

**Between Theatre & Anthropology**

Richard Schechner

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985. xiv + 342 pp.  
\$35.00 (cloth), \$14.95 (paper)*Reviewer:* Frank E. Manning  
University of Western Ontario

When Claude Lévi-Strauss met Roman Jacobsen in New York during World War II, the *entente* led them on parallel, though at times convergent, paths: structural anthropology for Lévi-Strauss and structural linguistics for Jacobsen. Three decades later, another meeting took place, also in New York, between Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. Again, the exchange opened parallel paths as well as active collaboration. Turner espoused "performance ethnography," the playscripting and acting-out of ethnographic monographs as a means both of better appreciating the native experience, and of developing a critique of how that experience is communicated in conventional anthropological writing. Schechner pursued "theatre anthropology," an approach aimed at introducing cross-cultural materials into theatre as well as at understanding, and experimenting with, the social basis of performance situations. Their common interests brought Turner and Schechner together in numerous conferences and workshops, which in turn established them as the nucleus of a seminal group of performance scholars.

*Between Theatre & Anthropology* is Schechner's account of life on the "liminoid" track—a fast one, at that—between disciplines that have come to achieve a cozy mutual admiration. Coverage is highly personal, centring on the author's work as a theatre director, his forays into non-Western cultures and the activities of his close collaborators. The seven chapters were originally written and published as separate essays, but have been revised for the present volume. Nonetheless, in style and scope the book is recognizably an anthology, not a unified study—a sampling, provocatively put together, of Schechner's views about what anthropology and theatre have to say to each other.

Schechner's insistence on cultural variety in theatre stems from his view that the modern world is "intercultural." It is a "world of colliding cultures no longer dominated by Europeans and Americans, and no longer capable of being dominated by anyone" (p. 149). Schechner implements this understanding by having his own company perform a Japanese ritual in an experimental theatre for an American audience, or by bringing an international conference of performance scholars to a black Pentecostal church in Brooklyn. Obviously, he rejects the notion that a performance must be traditional in order to be authentic. A Haitian voodoo service performed by trained actors for a tourist audience has as much claim to authenticity as one performed by conventional ritual specialists for a congregation of devotees. This view, while discomfiting to the romantics and purists among us, is ironically consistent with what anthropologists have usually said about cultural relativity.

Schechner highlights the subjunctive qualities of theatre, an emphasis that was undoubtedly nurtured through his work with Turner. For example, he describes "performance consciousness" as a "celebration of contingency" that is "full of

alternatives and potentiality” (p. 6). The fullest statement of this position is made in his thesis that the essence of dramatic action is the “restoration of behavior”—that is, the creative reconstruction of behaviour that has been removed from its social and psychological contexts outside the performance setting. “Put in personal terms,” he writes, “restored behavior is ‘me behaving as if I am someone else’ or ‘as if I am beside myself,’ or ‘not myself,’ as when in trance” (p. 37).

Schechner’s major interest lies in restorations of behaviours that are not bound by fixed rules and roles, as in stereotyped conceptions of classical theatre, but instead are negotiable, open-ended and continually subject to revision and improvisation. He deals at length with theme parks like Plimouth Plantation and Fortress Louisbourg. In these parks actor-employees are given “biographs” of historical figures whom they “play” in a simulation of daily life that is performed for an audience of tourists, who not only watch the proceedings but also are encouraged to participate in them and thus to “interact” with the principal *dramatis personae*. Encompassing and refiguring a bewildering diversity of conventional dramatic frames, this type of contrived ethnographic setting is regarded by Schechner as crucially important in the development of a performance theory that is informed by contemporary society and popular culture.

A rather different example of the suspension and confusion of customary dramatic frames is seen in *Belle de Jour*, a sadomasochistic theatre in New York where members of the “audience,” male and female, are invited to come on stage and either spank others or be spanked, with the victim’s buttocks fully exposed. One regular patron, a mechanic in “real life,” is particularly fond of having Belle, the middle-aged buxom impresario who runs the show, urinate into his mouth and drive a three-inch nail through his penis. For Schechner, this sort of theatre is *inter alia* a rough-cut version of the evening news on television, where violence is treated as entertainment and given sexual appeal through newscasters chosen for their implicit, but thinly-veiled, sexuality. He contends that the significance of the violence-entertainment-sex formula is more apparent in the widespread media coverage that is given to a “good sexy murder trial” (p. 321)—a contention, one suspects, that is readily corroborated by the recent Buxbaum case in Southern Ontario.

Schechner envisions a future where “metaphoric” (artistic) knowledge will enjoy parity with “linear” (empirical) knowledge (pp. 149-150). Unfortunately, there is a cultural lag between this ideal and the book itself, which is burdened with all types of linear communication—lists, classification schemes, charts, graphs and structural maps, some embellished with mathematical subscripts and other geometric figures. Schechner seems driven to identify, with absolute precision, the significance of his performance experience in an attempt to abstract theory from it. The exhibited result is an almost obsessive reflexivity, which is at odds with much of the book’s general argument.

Such problems notwithstanding, *Between Theatre & Anthropology* is undoubtedly a major work in the field of performance studies. It promises both to keep Schechner’s name at the forefront of that field, and to reward the reader with ideas that, like modern theatre, will entertain, disturb and engage.