explaining the Artificial Intelligence comic style and credo Miss Cassaro said: ‘We create the contradistinction between what they’re doing for the camera and what they’re really doing – like maybe they’re hitting each other. When we thought up our name, we hoped to be taken seriously – but we never want to take ourselves too seriously. We’re just a bunch of writers and actors with a sense of how absurd things are. We like creating a theatrically entertaining world and asking the audience to come into it. Maybe we can give people a different way of looking at television shows and weddings. (Klein 1987)

The Ritual of Doing Theatre

Every night, when the same wedding party appeared - *Brigadoon*-like – on the steps of the church, audience members were fully aware of being matrixed - as “guests” - within a theatrical Happening, and they got involved in the activity of doing theatre accordingly.

Theatre is a structured and conventional set of relationships and activities, the norms of which constitute theatre as its own form of ritual. The expectation that the rules of the theatre will govern the activities performed within theatrical space operates as a normative convention between actors and audience members within mock ritual events. As the creators of *Grandma Sylvia's Funeral* have stated, "In interactive theatre we acknowledge that the audience is a character in the play" (Wein and Blumsack 1998: 146). When guests enter the chapel to be seated for *Tony and Tina's Wedding* they are immediately asked "Bride's side or groom's side?" Aside from casting patrons in a role, it forces them to acknowledge their complicity within the theatre event, a relationship that normally goes unstated. It also sets up a *joking relationship* between audience members and actors, which *initiates* audience members as accomplices. In order to answer the loaded question, patrons must *consent* to enter the ritual through the door of the play-frame. When performers crossed the actor-audience divide to speak with audience members directly – in character – actors simultaneously also matrixed audience members within the interpersonal dimension of the performers own *social* world, as fellow actors. By responding in character, audience members entered the fantasy-role-playing environment having been *initiated* as fellow role players. Responding in character meant *engaging in make-believe* by upholding the veracity of the fantasy frame initially set up by the actors.

This initiation is repeated in the *receiving line* outside the reception hall where Tony & Tina wait to greet their "guests," and is again repeated in every subsequent interpersonal encounter. An important aspect of the receiving line is the *way* that people are greeted (through meta-messages). They are not just being met as if for the first time. There is always a high degree of *implied recognition* in the greetings, prompted by the actor's reading of the audience member's own willingness to play along. Tina, for instance, upon

seeing someone with a “familiar face” or a “wedding gift” may squeal with joy and say “Oh my god, I can’t believe *you* made it to the wedding. It’s so nice to see you *again*; how long has it been?” At the *Awesome 80’s Prom*, as patrons enter the hall, an effusive high school “drama teacher” proclaims “Welcome to *your* prom” and asks “aren’t you excited?” No matter how old the guest appears, whether eighteen or eighty, *today* is the date of *his or her* prom. At *Grandma Sylvia’s Funeral*, male “initiators” are given yarmulkes to wear, and may be asked to help carry the coffin inside. At *Finnegan’s Farewell* cast members commiserate with audience members, and try to cheer them up, through their tears. Others “reminisce” with patrons about the deceased. Gary Izzo refers to this technique of “casting” audience members in implied roles as an “endowment,” since each patron is being endowed with a role to play (Izzo 1997: 194-198).

Once inside, the potential always exists for audience members to cast themselves in character roles by initiating interaction *as actors* on their own terms (Fuchs 1993: 22-24). Guests participate in this convention reflexively, by also treating the actors as characters whom they reciprocally “recognize” from high school, church, the neighborhood, the pub, etc. Some Wedding guests bring their own “props” in the form of fully wrapped presents for Tony & Tina, which they carry to the reception as part of their own “costume.”⁵³ Elinor Fuchs has attributed at least some of the *inter-acting* to an initial sense of role ambiguity: “We ‘guests’ regard each other, not knowing which are the actors and which paying customers. This stirs a general simulation (‘whose friend are you?’ ‘I know Tony from the

⁵³ Patrons are encouraged to dress for the *theme* of the event, but not as “story-characters.” At the *Awesome 80’s Prom* guests often dress spontaneously in ‘80s style clothing. “That happens without us goading them at all. People tease-up their hair, find *Members Only* jackets, prom dresses, and varsity jackets, and really do it up” (Ken Davenport, telephone interview). However, participation must occur within the “reality” stipulated by the production. Actors must be able to maintain control within the activity. Inappropriate costuming and/or character portrayal by patrons is therefore discouraged as it becomes confusing for other patrons to recognise ‘official’ characters, and difficult for performers to maintain the integrity of the drama.

club'), as no one wants to take responsibility for puncturing the bubble of the fiction" (Fuchs 1993: 22). Others may throw themselves into it with vigor:

At Tony n' Tina, choices multiply dizzily as many 'guests' enter the action and sometimes elaborate it by inventing fictive personalities or situations of their own. At my own table, for instance, two women are staging their own improvisation, convincing their husbands that they are friends of Tina from the office. (Fuchs 1993: 23)

Since actors will never force patrons to play along by putting them on the spot, however, Guests can always opt out of interaction, or pay "selective inattention" to scenes (Schechner 1976: 14-18). The show:

...alternate[s] between scripted ensemble scenes and continuously improvised encounters. Here I can dance with the groom's father, discuss the disappointing ravioli with the bride, or commiserate with Tina's mother over Tony's father's cheap girlfriend and mob connections. I can also maintain a discreet distance at my table. It is, again, my choice. (Fuchs 1993: 23)

Frames and Meta-messages

Theatre and Ritual literally come into play in mock rituals because of the way these events are framed. In his article 'Verbal Art as Performance' (1975) Richard Bauman offers an excellent explanation of how framing works. All communication involves two channels; every message that is sent is accompanied by a second message which helps us to interpret the first:

We may draw on Bateson's powerful insight that it is characteristic of communicative interaction that it includes a range of explicit or implicit messages which carry instructions on how to interpret the other message being communicated. This communication about communication Bateson termed metacommunication (Reusch and Bateson 1968: 209). In Bateson's terms 'a frame is metacommunicative. Any message which explicitly or implicitly defines a frame, ipso facto, gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages included within the frame (Bateson 1972[1955]:188). All framing, then, including performance, is accomplished through the employment of culturally conventionalized metacommunication. In empirical terms, this means that each speech community will make use of a structured set of distinctive communicative means from among its resources in culturally conventionalized and culture specific ways to key the performance frame, such that all communication that takes place within that frame is to be understood as performance within that community. (Bauman 1975: 295)

Victor and Edith Turner provide an explanation for the framing phenomenon operating within mock rituals. They created their own version of a mock ritual wedding in their basement in 1981. It was intended as an embodied ethnographic experiment for students "to get a kinetic understanding of the 'other' in sociocultural groups" (140). Victor and Edith played the bride's parents. Other members of the Anthropology Department played "kinship and friendship roles...bride's sister, groom's former girlfriend, groom's father's father, bride's drunken uncle, and so on...Afterwards there was a 'reception' upstairs with a receiving line, real champagne and festive foods" (Turner & Turner 1987: 140). Because

participants were not conducting a real wedding, however, they became hyper-aware of their role in collectively accomplishing the artifice. The Turners concluded that the experiment produced an “intensified reflexivity” in regard to how participants actively frame the meaning of events, and how that meaning is coordinated between participants who organize their activities through interpersonal meta-messages. They explain: “Some social events are contained in multiple frames, hierarchically arranged, frame within frame, with the ultimate meaning of the event shaped by the dominant ‘encompassing frame.’ Frames, in other words, are often, themselves, framed” (Turner & Turner 1987: 140). By replacing the “pedagogical” references with Theatrical references in the first line of the Turner’s original explanation, we can catch a glimpse of how *Tony and Tina’s Wedding* also operates:

1. The encompassing frame is a [theatrical] one – ‘everything within this frame is [material] for [a theatrical event].’ The formula is ‘let us [Act].’”
2. Within (1) nests a play frame, with Batesonian ‘metamessages.’ (a) the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and (b) that which is denoted by these signals is non-existent. The formula is: let us make believe.”
3. Within (1) and (2) nests a ritual-script – the preparations for the wedding and a Christian form of the wedding service. If this frame had not itself been framed by the override ‘all this is play,’ the ritual frame would have had its wider cultural ‘moral function.’ Ritual says ‘let us believe,’ while play says, ‘this is make-believe.’ Without the play frame there would have been the real danger that, in terms at least of the Catholic theology, a real marriage would have taken place...But it was clear

that the serious ritual frame was being de-solemnized and demystified by its own containment in the wider play frame. (140-41).

The authors go on to define theatre *proper* as a mode of play-framing, a liminoid activity in which “play” operates as its *meta-frame*, and “ribaldry” operates as its Bakhtinian *meta-language*. In theatricalized mock rituals, because “audience members” are likewise included in the equation, they also participate in selecting frames, and negotiating interactions, which is the source of heightened *reflexivity*. According to Marco de Marinis (1991: 108), Western Theatre’s typical mode of audience reception is ‘make-believe,’ which not surprisingly, corresponds with its mode of acting. In interactive theatre, make-believe is shared out, and is therefore activated in both directions, as a joking relationship.

The phenomenon, of course, is not unusual. In chapter one I offered the example of the Fake wrestling match wherein theatrical spectators *act* like sporting fans at a sports event. As is the case with all mock rituals, in fact, while the behavior of audience members deliberately hobnobs with the norms associated with ritual participation, it is the artistic norms of Theatre production which actually govern the event to create the illusion that a *different* ritual is taking place. Like the dramatization of the sporting event, each event is met with a *dramatization* of *that* event’s proper mode of audience reception. But, while dramatic reflexivity is clearly flowing both ways, the question arises whether either side is doing so in violation or, rather, in strict obedience and in deference to Theatre’s own imposed set of highly rule-governed conventions. At *Tony & Tina’s Wedding*, *Grandma Sylvia’s Funeral*, *Finnegan’s Farewell*, or the *Awesome 80’s Prom*, etc. audience members quite clearly recognize the sportive, dramatically playful nature of these events and participate accordingly.

Dramatic Reflexivity

Throughout the 1980s dramatic reflexivity – or, the capacity to frame an event as theatre - was proving to be the great untapped resource in American theatre audiences, which savvy theatre makers were merely activating. Rituals are rule governed activities, and therefore easily converted into games. The kinds of rituals chosen for mock rituals were familiar enough to most people, that in their basic structure and behavioral expectations anyone could conceivably play along. Even if one had never been to a Christian wedding before, most people were familiar enough with the ritual from having been exposed to hundreds of such weddings on television and in movies. As Ken Davenport, the creator of the *Awesome 80's Prom* has observed, “Even Japanese foreign-exchange-students know what an American High School Prom is all about. They’ve seen all the movies a zillion times.”⁵⁴ Davenport admits designing the *Prom's* accessibility around popular film versions of both the ritual and Hollywood’s take on the 1980s: “I joined Netflix and watched all the films.”⁵⁴ And because these events were comic spoofs (almost cartoons) which alternated between scripted scenes between actors, improvisational interactions with audience members, and group ‘celebratory’ activities such as drinking, dancing, fake “marijuana” (i.e. oregano) smoking,” or “pretended” mourning, a general atmosphere of camaraderie took hold as people collectively worked together to accomplish the theatrical hoax. Often, the action spilled into the streets as a *processional* of “mourners” or giddy “celebrants” enacted their roles publicly while walking between performance locations. The effect was that theatre patrons also helped to make the event look real for passers-by.

⁵⁴ Ken Davenport names *Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *The Breakfast Club* as films that inspired his stock, basic character-types: the Captain of the football team, Head Cheerleader, Class Nerd, Boy-George wannabe. “They’re very broad general stereotypes that I think were made popular by those ‘brat pack’ characters, so we looked at a lot of those.”

Mediated Reflexivity

Gary Izzo (1997) attributes the popularity of audience interactive theatre events within American society to a growing desire for social interaction among community-starved post-moderns, realized in a fundamentally theatrical way, using “the first [form of] play we ever knew, the play of connection, experimentation, and discovery, the play of make believe” (6-7). Feeding the manner in which Postmoderns play is their relationship to media. Postmoderns are walking repositories of dramatic situations for the exercise of theatrical reflexivity. Constant Media exposure has provided an endless supply of scripted scenarios and recognizable character types to play *with*. According to Izzo, the centerpiece of any well designed interactive event is Ritual (49). Izzo defines ritual (rather agnostically and broadly) as any familiar strip of action - or social script - that is readable, playable and accessible to passer’s by (1997: 45-50). Ritual is, effectively, “stereotypical behavior” performed by stereotypical characters in stereotypical situations. Any predictable *behavioral strip*, which facilitates an audience member’s ability to jump into the action with full knowledge of how a sequence of activities ought to unfold within it, constitutes, for Izzo, a ritual script.⁵⁵

Many of Izzo’s own examples - and designs for interactive events - are informed, not surprisingly, by the presumption of popular media exposure. Izzo suggests that media literacy is so common a reference point within American culture that even casual passers-by will know what it means when a (Cowboy-Western) “*Sherriff*” attempts to round up “*Posse Members*” to go arrest a “*Bad Guy*” (71-86). Our familiarity with this event-

⁵⁵ Richard Schechner uses the phrase *restored behavior* to describe culturally pre-determined – or culturally programmed - behaviours. Erving Goffman employs the filmic notion of the behavioural *Strip* to denote a series of culturally predetermined acts. For a brief explanation of these, see Richard Schechner’s *Performance Studies: an Introduction* (2002), pp. 34-5.

sequence; indeed, our collective “memory” of the American cowboy Myth itself, is widely recognized as an assemblage of media-generated ‘memories’ (Bottoms 1998: 16-18). These recognizable *scenarios* and their attendant social and dramatic *roles* make it easy, therefore, for “audience” members to competently enter a dramatic frame and play along with actors when the time comes to be “deputized.”

As a post-modern form of *restored behavior*, what it is possible for post-moderns to reproduce, however, are not the sociological “originals,” but rather reproductions of theatrical reproductions. In the end, therefore, we get something like audience-members-as-actors acting like Actors acting like characters in a movie. The original behavior that is being restored and quoted is really that of Actors acting out characters supposed to represent real people, or Actors enacting *stage figures*.⁵⁶ It is *this* that in interactive theatre is being replayed; not some kind of sociological original, but rather a kind of playing at doing what actors do for work, which is why this kind of redoubling is so rife with reflexivity, actually amounting to a kind of *restored theatricality*; a citation of the movie genre.⁵⁷

Theatrical reflexivity via Media exposure ensures that literacy can be shared out as common currency and that performative competencies can potentially be acquired through informal practices from a very young age. The playing out of TV and movie scenes by viewers is an observable feature of American contemporary society. In chapter one, for example, I cited children playing at Cops & Robbers, Star Wars, or Transformers. Some studies dealing with the phenomena have tended to emphasize the negative influences of

⁵⁶ *Stage Figure* was a term employed by Prague School theorists to describe the materially composite figure of the actor-in-character & costume on the stage. A composite sign, not truly unified, the character seemed to borrow certain features from the actor, while the actor took on features of the character. For excellent synopses see Michael Quinn (1990), pp. 154-161. Also see Frantisek Deak (1976), pp. 83-94.

⁵⁷ In choosing the phrase *restored theatricality* I hope to convey the re-performed nature of theatrical reflexivity *vis a vis* theatre itself; Being paratheatrical, in a playful way.

media, and the acting out of socially destructive behavior by children (Jensen 1992; Chen 2007). But media can also have a positive influence on how we play as adults.

Theatrical reflexivity is so pervasive that it has even become a “resource” for emergent community making in the post-modern world. Fan cultures are recognized by sociologists as legitimate ways of forming new social bonds around common interests and shared sensibilities (Pearson, 2007). Indeed, Henry Jenkins (1992a) calls these “folk” cultures. Fan based media sub-cultures revolving around Music, Dance, Literature, Film, Television and Sports have become a popular area of cultural study since the 1970s (Sandvoss 2007). Documented Fan sub-cultures have included Wrestling fans (Dell 1998; Kerrick 1980; Levi 1997), Fantasy Role-Play Gamers (Gary Fine 1983), Star Trek fans, Sci Fi conventioners, Sherlockians (Pearson 2007), Anima/CosPlay fans (Kee 2004), Ravers (Tomlinson 1998), Deadheads (Sardiello 1998), and online video-gamers (McGonigal 2011), to name a few.

“Theatre as a Cultural System”

Erika Fischer-Lichte (1992) holds that theatrical reflexivity is culturally acquired, and is one of a number of interconnected cultural systems informing our understanding of social reality. Theatre, as a cultural system informs our method of producing and receiving aesthetically framed messages. Audience reception is a method of giving meaning to aesthetically framed contents, as Symbolic versions of external culture. Fischer-Lichte describes Theatre as a cultural sign system understood within the strictures of an aesthetic formula for interpretation. Culturally acquired modes of Audience reception foreclose the possibility of theatre being received as something other than simulation in Western culture. To paraphrase the author, its meaning is generated *on the basis of an aesthetic code* that

already delineates its *ontological status* as an *artwork* (Fischer-Lichte 1992: 7). In interactive theatre, reciprocating communication within the framework of theatre's ontological status as artwork requires audience members to generate responses to actors according to the same aesthetic code with which they – the actors – also produce them. Production and reception-as-production are “intimately connected” within the reciprocity of theatre's aesthetic means, which is to say, audience members must become actors, and in order to become actors, they must re-act in a way appropriate to the acknowledgment of the interaction *as artifice*. Within the context of interactive theatre events such as *Tony and Tina's Wedding*, Natalie Crohn Schmitt (1993) states that actors and audience members alike activate the same (theatrically self-reflexive) “double consciousness,” described by Bert O' States (1985) as an acute awareness of the *difference* between phenomenological realities and semiotic fictions (Schmitt 1993: 149-151). It is within the rubric of the audience member's acknowledgement of the actor as a real person, and of the character as a semiotic fiction, that audience members are able to take on the roles of fictional characters themselves, and to negotiate with actors for how a scene will play out. This tacitly *paratheatrical* acknowledgment, that “we are playing together,” drives interactive events.

Erika Fischer-Lichte (1992) describes the cultural system of theatre as one based upon a semiotic formula, which renders culture in the form of signs borrowed, in turn, from an external cultural system; in other words, Theatre poaches the world around it to reproduce culture as signs, and does so according to the rules by which signs operate within an aesthetic context. Fischer-Lichte's system is similar to State's Phenomenal/Semiotic model, which Fischer-Lichte employs extensively elsewhere, in her book on ritual (2005). In the end, the ‘reality’ of the theatrical event is that it is a fake version of reality, which as Art, can be interpreted across several different semiotic domains simultaneously (Semantic,

Syntactic, and Pragmatic), and which places the interpretant at a sufficient enough distance to be able to think-through the logic or ill-logic of a Culture's current course of historical action, as well as the reality, or else the merely assumed reality, of the roles associated with the realization of oneself as a player within that culture's historical moment of performative self-constitution. In Fischer-Lichte's words:

Theatre becomes a model of cultural reality in which spectators confront the meanings of that reality. In this sense, theatre can be understood as an act of self-representation and self-reflection on the part of the culture in question. . . . The new function given these signs in theatre, namely, that of being signs of signs, enables the culture in question to take a reflective stance on itself. In other words, wherever culture constitutes itself, it creates the preconditions for the constitution of theatre. For the signs that theatre needs are always available in culture. (Fischer-Lichte 1992: 10)

It is my contention that in the present cultural context, self reflection and representation include the fact that our own culture – in its present historical moment - is simultaneously the product of a theatrically reflexive, media-influenced reality. Media and identity feed into one another, thus American culture has adopted the credo that one can become anything one wants to be. Within the popular imaginary, identity becomes fluid and a matter of individual choice. Umberto Eco (1998) has argued that self invention is a matter of necessity in American society owing to America's own peculiar historical circumstances, as a nation without a Past that is physically *present* to it (Eco 1998: 6-11; 19-20). Having shed the past, Americans playfully reproduce it in the form of make-believe events such

fake jousting tournaments in imitation medieval castles, where patrons go to be served by “wenches,” and eat food with their hands.

Theatricality is already incorporated into the culture that theatre itself reflects, and in which the act of gathering for the constituting of a theatrically reflexive event, is already, in turn, the act of constituting the gathering itself – as a body – or a community - constituted by and for the purpose of exercising its own theatrical reflexivity. Theatrical/Community now constitutes the performance *of* community *as* theatre-making. American society is on some level constituted by its own theatrical reflexivity, and comes into being – as a community - by the performance of “community” as a moment of that reflexivity. Community-making theatre and the Theatre-making community have, on some level, become mirror images of one another. Theatricality has now become part of the feedback loop with which we view ourselves as post-modern people. If Judith Butler is correct, and “Subjectivity is itself ‘performatively constituted’ precisely by the ‘ritualized production’ of codified social behavior” (Butler 1993: 95 quoted in Marvin Carlson 2002: 240) then the production of self is now constituted by the ritualized re-production of theatrically coded performances as well.

Theatrical Frame-playing as Performance Art, and Nancy Cassaro

Nancy Cassaro, who first conceived the idea for *Tony and Tina’s Wedding* insists that it is a form of Performance Art. Performance art foregrounds the phenomenal *presence* of the embodied performer, stressing the *making* and *doing* of art over the work of art itself; process over product (Carlson 2002: 245-246). The actors in T&T engage in the mimesis of reproducing a fake wedding. They invite their audiences to do the same. In seeming opposition to Performance Art’s rejection of the text and its characters’ existence within a

matrixed narrative story-world, the actors in *T&T* insist on exactly this fiction, with paradoxical consequences.⁵⁸ Brecht's own theatre relied on distance mediated by Presentational address to the audience, and alienated characterization, to achieve a perceived separation between the actor and the character. *Tony and Tina's Wedding* achieves this effect more directly by bringing the actor *closer* to the audience, and engaging the audience member in interpersonal communication responses, which can only be generated by the Actor himself, essentially out of character/in character.

Out-of-character responses are conveyed through subtle meta-messages delivered on what Austin describes as the "illocutionary" channel.⁵⁹ The cuing of the illocutionary dimension of interpersonal communication, which, in effect, is the very thing alienated but being simulated from the stage by Presentational delivery, is ever-present - and *Real* - in play-acting. Again, to be clear: *Presentational Acting is a mere Simulation of the Illocutionary dimension of interpersonal communication*. Its reality is only *Real* IF it can be played-out within the feedback loop of ordinary communication; the very thing that the audience is cut off from in non-interactive theatre, but whose apparent fictional nature, as the mode of communication between actors on stage, is in fact, the only *Real* communication going on between them that is not being offset by their character's representation of the Author's script. In short, *Real* communication between actors is Illocutionary and is being shared with audience members, in the manner of letting them in-

⁵⁸ Similarly, Michael Kirby (1972) describes typical proscenium-style theatre acting as "matrixed" because actors are identified only AS their characters. These characters exist in a hermetically sealed fictional world such that theatre patrons cannot interact with the actors without piercing the veil of the fiction. Although acting styles exist along a continuum, non-matrixed actors can inter-act with patrons more easily because they do not affect the pretense of fully inhabiting the fiction, and instead acknowledge their actual role as a Performer.

⁵⁹ Every utterance contains two messages. The *propositional* message conveys factual information. The *illocutionary* message conveys subtle information regarding the speaker's intentions and how the message is meant to be received by the listener: as a joke, a warning, a threat, a promise, a sexual come-on, etc. The latter is sub-textual and places speakers in-the-know with regard to the kind of "game" they are playing.

on the production of make-believe. Letting them in on the production of the fiction is the same as letting them in on the Truth of Theatre's merely created status; its artificiality.

We can examine this in the Brechtian sense of separating the actor from the character, which in the case of *T&T* was achieved by foregrounding the actor; that is, by bringing him or her so closely within the vicinity of everyday interpersonal communication transactions that the audience member involved in the transaction is forced to recognize his own pretend behavior in order to collaborate with the actor qua actor in pulling off the scene. Brecht eschewed Identification with character, but promoted Identification with the Actor who spoke directly to the audience. Feminist scholars such as Elin Diamond (1997), inspired by Brecht's split imaging, have subsequently re-imagined Identification itself – on modified Freudian terms, as a cathexis of available role-choices for the *personal* expression of character (1997: 31; 114-15, 124-130). A woman is what she identifies *with*, not what she is alienated by, and thus chooses to perform her identifications in the mode of self-becoming. Diamond illustrates this through the work of Adrienne Kennedy whose own role identifications span the range of available postmodern choices; simultaneously black, white, male, female, ordinary drudge and (Bette Davis) superstar (1997: 106-141; esp. 124-130).

The performer AS performer, the Actor AS Comic, I would assert, is as valid a Role model to be taken up as any in post-modernity. At *T&T* one is asked to identify with the actor *as* role player, and to experience the joy of doing comedy. In *T&T*, audience members identify with the actor-DOING-character-playing. In performance art, the foregrounding of the Actor as social/political being involves the performer's self identification with Performance as a mode of *demonstrating*. In *T&T*, the foregrounding of the actor as an artistic being involves the Performer's *Identification* with Theatre-making, and her own

self-identification as a lover of mimesis. But by also involving the audience in the process of *doing*, its actors succeeded also in putting people *behind* the scenes of the product's own manufacture.

Semiotic Code Systems and Code Switching

In defining *Tony & Tina's Wedding* as an audience participation play event, two immediate questions arise: 1) how do people know how to attend the event *as ritual*? And additionally, 2) how do people know how to attend the "ritual" - *as theatre*? Navigating the event requires *prior* knowledge. More importantly, it requires not only an ability to differentiate between Ritual and Theatre, but to identify the respective event *grammars* that *structure* participation. *Tony and Tina's Wedding* is not exclusively *Ritual* or *Theatre*, but simultaneously a combination of both. This combination sets into play two different code systems whose Semiotic finality is referred only to the constant play of *difference* (Derrida 2001; Auslander 1997). The rules that govern each code system operate in dialectical tension, resulting in the ongoing production of irony and paradox. *Double-coding*, which drives the event into play, is recognizably a feature of post-modern aesthetics, which Marvin Carlson (1996) describes as "the simultaneous *installation* and *subversion* of already familiar codes" (147; esp. 142-147), so characteristic of modernist *dance*. The resulting tension between codes produces syncopation and collision rather than synchrony; hence play, including identity-play – the actor in character/out of character.

The *T & T* event relies on code-switching, and can be analyzed as the Semiotic deployment of three different sets of rule-governed performative/cultural codes – *Theatre*, *Ritual*, and *Ordinary Communication* - each of which renders a given performative action

felicitous or infelicitous, *on its own terms*.⁶⁰ Meaning results not just from the *play of individual signifiers*, but from the interplay of whole *signifying systems*. Being performative on three different levels simultaneously, *Tony and Tina's Wedding* reveals within American society both an acculturated capacity to recognize which performance codes are being invoked and/or deployed at any given moment, and an implicit ability to *play them*. Because *Tony & Tina's Wedding* operates in three modalities, code switching on the part of performers requires frame switching on the part of decoders. Without the ability to switch codes, audience members would not be able to interact.

Activities must additionally be coordinated between players via a steady stream of recognizable but shifting meta-communicative messages. These messages issuing between Actor-Performer-Players regulate the direction of the play and its plot. In deploying either *ritual, theatre* or *ordinary communication* codes, respectively, Performers continually refer participants to different kinds of performative competencies, each of which requires 1) accessing a cultural inventory for correctly Interpreting & Framing the activity, 2) identifying the correct set of rules by which a given performance can be *counted* as competent, and then 3) verifying this interpretation - and indicating its "correct" reception - by responding *in turn*, and *in kind*; thereby completing the circuit of communication. To summarize the matter: **As Ritual:** *Weddings* get validated as cultural performances by meeting the requirements of conventional rules, codes and contextual conditions (Austin, 1975). Additionally, a hetero-normative subset of those conditions links the Ritual to other related codes such as Gender (Butler, in Bial 2004). **As Theatre:** T&T functions within the rule governed semiotic codes and conventions of Theatre, portraying fictional costumed

⁶⁰ J. L. Austin deems a speech act to be felicitous only if it meets cultural expectations and conditions for a recognizable utterance or a valid/correct performance of an action .

characters, in a matrixed environment, employing scripted scenes and dialogue between characters within a plotted narrative structure (Alter 1990: 1-12). Additionally, *theatrical reflexivity* operates as a necessary condition for proper reception. A sub-set of the theatrical code also exists in the form of rules governing improvisational comic interaction.⁶¹ Among cast members these rules are quite specialized, but among audience members their operations can be received generically as the permission to engage in a joking relationship with cast members. **As Everyday Communication:** T&T meets the conditions for everyday speech through constant conversations. Performers are continually *tested* in their command of these skills throughout the evening by engaging audience members in person to person interaction. *T&T* is also communicative at the material/phenomenological level of its real food and drink, and at the active and *present* level of its sociability via real conversations, dancing and interacting, all of which seem to testify to the event's veracity on a bodily level.

Cassaro and Mediated Personal Reflexivity

Nancy Cassaro attributes the origins of *Tony and Tina's Wedding* to her life-long fascination with theatre and television as framing devices, and the playful inversion of substance and image that results. Cassaro had been involved in theatre since childhood, and admits "I went to Broadway plays almost every weekend" (tel. interview, 2008). Mark Nassar, who played the role of Tony in the original production, and studied Theatre with Cassaro at Hofstra University, attributes the birth of Tony & Tina to playful character improvisations that he and Cassaro would do together in their spare time in the dorms.

⁶¹ For a synoptic description of the game-rules of Improvisational play used by actors see Anne Libera's *The Second City Almanac of Improvisation* (2004), pp. 9-11.

Cassaro said, “We did it for years...just for our own entertainment” (Benton 1990). They pretended to be a loud New York Italian couple. ‘One time we were doing improvisations of a young couple having a fight. They became so real that the dorm master called, wondering what was the matter. It snowballed and we enlisted other friends who created other characters” (Holden 1988).

Although in retrospect these improvisations functioned as a rehearsal period for Tony and Tina, originally they simply constituted a way of playing. Cassaro denies, however, that the couple itself was *T & T*. The couple had not been given names, only personalities, and they were different than what later became *T & T*.

[Mark would] come over to the apartment at nighttime, and we’d just be hanging out and we’d just kind of go into these characters for fun. But they were really an older Italian couple. They weren’t a young couple. Like maybe they’d been married for a while. Not that the bloom was off the rose, but they just kind of fought all the time, and yet they loved each other. I always thought they were more like my parents’ generation, or my grandparents’ generation as opposed to Tony and Tina, but they definitely were in the same family line, if that makes sense. (Cassaro, tel. interview, 2008)

Cassaro attributes her foray into audience interactive theatre to her tendency to frame the world on theatrical terms; a comic sensibility honed, in part, by the comparisons she drew as a child between her own family, and the ones on TV. Cassaro grew up constantly watching television, “I used to live in front of the set” (Holden, Feb. 1987). Television also became her window onto the holiday season, which she describes as her holiday “ritual.”

The connection that I drew was from being with my family – and I had a tumultuous childhood – so it was like being with them during happy times with the six of us and my mom and dad and watching *Andy Williams* and all of the various TV specials. That was sort of a ritual that I really remember. You know, I remember every Christmas waiting for *Charlie Brown* and then *Rudolph* to come on, and then it [the broadcast season] would sort of ramp up. I mean it started actually with Thanksgiving; there'd always be the *Wizard of Oz*, so I sort of marked these moments, you know, with whatever was on television. *Then* [I knew] it was getting to be the holiday season and we'd have these times when we'd make popcorn and we'd watch *Rudolph* and I'd think "oh, it's so fun" and we'd have peppermint ice cream and watch these specials together. (Cassaro, tel. interview, 2008)

Cassaro is intrigued by the idea of watching real characters caught in an artificial spotlight; the imposed artificiality of holiday celebrations, the artificial glitter of celebrity Christmas TV shows. She had learned that *behind the scenes* of these staged pageants were real people whose actual lives were often falling apart at the seams. And it was the "seems" she was interested in. What was happening in front of the camera and what was happened behind it were often two very different things. These were frail superstars who could never really live up to the expectations of their ritual roles. And their tragic-comic facades were epitomized in televised spectacles such as the Judy Garland, or the Joan Crawford family Christmas specials. Cassaro wanted to invert the spectacle, to offer a glimpse into the behind-the-scenes lives of these characters, at the height of the artifice. This eventually became her comic aesthetic: "In everything we do, whether it's a wedding, a TV show, or a

wake, we invite the audience to re-examine the ritual,” Ms. Cassaro said. ‘Because they know it’s theatre they get a different perspective on it’” (Holden, Feb. 1987).

She remembers several distinct events that would alter her viewing perspective forever. The first was the disillusionment she experienced following the death of Judy Garland.

I remember reading, or someone told me - maybe it was my parents - when Judy Garland had died. And I remember being really frightened about that because it was like she had died from *drugs*, or she had an alcohol problem, and a troubled life. And I remember it was like “You can’t tell me that *Dorothy* ended up *here*.” And I remember then being fascinated by her life and reading everything I could about her, and everything I could about Billy Holiday, oddly enough...So suddenly this idea of the celebrity with the not-what-you-see-on-the-screen, with this underbelly; *the underbelly* became very interesting to me. And so that’s when I went head first into reading every biography of Judy Garland (tel. interview, 2008).

The second alteration to her viewing perspective came from a picture in a book years later, which she refers to again and again.

There was a book; actually it was Desi Arnaz’s autobiography, and in it was this photo of the *I Love Lucy* set. And what was interesting to me conceptually was that it showed the set and then it pulled back further behind the line, and you saw the crew, and then cameras, and then the writers, and then it pulled back further and then you saw the studio audience sitting there in the stands, with the Phillip Morris sign [behind them], and then suddenly the things that I knew growing up as a little girl – I mean I watched TV every single day – suddenly shifted, and it became the

artifice of television or of theatre, and I became intrigued by that...It was really mind blowing to me...it was just like wow! Suddenly this thing that I knew [had changed] – [Looking at the photograph] I’m like ‘That’s Lucy, and that’s Lucy’s house when I watch that show, and, oh that’s Mrs. McGillicutty and those other people when she goes to the country in that one episode.’ And now all of a sudden it was like: ‘Hey, that’s not *really* her house!’” And of course, you [do already] *know* that on some level. But *that* was it. It just shifted it. That photo was what really turned it around for me. It just did something to me, and so [after also attending a live taping of the improv comedy TV show *Saturday Night Live*, in New York City] I started knocking around this idea of having an audience play the role...of *an audience*, with the caveat that there is a live taping of a television show in the 1960s. (tel. interview, 2008)

About this same time she applied this perspective to the wedding ritual, finding herself unable to take the ritual completely seriously: “I found myself going to a lot of friends’ weddings. At one point I attended four – three of them on Long Island – within a few weeks, and they were all the same” (tel. interview 2008).

““The second weekend, the wedding was in the *same* place, in the *same* room, and they had the *same* band – a different cast of characters, but the same exact ritual,’ she said. ‘I started thinking *this* would make a great piece of theatre”” (Cassaro quoted in Lipson, 2007 NYT.com).

Cassaro then formed *Artificial Intelligence*, and within a very short span of time created both the fake wedding and the fake TV show taping, both of which were framed as Theatre.

Categorizing Mock Rituals

To properly participate in a mock ritual requires the conscious application of both theatrical Framing and dramatic Reflexivity. Stated differently, to participate in ritual *as theatre*, one must actively participate in “make-believe” while deferring to the rules governing theatre-making. This makes the mock ritual something of a novelty within performance studies. In anthropological terms the mock ritual is a liminoid/leisure phenomenon, but cannot be categorized as Ritual proper. It is worth exhausting our efforts to do so, however, if only to avoid overlooking anything important. The relationship between Theatre, Ritual, and Everyday Life has been widely theorized in Anthropology (Turner 1957), Sociology (Goffman 1997), and Performance Studies (Schechner 2002). In a mock ritual these three literally come into *play*. Yet previous studies exploring the relationship between ritual and theatre have examined only *real* rituals containing theatrical elements or vice versa (Cole 1975). They have not compared, for instance, a real Ndembu fertility ceremony (Myerhoff 1982: 110; Turner 1967: 4-6; 12-13) or Bachama funeral rite (Stephens 1994), with a fake version of that same ceremony, performed entirely *as theatre*. It is difficult to find a direct analog to the theatrical mock ritual of the 1980s. Hopi Kachina ceremonies may switch back and forth between theatrical clowning and sacred dancing *within* the one event, yet to my knowledge there is no such thing as a mock Kachina ceremony in which actors play the Kachinas, and mock “clowns” make fun of fake “tourists” (Wright 1994). Nor am I aware of deliberately faked Korean shamanic rites (Du-Hyun Lee 1991) at which actors playfully portray the *mudang* spirit medium and her assistants, while audience members only *pretend* to be healed. Or else mock Ta’ziyeh events at which comedians play the sacred religious characters and audience members are invited to laugh instead of cry. The environmental

mock ritual - in comically reproducing a pseudo-ritual in its entirety, *without ritual efficacy* - would seem to place it in a unique conceptual category.

Victor & Edith Turner's (1987) "embodied" ethnographic experiments are no exception. Their purpose in re-creating and performing rituals was to better understand the phenomenon of being-involved-in-the-ritual itself; they were not intended *as* theatre. Similarly, Theatre practitioners who have studied ritual's relationship to theatre have done so largely in order to justify incorporating ritual efficacy *into* theatre, or incorporating themselves into theatre *as* efficacious ritual practitioners. The Performance Group, for example, aimed sincerely at creating a hyphenated form of ritual-theatre, which Bouissac describes as: "a way of focusing on the existential efficacy of collective events characterized by deep involvement of the participants (e.g. Schechner 1977). In this latter sense, it can be considered "an effort to carry forward religious values in a desacralized world or to identify the particular intensity of some collective secular experiences as a re-emergence of the sacred in the Western cultures" (Bouissac 1990: 194). The implication, however, was that the utility of theatre was increased by bringing it into line with the "religious." Certainly, all of the political theatre groups employing ritual as a form of efficacy intended to be taken *seriously*. Mock rituals seem to reverse this equation.

Many societies engage in what Turner (1995) has called rituals of "status reversal" and "elevation" (166-203) These serve a structural function, which intentionally feeds back into the maintenance of society and its symbolic order. In rituals of reversal, the bearers of real social roles are temporarily displaced by lower status individuals. A real priest may be replaced for a day by a social/structural subordinate. In mock rituals, however, no real status reversal actually occurs because no real role displacement occurs. Any semblance of reversal is *contained* within the event *as* theatre. In mock rituals the company performing

the play may rent a church building, but no actual clergy are involved in the production. Nothing takes place within the structural functions of the church, hence there is no “[dis]enfranchisement from the norms and values that govern the public lives of incumbents of structural positions” (Turner 1995: 166). Nothing is ‘desacrilized’ (Bouissac 1990: 199) and theatre’s relationship to the ritual remains peripheral.

Mock rituals could potentially be defined as comic “profanations of the sacred,” whether civil or religious (Bouissac 1990, esp. 194-199). They are similar to carnival inversions. Bouissac defines “profanation” as any act which places sacred objects or texts in an improper context or uses them in an improper way; additionally, it is the performance of sacred acts (“patterned behavior”) placed in their prescribed context, but performed by “inappropriate” people, or before the eyes of inappropriate spectators (1990: 196). There is a critical utility to this, however. Bouissac argues that by violating rules, the role of the circus clown is to reveal the “basic but unwritten rules on which our construction of a culturally bound meaningful universe rests.” This “operation performed on ritual” represents a “meta-discourse on the tacit rules shaping the culture,” and it occurs in a theatrically bounded space, “within the limits defined by a playful context” (196). Bouissac defines most rituals as being either “transformative or demonstrative,” and concludes that the clown enacts the latter, as ritual. This critical function is not necessarily intended in mock rituals, however, which are mostly play activities.

A variation of Bouissac’s argument is the *staging* of “tribal rituals” by indigenous peoples for touristic consumption, or the staging of religious dances for paying customers. These can variously be described as forms of intercultural *demonstration*, as the marketing of *counterfeit* cultural products (Bruner 1994: 412; Notar 2006: 79-80), as *staged authenticity*, or hegemonic conformity to the values of the (touristic) Other (MacCannell

1973). While these are certainly “faked” rituals, and therefore “performances,” the difference between these events and the kinds of events I am labeling as “mock” rituals only serves to highlight the appropriateness of the phrase “*make-believe*” – not just “fake” or ‘profane’ - in relation to the events I am describing. Dean MacCannell (1973) notes that touristic “rituals” are invariably marketed as “authentic.” This involves an internal knowledge by indigenous peoples of the existence of a “back region” (Goffman), which is not revealed to the tourist consumer. In short, the “artifice” remains concealed from the “dupe.” Yet, the performance is presented *as* ritual; not *as* theatre. The audience is not *in-the-know*; certainly not enough to be able to *stage* itself *as* the “tourists” *of* that consumption. It remains non-reflexive *as* play behavior because no meta-theatrical frame surrounds the definition of the event. The gullible – or even the dubious or appreciative - tourist is not the same as one who *participates* in a “mock ritual” event *as* Theatre. The dupe cannot be *in* on it. While rituals performed for tourist audiences may be *theatrical*, they are not *Theatre* because, performed *as* ritual, they are inaccessible *as* Play. But *mock rituals*, as I am defining them, are both rituals performed *as* Theatre AND accessible *as* Play.

In the end, trying to define a mock ritual as a Ritual *proper*, fails because we already know what kind of ‘ritual’ it is; or rather, we know the Tradition to which the event’s mode of duplication belongs – it is mimesis - and we have a structural and cultural reason for defining it so. The ritual of doing theatre is a well established Tradition in Western culture. And it belongs to theatre’s mode of framing and objectifying social life in an imaginative and creative way, as Art, that we must locate our definition of what kind of an event the mock ritual is, in Theatre, and as a form of make-believe. What is revealing about mock rituals is the extent to which theatre audiences are capable of participating. But what

remains in question – and will be addressed in the conclusion below - is whether any *other* form of *staged authenticity* yet remains to beguile the theatre audience into becoming dupes.

Mock Rituals are Theatre

Tony and Tina's Wedding is unmistakably theatrical, and governed by the convention of *mimesis*. Guests yield to the normative expectations of theatre, and of being audience members, throughout. Tony & Tina's Wedding is essentially a "fully scripted" stage play, with a traditional dramatic arc, and an episodic through-line. Fully or partially scripted scenes occur in order to move the action forward to an eventual climax and conclusion. In theory, it is possible to perform any interactive show on a proscenium stage from beginning to end; nothing crucial within the script relies on an audience member to complete the action. The norms and conventions of theatre continually reassert themselves throughout the evening. Characters exist within their own fictionally matrixed story-world (Kirby, 1965). Actors relate to each other in such a way as to preserve this fictional matrix at all times. They work as a team to preserve the integrity of each character's biography and the past history, which they share with *all* of the other characters within the meta-narrative. There is always a tightly controlled plot structure, and key events must occur in sequence.

Every mock ritual is a Drama. The drama is the *story* of the characters that enact the ritual. While dramatic tension between characters is necessary to many a good plot, *tension* itself is often *why* there is a ritual, so its inclusion also becomes part of the theatrical realism. Most of the time, this tension remains beneath the surface within the story of

individuals trying to fulfill their social obligations. Complex characters, rather than just accessible archetypes alone, are part of a successful formula.⁶²

Like any other play the “audience” at a mock ritual watches the primary plot unfold in a linear fashion, and finds out no more information about the story’s ancillary characters than would normally be the case in any proscenium drama. What the interactive context adds is merely the opportunity to interview characters between scenes, and thus fill in background information which one would normally not learn about. It adds a depth dimension. What is unusual is that the multiple narrative sub-plots unfold post-structurally, as actors weave their way around the performance space and mingle with spectators. The wider story is assembled and elaborated by guests sharing information with each other. The *Awesome 80’s Prom* relies most heavily on this kind of narrative because it is essentially a dance. Its characters only take to the stage briefly to make their campaign pitches, each vying to be voted Prom King or Queen. That the characters are campaigning throughout the evening to gain the votes of audience members (i.e. their *fellow classmates*) is not part of an actual prom night, but was added as a way of giving audience members and actors a reason to interact with each other, and something for audience members to *do* besides dancing.

The role of actors *as entertainers* is always acknowledged. Theatrical authority reasserts itself continually in prepared scenes, during which audiences inevitably yield to dramatic conventions. Actors *entertain* audiences in ways that most fellow ritual attendees would not. They perform choreographed dance routines, sing numerous songs, play instruments, and perform stand-up comedy acts. This involves the otherwise odd notion of friends and family members frequently speaking into microphones, and unlikely individuals such as a

⁶² Although realistic, these characterizations are also comedic. Actors “confide tiny seeds of family rivalries and grievances” to audience members personally, that will soon “escalate into comic imbroglio, or several of them, at the nearby reception” (Fuchs 1993: 22).

“caterer” acting as “master of ceremonies.” Most shows incorporate an MC character as a way of giving “participation” directions to audience members throughout the evening. Ken Davenport added an MC role to his *Awesome 80’s Prom* to help disseminate the narrative, to encourage people to dance, and to instruct them on how to vote for Prom King & Queen. The early experimental piece *Tamara* – although not fully interactive - utilized a Host/Valet in order to instruct theatre-goers regarding which parts of the “mansion” were off limits to them: “If one of the people closes a door in your face,” patrons were told, “do not follow” (Krizanc, 1989, p. 24).⁶³ Essentially, all interactive shows therefore employ the implicit convention of a “backstage” or “curtained” area, which demarcates the playing area from the non-playing area.

Music fulfills the same function as it does in the proscenium theatre. Music keeps theatrical time, and songs act as cues or background orchestration for prepared scenes that will occur. There may be “theatrical” *lighting* cues and follow spots that suddenly appear to highlight dramatic actions. The majority of scenes are fully *scripted* and performed word for word. Even those that are not, are usually carefully rehearsed. *Grandma Sylvia’s Funeral* and *Finnegan’s Farewell* rely on witty character dialogue and allow for improvisation during dinner. *Costumes* and most of the *props* are *representational* just as they are on a proscenium stage. Audience members do not handle them. In *Tony and Tina’s Wedding* characters use fake cell phones, cameras, flowers, marijuana, cocaine, and other items which are only “real” within the character’s world, although characters do offer to smoke a joint (oregano) with guests who want to play along. The alcohol consumed by characters during toasts is colored water. The table of Wedding presents is covered in

⁶³ Jhon Krizanc’s *Tamara* was environmentally staged in an exotic “Italian villa, c. 1927.” Patrons were treated as guests, and lavished with fascist privileges. Scenes were performed throughout the “mansion.” Guests followed characters, but did not inter-Act with them. The centrepiece of the event was its exotic banquet during which guests conversed with one another, piecing together the story through conversations.

merely decorative gifts; often empty boxes. Even the wedding cake is made of chicken wire and plaster (guests are served a different cake). *Grandma Sylvia's Funeral* and *Finnegan's Farewell* both use empty coffins. All of these work only within the representational world of theatre. To the extent that they add reality, they also act as components within the environmental theatre set.

Actors always stay in character. If guests ask “how many times a week do you do this show?” actors do not acknowledge that they are in a show. When actors take to the dance floor, it is because their character is supposed to be dancing during that particular scene. Some dances are choreographed. In the *Awesome 80's Prom*, for instance, characters form a break dancing circle, after which audience members are invited to jump in. The eating of food by characters is *mostly* representational. Actors perform “eating” because they are on stage; they do not always finish the food. Even the ‘random’ movements of cast members are carefully scripted actions which *represent* spontaneity. They are prepared activity-sequences, much like a film script or clowning script. A typical scene in *Tony and Tina's Wedding* runs as follows (1988: 87-8). The band pauses and the band leader announces:

1. DONNY: ‘We’re gonna take a short break after this instrumental. Enjoy your dinner. We’re gonna do the same and we’ll see you soon.’
2. Sal gets Tony and Tina and takes them around to each table for a photograph. This is a chore for Tony and Tina, but to make it fun they torture Sal. On the count of three, instead of saying ‘cheese,’ they say ‘Dick’!
3. Marina looks for her date, Johnny Maritello. She fears he’s standing her up, but she won’t admit it.

4. Nunzio has watched Celeste move to the bar with great interest. He goes there, too, and works his magic on her.
5. Barry has rounded up some guests to go to the bathroom to smoke pot. Michael comes in. Barry gives him a beer, which he chugs down.
6. Tina and Sister steal a moment to sneak a cigarette together, just like when they were kids.
7. Donna approaches Donny about singing with his band. She is being pretty flirty. Dom comes over and threatens Donny.
8. At the bar, Maddy has overheard the juiciest part of Nunzio's 'come-on' to Celeste. Celeste and Maddy fight. Nunzio takes Maddy outside to cool her down.

In the end, an interactive show is carefully scripted, never a free for all, and while individual actors will respond to audience-initiated dialogue in real time, they will never yield the floor to patrons during a key Theatrical scene. Their allegiance is to their fellow actors, the story, and the plot. And with the exception of a few free-floating characters, everybody has somewhere they need to be - or get to - at all times. It is only the constant movement and circulation of characters that provides the illusion that their actions are "unplanned." Just as in the proscenium theatre, actors are *always* on stage, and part of their performance also involves knowing when to *yield* the floor to fellow actors so as not to pull focus during key scenes. This often involves cueing audience members to also give focus to actors by signposting an upcoming scene or else telegraphing the action of "paying-attention" on stage.

Chapter Conclusion: Community and Tradition Analysis

We began this chapter by differentiating between “audience” and “community.” We defined *Audience* as a temporary collection of individuals gathered for a single event, and defined *Community* as an enduring group status, which *precedes* and/or *survives* an event on a potentially *recurring basis*. These two converge in folk/drama. We reviewed Victor Turner’s dual classification of Ritual events as *liturgies* (serious/devotional) or *ludergies* (playful/recreational), both of which maintain communities over time. I argued that post-modernity is post liturgical and suggested, therefore, that *ludic post-modernity* might then become *ludergical*. I proposed that ludergy may constitute a means of forming *emergent community* around performances adopted as *traditions* within particular social contexts. Finally, I suggested that because theatrical reflexivity and media saturation enable *audience* members to play along with actors within mock-ritual activities, then these same factors may also predispose audience members towards becoming members of a community, perhaps even through the route of media *fandom*. We may now ask whether the mock ritual event actually constitutes ludergy. To the extent that *ludic* postmoderns can define Ritual as *ludergy* as well as *liturgy*, then, in terms of efficacy related to cultural conditions, playing at mock rituals would certainly seem to constitute no less of a “ritual activity” than did Schechner’s faux liturgical events. In the end, however, neither is a true Ritual, and for the same reason. Both are one-off commercial Theatrical events, neither of which aggregates the members of a *real* Community/Folk because neither is adopted as a Tradition *of* that community over time, not even as a Fan community. In short, neither achieves the mutually constitutive status of Folk-slash-Theatre.

In this connection, “Community” and “Tradition” remain the operative terms. The people who attend mock ritual events do not constitute pre-existing members of a *community* reunited; they are one-time-only members of a theatrically constituted *audience* who will never see one another again; and, there is no evidence that *Tony and Tina’s Wedding* ever developed a Fan-based sub-culture around the activity, in its surrounding social frame. The event, for its audience members, was not a means of re-aggregating an existing community or of forming a new one, but rather a chance to experience a theatrical novelty.

In production, the event does not come *from* them (the audience), nor do they *receive* it into their midst or into their “community,” as its hosts. Those who have gathered do not precede the event in any substantial way as a collective body whose members reconstitute it from time to time as their chosen Tradition. Rather, they encounter the mock ritual event, for the first time, as a consumer product made by a group of professional actors whom they do not personally know as friends. Additionally, they participate in the event with other people who are strangers to them, and whom they will never encounter again. Nothing permits us therefore to speak of the event as a folk event. Theatrical reflexivity provides these audience members with a *means* to participate, but the fleeting nature of the activity provides them no substantial means of forming community.

What is missing from this equation is *tradition*. Tradition, as Dell Hymes reminds us, is “a functional pre-requisite of social life” (1975: 313, quoted in Bendix 1997: 211-12). Tradition and Community are reciprocally related and constitute one another as co-emergent phenomena. Additionally, as Peter Harrop (2012) reminds us, *tradition* also secures the social custom of *re-visiting* whereby social continuity is continually re-enacted, as a community *re-member-ing*. None of the social relations affected in a mock ritual event

have as their counterpart a similarly substantial relationship to audience members in reality. Audience members merely *pretend* to be family members, they pretend to be old friends, and pretend to live in the same neighborhood. In reality, however, they do not share collective memories together, they are not reuniting at the event, do not re-experience deep emotions together or cement communal bonds. Each of these relationships is affected, one-time-only - in make believe - as a participatory sub-set of being, once again, a temporary member of an *audience*, not a lasting community member.

The audience does not constitute an *imagined community* either – Regina Marchi’s (2009) term for a substantially *emerging* community based on its member’s desire to forge lasting social alliances around shared interests and performance traditions, and, thereby, to *perform* a community substantially into being. Rather, it is an *imaginary* community – or a *temporary community* (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 256-7) - whose “members” are bound only by the conventions of theatrical make-believe, and only for the duration of the event. The script is copyrighted; it is not owned by the (community) audience in general. Audience members cannot re-perform it without paying royalties. It does not tell the community’s own story, but the story of fictional characters, from a fictional family and community. Access to the event is not *expected* in advance by right of previously belonging to a community whose membership demand one’s attendance, or who personally request one’s presence and/or *invite* one’s creative participation, or even demand one’s creative contribution. Rather, one gains access by buying a ticket, in a commercial transaction.

At the event, substantially domestic *Entertainment* practices are also foreclosed by the commercial nature of the production. Traditional entertainment practices cannot be shared out; that is, hosting practices, recipes handed-down for baking, traditional dances, music etc. cannot be contributed by those attending the event; rather, imitations must be

purchased from vendors subcontracted by the theatre company to cook “authentic” Italian food, which - within the context of the script - is supposed to be Grandma Nunzio’s old family recipe for making ziti, but which, in reality, is simulated. The food is real, while at the same time serving a semiotic function within the drama, by playing the part of the “wedding banquet” within the fiction. Yet, significantly for Turner, the food is not an authentic performance of anyone in the audience or the cast; they did not cook the food for each other. As such, they are prevented from making an authentic creative contribution to the event, which was a major function of the folk activity: to enhance self actualization and community well-being, alike.

The Theatre Community

Only two options remain for audience members to become community members: they can either join the theatre company itself, or form a fan culture around the event. If there is a potentially *real* community present, which fits commonly accepted definitions of a “Folk;” then it is the Actors themselves, as co-workers, artists and members of the same theatrical company. This community, however, is not “open” for audience members to join, though it is *this* community, no doubt, that some audience members wished to gain access to, ostensibly as a means of making contact with *another culture*. They use the event *meta-theatrically* to realize their own fantasy of being an actor within the theatrical company itself; a fantasy of belonging to the acting community, and of fitting in there; again, an *imaginary* experience befitting the media age. And there is much to commend this interpretation of the mock ritual event *as meta-theatrical fantasy* or *actor-fantasy* in line with the cultural conditions of post-modernity. It is here that we enter the realm of *staged authenticity* being marketed to the consumer, and of the consumer becoming the dupe.

Through an event like *Tony and Tina's Wedding* people can entertain the fantasy of potentially being “discovered” acting in a Broadway show. Everything changes when we consider the Theatre event – and not the wedding/prom/funeral or other ritual – as *the* primary Ritual that - at least *some* - audience members wish to gain (privileged) access to. And it would be a stretch, after all, to assume that audience members truly fantasized about being friends or family members of the characters within the dramatized ritual (i.e. the prom, wedding or funeral), as opposed to fantasizing about their relationship to the *Dramatic* Ritual (i.e. to Theatre, to its Actors, or of Acting in a professional theatre company). It is the latter's mystique and aura that post-moderns dream about (Quinn 1990). Being an actor remains a desirable fantasy for many people in our celebrity obsessed culture, in which, over the last two hundred years especially, actors have gone from being an officially reviled class of traveling vagrants and outsiders to the most institutionally revered, celebrated and adored members of society. The overall message being, “if you want to achieve social recognition and lead an exciting life, become an actor or other celebrity.”

Theatricality has indeed become part of the culture that theatre itself reflects, a culture in which being an *actor* really is an available role-option within society. And, the presence of working professional actors (“living their dream”) in *Tony and Tina's Wedding* only seems to confirm this notion of accessibility. As a culture in which people believe they can become anything they want to be, being an Actor is among the most coveted roles today, and it is *this* that the mock ritual makes available - as meta-theatrical fantasy. Wasn't this, after all, what Richard Schechner was also selling tickets to: privileged access to actors, as an auratic class – as “shaman”? If *Tony and Tina's Wedding* promises this also, it does so certainly no less than *Dionysis in 69*, but perhaps more honestly, as theatrical make-believe.

There is no doubt of course that it is the fulfillment of *this* fantasy that some people are buying along with their ticket; the meta-theatrical fantasy of being part of the cast, in the show.

My own experience of being a cast member in T & T confirmed this, as people often wanted to interact essentially *out of character* with the show itself by transcending the *dramatized* event (the wedding) to be a part of the *dramatic* event, as one of the cast. These were people who attended multiple times, but were never “accepted” by the company because, essentially, they represented a disruption to the script; they tried, in effect, to be too chummy with the actors. Along with being in the show, of course, came exposure through other media, which further created a celebrity appeal. This celebrity appeal was also marketed. Cast members appeared as guests on local television shows; we opened baseball games, rode on floats in local parades, and appeared regularly in print ads and on television commercials promoting the show. Additionally, we gained parts in unrelated TV ads, films, and television shows from which people also recognized us (as *ostentations* of our media roles). Through direct contact, the mock ritual seems to hold out this same promise to others, as well as the promise of belonging to an “elite” class of people. But alas, this too, proves inaccessible to the audience member. If the Ritual that people wish to gain privileged access to - in all its authenticity - is the ritual of making theatre, then in relation to it, audience members really *are* the equivalents of *tourists*. The theatrical ritual is one whose *back-region* remains permanently off limits to the customer. If treated as a vehicle for celebrity access, the show will ultimately reveal its own *staged authenticity*. Rightly or wrongly “audience” will never be permitted “back-stage” to join with “community.” To quote Dean MacCannell (1973: 591)

“A back region, closed to audiences and outsiders, allows concealment of props and activities that might discredit the performance out front. In other words, sustaining a firm sense of social reality requires some mystification.”

The performance out front that threatens to *be* discredited and demystified by the revelation of its back region is ultimately the pretense of its ever having *extended* lasting friendship, belonging and community. When the show ends, the actors disappear, and the audience disperses.

Conclusion

T&T succeeds in activating a playful social presence marked by joking relationships, but only results in an *imaginary* community. By channeling social expression into a commodified substitution for true Community experience, which ends after only two hours, any further possibilities for meaningful social interactions are foreclosed thereby subverting the event’s potential to enhance community bonds. People do not continue to have names and faces for each other after the event. Those who are present comprise an audience, but not a community. Since the event was never adopted as the object of a fan subculture, the temporary role of audience member was never transcended. Additionally, by providing everything needed to accomplish a wedding ready-made (by retailers) for customers-posing-as “guests” (to consume) the event robs participants of essential opportunities for making “authentic” contributions to a community, or for having authentic phatic experiences with others. Customers are prevented from experiencing self-authenticating and self-fulfilling creative/artistic contributions (by bringing food, helping to decorate the hall, authentically considering the meaning of friendship through gift selection or

meaningful gift-exchange, etc). These community-making practices being absent from the mock ritual event, leads me to conclude that they are ludic without being ludergical. If there is anything that the mock ritual event does teach us, however, it is that the Theatrical *format* has great potential among post-moderns, and deserves to be explored as a resource for future performance projects aiming for community.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began by challenging Richard Schechner's definition of *efficacy*; particularly its relationship to pre-modern Myth-Ritual-Belief complexes. While Schechner (1974) cited several examples of events that served an "ecological function," he too hastily linked this function to Myth-Ritual-Belief complexes. Since it was in direct relationship to an event's social function that we initially granted the value of his examples, I proposed amending the model to consider a fuller definition of *entertainment* within a broader notion of *traditions* centered on *re-visiting*. Although traditional entertainment serves an important social function, Critical/Ritual approaches to the study of theatre have obfuscated theatre's potential to make community in relation to *play* and *entertainment* in postmodernity. In this connection I identified shared *media literacy* and widespread *theatrical reflexivity* as potential resources for the enactment of *postmodern ludergies*, whereby the theatre-making community and the community making theatre might become reciprocal and self-constituting byproducts of one another.

Chapters One through **Three** described events that function as postmodern ludergies; that is, events that utilize play in order to build or maintain communities via ongoing reunions and re-visitation customs. In **Chapter One**, a seasonal basement performance event was described in which the roles of performer, audience member, and community member were deemed interchangeable and consubstantial. Performers were members of the same community who would gift their song or skit or puppet show to the community and then return to the audience (in the surrounding social frame) from which they had come previously, subsequently to be superceded by the next performer who, moments earlier, had been an audience member, and so forth, in an ever revolving cycle. Although the event did

not involve the entire audience/community in helping to enact a single dramatic narrative, the circularity of social roles and performative positions within the event constantly confirmed the consubstantial nature of the roles “audience,” “community,” and “performer.” The chapter ended by putting forth a reciprocal and process-centered model: of community-making theatre and the theatre-making community that simultaneously also explained community in terms self-other relationships, which I labeled as acts of *reciprocal self-constitution*.

In **Chapter Two** I theorized the importance of replacing the Myth-Ritual-Belief complex (which produces authoritarianism and communitarianism) with a Literature-Tradition-Unbelief complex along the lines of a folkloristic literary community (ala Jean-Luc Nancy). In this connection, we examined two events: 1) *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and 2) the *historical reenactment weekend* or LARP event. These were treated as instances of *myth interrupted*. The chapter focused on these activities as (fan-based) literary/writing events, and on the concept of Community as being *folkloristic* rather than Mythic. Play and re-visitation were equally implicated in constituting the events’ overall efficacy, as tradition-bearing folk (lore) activities. It was, after all, through the customary activity of taking part in playing-together, and of co-writing together in the margins of the same source-text, that re-visitation was accomplished in the surrounding social frames of these events.

Chapter Three considered how a formerly scattered and isolated collection of literary fans were brought together by a commonly shared interest in *murder mystery* literature and to other media related to the genre (e.g. puzzles, films, and an appreciation of creative authorship). This led fans to create a live gaming version of the genre’s puzzle element, and to work together to solve the mystery-puzzle, as a team, rather than as solitary readers. Re-

reading and re-writing – as well as re-enacting the solution to the puzzle through performance - became a collective social activity, and eventually the Mohonk event began to function annually as a reunion and a custom of re-visiting, which solidified long-term friendships among attendees. An emergent community arose in conjunction with the event as an emerging tradition.

Chapter Four focused on a *situational folk event*; an event that was “situational” because, in the familiarity of the American Military USO context especially – and in its bringing together “fellow Americans” for a neighborly visit, a certain *Quality* emerged between performers and audience members, which joined them together in the same Community. How actors and audience members, alike, *perceived* one another effected how they *received* one another through interaction, play, and shared joking relationships. Being together as fellow Americans in a strange place directly determined the kind of surrounding social frame that continued to enjoin the event’s participants long after “the show” was over, as its social *aftermath*. In ways similar to the basement event discussed in chapter one, performers could be perceived as coming from the same community inhabited by members of the audience, and then returning to that audience/community after the show was over. In the end, interaction came to define the surrounding social frame as reciprocal and mutually constitutive: as folk/theatre.

In **Chapter Five** I applied the contours of the liturgy/ludergy binary more explicitly than in any of the previous chapters, to reveal two things. First, that the rather serious “efficacious” events of the 1960’s could be examined as hybridized political/religious liturgies in relation to which audience members were expected to *enact belief systems* as Rituals, with “participation” itself - rather than tradition, repetition or re-visitation – being counted as the essence of “the ritual.” Second, I applied Victor Turner’s ludergical criteria

to the analysis of the explicitly “mock” ritual event, *Tony and Tina’s Wedding* as a case in point, to conclude that while it fit well within the category of a ludic event, and easily fit Schechner’s merely interactive definition of participation-as-ritual, it did not constitute a Ludergy. The event did not function as a tradition-bearing activity that might gather the same people together repeatedly as a community. Yet, the event did reveal something important. T&T inventoried a postmodern capacity to be literate in relation to mediated fictions and also demonstrated a postmodern propensity to engage in theatrical reflexivity. The play dramatizes community, enacts roles related to community (friend, family member, neighbor) and is premised on notions of reunion and shared memories. But, while it invites audience members to play along with the fiction, the T&T event’s implied promise of actually delivering Community and/or performing inclusion is, in fact, never realized. Although the play initially seems to hold out the promise for potential inclusion within the theatrical community inhabited by the performers, the play instead performs a kind of *staged authenticity*, which satisfies the criteria for a touristic fantasy only. As a one-off activity, ticket buyers remain merely members of an *audience* who will eventually be dismissed, and will disperse, once the show is over.

Implications of this study

Only in folk theatre do the theatre-making community and the community making theatre converge on one another regularly, either through liturgies or ludergies. Theorizing why some communities pursue ludergy while others do not, requires that we first come to terms with what folk *play* actually is, and why it occurs. The prescriptive drive towards defining

efficacy solely on political and/or religious terms has caused theorists to overlook the emergence of folk play activities and emergent ludic communities in Postmodernity.

This thesis, I hope, has expanded our criteria for what counts as a “legitimate” reason for forming community around theatrical events, with significance to be located both in theatre’s *entertainment* function and in its potential to enact rituals of social continuity (i.e. “customs of revisiting”). The preceding study allows us to propose a standard by which the function and *quality* of a folk event can be measured; namely, *its ability to re-member and re-unite*. The so-called “ideology” to be found as the centerpiece of an event, and for which an event is supposed to function as a ritual for the enactment of a belief system, may be deferred instead to the significance of the event’s surrounding social frame and to the event’s social function in binding community members together regardless of beliefs or ideologies. In fact, Un-belief may serve equally well for the purpose of gathering people together in postmodernity. In this connection, therefore I have raised the question of significance, and for what counts as being a good reason to gather together. Events such as the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the murder mystery weekend, and the historical reenactment weekend do not exhaust all possible cases of ludery in postmodernity or their potential to form community, but they do shed light on the importance of theatre’s surrounding social frame. Throughout this study I have provided a rudimentary theoretical basis and nomenclature for recognizing postmodern ludergies, for seeing other forms and instances of emergent community-making when it occurs, and for accurately recognizing the motivations of those who attend and participate in such activities.

Future research might, by analogy, provide new insights into the importance of older customs of revisiting such as mumming, to be treated not as fossils or relics of a bygone era revived, but as relevant and up-to-date examples of tried and true performance technologies

for making and building community today. By analogy also, we might underscore the contemporaneousness of these ancient events, while simultaneously also demonstrating the “traditional-ness” of recently emerged events such as Gay Pride festivals, murder mysteries, and online gaming communities, all centered around current tastes, interests, literacies and performance capabilities.

The constant emphasis on ritual and political efficacy over the last fifty years especially, continues not only to expand the scope of our blind spot relative to ludergy, play and entertainment, but continues to tell only one half of the story of what has historically motivated community members to come together. It may not even be telling the most important half of the story, at that. It is time we restored *entertainment* to its proper place within the Western theatrical canon, and that we revisit the ludic tradition with a renewed emphasis on the cultural conditions of postmodernity. These include different kinds of literacies and authorial capabilities, and a ready supply of theatrical reflexivity. Bearing in mind that shared Ideology is no substitute for shared memories, granting efficacy to so-called “Rituals” that cannot in any way be defined as *traditions* seems relatively short sighted relative to longer term goals of creating community by establishing revisiting customs on a par with pre-modern ludergical examples. If these three: *play*, *entertainment* and *theatre* - are to make their way back into Theatre Studies with the proper degree of recognition, their relevance to people living in both pre and post modernity must first be acknowledged.

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