

Richard Schechner's Anthropology of Performance

Edited by Leszek Kolankiewicz



Richard Schechner. Photo: Łukasz Giza, courtesy of the Grotowski Institute Archive

Richard Schechner

Foreword

Anthropology's Many Facets

I first heard the word "anthropology" when as a graduate student at Tulane University in 1960 I was assigned to read the writings of Jane Ellen Harrison (1912, 1913), Gilbert Murray (1912a, 1912b, 1925, 1961), and Francis M. Cornford (1914) who, following Aristotle's lead connecting ancient Greek tragedy to Dionysian dithyrambic singing and dancing, devised their "ritual origin" theory of tragedy. That theory proposed a "primal ritual" from which derived Dionysian dithyrambic dances, and from these, Greek tragedy. I soon found that these brilliant scholars were armchair anthropologists. That is, they studied ancient texts, examined vases and friezes, etc., but they did no "fieldwork" in the cultural anthropological sense: they did not study – no less participate in – the practices of living societies.

Growing increasingly skeptical of the Cambridge Anthropologists, in 1966 – having earned my PhD, become an assistant professor at Tulane, and editor of the *Tulane Drama Review* – I wrote and published in *TDR*, "Approaches to Theory/Criticism" which sharply criticized the Cambridge theory. In part, I wrote:

I do not propose to substitute *another* origin theory for the Cambridge thesis. Origin theories, I think, are irrelevant to understanding theatre. Nor would I wish to exclude ritual altogether. It is one of several related to theatre. The others are play, games, and sports (special kinds of games). The relation among these that I wish to explore is not vertical – from any one to any other(s) – but horizontal: each autonomous form shares characteristics with the others; methods of analysis of one may be useful in the analysis of performance activities of men [humans]. If one argues that theatre is a "later" or more "sophisticated" form and therefore must derive from one of the others, I answer that this makes sense only if we take 5th century Greek drama (and its counterparts in other cultures) as the only legitimate theatre. Anthropologists, with good reason, argue otherwise and suggest that theatre – understood as the enactment of stories by players – exists in every known culture at all times [...]. We may then consider these activities as



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primeval; there is no reason to hunt for "origins" or "derivations"; there are only variations in form and intermixing among forms, and these show no long-term evolution from "primitive" to "sophisticated." In some places, ritual, games, sports, and theatre are merged so that it is impossible to give the activity any single name. (1966: 26-28).

Nearly 58 years has passed since I published this text, but the road I mapped in 1966 is, generally, the path I have stayed on. Of course, over time, I added and revised. In "From Ritual to Theatre and Back" (1974), I focused on the ways in which ritual and theatre each may "derive" from each other. In *Performance Theory* (1988 and subsequent editions) and *Between Theater and Anthropology* (1985), I studied the performances of everyday life, the professions, and animals. Basically, for me, performance studies examines a very broad spectrum of activities. In all of these works, I am profoundly influenced by cultural anthropologists – especially those I knew personally and worked with, most powerfully Victor Turner (1969, 1974, 1982). We collaborated closely in workshops, conferences, and publications (Appel and Schechner 1990).

The brief intellectual history sketched above is necessary in the context of what is published below because I want to make clear the differences between my approach to anthropology and both Jerzy Grotowski's and Eugenio Barba's. I deeply respect their work, but my investigations – anthropologically speaking – have gone in a different direction. As I understand it, Grotowski sought similarities among cultural practices in a research that led him "back" and "deep" as he sought to find what he termed the "higher" or "vertical" connection. His was a search for ultimate truth expressed performatively. In his own way, Grotowski sought the "primal ritual" theorized by the Cambridge Anthropologists. Barba in his and Nicola Savarese's *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (1991, 2006) describe what they believe is the universal "pre-expressive" behavior of performers. Although in the book and elsewhere, Barba gives many examples, the majority are from western and asian cultures. That is, Barba has not looked as closely at myriad other possibilities in Africa, Native America, First Nations Peoples Australia, Pacific Island cultures, etc. I am not faulting him for this – but cautioning with regard to generalizing based on limited data.

My own "anthropological work," if it can be termed that, is in line with modern cultural anthropology – the thinking of Turner, Gregory Bateson (1972), Erving Goffman (1959, 1974), Clifford Geertz (1973, 1980, 1983), and many others. I realize that cultural anthropology has its roots in colonialism and Christian missionaryism. In later days, anthropologists have acknowledged and to a large degree dealt with and corrected these. Also there is a growing cohort of non-western cultural anthropologists, making the profession less imbalanced.

Cultural anthropologists use "participant observation" – living among and, as much as feasible, participating in, the lives of the people they are studying. This leads to embodied learning about a broad spectrum of practices. For what purposes? The question does not have a single or simple answer. Sometimes, it is pure research, learning for learning's sake. At other times, the information is used to exploit; and at still other

times, to aid. For myself, I have used what I have researched both to better understand the "broad spectrum of performance" – first outlined in my "Approaches" – and to enrich my artistic work. This is not the place to further explore these "applications". I note only that cultural anthropology and ethology (animal studies) have very much enriched and influenced my thinking and practice. This can be seen not only in my own writings, but in some of what is published in *TDR* which I continue to edit. The selections below from my writing are examples of the kind of anthropological thinking I do.

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