

**PART I**

**THEORETICAL  
CONSIDERATIONS**



**MINORITY/DOMINANT CULTURE  
IN THE THEATRE  
(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO  
BAKHTIN AND BOURDIEU)**

Theatre theory encompasses a diverse range of interests and perspectives which cannot be neatly captured in a few words. Nevertheless, we fall back on convenient phrases - take, for example, "from Aristotle to Brook" - because we assume that what has been left unsaid will be understood. Not so long ago the line would probably have stopped at Brecht. Today it extends to semiotics as well as to various theories of postmodernism, or what are described as postmodernist, this new contribution coming out of universities rather than from theatre artists themselves. The way in which the academy has become the major source of theorizing about the theatre indicates an important slide (or perhaps even shift of power?) away from the site of theatre practice to institutions whose experts do not necessarily have a working expertise in the theatre or a special sensitivity towards it as a living, breathing art. It seems that, until relatively recently, theatre practitioners - Brecht and Brook certainly among them - would have towered over any survey of theatre theory.

The purpose, of course, of any overview, wherever it may begin or end, is to point out that a canon is available for our edification. Pierre Bourdieu, in a different context, calls it a "scholarly culture" which, he argues, both consolidates and legitimates the standing of dominant social groups.<sup>1</sup> In other words, scholarly culture - and it is by no means confined to academics - is especially useful for preserving the status quo. What, though, has happened to our theoretical canon and particularly to its reputed classics, modern "classics" included? Irrespective of whether or not they constitute an established culture, which, in Bourdieu's terms, is exclusive to elites, they have retreated into the shadows, only appearing

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now and again in cameo parts to remind us of their existence.

Meanwhile, the new culture, which theatre semiotics may be said to represent, has claimed the limelight. This has to do with fashions, trends, and the like. Yet fashions catch on in a given time and place, mediating the socioeconomic structures, institutions and criss-cross of values from which they climb to prominence. Theories, then, although conceptual constructions, do not transcend the pressures of empirical reality. Bourdieu would here say that theories, and specifically the theorists developing or annexing them, play for high stakes, for the symbolic power invested in knowledge and which is conferred on those who have knowledge perceived to be at the top of current intellectual priorities.<sup>2</sup> In addition, still following Bourdieu, symbolic power is never more prestigious than when real power - economic, social or political - is well and truly out of reach. The notion of power as regards knowledge, referred to here, has to do with much more than the notion of "cultural competence" on which Bourdieu relies in order to explain how certain theorists rise to the top and succeed in maintaining their position of strength against contenders. That is to say, insistence on one's own competence (which bestows authority on the claimant) implies a lack of competence and even sheer incompetence on the part of those who are deemed to be out of the running for the symbolic power in question. If nothing succeeds like success, nothing succeeds in "scholarly culture" - here providing further interpretation of Bourdieu - like brash confidence, especially when technical and other instrumentalist ideas of learning and implementation thereof are called upon to legitimize the activity. Nothing succeeds today like justification in the name of use-value, whether scientific and technological, or purely commercial.

The ascent of semiotics is related to the great value accorded to the technological sciences in the second half of the twentieth century. The sociological intricacies involved need not concern us unduly, but what should at least be noted is the impact of semiotic theory on so-called traditional notions of theatre art. In other words, the ideas integral to aesthetics, from which the very terms "playtexts" and "stage productions" draw their meaning, have taken on a scientific character where the laws of sign systems, and the models, schemas and diagrams illustrating them, abound. Never before have works of the theatre been subjected to such strict analytical procedures, nor been so tightly bound by the rules purportedly governing them. Nor have dramatists, actors, directors and all other participants in theatrical activity, audiences included, ever been so completely removed from sight. Clearly, a theory that can do all this is nothing if not efficient.<sup>3</sup>

Now, these remarks do not call into question the internal coherence of the theory as such. Theatre semiotics is certainly rigorous and consistent. Major problems arise, however, when factors considered to be external to it enter onto the scene. Theatre semiotics has relegated categories external to its framework to other approaches: "art" to aesthetics, "society" to sociology, "culture" to anthropology, and the list could go on, each item ensuring a plurality of methodologies applicable to the study of theatre. The whole thing looks like an equitable division of labour, but is, in fact, an exercise in fragmentation from which theatre emerges impoverished. The step from impoverishment to disempowerment is very small indeed.

The separation between approaches in the name of pluralism probably has less to do with the open-minded tolerance advocated by it and more to do with the decidedly non-pluralistic supposition that different approaches are mutually exclusive. Yet theatre would be far better served if we looked for connecting links between them. This does not imply borrowing pieces from here and there in the hope that they will fit together. It entails a search for mutually inclusive principles. These would allow us to cross barriers imposed artificially beforehand by theoretical fiat. They may resist attempts to bind them into a fully coherent theory. So be it, for if they illuminate theatre practice, which is precisely what theatre is, they will have fulfilled their purpose. And, in any event, even the most complete theories are not self-sufficient, self-regulating entities. They are designed to help us understand and explain the empirical, concrete world - in our case, theatre. Put differently, this means that theories cannot rely solely on their internal organization. They are always at the beck and call of something external to them. If they fail to respond, they have to be rethought.

And here is the crux of the matter. Theatre practice, though involving creativity, fantasy, imagination - in a word, art - is the action of those who do it. Whether professionals or amateurs, their work takes place in nameable societies which, despite the all-embracing term "society", are neither unified nor homogeneous. Societies, wherever they are geographically, are composed of groups differentiated by gender, ethnic identity, religion, occupation, salary and other sociodemographic features, some of them common to several groups. Although the criteria for defining them vary, social groups form strata, castes, classes, sub-classes or sets, the number and kind of larger groupings depending on the present circumstances as well as the historical antecedents of a particular society. The individuals who combine into groups, small or large, are social beings, whether they like it, admit it, or deny it because they feel they are unique. A unique one is no less social for being distinctive from many.

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The individuals coming together to mount a stage production, this entailing a variety of preparatory processes, are no less social because they are directors, actors and so on, that is, distinguished by their role in creative enterprise. Try as we might, then, we cannot cut society out of theatre. For this reason alone, an activity belonging to the conceptual framework of aesthetics belongs, at the same time, to a sociological framework.

A series of objections could be raised at this point, going roughly as follows. The interconnection described applies to people's activities on the job, but is irrelevant to the final outcome of their efforts, namely, the works or products produced by them. Plays and play productions are compositions. They are forms, genres, styles - everything that is specific to art. A given tragedy, for instance, conforms more or less to the genre, which is why it cannot be confused with other types of plays. When it is staged it becomes a performance, and this relies on numerous interpretative skills: vocal projection, gesture and movement, taking only the bare minimum from a whole array displayed by performers. Then there are props, costumes, music, lighting, and the like. These are integral to the stage composition and to its overall style. Then there is the director, or her/his equivalent, whose aesthetic vision is intrinsic to the aesthetic of the production itself. All this is the final product to which the specialized discourse known as aesthetics refers. Since society is extrinsic to the former, talk of societal principles in relation to the principles of aesthetics is misplaced.

As the argument very briefly outlined draws to a close, it becomes apparent that the purely formalistic view of plays and productions around which it revolves means they are bound to be treated as things, as objects identified by their properties. But this is the aestheticized counterpart of the scientific endeavour of semiotics, genres and related concepts replacing sign systems. We are left with little choice. Either we adopt the idea that theatre works are things and proceed accordingly. Or else we persist in believing that theatre is practice. The second commits us to the idea that works not only embody someone's actions, but are also actions in their own right. In other words, they are charged through and through by the dynamic process of creation generated by their creators.

With this in mind, let us return to the notion that signs constitute the systems which, in another language, are called "works". Does defining works as actions mean abandoning the very concept of the sign? I think not, provided it is taken out of the static, mechanistic sphere of systems and put into the dynamic and changing sphere of practice. When this is done, we can talk about sign processes that activate works of the theatre instead of sign systems that control them. It also helps us to understand

why theatre signs are social signs.

Here we must turn to Bakhtin for whom signs, if not social, can be nothing at all. Bakhtin, it must be remembered, does not discuss the theatre. Which does not mean his ideas are irrelevant to it. Moreover, although he is essentially concerned with verbal signs, he occasionally extrapolates from them so as to cover signs in general. Thus his observations are applicable to facial, gestural and visual signs, among many more, which, besides the verbal signs rendering dialogue and prompting its inflections, intonations and rhythms, give sense and meaning to stage productions. These, because of the network of signs overlaying each other simultaneously, are extremely complex aesthetic compositions put together in the very moment of creation by performers, the creativity of non-performers (for instance, of the director, set, lighting and costume designers) welded into their performance.

Bakhtin's theory is based on the premise that signs are brought about by people as they interact with each other. Speech, although crucial for their social interaction, is but one of numerous activities in which they are engaged during the course of their lives. Since people are not amorphous, the signs they make are specific to their social groupings, some signs becoming strong markers of this or that social class as a whole. We could say, for example, following Bakhtin's train of thought, that lawyers do not speak, dress or gesticulate in the same way as street cleaners. The differences in sign production, then, have to do with social relations; in addition, with the social values attached to signs by those making them and those to whom they are conveyed. The values in question are not necessarily exactly the same for each partner in the exchange of signs taking place.

The idea of exchange alluded to here is at the heart of Bakhtin's argument that meanings of some sort are always communicated through the ongoing flow of signs between social beings as they construct their world. Signs are the very substance of communicated meanings which are specific to the situations in a determined space and place where communication occurs. Meanings are understood best when signs and, therefore, the evaluations made through them are shared. They are poorly communicated, or miscommunicated altogether, when words, tones, images, movements, and so forth, are too closely bound to the "jargons" of their users. (I am using "jargons" for non-verbal as well as verbal signs for want of a better term.) Bakhtin maintains that the meanings in and of signs are constantly involved in processes of exchange between people. Thus, although they are specific to social groupings and to the situations relevant to these groupings, they are circulated across the board; and

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precisely because they are circulated throughout society in general, sign-meanings can be appropriated by a singular or collective someone else for their own purposes. It must be noted that the concept of appropriation developed by Bakhtin is not the same as those of co-option or annexation with which it is sometimes confused.

What must now be added to my interpretation of Bakhtin's theory is his idea that signs are made intentionally. That is to say, they depend on the volition, intentions, decisions and goals of people at a given historical time. Hence his emphasis on their irreducibly social character.

Several more points are worth making. A theory of culture is implicit in Bakhtin's observations, particularly on discourses in the novel, the art form of special interest to him. However, his focus on the social sources, communicative powers and capacities for the interchange of signs can be widened to include their cultural significance. If we develop Bakhtin's argument in this way, signs can be understood to be sociocultural signs.

The following considerations now need to be taken into account. Cultures, like societies, are heterogeneous. A whole host of different cultures exist in one country and within its national culture. We speak of "regional", "folk", "popular" and "high-brow" cultures, among possible descriptions. Bourdieu, as was noted earlier, speaks of the culture of the elite, this category intertwined with a series of categories designating what he generally calls a dominant culture. Whichever term is used to distinguish one type of culture from the next, its applicability depends on the momentum of a society as well as on the groups, castes, classes, or whatever is peculiar to it. This is why Bourdieu, when referring to the phenomenon he identifies as dominant culture, must also refer to the dominant classes or class fractions whose culture predominates. According to Bourdieu, these classes or class fractions wield such enormous power through the institutions they have inherited from their forebears, and which they continue to reproduce, that social mobility is virtually impossible. Furthermore, they impress upon subaltern classes the view that their own cultural tastes, *vis-à-vis* works of art in particular, are the most valid tastes to be had and, consequently, are to be desired above all others. This view is imparted so effectively through all the institutional channels monopolized by the ruling minority that the subaltern classes absorb it, thereby bending their will to the dictates of an oligarchy whose tentacular culture is, in any case, inaccessible to them. Their attempts to generate an autonomous culture are thwarted at every turn.

Given his vision of what can only be called social blockage, where art-culture, too, is obstructive and obstructed, Bourdieu has no alternative but to conclude that popular culture or a people's culture is sheer myth.<sup>4</sup> It



may once have been viable (presumably when powers of coercion were not quite so ruthless - here surmising from Bourdieu's omissions regarding this subject) but is out of the question for a highly rationalized France which Bourdieu seems to take to be representative of "advanced", "post-industrial" or "postmodernist" societies, the choice of adjective not changing in the slightest an irreversible state of affairs. The situation delineated by Bourdieu simply cannot accommodate a people's theatre, a minority theatre (as opposed to the "majority" theatre of the establishment), or any other theatre that does not conform to the canonical expectations, aspirations and tastes of the ruling elite.

Bourdieu's conclusion needs to be critically reassessed, as do a number of the steps by which he reaches it. However, I have referred to him in order to stress that notions to do with culture call upon those to do with society, and vice versa. How this necessary linkage between the two is dealt with is of consequence, as is clear from Bourdieu, to the role and status of works of art for those who make them, those who enjoy them and those who are excluded from them. The penalty of exclusion, Bourdieu maintains, is dispossession, not least in respect of works of art which, by the force of circumstances, are transformed into cultural goods. Bourdieu, of course, concentrates on the processes by which these goods are distributed unevenly. And, although perfectly aware of the impact of signs (arguing, for instance, that cultural capital is a sign of distinction for those who have it, and is interpreted accordingly by those who do not), he is not concerned with the sign processes constituting art works as such.

Here we may return to Bakhtin, whose theory of signs - or more accurately of sign processes - allows us to understand how and why stage productions purposefully communicate something to someone. The "something" at issue refers to multiple meanings and the "someone" refers to spectators who, although united for the duration of a performance, are far from being a single social unit. This by no means repeats the idea that spectators are an anonymous body, an abstraction to whom the performance must nevertheless play in order to be a performance in any sense of the word at all. Nor does it resuscitate the old idea, let us call it the fourth wall syndrome, which places performers on one side of a barricade and spectators on the other, thereby turning spectators into mere onlookers or, worse still, into voyeurs poking in the dark. More recent variations on the theme of onlookers give us spectators who are receivers of art objects or, as Bourdieu puts it, of cultural goods. Reception theory embellishes the theme but, despite enhancing the role of spectators, essentially leaves them on the receiving end of the transaction. That is to say, the artefact comes first and its reception follows. What might be

called functionalist approaches cast spectators in the role of consumers. Thus the stage production is the product packaged on the assembly line, while the consumer is the buyer who closes the production-consumption circuit. But, although the image has changed from lines to circuits (walls also being lines), the buyer, who legitimates the input of labour into the commodity, is outside the productive force itself.<sup>5</sup>

None of these holds when we take a Bakhtinian perspective on the relationship between performers, performances and spectators, a relationship acknowledged by theatre studies to be crucial but which, all things considered, has not had the attention it deserves. What Bakhtin offers us is a number of interlocking concepts with which to grasp this relationship as one composite process (thereby also allowing us to see how theoretical discourse can be adequate to theatre practice, an issue raised earlier). The composite process in question re-positions spectators, who are no longer outsiders looking in - and the reverse holds for performers, that is, they are no longer insiders looking out - but who, *together* with performers, make the meanings of performances. Meanings, as Bakhtin's principles indicate, are neither univocal nor monolithic. Nor, again, do they turn inwards, as if on an axis unique to the stage processes at hand. They come from outside that plethora of sign activities which are materialized by and through social beings in the complex, diversified and contradictory place and space of society. They are borrowed and interpreted by performers for the intentions of a particular performance, these intentions not always conscious, deliberate or even transparent. And they are interpreted by spectators who, since they share the experience of the performance and share, however unequally, the social space encompassing the theatre, recognize the signs that come to them and go back to the stage in the form of sighs, tears, laughter, applause or any other form of responsive return. The communication taking place on multiple interpretative levels can only occur because the "outside" world is inside the theatre. Thus, how a performer speaks, moves, gesticulates, and so on, draws on the speech, movements, gestures, and so on, that spectators also know, feel and can imagine precisely because they, too, produce similar signs in their daily interaction. Nothing in the theatre is plucked out of pure nothing.

Now, just because communication occurs in variegated tones and colours does not mean that spectators will interact in directly corresponding fashion, tone for tone. As was indicated earlier, spectators, albeit temporarily united, are anything but a homogeneous mass. They are anything but united as one. Their differences, by whichever criteria are brought into play (gender, ethnic origin, ethnic self-definition, class

background, aspirations to class ascent, and more again), help explain why certain sign processes in performance have a special resonance, a special spring and bounce for some members of the audience, and evoke perhaps little more than a token gesture of recognition from their neighbours.

Spectators, although differentiated, do not have absolute liberty to interpret as they will. A very subtle, moderately discreet or sometimes blatant guide is right there in the aesthetic vision mediating the performance's content or substance. It guides the spectators' entry into the dialogue which is presupposed from the outset for any kind of communication to happen at all. Dialogue fails to take place when certain spectators experience exclusion. However, exclusion, just like inclusion, is relational, that is, with respect to its implied antinomies, however ambivalent or opaque they may be. And this means that, when exclusion is experienced, a limited form of communication has occurred, a negative communication which relies on the great range of sign-actions and sign-meanings circulating, as Bakhtin describes it, throughout a given society. In other words, while the sign processes going back and forth between performers and spectators are group-specific or even group-centred, they break out in kaleidoscopic fashion, refracting (another Bakhtinian trope) the multiple social relations without which they simply could not exist.

All this suggests that everything Bakhtin says about social signs is just as relevant for what I have called sociocultural signs. Let us take the distinctions between classical high-art theatre, which belongs to the canon, and "popular" theatre which, in being non-canonical by design (until such time as it is co-opted!), either has a lower position in the hierarchy (thus "low-art") or is outside the vertical structure altogether, decentred, so to speak, and delineating margins of its own. A production of, say, Shakespeare, Racine or Chekhov, whether performed in their national culture or transferred across cultures, targets audiences who are equipped with a certain "cultural baggage" or, at least, are presumed to be capable of acquiring the requisite trappings for understanding it. The production may not be oriented to very specific, perhaps even well-seasoned, theatregoers. It may be attempting to reach a "wider audience", this phrase often referring euphemistically to economically disadvantaged groups. In which case, it will anticipate the capacities for interpretation on the part of the potential or explicitly identified spectators who, to boot, may well be totally new to the theatre. As Bakhtin reminds us, sign-makers always seek out other sign-makers by their very actions. If this were not so, we would only talk or gesticulate to ourselves. Even then, Bakhtin argues, we are engaged in interior dialogue, in the necessarily dialogical relationship between self and other that is contingent upon the use of signs. In the case

of interior dialogue, we might be said to be communicating with a number of split selves in our persona, all of which refract our interface with numerous others filling our world. The issue of the “other” (someone who is not-I) is rooted, in Bakhtin, in his completely materialist conception of social relations. It does not, in other words, stem from psychoanalytical considerations on the self or on alterity to self, many of which have fed postmodernist theories of one kind and another.

My hypothetical production, then, not only builds shared knowledge, experience, emotions and expectations into its structure in order to have this or that special resonance for a collectivity, whatever its size. It also appeals to the cultural predilections of its real or imputed spectators. In being part of a theatre culture, whether exclusive to an elite (as Bourdieu would say) or open to purposeful appropriation beyond an elite (as Bakhtin would say), the production’s entire aesthetic is constructed from the sociocultural signs at its disposal. A play by Shakespeare performed, for instance, by the Comédie Française, not only reprocesses linguistic signs, but, in doing so, finds the vocal registers, physical images and spatial dispositions that are bound to strike some chord appropriate to the culture of its spectators. “Culture” here has two main meanings. The first refers to culture in the broadest sense of the term, which gives us “French” as distinct from “English” culture. The second has the narrower meaning denoted by such terms as class culture or group culture. The play performed by a different company based in the working-class suburbs of Paris (or, for that matter, of regional cities) is sure to keep an eye on its known or imagined audiences, communicating to them somewhat differently from the modes adopted by the Republic’s (formerly the King’s) consecrated players.

Well, the second instance may be an example of Shakespeare brought to the people, as the expression goes. Indeed, the issue of whether, today, a classical heritage can or should be “brought” to the people is vast. It involves, *inter alia*, debates on the educative value of theatre. It is as vast as the issue of whether and how non-privileged communities, which by the catch-all “people” are distinguished from privileged ones, should develop their own theatre, with or without the classics. Even to begin to tackle these issues would take me much further afield than is possible in the present context. However, the very least that may be suggested is this in the form of questions. If Shakespeare is confined to the hallowed halls of culture, which halls, as scholars have argued, have expropriated him from the people, are societies doomed to the impasse analyzed by Bourdieu? Will established theatre remain, to all intents and purposes, the theatre of the establishment, all alternative theatrical forms meanwhile pushed to the

periphery where they will be little more than curiosities, minor cultures with little hope of matching the culture of a minority?

Further. If the subaltern classes do develop their own theatre, let us say *without* Shakespeare (or Racine, or any canonical figure), does the ensuing empowerment, culturally speaking, bring about a contradictory situation, namely: they are empowered in the delimited sphere of culture which is justly their own, but remain disempowered in respect of a far bigger conglomeration that, while no longer dominating them completely, confines them to ghettos? I have used "subaltern classes" for the sake of terminological consistency vis-à-vis my references to Bourdieu. However, it should be noted at this particular juncture that I am including in the category, as in the generalized "people" cited earlier, the now unfashionable working classes, rural workers and peasants, as well as the urban and rural poor who elude precise classification. By the same token, I am also including the now fashionable groups who, although certainly no less important for being discursively *à la mode*, go under the general rubric of ethnic minorities and women.

So, having inelegantly left you with the questions, let me come back to the spectators who, dignified by a sociocultural perspective derived from Bakhtin, resist being defined as the pawns of systems. For, as soon as theoretical reasoning aided by empirical observation acknowledges them to be empowered, albeit to varying degrees in dissimilar social conditions, spectators can no longer be put in the abject position of recipients on whom graces are bestowed. Furthermore, the whole notion of production-performance takes on an entirely different dimension when spectators are understood to be active partners in it. It is imperative to remember this in an era where talk of the "theatre industry" assails our ears. The preemptive idea of industry, with its goods and products replacing art and creativity imposes the view that spectators are incapable of asking the theatre to speak to their lives. The assumption behind the rule of commerce is that their lives are a matter of behaviourism, of the right stimuli triggering the right mechanical responses.

On the assumption that the dominion of markets has not crushed the vitality of cultures, the threads of my argument must converge on the issue of multiculturalism. The social heterogeneity of spectators is intertwined with the fact that multiple kinds of productions can be mounted in any one society at any one time. But this heterogeneity can be primarily defined, as it tends to be in Bakhtin, in terms of group-and-class cultures. (A group culture could be, for example, the culture of a certain profession - say that of doctors - which has a world-view, practical approach to life, method for

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dealing with it, jargon for articulating it, and so on, that gives it a particular character and distinguishes it from other group cultures.) What needs to be taken into account, especially in our time, is the *ethnic* heterogeneity to be found in one social structure, and which problematizes the very notion of a national culture, national theatre included. Awareness of ethnic heterogeneity and, consequently, of the cleavages between “minority” and “majority” cultures, has led to attempts to come to grips with the phenomenon, without necessarily relinquishing the principles on which modern nation-states were founded.

How does this affect the theatre, not to mention theories of the theatre? The question, when posed in relation to the points briefly mentioned here, is difficult enough, but is compounded when we consider the work of Peter Brook with the CICT. As is well known, Brook’s performers come from a range of disparate races and cultures. Their collective purpose is to create productions which, when performed to heterogeneous audiences, will mean something to everybody. The aim of maximized communicability reflects Brook’s conception of “popular” theatre. It also endorses his goal of a universal theatre which, in cutting across ethnic, linguistic and value differences, will traverse cultural boundaries, closing the gaps that divide race from race, class from class and whatever else sets divisions in motion. *The Mahabharata* is, to date, the most eloquent example in the theatre of multiculturalism conceived in terms of the multi-cultures making up what is known as the “world community”. True to its vocation, it travelled across the planet before returning to its cultural source in India.

*The Mahabharata* amply demonstrates how a production anticipates widely differentiated audiences whose very diversity is both physically and symbolically represented by the cast. (There are performers from India, Senegal, Vietnam, Japan and Iran, as well as from Europe and North America.) In the process, it shows how an entire production interprets signs so that they may be interpreted with the greatest flexibility by spectators. This is done in an intentionally contradictory manner. Verbal signs are simplified to the maximum so that a maximum number of spectators, whoever they may be in precise sociocultural terms, can follow what is said. All other signs are *synthesized* to the maximum so that a maximum number of sociocultural inferences may be drawn from them. For example, the war between the Bharatas, which is the third and last part of the nine-hour performance, synthesizes steps, positions, movements, and more again, to be found in Chinese martial arts and acrobatics, Japanese martial arts and dance, Indian classical dance (notably

Kathakali), classical ballet, and folk and tribal dances - the whole giving an infinitely suggestive choreography where words, sounds and music are also choreographed rather than delivered or played. This, as Brook sees it, is exactly how spectators can be empowered to the maximum: for, by drawing on whatever is familiar to them, even subliminally, they can take hold of worlds that are foreign to them. A proper valorization of cultural difference - difference or "otherness" being inseparable from dignity - accompanies the realization brought about by performers and spectators of their common humanity. Humanity, past and present, is the core of the production. As such, it reflects what performers and spectators are meant to have achieved together, this fusion mirroring Brook's conception of the theatre as a binding force. What emerges from *The Mahabharata*, besides its extraordinary aesthetic achievement, is Brook's vision of the theatre's social role and power. Words to this effect are to be found in his essays which, although not claiming to be theoretical, have the generalizing thrust of theory.<sup>6</sup>

Brook's work with the CICT suggests how multiple cultures may be appropriated, in Bakhtin's sense of the term, in order to create a theatre that is "popular" insofar as it draws on the resources of the folk arts and seeks to redefine canonical theatre through them. It is also "popular" in that it aims to reach the widest audience possible, not through mere touring but because, when appearing on the international stage, it intends to be accessible to the common people. Yet here Brook's enterprise is ensnared in a web of difficulties, starting with the fact that the common people may not have the cash for costly tickets. Furthermore, official discourses vis-à-vis the arts in general hold such sway over perception, projecting an image of the arts as the property of a select few, that the very idea of attending performances valued by perceived elites may well be unthinkable.

This is not to say that the theatre, by definition, is doomed to Bourdieu's paradigm for culture. What these remarks suggest is that the cleavages between "minority" and "majority" cultures alluded to earlier, and which are at the heart of Brook's endeavour to blend disparate forces, reappear every time socioeconomic inequalities enter the picture. Nor can they be willed away in the name of race or, worse still, through a mystique of race. In other words, when talk of ethnic diversity is obfuscated in this way, "minority" cultures of one kind or another either become colourful ornaments or pose a mysterious threat. In both cases, the divisions set up on all fronts by very real, and not purely symbolic, inequalities are reinforced. This is especially relevant when intra-ethnic diversity in one

society is at issue, though is not immaterial to the inter-ethnic diversity of the kind called upon by Brook. The second, because on a global scale, can be distanced. Or else, as happens in Brook's theatre, it can be absorbed more easily into a humanistic and humanitarian perspective.

It is worth recalling that Bourdieu, when making the distinction between minority and dominant cultures, relegates the former to the working classes, popular classes or lower classes, each term belonging to a concatenation of terms signifying the opposite of the elite. Bourdieu identifies various elites, which are distinguished by the relative edge they have on their coevals. Thus they are economic, social, political, intellectual or cultural elites. An economic elite, for example, does not necessarily coincide on all points of the graph with an intellectual elite. Nevertheless, the elites form a dominant bloc which stultifies movement. Ethnic minorities which, after all, belong to all classes and class fractions across the board, virtually disappear from Bourdieu's schema. Perhaps this is so because they are subsumed under his general "minority". And yet, when minority culture is invoked, they surely need to be particularized. If not, the whole notion of minority culture risks becoming a metaphor. Whereas the numerous disadvantages ushered in by economic dispossession are exacerbated when dispossession by ethnicity is added to them.

The issue is enormous. However, it has to be kept somewhere in sight when discourses of power in respect of the theatre - and, ipso facto, in respect of society - are at issue. It is incipient in the very fact that multiple cultures exist, which the theatre respects or usurps. Above all, it cannot be shelved when multiculturalism, in a more focused, more precise sense than can be attributed to Brook's theatre, enters the fray. Multiculturalism, as it is known today, may be said to be the expression, by ethnic minorities, of their desire and right to develop their languages, arts, crafts, values and particular way of life (the latter giving us "culture" in the broadest anthropological sense of the word). Since it is inseparable from the economic conditions that splinter ethnic minorities, multiculturalism may also be said to be a popular phenomenon, that is, not generated by the middle classes of these minorities. Multicultural theatre, then, when understood in the terms outlined, is a form of its own.

Several closing remarks are now in order. They concern Italo-Australian bilingual theatre, the type of multicultural theatre with which I am most familiar. This bilingual theatre essentially comprises the Sydney-based FILEF Theatre Group, and Adelaide's Doppio Teatro whose justly celebrated *Ricordi* travelled to the Mayhem Festival in Leeds in 1990. Both groups began their work in the early eighties as part of the community theatre movement whose antecedents may be traced back to



the late sixties. They shared with the community movement in general the idea that "ordinary people" in suburban and regional zones had not had direct access to the theatre; further, that these people could make theatre together with the professional artists in their midst. The professionals engaged in the work, besides providing artistic inspiration and guidance, doubled as animators whose principal task was to galvanize communities through their own creative efforts. Community theatre in the seventies serviced a non-specified "community" in that, solely in English, it was geared to monolingual, monocultural audiences. However, the areas in which theatrical events took place were populated by large groups whose origins were anything but Anglo/Celtic. Many of them were far from fluent in English.

The FILEF Theatre Group and Doppio Teatro were formed in order to remedy a situation which, by distorting social reality, continued to isolate non-Anglo/Celtic immigrants from national life. They explicitly targeted Italians who had emigrated, especially from southern Italy, in the late forties, during the fifties, and still in the sixties and who, on arrival, swelled the ranks of the industrial, construction and farm workers required for Australia's economic expansion. The forties-fifties was a period of mass immigration into Australia by a labour force which, apart from Italy, came from Greece, Macedonia, Central Europe, Eastern Europe and, also, from the United Kingdom. Italians or those of Italian descent constitute approximately 5% of Australia's total population of 17 million and are the second-largest minority group in the country. (About 4 million are of non-English-speaking background; recent immigrants are mainly from Asia and the Middle East.)

The two companies cited have common objectives: tackle material of relevance to immigrant communities but which mainstream theatre still ignores; show that the issues raised concern the whole of Australian society and not merely its ethnic enclaves; validate the history of immigrants, Italian immigrants in particular, by bringing to light the role they have played in the history of Australia; make theatre accessible to the Italian-born who for economic, linguistic and related sociocultural reasons not only do not go to mainstream or even "alternative" theatre, but have been marginalized in other respects as well; reach their children, namely the second and third generation of Italo-Australians who may have been more or less assimilated into the dominant Anglo/Celtic culture but who, on the other hand, are losing or have lost touch with their language and culture of origin; evaluate positively a cultural legacy that had been virtually driven underground by the immigrants in question and derided by their adoptive country. The purpose, then, of working in two languages

was to foreground all these difficulties and help alleviate them. The dialogue and songs of productions move from Italian to English while expository passages delivered by narrators, who also play characters, usually summarize in English preceding scenes performed in Italian.

Both companies cull stories from Italian families, associations (which group people from specific regions in Italy) and clubs. Oral history is then transformed into productions functioning to all intents and purposes like living documents. The FILEF Theatre Group has used dozens of grandparents, parents and children in performances combining the dynamics of religious processions with the humour of fables, puppetry and *commedia dell'arte*. Doppio Teatro, by contrast, rarely uses amateurs. Its productions, to date, have been elliptical, poetic. The masks, robes and legends of southern Italian popular culture intercept, as in a montage, scenes from the present, the whole reminding spectators of a cultural heritage, which is above all a *popular* heritage, that has been fragmented and dissipated by immigration. The power of memory is an important motif in Doppio productions. So, too, is cultural identity. These motifs are linked so as to highlight the difficulties of integration, where incomprehension, resistance or outright rejection appear on both sides, Anglo/Celts urging conformity with their norms, Italians meanwhile fearing to let go of the very thing, "identity", that had assured their survival in an alien society.

My research on audiences of the FILEF Theatre Group shows that they clearly understand the aims of Italo-Australian theatre, Italians being particularly appreciative of its focus on their history past and present. This not only vindicates, in their eyes, the painful experiences they have undergone, but also encourages them to feel pride in the contribution they have made to the country.

Their children, most of whom were born in Australia, recognize in the productions the dilemma of living within two cultures, the old impinging on the new without necessarily being fully accepted by them; and yet the new does not fully accept them. Spectators from other minority groups comment on the pertinence to their own situation of the scenes presented. Spectators of Anglo/Celtic origin generally show that they are aware of the problems, some of them explicitly referring to details of Italian immigration to indicate support, while others suggest that they are leaving the performances with a new insight into another culture and its importance for the overall culture. Some of them say they feel excluded because of the use of Italian.

Perhaps one of the most striking things to emerge from spectators' observations, whatever their ethnicity, is their feeling that this type of

theatre can play a significant role in changing perceptions and attitudes, and in fostering greater understanding of social and cultural mix. Irrespective of differences of emphasis and stylistic approaches, the whole point of ethnically-oriented, interventionist theatre in a multicultural society is to empower minorities, allowing them at least the beginnings of a real social input that supersedes the logic of economic exploitation. Multiculturalism is not unique to Australia. It is the condition of our post-imperial or, perhaps more accurately, deimperializing epoch, each variant of it a particular case, but all of them together radically altering the shape of the world. Theatre, an intrinsic part of culture, cannot help but be affected, affecting in turn the myriad of societies to which it is indissolubly bound. Thus, what is pertinent to multicultural theatre in Australia will be pertinent, albeit differently, elsewhere.

Several shifts have occurred during my exposition. We have moved from the grand art of Peter Brook to the small, though by no means insignificant, art of Italo-Australian theatre; from institutionalized great theatre to impermanent, localized theatre; from a fusion of cultures to contradiction and tension between cultures. And we have moved away from the controlled world of Bourdieu to a world where intervention and change are possible. Brook's form of intervention has a utopian quality insofar as it projects an ideal to be attained. Yet the harmonious universe imaged in Brook's theatre is fractured when transferred to the theatre of ethnic minorities. Bakhtin's vision of open-ended, ongoing processes, with which Brook's practice has a good deal in common, is open to minorities only when they become protagonists of their own destiny. Theatre is the art of the possible. As social practice it is as strong as the societies, however large or small, major or minor, where it is generated, performers and spectators interchanging roles in order to make the possible real. Discourses on the theatre, to return to my point of departure, either attempt to come to grips with this social practice, or else risk a canonization that will see them frozen in time - suspended, abstracted icons of their own image.

## NOTES

1. For what might be termed a summary of some of Bourdieu's main theses, see "Artistic Taste and Cultural Capital". *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidman, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 205-15. However, this paper draws on the whole corpus of Bourdieu's work and, notably, on *Les Héritiers* (with J-C. Passeron). Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1964; *L'Amour de l'art* (with Alain Darbel and Dominique Schnapper). Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1969; *La Reproduction* (with J-C. Passeron). Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1971; *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979.
2. The linkage between knowledge and symbolic power appears in all the works cited above. It is specifically related to the question of whether and how contemporary French intellectuals define educational institutions and are, in turn, defined by them, this being the principal subject of *Homo academicus*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1984.
3. For a relatively detailed critical account of theatre semiotics, see my article "The Sociology of the Theatre, Part Three: Performance". *New Theatre Quarterly* V, 19 (August 1989), pp. 282-300.
4. As expressed in an interview with Didier Eribon regarding the pessimistic view expounded in *La Distinction*. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1980, p. 15.
5. I am here generalizing, as regards functionalist methods, and so on, from the assumptions more or less implicit in such books as Anne Ubersfeld, *L'Ecole du spectateur*. Paris: Les Editions Sociales, 1981 and Patrice Pavis, *Voix et images de la scène: pour une sémiologie de la réception*. Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1985. Pavis, it would not be wrong to say, draws on the *Rezeptionsästhetik* of the Konstanz school as exemplified by Hans Robert Jauss in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated from the German by Timothy Bahti, with an introduction by Paul de Man. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982. For an example of functionalist approaches to literature, which are absorbed by semiotic studies of reception, see Robert Escarpit, *Introduction à la sociologie de la littérature*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958 and Robert Escarpit, ed. *Le Littéraire et le social*, Paris: Flammarion, 1970.
6. For a detailed study of *The Mahabharata* from the point of view very briefly outlined here, see my "Interaction-Interpretation: *The Mahabharata* from a Socio-Cultural Perspective". *Peter Brook and The Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives*. David Williams, ed. London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991, pp. 206-27. For Brook's reflections on his work, notably with the CICT, see *The Shifting Point*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987. See also Brook's foreword to his English translation of Jean-Claude Carrière, *The Mahabharata*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987, pp. xiii-xvi.