

## Theatre Analysis: Some Questions and a Questionnaire

One of the problems of applying semiotic techniques to theatre work has been a vocabulary which too often mystifies rather than clarifies the theatre experience for the non-specialist student. Patrice Pavis, in his work with students at the University of Paris III, has evolved a questionnaire about theatre performance which, while not in itself utilizing semiotic terminology, attempts to direct the respondents' attention to all the aspects of theatrical signification upon which it touches. In the following article, Patrice Pavis, whose major study of theatrical terminology, entitled *Dictionnaire du Théâtre*, was published by Editions Sociales in 1980, outlines the purpose of the questionnaire, and provides explanatory notes to the individual questions, outlining an approach on which many involved in theatre teaching may wish to comment and build.

THIS QUESTIONNAIRE was devised and used during the 1983–84 academic session at the Institute of Theatre Studies at the New Sorbonne, for a third-year seminar course entitled 'Semiological Analysis of Performance', aimed at students with a theatre studies background who were not familiar with semiology. The questionnaire was the result of work undertaken in several seminars during which Paris productions had been analyzed.

The main purpose of the questionnaire is to push and/or assist spectators towards writing down precise notes on a performance, several hours or days after having seen the show. I do not instruct students to take notes during a performance, but it is true that notes on technical details (particularly staging) or on acting style are very useful when writing up a full report. Seeing the show a second time is also extremely useful, though it must be admitted that this is not a normal situation for the average spectator.

The questionnaire was compulsory and had to be completed as part of course assessment. Students responded well, so far as I can judge. They were allowed absolute freedom in formulating their answers, but had to fill in those answers in the week immediately following the performance. At first this was difficult, because in spite of my efforts to avoid technical jargon and obscure theorizing, there were some

questions, particularly 8, 10c, and 13, that required acquaintance with semiology in order to be fully understood. Theoretical work is gradually introduced in classes, linked to specific questions raised by the type of performance being analyzed.

This pragmatic way of looking at things is also determined by a desire to apply semiological theories to the analysis of texts and performances and to introduce semiological practice into the educational system 'from the inside'. There was also a certain sense of dissatisfaction with questionnaires aimed at a 'normal' theatregoing public (people who are not theatre studies students), where the formulation of the questions is necessarily simplified and adapted to codes of aesthetic and ideological reception that have been distorted by the mass media and the image the media creates of 'art theatre' (taking up Stanislavski's term that Antoine Vitez is so fond of today).

I felt a similar sense of mistrust towards statistical studies based on the psychology of the reception of a work of art and towards sociological investigations into the social origins and the taste of the theatregoing public. This kind of research is, of course, both valid and illuminating, but does not lead me towards the core of the problem: how is meaning produced for the spectator, starting with a dialectical theory of production and reception aesthetics?<sup>1</sup>

**1. General discussion of performance**

- (a) what holds elements of performance together
- (b) relationship between systems of staging
- (c) coherence or incoherence
- (d) aesthetic principles of the production
- (e) what do you find disturbing about the production; strong moments or weak, boring moments

**2. Scenography**

- (a) spatial forms: urban, architectural, scenic, gestural, etc.
- (b) relationship between audience space and acting space
- (c) system of colours and their connotations
- (d) principles of organization of space
  - relationship between on-stage and off-stage
  - links between space utilized and fiction of the staged dramatic text
  - what is shown and what is implied.

**3. Lighting system****4. Stage properties**

type, function, relationship to space and actors' bodies

**5. Costumes**

how they work; relationship to actors' bodies

**6. Actors' performances**

- (a) individual or conventional style of acting
- (b) relation between actor and group
- (c) relation between text and body, between actor and role
- (d) quality of gestures and mime
- (e) quality of voices
- (f) how dialogues develop

**7. Function of music and sound effects****8. Pace of performance**

- (a) overall pace

- (b) pace of certain signifying systems (lighting, costumes, gestures, etc.)
- (c) steady or broken pace

**9. Interpretation of story-line in performance**

- (a) what story is being told
- (b) what kind of dramaturgical choices have been made
- (c) what are ambiguities in performance and what are points of explanation
- (d) how is plot structured
- (e) how is story constructed by actors and staging
- (f) what is genre of dramatic text

**10. Text in performance**

- (a) main features of translation
- (b) what role is given to dramatic text in production
- (c) relationship between text and image

**11. Audience**

- (a) where does performance take place
- (b) what expectations did you have of performance
- (c) how did audience react
- (d) role of spectator in production of meaning

**12. How to notate (photograph and film) this production**

- (a) how to notate performance technically
- (b) which images have you retained

**13. What cannot be put into signs**

- (a) what did not make sense in your interpretation of the production
- (b) what was not reducible to signs and meaning (and why)

- (a) Are there any special problems that need examining

- (b) Any comments, suggestions for further categories for the questionnaire and the production

To obtain the type of response required, the questionnaire stresses the importance of verbalizing the aesthetic experience and of considering the overall system of a production after seeing it. The spectator-witness is therefore led along a systematic, linear path following a particular

order. The questions were chosen to facilitate the verbal, but also to suggest a way towards an overall perception of the performance. Finally, the details and the listing of the aesthetic problems enable the questionnaire to be used as a checklist (even an 'idiot's guide') for the

study of performance, in spite of some unavoidable overlaps in formulating the answers.

The whole questionnaire is based on an ideology and a point-of-view that is necessarily predetermined and distorts the object of analysis. Overall it could be suggested that this rests on a belief that performance can be analyzed – that is, taken apart – and that it functions as an entity, wherein all the parts join in shaping it and giving it meaning. I will now draw the underlying theory behind certain points out of the wings into the limelight.

*1. General discussion of performance.* The first group of questions invites students to sum up their impressions and to think through one or more general signifiers derived from repetition and patterning of partial signifiers. The dominant discourse has to be established, whether it is implicit or explicit in the performance.

*1a, b, c.* What holds the different (diachronic) moments and the (synchronic) lines together in the stage materials used? An awareness of the fabric of performance does not hinder, indeed it implies a criticism of coherence or incoherence (*1c*). The construction of the staging lies in perceiving redundant elements, contradictions, dislocations in the structuring of performance.

*1d* raises the same kind of question in a non-semiological way, by inviting the spectator to order what he/she knows according to the most obvious aesthetic choices available.

*1e* is somewhat contentious and offers scope for students who feel unhappy or who have not understood the performance.

*2. Scenography.* The question of non-literary visual aspects and situation in performance has been sufficiently emphasized for it to seem logical to begin with a description of spaces (*2a*).<sup>2</sup>

The production is a meeting point in one place between a spectator, who is constructed and constituted, and objects located in a spatial context (*2b*). That meeting is experienced as a face-to-face encounter and as shared participation. Between the extreme positions of confrontation and compromise, of voyeurism and participation, the spectator-witness has to establish his/her own individual and collective

relationship to the performance.

*2d* presupposes that in order to describe space the different functions have to be assessed, with the contradictions between what is seen and what is intuited, between what is concrete in space and what is constructed in the mind. This exercise of perception and perspicacity contributes towards shaping a perception of space in relation to its use in giving meaning to the production.

*3, 4, 5. Lighting system, stage properties, costumes.* In order to describe these systems adequately, their function in performance has to be discussed together with the contrasts running through them. So lighting is often set up in flat colours – white versus warm yellow tones. Variations of intensity are linked to change of place, atmosphere, themes, and dialogues. Being able to describe the variations in principle means understanding the way in which they are integrated in the complete show and grasping the way in which other signifying systems are subordinated.

The same applies to properties and costumes. Rather than talking about props or decor, terms such as *object* and *scenography* are used. The traditional boundaries between the elements on stage as might have operated at the end of the nineteenth century, for example, are far more fluid today.

*6. Actors' performances.* These are very difficult to describe, especially without the help of videotaping or notes taken during the actual performance. *6a* invites a consideration of playing techniques that belong to a particular historical or theatrical tradition. A consideration of several actors might show whether the director had aimed for a generally similar acting style, or whether each individual actor is working his/her own way without considering the group.

*6c* invites a consideration of the way in which the text and the voice are integrated in the actor's physical appearance, in the distance between what is said and how it is said, between utterance and uttering. This involves taking notes on the actors' use of intonation and on their attitude to the text they are delivering. Is an actor trying to make us believe that the text

is the expression both of the situation and of his/her physicality or, at the opposite extreme, are those two systems being divorced from each other?

6d and 6e are not asking for any value judgement on the quality of gestures, voice, or facial expression. The questions are aimed at disclosing the system and the paradigmatic and syntagmatic expression of certain units. 6f notes the development of these paralinguistic systems in relation to delivery of the text. Does the discourse unfold in a continuous flow or in fits and starts? Are there any pauses, accelerations, halts in the fragments of spoken discourse? What do the breaks mean?

7. *Function of music and sound effects.* Without going into the separate question of the semiotics of music, points where music is used should be noted, together with the way that music is performed (on tape, produced on stage) and the effect it has on the rest of the performance.

8. *The pace of the performance.* This is the result of the rhythms of the different signifying systems (8b). This notion is close to the ideas behind the staging. What remains to be established, theoretically in the particular case of the staging, is whether the pace is imposed on the text and performance by outside pressures or whether it derives from a reading of the text to be performed.

9. *The interpretation of the story-line in performance.* According to Brecht's concept of plot and the way it emerges in performance, every production (where a written text exists) makes choices in telling the story. Therefore the director and the actors decide on a specific reading following a dramaturgical analysis. We the spectators have to reconstruct that dramaturgical reading (9b, 9e) and to establish which ambiguities are thrown up in performance and which can be determined by a reading of text either before or after seeing it performed.

A hermeneutic process of clarification or confusion (9c) characterizes these investigations of the text through its staging and then through a 'reading' of the performance.<sup>3</sup> Through a study of the staging, the genre of dramatic text emphasized in the performance can be determined.

10. *The text in performance* does not always have the same status. The staging can simply illustrate and exemplify what the text says by suggesting a systematic making-visual of situations suggested by the text. On the other hand, it can reduce the text to one system that does not dominate other systems, that only derives its meaning as rhythmic sound or rhetoric.

Testing the relationship between text and image (10c) consists of comparing the signifiers produced by both and establishing the way in which each system can base itself on the other, or the way in which each system has its own range of meaning.

11. *The audience* is the central component of reception, and certain mechanisms of reception can be analyzed. By determining the identity and status of the theatrical institution in which the performance takes place, a whole range of traditions, techniques, and selection processes which influence both acting and audience responses can be explained. It is also important to take into account the very different set of expectations of each member of the audience and the way in which these expectations are met during the performance (11b, 11c).

11d aims at discovering whether the production is a result of collaborative work, compelling the spectator to provide information that is only implied and to read metaphors and metonymies of the disposition of the stage, to construct the plot-line, etc.

12. *Image notation.* Moving from one meta-language (the written commentary) to another (photography and film), the point-of-view changes radically. The student is invited to select from the performance those moments which lend themselves to an understanding of the aims. A starting-point for considering the methods of emphasizing a given production involves the possibility of adapting those methods to the type of performance being examined.

The images that we retain (12b) are not necessarily the most important ones in the performance, but they make up the framework of our perception and of what we remember and therefore exert enormous influence on how we

structure the plot (9*d*) and the production of meaning (11*d*).

13. In spite of all attempts to transpose performance into signs, there may be certain elements left out. Don't worry about this! Those elements that cannot be described in semiotic terms may well be used by the director in an indefinable way (in relation to the rest of the production) or may not be used in a reading of the general discourse of performance. In the latter case, this does not imply that the reading is faulty or incomplete, merely that it is based on other lines. This can result in a reconsideration of the relevance and usefulness of a reading of signs.

14. This is a metaquestion about the questionnaire itself, a final possibility of noting what has escaped the previous lines of inquiry. It also suggests that the order and type of questions is not fixed in any way. It is also possible that the questionnaire leads to a way of seeing things that is almost as rigid as the theatre event, if questions are repeated too often and in the same

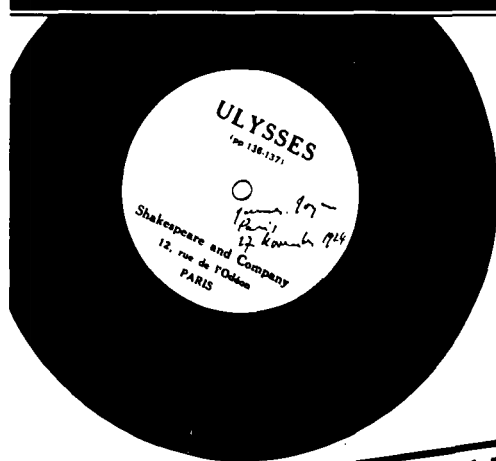
way. Not to be taken without proper medical advice, in fact.

In reality, and students seem to tend most frequently towards this conclusion, this process of questioning has the aim of eliciting a productive response, one that is both varied and fruitful to the performance, and of establishing a dialogue between the production as it 'happens' and the production that the spectator sees. This is the only avenue left open, since nothing final can ever be said about a performance, nor said in any definitive way. Does this mark the death sentence of semiotics and make its results and methods relative? This is yet another question that must remain without an answer.

*Translated by Susan Bassnett*

## References

1. Patrice Pavis, 'Production et réception au théâtre: la concrétisation du texte dramatique et spectaculaire', *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, LX, 189 (Jan-Mar. 1983).
2. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du théâtre: termes et concepts de l'analyse théâtrale* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1980).
3. Patrice Pavis, 'Production et réception au théâtre', op. cit.



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