

# INTRODUCTION

## Performative Stages of the Nordic World

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It might be said that the modern approach to the study of “performance” in folkloristics and ethnology has roots in the field of drama and theatre arts<sup>1</sup> which developed in the late 1940s. This new academic discipline, which also involved practical training and experience in the field, sought to break away from the earlier concentration on the preserved literary aspects of works of drama. Its aim was to focus more on the ways in which plays worked within the performance space of the theatre (or street) in close interaction with their audiences. As all theatre practitioners are aware, drama is perhaps the most complex of art forms, communicating with its audience not only through text, but also a range of other media, including the aural (tone, rhythm, volume and silence), the visual (the theatre setting, the stage, the lighting, the appearance, movement and juxtaposition of performers and stage properties), and other senses like the haptic, the olfactory and the gustatory (see further Pfister 1988: 8), along with further external features that work on expectation and interpretation, like posters, reviews and programmes. It is also clear that in live drama each performance is unique (or “emergent”: see Bauman 1992: 42), and perceived uniquely by each and every audience member who, in addition to observing different things to the person sitting beside him or her, will also have a different background and (in varying degrees) a different understanding of the semiotics of the performance (such as the words used or the associations implied by the colours of costumes or scenery or the objects scattered about on the stage)

(see further Foley 1991: 9). Furthermore, the understanding of each theatre performance is uniquely affected by its social, geographical, historical and cultural context, all of which could radically change the meaning of the words from one performance to another (see Gunnell 2006: 11–12). Identical performances (if they were possible) of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in London in 1601 and Prague in 1968 would thus be received and experienced as very different works, especially if we consider the “work” in terms of its dramatic performance, and the way it was perceived by both the actors and audience jointly involved in the communicative act of the performance rather than just a play text.<sup>2</sup>

### The History and Development of the Study of Performance

The increasing application of this multidisciplinary, multidimensional performance approach to daily life, and thereby to the field of folkloristics and ethnology in the last three or four decades, has involved a gradual meeting of several fields of research. Within drama, and especially in connection with research into the forms of medieval drama, and street theatre like the “happenings” of the 1960s (see, for example, Wickham 1987: 4, and Hunt 1976), it was clear that “drama” had never been restricted to the stage, and that aspects of drama, role play and theatre were also involved in festivals, rituals, sports and play, all of which formed their own performance spaces and periods of special “heightened” realities within these spaces (of course, drama is itself a kind

of festival, ritual, contest and game).<sup>3</sup> This connected closely with the concept of play expressed in Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1949; see also Bateson 1978), which suggested that much of human culture could actually be seen as a form of play involving marked-out spaces, different rules and dynamics, a different senses of time, and different kinds of role play. Such ideas were followed up by Clifford Geertz' discussions of the symbolic nature of culture (Geertz 1973). They also found support in Erving Goffman's considerations of the "performances" of everyday life (Goffman 1971), and the concept of "framing" whereby everyday life can be seen "as" a performance, especially if it is "framed" in one way or another (visually or temporally), thereby allowing it to be analysed in the same way in which we analyse a form of play or theatre performance (see above).<sup>4</sup> In other words, in addition to examining the verbal discourse engaged in by the participants in daily cultural activities, this approach also encourages us to consider the other communicative, contextual and semiotic features that surround this discourse (or any other activities), features that tend to be registered unconsciously and are rarely considered in detail, essentially because – in western societies at least<sup>5</sup> – we have come to give more importance to linguistic communication than to other messages received by other senses.<sup>6</sup>

For many researchers working within the field(s) of folkloristics and ethnology (their occasional division is, to my mind, unfortunate not least because it ignores the fact that both deal with performance and unofficial tradition), the road towards performance analysis in the modern sense began on one side with the advent of the functionalist approach in anthropology and folkloristics (advocated by Malinowski, Radcliffe Brown, von Sydow, Eskeröd and others). Here, rituals and festivals were collected, described and analysed in terms of their structure, social role and dynamics.<sup>7</sup> On the other side, it was reflected in the increasing interest in the individual "performances" of oral singers, poets, and storytellers which was spotlighted by the work of Lord and Parry and the Harvard school (see especially Lord 1960; Foley 1988, 1991, 1995, 2002). The focus on individual

performance was then developed from a slightly different angle in, among others, Richard Bauman's examinations of "performance" which, rather than considering the nature of the oral "recreation" of traditional narratives (the examination of formulae, runs and stock scenes), have roots in the sociolinguistic approaches of Labov (1972), Hymes (1977) and others (see Bauman 1975, 1978, 1986, 1992; Bauman & Braid 1998; Foley 1995: 7–11).<sup>8</sup>

With certain exceptions (see especially Foley 2002: 60; Glassie 1975, 1995),<sup>9</sup> those working on narrative performance in the past nonetheless tended to concentrate on the text,<sup>10</sup> while those analysing traditions and festivals tended to concentrate on visual description rather than on how these festivals actually "worked" multidimensionally. Few prior to the advent of works like Henry Glassie's *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (1995; originally published in 1982) considered the ways in which surroundings or objects can also be said to "perform" within these performances, or outside "official" performance contexts. Arguably, these other performative factors, the visual, the spatial and the other aural elements, received most attention from those working in the fields of ritual and festive tradition (see, for example, Bell 1997; Turner 1982; Schechner 1973, 1977, 1985, 1988, 1993).<sup>11</sup>

The meeting of the ways came with the development of "Performance Studies" as an academic discipline first in the United States, and later elsewhere, in the 1970s and 80s, when experimental theatre practitioners like Richard Schechner joined forces first of all with anthropologists like Victor Turner, and later folklorists like Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (see further St John 2008; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004; Conquergood 2004). Schechner's work on rituals, festivals and theatre has been particularly influential in this area (see works by Schechner noted above, and especially 2002a, 2002b, 2004; see also Bial 2004). For Schechner, performance is not merely "a mode of language, a way of speaking" (Bauman 1978: 11). For Schechner, the key feature is activity, of which speech is just one part. As he states himself, and as other the other authors in this volume have effectively noted, "The underlying notion

is that any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance” (Schechner 2006: 2), and “... a performance (...) takes place between a marked beginning and a marked end. This marking, or framing, varies from culture to culture, epoch to epoch, and genre to genre – even, sometimes, from instance to instance” (Schechner 2006: 240). Schechner agrees with Goffman that “A ‘performance’ may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman 1971: 15–16; Schechner 2006: 29). Indeed, as Schechner states himself, “There is nothing inherent in an action in itself that makes it a performance or disqualifies it from being a performance ... What ‘is’ or ‘is not’ performance does not depend on an event in itself but on how that event is received and placed ...” (Schechner 2006: 38). Indeed, “at present, there is hardly any activity that is not a performance for someone somewhere”, and “any behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied ‘as’ performance” (Schechner 2006: 40). In short “... every social activity can be understood as a showing of a doing” (Schechner 2006: 167), which, like performance (conscious or otherwise) is “nested within social, cultural, technical and economic circumstances that extend in time, space and kind beyond what happens onstage” (Schechner 2006: 245).

However, like any other theatre practitioners, Schechner also underlines that performances, which he sees as having seven main functions (“to entertain, to make something that is beautiful, to mark or change identity, to make and foster community, to heal, to teach, persuade, or convince”, and/or “to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic” [Schechner 2006: 46]), are not limited to human activities (especially those in the obviously performative interconnecting fields of ritual and play), but can also be applied to objects and spaces that likewise “perform” as part of their interaction with human beings (and other objects and spaces observed or experienced by these human beings). As Schechner writes:

In performance studies, texts, architecture, visual arts, or any item or artefact of art or culture are

not studied as such. When texts, architecture, visual arts or anything else are looked at by performance studies, they are studied “as” performances. That is they are regarded as practices, events, and behaviors, not as “objects” or “things”. Thus, performance studies does not “read” an action and ask what “text” is being enacted. Rather, performance studies inquires about the “behavior” of, for example, a painting: the ways it interacts with those who view it, thus evoking different reactions and meanings, and how it changes meaning over time and in different contexts; under what circumstances it was created and exhibited; and how the gallery or building displaying it shapes its presentations. These kinds of performance studies questions can be asked of any event or material object. (Schechner 2002b: x)

In short, just as a stage set communicates and “performs” for audiences before a single word is spoken or a move made, so too can a museum, a building or a street “perform” for those who walk through them. In interaction with the observer, they cease being empty spaces and become four-dimensional “places” (also gaining a history) as part of a shared “performance” (see further de Certeau 1984: 117–123; Gunnell 2006, and the various articles contained in this volume).

This new wider multidisciplinary approach to performance is now being effectively applied in a wide range of disciplines ranging from drama, media, folkloristics, ethnology and anthropology to gender and racial studies, politics, sociology, archaeology and the study of heritage and museum studies.<sup>12</sup> Relating well to Lauri Honko’s idea of the analysis of the “thick corpus” (Honko 2000), it certainly deserves more attention than it has so far received outside the United States and the immediate field of dramatic performance (where it still tends to be concentrated). Indeed, it offers some very effective, useful tools for understanding how folklore and other ethnological material function in daily life: Indeed, as Schechner and others have noted, as part of daily life, all folklore and ethnology, all culture can be seen as “performing” multidimensionally in

one way or another, communicating uniquely with the observer or listener (who is naturally not merely observing but also participating in and experiencing the cultural “act” or “event”, whether physically present at the site of the performance or not). The word “perform” underlines precisely this shared act of communication in which a set of signals is sent out and then received, triggering a chain of other influences. And whether the act in question is designed as a “performance” or not, as Goffman and Schechner have underlined, all social “acts” can be seen and effectively analysed “as” a form of performance. In short, we can be seen as taking on different roles (using different but relevant types of communication in each situation) as we move through the various “scenes” of our lives. And the same applies to the objects and places that surround us.

### The Performance of the North

In its concentration on the expansion of concepts of the Nordic countries, this special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* aims to increase understanding as to how transnational communities are formed; that is, how “the North” reaches beyond territorial boundaries to include numerous cultural and educational networks. More specifically it means to identify and explore the role of performance in the reshaping of Nordic life. By focusing on different performances of heritage, the performative aspect of several Nordic Spaces is foregrounded, something which simultaneously highlights the central importance of the embodied experience.<sup>13</sup>

The articles contained in this volume thus effectively demonstrate the potential benefits of the wider, multidimensional performance-studies approach for folkloristics and ethnology, which is employed here in a number of ways by scholars with a range of differing backgrounds. All of them nonetheless relate to questions of the performance of Nordic identity in one way or another. Indeed, as Schechner and others have underlined (see above), the elements of “marking and changing identity” and “fostering community” are two of the key functions of performance. We perform to each other our differences and sense of *communitas* not only in the languages,

dialects and registers with which we express our thoughts, but also in the ways in which we behave, clothe ourselves, decorate our bodies, cut our hair, compete and nourish ourselves, in the objects we make and use, and the ways in which we decorate, traverse and generally deal with our local environments. The works of art and the media that we produce are also designed not only to communicate with local people but also (increasingly in modern times) to pass on statements to the “outside” world about who we are and how we feel. And even though we have now progressed beyond the old nationalistic agendas that directed the folklore and ethnological collections of the nineteenth century, nations and continents continue to promote particular images of the spaces they occupy, not least through the use of “heritage” (something seen particularly clearly from a multidimensional performance comparison of, for example, the opening ceremonies of the Olympics in Beijing in 2008 and the FIFA World Cup in South Africa in 2010 with the Obama inauguration in Washington in 2009).<sup>14</sup> The question of how “Nordic” Space (as opposed to Chinese, South African or American spaces) is and has been performed in the past and present remains both relevant and enlightening.

In his article on the wide-ranging national semiotics of the annual Swedish *Allsång på Skansen* music festival, which now reaches the entire Swedish nation via television, Chad Eric Bergman draws on Schechner’s ideas of performance, modern ritual theory (especially the work of Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon), and Butler’s considerations of performativity to analyse the different ways in which the festival ritualistically “performs” a modern Swedish national identity. As Bergman stresses, this particular Nordic Space, which works on various levels through different forms of media, regularly maintains its freshness and popularity by blending tradition with reaction to tradition, thereby stressing a continual (if gradual) recreation of Swedish identity.

The idea of the museum and the village festival as a spatial and embodied means of producing and performing ethnic heritage is developed by Ester Vösu and Ergo-Hart Västrik in their article on the re-

invention of Votian identity in northwest Russia in the early twenty-first century. Building on ideas drawn from both performance and heritage studies, the authors examine the materiality as well as the symbolic dimensions of both the festival and the museum, both of which are dynamic and heterogeneous cultural spaces involving encounters between different memories, different types of enactment and differing representations of community members.

Further analysis of the ways in which museum collections and the individual objects within them “perform” in time and space is given in Lizette Gradén’s article on the “Värmland Gift to America”. Utilising Goffmann’s, Schechner’s and Latour’s theories of performance and “actor networks”, Gradén shows how gift-giving can be seen as a means of both materialising relationships and delimiting boundaries between nations, regions, organisations and individuals in the wake of migration. More particularly, she analyses how the presentation to a nation or museum of a heritage collection with a dense biography (in this case the Värmland Gift which has been kept on the move for over fifty years) actually involves a series of ritualistic performances which vary by time and context. As Gradén demonstrates, the differing performances involved in the Värmland “heritage gift” have served to foster a wide range of binding dynamic transatlantic relationships.

Focusing on another function of the museum as a collector and preserver of archive materials, the article written by Hanna Snellman steps back to a different point of time to demonstrate how the performance approach can help bring archive materials back to life. Developing Conquergood’s ideas on fieldwork as a collaborative performance (see Conquergood 2004), and allying them to the approaches of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Schechner, Snellman analyses the unconscious “role-playing” of the Swedish ethnographer and Swedish-Finnish informant, and how the objects the informants were shown to own and the spaces they were shown to inhabit were bound to affect the ways in which the archive material was collected and “read” (both then and now). However, rather than devaluing the archive mate-

rial, this approach actually adds a new dimension to it, and simultaneously added value.

The same applies to the article by Timothy R. Tangherlini which demonstrates still further how insane “burning the folklore archives” would have been, whatever judgement one may place on the methodologies that lie behind the collection processes. Applying de Certeau’s understanding of stories as “repertoires of schemes of action” to Labov and Waletzky’s ideas concerning the structural map of everyday narrative, and his own comprehensive database of the Danish legend collections of Evald Tang Christensen, Tangherlini shows how combining digitally available materials on storytellers, their lives, their movements, and the societies and landscapes they inhabited can help recreate the living context in which these narratives functioned. The article analyses how both the legends and those who told them originally “performed” for their audiences on a variety of levels, many of which we tend to forget about.

De Certeau’s understanding of space and place, now allied to Urry’s concept of the “tourist gaze”, also forms the background of Susanne Österlund-Pötzsch’s article on the “tourist gait”, which underlines not only how landscape (in the form of Nordic city streets), somewhat like a museum, festival or play, can also be seen as something that “performs” for different people in different ways at different times, and not least for the tourist with the guidebook script in front of him. The article also effectively demonstrates how when we stroll through a city landscape, our walks themselves can be seen as particular “performances” designed both for ourselves and for others.

Hanne Pico Larsen’s article on the world-famous Danish gourmet restaurant, *noma*, also deals with spatial performance, but concentrates on a different kind of sensual performance and reception in its analysis of the ways in which food and food ways, like space, can be made to perform for their audiences. Drawing on the ideas of Barthes, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Warde and Fine, among others, Larsen analyses how the taste, smell, appearance and context of food (and the ways in which it is advertised)

can, like museum artefacts, be used to create a multidimensional national image for both insiders and outsiders. Her article underlines how in *noma*, the “foodness” of food, aspects of nostalgia and the emphasis on a particular *terroir* seem to work together playfully to form a particularly Nordic Space and a new kind of Nordic heritage.

As noted above, taken as a whole, these articles dealing with the performances of and within the spaces of the northern Europe serve to underline how the Performance Studies approach can encourage the analysis of a range of new dimensions often neglected in our study of folkloristic and ethnological materials, enabling us to get closer to the various ways in which this cultural material was and is experienced by people in their daily lives. The approach does not only allow us to sense the presence of fresh air running through these old Nordic surroundings; it also encourages to breathe this air deeply and experience a feeling of what Tolkien referred to as “recovery ... a re-gaining of a clear view” (Tolkien 1975: 52–55).

## Notes

- 1 I should stress that, unlike some scholars who use the word “drama” to mean a kind of play (see, for example, Schechner 1977: 36–62), I use the word “drama” as many theatre practitioners do, in the sense of a cultural phenomenon that involves the temporary creation of a kind of “double reality” within a particular space and time frame produced by a performer: see further Gunnell 1995: 12.
- 2 With regard to the joint role of performer and audience in storytelling, see further, for example, Bauman 1986: 3; Niles 1999: 53–54; Okpewho 1992: 57–63; Foley 1991, 1995: 6–7, 2002: 109–124, on the “immanent” art of oral performances.
- 3 As Glynne Wickham effectively underlined, “If we are to approach the drama of the Middle Ages intelligently (...) we must first dismiss all our contemporary notions of what a theatre should be, and how a play should be written, and then go on to substitute the idea of community games in which the actors are the contestants (mimetic or athletic or both) and the theatre is any place appropriate and convenient both to them as performers and to the rest of the community as spectators. If the contemporary catch phrase ‘total theatre’ has any meaning, it finds a truer expression in medieval than in modern terms of reference; for song, dance, wrestling, sword play, contests between animals, disguise, spectacle, jokes, disputation and ritual all figure, separately or compounded, in the drama of the Middle Ages, which was devised in celebration of leisure and for a local community” (Wickham 1987: 4).
- 4 Alongside this, one can place Augusto Boal’s form of “invisible theatre” whereby actors cause a particular situation to occur in real life by putting on a performance in a public setting without telling those not involved that the performance is taking place: see further Boal 1985: 143–147. Here, too, the line between performance and daily life is blurred: see further Geertz 1983 on blurred genres of this kind, and especially pages 24–30 on the way the social sciences have been increasingly making use of concepts of game and drama (drawn from the humanities) as a means of examining cultural behaviour.
- 5 I think it is relatively certain that if Africans had made the original classifications of artistic genres, these classifications would have been very different from those we tend to use today (in the west). In the very least, they would have been more multidisciplinary. For a Kenyan storyteller, for example, movement, rhythm, music and dance are essential parts of a story, along with the words. Similarly, for Kenyans, dance, music and song are indivisible. See further Okpewho 1992: 46–51; Conquergood 2004: 318.
- 6 Similar ideas are effectively expressed in Conquergood 2004.
- 7 One of the best examples here is Glassie 1975.
- 8 For other key analyses of narrative performances and performance traditions which vary in emphases from the socio-linguistic to the socio-historical, the literary and the structural see further, for example, Dégh 1969 and 1995; Niles 1999; Tangherlini 1998; Delargy 1945; Ó Súilleabháin 1973; Zimmermann 2001 (on Irish storytelling traditions); and, with particular regard to Nordic traditions, Siikala 1990; Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1996; Holbek [1987] 1998; Tangherlini 1994; Palménfelt 2007 (among others).
- 9 I refer here to Henry Glassie’s detailed analysis of Irish mumming performances in *All Silver and No Brass* (1975), and John Miles Foley’s important statement that “Any oral poem, like any utterance, is profoundly contingent on its context. To assume that it is detachable – that we can comfortably speak of ‘an oral poem’ as a freestanding item – is necessarily to take it out of context. And what is the lost context? It is the performance, the audience, the poet, the music, the specialized way of speaking, the gestures, the costuming, the visual aids, the occasion, the ritual, and myriad other aspects of the given poem’s reality ... And when we pry an oral poem out of one language and insert it into another,

things will inevitably change. We'll pay a price" (Foley 2002: 60). See further Sándor 1967 on the "Dramaturgy of Tale-Telling".

- 10 See, for example Bauman 1978: 48, where Bauman describes performance as essentially "the nexus of tradition, practice, and emergence in verbal art." Fourteen years later, this definition was slightly widened to encompass "A mode of communicative behavior and a type of communicative event (...) an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience. The analysis of performance – indeed the very conduct of performance – highlights the social, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of the communicative process" (Bauman 1992: 41). Nonetheless, it should be stressed that Bauman's analyses of performance rarely involve the visual appearance of the surroundings. They tend to be text based.
- 11 With regard to masking traditions, for example, one can mention Glassie 1975, Bendix 1985, and most recently the various articles contained in Gunnell 2007 (on Nordic masking traditions), all of which attempt to give a more multifaceted view of the performances involved (see, in particular, Larsen 2007). See also, for example, again in more recent times and with particular regard to the Nordic area, Ronström 1992, which deals with the dynamic interconnections between dance, costume and music in Yugoslav immigrant traditions in Stockholm; Gradén 2003; Österlund-Pötzsch 2003; Larsen 2006 on, among other things, the communicative role played by costume and surroundings in Swedish and Danish immigrant traditions in the USA.
- 12 For further reading on modern approaches to performance studies (and a range of case studies), see further Schechner 2002a (rev. 2006), 2002b; Bial 2007; Davis 2008; Auslander 2003, 2008; Carlson 2004; Counsell & Wolf 2001; Striff 2003.
- 13 Nordic Spaces in the North and North America: Heritage Preservation in Real and Imagined Nordic Places is a project funded by Stiftelsen Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and include Chad Eric Bergman (USA), Lizette Gradén (SE), Valdimar Tr. Hafstein (IS), Hanne Pico Larsen (DK/USA), and Susanne Österlund-Pötzsch (FIN). To read more about the project please go to [www.nordicspaces.com](http://www.nordicspaces.com).
- 14 With regard to the performance of Nordic heritage at home and abroad, see further, for example, Klein 1980, 2001; Gradén 2003, 2009; Larsen 2006, 2009; Schram 2009; Ronström 2008; Österlund-Pötzsch 2003. See also the various articles on Nordic identity, space (religious and secular), narrative, and heritage in Siikala, Klein & Mathisen 2004.

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