

# *Pretense and Display Theories of Theatrical Performance*

*James R. Hamilton*

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**Abstract:** In this paper I present two competing theories of acting, the “pretense theory” and the “display theory.” I aim to show we should not have as much confidence in the pretense theory as we may be tempted to have. And I hope show why the display theory *of acting* may be more attractive than the pretense theory of acting, whatever merits examining pretense may independently have for understanding the mental mechanisms underlying many of our interactions with the world and with each other.

**Keywords:** pretense, display, acting, theatrical performance, convention.

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*I am not suggesting that the distinction between the normal or serious use of speech and the secondary uses to which [Austin] calls etiolated or parasitical uses is so clear as to call for no further examination.*

P. F. Strawson (1964, 439)

The question I want us to think about is this: what do actors who portray characters in narrative performances do? In discussing what *actors* do, we are focusing only on what theatrical performers do in narrative theatrical performances. The contents of such performances are stories. Stories are the representations of sequences of actions put in motion by agents. Unless we are committed to the view that all representations are fictional (Walton 1990), we should take the ordinary, pre-reflective view that stories may be either fictional or non-fictional.

Such performances are familiar, of course. But their familiarity can be misleading. This kind of performance practice is not determinative or even paradigmatic of theatrical performance in general (Beeman 1993, 381 – 382). Still, acting is related to the more general phenomenon of

theatrical performance, as something like a species is related to its genus. And that fact alone makes any attempt to get theoretically adequate account of acting worth undertaking.

The main families of theories that recommend themselves to us are those that regard acting as kind of pretending and those that regard acting as a form of display behavior. The pretense family – that I will refer to inclusively as “the pretense theory” – has a long pedigree, important recent adherents (Searle 1975; Lewis 1978; Austin 1979; Currie 1990; and Walton 1990), and has been given new life by work in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science over the past three decades. This latter work sets forth and purports to explain important connections among pretense, pretend play, and cognitive imagination (Nichols 2006). The display family of theories – that I will refer to inclusively as “the display theory” – is derivable from work by performance theorists in the 1980s and 90s (Schechner 1988; Schechner – Turner 1985; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1976; see also several early essays in Bial 2007) who were deeply influenced by certain strands in anthropology and ethology focusing on the nature of rituals and display behavior, both in human cultures and among other animals, with a view to finding an evolutionary basis of that behavior and an explanatory model for the enrichments of those behaviors in human beings.

In this essay, I do not try to resolve all the issues that need to be addressed to have a comprehensive view of these matters, even though I suspect the arguments for the display theory will turn out to be compelling. For now, I am content to sketch the alternatives, enumerate their strengths, and offer a provisional assessment of how each theory handles the challenges any theory of acting faces. The upshot is that, both *ceteris paribus* and provisionally, the display theory of acting looks more promising than the pretense theory of acting.

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Before turning to a presentation of the candidates and a discussion of their capacities and weaknesses, it is worth taking a moment to forestall the tempting assumption that the success pretense theories have had in explaining the reception of narratives, especially fictional narratives, gives it an edge in thinking about how those narratives are produced, especially in the case of acting. The point may seem obvious, but it is still worth working through explicitly.

Imagine a spectator who has grasped that what is being performed is a narrative. Imagine too she knows it is fictional. And suppose that the recognition of these facts is best explained by saying she participates in make-believe or pretends things in order to sustain or assist the narrative fiction. Does this entail the performer must also be pretending or engaged in make-believe in order to entice or induce that reaction in that spectator?

Currie (1990) thinks there must be some recognizable fictive intent to trigger the recognition of the presence of fiction and an invitation to engage in games of make-believe with that fiction. But there is nothing in that thought that requires the triggering signal be carried out by an act of pretense.<sup>1</sup>

Walton (1990) holds that actors are props in games of make-believe. But there is nothing in that thought which requires *they* are engaged in make-believe.<sup>2</sup> In fact, actors have more in common with what Walton calls “onlookers” – people who

take great interest in the game... may study it and its props thoroughly, learning what is fictional, which fictional truths imply others, what principles of generation are operative, and in many ways analyzing and explaining the game and assessing its significance (Walton 1990, 209)

without, however, “thinking of themselves as subject to [the] rules [of the game]” (Walton 1990, 209). What they are subject to, as we will see below, is the routine they establish together by means of the sort of activities Walton attributes to onlookers.

So: even if getting the fiction, or getting that the narrative is fictive, requires *spectators* to engage in games of make-believe, we have so far learned little from this about what *actors* do. In particular we have not shown we need a pretense theory of *acting* in order to explain why what the performer does counts as what the character does.

This is, I believe, no problem for the pretense theory of acting. That theory of acting has plenty going for it apart from whatever benefit it may have been thought to have as a result of the assumption with which we have just dispensed.

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Currie (1990) is at some pains to deny this himself, at least when it comes to authors of plays.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, Walton *does* think actors engage in make-believe: that is why his final position, in contrast to the better position suggested to him here, is that actors are “reflexive props” (Walton 1990, 209).

## 1 Pretense Theories

When Gertrude asserts, “Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended,” how should we characterize what the actor playing Gertrude does? Here are some things she does *not* do. She may believe that Hamlet has offended his father, but ordinarily she does not believe the actor playing Hamlet has offended anyone. She does not intend either the actor playing Hamlet or Hamlet himself to understand *her* and to explain himself *to her*. She is not sincere in making a demand for an explanation, nor is she under an obligation to believe or intend any of these things. She does not intend that the audience should believe that she believes what she is saying.

For these reasons, it seems easier and simpler to characterize her as playing a game in which she pretends to be Gertrude saying and doing what Gertrude says and does. Just at this point, for example, the script calls for Gertrude to say “Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.” This is a very basic version of the pretense theory of acting.

This theory is equally adaptable to actions other than illocutionary actions. It can also capture the thought that actors do have some kinds of obligations. For example, if actors are obliged to intend that spectators imagine what they do and say they are also obliged to be sincere in their desire that audiences imagine their characters saying and doing what they say and do.<sup>3</sup>

The institution of theatrical performance is often thought to have close connections to games of make-believe. Since it is possible for someone to understand games of make-believe but have no concept of theater or of theatrical analysis (Hamilton 1982), the pretense theory of what actors do amounts to the stipulation that some of us (actors) play games of pretense in front of others (spectators). Those games will be more highly structured than ordinary games of pretend play. By acquiring denser structures, those games of pretense come to be enriched. Much of the artistic weight we are inclined to attribute to theater is derived from the dense structuring of the games, and not from the pretend-

<sup>3</sup> But, since performers need not be sincere about what they say or do, we need not go so far as to hold that actors engage in any special sort of speech and action, characteristic just of the stage. Such a view might be derivable from Currie (1990, Chapters 1 & 2). Alward (2009, 321) has suggested that this view is derivable from Currie so long as we see the creation of fiction as a species of theatrical production.

ing *per se*; but that is no barrier to the pretense account of the actions, including the linguistic actions, of actors.

There does seem to be some sort of problem: consider what happened when my cousin David asked me to pretend that we were cowboys and then yelled out, "The Indians are attacking," or "Stampede!" This is quite different from what actors do, even in improvisational narrative performances. For one thing, when a performer is enacting a character, we are inclined to say it is the character who asserts and exclaims things, if anyone does. But in the game of make-believe, it was David who did those things. And it was to David as *a* cowboy, and not as *particular* cowboy (Roy Rogers, for example), that I addressed my query, "Where are they?"

Perhaps going from playing a cowboy to playing Roy Rogers or Dale Evans is just part of what goes on in that stipulation that takes us from ordinary games of make-believe to those in which some of us engage in such games in front of others. Let us suppose so for now, and let that change secure for us what we want to say on the pretense theory, namely that it is characters who assert, command, ask questions, and exclaim.<sup>4</sup> What then does the performer do? Just now we said that the performer pretends to be Gertrude saying and doing what Gertrude says and does. Just at that point, for example, the script calls for Gertrude to say "Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended." This suggests part of what we wanted: Gertrude does assert some things, asks some things, and she does some other things too – for example, she looks at herself in a mirror.

This move leads to the conclusion, worrisome to some, that spectators *see* Gertrude when she looks in the mirror, and that spectators *hear* Gertrude say "Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended." Worries like these might be thought to lead to a second stipulation in developing the pretense theory, adding to it a pretense theory of spectatorship. On this theory, spectators as well as actors engage in make-believe or pretense: for example, they pretend of that actor that she is Gertrude, doing and saying those things (Currie 1990; Walton 1990; Saltz 2006; Osipovich, 2006).

I am not entirely convinced this stipulation is necessary. First, it is unclear the worries prompting the stipulation are well grounded

<sup>4</sup> This might be derivable, for example, from the specificity of predication that goes along with the specificity of the object imagined (pretended) to have the properties predicated in any pretense. See Leslie (1994, 216 – 219 *passim*).

(Thomasson 2003; van Inwagen 1977). Second, what I am calling the “pretense story of spectatorship” has problems of its own. It is worth noting, for example, that if spectators are thought to participate in games of make-believe or to pretend actors are characters in order to follow any narrative performance whatever, then either narrative performances are all fictional or the make-believe story has to be completely rethought as a strategy for its originating task. The first strikes me as an odd result. So perhaps the second task must be undertaken. Or perhaps the pretense theory of spectatorship should just be abandoned.

But, since settling any of these issues is no part of the present paper, I am going only to mark them for separate discussion and continue as if there were no problem here. So, let us just say this: so far so good (at least for now).

The pretense theory appears to fare badly in spelling out exactly what explains why an actor says the next line or engages in the next bit of stage-business. The most plausible explanation for what prompts the actor who is playing Hamlet to say “Mother, you have my father much offended” is that this is what is *called for by the script* right after “Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.” One way to think about a script “calling for” something to happen is to think of actors being caused to say their lines in a particular order by the order in which those lines appear in a routine developed in rehearsals (also noticed by Alward 2009, 324). Companies develop such routines by examining the stories in scripts, the motives of the characters in stories, and the directions of the overall narratives. But, once a routine is established, *that* is what the performers execute when they get to performance.

At this point the pretense theory of actors’ speech and action seems to have all but disappeared. Unlike our explanations of actual games of make-believe, where we refer to amendments that are made on the fly by means of explicit suggestions that the parties amend the pretense (Leslie 1987; Lillard 1993; Nichols – Stich 2000), in scripted performances there is no moment that we need to explain by saying here and now there is a pretense of believing, intending, doing or saying something. Instead we get all we want for scripted performances from the thought that here and now there is something said or done because that is caused to follow, given the rehearsed routine, after what happened there and then. Either the pretense story explains why an actor says “Mother, you have my father much offended” or we explain it by reference to the routine

that the performers have developed and rehearsed. And it looks like only the latter is driving the explanation.

This result may only be an artifact of a mistaken idea of what the pretense theory is supposed to explain. We can avoid this unexpected consequence by holding this: we explain why a character does what she does by reference to the enacted story; we explain why a performer does what she does by reference to the routine resulting from rehearsals; and the pretense theory explains why what the performer says and does counts as what the character says and does.

This way of putting the matter helps us see the following point. Earlier, I noted several things the actor playing Gertrude does not do. Here is another one: since she does not intend Hamlet to understand, respond and explain himself to *her*, so also ordinarily, *she* would not even expect Hamlet to explain himself to *Gertrude*. The script calls for that to happen in the story at just that point. And because scripted story calls for that to happen – however the actor playing Hamlet undertakes that task – we might say that the actor playing Hamlet carries out the task by doing something that amounts to *pretending* to explain himself to Gertrude. That is, reference to the routine explains why the actor does or says the next thing at any given moment and then we invoke the idea of pretense to explain how that action or saying becomes the action or saying of *Gertrude* or of *Hamlet*.

To make this work, we must specify the conditions that make saying or doing one thing an instance of pretending to say or do another thing. Pretense theorists (Currie 1990, 32; Walton 1990, 219 and 221) have often held something similar to John Searle's observation:

It is a general feature of the concept of pretending that one can pretend to perform a higher order or complex action by actually performing lower order or less complex actions which are constitutive parts of the higher order or complex action. (Searle 1975, 321)

So, for example, you might pretend to drink tea by holding out your hand in the shape it would have were you to have a grasp on the handle of a teacup and, moving your hand appropriately, bring it close to your face, tilt back your head and move the muscles in your throat as you would were you drinking. When we consider games of make-believe as our source for cases to illustrate the pretense theory of acting, Searle's suggestion seems to be exactly right.

But it is not enough for our purpose. While the actions described are a common enough way to represent someone drinking tea, there are

others that, given certain contexts, would not employ any of the constituent parts of that complex action. Although common in games of make-believe, neither constituency nor even imitative resemblance of one action to a higher order or more complex action is necessary or sufficient for the representation of one action by another (Goodman 1976). Just try explaining why someone could not assert, in rehearsal,

This stick is my bath towel and when I poke it in the ground I am drying my back,

or why she could not engage in a portrayal in which that assertion is operative (cf. Saltz 1991, 42).

An interesting response is to make another stipulation regarding ordinary pretense that gets us what we want:

Pretense requires the existence of conventions according to which actually performing an action of one type counts as pretending to engage in an act of another type. (Alward 2009, 328)

This would help us with the stick-as-bath towel. Moreover, it reflects the way we already go about dealing with other symbolic actions, like those surrounding the following:

This stick is my country's standard and when I poke it in the ground I claim this land.

The difference between the cases is that in the latter we understand what is going on because we are familiar with conventions of claiming (and other social acts), while in the former we understand what is going on because we are familiar with conventions of pretending.

This stipulation also allows the pretense theory to capture the fact that *sometimes* actors do intend precisely what they do and say, much in the way you might intend to purchase Park Place when playing a game of *Monopoly* (Saltz 1991). Absent the present suggestion, it is not clear how some versions of the pretense theory could capture this fact. It is reasonable to expect that whatever view we adopt must account for the fact that actors sometimes just do and say what they appear to be doing, saying, intending, and believing – and being sincerely involved in those efforts. The stipulation that one thing may count as another when pretense-conventions are in play allows for the possibility that, when they are not in play, the first thing may be just what it is and may count, so to speak, as itself.

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At this point, we have shown how of games of pretense are thought to generate the theatrical behavior we call acting. This comes about by several stipulations. (1) The pretense theory of what actors do amounts to the stipulation that some of us (actors) play games of pretense in front of others (spectators). Without analysis, I have assumed this stipulation also gets us the particularity of characters that spectators attend to in watching a performance and that they refer to in describing a performance. (2) We have stipulated a separation between what the performer does from what the character does, offering different explanations for why they do and say things in the order in which they do and say them, and specifying what precisely is to be explained by reference to pretense. And, finally, (3) we have stipulated, with Alward, the existence of pretense-conventions to provide that required explanation.

In passing, I have noted that some think we also need to stipulate a pretense theory of spectatorship that allows us to retain the thought that it is characters who assert, deny, exclaim and so on without any troubling consequences about what spectators see and hear. But we have set that discussion aside; and it plays no role in what follows.

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Before examining how well the existence of pretense-conventions does the job we require, let us take a small detour concerning a fact about grasping conventions.

When Strawson investigates Austin's ideas of "illocutionary force" and "illocutionary acts," he notes they are "not so closely related" that knowing the former (knowing, for example, that an utterance has the force of a warning) tells us straight off what act has been performed (in issuing that warning) (Strawson 1964, 440). It is in light of that fact that Strawson examines Austin's claim that for an utterance to have a particular illocutionary force is a matter of convention (Strawson 1964, 441ff; Austin 1962, 103 - 127).

To further assist in his examination of that claim, Strawson modifies H. P. Grice's account of "utterer's non-natural meaning" (Grice 1957) to turn it into an account adequate for analyzing the understanding of an utterer's meaning by an audience to that utterance. By this means, we gain access to the idea of "securing uptake" - without which, accord-

ing to Austin, no illocutionary act can come off (Strawson 1964, 445 – 449).

Thus, Strawson examines how uptake is secured first by acts, like warnings, that are not standardly conventional but which are still cases of “*doing* [something], *in* what we say.” For this to work, there must be some means by which the speaker conveys that what she has said *is* a warning (and, I might add, a means by which the hearer recognizes it as a warning when it is one). Strawson sees the mechanism in such cases as “comments.” Thus, for example, the speaker comments – “That was a warning” – in reference to what she had previously said. From this, Strawson notes, it is but a “short step” to “explicitly performative formulae” (Strawson 1964, 451) in which we have one utterance rather than two. There is a convention of “explicitly performative utterances” (Strawson 1964, 449 – 454).

By these means, Strawson is able to explain the Austinean orthodoxies about performative utterances. What is of interest in the present paper is this: in explaining illocutionary uptake in this way, the fact of the conventionality of explicitly performative utterances is made into, at best, an epiphenomenon. For, even though it may be true that failure of uptake in the two cases is different, what constitutes failure of the illocutionary act in both cases is explained by the comment story, not the convention story. In the two-utterance case, I may be frustrated if you do not take my warning as a warning. In the latter case, there *is* some sort of “breach of conventions” (Strawson 1964, 458). But note that it is not that you fail to grasp the convention *qua* convention that frustrates me; it is still that you fail to grasp *the point*.

This is an important step in the right direction. And, as we will see, it poses a much more serious problem for the pretense-convention analysis of how some actions get counted as other actions in the case of theatrical performances.

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Let us now return to the thread. It is right to think we must specify the conditions that make saying or doing one thing amount to saying or doing another thing in theatrical performances. And Alward is right to think that the un-enhanced pretense theory does not do the job. Moreover, he is right to think that this sometimes has something to do with conventions. But, to speak of theatrical conventions is to speak of something like the following. Imagine a stretch of performance in which you hear this:

And she said, Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended,  
followed by this:

And then he said, Mother, you have my father much offended.

On the pretense theory, the actor playing Hamlet says the words in the first line pretending to say what Hamlet says in the manner in which Hamlet would say it were he imitating or mocking Gertrude. He also says what Gertrude says; but he is not pretending to be her.

The point is not about iterated pretense. Instead it is about how we explain what spectators do when grasping a performance. Consider: Who would the actors pretend to be were they, when saying these lines, standing to one side while other performers manipulate a Hamlet-puppet and a Gertrude-puppet? That is, whose speech acts would spectators or actors think the actors are pretending to commit? Would we say the same thing were the human performers to stand still, staring across the stage at each other, and quietly pushing buttons on machines in an ordered sequence that resulted in our hearing these words from the closet scene?

These are not rhetorical questions. How *does* a spectator know what is being said and done, and who is doing the saying and doing? Reference to *theatrical* conventions at work in a production is, I have said, required for explaining how spectators grasp what is going on in a scene. But do we have to refer to a second set of conventions, pretense-conventions, in order to explain how spectators understand the scene? Pretty obviously we do not (Hamilton 2001).

Spectators do not need to grasp the conventions to grasp the scene. This is the lesson of our detour through Strawson. A further point is this: some theatrical conventions are designed to work sub-doxastically. Their very point and efficacy would be undermined were they to be grasped by the Gricean mechanism of intention-recognition (Grice 1957). These facts about what goes into spectators grasping a scene contrasts nicely with the fact that we do need to refer to conventions to *explain* how spectators grasp what they grasp and what it is they have grasped.<sup>5</sup> And here is the point. Reference to theatrical conventions themselves does *that* job perfectly well.

<sup>5</sup> This is why recognition and description of conventions at play in the construction of a scene play an important role in the evaluation of any theatrical scene.

In light of that fact, reference to special pretense-conventions now seems otiose. But if, to avoid this result, we revert to the idea that pretending to do one action necessarily involves executing some constituent part of that action or something like that action, we will be left with the puzzles that conventions of pretense were invoked to solve. Neither the Searle-style analysis nor Alward's fix by means of a stipulative addition to that analysis shows how pretense explains why or how what an actor does and says counts as what a character says and does.

## 2 Display Theories

The display theory of what actors do originated in performance theory in the 1980s and 90s that reflected on anthropological and ethological examinations of more general performance phenomena. The anthropologists (Turner 1972, 1974; Goffman 1959, 1961, 1963, 1974; Geertz 1973, 1974) who were influential on performance theorists focused their attention on rituals that were collective in nature, connected to supernatural beliefs, and often examined as though they were evolutionarily selected modes of human behavior. In contrast, the influential ethologists (Lorenz 1966, 1970; Huxley 1964, 1968; Goodall 1971) were focused on display behaviors of individuals who were, principally, *non-human* animals, where the mechanisms for delivery of information were thought to have had selection effects at the genetic level, and where some of those mechanisms had become sufficiently stereotypical that ethologists referred to them as "ritualized" (Smith 1979; Goodall 1990).

The debates that have since raged in biology concerning the size of the evolutionary unit, that on which natural selection operates, is not pertinent to our story. Nor are we concerned with differences among these figures regarding their uses of the terms "display" and "ritual." We can also ignore the connection of ritual to the supernatural that had an unfortunate influence on early performance theory. None of these issues need have an enduring legacy in the study of performance.

Several things are of continued interest, however. Performance theory provided one of the first instances of self-consciously naturalistic explanations of human performance, regarding it as a wide and non-homogeneous class of human behavior, and interpreting it as similar or analogous to behavior in other animals. For the most part, the influential figures thought of display and ritual as elements of information-transfer

systems. Moreover, the picture of information transfer they adopted was characterized by two significant features. First, these theorists argued that ritual and display (and especially the latter) are capable of conveying information about “non-behavioral attributes” of individuals engaging in display behavior, including such things as location and identity. Second, they argued that the motivational states of performers are “less relevant” than the “kinds of information [that] displays make available to those individuals who interact with the communicator” (Smith 1979, 61).

Kendon’s (1970) study of human behavior exemplifies one application of these seminal theories to specifically human activity. Kendon examined the behavior of people preparing for formal conversation. The study demonstrated that preparation-for-conversation behavior is extremely subtle, usually occurs below the level of conscious attention, and often puts speakers and listeners into a kind of mutual physical synchrony before conversation that continues during it as well. This is useful information for any analysis of how performance works, and not only because it examines the sub-doxastic *physicality* of the relationship between performers and spectators in most theatrical performances (cf. Hamilton 2007, 75 – 78).

The main roadblock performance theory faced in the 80s and 90s took the form of a self-imposed constraint on explanations of performance. The constraint developed from the thought that, since theater and other forms of institutionalized performance are phenomena that grow out of other social phenomena, the only explanations of theater and other forms of performance that would suffice were the kinds of explanation characteristic of anthropology, ethology, and sociobiology. This led to the constraint that explanations of theatrical performance had to be univocally social, wherein the social features of theater explained what individuals did and no causal efficacy flowed from individuals or from their states, especially from their mental states.<sup>6</sup> This helps explain why display theories ran into insuperable limitations.

<sup>6</sup> The full explanation of this history remains to be written, so far as I know. When it is, I wager one crucial element will have to do with the ways in which cultural critics working in the theater grew to distrust Naturalism in the theater, of its connection to both substantive and methodological individualism, and of the insistence of Naturalists that theater seek to expose the inner psychology of characters because that is what is important about and in human life (Williams 1977).

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We can still learn from these theories. For example, Turner's analysis of the social determinants of late European theater provides genuine insight regarding the social significance of the emergence of the modern theater (Turner 1987, 114 - 118). Some insightful anthropological studies of theater arguably would not have been conducted at all were it not for the rise of performance theory (Beeman 1993).

It is also worth noting that performance theories did not accept all the results of ethology and anthropology uncritically. Schechner, for example, criticizes Lorenz' account of theater for concentrating on "the finished artwork" in human culture and, so, failing to see how important the rehearsal process is to explaining any theatrical performance (Schechner 1988, 242 - 245; Lorenz 1970).

But the constraint that explanations always be social drives many of Schechner's own positive analyses. For example, his analysis of what he calls "blocked display" starts promisingly, by focusing on the ways in which *human* ritual behavior differs from that of other animals and on the "performer's process and the spectator's response" (Schechner 1988, 261). But the main thrust is still to find a completely social explanation of these phenomena. In his view, artistic performance occurs when a natural display response (1) is stimulated but is "blocked from full expression" (2) morphs into a fantasy - which is "rarely a literal translation of the blocked display" - (3) gets redirected, and (4) "re-emerges as a display, a performance,... a public way to show off private stuff" (Schechner 1988, 263 - 264). Schechner's discussion of jokes - in which the fundamental question becomes "what is their social function?" (Schechner 1988, 282) - offers up a connection of jokes to "threat and bond," but provides no analysis of what threat or bond consists of or of how jokes manage to have any social function at all (Schechner 1988, 281 - 283). It is useful to compare this to Ted Cohen's analysis of jokes (Cohen 1999). Cohen's analysis is also concerned with the social function of jokes; but what Cohen's analysis does, that Schechner's never even attempts to do, is connect the social question to the examination of the beliefs and desires involved when an individual understands or fails to understand a joke and when an individual finds or fails to find a joke funny. By means of a discussion of what individuals need to know, believe, hope, fear and so on - by means, that is, of reference to the mental states of individuals in such transactions - Cohen is able to explain how jokes fulfill several social functions.

In short, the main thing missing in accounts of display and ritual in performance theory of the 80s and 90s was what is largely ignored in the anthropological and ethological studies that influenced it. Analyses having anything to do with the mental states of performers were set aside when it was seen that the motivational states of those engaging in display were not always relevant to understanding the behavior. But the fact is that any spectator engaged in trying to understand what is presented to her in a theatrical performance recognizes that she is in the vicinity of intentional behavior, and that is a major part of why she is interested in the behavior in the first place. Examinations of social determinants alone do not respond to an interest in what particular performers are doing. Nor do they respond well to a theoretical interest in what it is in general that performers do. If we fail to provide an analysis of display that makes explicit what the mental states of participants are, we will not be able to understand how theatrical performance works. And the failure of performance theory to provide that analysis is a direct result of its largely unconscious commitment to the seamless explanation hypothesis.

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I believe, however, that the display theory is on the right track and that it can be described in a manner that allows it to do what early versions of the display theory failed even to attempt to do. Some elements of the display theory resemble elements in several recent analyses of demonstration, analyses that were crafted in the service of theories of quotation. I suggest we exploit these resemblances to get started. It is not part of my project to endorse or argue for a particular theory of quotation. But I will begin with reflections on one set of such theories.

Consider two cases used to suggest a demonstrative theory of indirect discourse, of saying *that*. Heal's (2001) is a case of showing someone how a tune goes. Récanati's (2001) is a case of showing someone the particular way in which his sister, Elizabeth, drinks tea. Similar examples have been deployed in discussing demonstrative theories of *direct* discourse as well, by Clark - Gerrig (1990), Saka (1998), (2005), (2006), and Patterson (2005). The details of these positions, and most of the differences among them, are not relevant here. I am using these investigations only as jumping-off points for showing how a display theory of acting can be developed and how it can overcome the self-imposed constraint that hobbled earlier versions of the theory.

Let us start with this. Imagine Angela telling you about a conversation she overheard between two actors (whom Angela designates “He” and “She”). Angela reports the conversation thusly:

He said, ‘I’m going to play Gertrude,’ and she went {*eyes rolling accompanied by a barely articulate gurgle*}<sup>7</sup>

Patterson claims that in such cases there is *no* difference between the references; for, he observes, in neither case is there reference to words. That is, he urges, we may safely ignore the Davidsonian thought that what is referred to must be something *linguistic* (Davidson 1979). Instead, both references can be construed as references to behavior that is immediately displayed. Whether or not Patterson is right about quotation,<sup>8</sup> his claim provides us with an important heuristic device for understanding what goes on in theatrical performances.

So here is a crude starting place: we might think of the institution of theater as functioning like the matrix of a quotation, where quotation is demonstratively understood and where demonstration is understood to be conducted by means of behavioral display. People who go to the theater recognize it is a place of demonstration (or, if you like, of presentation); stories are often presented there; and this just means that, on many particular occasions, one or more performers will demonstrate how a particular story goes.

How do we go on from there? On a first pass, it might help to remember that the pretense theory of acting yields the right story about the mental states and the exercise of the mental capacities of actors. When the actor portraying Gertrude says, “Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended,” we do not construe *her* as believing the actor playing Hamlet has offended anyone. She is not sincere in demanding an explanation either from Hamlet or from the actor playing Hamlet. So, if we think the actor portrays Gertrude by pretending to be Gertrude, these mental state ascriptions will hold.

<sup>7</sup> I adopt Heal's (2001) convention of putting descriptions of the relevant non-linguistic behavior in brackets { }.

<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, as I understand it, Patterson's argument depends on an analysis of Davidson's reasons for thinking the interior material in a quotation has to be compositional. But his reasons for rejecting compositionality ‘all the way down,’ so to speak, are beyond the scope of this paper. So I will not dwell on this, at least with respect to quotation.

But why, exactly, *do* they hold?

Consider what happens, on a display (or demonstrative) account of quotation, when I present Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address." I do *say*, "Four score, and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation..." but I do not believe the founding of the United States took place nearly ninety years ago, nor do I believe I am addressing people for whom that speech is intended. So, the display theory appears to be on track for getting exactly the right story about the mental states of actors, just as the pretense story clearly does.

### 3 Some Provisional Comparisons

This suggests that there is a relation between display and pretense. It also suggests an argument for thinking it is display that explains why the pretense theory gets the right story about mental states. In pretending to be Gertrude, the actor is displaying to an audience what Gertrude is like, and how Gertrude does and says things. And that display can be carried out by the actor without thinking Gertrude's thoughts, holding her beliefs, intending what she intends, or asserting what she asserts. It appears that, in order to pretend, to make-believe one is Gertrude *for others*, one must display Gertrude to them.

It is now worth saying that – in order to give the pretense theory room to succeed in the first part of this presentation – I ignored the fact that pretending *in front of others* cannot succeed as an account of theatrical performances unless "in front of others" is taken to mean "*for others*." For there are cases of pretending to be someone else, or to be something one is not, in front of others that do not count as theatrical performances. Cases of deception and extreme self-indulgence come readily to mind. At least part of what disqualifies them as instances of theatrical performance (and earns them some social disapproval as well) is that they are not done in the service of presenting something for others to observe. So, a pretense theory of acting must add yet another modification. In addition to holding that that actors pretend, it must hold that they pretend in front of others, and that they constrain their pretending by the conventional stipulation that they are doing it for others.

But, if the pretense we have in mind *is* done for spectators, we need only the display theory to account for the relevant and correct mental state ascriptions. In fact it does better than the pretense theory. For the

latter fares less well than the display theory at explaining why actors *sincerely* wish their audience to grasp what they present.

Consider Walton's (1990) account of children playing a game of make-believe with a stump and pretending it is a bear. What is going on is that they regard the stump as a bear, giving prominence and interacting with some features of the stump and ignoring others. A parallel for acting then would be this: if an actor pretends to be Gertrude, she regards herself as Gertrude, giving prominence to and interacting with certain of her own features and hiding others. And she is doing this in front of others. That she is also doing it *for* others is an added convention that is extraneous to what makes it an instance pretense. In contrast, if anyone engages in display behavior, there is always a context consisting of those for whom the display is constructed. It is an inherent fact of the general kind of behavior that acting is said, on the display theory, to be a species. And the sincerity of the actor's wish that her audience grasp the content in what she presents is readable directly from the fact she intends to display that content.

A related point is that the display theory seems to fare much better than the pretense theory with regard to explaining success at theatrical portrayal. For it seems one can succeed at pretense yet fail at portrayal. In contrast, if portrayal is understood as a species of display then, since a display is inherently shaped for an audience, one cannot succeed at displaying a character yet fail at portraying her. If one fails at portrayal, one fails at the display. This contrast also explains why the pretense theory appears to give us the wrong story about plays being performed in translation. Suppose an actor has a choice of speaking in German or in English. For purposes of *pretending* to be some particular character, the considerations the actor must attend to concern only whether the character speaks English or German. The actor *may* also have further intentions that are governed by the others she is playing with or for. And, obviously, if they don't speak English, it could easily be in her interest to speak German, no matter what language the character speaks. Still, so far as being successful at *pretending* to be the character, *qua* pretending, it is the character's language that is decisive.

But theatrical portrayal, like quotation, would appear to fail – at least to some extent and in the majority of cases – when spectators cannot understand what the actor is saying because they do not share the character's language. So on the pretense theory portrayal is, at least in this respect, an

extraneous further intention that the actor might have in addition to the intention to pretend to be the character. Not so on the display theory. Whether it is offered as a theory of quotation or a theory of acting, the reason we speak in translation is the same: if you are demonstrating to someone how something goes, you will take account of what they can get and shape what you do so they can, indeed, get it. If they do not speak the language of the original speaker or of the play, you translate it.

A final point I want us to consider is this: how do we explain what actors do when they engage in non-mimetic or only partially mimetic representation? For example, suppose a killing is presented this way: actor A makes mimetic gestures of slashing with a sword, while actor B makes mimetic gestures of being cut (and then collapses). Simultaneously, however, actor C makes the sounds of being cut, actor D makes the sounds of a sword swishing through the air and cutting through flesh, while actor E wails a brief dirge. Imagine they are standing 3 meters apart from each other, arrayed across the stage. Clearly none of these actors is pretending to kill another nor is any pretending to be killed by one of the others. But they are portraying a killing.

Think of this kind of staging as analogous to the following. You ask me "What did the judge say?" And I go "eehhhh {while jerking my thumb in a gesture of dismissal}."<sup>9</sup> I do not imitate the judge. The judge did not *say* what I said. The judge did not *do* what I did. I may, nevertheless, have conveyed to you what the judge said and did.

Although it is true that most cases of quotation and many theatrical performances involve mimetic demonstrations, demonstration is a broader category than the mimetic. And it is that broader category that provides us with the natural kind of human behavior of which theatrical performance is a proper, but culturally developed, species.

To provide an analysis of the kind, we might do worse than to borrow some of the apparatus Nelson Goodman employed (Goodman 1968, 52 – 57) in discussing exemplification. To exemplify is to make prominent certain features of a putative sample that are the relevant features for demonstrating the target information to another person. What governs the selection of a swatch of fabric, for example, is the fact the other person is interested only in certain features of the swatch and not others – the color and texture as opposed to the size – because the other person

<sup>9</sup> I owe the example to Doug Patterson.

is interested in how the fabric will look when it covers her sofa. The selection of features is, then, highly context dependent, just as the features of samples in indirect discourse are. The fact of context-dependency is also what explains how I might succeed in conveying to you what the judge said and did by going “eehhhh {while jerking my thumb in a gesture of dismissal}.”

There is no important difference between the appeal to relevant contextual information in order to explain the conveyance of information in the case of reporting what the judge said and the appeal to contextual information to explain how our four or five performers convey that a killing is taking place. Each will misfire if the audience for the display is insufficiently prepared or knowledgeable about how the information is being conveyed.

Moreover, consistent with the lesson learned earlier from Strawson, this conventional staging presents an important fact about theatrical conventions. The first time a spectator sees it, she has to figure it out, bit by bit. The fact it is a convention is of no use to her, nor does it enter into her thinking in figuring out what is going on.

To see the point more clearly, imagine the company chooses to use this device three times. On the third occasion, they allow the scene picture to develop slowly, almost as if arising out of a different direction to the narrative, so the killing is both revealed to the discerning viewer as it approaches and concealed within the apparent narrative direction at the same time. If our spectator is discerning, she will see it developing and be able to appreciate the subtlety by which this happens. Here of course, she *does* rely on the fact this is a convention. She has seen this stage pattern twice before and knows what it portends; and the actors have set it up so that her attention is focused in a way that allows for that.

\* \* \*

In the end, I have not tried to lay to rest all that can be said in favor of the pretense theory. Nor do I pretend to have worked out the display theory in full enough detail to warrant your undisputable agreement. I have not even attempted a rigorous distinction between pretense and display, relying instead on a fairly intuitive grasp of some of the key differences.

I have aimed at something short of all that. And I hope to have gotten both views on the table. I hoped to have shown we should not have as

much confidence in the pretense theory as we may be tempted to have. And I hope to have shown why the display theory of *acting* may be more attractive than the pretense theory of acting, whatever merits examining pretense may independently have for understanding the mental mechanisms underlying many of our interactions with the world and with each other.

*Kansas State University*  
*Manhattan, Kansas*  
 USA  
 hamilton@ksu.edu

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