# "A JUST AND LIVELY IMAGE" – *PERFORMANCE* IN NEO-CLASSIC THEATRE CRITICISM AND THEORY

by
Anja Huismans

Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Drama** at the University of Stellenbosch

**Supervisor:**
Prof. Temple Hauptfleisch

April 2005

# DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:    .........................................

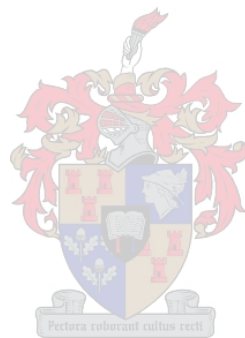Date:    .........................................

# ABSTRACT

The claim that theatre theorists and critics have historically considered the dramatic text a more important part of theatre than the performance is a prominent theme of 20th century theatre theory. This claim was made in various ways, by different theorists in divergent critical contexts. A brief survey of relevant statements by some of these theorists reveals that different things are meant by this claim and that it relates to a range of important critical issues, for example how theatre is defined, how elements within theatre are ranked, authority and autonomy in theatre practice and theory and attempts to control the processes of interpretation in the theatre. We also see that post-structuralist theatre theorists believe that a majority of statements relating to this claim reflect a logocentric attitude in theatre theory. The aim of this thesis is to determine whether this claim is valid when applied to theatre criticism and theory of a particular period, namely Neo-classicism of the 17th and 18th century. Chapters Two and Three consist of a survey of mainly English and French criticism and theory of this period in the context of some of the general philosophical trends of the era. Chapter Two finds that there is a direct link between the rise of Neo-classicism and the trend in philosophy of system-building and that this informs the dismissive attitude to performance that one finds in this era. In Chapter Three we see that the emergence of new directions in philosophy like empiricism encourages a transformation in the critical attitude to performance. Critics acknowledge the importance of the performance to a far greater extent and in some trends in particular, for example the tentative steps towards Realism and the development of acting theory, we see that critics and theorists are starting to insist that all aspects of staging have to be considered. This is due in part because they are concerned with the integrity of the representation and the intentions of the dramatist, so it does not really mean that the text is not, in this era, considered the most important aspect of theatre after all. Chapter Four discusses more systematically how the issues and questions raised in Chapter One figure in the criticism and theory examined in Chapters Two and Three. This discussion finds that to a large extent the claim investigated in this thesis is valid, but that the respective attitudes to 'performance' do reflect different responses to many of the same problems, most specifically problems associated with representation.

# OPSOMMING

'n Belangrike tema in 20[e] eeuse teaterteorie is die aanspraak dat kritici in die verlede die dramatiese teks as meer belangrik as die opvoering geag het. Hierdie aanspraak is op 'n verskeidenheid van maniere, deur verskillende teoretici, in diverse kritiese kontekste gemaak. 'n Oorsig van relevante opmerkings deur sommige van hierdie teoretici wys dat hulle verskillende dinge met hierdie aanspraak bedoel en dat dit verband hou met 'n reeks belangrike kritiese kwessies, soos byvoorbeeld: hoe teater definieer word, hoe elemente van teater hierargies organiseer word, gesag en autonomie in teaterpraktyk en teorie, sowel as pogings om die prosesse van interpretasie in die teater te beheer. Ons vind ook dat post-strukturalistiese teater teoretici daarvan oortuig is dat 'n meerderheid van hierdie opmerkings spruit uit 'n logosentriese tendens in teaterstudies. Die oogmerk van hierdie tesis is om te bepaal wat die geldigheid van hierdie aanspraak is wanneer dit toegepas word op die teaterteorie en kritiek van 'n bepaalde era: naamlik 17[e] en 18[e] eeuse Neo-klassisme. Hoofstukke Twee en Drie bestaan uit 'n oorsig van hoofsaaklik Franse en Engelse kritiek en teorie van hierdie era in die konteks van sommige van die meer algemene filosofiese tendense van die era. Hoofstuk Twee vind dat daar 'n verband is tussen die opkoms van Neo-klasissisme en die filosofiese tendens van sisteembou en dat hierdie verband die basis is van die houding teenoor die opvoering wat mens in hierdie tyd vind. In Hoofstuk Drie sien ons dat die opkoms van nuwe rigtings in

filosofie, soos empirisisme, 'n transformasie van die kritiese houding teenoor die opvoering aanmoedig. Kritici erken die belang van die opvoering tot 'n groter mate en in sommige tendense, soos die stappe in die rigting van Realisme en die ontwikkeling van toneelspelteorie, sien ons dat kritici daarop begin aandring dat alle aspekte van die verhoogkuns in ag geneem moet word. Die motivering hiervoor is deels hulle besorgdheid oor die integriteit van die voorstelling of representasie en die intensies van die dramaturg. Die nuwe benadering beteken dus *nie* dat die teks nie in hierdie era as die belangrikste geag word nie. In Hoofstuk Vier word meer sistematies gekyk na hoe sommige van die kwessies en vraagstukke wat spruit uit die bespreking in Hoofstuk Een figureer in die kritiek en teorie van die 17$^e$ en 18$^e$ eeu. Hierdie bespreking vind dat die aanspraak wat in hierdie tesis ondersoek is wel tot 'n groot mate geldig is, maar dat die onderskeie houdings teenoor die opvoering wel verskillende reaksies tot baie van dieselfde probleme verteenwoordig, spesifiek probleme wat assosieer word met representasie.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# CONTENTS

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The Problem: 'Text' and 'Performance' in 20th Century Theatre Theory

The notion that theatre and drama critics and theorists have, until well into the 20th century, tended to disregard the actual performance in favour of the dramatic text has been generally accepted for great parts of the last century. This can be seen in various areas of 20th century theatre theory and criticism: where critics of the past are criticised for treating plays as nothing more than works of literature and not taking staging into account in their analyses of plays, where modernist director-theorists such as Antonin Artaud claim that they want to free theatre from the 'tyranny' of the text and finally also in the proliferation of discussion of the word 'performance' in theatre studies at the end of the twentieth century. This study wants to revisit and re-evaluate these assumptions.

### 1.1.1 The Director-Theorists

Up to the late 19th century the majority of theoretical works dealing with theatre were written by critics and playwrights rather than stage practitioners. As a result such works tended to focus on the end product, the play, rather than the processes that created it, in other words such works rarely examined staging as a coherent system. In the second half of the 19th century works that discussed the production processes of theatre became more general. This trend can be linked to the development of the modern concept of the director, a single person whose creative vision guides the entire performance. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards European theatre was radically reformed by a new breed of theatre artists, for example the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, André Antoine and especially Constantin Stanislavski, who argued that every aspect of a production had to be carefully planned and rehearsed and that actors should work together as an ensemble rather than as competing individuals. These new directors often put their ideas in writing, creating systematic theoretical explorations of such aspects of stage production as acting, set design and lighting. Such works generally emphasised not only the importance of the director in providing

a coherent vision for the performance, but also pointed out that this director, and not the dramatist, was the true creative force behind the performance; its real 'author'.

Building on the work and ideas of the Realist directors mentioned above (even while they vehemently reject Realism) early 20th century directors such as Edward Gordon Craig, Vsevold Meyerhold and, later in the century, Jerzy Grotowski claim that the true essence of theatre is not the text, but the performance event itself. Craig argues that the arts of theatre and literature must be separated (1983:15) and that the director must be clear on the distinction between the dramatic poem, which is to be read, and the drama which is to be seen on stage and appeals to the eyes and ears of the spectator (Craig 1983:53). He writes that it is because a piece written for the theatre is incomplete until it is realised on stage; that the theatre depends on the director, the "artist of the theatre" as Craig calls him, to allow theatre to reach its full potential and be self-reliant (1983:55-7).

Meyerhold also rejects a theatre that is nothing more than an illustration of the author's words (1969:30) or "the servant of literature" (1969:123). Meyerhold conceives of a new theatricality that will serve as a direct antidote to the literary stage and even suggests that literary dramatists be forced to write some pantomimes[1] in order to overcome their excessive misuse of words and (re)discover theatrical action and movement (1969:124). He asks:
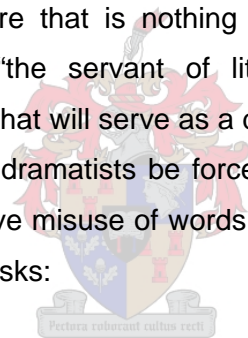
> How long will it be before they inscribe in the theatrical tables the following law*: words in the theatre are only embellishments on the design of movement*?
>
> (Meyerhold 1969:124)

Jerzy Grotowski expands on the work of theorists like these when he undertakes a search for the essential elements of theatre in *Towards A Poor Theatre* (1968). He says that theatre can do without various elements traditionally associated with it, such as make-up, a set, and also a text. He says that the text was one of the last elements added in the evolution of theatrical art (Grotowski 1968:32). He does not reject the idea of the text altogether, but feels that it important to point out that it is not in itself theatre. For him theatre is, in essence, the encounter between spectator

---

[1] Used in the sense of a play consisting of mimed action or dumb show rather than the British entertainment performed during the festive season.

and actor (Grotowski 1968:56). The majority of the director-theorists hold this moderate view of the role of the text. It is a question of considering the text in its proper place, rather than an attempt to create theatre without any type of text at all. The issue is the recognition of the essential elements of theatre. These director-theorists generally believe that action and movement are such essential elements, with words or dialogue being a secondary or non-essential element.

The theorist that appears to come closest to suggesting that the text be totally banished from the theatre is Antonin Artaud. He emphatically rejected the idea that the proper medium of drama is words, asking instead for a concrete poetry of physical action. In *The Theatre and Its Double* (first published 1936) he calls for a theatre that speaks its own language, a language that is particular to the stage. He says that in Western theatre everything that cannot be expressed in words, or be contained in dialogue, has been pushed to the background (Artaud 1995:26). For him the Balinese theatre is ideal because in it the director "does away with words" (Artaud 1995:36) and theatre is not seen as branch of literature or equal to script production.

> The Balinese Theatre was not a revelation of a verbal but a physical idea of theatre where drama is encompassed within the limits of everything that can happen on stage, independently of a written script.
>
> (Artaud 1995:50)
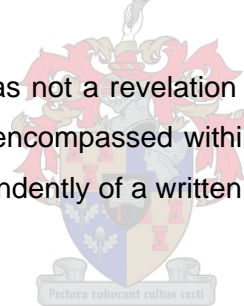
But Artaud also says that it is not a question of abolishing speech in the theatre but rather changing its purpose and function. He wants speech to have a physical and concrete aspect to it, inflection will be more important than meaning, so that it becomes more like incantation (Artaud 1995:53, 68). Even here then, the text remains a part of theatre. The issue for these writers is finding the right kind of place for it so that the integrity of the theatre is protected, so that it may be understood as a distinct art form and not a servant of the other arts, especially literature. Although these director-theorists have in mind very different types of theatre, this new approach to the dramatic text is in all of them inseparable from the idea that theatre is an autonomous art form, with its own unique principles. Where the text is over emphasised the result is a theatre that does not speak in its own voice. A fundamental part of the project of these writers is to promote an authentic and autonomous theatre that speaks its own language in its own voice.

Jacques Derrida, in two essays in *Writing and Difference* (1978), specifically

discusses Artaud's idea of theatre in such terms. Derrida sees Artaud's theatre as an attempt to counter the authority of the author and the evil of representation and return to the actor the breath stolen from him by these elements. The title of his first essay on Artaud is virtually untranslatable: 'La Parole Soufleé', is a complex of puns that points to Artaud's attempt "to forbid that his speech be spirited away [soufflé] from his body" (Derrida 1978:175). Derrida writes that the text is for Artaud a thief that alienates the actor from his speech and inspiration, the very appearing of himself. This is also connected to Artaud's rejection of representation that Derrida deals with in the second essay: 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation':

> Released from the text and the author-god, *mise-en-scène* would be returned to its creative and founding freedom. The director and the participants (who would no longer be actors *or* spectators) would cease to be the instruments and organs of representation.
>
> (Derrida 1978:237)

This idea that representation is the enemy of theatre is widespread in the 20th century. See for example Richard Schechner's comment that artists who understand art as mimesis, accept that art is a second hand version of a more primary reality (Schechner 1982:80). Art that rejects representation is art that proclaims that it is a primary reality in its own right. It is art that is finally and fully autonomous.
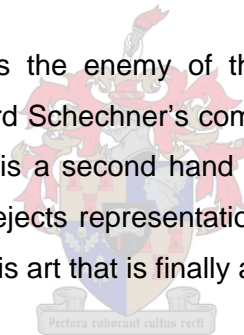
Other issues addressed by these 20th century director-theorists also tie in with their approach to the text: their rejection of Western models of theatre, their rejection of realist illusionism and attempts to break through barriers between performers and audience. Generally these director-theorists' concept of theatre is based on the assumption that Western theatre has historically been subjugated to literature, too discursive and rational and with too little attention being paid to the experience of the audience in the theatre. Putting the text in its proper place is then one step in the direction of a type of theatre that overcomes these shortcomings.

### 1.1.2   Performance criticism

It is quite possibly a result of this type of theatre theory that more literary-oriented critics started to realise that the traditional approach to drama may have ignored the fact that plays were meant to be performed rather than read. So the idea of 'performance criticism' gained ground. J. L. Styan was a major figure in this regard.

He describes the new approach as one in which Aristotelian models of play analysis were left behind for an approach to theatre that would be stage-centred and would take into account that theatre is more than the transference of meaning, but an experience. Thus performance criticism deals with the totality of what the spectator perceives and not only the dialogue (Styan 1987:4-5). The central issue in performance criticism, Styan says, is the interdependence of three elements: script, actors and audience. The aim of performance criticism is to approach the play in its living context, the performance (Styan 2000:2). For Styan and other performance critics the play is not complete until it has been staged.

W.B Worthen, on the other hand, sees performance criticism as an approach that ultimately reaffirms the value put on the text rather than as an attempt to dispel its authority. In *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance (*1997), Worthen argues that performance critics like Styan, continue to depend on the categories of literature and literary interpretation and use performance to uncover meanings intrinsic to the text. In other words Worthen argues that performance critics claim that the true meaning of the text emerges only when it is staged, since it was intended to be performed, but that this in effect preserves the idea that the text already contains all the possible meanings that can be achieved in performance.

> Performance criticism often takes performance as a way of preserving the authentic literary work, as though stage performance merely replays the formal structures of Shakespearean character, language and meanings, in the corporeal idiom of theatre.
>
> (Worthen 1997:155)

For Worthen many 20th century approaches to Shakespeare in performance are to a surprising degree concerned with the idea of the intending author (Worthen 1997:3). He finds that both 'literary' and 'performative' approaches to Shakespeare share an essentialising rhetoric that appears to ground the relationship between text and performance.

> Much as the text-centered view universalizes reading or interpretative practice (the meanings of the play are *in* the text, regardless of the ways readers have been conditioned to read it), so the performance-oriented view universalizes notions of stage performance (the meanings of the play emerge

*on* the stage, regardless of how performers and audiences have been conditioned to produce and see them).

(Worthen 1997:4-5)

This leads him to conclude that texts and performances are not really the issue, but rather how they are constructed as vessels of authority. The text-performance opposition is created by the desire to ground the meaning of theatrical production by attributing it either to the authorial work or to the authorized institutions of stage practice (Worthen 1997:5-6). Instead, Worthen suggests, we could see reading and performance as equivalent sites where meaning is produced. Reading and performance produce alternative interpretations, not a correct versus a false one.

### 1.1.3   Theatre Semiotics

In the theatre and drama semiotics that came to the fore since the 1960s and 70s there is a similar concern with the performance as proper object of study. Theatre semioticians claim that theatre is a system of communication consisting not only of verbal signs, but also of visual and aural signs and that an analysis of a play should take the total situation of the performance event into account, including the contribution of the audience. Susan Bassnett-McGuire (1980) writes that semiotics offers a new methodology that can tackle the fundamental questions of theatre and treat theatre as theatre in the context of the recognition that theatre cannot be reduced to the drama text alone. She considers semiotics to be ideal for a reconsideration of the value of performance, referring to the statement by Patrice Pavis that theatre semiotics arose in reaction against 'textual imperialism' and his declaration that "the text has been restored to its place of one system among the systems of the whole of the performance" (In Bassnett-McGuire 1980:50).

Semioticians or semiologists generally distinguish between a performance (or spectacle) text and a dramatic text (See Elam 1980:3, Aston & Savona 1991:2, Carlson 1990:95 & De Marinis 1987:100). This does not, however, mean that they agree on what the relationship between the two is or should be. In fact the relationship is often considered as one of the central questions of theatre semiotics. Keir Elam for example says it is a central motivating question behind his study of theatre semiotics (Elam 1980:3) and the question is posed on the back cover of Elaine Aston and George Savona's book on theatre semiotics.

Elam says that on the whole literary critics have considered the performance as nothing more than a 'realisation' of the play, but that more recently others have reversed this relationship to argue that the performance in fact determines the play. Elam himself would like to see a more flexible and less deterministic account of the relationship than expressed in either of these positions (Elam 1980:209). Umberto Eco also refers to conflicting tendencies in how the relationship is understood. He says that some consider the performance and not the literary text as the object of theatre semiotics (this appears to be his own position), while others consider the text as the 'deep structure' of the performance and attempt to find in it all the seminal elements of the *mise-en-scène* (Eco 1977:108). Patrice Pavis comments on the absurdity of the idea held by some semiologists that the text is an invariable of the theatre and that the performance is a mere transcodification of one system into another. He says the "*mise-en-scène* is not the putting into practice of what is present in the text" (Pavis 1982:18).

These comments indicate that the issue here is not so much that critics of the past somehow forgot that plays were written to be staged, but really how they define 'performance', particularly in relation to text. In an essay on trends in performance studies Strine, Hopkins and Long identify three ways in which the word 'performance' is generally used. One of these is 'performance' as either metaphor or metonymy, depending on how its relationship to a pre-existing text is interpreted. Viewed as a metaphor,

> the performed text is both constituted and judged in terms of its adequacy, its fidelity, its similarity to aspects or elements of the (typically) written literature.
>
> (Strine et al 1990:185)

As metonymy, the differences between the performance and the literary work are emphasised. Where the play is thus understood as the 'deep structure', or invariable of the performance or where the performance is seen as a actualisation of the play, the relationship between the two is viewed as metaphor. If performance is defined as a metaphor for the text it does not much matter what happens in it, because the real thing is the text. The performance either lives up to the text or it doesn't, either way one need not be bothered with it. Henry Sayre writes that 'performance' has traditionally been defined as the single occurrence of a repeatable and pre-existent text. In this definition the work not only exists independently of its actualisations, but in fact transcends them (1990:91).

> In this model then, a good performance will result from careful attention and scrupulous fidelity to the score or text. It presupposes that the artist's intentions are embodied in the work itself.
>
> (Sayre 1990:92)

The view of the relationship of performance to text that Pavis calls 'absurd' and Sayre as the traditional definition is thus one in which the performance is viewed as a metaphor of the text. Pavis' own position, and that of the other semiologists discussed here, is understanding the relationship as one of metonymy. What Pavis points out is that some semiologists have in their acknowledgement of the importance of performance still found ways to privilege the text because it would somehow already contain everything that can be realised in a performance. This is the same criticism that Worthen directs towards the performance critics. This is also not in essence different from the classic position on performance rejected by performance critics and director-theorists in the 20th century. Generally the tendency in theatre semiotics since the late seventies has been to understand the relationship between text and performance metonymically and to focus on the performance rather than the dramatic text.

These new approaches to theatre criticism and theory are based on the assumption that any discussion of theatre that uses Aristotle as a starting point, as most pre-19th century criticism and theory did, would (because they defined 'performance' as an actualisation of the text) necessarily fail to take the performance as a whole into proper account and put too much emphasis on dialogue in text analysis. Sayre argues that the traditional understanding of performance was then in the course of the 20th century replaced by a new definition where the term refers to a type of work "from which the authority of the text has been wrested" (Sayre 1990:93). Performance becomes a creative transformation of a text and exists on its own terms. As such Sayre sees it as inherently open-ended, participatory and indeterminate (Sayre 1990:94). This new definition of performance would then lead theatre theory into new directions. The shifts in theatre and drama theory that have been discussed thus far stay within the parameters of theatre itself, and the performance referred to is basically still the staging of a play. In the last decades of the 20th century the word 'performance' has, in the spirit of this new definition, also been used to challenge and broaden definitions of theatre and even sometimes defined as something diametrically opposed to it.

### 1.1.4   Performance Theory

Journal articles and books from the 1960s onwards reflect a growing tendency within theatre studies to move away from examining and writing about theatre towards studying 'performance', especially in the United States. The word is now used widely and in a variety of ways. This trend opened up the field so that the word 'performance' has become subject to what Bert States calls a limit problem. What it referred to was no longer clear because it could mean almost anything. States writes that 'performance' has become a keyword in the sense used by Raymond Williams: that is as "words whose meanings are inextricably bound up with the problems they are being used to discuss" (States 1996:1). Strine, Long and Hopkins describe 'performance' in a similar way. They write that one of the three ways the word was often used was as what philosopher W.B. Gallie called a 'contested concept'. This means that the word's very existence is bound up in disagreement about what it is.

> Although they [performance theorists] place performance in a valorised category, they recognise and expect disagreement not only about the qualities that make a performance 'good' or 'bad' in certain contexts, but also about what activities and behaviours appropriately constitute performance and not something else.
>
> (Strine et al 1990:183)

Studies like these and also Marvin Carlson's *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (1996) take on the task of unravelling 'performance's' meanings. The problem seems to be that on the one hand the rise of 'performance' was due to various metaphorical uses of the term, for example in: linguistics (Austin and Searle), anthropology (Victor Turner), sociology (Erving Goffman) and gender studies (Judith Butler). These metaphoric uses were then often employed by what States calls insider theorists to broaden the field of theatre and performance studies and to help formulate new definitions of theatre and performance. It seems that almost anything can be described as a performance, while it is at the same time not clear how any of this contributes to our understanding of theatre or any narrower definition of 'performance'.

Here we see that 'performance' is often used to extend the field of theatre research in a context where theatre is viewed as marginal cultural activity or where the term 'theatre' is viewed as too limiting and Euro-centric. Schechner specifically uses the

word performance to enable him to deal with activities that do not fit a narrow Western idea of theatre. Schechner builds on the work of Victor Turner, who uses drama as a metaphor in his anthropological work, to create a fresh understanding of theatre. In *Performance Theory* (1988) Schechner claims that theatre has less in common with literature than it has with other activities that may be labelled performative such as ritual, play, games, and sport (Schechner 1988:6)[2].

This kind of shift means that 'performance' may be used to expand the boundaries of theatre studies and can allow theatre scholars to look beyond theatre in their investigations. David George is very excited about 'performance's' ability to overcome traditional boundaries (1989:71). On the other hand, Jill Dolan (1993) and Gay McAuley (1996) are concerned about the marginalisation of theatre that this reflects. Dolan writes that the performative threatens to evacuate theatre studies; so rather than broadening the study of theatre it seems to have enabled theorists to abandon the theatre altogether (Dolan 1993:421). In a general sense then, 'performance' came to be a genus of which 'theatre' was just one species. This meant that theatre was always a form of performance even though all performances weren't theatre.

But more specifically, however, 'performance' also came to be used to describe a new genre of live art. As such it was often used as the opposite of theatre. This new genre took the basic situation of theatre, that of real physical people acting in the presence of other real people, but claimed to do away with traditional elements of theatre such as narrative and character. This performance art was initially very much focussed on the performer's physicality and presence, but later also tended to include the use of various media and technologies. Performance art developed out of a variety of sources: from new directions in the visual arts such as conceptual art, experimental dance and music as well as attempts by theatre artists to overcome boundaries between audience and spectator, art and life. Carlson describes performance art as a varied mixture of artistic activity that tested the boundaries of art and life, rejected the unity and coherence of traditional art, an interest in

---

[2] In *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (1985) Schechner defines performance as restoration of behaviour (or "twice-behaved behaviours" (Schechner 1985:36)) a definition that frames the idea of 're-enactment' in terms of physical action; a definition that again minimises the importance of language and story to theatre and emphasises physical action.

developing the expressive qualities of the body in opposition to logical and discursive thought and speech and celebrating form and process over content and product (Carlson 1996:99).

Many of those involved in creating and describing performance art see it as directly opposed to theatre (Diamond 1996:3). In practice, however, it is not always easy to distinguish between experimental or avant garde theatre and performance art. 'Performance' used in this way is both a genre distinct from theatre and a way to describe a form of theatre that is non-traditional, avant garde and experimental with goals and practices that overlap with 'performance' as a distinct genre. 'Performance' used in this narrow sense is also specifically endowed with characteristics that may distinguish it from theatre. Where 'theatre' is used here (also narrowly) in association with narrative, character, referentiality and a proscenium stage, 'performance' means the rejection of all these things. So we see that Judith Hamera (1986:14) and Schechner (1982:97) specifically speak of 'performance' as a kind of work that lacks narrative continuity or abandons narrative as its foundation. Josette Féral also writes of performance's rejection of narrativity and representation (Féral 1982:177). In addition to the absence of narrative, performance art is also defined in terms of the importance of the performer to the work. Hamera says that the artist's presence is of such vital importance that the artist and piece may, in fact be indistinguishable (1986:14). In this way the persona of the performer appears to have taken the place that character has in traditional theatre.

The aspect of theatre that is rejected most specifically by American performance artists and experimental theatre practitioners of the 1960s and 1970s is its reliance on a drama text. Elinor Fuchs writes of how performance artists assigned a positive value to improvisation, audience participation and communion in opposition to the author's script that was viewed as a politically oppressive intruder. Fuchs see this as an opposition between "speech that bubbled up from the inner depths" and the alien written word (Fuchs 1985:164). Philip Auslander also describes how experimental theatre and performance of the 1960s predicated its radicalism on its rejection of the authority of the absent author in favour of the actor's pure unmediated presence (Auslander 1994:36-7).

When the term 'performance' first gained currency it was in many ways part of a continuation of the project of the modernist directors described earlier. The central issues were the autonomy of the form and the locus of authority. Where the

modernist directors championed the director as an authority the next generation championed the performer as a foundation of authority (Schechner 1982:32). Generally performance art in this early period (1960s) was a form that saw itself as liberated from any authority outside itself, it was to be completely of the 'now' and 'here'. It offered an experience that could not be reduced to language; that was created in the moment and not programmed by some absent force such as an author. 'Performance' used in this sense translates to an emphasis on the experiential, the extra-linguistic and the unmediated qualities of live art. 'Performance' here was an idealistic celebration of the indeterminateness of both the theatrical event and of live art; it was used to assert that the event should not be reduced to what it means and that it is process rather than product that is important.[3] Later definitions of 'performance' (for example Phelan (1993) and Féral (1982)) build on these ideas and emphasised the impossibility of absolutely capturing performance and it is described as indeterminate, open-ended, ludic, uncertain and ambiguous.

### 1.1.5   Performance, Postmodernism and Post-structuralism

This sense of performance as fundamentally playful, ambiguous and uncertain then also contributed to a strong association between 'performance' and 'postmodernism'. David George (1989) suggests that performance in its ambiguity can provide an ideal model in a postmodern age and Michel Benamou calls performance the unifying mode of the postmodern (Benamou & Carmello 1977:3). Nick Kaye describes the postmodern as an unstable event that disrupts discourse and representation and resists definition (Kaye 1994:145). The postmodern is in this sense already performative and performance is thus particularly suited to postmodern experience because it also refuses to be pinned down and defined.

It would be in this association with postmodernism that the term becomes most unstable and confusing. This is so specifically because authors of descriptions of postmodernist theatre, influenced by post-structuralism, often distinguish their

---

[3] This 'performance' is often specifically opposed to semiotics. See for example Jean Alter's (1990:31) distinction between the semiotic (or referential) and performant functions in theatre. For Alter both these functions are essential, although he says that there are theorists that privilege one over the other. Marcia Brewer also refers to this tendency:

> Although their definitions remain slippery, a new opposition appears to be emerging between theatricality understood semiologically, and performance, considered as an infra- or supersemiotic that opens theatre and spectatorship to productions no longer governed by a hierarchy of representation subordinated to language as meaning.
>
> (Brewer 1985:24)

approach to the word 'performance' from the approach of earlier writers that opposed text and performance in an absolute way. Michael vanden Heuvel, for example, writes that Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics renders the foundation of much performance theory and theatre from the sixties problematic (1994:46).

It is possible to speak of two phases in the discourse around 'performance': an initial stage in which performance was celebrated as everything the text was not and in this sense served as the inspiration for new types of art and the basis of new types of theatre, and a second stage in which the text itself was seen as performative and the opposition between text and performance breaks down. Writers like Fuchs (1985), Diamond (1996), Auslander (1994), Sayre (1983) and George (1989) still associate 'performance' with ambiguity, uncertainty and dispersal of authority (associations that inform the opposition to text in the first place), but point out that these qualities characterise texts as much as they do performances.

These writers show that the opposition between text and performance deconstructs in a way that is analogous to the opposition between speech and writing of which Jacques Derrida writes[4]. The result is that 'performance' is now also associated with

---

[4] Derrida rereads many of the canonical texts of Western philosophy to illustrate how they are constructed as truthful descriptions of reality, while at the same time their claim to truth is undermined because their foundation is a way of thinking based on binary oppositions of which the opposition between speech and writing is central. In *Of Gramatology* (1976) Derrida argues that the tradition of Western thought since Plato has privileged speech over writing. Writing is seen as a mere representation of speech and, even more particularly, as a dangerous representation that separates the utterance from its author and his intentions. Philosophy wanted to define itself against writing to protect the relationship between an author's intentions and his words as experienced by the reader. This favouring of speech over writing Derrida calls logocentrism.

> Logocentrism, to put it in summary form, is an attempt which can only ever fail, an attempt to trace the sense of being to the logos, to discourse or reason (*legein* it to collect or assemble in a discourse) and which considers writing or technique to be secondary to logos.

(Derrida in Mortley 1991: 104)

The opposition between speech and writing acts as the basis of other oppositions for example between nature and culture. In each of these one term is privileged over the other. Derrida argues, however, that because these terms depend on one another this hierarchy cannot be maintained and the opposition deconstructs. Deconstruction is the process whereby texts reveal their inherent instability. Derrida repeatedly points out that deconstruction is not a project, method or system (see for example 1995:356), but something that 'takes place' (1988:3-4).

Gayatri Spivak points out in her preface to *Of Grammatology* (1976), that Derrida's project is not a simple reversal of the hierarchy established by the opposition between speech and writing, he is not now privileging writing over speech, but rather points out that speech is structured like writing (that there is 'writing in speech'), in other words that there is no

a new type of textuality. This allows the authors mentioned above, and also someone like Erik MacDonald to speak of the text's return to the theatre in the 1980s (MacDonald 1993:5). This 'return of the text' does not mean that theorists have merely reverted back to the old idea of the text as the stable benchmark of which a performance is only an inadequate realisation or actualisation. This is textuality as described by Roland Barthes[5] (1979 & 1981) or Derrida's play of *différance*; a type of textuality that may be called performative itself.

Auslander (1994), Fuchs (1985), Brewer (1985), Sayre (1983), MacDonald (1993) and Vanden Heuvel (1994) recognise trends in performance art and theatre from the 1980s onwards that they understand in terms of the post-structuralist critique of the aesthetics of presence[6]. These writers believe that the new generation of American

---

structural difference between writing and speech (Spivak 1976:lxx). Speech, for Derrida, is already a form of writing in a generalised use of the term that he here calls arche-writing (Derrida 1976:53-56). It is not a writing that is produced, but the structure that produces language. This structure is, Derrida says, the writing that comprehends language (Derrida 1976: 7).

Such reversals of the oppositions do happen, according to Derrida it might even be an unavoidable part of political struggles, but

> if from the beginning another logic or another space is not clearly heralded, then the reversal reproduces and confirms through inversion what it has struggled against.
>
> (Derrida 1995:84)

Reversals of the oppositions appear revolutionary, but only replicate the same kind of logocentrism. The opposition will still be vulnerable to its deconstruction. It is still not able to sustain itself because the privileging of the dominant term depends on the second term. The first term acquires meaning only through its differentiation from the second and therefore cannot exist without it.

[5] Roland Barthes' distinquishes between 'work' and 'text'. This distinction is closely related to other distinctions like *ecrivants* (writers) and *ecrivains* (authors) and that between lisible (readerly) and *scriptable* (writerly) books. *Ecrivains* produce writerly texts and *ecrivants* produce readerly works. Where the work is concrete, has a determined meaning and is regarded as the possession of its author (whose intentions are respected), the text is not so much an object as an methodological field, it is experienced as an activity a free play of words and meanings. Barthes identifies the text with play, plurality and intertextuality. No respect is owed to the text and the author's intentions are not privileged: he can return only as a guest. The text closes the distance between writing and reading, and is associated with pleasure (*joussance*) and play (Barthes 1979: 74-80). The text is writing as performance:

> Text functions as a transgressive activity which disperses the author as the centre, limit, and, guarantor of truth, voice and pre-given meaning. Instead it produces a performative writing, which fissures the sign and ceaselessly posits meaning endlessly to evaporate it.
>
> (Barthes 1981:31)

[6] Henry Sayre describes an 'aesthetics of presence' as the attempt to make an absolute of art by escaping temporality and transcending history. An 'aesthetics of absence', on the other

performance artists like Laurie Anderson and the later Wooster group recognise the complexity of the text-performance relationship (Vanden Heuvel 1994:7) and "have begun to expose the normally 'occulted' textuality behind the phonocentric fabric of performance" (Fuchs 1985:166). Such performers undermine their own presence (Auslander 1994:43) and in this way deconstruct the "mythology of presence" (Sayre 1983:177) that was fundamental to earlier performance artists like Julian Beck of The Living Theatre, Schechner of The Performance Group and Joseph Chaikin of The Open Theatre.

Post-structuralist performance theorists argue that the celebration of performance as opposed to the text found in experimental theatre and performance of the 1960s was merely a reversal of the hierarchy of the opposition between text and performance. As such it was just another attempt to fix authority and meaning in the theatre, another variety of the metaphysics of presence, this time located in the person of the performer rather than the dramatist[7]. Vanden Heuvel writes that in their attempts to break down the text's transcendental signifier performance artists like the Becks, Schechner and Chaikin inadvertently proposed performance as a new transcendental signifier, they really only succeeded in substituting one authoritarian locus of power for its opposite (Vanden Heuvel 1994:11-12). Fuchs makes the same argument:

> We can now see that the radical Presence of the earlier generation was only an extreme version of the traditional theatrical Presence that has always banished textuality *per se*, and enshrined the (apparently) spontaneous speaking character at the centre of action. … The earlier generation, while declaring with Beck that 'the Theatre of Character is over', was still carrying

---

hand, recognises how art is rooted in its context and can only ever be conditional (Sayre 1983:174).

[7] Auslander extends this critique to modernist director theorists. He says that theatre theorists have tended to treat acting as philosophers treat language, that is as a transparent medium that provides access to truth, as 'speech' in the Derridean sense where there is no disjunction between intention and meaning (Auslander 1997:29). The self is seen as the autonomous foundation of acting.

> Theorists as diverse as Stanislavski, Brecht, and Grotowski all implicitly designate the actor's self as the *logos* of performance; all assume that the actor's self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths.
>
> (Auslander 1997:30)

out the Renaissance humanist program of Cartesian self-centred signification. A theatre of Absence, by contrast, disperses the centre, displaces the Subject, destabilises meaning.

(Fuchs 1985:165)

Furthermore theorists have started to point out that the concept of 'theatre' that these earlier performance artists were using was also problematic. McAuley argues that proponents of performance like Schechner have exacerbated the misconception that theatre is primarily a written art form. She says that theatre is the form of art that always evades closure, is always interactive and thus open to deconstructive practice (McAuley 1996:142-4). For George theatre is fundamentally ambiguous and as such always subverts logos. He says theatre is ontologically subversive (George 1989:74). Similarly Vanden Heuvel says that theatre by its nature gives voice to difference (Vanden Heuvel 1994:7). The proponents of performance appeared to have, in their attempts to escape the dominance of the text, accepted the old fashioned definition of theatre as something conceptualised in the written paradigm. These later writers argue that that definition of theatre was never valid and that "[m]aybe the text never really left the theatre" (MacDonald 1993:5). These writers thus suggest that the text and performance relationship should not be understood as antithetical, but as dynamic and complimentary.

Text and performance, when one dominates without the mediating influence of the other, tend to confirm and endorse Presence and to give a self-confirming illusion of power. The essential difference is that the text does not mask its Presence, while performance art uses a more subtle strategy to mystify its relationship to the spectator.

(Vanden Heuvel 1994:12)

Postmodernist theatre is thus distinguished both from an idea of theatre that puts the (logocentric) text central and one that reverses the opposition to put performance central. This may be rephrased in the following way: postmodern theatre may be distinguished from modern theatre in its rejection of a hierarchical opposition between text and performance whether 'text' was the privileged term in this opposition or whether 'performance' was the favoured term (as increasingly happened in the 20$^{th}$ century). A post-structuralist theatre theorist such as MacDonald says that the text is the primary vehicle for making sense in the dominant theatre tradition (MacDonald 1993:1), a statement that any of the director-theorists or

proponents of performance criticism would agree with. Where theorists like MacDonald leave many of these director-theorists and some performance artists behind is in the assertion that substituting another primary vehicle for making sense for the text is not sufficient. 'Making sense' is not an activity that can be controlled by authors, directors or performers.

These post-structuralist theorists focus on distinguishing postmodern work from experimental work of the 1960s. Since their agenda is primarily to find ways to describe contemporary work, the text-centred logocentrism of Western theatre up to the 20th century is assumed rather than examined. So when Fuchs states that drama has, since the Renaissance been the form of writing that strives to create the illusion that it is made up of spontaneous speech (1985:163) and George points out that the ambiguities of performance have traditionally been resolved by the tyrannical process of privileging one term over the other (1989:77), they are claiming that Western theatre since the Renaissance has been logocentric without any attempt at a thorough investigation. While Auslander (1997) has examined the logocentrism of earlier director theorists, specifically Brecht, Stanislavski and Grotowski, he has not extended his enquiry to include any earlier writers.

The specifically post-structuralist understanding of Western theatre as logocentric thus supplements the general idea that on the one hand theatre critics and theorists have neglected to take the full implications of theatre being a performed art into account (i.e. have not practiced performance criticism or have misunderstood the relation between text and performance) and on the other hand the claim of twentieth century practitioner-cum-theorists like Artaud, Craig, and others that 19th and some 20th century directors, playwrights and actors have in their approach to theatre practice not recognised that the true essence of theatre lies in the performance and not the drama text. In the post-structuralist version, however, it is not a simple question of opposing text and performance, but of recognising that that opposition has existed in Western theatre, that it has been reversed, and that both cases reflect an attempt to establish a central authority in the theatre that would contain the ambiguity of the event.

All of this leaves the contemporary theatre scholar with the vague idea that Western theatre has traditionally been text orientated at the expense of performance and that this situation has to a large extent been remedied by the end of the 20th century, at least theoretically. It is usually Aristotle who is blamed for the neglect of performance.

Natalie Cohn Schmitt, for example, says that it is Aristotle's assumption that language corresponds to and reflects the world exactly that enabled critics and theorists to regard the text as the play itself. Aristotle, she says, believed that language was the premium medium of drama and that as such it accurately captures reality so that no more is needed than what is contained in the text of the play (Schmitt 1990:16). Although a reading of his *Poetics* would suggest that Aristotle viewed action rather than language as the primary medium of drama, his theory of drama does not appear to include serious consideration of the performance.

In his *Poetics* Aristotle identifies six elements of drama and organises them into a hierarchy that ranks spectacle lowest (Aristotle 1965:39-41). He does not say much more about spectacle apart from instructing dramatists not to put anything in a play purely for spectacular effect. He writes:

> For the power of tragedy is independent both of performance and actors, and besides, the production of spectacular effects is more the province of the property-man than of the playwright.
>
> (Aristotle 1965:41)

On the other hand, he spends considerable space on language and diction (1965:57-65). He also writes primarily about what happens in the story rather than what happens on the stage and tragedies are classified according to their plots (1965:56). So the implication is that Aristotle would judge the performance according to its fidelity to the text. This work has been the primary reference point in discussion of theatre until at least the late 19th century. It is therefore easy to assume that those who write about theatre in this context would share his disdain for elements that relate to theatre as a performed art like spectacle and prefer to concentrate on analysing the drama.

But how Aristotle was applied of course depends on the context in which he was read. Critics and theorists interpret and adapt Aristotle according to the age they live in. It can therefore not just easily be assumed that all critics and theorists in Europe since the Renaissance blindly followed his lead and that he is therefore the only source of logocentrism in Western theatre, if such logocentrism is indeed a fact. The problem is not so much what Aristotle said as how he was used. To claim that Western theatre has historically been characterised by a disdain for performance that is accompanied and informed by a logocentric approach to theatre one would have to

examine specific works of criticism and theory to see how they treat the performance and what type of logocentric attitudes are displayed in this treatment.

## 1.2    Aims

This study thus aims to scrutinize the notion that Western theatre has historically been text orientated rather than performance orientated through an examination of a selection of works of criticism and theory that may be said to be representative of historical attitudes to 'performance'. The study thus hopes to be an examination of how such works of criticism and theory deal with the relationship between text and performance, if that relationship is dealt with at all, what significance is attached in these works to elements specifically associated with performance or staging and whether the text is seen as the primary vehicle for making sense of the theatrical event. Such an examination should give an indication of whether it is indeed accurate to assert that theatre critics and theorists have up to the 20th paid more attention to the text than the performance as is declared by a great deal of criticism and theory in the 20th century.

The aim of this introduction was not only to explore the different ways in which the question of 'performance' featured in 20th century criticism, but also to show that the contemporary concern with 'performance' ties in with very specific issues. Such issues have to do with for example how theatre is seen in relation to its context or to what extent representation is the basis or function of art. As I have said it is not so much that 20th century critics and theorists claim that critics of the past have simply missed the fact that theatre is really a performed art, but that the way in which they define theatre implies a particular relationship between a dramatic text and a performance in which the former is privileged over the latter. It is thus not simply a question of hunting down statements about the irrelevance of the performance (Styan (1987) provides interesting examples of such statements), but to look at how the underlying issues also feature in criticism and theory of the past.

For 20th century critics it is often the related issue implied by the statement that performance has been ignored that is of real importance. So, for example, when a director-theorist like Edward Gordon Craig writes of the text-orientation of traditional theorists he is specifically concerned with the idea of theatre's autonomy and implies that traditional critics have not viewed theatre as autonomous. Thus historical theorists' position on these issues would be as important as any direct statements on

the importance or irrelevance of performance to discussions of theatre by them. An examination of the notion that Western theatre theorists and critics have privileged the text over the performance thus would have to include a look at how the following issues figure in historical works of theatre theory and criticism:

- The proper place of the text in the theatrical system. In other words, is the play and its words one element among many in theatre or a primary or predominant element? No 20$^{th}$ century theorist claims that it is even possible to create theatre without some form of a text, even if it is just a loose plan or scenario for a performance. The issues are, on the one hand, whether that text should primarily consist of words that are to be spoken or actions that are to be carried out and on the other whether it is words, actions or visual and aural effects that provide the chief reference point in making sense of the play or the performance. More than that, the issue is also whether the text is seen as something that provides meaning on its own, or whether the collaboration between actors, script and audience, the interdependence of these elements, are recognised. The notion that past theorists have ignored the performance here relates to the idea that past critics have seen words as the main interpretative reference point, and have analysed the text in terms of words rather than actions, studied this text as separate from other theatrical elements, have not valued spectacle as an element of theatre and in this way exaggerated the importance of the words to theatre.

- The autonomy of theatre as an art form. The question of the autonomy of art is generally the question of whether art should be judged according to principles outside of itself, whether it needs outside justification. But more specifically the idea that art forms are autonomous also means that each form of art is governed by its own unique principles. The issues here are, on the one hand whether theatre is a form of literature or an art form in its own right governed by distinctive principles and on the other hand whether theatre should be judged according to principles outside of itself, such as its fidelity to reality or its morality. So the assertion that the text has been favoured over performance is often also a statement that theatre has been viewed as branch of literature and that too much emphasis was put on theatre as representation.

- How 'performance' is defined in relation to the 'text'. This introduction referred to two ways in which the relationship between a drama text and a performance can be described. The performance is either a necessarily imperfect actualisation of the text or a total transformation of the text that becomes work of art in its own right. The question here is whether the text is seen as sacrosanct or as something that can be worked on, improvised with or transformed in a performance. How the relationship is defined also indicates whether the dramatic text is seen as already containing all the potential meanings that can be generated in a performance of it, in other words functions as a 'deep structure' for the performance, or whether the performance is seen as a new text with new meanings. The understanding that plays are written to be performed and cannot be considered complete before they are performed is at the heart of this issue. Is a play defined as essentially a written thing or as something that has to be performed in order to fulfil its potential?

- The dissatisfaction with how traditional definitions of 'theatre' exclude non-European dramatic activities, and also less formal and more popular European forms or avant garde work. Some performance theorists criticise the emphasis on a drama text specifically because they claim that theatre has traditionally been defined by its use of a particular kind of text. The traditional definition, relying also on other elements such as a stage, costumes, representation etcetera, is seen as Euro-centric, elitist and dependant on a dichotomy between popular and serious culture. The claim that theatre theorists and critics have traditionally favoured the dramatic text over the performance thus also sometimes addresses a definition of theatre that appears to exclude popular, non-Western and avant garde performances and is a plea for a more inclusive definition of theatre.

- The question of authority in relation to the theatrical event, which is closely related to the assumption that western theatre, like other branches of Western thought and culture, has been logocentric. This means that theatre theory has attempted to keep potential interpretations under control and to preserve the intentions of the author. This author need not be the dramatist, but any creative source in the theatrical situation, for example the director or the performer. Theatre is logocentric whenever it attempts to assign a privileged position to the author with regards to how the play or performance may be

interpreted. Such logocentric attempts are examples of the privileging of speech over writing precisely because it is believed that in speech there can be an exact match between author and intentions. When post-structuralist theatre theorists write that the text, rather than the performance has been the primary vehicle for making sense in Western theatre, that text has been privileged over performance, they are concerned with how theatre theorists have traditionally privileged speech over writing in their descriptions of theatre.

## 1.3    The Process of Selection

If the goal of this study is to examine the notion that Western theatre critics and theorists have in the past tended to focus on the text at the expense of performance, the ideal would be to look at as many works of criticism and theory as possible covering the entire known history of Western theatre. This ideal would, however, exceed the requirements of a study of this and necessitate a work on the scale of Carlson's *Theories of the Theatre* (1993). The best that can reasonably be attempted is to reduce the scope the study by limiting the examination in specific ways by selecting particular works to be examined. Such a selection could be made based on a particular era or period, works from a particular country, a specific type of work (e.g. commentaries on Aristotle) or on a specific topic (e.g. Shakespeare criticism).

While there are very specific problems associated with basing such a selection on era or period it would seem to be a relatively neutral and inclusive way of doing it. The decision made in this regard was to examine the period and body of work in Western theatre history usually labelled Neo-classicist, a period extending roughly from the 1620s to the 1780s. The selected period thus consists of the two centuries that effectively represent the birth and early development of modernity in Western thinking and culture. Within such a time frame further selections will have to be made. The next step is thus selecting what can be considered to be a reasonably representative sample of works of criticism and theory of that period. The fact that the selection is made on this basis does not mean that the problems associated with such a selection are not acknowledged. The way in which the study is limited is not meant to imply agreement with the idea that theatre or literary history can be

understood as a succession of distinct periods, or agreement with the evolutionary model of development implied by historical overviews[8].

Modern Western dramatic and literary history has traditionally been described as a succession of ages characterised by a dominant trend or theme, such as Neo-classical, Romantic, Realist, Absurdist etc. While this neat progression has been discredited as over simplified and reductionist by theorists such as Northrop Frye (see Sambrook 1986:10), the scheme persists as a convenient structural device in historical overviews of Western theatre. And while it is certainly true that actual works of art, criticism and theory generally tend to exceed these kinds of neat categories and that where such themes can be identified they often co-exist rather than succeed each other as an orderly development, the label Neo-classic would appear to be more effective than most.

Neo-classicism is unique in that it was a long lasting, reasonably coherent theoretical system that dominated discussion of all the arts. From the early 17th century up to the last part of the 18th century it would almost impossible to find a critic that rejected it completely, even while there was increasing disagreement about how its basic principles should be interpreted and applied. After the end of the 18th century it becomes increasingly difficult to discuss theatre theory and criticism under a single heading. A discussion of Neo-classicism can thus claim that it covers most or a reasonable majority of theatre critics and theorists of the era which discussions under the heading of Romanticism or Realism cannot do. For this reason it seems ideally suited to the type of project outlined above.

Furthermore, Neo-classicism is generally considered to be the most conservative type of Western theatre. If there is any period in the history of Western theatre that

---

[8] The idea of literary history generated some controversy in the second half of the 20th century. While René Wellek's *History of Modern Criticism* (used extensively in later chapters of this study) was published very optimistically in the 1940s, the idea that such a project was even possible seemed to be universally rejected soon after. So much so that Wellek later wrote an essay in which he addresses the decline of literary history and his own disillusionment with the evolutionary model. He later writes that literary works do not cause one another, even while one can be the necessary condition of the other (Wellek 1982:72). The end of the 20th century saw a return of interest in history as the ideal of universality that inspired groups like the New Critics to reject literary history was rejected in its turn. The new historicism, as described by Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdés is not an attempt to revive the idea that the history of art or literature is a steady development or improving progression, but rather a understanding of how all works of art are embedded in a specific ideological cultural and social context. While understanding art historically is thus once again acceptable, what Hutcheon and Valdés call a 'teleological, developmental narrative' (2002:x) is not (even if, as Hutcheon also shows (2002:3), such narratives are very persistent).

would fit the accusation that theatre as performed art is not acknowledged or where theatre is not seen as autonomous, Neo-classic theatre of the 17th century (as distinct from the more informal respect for the classics that characterises the Renaissance) would have to be it. The type of theatre prescribed by the principles of Neo-classicism is moralistic, representational and firmly regulated. While the theatre artists of the Neo-classic era did not invent the proscenium stage (that universal enemy of the modern theatre was a product of the Italian Renaissance) it does to a large extent represent the moment in history where that type of staging becomes almost universal in formal European theatre. Many of the writers discussed in the introduction associate their critique of a theatre dominated by the text to a theatre that uses the Italianate or proscenium stage. It would therefore seem particularly fitting to examine this specific era for its attitude to performance.

It was in France that Neo-classicism first began to be formulated. The French supplanted the Italians as the chief theorists in Europe in the 17th century through the development of their particular type of Neo-classicism. From then on Italian critics would mostly follow the lead of the French (an example of such a Neo-classic Italian critic in the 18th century is Carlo Goldoni). In the 18th century English critics began to play a stronger role in the direction that Neo-classicism was taking and English criticism now had a discernible influence on French critics and theorists such as Diderot. The demise of Neo-classicism was first visible in Germany, where Lessing's new interpretation of Neo-classicism inspired the birth of Romanticism. France, England and Germany can thus be identified as the strongest role-players in the rise and fall of Neo-classicism. This is why the selection of theoretical works is made from these three countries.

Since the aim of this study is to examine the attitude that *critics and theorists* have to performance, there will be very little reference to actual theatre practices or plays of the era. This might create the impression that the critics and theorists provide an accurate description of theatre practice of that era. It is important to acknowledge that what happened in the theatre in this era could be very far removed from the theoretical ideals. Most theatre historians will point out that French and English theatre in the Neo-classic era was a very boisterous affair with a high level of interaction between stage and auditorium (promoted by such factors as seating audience members on the stage and that the chandeliers in the auditorium weren't put out for the performance). Furthermore it sometimes seems that what was performed in this theatre were not so much plays as social games, with people

attending the theatre to see and be seen rather than with any concern for the particular play. Neo-classic critics spoke out against many of these practices, but clearly never managed to bring actual theatre practice absolutely in line with their ideals. And while the successful French plays of the 17th century mostly abide by the rules, there seems to be very little regard for these rules in English plays even where their authors express their acceptance of the basic principles of Neo-classicism. This kind of gap between theory and practice is not uncommon, it may even be inevitable. Even where the theory and practice is as interwoven as it is in the work of Bertolt Brecht, there is a noticeable difference between goals and results. So, although Neo-classicism influenced theatre practice it is chiefly a phenomenon of theory. The focus on theoretical works does not mean to imply that how theatre is defined in this domain is how everyone, including theatre artists, actors and dramatists understood theatre.

This study cannot claim to be based on an examination of every single work of theory or criticism produced in the 17th and 18th century. The best that can be said is that the findings of this study are based on an examination of a selection of works of criticism and theory from the period, supplemented by general studies of the period done more recently by for example René Wellek (1970) and Marvin Carlson (1993). The selection of works of criticism and theory was guided, on the one hand, by what is included in two major anthologies of drama theory and criticism, Bernard Dukore's *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski* (1974) and Barrett H. Clark's *European Theories of the Drama* (1965) and on the other hand, by works and writers that Carlson, Wellek etc. specifically identify as significant.

The use of these anthologies creates some problems for the study. In the first place essays included in these anthologies are usually abridged. This means that the opinions and arguments as they appear in these anthologies have already been mediated by the biases of the editors of the anthologies. With major writers like John Dryden, Denis Diderot and Gotthold Lessing complete versions of the essays or books are readily available and editions where the editing is less severe and intrusive could be consulted. With lesser-known critics the anthologies are sometimes the only readily available source. Essays or treatises by such writers were used as they appear in the anthologies with the conviction that comparisons between the selections in the two anthologies and with how the arguments are described in general studies of the period could prevent this problem from impacting on the study too severely.

In the second place there is a possibility that the criteria used by Dukore and Clark for inclusion in these anthologies may in themselves reflect the kind of bias that this study wants to examine. This would mean that the findings of this study might better reflect the attitude that Dukore and Clark have towards performance than the attitude of 17th and 18th century critics. This possibility is confirmed by the fact that no works on speech or acting of the 18th century are included in the two anthologies while Carlson (1993) and Taylor (1972) refer to various treatises on acting that appeared in this era. It is, however, safe to say that Carlson does not share this bias. This is confirmed not only by this specific work, but also by the other works by him referred to in this introduction (1990 & 2000). And Carlson does indeed distance himself from the selection criteria of Dukore and Clark in his preface to the first edition of *Theories of the Theatre* (1993:10). The extent to which Carlson, then, supplements the selection of works to be examined here would hope to remedy this problem on the assumption that Carlson would include reference to theoretical works that deal with production and staging where these exist.

## 1.4    The Project

The project undertaken in this dissertation is thus a close reading of a selection of European works of theatre criticism and theory from the 17th and 18th centuries to determine the extent to which theatre is treated as a performed art, how elements specific to performance are treated and also to identify common themes and issues. Such general themes can then be explored to begin to see how they relate to the issues fundamental to the text-performance discourse of the 20th century.

The vocabulary of 17th and 18th century theatre criticism and theory is very different to that of contemporary theory and the text-performance dichotomy does not, as Worthen points out, actually exist until the 19th century[9]. It is thus unlikely that words

---

[9] Worthen argues that the modern construction of the text-performance dialectic is dependent on the rise of print culture and the 19th century institutionalisation of 'literature' as a rival means of producing drama. Institutionalised literature displaced theatre as a centre of cultural authority, and Worthen, following Michael Bristol, sees this as the source of the text-performance debate which is really about authority (Worthen 1997:25). According to Worthen the relationship between text and performance in earlier periods of English theatre, as well as Noh theatre for example, is immanent rather than interpretative. Performance and text had very little to do with one another. Authority came from theatrical tradition, the theatricality of the performance and how it conformed to taste of audience, not its faithful interpretation of the text.

like 'text' and 'performance' will feature much in 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century essays on theatre, and if they do it is unlikely that they have the same meanings, or at least the range of meanings, that they do today. If the assumption that all of these critics saw the performance as irrelevant to their discussion is true, it is hardly likely that they would need to justify or explain that attitude by for example even making a proper distinction between a play and a performance of it. It would be implicit. In the absence of explicit statements, or in the light of the possibility that there may be very few statements that directly indicate a privileging of text over performance, an assessment of the claim that such a privileging exists will to a large extent have to be inferred from general trends and statements on related issues.

A good starting place is to look at the way in which 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century critics and theorists approach aspects of theatre that are related more closely to theatre as a performed art than as a literary art. Such aspects include in the first place what these theorists, following Aristotle, call spectacle, that is visual and aural aspects. Secondly it would include references to acting as an art or discipline and the effect that good or bad acting is seen to have on a play. Thirdly the role of the audience may be included here, the importance of the reception of a play as well as the kind of responses the critic appears to expect.

Since the objective of this study is not to examine the attitude to performance as an isolated phenomenon, but as an anchor in a network of related issues, statements that may not immediately appear to have direct bearing on the issue, but that are indicative of more general trends in criticism and theory of the period, will have to be examined as well. Such general trends may relate to issues such as the autonomy of theatre, the importance of representation and the hierarchy of theatrical signifiers, all

> The possibility that a performance's authenticity could be judged through reference to the text or, more precisely, through reference to literary values thought to lie in the text develops with the evolving status of literature as a recognized and distinct mode of production, and of the author as its normative agent.
>
> (Worthen 1997:28-9)

The rise of the modern director is then directly tied to these developments. The director's function, Worthen says, measures the newly unstable relations between texts and performances because the director restates and rivals the work of the author. The director, as a modern institution, thus arises exactly when theatrical practice "developed both an optional relation to the text and a need to encode its representations in relation to the text and the literary authority it now held" (Worthen 1997:32). As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter it was these modern directors that took the lead in the attempt to distance theatre from literature as an institution and to draw emphasis away from the text. Edward Gordon Craig, as we have seen, wished to establish the authority of the director as theatre artist in the place of the dramatist.

of which are directly related to 20<sup>th</sup> century discussions of the text-performance relationship. It is possible that an examination of such more general trends will also serve to illuminate underlying factors and motivations for the particular attitude to 'performance' that can be identified.

The following chapters will thus be a discussion of various themes identified in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century criticism and how aspects relating to theatre as a performed art are treated in works of criticism in theory, either explicitly or implicitly. Chapter Two will deal specifically with the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Chapter Three with the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although an absolute separation of the two centuries is artificial and to a certain extent arbitrary, it would appear that Neo-classicism takes a distinct turn at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and that two phases, roughly concurrent with the succeeding centuries can be identified. The two chapters on Neo-classic theory are thus meant to deal with the particular themes and concepts of two distinct phases of Neo-classicism. This does not mean that the second phase replaced the first exactly at the turn of the century, but rather that generalisations about 18<sup>th</sup> century theory and criticism show a tendency to take the basic principles of Neo-classicism in directions novel enough to warrant a separate discussion of general trends of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The fourth chapter will attempt to draw together the findings of the examination of the two phases of Neo-classicism. In this concluding chapter I will hope to make a coherent statement about the early modern understanding of the performance aspects of theatre and the extent to which the early modern definition of theatre is based on an idea of the performance as inferior to the text.

## 1.5 Terminology

It should be clear from this introduction that the basic vocabulary of theatre studies has over the last few decades become treacherous territory. 'Performance' and to a lesser extent 'theatre' now appear to be words that may mean various things and they have exceeded their dictionary definitions to a large extent. So it has become necessary to be quite explicit about what one intends with the word when using it. Although all the general problems of theatre studies' terminology cannot be addressed here, this last section of the introduction will briefly look at how some of the basic concepts of theatre studies are used in this enquiry.

**'Theatre':**

'Theatre' may mean a building as well as the activity that takes place in that building. 'Theatre' can thus be described as a type of activity, but how that activity is defined depends to a large degree on the specific theoretical perspective from which that definition is attempted. Thus the activity of theatre can described as the staging of plays, but a definition of theatre that includes the text as a necessary element is of course problematic in light of what has been discussed in this chapter (we have seen that some reject theatre specifically because they define it as something that depends on a text). It may therefore be safer to define theatre as the process of performance (like Carlson (1993:10) does). On the other hand 'theatre' as activity can also be defined as a specific type of performance as Richard Schechner (1988) does. In this case theatre is the process of performance associated with particular characteristics for example a stage, representation and the use of a particular kind of space (although these need not be essential) and is an expression of the social life of a community.

From a different angle, theatre can be defined even more inclusively as a social and cultural institution. In this case it is the sum of its various characteristics, conventions, functions and activities as they operate within a social and cultural context.

It is very difficult to limit use of the word theatre to just one of these meanings, especially because alternatives can not always be found. Where 'theatre' is used in this study it most often means theatre as an institution. In these cases it will generally be qualified by the particular country or period it belongs to as in the French theatre or the 18th century theatre. Where 'theatre' is used as an activity the intention is to use it as neutrally as possible. Fortunately the type of activities that can be called theatre in the 17th and 18th centuries and are relevant to this study can without much controversy conform to 'text plus performance' as much as 'the process of performance' without thereby implying a specific relationship between performance and text. Where 'theatre' is used in this way it should be obvious from its context and it should appear without a qualifying adjective.

**'Performance':**

The introduction has dealt with the variety of ways in which the term 'performance' is used. For the rest of this study 'performance' will be something that happens in the

context of theatre and it refers to the staging of a play as a singular event. There may be a number of occasions where using 'performance' as a genus of activities is unavoidable. This means that 'performance' can also refer to activities that are related to theatre, but not quite covered by its basic defining characteristics such as stage building etc. Where 'performance' is used in this way it should be clear from the context.

**'Drama':**

'Drama' may be used to describe a genre of literature written for the theatre as well as individual works belonging to that genre, i.e. plays. Outside of the context of theatre the terms 'drama' and dramatic' are of course also used generally to describe events that are particularly intense or heightened. Here the word 'drama' will be used to refer to the genre consisting of texts written for theatre; thus meaning 'the tradition of the writing of plays'. French 'drama' thus refers to a type of French literature that exists in written or published form, and may be read, even though it was written with staging in mind. Drama- or dramatic texts thus refers to texts written in the tradition of drama.

**'Theory' and 'Criticism':**

These terms often used together to cover two sides of the theoretical aspect of theatre. 'Theory' is a system of general and abstract principles used to explain different aspects of theatre. 'Criticism' refers to works dealing with specific instances of theatre rather than general principles; thus the analysis and critique of a play or performance. To a certain extent the distinction does not properly exist before the 18th century since it is only then that 'reviews' really come into existence as that is when journalistic coverage of the theatre began (at least in London) (Wardle 1992:16). Before then theatre was written about in letters, prefaces and manifestoes as well as books. 'Criticism' in the context of this study thus mostly refers to such letters, prefaces and manifestoes that deal with specific plays rather than general theory. It should also be noted that the form that criticism took before the 18th century really determined that what was written about were published plays rather than performances. This tendency does not in itself reflect any specific bias towards published plays, but rather that it did not necessarily make sense to describe an event that is long past by the time the commentary is printed. The bias is not so

much a question of the specific subject (play vs. performance) but the extent to which the play is understood as something that is to be performed.

**'Text':**

The word 'text' is used as a synonym for 'play' (which is sometimes substituted for it) and as such refers to the written thing that is staged in a performance. It is thus a written work, created with staging in mind, which consists of dialogue to be spoken in a performance, a list of characters and occasionally also instructions for specific actions that should take place on stage, as well as the appearance of that stage (although these aspects are usually inferred from (or imposed on) the dialogue as is the story and types of people featured). In this introduction there was reference to a distinction often made between a dramatic- and a performance text. 'Text' on its own will generally mean a drama text, but sometimes it will still be specifically called a dramatic text in order to avoid possible confusion.
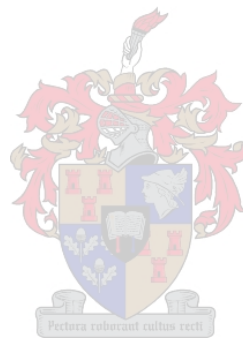
# CHAPTER TWO

## NEO-CLASSICISM IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: REASON, METHOD AND PERFORMANCE

The birth of modern Western theatre coincided, ironically, with a revival of classicism, formalised in France in the 1630s, and disseminated to England and the rest of Europe. This Neo-classicism would remain the dominant mode of criticism well into the 18th century. From the 1630s on, a series of debates and critical skirmishes facilitated the formulation of the basic principles of Neo-classicism, which critics generally derived from admiration for the writers of antiquity and respect for Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Neo-classicism was underpinned by the following basic assumptions: that drama had to be created in accordance to general rules, that these rules were meant to facilitate both a degree of realism, or verisimilitude, and a sound moral message, and that the function of the critic was to judge works' faithfulness to the rules as well as to elucidate the rules derived from Aristotle. The rules themselves were organized around the mimetic function of drama on the one hand, and its moral function on the other. To serve the mimetic function, i.e. verisimilitude, works had to conform to the unities of action, time and place. These unities defined the limits as to what an audience would accept as true. In terms of the moral function, characters and their actions had to conform to *les bienséances*, or good morals, and had, in the Roman and Renaissance term, to be decorous. Although critics differed on some individual points, a fairly coherent theory of drama had emerged by the end of the 17th century.

At the same time one cannot assume a simple homogeneity amongst 17th century critics. Gordon Pocock points out that late 20th century scholarship has challenged many of the traditional views of Neo-classicism. For example the principles were not as binding or monolithic as sometimes supposed. There was not always agreement on even basic issues and authors and public went their own way, sometimes not even paying lip service to the critics' prescriptions. Racine's faithfulness to the rules was not typical of French theatre as a whole. Secondly, the theory itself lays much more emphasis than usually recognised on matters that have little to do with rules, morality or rationalism. Through concepts such as the '*je ne sais quoi'* or the

'sublime' critics acknowledged that poetry might in the final instance be intuitive, irrational and indefinable (Pocock 1980:12). Furthermore the theory was not absolute, but corresponded to social changes.

> The rules themselves were in part founded on observation of what pleased contemporary audiences, rather than on the moral and rational grounds that were asserted.
>
> (Pocock 1980:13)

Pocock nevertheless asserts that Neo-classical doctrine was uniquely powerful because of its combination of three features. In the first place, the principles preceded and accompanied the works written according to them, secondly the great writers of the era took this doctrine seriously and influenced its development. Thirdly, it was also long-lasting and widely accepted (Pocock 1980:14). Neo-classicism transcended enormous social and political changes and was also influential in widely different countries. It was popular in both England and France, in spite of acute differences between these countries (Pocock 1980:15). Such differences also existed in the eras of its lifespan.

> The continuity is the more striking in that it bridges the great divide of early modern history: from the Counter-reformation to the Enlightenment, from Renaissance magic to modern science, from the so-called General Crisis of the 1640s and 1650s (if it existed) to Europe's take off into the industrial revolution and colonial expansion. It is a truism that the intellectual revolution of the 17th century brought profound changes which were to transform not only material civilisation but also mankind's wider culture. Many have seen these changes as causing the decline of poetry, science, it is said, weakened the poetic spirit. Whether this is true or not, the importance of Neo-classical doctrine during this crucial period must at least attract our curiosity.
>
> (Pocock 1980:15)

The connection that Pocock establishes between the rise of science and an understanding of art and literature that emphasises what is reasonable and useful is important. These concepts were crucial to Neo-classicism and have to be understood within the intellectual climate in which they came to the fore. Arguments and debates within Neo-classicism usually derived from different interpretations as to how the rules had to be precisely applied, but however intense the differences on individual

points, the question of what was reasonable was of universal importance. Reason as the basis of truth and value would therefore appear as an important unifying principle in Neo-classic theory, becoming more important than classical models and Aristotle. Classical examples and Aristotle were admired and respected because they conformed to the Neo-classic idea of reason, not for their own sake. It is this emphasis on reason that characterises Neo-classical critics and writers as modern. Their admiration for and emulation of classical models was by no means unique, this is found in other literary periods as well. The significance of Neo-classicism, as well as its fundamental modernity, lies rather in the way it represents a formal attempt to rationally systemise the principles according to which good art is created and enjoyed.

This kind of rational systematisation is typical of 17th century thought. It was the foundation of a new style of thinking in this period, sometimes called scientific, that established the foundation of modern philosophy. Descartes' *Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting Reason and reaching the Truth in the Sciences* appeared in 1637, the same year as the first performance of Corneille's *Le Cid,* generally understood as the event that established Neo-classicism in the theatre. Descartes' treatise has been said to inaugurate modern philosophy and established Descartes as the chief architect of the 17th century intellectual revolution which destabilised the traditional doctrines of Medieval and Renaissance scholasticism (Cottingham 1995:188-9).
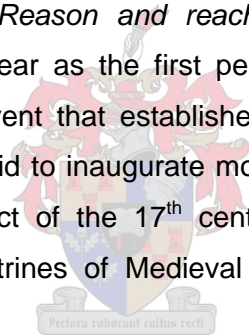
This intellectual revolution is also occasionally referred to as the crisis of the European mind. This phrase describes a period of intellectual upheaval between the authoritarian confessional era and the 18th century enlightenment (Israel 2001:20); in other words the era that marks the transition of authority from church to science. Previously, the combination of church and Aristotelian scholasticism had provided for Western civilisation a largely shared core of faith, tradition and authority; a stable system of meaning that had lasted many years.

> By contrast, after 1650, everything, no matter how fundamental or deeply rooted, was questioned in the light of philosophical reason and frequently challenged or replaced by startlingly different concepts generated by the New Philosophy and what may still usefully be termed the Scientific revolution.
>
> (Israel 2001:4)

This revolution, sparked by Galileo amongst others, generated uncertainty and even the fear that the dissolution of the stable and coherent worldview founded on the authority of the church might lead to chaos. Philosophers and thinkers, in the light of this, felt it was a pressing priority to

> overcome the growing fragmentation of ideas and, by means of solid demonstrations and convincing arguments, restore stable and enduring structures of authority, legitimacy, knowledge and faith.
>
> (Israel 2001:9)

Descartes' method was instrumental in attempts to re-establish grounds for certainty. From the very start the new philosophy wanted to restabilise what it had destabilised. This restabilisation consisted of the following aspects: firstly reason was put before authority as an anchor for ideas and secondly, to ensure that reason did not just degenerate into scepticism and gratuitous questioning it was tied to method; in other words its application was stabilised into procedure. Through this application reason could be the primary instrument of system-building which is the attempt to unify knowledge into principles that are universal and generally true. As this chapter will show, this was exactly the function of Neo-classicism in this era.

## 2.1    The rise of Neo-classicism in the 17th Century
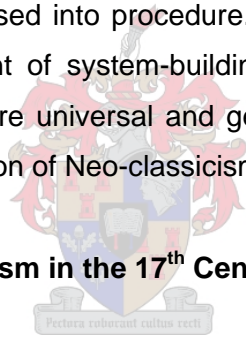
For the first three decades of the 17th century only occasional critical attention was paid to the idea of formulating rules for drama. Then, in 1630, several writers reopened the discussion. These arguments finally culminated in the controversy over *Le Cid* (Carlson 1993:90-94). Pierre Corneille's play was first performed in 1637, and had such an impact that modern French theatre generally dates its inception from it (Hartnoll 1998:98). *Le Cid* proved not only popular, but also controversial, and provoked various critical attacks. To a certain extent the controversy brought up nothing new. Neo-classic principles were already in ascendancy. Carlson points out that the significance of the controversy lay not so much in its content, but in the interest it aroused in the general public consciousness, stimulating a general interest in the rules. Furthermore it made France the European centre for critical discussion

of the drama. French critics would retain this central place for the next century and a half[1] (Carlson 1993:96).

The controversy also illustrates many of the issues that were central to Neo-classicism in this century. George de Scudéry's main criticisms of the play were that it was implausible and immoral. It did not matter that the play was based on historical facts; Scudéry felt that it was not only unlikely that Chimene would marry the man that killed her father, but also immoral (Scudéry in Dukore 1974:212-215). Jean Chapelain, as representative of the French Academy, agreed. Probability and morality should take precedence over historical accuracy.

> There are some truths that are monstrous or that we must suppress for the good of society, or, if we cannot keep them hidden, we must settle for singling them out as abnormal.
>
> (Chapelain in Dukore 1974:223)

The main aim of the Neo-classicists was to ensure that drama was moral, in other words that it expressed and conformed to what they called *'les bienséances'* (good morals, or what is appropriate). In order to convey the moral message effectively, the play also had to be convincing, it had to conform to *vraisemblance* (verisimilitude). *Vraisemblance* did not mean the realistic representation of everyday life, although some came close to implying it should. Nor did it mean literal truth. "*La vraisemblable* usually meant a generalised, idealised probability" (Pocock 1980:6). It had two aspects: idealised truth and what is normally expected.

---

[1] After the Restoration Neo-classicism also took hold in England. Neo-classicism in England necessarily took on a less dogmatic and totalising tone largely because critics there had to deal with an existing national tradition of unquestionably great works that did not fit the Neo-classic mould. While there were attempts to dismiss Shakespeare, and the occasional suggestion that he would have been even greater had he followed the rules, he presented English critics who promoted Neo-classicism with a challenge that 17th century French critics did not really have to face. The English followed Neo-classicism largely in terms of general ideals rather than specific dogmas. Sherburne and Bond can therefore say that:

> Although many of the dogmas imported from the continent were never completely accepted in England, the common-sense aspect of Neo-classicism easily domesticated itself.
>
> (Sherburne & Bond 1993:710)

Although some 17th century English critics contributed to Neo-classicism, and their work will be considered here, it is only in the 18th century that this common-sense version of Neo-classicism becomes dominant and English critics start to play a more significant part in Neo-classicism.

> To judge from some 17<sup>th</sup> century pronouncements, the purpose is an expression of that aspiration of classical art towards the permanent and universally valid, disdaining the ephemeral and freakish.

> (Pocock 1980:6)

That verisimilitude is not simply realism is clear in John Dryden's argument for the use of rhyme in tragedy. Dryden debated the issue with his brother-in-law Robert Howard, who rejected the use of rhyme because he believed that theatre should give the impression of naturally occurring speech (Carlson 1993:113). In his 'Of Dramatic Poesy' (1668)[2], Dryden has his spokesman Neander counter this argument made here by Crites. Neander argues for the use of rhyme, not only because it keeps the imagination under control (Dryden 1962:90), but also because prose would be too exact an imitation of ordinary conversation. Good art selects and heightens the beauties of that which it represents (Dryden 1962:114). Here, as almost always in this period, the Neo-classic idea of 'imitation of nature' is the representation of an idealised reality, abstracted and made universal. In Dryden's view rhyme is not at odds with verisimilitude, but may in fact promote it.

In this sense of it being an 'idealised probability', v*raisemblance* becomes more than just an attempt to be universal, it has a moral dimension as well. This is why v*raisemblance* is closely connected to *les bienséances* (Pocock 1980:7). The latter term again provides us with a mixture of aesthetic and moral factors. It is linked to the high Renaissance concept of decorum, with what is seemly or fitting, but also decency in the moral sense: no heterodox behaviour or ideas should be represented, unless clearly shown that it is not to be admired (Pocock 1980:7).

Working together these two concepts create an interesting tension. The doctrine demands a certain amount of realism, but it has to be a realism of a special kind, it should also be moral. Thora Jones and Bernard Nicol point out that a double standard of evaluation arises out of the partnership between the two concepts.

---

[2] This essay is set within the frame of a fictional conversation between four friends. The friends are: Crites (the critical or censorious), Eugenius (the well-born one), Neander (the new man, possibly represents Dryden himself) and Lisideius (the name is either an anagram of the real person represented or a pun on *Le Cid*). Crites and Eugenius debate the question of the ancients versus the moderns. Neander and Lisideius debate the superiority of English versus French drama. Finally Crites and Neander engage in a debate about the advantage of blank verse versus rhyme. These debates provide an opportunity for a review of some of the critical positions of the time, the debates are not finally resolved and the arguments largely speak for themselves so that the reader is apparently free to make up his own mind, although Eugenius and Neander do seem to come out of it better than the other two.

Certain things are unacceptable because they are not naturalistic and others because they do not conform to moral ideals.

> Naturalism, the closest possible identification between reality and fiction, is invoked in order to persuade and audience that these things as portrayed are, in a general sense, 'true'. On the other hand, the purpose of the persuasion is to instruct, to teach good morality, to present an idealised picture of human conduct.
>
> (Jones and Nicol 1976:56)

In general then, we can see that critics of the 17th century agree that literature should provide some degree of moral instruction. They did not necessarily discount pleasure, it may assist in bringing home the moral aims, or it may exist as a function alongside the moral one. There is no question, however, of art or literature being autonomous, its value is dependant and subordinate to an idea of the good of society. As Jones & Nicol say, with reference to Chapelain, who wrote a general work on drama in addition to his response to *Le Cid*, that poetry is identified with purposes that are unpoetic in their intention, it is judged by norms outside itself.

> Poetic imitation is identified with social and moral conformity.
>
> (Jones and Nicol 1976:54)
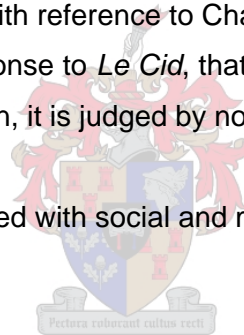
In the Neo-classic view, theatre should not be enjoyable for its own sake. As we have seen in Chapter One the question of 'performance' in the twentieth century is tied up with the idea that art should be autonomous. The rejection of representation that characterises avant garde theatre and eventually performance art for most of the 20th century is largely an attempt to confirm the autonomy of theatre and performance. 'Performance' thus emerges as an important concept as theatre theorists reject two principles absolutely central to Neo-classicism: the idea that art should be a faithful representation of 'life' or 'nature' and the idea that this representation should serve society.

In a general way Neo-classicism is thus inherently at odds with the idea of 'performance', at least as far as this concept is associated with the rejection of representation. The Neo-classic representation has to conform to the ideals of its society and the emphasis is on the message it communicates, not on what specifically occurs in the course of this communication, in other words on the actual

theatre event. But this is not enough to support the claim that Neo-classicists systematically favoured the text over the performance in their view of theatre. It only means that they rejected 'performance' in so far as it is associated with the idea that theatre should be autonomous; this does not necessarily translate into an absolute disregard for the performance as theatre event. The next section will consider the Neo-classic attitude to the performance as theatre event in order to, by the end of the chapter, examine whether Neo-classic critics and theorists did favour the text over the performance in a systematic way.

## 2.2    Neo-classicism and 'Performance'

Criticism of the 17<sup>th</sup> century does not generally give the impression that critics consistently distinguished between drama as performed art and drama as a genre of literature. What goes for the text, goes for the performance as well: it must be morally correct and obey the rules. Although there are a number of ways in which critics implicitly acknowledge that theatre is a performed art, theatre criticism of this era contains very little explicit remarks on the issue.

Many of the general theories of drama offered by critics in the 17<sup>th</sup> century took the form of prefaces to published plays. Reviewing particular productions was not generally practiced in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. While the absence of reviews might in itself indicate that critics did not consider the performance to be important, other factors contributed to this practice as well, for example the fact that newspapers did not really exist at this point and that there would have been no real point to reviewing plays if the review had to be published long after the play had run. Commentary on plays were thus for the most part accompanied by the published play and directed at it in that form. At the same time these commentaries also usually provided some form of a general theory of drama with Aristotle as starting place. These general theories did not for the most part pay much attention to staging, their subject was the writing of dramas, as if that covered the whole art of the stage. Critics assumed that plays were written to be performed, when this was not the case it would be explicitly pointed out, as is the case with Milton's preface to *Samson Agonistes* (1671). But the fact of a play having to be performed did, at the same time, not seem to have any impact on what it in essence was.

More telling, perhaps, is the contrast between actual stage practice and the Neo-classic ideals. While Neo-classic ideals absolutely dominate criticism in this era, the

same was not true of the theatre practices of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In Paris the performance of Neo-classic works was concentrated in the *Hôtel de Bourgogne*, while other theatres such as the *Théâtre du Marais* and the *Salles des Machines* tended to offer fare that satisfied the public's appetite for spectacle. Outside of these licensed theatres a wide range of other types of performance were also on offer, mountebanks, jugglers and all kinds of similar activities constituted an active culture of popular performances. It was only by making a rigorous distinction between respectable theatre and unacceptable vulgarity that Neo-classic theorists could claim that their ideal theatre was a universal model for theatre. One of the chief differences between these disregarded activities and the more respectable fare offered by the *Hôtel de Bourgogne* was that the popular forms paid little attention to morality or the idealised version of 'nature' represented by Neo-classic plays, and very often a text was of little or no importance. So we see that Neo-classic critics ignored forms in which the performance is central in favour of forms in which the text is a much more important part.

Because he was a successful playwright, it might be logical to assume that Corneille would in his works of criticism display a greater sensitivity to theatre as a performed art than most 17<sup>th</sup> century critics. His 'Discourses' (1660) actually reveal the opposite. Jones and Nicol point out that Corneille believed that Aristotle did not consider actors or performance essential to the appreciation of tragedy. Corneille argues for stage directions on this basis: for him stage directions are not primarily meant to help the actors or director translate the text into performance, but to help the reader get a better picture of the play. Where stage directions are helpful in performance it is where they ensure that actors do not make embarrassing mistakes or miss the meaning of the author (Jones & Nicol 1976:78). Corneille's position appears to be quite close to that of 20<sup>th</sup> century performance critics.

In his 'Essay of Dramatic Poesy' (1668), Dryden gives Lisideius the opportunity to define what a play is:

> a just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind.

> (Dryden 1962:25)

Crites notices that this definition is not limited to the genre of drama. All the arts create in some sense images. In the discussion the matter is also left there. Crites does not offer an alternative definition, nor does anyone else. The definition is accepted and the debate continues. Crites does not say that a play is an image of human nature presented on a stage for an audience whom it may delight and instruct, as he might have done if Dryden thought these factors had any importance. Crites has a point, but in the context of Dryden's imaginary debate, this point pertains more to what a definition should be (precise), than to the implications that a more precise definition would have for a discussion of critical issues. The implication is that a performance itself makes no real difference to what the play already is.

These examples do not in themselves indicate any systematic opposition between text and performance in which the former is privileged over the latter. The least they do is to suggest that drama is both a performed art and a genre of literature and that certain of its characteristics are more important when it is primarily one rather than the other. It would be impossible to derive a 17th century view of 'performance' from explicit remarks on the issue. There are simply not enough of those. It is only by looking at the critics' attitude to factors relating directly to drama when performed that one can begin to form an impression of how 'performance' functions in Neo-classic ideas. The factors which can then be considered in this process are: visual and aural aspects, in other words what these critics call spectacle, acting and to a certain extent audience reaction. Neo-classicism's conception of how meaning is generated in the theatre and their idea of what a play is may also contribute to this inquiry.

## 2.2.1   Neo-classic attitude to spectacle

Aristotle ranked spectacle last in his hierarchy of dramatic elements, after all the elements relevant to the text and even after music. Neo-classic critics generally follow his lead. Some are downright dismissive of spectacle. Georges de Scudéry, in his attack on *Le Cid*, says that its popularity was due to its visual appeal rather than any inherent worth. He, as Carlson says, eliminated spectacle as a factor (Carlson 1993:97) and treated those who enjoyed it with disdain.

> Therefore it does not astound me that the groundlings, whose discernment is largely visual, fall into error from trusting that one of the senses most easily deceived.

> (Scudéry in Dukore 1974:211)

In his 'A Short View of Tragedy' (1693) the English critic Thomas Rymer, who is often regarded as the prototype of the inflexible Neo-classicist, blinded by limited critical standards (Carlson 1993:119) describes various ways that the audience may be misled into enjoying a worthless play. Spectacle, action and pronunciation may, he writes, cheat the audience and divert them from wit and sense (Rymer in Clarke 1965:159-60). The eyes and ears may mislead the spectator and cause him to judge the play wrongly. Here it is not so much that the performance does not matter, but that it may be dangerous.

> Considering then what power the show, the action, and the pronunciation have over us, it is no wonder that wise men often mistake and give a hasty judgment, which upon review is justly set aside.
>
> (Rymer in Clarke 1965:160)

On the other hand, François Hédelin, the Abbé D'Aubignac, shows in his 'The Whole Art of the Stage' (1657) that he attaches more positive associations to spectacle:

> The way therefore, of choosing a subject is to consider whether it be founded upon one of these three things: either upon noble passions, as *Mariamne* and *The Cid*; or upon an intricate and pleasing plot, as *Cleomedon or The Disguis'd Prince*; or upon some extraordinary spectacle and show, as *Cyminda or The Two Victims*; and if the story will bear more circumstances of this nature or that poet's imagination can fitly supply the play with them, it will be still the better, provided he observe a just moderation, for though a poem ought not to be without a plot nor without passions or noble spectacles, yet to load a subject with any of them, is a thing to be avoided.
>
> (D'Aubignac in Clarke 1965:95)

Scudéry and Rymer are examples of a conservative extreme in Neo-classicism that views spectacle as potentially dangerous and appear to barely tolerate it as an element of drama. D'Aubignac's view is probably more representative. But while he sees spectacle as a proper motivation for creating a drama, he does not rank it very highly and emphasises that it be presented in moderation. Furthermore, in the way he speaks of it here, spectacle is an element of story, not a question of how a story is presented. Spectacle here is an attribute of text, not of performance. It is generally

accepted that the spectacle must serve the text. Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux explains this function in 'The Art of Poetry' (1674):

> The secret is attention first to gain,
>
> To move our minds and then to entertain,
>
> That, from the very opening of the scenes,
>
> The first may show us what the author means.

> (Boileau in Dukore 1974:259)

Spectacle has no function independent of the text, at best it helps the spectator to understand the text's message, at worst it detracts from that message. It thus seems safe to conclude that while the Neo-classicists saw spectacle as a fundamental part of drama, dramatists had to be careful to avoid its potential dangers. Spectacle could be useful in moving the spectator to more greatly appreciate the moral message, but it could also deceive them into accepting an unacceptable play. Gratuitous spectacle would be unacceptable to all, and where it was used it would have to serve the text, not the pleasure of the spectator.

## 2.2.2   Neo-classicism and Acting

Seventeenth century critics have almost nothing to say on acting, which is in itself illuminating. In formal criticism there are hardly any rules formulated for it, definitely no system. One of very few direct comments in 17th century criticism can be found in François Ogier. Ogier's preface to *Tyre and Sidon* (1628), attacks Neo-classicism and defends the older, looser style of writing against the new Neo-classic style. His views thus provide an interesting contrast to those of Neo-classic critics. Ogier, in defence of deviation from ancient models, says that Aristotle

> who demands that supreme reason be obeyed on all occasions, and who concedes nothing to popular opinion, does not refrain from admitting at this point that poets should grant something to the convenience of the actors, in order to facilitate their acting, and should make many allowances for the stupidity and the mood of the spectators.

> (Ogier in Clarke 1965:87)

Ogier has a clear sense of the actual business of theatre: a text is written for actors and should facilitate their art; spectators are fickle and should be accommodated.

Ogier thinks of theatre as a performed art, but he seems to be unique in this regard. Almost no 17th century Neo-classic critic consulted for this study comes close to this kind of acknowledgement of theatre as a performance by actors. Of course actors were not looked on with much favour in this era. Their social status was low and they were not, for example, eligible to become part of the French Academy. The general bad opinion of actors would have made it quite acceptable for critics to ignore their art. The critics seem to consider them at best a necessary evil. They certainly did not think that actors had much to contribute. Dryden says the following of actors:

> The words of a good writer, which describe it lively, will make a deeper impression of belief in us than all the actor can persuade us to…
>
> (Dryden 1962:51)

It is the words actors speak that are important, and their delivery of these words could usually be regulated by the rhythm of the verse form. Rymer does, for example, comment on pronunciation and delivery, saying that the actor should speak like a man of business (Rymer in Clarke 1965:160). But his concern is as usual with the stage's potential to mislead the audience. Pronunciation may, he says, divert the audience from 'wit and sense'. Gesture and movement are basically ignored. The actors are mouthpieces for the author and should not compete with him.

D'Aubignac, true to the title of his essay, 'The Whole Art of the Stage', does give acting some consideration. Carlson summarises what he has to say:

> Actors must speak as if they were truly their characters, behave as if they were truly in the place represented, and pretend that no audience is present.
>
> (Carlson 1993:99)

This idea is clearly significant, if quite isolated. D'Aubignac here expresses an attitude to acting that will become more and more common as time goes by. Acting has to serve realism and verisimilitude; and of course this implies that verisimilitude cannot be created by the text alone. But still, what this really means is that the performance must preserve the integrity of the text. If actors acknowledge the audience, or behave as if they were not really their characters, they draw attention to the situation of the performance, rather than to merely convey a message conceived independently of it. This at the very least implies a view of performance in which it is subordinate to the text which is its function to convey.

### 2.2.3 Neo-classicism and the audience

Neo-classic critics are often very dismissive of the experience of the audience. Although they generally agree that pleasing the audience is an important goal of the poet, they did not think that the general audience could adequately judge a play[3]. This was partly because they understood that taste was relative and they wanted criteria for judging art that would be universal. The following statement by Dryden may illustrate this view:

> The liking or disliking of the people gives the play the denomination of good or bad, but does not really make or constitute it such. To please the people ought to be the poet's aim, because plays are made for their delight; but it does not follow that they are always pleased with good plays, or that the plays which please them are always good. The humour of the people is now for comedy, therefore in hope to please them, I write comedies rather than serious plays: and so far their taste prescribes to me: but it does not follow from that reason that comedy is to be preferred before tragedy in its own nature; for that which is so in its own nature cannot be otherwise, as a man cannot but be a rational creature: but the opinion of the people may alter, and in another age, or perhaps in this, serious plays may be set above comedies.
>
> (Dryden 1962:120)

But while they did not rank the audience's capacity to judge plays highly, Neo-classicists were also obliged to prove that a spectator's experience of the drama has particular moral advantages. The rules had to ensure that this experience provides the optimum of such advantages. Generally the moral health of the audience was considered to be quite precarious, and this made the rules all the more essential. The

---

[3] Molière, whose 'Critique *School for Wives*' (1663) may be considered a work of theatre criticism, provides an interesting contrast to how most Neo-classic critics felt about the audience. In this work, he, for example, has Dorante say:

> I would rather obtain the approval of the pit, because a few of its members can judge a play according to the rules, but the others judge it by the right method of judging it, which is to let themselves be caught up by it, with neither blind prejudice, affected complaisance, nor ridiculous fastidiousness…
>
> (Molière in Dukore 1974:249-50)

This view is, however, exceptional in the 17th century, although this kind of common-sense Neo-classicism would become more common in the 18th century.

dangers were mainly of two types. In the first place drama could set a bad example by portraying things contrary to *les bienséances*:

> Evil examples are contagious, even in the theatre; the representations even of feigned acts produce only too many real crimes; and there is great danger in diverting the people with pleasures which may some day result in public catastrophes.
>
> (Chapelain in Clarke 1965:90)

In the second place, theatre stimulates the emotions. This means that there is a danger that the audience may experience an excess of emotion. Corneille tells us that

> … our audience is composed neither of wicked men nor of saints, but of people of ordinary integrity, who are not so severely entrenched in absolute virtue that they would not be susceptible to emotions and capable of falling into dangers which engage those who submit to them too much.
>
> (Corneille in Dukore 1974:230)

This danger may be averted through catharsis. Catharsis was generally not much of an issue early in the 17th century. Corneille was unique amongst his contemporaries for bringing it up (Carlson 1993:102). The proper use of tragedy was the purgation of pity and fear (Corneille in Dukore 1974:227-9). It was in this analysis of catharsis that Corneille introduced something new into French criticism, the idea that tragedy is psychological. After Corneille the emotional response of the audience would become more of a factor in criticism. He also set Neo-classicism on the road to a less literal interpretation of drama's moral function and a greater appreciation of the value of feeling and compassion (Jones & Nicol 1976:74).

We thus find that later in the century a critic like René Rapin, who is generally a conservative Neo-classicist, believed the function of tragedy was to stimulate feeling. He also, however, leaned towards the psychological view pioneered by Corneille. Although he criticised an excess of sentiment, an emotional response was for him very much part of tragedy. Jones and Nicol describe this:

> Tragedy is concerned with the heart 'giving itself over,' becoming 'susceptible to all the passions which are shown to it' and 'the whole of the pleasure that one is capable of getting from tragedy consists in this emotion.
>
> (Jones & Nicol 1976:93)

Tragedy must at the same time puts those feelings in a proper balance so that it won't interfere with virtue:

> Tragedy rectifies the use of passions by moderating our fear and our pity, which are obstacles of virtue.
>
> (Rapin in Dukore 1974:265)

In the first understanding of how drama affects the audience, as expressed by Chapelain, the matter was fairly straightforward. If the text stuck to what was proper, the performance may safely convey the right moral message. Chapelain's view of the audience was entirely theoretical; he did not take the actual situation of reception into account. Theatre historians have long claimed that actual 17th century theatre in France as well as England was a much more boisterous affair than it would seem if we read only the 17th century critics. Theatre was a social event, and there were no guarantees that the drama on the stage would receive more attention than the dramas playing themselves out on the *parterre* or in the pit. A further factor undermining the play would be the nobility who threatened to steal the show when taking their seats on the stage itself. In the 17th century this did not appear to be of great concern to the critics.

D'Aubignac did admit that the audience makes a play unique. The poet had to take the customs of the audience into account.

> For all dramatic poems must be different according to the people before whom they are presented; and from thence often proceeds that the success is different though the play be still the same.
>
> (D'Aubignac in Clarke 1965:97)

But his point was that French plays differ from ancient Greek plays because the French love their kings and princes more than the Greeks. His point was not that a particular audience creates unique values in the moment of performance. A French audience is a French audience, different from a Greek audience, perhaps, but not

because of what they do, but because of what they all believe. While the behaviour of the spectators probably accounts for the general disdain that the critics felt for the audience, there is no real sense that the actual conditions of reception, the performance in other words, has very much of an effect on the play's message. Also, critics did not seem to be able to imagine that the general audience might have a different experience from their own. Jon Erickson has said the following of 20th century proponents of political theatre, but it is equally applicable to Neo-classicist theorists of the 17th century:

> [Too often theorists of such theatre] assume that the audience is simply a projection of themselves, and that, since they desire a certain theoretical strategy to work (usually to illustrate an already assumed theory), it does indeed work for everyone.
>
> (Erickson in Carlson 1996:140)

The second understanding of how the moral benefits of theatre work, which we find in Corneille and Rapin, would appear to allow more scope for audience activity than that of Chapelain. Not because they paid any more actual attention to the conditions of reception; they paid it as little mind as he does. But if the function of tragedy is to stimulate and then balance feeling, the play is not complete without the spectator's emotional contribution. If the spectator does not feel, the play fails, and it is only through his experience of the play performed that the spectator can thus be a factor in the moral working of theatre. They did not, however, say that this could not happen if the play was read rather than watched. But in a more literal understanding of how theatre promotes morality, the stress is on the moral content of the message. The spectator does not have to interpret the message for it to be moral, it is moral as written. In the second view, morality is the result of a process; it is created in the work's reception and does not necessarily exist without it.

For Corneille catharsis was, however, a strictly causal and logical process. Pity for a character leads to fear in us, which in turn leads to a desire to avoid, which leads to a wish to purge (Corneille in Dukore 1974:229). The process is predetermined, and it is determined by the text, through characterisation and plot development. The audience can respond in only one way. They must feel, but they are not free to feel whatever they want, or if they feel anything else it will be a mark of depravity. The text will program them to feel the appropriate feelings.

Rapin had also not abandoned the idea that poetry should convey a specific moral message. Poetry should be "a public lesson of good manners" (Rapin in Dukore 1974:265). In Aristotelian tragedy pity and fear correct pride and hardheartedness (Rapin in Dukore 1974:266). Jones and Nicol say that for Rapin tragedy was simply a demonstration of human conduct from which lessons may be learned (Jones & Nicol 1976:81). Feeling has a greater part to play in the pleasure provided by the play than in its specific moral effects. Rapin's view was thus not so far removed from Chapelain's after all. And Corneille saw catharsis as only one of four ways in which to convey moral messages, the other three of which are essentially not different from Chapelain's fear of evil examples (Corneille in Dukore 1974:228).

We could thus say that the increased emphasis on feeling that Corneille and Rapin demonstrated had the potential to acknowledge a value for performance distinct from that of the text. These specific writers, however, stopped short of doing that. The scope of feeling properly inspired in the audience was limited to what message the author conveyed through his text. The moral effectiveness of theatre does not depend on the process of performing a text in front of an audience, but still finally on the text itself. That said, there is another way in which the audience contributes to the success of the play: if the play is to have any moral effect at all, they have to be convinced of it. The next section will look at how the rules of Neo-classicism, the principles formulated to make the play convincing, relate to the Neo-classic attitude to performance.

### 2.2.4   The Rules and Verisimilitude

Neo-classic critics organised the various genres of tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry etc., into a strict hierarchy, each governed by its own rules. These genres were not to be mixed. Tragedy, because it was ranked very highly, was subjected to particularly strict rules. Although there were some principles which were not universally accepted, such as poetic justice, or, in England, the use of rhyme, the three unities were accepted by most critics of the era. A discussion of the unities of time, place and action was part of most works of criticism in the 17th century and very few critics did not think that tragedy should be governed by the principle of unity.

Critics differed, however, on the length of time constituting unity of time and the area that would keep place unified. D'Aubignac, for example, attempts to clear up any uncertainty about the exact length of the day in which a correct drama must play itself

out, by arguing for 12 hours on the basis, firstly of there never happening much at night anyway and secondly the chorus' continual presence on stage. The chorus could not go all that time without "satisfying some necessities of nature" (D'Aubignac in Dukore 1974:245-6). Both D'Aubignac and Dryden's Crites argue that more than one place cannot be represented in a play because the floor of the stage remains constant. D'Aubignac allows that the sides and end may represent other places through the use of scenery as long as the representational consistency of the floor is not violated (D'Aubignac in Dukore 1974:244). Dryden's Crites says because

> the stage on which it is represented being but one and the same place, it is unnatural to conceive it many, and those far distant from one another.
>
> (Dryden 1962:29)

The rules were mainly directed at the text (in the sense that they were written into the play), but they did have implications for how a drama is to be performed. In fact they are usually formulated specifically to facilitate a convincing performance. Epic poems are not subject to any unities; it is only on stage that verisimilitude is undermined by the representation of more than one locale. Generally it was usually an issue of what the audience in the theatre would be prepared to believe given the specific nature of theatre. At the same time this does not mean that performance was regarded as absolutely essential to drama. Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671) was not written to be performed, this does not allow Milton to feel that he may disregard the unities, it only allows him to omit act and scene divisions (Milton in Clarke 1965:157).

The audience has to be convinced of the play, otherwise it has no value. Verisimilitude is essential if theatre is to have any moral efficacy at all. Dryden describes the very limited extent to which an audience will suspend disbelief:

> Imagination in a man, or reasonable creature, is supposed to participate of reason, and when that governs, as it does in the belief of fiction, reason is not destroyed, but misled, or blinded: that can prescribe to the reason, during the time of the representation, somewhat like a weak belief of what it sees and hears; and reason suffers itself to be so hoodwinked, that it may better enjoy the pleasures of the fiction: but it is never so wholly made captive as to be

drawn headlong into a persuasion of those things which are most remote from probability: 'tis in that case a free-born subject, not a slave; it will contribute willingly its assent, as far as it sees convenient, but will not be forced.

(Dryden 1962:126)

Because reason can only be pushed so far, unity of place is a necessary rule. But this also credits the spectators with some autonomy, for it is not that they shouldn't be allowed to believe certain things, it is that they are reasonable creatures and will believe only so much. The spectators are thus not merely passive sponges soaking up the play's moral message. They play only succeeds if it does not insult the intelligence of the audience and can persuade the spectators of its meanings. Verisimilitude is a device that ensures that the play will succeed in performance. At the same time it is not a device of the performance itself, it is the text that guarantees verisimilitude, not the performance. Dryden does not allow for the possibility that there might be some staging technique that convincingly portrays two places in the same play. It would not be very hard to find examples of English plays that 'hoodwink reason' by ignoring unity of place and still succeed quite well. Dryden is not really thinking in terms of staging at all. He is concerned with how plays are written, not with how they are performed. If the play is written convincingly, it will appear so on stage. The performance is really only the presentation of a text already complete in itself.
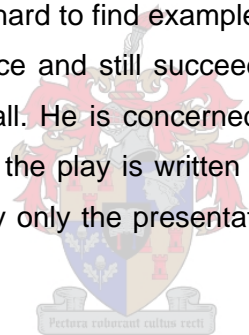
I have said that any theory of drama that stresses the moral benefits of theatre has to take the audience into account. This is true, but it also means that meaning has to be tightly controlled. This would not be necessary if the critics were in some way prepared to attempt to argue that theatre was beneficial in itself, that theatre was autonomous and not subordinate to life. This they weren't, even if some critics laid the groundwork that would have made such an argument possible. To be fair it is probably not a particularly easy argument to make, especially in a context where there was not much precedent for serious consideration of theatre as a performed art. A play was a picture of human life, drawn by the author to demonstrate moral lessons. This could only work if the entire enterprise was geared to ensure that the message get across and be interpreted correctly. If the message is the basis of moral efficacy, and the message is created by the author, the performance can only be subordinate to the text. The meaning of the play must be fully formed before it is performed and the performance itself must absolutely serve this meaning.

It is thus not completely fair to say that critics of the 17th century believe that the performance does not matter at all. They do acknowledge that the performance can affect the message of the play, and for this reason they argue for the rules of verisimilitude. What they are really arguing for, however, is control of the performance. The text in many ways regulates the performance. At the same time they exhibit a variety of attitudes that do show that they do not value performance very much. In the first place the rules of verisimilitude do not constitute a thorough and systematic theory of staging that understands the performance as more than the servant of the text. In other words they do not acknowledge the possibility that it might be desirable that the performance communicates in its own right.

Secondly they work with the theory that aspects of the performance not in the play primarily impact on the senses. In other words the performance affects what they call the 'passions'. As such those aspects are potentially dangerous. In the Neo-classic worldview emotion always has to be held in check by reason. There seems to be some sense that emotion is inherently dangerous. It is likely that they derive this from Plato who specifically argued in his *Republic* that art was dangerous because it appealed to the senses (Plato 1974:434). Therefore the text and the communication of its moral message must not be overshadowed by spectacular staging. In fact the performance must not be allowed to communicate in its own right, because whatever it can communicate independently of the text may be dangerous.

In the third place, the extent to which Neo-classicists cared about performance did not include any concern about particulars. The ideal Neo-classic setting was the *palais à volonté*, any place hall. It did not denote a specific place but a generalised 'anywhere plausible'. There was also no attempt at historical accuracy or presenting things in context. The events and characters of the play aren't put into a specific time and place, partly to serve their idea of verisimilitude, but maybe more importantly because the Neo-classicists believe that in order to be truly moral particular details must be avoided. This is so that the message appears universal, general and absolute. Too many particulars might suggest that the moral is rooted in the context, rather than something existing beyond it. The next section will examine this philosophical ideal of generality and discuss how it may be said to underlie the basic attitude that performance is subordinate to text.

**2.3    The Neo-classic view of 'performance' and philosophical method**

**2.3.1    'Reason' and system-building**

'Reason', or alternatively 'good sense' is a concept almost universally invoked by Neo-classical critics. It is stated as an authority higher than Aristotle and the bottom-line in terms of judgment. In Neo-classicism the rules were wholly identified with reason and morality. In the Neo-classical account, applying the rules was the rational (and moral) way to create drama, and deviations from the rules could be seen as deviations from rationality itself. The emphasis put on reason does not, however, mean that logical processes were necessarily explicitly accounted for; nor was it particularly clearly defined.

> Like Nature, the Reason invoked is usually an impersonal, idealised version of what commonly exists, or ought to exist, or is generally thought Normal.
>
> (Pocock 1980:11)

Most 17th century critics make a point of saying that their defence of the rules is based not on Aristotle's authority, but on reason. This 'reason' was seen as universal and no-one could be excused from not conforming to it, even the ancients.

> reason, being alike all the world over, does equally require everybody's submission to it, and if our modern authors cannot without offence be dispensed from the rules of the stage, no more could the ancients; and where they have failed, I do not pretend to excuse them …
>
> (D'Aubignac in Dukore 1974:240)

In practice, however, Aristotle was pretty much always deemed reasonable without any examination. Authors appear to pay lip-service to the idea of reason, while upholding Aristotle's authority quite blindly. The following statement by Jean Chapelain is quite typical in this regard:

> [This rule] derives from a sound and solid doctrine based on Aristotle's authority, or, better, on that of reason.
>
> (Chapelain in Dukore 1974:225)

As is this statement by Corneille on the importance of unity of action:

> Many speak out against this rule which they call tyrannical, and they would be
> right if it were based only on the authority of Aristotle; but what ought to give it
> general acceptance is the natural reason that supports him.
>
> (Corneille in Dukore 1974:236)

In both these cases stating that something is supported by reason is enough to make it so. The arguments are not supported by logical proof. 'Reason' was used more often to justify dogma than challenge it. It served to confirm the authority of Aristotle, in an era where that authority could no longer stand on its own. It justified rules in an era where the popularity of a piece was not enough to justify its success as a work of art. And of course critics found it invaluable in putting down opponents of their particular views, or whose success rivalled their own. It was certainly not coupled with any kind of rational analysis of principles, or questioning of beliefs. Reason, in these writings at least, was not a tool with which principles were formulated, or assumptions challenged, but rather a implement with which ready-made principles were given an enlightened aura. Pocock describes the tendency:

> But there is also a kind of rationalism implicit in the existence of the doctrine:
> a belief that reasoning is the instrument by which critics can establish the
> importance of these basic concepts, and so lay down rules for poetry. What
> Reason does not mean is the willingness to follow a logical argument
> wherever it leads. The reasoning used to justify the unity of time, say, is often
> surprisingly feeble. The rational process in Neo-classical argument is system-
> building activity. It is rationalisation rather than rationalism.
>
> (Pocock 1980:11-12)

The Neo-classicist obsession with rules is a result of a general tendency in 17th century to organise thinking into systems that would provide a solid basis for knowledge. This system-building has its origins in Galileo and Descartes and the development of the idea of method. The idea was that specific principles could be ordered into a method that would, if applied rationally, lead the thinker on the road to Truth. According to Hollinger, Galileo and Descartes believed that reason would allow them to discover the fundamental absolutes of reality (Hollinger 1994:23). Method would be the guarantor of truth. Cascardi makes the same point, and then shows how method tends to be converted into rules.

In Descartes, the dialectic of science as grounded in the rejection of all prior assumptions about the nature of things and as reflected in the premise of radical doubt generates fears and anxieties about the consequences of disorder. The problem of order is resolved in the establishment of a method, but in such a way that reason (or 'science') is not absolutely immunised against this fear, but becomes itself an organised repression of it, as formulated in rules, method as procedure.

(Cascardi 1992:13)

Descartes proposed a new system of thought that revolutionised philosophy. He developed his ideas from a vision that the entire universe could be explained by the application of mathematical science. He conceived of a system that would not only include all knowledge, but unite it. Descartes thus set in place the foundations for the development of general abstract theories. Such theories could then be applied in a variety of spheres. Hollinger points out that this led to the development of value as a theoretical idea. The modern idea of value as objective fact results from seeing method as the way to truth and the split between facts and interpretations that this implies (Hollinger 1994:59). He gives an account of the argument:

If objective knowledge and truth exist, and if nature can be reduced to the language of mathematics, then the only reality is physical reality…. Thus, an objective account of the world must be guided by objective rules; that is, by a method. The method must be purged of all elements that prevent us from discovering objective truth. Because reality is universal and independent and truth is absolute, invariant, and independent, the most rational method will be purged of any factors that do not have these features. Because reason is invariant and independent, while values, judgements, opinions, subjective states, interpretations and emotions are not, these factors must be expunged or at least kept in abeyance. Moreover, because reality is physical, these factors are not themselves part of the objective world, but are a result of individual relation to the world.

(Hollinger 1994:59-60)

This was precisely what the Neo-classic pre-occupation with rules was about, the formation of universal and objective principles to judge the value of a work of art. Neo-classic critics' attempts to ground art in rationality and to provide objective criteria of judgement may be measured against an earlier statement by a critic

opposed to Neo-classicism. François Ogier, in the preface to his play *Tyre and Sidon* (1628), discharges art from the burden of philosophy, in other words its obligation to conform to universal rational principles.

Ogier argues that ancient plays cannot provide an absolute model since they depend on religious beliefs and their performance context. The tastes of nations differ and writers should take this into account. To make his point Ogier distinguishes between art and philosophy. Philosophy has to strive to be universal, but art is less serious, and its principles therefore do not need to be universally binding. He writes:

> … but philosophy, nevertheless, has no part in this matter: for it expects, to be sure, that the minds of all men, under whatever sky they may be born, shall agree in one and the same opinion concerning the things necessary for the sovereign good, and it strives as far as possible to unite them in the search after truth, because there can be but one truth; but as for matters which are merely amusing and unimportant, such as this of which we are speaking, it allows our opinions to take whatever direction they please, and does not extend its jurisdiction over this matter.
>
> (Ogier in Clarke 1965:86)

Ogier thus argues against rules in art, if not in philosophy. He has no quarrel with the idea of method and rules which give it substance, but does not see this as applicable to art, which depends on changing tastes and has to make concessions to its specific audience. Ogier thus denies that art can ever be evaluated by universal criteria of judgment. But Ogier is of course not a Neo-classicist. This essay, written in the 1620s, attacks Neo-classicism and defends the older, looser style of writing against the new Neo-classic style. As Carlson points out Ogier's view continued to have supporters, but the dominant critical position opposed it (Carlson 1993:91). The aim of French critics for the rest of the century was to do for drama what Descartes did for philosophy, build a system of rational principles that provide a foolproof method for judging its value and regulating its creation.

For Pocock it is the 17th century wish to build such systems that causes the desire to legislate that he sees in Boileau's *L'Art Poetique* and that is evident in other works as well (Pocock 1980:127). Pocock further claims that it accounts for the unique power of Neo-classicism, its influence in England and into the 18th century (Pocock

1980:128). He describes the attraction of the kind of thinking one sees in the work of Hobbes, Descartes, Locke, Bacon and the Royal Society. He says they

> seemed to inspire in their followers a feeling that here at last was a doctrine or method that made sense of the world and proposed an authoritative frame of reference…. What we find in these various cases is a more or less authoritative world-view which proclaims its own version of the truth, to which poetry, like everything else is subordinate.
>
> (Pocock 1980:129)

The worldview is authoritarian because these systems are thought of as absolutes and cover all aspects of life. This leads to an authoritarian theory of poetry. In such a theory art must serve life, it has no autonomy. These systems prescribe that art has to have a social function. Pocock argues that Neo-classicism was a defence against the rise of science and its insistence on unadorned truth, by affirming art's moral function (Pocock 1980:129-133).

With the rules organised into a system, where they can represent a method, they may save art from frivolity and from any accusation that it does not serve the best interests of a rational society. To achieve this, the rules also have to ensure that poetry is true to life, hence the importance of verisimilitude. Rapin illustrates this in his 'Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesy' (1674):

> Only I affirm that these rules well considered, one shall find them made only to reduce nature into method, to trace it step by step and not suffer the least mark of it to escape us. 'Tis only by these rules that the verisimility in fictions is maintained, which is the soul of poetry, for unless there be the unity of place, of time, and of action in the great poems, there can be no verisimility. In fine, 'tis by these rules that all becomes just, proportionate, and natural, for they are founded upon good sense and sound reason rather than on authority and example.
>
> (Rapin in Dukore 1974:265)

'True to life' does not, however, mean simple realism. As shown earlier, verisimilitude was rather a generalised, idealised probability. For Rapin verisimilitude shows the extent to which the poem is founded on good sense and sound reason, the extent in other words to which it conforms to the rational account of reality arrived at by

reducing nature to method. This is why there is a distinction between historical truth and verisimilitude. Chapelain, for example, argues that the poet should not bind himself to facts:

> … he should rather change it completely than leave a trace of anything unconformable to the rules of art, which, addressing itself to universal concepts, purifies reality of the defects and of the individual irregularities with which the rigid laws of history compel the latter to bear.
>
> (Chapelain in Dukore 1974:223)

As in Aristotle, philosophy is better than history because it reveals essential truths rather than facts which may not appear to conform to the bigger picture. If art is modelled on philosophy, it may do the same thing. Pocock says that observing *vraisemblence* means ideological conformity (Pocock 1980:135). It means not representing anything that does not conform to the system. It is a way of showing poetry's commitment to the project of early modernity: its attempt to make sense of the world in a rational and totalising way. Poetry has, in this account, a contribution to make to upholding civilisation, to counter that which is 'unnatural' and 'monstrous' and to reduce the disorderliness of life to bare essentials.

What we thus see in the 17th century is that 'reason' very often looks more like rationalisation than like a tool for open enquiry. The reason for this is at least partly that it was utilised not to explore the potential of intellectual endeavour, but to build a rational picture of the world founded on absolute truth, a totalising system. Neo-classicism becomes the dominant critical discourse in drama, because it provides such a system for the arts. A system, which by regulating verisimilitude and moral content, can in turn affirm the value of art in the face of a worldview created by philosophical and scientific systems of thought.

## 2.3.2   System-building and Performance

As shown above the Neo-classic critics had very little to say about performance, at least explicitly, but the way they treat factors pertaining to theatre as a performed art, seems to indicate that they do favour the text over the performance. It is only in a critic like Ogier, who was opposed to Neo-classicism, that we see theatre acknowledged as primarily a performed art. Neo-classic critics had to reject

performance because it was their aim to prove the usefulness of theatre and this could only be done by making the text central.

At the same time we have seen that the idea of 'performance' figures so little in their writings that it would not be accurate to imply that they distinguished between text and performance in any systematic way. Indeed a text-performance dichotomy was not an explicit issue in 17th century criticism and theory. This does not mean, however, that 17th century criticism did not contribute to the development of that dichotomy when it finally made its explicit appearance. The rest of this chapter hopes to show that not only this opposition, but also the favouring of text over performance, is implicit in 17th century dramatic criticism's application of philosophical method and system building.

Stephen Toulmin identifies a number of modifications in the concept of 'reason' that the development of method depended on. In the first place, Toulmin shows that the 17th century idea of rationality was based on a shift from the oral to the written, a move away from rhetoric towards formal logic. So that after the 1630s philosophy would formally analyse statements rather than examine the effectiveness of persuasive utterances (Toulmin 1990:31). Rhetoric as a model of judgement was thus discarded in favour of logic, and the unfavourable view that Plato held of rhetoric became entrenched. Analysis discards reception and exchange and isolates its objects by examining only formal properties that exist out of context.

> The research program of modern philosophy thus sets aside all questions about *argumentation* – among particular people in specific situations, dealing with concrete cases, where varied things are at stake – in favour of *proofs* that could be set down in writing, and judged as written.
>
> (Toulmin 1990:31)

The move from a rhetorical model to an abstract theoretical model is quite clear in drama theory. As Carlson makes clear the rhetorical tradition originates in Roman antiquity. In Roman criticism, rhetorical concerns dominated all others. Cicero, for example, wrote about comedy, not as a dramatic genre, but as a general source for oratorical effect. Horace stands more directly in the Aristotelian (therefore theoretical) tradition, although there is no evidence that he had firsthand knowledge of Aristotle's *Poetics*. But Horace's criticism is already more practical than Aristotle's in that he lays down specific guidelines for how drama should be written for best effect. In the

late classical period poetry was studied not for aesthetic, but for practical reasons, as an aid for effective speaking and writing (Carlson 1993:23-26). Practicality and the immediate effects of a text were, therefore an important part of an approach based on a rhetorical model.

Plato and Aristotle were the original theoretical theorists. The move to theory in the 17th century reflects a growing interest in their work as opposed to Romans like Horace or Cicero. Generally Renaissance writers preferred the Romans to the Greeks. When Aristotle's *Poetics* was rediscovered in the Renaissance it was not immediately well received. Aristotle's theory did not harmonise with late medieval conceptions of the nature and function of tragedy that had been derived from a harmonising of elements of the Latin rhetoricians and late classic grammarians (Carlson 1993:37). The rhetorical model was thus preserved and with it a practical approach to poetics and its concern with the reception of a work of art and the style of delivery[4]. But abstract theoretical models were in the ascension as Aristotle gradually gained acceptance.

Later Renaissance theorists would attempt to develop systems of dramatic theory that would rival Aristotle's. Lodovico Castelvetro, for example, writes a commentary on Aristotle in which he disagrees with Aristotle on many counts. His central digression from Aristotle was his critical focus.
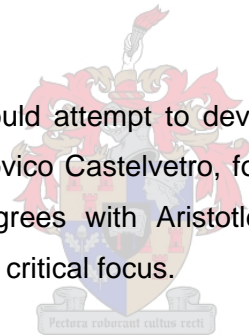
> For Aristotle the focus was the drama itself, its structure and internal relationships. Castelvetro sees the proper concern of dramatic criticism as an analysis of drama in the light of the needs and demands of the audience.
>
> (Carlson 1993:48)

He emphasised drama as a performed art and rejects attempts to consider drama apart from performance (Carlson 1993:48). Castelvetro does not stand directly in the tradition of the rhetoreticians, but he shares with them an emphasis on the effect of

---

[4] It is tempting to assume that the rhetorical tradition had a better developed sense of the performative than the modern theoretical approach. Bernard Beckerman points out, however, that the rhetorical discourse provided an opportunity to discuss public performance, but did not follow through on this promise.

> Writing on delivery illustrates the conventional and persistent subordination of the event of speaking to the composition of speech. So prevalent was this way of ordering the parts of rhetoric and poetics that rare indeed was the person who conceived of performance as an independent entity.
>
> (Beckerman 1990:xi)

drama rather than on decontextualised internal structure. A rhetoric of drama is concerned not with how a drama is shaped, but on how it says what is says and for that a context as well as an audience are indispensable factors.

In late Renaissance dramatic theory there was a major shift in focus from a reverence for classical tradition to audience psychology. In the 17th century the focus would move back to reinstating tradition as an authoritative model, even if that shift was couched as a move towards using reason as a guide. Although Neo-classic theory was concerned with the audience to the extent that a drama had to be morally instructive, this concern was not related to specific situations, but based on the assumption that the moral instructiveness was not dependant on the context of the text's reception, but resided in the text's faithful adherence to the principles of classical drama.

Since the rules were identified with what was rational and therefore universally valid, they became less bound up with immediate effectiveness, and more with the search for a theoretical method. Gradually the Neo-classic rules would be rejected as dogma by later theorists. As the high enlightenment took hold there was a drive to liberate man from all the restrictions and limitations placed on him. The result was that the rules underlying drama were made even less particular and even more universal. All vestiges of rhetorical criticism were left behind in favour of a model that concentrated on internal relations. Abstract theoretical models were set to become dominant. In the 17th century the aim of philosophy was the formulation of permanent structures underlying nature (Toulmin 1990:34).

The shift from rhetoric to logic in philosophy was thus paralleled with a move from the particular to the universal. This move is clear in Neo-classic drama practice as well as its theory. The insistence on rules was not the only change that characterised Neo-classic theatre. It was also a question of how the representations were structured. Arnott contrasts medieval theatre with Neo-classical theatre:

> Classical drama considered the moment, and drew lessons for eternity. Medieval drama considered eternity, and drew lessons for the moment.

> (Arnott 1977:63)

In logical terms this can be translated as a distinction between induction and deduction. Again this reflects a move from the particular to the universal. René Rapin does the same kind of thing when he writes about the function of comedy:

> Comedy, which is an image of common conversation, corrects the public vices by letting us see how ridiculous they are in particulars.
>
> (Rapin in Dukore 1974:265)

And when Jean Chapelain says that historical material should be made compatible with decorum, he is also favouring the universal over the particular:

> … [the poet] should rather change [the historical account] completely than leave a trace of anything unconformable to the rules of art, which, addressing itself to universal concepts, purifies reality of the defects and of the individual irregularities with which the rigid laws of history compel the latter to bear.
>
> (Chapelain in Dukore 1974:223)

The move from the particular to the universal is thus demonstrated by not only a change in subject matter, but a shift in theoretical focus as well. Theatre criticism turned away from reviewing individual performances to focus on developing abstract theory; from considering the particular moment of performance to considering the eternity illuminated by them. We see in 17th century criticism that specific plays were used as a springboard to general theory, and not as important in themselves. The examination of the particular was ignored in favour of an examination of the universal principles underlying the drama.

At the same time that there was a shift from the particular to the universal, a move was made from the local to the general. In their search for general principles 17th century thinkers had to disregard disciplines such as ethnography and history that concentrated on local particularities and idiosyncrasies.

> The demands of rationality impose on philosophy a need to seek out abstract general ideas and principles, by which particulars can be connected together.
>
> (Toulmin 1990:33)

Furthermore, what Toulmin calls 'timeliness', the notion that something exists in time and is determined by it, was also excluded as a factor by the new rationality of the

17th century. In practical disciplines it is as important when you do something as how you do it. In law and medicine all problems are time-bound; they refer to specific moments in time. Descartes and his successors weren't interested in time-bound questions, but wanted to illuminate permanent structures that underlie the variable phenomena of Nature (Toulmin 1990:34).

> Philosophers had no interest in factors that held good in different ways at different times. From Descartes' time on, attention was focussed on timeless principles that hold good at all times equally: *the permanent was in, the transitory was out*.
>
> (Toulmin 1990:34)

If something is seen to be occurring in time as well as space it is acknowledged to be open to change and adjustment as circumstances shift. What is valid at a specific time might not be valid at another time. For something to be universal and abstract it has to occur outside of time. Rhetorical utterances are dependant on time, in the sense that they are context-bound, while logic is meant to be universal and eternal, it functions out of context and out of time. To be valid, reason also has to be valid for all times, without adjustment to specific circumstances and specific times.

As Toulmin says, all of these shifts reflect a move from practical philosophy to theoretical philosophy (Toulmin 1990:34). By the same measure we see a move from practical poetics to theoretical poetics. Although poetics can never wholly escape a practical dimension, since it always has to deal with the specific textual manifestations of ideas, there were also attempts to find and entrench abstract theories that could be applied to literature. Critics in the 17th century do not review plays, they write about the guidelines that rule all plays. Playwrights wrote prefaces to individual plays that had the purpose of placing these plays in a larger theoretical context and so contributed to the general critical debate. Corneille, for example, claims that his experience as a poet gives him the authority to formulate general theoretical principles (Corneille in Dukore 1974:237).

Toulmin notes that what Descartes effectively ruled out was the audience for philosophy (Toulmin 1990:36). If this kind of method is applied to poetics, the reception of a work, the way that it would be interpreted in a specific context, becomes irrelevant. A text, in this way, becomes a timeless object, it is not seen to change through successive receptions of it. Abstract theoretical principles can be

applied to it in order to establish what it means and says. Also, the implication is that those factors that distinguish drama from other genres of literature, the fact that it is performed, becomes as irrelevant as other elements of reception.

An abstract poetics as applied to theatre is thus a particularly complex issue. In theatre a text is performed in a particular way before it is to be interpreted by an audience. A performance is already a particular, and time-bound, interpretation of a text. It is never repeated in exactly the same way and depends on its context and time. If abstract theories such as have been under discussion are therefore applied to drama, with their claim of universal validity, it is not only the audience that has to be excluded from the field of theory, but also the performance itself.

Performance as the particular manifestation of an eternal text would be seen as irrelevant in this particular model of thought. Performance relies on a particular context in which performers and spectators are gathered. A text, because it is printed, can be transmitted independently of a particular performer. Although it may be interpreted in different ways at different times and in different places, its basic features remain the same. More contemporary theories of literature would dispute the timelessness and universal character of texts, so that texts cannot really be seen to exist independently of their interpretations. At this point, however, a text was viewed as a relatively stable phenomenon, while a performance could not be seen as either abstract or universal. Through the development of modern reason the text takes centre stage as performances become irrelevant to theory.

The shifts from a practical to a theoretical focus thus reflect a move a way from a poetics that considers performance towards one that can only consider the text. The fact that drama is a performed art can of course not be ignored completely. Critics have to deal with the drama as it is presented in a theatre. Practically, the shift described above thus translates into a definition of performance that can exclude it from the chief theoretical aims of the piece of criticism. Of course in practice the exclusion was never as complete as this discussion may have suggested. Critics do deal with performance. But their definition of it assumes an ideal identity between the aims of the text and the aims of the performance.

Henry Sayre points out that critics have traditionally held a view of performance that marginalized its particularities. The traditional, modernist, definition of artistic performance, understood it to be the single occurrence of a repeatable and pre-

existent text. Sayre shows that this definition of performance rests on the basic assumption that the work is not only distinct from its actual or possible realisations, but in fact transcends them.

> That is, it anticipates, even *authorises*, its many occurrences and somehow contains their variety.

(Sayre 1990:91)

The text not only precedes the performance, but is also the standard against which it is measured. It is understood that a performance always necessarily contains some imperfections and misreadings, it can never fully live up to the work, although it may come close. An audience may judge the success of a performance according to the extent to which it lives up to the intentions contained within the original work (Sayre 1990:92).

This view of performance expresses the limits that an Enlightenment definition of reason placed on all theoretical endeavours. This theory has to disregard everything that cannot be expressed in universal terms and that are dependent on context. In theatre, the performance, the interplay of performers and audience, is reduced to the representation of the author's independently determined intentions. The text transcends the context of its performance as the universal principles of method transcend the philosophical utterance.

Modernist rationality and the theory or method that could express it, was geared toward very specific results. It was aimed at illuminating the absolute principles underlying the universe. These principles were in themselves seen as rational; this universe was ordered and meaningful. In the process, practical, local, particular and performative matters became irrelevant. Reason was opposed to the unpredictable, the emotional and the bodily. It was not so much that these factors were denied as that they were seen to threaten reason. Thus we see the individual torn between his involuntary emotions and his obligatory rationality, his body and his mind. In an analogous way this individual is also torn between facts and the truth.

Neo-classicism demanded a certain degree of realism. This realism was necessary to make the presentation convincing. The assumption was that the audience would not be willing to believe the truth of the play if the presentation did not conform to their idea of what was real. At the same time the depiction of the real should not be

too specific. Critics feared that if the presentation were too firmly rooted in context it would lose its sense of being generally and universally true. The presentation, if too concerned with particulars could end up not being moral. The assumption was that the principles of morality were absolute and universal. Reality, of course, did not always conform to these principles. Also if too great an aura of particularity was created, the universality of these principles may not be recognised. Historical truth had to give way to universal truth; the particular instance had to serve the general principle.

Toulmin comments on the fact that philosophy in the 17th century, generally considered the era in which modernity was born, in many respects represents a step back from the more expansive and anti-authoritarian Renaissance. Mikhail Bakhtin sketches a similar picture. In his work on Rabelais, Bakhtin analyses the transition from a medieval worldview to a Renaissance worldview to modernity in continental culture. Bakhtin argues that it was through the body that Renaissance philosophers overturned the hierarchical structure of medievalism. In the Renaissance, he says, the body was central to a philosophy that destroyed the medieval hierarchic picture of the world. Thus, a new concept was created (Bakhtin 1995:249). This new concept involved a transfer of the vertical (i.e. hierarchical) to the horizontal (i.e. non-hierarchical) realized through the body. This body became the relative centre of the cosmos that moved not from top to bottom, but along the horizontal line of time (Bakhtin 1995:250). Bakhtin opposes the grotesque body he finds in Rabelais' novel *Pantagruel*, with the classical body rid of protrusions and orifices.

> The grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the
> body as a separate and completed phenomenon.

(Bakhtin 1995:227)

The grotesque body is the body of interchange and interorientation, it overcomes the confines between bodies and between the body and the world. In contrast the body after the 17th century, in what Bakhtin calls the new bodily canon, presents a finished, limited and impenetrable body shown as something individual with all traces of duality eliminated (Bakhtin 1995:228-30). For Bakhtin the grotesque body is materially linked to its past and future, in the cycle of birth and death. It leads to concrete historical awareness, rather than abstract thought about the future. When modernity commences, however, the body is closed off from this cosmos and becomes individualized so that 'death is only death', it loses its coupling with birth.

The individual has no sense of belonging to the 'progressing body of mankind' (Bakhtin 1995:253), and is cast alone into an alien and hostile cosmos. As Morris points out,

> [t]his offers no means of overcoming the cosmic terror of death or of the vast physical forces of the universe.
>
> (Morris 1994:227)

In the Renaissance the hierarchies of Medievalism were subverted through a celebration of a body that was open to the world. In modernity the body becomes idealised in terms that close it off from the world and construct an alienating individuality. Time is viewed as linear and progressive, rather than circular. This robs the individual of a sense of belonging and subjects that individual to the terror of death as the end. Comfort now has to derive from rational picturing of the world, making sense of the bigger picture, rather than enjoyment obtained from being part of it. But this also means that variety and detail have to give way to coherence and logic, the physical to the mental, the body to the mind.

Bakhtin relates his distinction between the classical and the grotesque to another distinction: between monologic and dialogic texts. A monologic text has a homogenous and relatively uniform logic. It sets up a single-tiered world in which everything is subjected to the single vision of the author and his controlling perspective. The dialogic text, on the other hand, exhibits a polyphonic interplay of many voices, perspectives and levels of reality. Its impulse is carnivalesque, undermining hierarchies of authority and power. Bakhtin also occasionally refers to such dialogic texts as novelistic, because he sees it as a potential that might most successfully be realised in the genre of the novel.

Bakhtin's description of the drama as essentially monologic has puzzled many theatre scholars. Bakhtin believes that drama depends on the presentation of a unified world. "In drama the world must be made of a single piece. Any weakening of this monolithic quality leads to a weakening of dramatic effect" (Bakhtin in Carlson 1992). For Bakhtin, there exists only one level of reality on stage, the stage does not allow for references to another voice that may interact with that reality, the field of vision is unified in author, director and audience. As Marvin Carlson points out, it appears as if Bakhtin thinks of theatre only as tragedy (Carlson 1992:318). Simon

Dentith says that it seems as if Bakhtin thought that all dramas were written by Racine (Dentith 1995:86).

Of course if an artwork was made according to a model based on the assertion that art should be free of artifice, hiding its facticity, the result would have to be monologic. Dialogism ruptures the coherence and self-containedness of the artwork (its natural unity) because it allows for different voices and different levels of reality to exist simultaneously. The dialogic novel is not a self-contained isolated body, but reaches outside of itself as it allows other voices and other realities to emerge through its form.

Carlson sees a contradiction in Bakhtin's work where he claims that the novelistic imagination (the polyphony of dialogism) is suppressed at roughly the same time that the modern novel is born. He does not believe that the novelistic should be seen as something that is characteristic of only the novel. The novelistic is rather a possibility realised in particular acts of literature, it emerges when polyphonic inter-penetration undermines the self-contained and individual coherence fundamental to a modernist view of art. Carlson points out that theatre since the late 19th century has become increasingly novelistic in Bakhtin's sense, i.e. indeterminate, semantically open-ended (Carlson 1992:316).

In fact if the novelistic discourse is to be identified by characters who are not "voiceless slaves," but "*free* people capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him" (Bakhtin in Carlson 1992:317), Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) has to be an almost perfect example of dialogism. The play not only represents multiple realities but in fact dramatises the process whereby an author loses control over the desires and intentions of his characters.

Apart from referring such instances of dialogism evident in specific theatre pieces, Carlson argues that it might be possible to claim that performance is inherently dialogic because of an inevitable disjuncture between author and enactors. Even where the director attempts to bring all elements of the production under his or her control, surplus meanings will arise through the necessary involvement of author on the one hand and actors on the other (Carlson 1992:319-20).

> In the performed play, as in the utterance, the restrictive and systematising forces of canonisation confront the unique and situation-orientated force of heteroglossia.

> (Carlson 1992:320)

If the text is read, however, rather than enacted, Bakhtin's observation would seem to generally hold true. Apart from cases where the author explicitly inserts himself into the text through stage directions (e.g. Shaw) or explicit meta-theatricality, the author of the drama text retreats into the invisibility of a god-like puppet-master. There is no authorial presence in the text itself that allows a reader to distinguish between the voice of the author and the voices of characters not under his control. The only level of reality presented is the level of the character's world, a world which may never transcend the unity given to it by the invisible author.

A performance in which the aim is to create a perfect illusion of reality may be seen as an attempt to extend this monologism into the theatre. The conventions of realism that developed in the 19th century were designed to focus the spectator's attention as much as possible on the world created on the stage and to minimise factors that draw attention to the actual situation in the theatre. This kind of realism is, however, created through particulars and as such it is very different from the 17th century Neo-classic ideal of an abstract and generalised realism.

Jones and Nicol write of a tension in Neo-classicism between verisimilitude and *les bienséances* that create a double standard of evaluation. Some works are too naturalistic and others not naturalistic enough (Jones and Nicol 1976:56). This idea could maybe be restated as a tension between the particular and the general. Particularity makes the presentation believable, but an excess undermines the universality of the moral message. This tension is not so much resolved as contained within a hierarchy that puts the general before the particular. The result is that what is depicted is an idealised, abstracted reality; the kind of reality that Bakhtin associated with the modern era. In this era the carnivalesque interplay of diversities is tamed by a stable system of universal principles existing outside of history. At the same time humanity is particularised into individuals, cut off from history and the world. Reality's sense of wholeness and interconnectedness is lost. Thus the idea of the general creates the idea of the particular.

The general and the particular are so interconnected, however, that the opposition threatens to deconstruct. The general has to show itself in particulars. The general can only be made concrete and present by the particular. Otherwise it remains symbolical, abstract and thus fundamentally absent. By analogy the performance has to make the text concrete. This is why there is an extent to which performance matters for 17th century critics. That extent is, however, limited by the fact that the tension between the general and the particular, and by analogy the text and performance, is contained by a hierarchy that privileges the general over the particular and the text over the performance.

This hierarchy can, however, not be sustained indefinitely. As I have said, it deconstructs. Criticism in the 18th century will begin to show signs of this deconstruction, Neo-classicism will begin to waver under internal contradictions. This will happen for a variety of reasons, but central to this process of destabilisation will be the ironic way in which the individual created through a loss of historical awareness in early modernity will provide the basis for the emergence of a new kind of historical awareness. This new historicism would be instrumental in reversing the hierarchy between the general and the particular and finally that between text and performance.
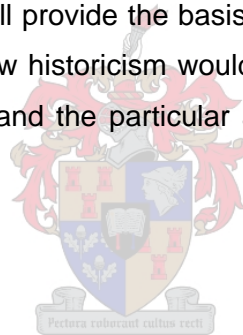
## 2.4    Conclusion

In the 18th century some themes of a more humanist modernity reappeared, linked to the growing trend of empiricism in philosophy that moved away from the metaphysics of Descartes. In the process criticism became less dogmatic and more sympathetic to factors such as emotion and psychology. The classics were still revered, but the new importance of the concept of the 'genius', allowed for more creative freedom. The next chapter will examine how dramatic criticism in the 18th century developed the themes discussed above and introduced new themes, without completely abandoning the fundamentals of the Neo-classicism discussed here.

Before turning to the 18th century, however, I would like to summarise a few general findings at this point. It should be clear by now that 17th century critics and theorists are to a large extent guilty of the charges laid against them by late 19th and 20th century theorists and critics. It would certainly seem from the examples considered here that these critics looked primarily at the text when considering theatre. They did not distinguish between the play as written and the play performed. The audience

was important insofar as the play had to have a particular effect on them, but that effect was considered in the abstract, not a measurement of actual audiences in actual theatres.

In the second place, Neo-classic critics, with the emphasis they put on the moral correctness of the play, clearly did not consider theatre an autonomous form. Although the concept 'literature' did not exist in its modern form, theatre was associated with literary forms like the epic rather than popular folk performance genres. Theatre was autonomous only insofar as tragedies and comedies were governed by different principles or rules. As we have seen, however, these unique principles related to the question of 'performance' only very loosely, plays did not derive their uniqueness from it.

Thirdly, in terms of how performance was defined, the section on system-building and performance in this chapter has found that the attempts of Neo-classic theorists to build a system for dramatic theory implicitly relied on exactly the kind of definition of the relation between performance and text that 20th century theorists complain of. The text was invoked as the ideal standard against which performances were measured. The type of theatrical events they investigated was also only text-based and absolutely no interest was shown in anything but what can be described as high or serious culture.
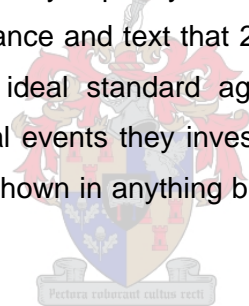
Finally, authority was an important issue in 17th century theory and criticism and this importance continued to increase throughout the next century. What we see here is a process whereby the authority derived from ancient writers such as Aristotle was replaced by authority derived from rational systems of thought. This obviously relates to the issue of autonomy, since the individual work is legitimised and in that sense *authorised* by institutions wholly outside of it. In 20th century text-performance discourse the issue of authority related to the alleged logocentrism of traditional Western theatre, the attempt to protect the intentions of the author by privileging speech over writing. This concept of 'logocentrism' may be compared to Bakhtin's concept of 'monologism', used to describe fiction in which the characters all speak in the voice of the author. In 17th century criticism the author was not held in any particular regard, his or her intentions were already subject to what was prescribed by the rules of morality and verisimilitude. It was only in the next century that the author really became a figure of authority in criticism and theory. Chapter Four will

look more fully at how the trends and themes discussed here relate to the issues underlining the text-performance discourse as described in Chapter One.
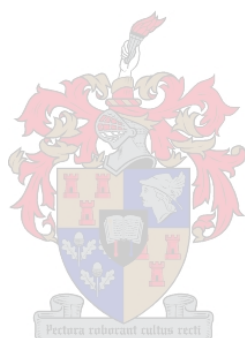
# CHAPTER THREE

## NEO-CLASSICISM IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: SENTIMENT, REALISM AND PERFORMANCE

Criticism in the 18$^{th}$ century built on the themes of the 17$^{th}$ century: Neo-classicism was still for the most part firmly entrenched and reason remained a key concept. At the same time critics increasingly paid attention to the emotions and feeling as a source of moral goodness and value. Critics did thus appear to shrug off some of the shackles of the restrictive rationalism that characterised the 17$^{th}$ century. With some of the uncertainties of the 17$^{th}$ century left behind, modernity was based on greater confidence and was thus freer. Critics became less obsessed with laying down individual rules. This did not, however, mean that they abandoned the values that motivated the making of rules in the first place. If anything, their pursuit of these values became more sophisticated. Critics in the 18$^{th}$ century still generally thought in terms of principles that were abstract, universal and reasonable; even as their definition of what was reasonable became less restrictive.

### 3.1    The Enlightenment: ethos and dogma
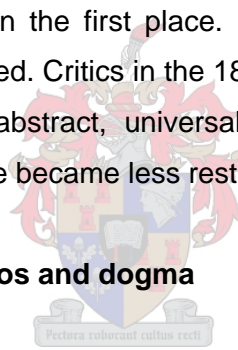
The 18$^{th}$ century is often referred to as the era of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment can be basically defined as a movement or project, originating in the 17$^{th}$ century, but peaking in the 18$^{th}$, aimed at emancipating humanity from its subjection to ignorance, superstition and dogma through rational and scientific thinking. The problem of authority was central to Enlightenment thought. Generally thinkers of the Enlightenment rejected any authority not derived from reason, like the powers of magic, superstition and religion. They sought true knowledge through reason and argument. All forms of traditional authority like the church and past philosophers became suspect. Enlightened philosophers believed that men should be taught to rely on the evidence provided by nature or reason, not on the arguments supplied by tradition (Cragg 1964:2). Freedom became a chief pre-occupation. To a large extent this notion of freedom was tied up with the idea of an intelligible universe.

Intellectually, men felt that they had escaped from an oppressive confinement into a world of liberty and light. The restraints imposed by a mysterious universe were lifted by the discovery that order and intelligibility embraced its most minute particles and its most remote spaces.

(Cragg 1964:3)

The development of the Enlightenment did not mean that everything that had gone before was rejected out of hand. Jonathan Israel distinguishes between the mainstream Enlightenment of for example the philosopher John Locke and his followers and the radical Enlightenment of those who to a large degree followed in the footsteps of Spinoza. While the radical Enlightenment rejected all compromise with the past, the mainstream Enlightenment was more interested in synthesis with tradition. Israel describes the mainstream Enlightenment as follows:

This was the Enlightenment which appeared to conquer ignorance and superstition, establish toleration, and revolutionise ideas, education, and attitudes by means of philosophy but in such a way as to preserve and safeguard what were judged essential elements of the older structures, effecting a viable synthesis of old and new, and of reason and faith.

(Israel 2001:11)

Those thinkers who operate within the mainstream of Enlightenment rejected religious enthusiasm, but not all religion. They stressed a degree of accountability in a ruler, but did not reject the idea of monarchy altogether. As such the mainstream Enlightenment posed little enough of a threat to church and state for its ideas to be allowed to flourish and gain widespread acceptance and influence. As we shall see this compromise with tradition characterises most drama theory and criticism as well. Aristotle and the Neo-classic doctrine derived from his premises continue as the main reference point of criticism throughout the 18th century, even while the authority of this doctrine was opened to questioning.

The Enlightenment suspicion of authority and rejection of dogma did not, however, mean that the Enlightenment was entirely free of all forms of dogmatic thinking. Michel Foucault makes a distinction between the ethos of the Enlightenment and the dogma of the Enlightenment in an essay titled 'What is Enlightenment?' (1992). This essay is a response to Immanuel Kant's essay of the same name. The ethos of the Enlightenment is described by Foucault as a permanent critique of our historical era

(Foucault 1992:103). It is the belief that no authority is exempt from questioning. Foucault argues that late 20th century philosophy is still tied to the Enlightenment through its ethos. Hollinger describes the ethos of the Enlightenment as one that,

> teaches us that our dogmas and doctrines are not as rational as we had thought …. It means that we need to question the limits of our current dogmas, explore ways of transgressing them, and continually test the scope and limits of reason.
>
> (Hollinger 1994:15)

The dogma of the Enlightenment, on the other hand, asserts that everything important can be articulated and proved or disproved by the sciences and that what cannot be articulated in scientific language is not worth anything (Hollinger 1994:16). In some circles a new kind of rationalist dogma was derived from some of the basic assumptions of Enlightenment thinking. Hollinger gives a list of these assumptions. In the first place the Enlightenment thinkers assumed that what was worth knowing could be consolidated into a set of principles that could be assented to rationally and accepted on the basis of a universally valid set of methodological premises (Hollinger 1994:7). In the second place they presupposed that all rational human beings were subjected to universal moral principles which could provide guides and standards for conduct and judgement. Moreover they assumed that beliefs that contradict this moral and epistemological unity are obstacles to progress and happiness.

> Only a society based on science and universal values is truly free and rational; only its inhabitants can be happy.
>
> (Hollinger 1994:7)

In the context of this type of thinking art would either have no value, or critics would have to prove that art served life, that it could not only be described in rational terms as being founded on rational principles, but had a clear function in the organisation of social life. This aim is the foundation of the Neo-classic insistence on the moral function of art, the emphasis on art as representation (and its regulation of this function through the concept of verisimilitude) as well as its desire to organise the principles of drama into a complete critical system. This aim may also explain why 17th century criticism is so prescriptive and even dogmatic. Finally this rationalism encouraged critics to think of theatre as a literary genre rather than a performed art. The text could ostensibly transcend the moment of its reception. The text fitted the

rationalist model, it was seen as timeless and transcended a particular context. The performance itself had little value or interest, in some cases it was blamed for undermining the message of the play through its appeal to the senses.

While Neo-classicism remained the chief reference point for criticism throughout the 18th century, the application of its principles by its 18th century supporters was generally less dogmatic. The principles of Neo-classic criticism were themselves subject to rational inquiry; its authority was, at least in theory, not viewed as self-evident. With the rise of the experimental approach to science, derived from Locke and Newton, experience and sense-perception become part of the tools of rational and scientific inquiry and undermine the centrality of deductive logic in epistemology. We also see that subjective experience and emotion come to be viewed with less suspicion. This means that some of the philosophical assumptions that guided a particular understanding of what theatre is (as explored in the previous chapter), were losing ground.

The ethos of the Enlightenment stimulated new ways of looking at theatre and less dogmatic applications of Neo-classicism and the alternatives to it that developed in the 18th century eventually allowed for a better understanding of theatre as a performed art. There are certainly many more examples of critics or theorists specifically describing theatre as a performed art than we find in the 17th century. Sir Richard Steele is a good example of this trend. In the first issue of his periodical *The Theatre* (1720) he distinguishes between the composition of a play and its performance (Steele 1961:2) and in issue no. 28 he states that a play is designed for the spectator rather than the reader (Steele 1961:123). Steele's most famous comment in this regard is from the preface to his sentimental comedy *The Conscious Lovers* (1723):

> [I]t must be remembered a Play is to be Seen, and is made to be Represented with the Advantage of Action, nor can appear both with half the Spirit, without it; for the greatest Effect of a Play in reading is to excite the Reader to go see it; and when he does so, it is then a Play has the effect of Example and Precept.
>
> (Steele 1969:83)

On the other hand there were still many 18th century critics and theorists who believed that it was better to read than to see a play. R.D. Stock writes that it was

generally assumed in the first half of the 18th century that readers were the proper judges of dramatic merit and reviewers approached plays as books rather than as staged productions (Stock 1973:209). Samuel Johnson appears to do just this when he writes the following in his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765):

> A dramatick exhibition is a book recited with concomitants that increase or diminish its effect. Familiar comedy is often more powerful on the theatre, than in the page; imperial tragedy is always less …. A play read affects the mind like a play acted.
>
> (Johnson in Stock 1973:101)

Other comments would indicate that Johnson is not consistently so dismissive of performance: he writes in the dedication to John Hoole's *Cyrus* (1768) that the play might be better appreciated in performance (Johnson in Stock 1973:211). The quote above comes from an argument against the unities and the equation of reading and seeing a play is in the context of that argument quite reasonable. Still it is clear that Johnson sees the performance as a product of the play rather than its actualisation to the extent that Steele does earlier.

Some other comments on the subject include Sebastien Mercier's statement that a play requires actions and a stage as a symphony requires an orchestra (In Stock 1973:210n); and, contrarily Oliver Goldsmith's assertion that that it is better to read than to see a play (in Stock 1973:210). Denis Diderot also argues that a play is meant to be produced (in Clark 1965:250). Beaumarchais argues that the effect of drama is more powerful on the stage (In Clark 1965:257). It would appear that 18th century attitudes to performance are beginning to crystallise into two camps. On the one hand more traditional Neo-classicists, like Samuel Johnson, are still suspicious of the performance, on the other hand many thinkers are beginning to acknowledge not only the power of performance, but also its importance in making the play reach its full potential. Interestingly enough this new attitude is most apparent in writers that criticise, reject or attempt to radically reform Neo-classicism, like Steele, Mercier and Diderot.

Steele, Mercier, Beaumarchais and Diderot were, amongst others, proponents of a new genre of theatre that made its appearance in the 18th century. They rejected traditional comedy and tragedy in favour of the sentimental comedy and domestic tragedy (or *drame*), forms that moved the theatre closer to realism and were chiefly

designed to inspire benevolent sympathy (as opposed to admiration and fear) in the audience. These new forms were products of a philosophical shift away from the rationalism that dominated late 17th century thinking. There would thus seem to be a definite link between the 18th century approach to performance and this shift. The next section of this chapter will thus look specifically at this philosophical shift in preparation of a more thorough examination of trends in 18th century dramatic theory and criticism.

## 3.2 'The Age of Reason' and 'The Age of Sensibility': 18th century approaches to rationality and emotion

In the 18th century thinkers continued to emphasise 'reason', and as Gerald Cragg says 'reason' together with 'authority' constitute the chief preoccupations of the thought of this era.

> The leaders of 18th century thought did not question the authority of reason; their controversies concerned its sufficiency.
>
> (Cragg 1964:93)

There was, however, a shift of emphasis in terms of how reason was understood. As seen before, system-building was an important aspect of rational thought in the 17th century. Neo-classicism was system-building applied to the arts. In the 18th century, however, critics and philosophers viewed system-building with mounting suspicion.

> Increasingly, however, the consensus amongst 18th century intellectuals was to move away from the kind of ideal entertained by Descartes a century earlier, of a total body of knowledge built on a single set of intellectual principles.
>
> (Munck 2000:5)

Systems such as Cartesianism initially appeared to promise a stable alternative to authoritative religious-based worldviews. In the light of what has been termed the 'crisis of the European mind' of the late 17th century (Israel 2001), it must to many have appeared absolutely necessary that they do so. In the light of the religious strife generated by the Reformation and Counter-reformation it was probably hoped that the new philosophy and science would prove to be even more stable, less prone to promote disagreement and strife than religious absolutism. But the tools with which

this was attempted would prove to have the capacity to undermine those very goals. A pluralistic world was emerging, even while most were still very far from considering this a good thing.

System-building was losing favour because it was becoming obvious that it was not really sustainable. As Thomas Munck points out, system-building was a common and understandable scholarly pursuit "[a]s long as one individual could still hope to embrace a good part of the entire corpus of learning of western Christendom" (Munck 2000:4). This was becoming increasingly difficult. So we find that some of the French *philosophes* "dismissed abstract metaphysical system-building as verbal sophistry" (Munck 2000:5). Dennis Diderot, for example writes:

> The more I think of the drama, the more vexed I am with those who have written about it. The drama is a tissue of particular laws, from which the critics have deduced general precepts. It has been noticed that certain incidents produce great effects; and immediately it becomes a rule that all poets shall resort to the same means in order to produce like results.
>
> (Diderot in Clark 1965:250)

Following this trend Gotthold Lessing makes clear in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1769) that this work is not meant to present a complete system of thinking on drama. The *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* is a collection of 104 short essays that reviews the repertory of the Hamburg National theatre. As reviews these are, at least initially, very performance orientated (although discussion of the actual performances cease after no. 25). Lessing frames these reviews with commentary on the specific play, its history and some general theory. Lessing refuses to universalise his insights. He is very aware of cultural differences, recognising that what appeals to the French or English, is not necessarily acceptable in Germany and vice versa. He also warns the critic to not turn personal taste into a general law. Lessing thus rejects the kind of system-building that French critics were engaging in a century earlier. He reminds his readers that "these sheets are to contain anything rather than a dramatic system" (Lessing 1962:251). As the work progresses, however, he turns more and more to general theory, abandoning individual reviews.

> The *Dramaturgie* was never intended to be a systematic treatise of dramatic theory; if anything, it finally turns out to be rather more of one than was originally envisaged.

<div align="right">(Lamport 1981:126)</div>

As the example of Lessing might illustrate, the rejection of system-building was often more theoretical than practical. Philosophy still tended towards it because philosophers were not willing to let go of the idea of universal and general truth. Philosophers continued to hope that reason or experimental science would establish the foundations of such truths. So we find that alongside appeals to 'reason', 'nature' figures as a reference point in the pursuit of truth that would transcend the moment. References to 'nature' are sprinkled liberally throughout 18th century discourse, and as Munck points out, mostly with little attempt at precision (Munck 2000:11). In Neo-classicism the concept 'nature' really means 'general nature' and "… this view of 'general nature' meant the exclusion of the purely local, concrete, and individual" (Wellek 1970:15).

In the 18th century this is still mostly how the term is used, although it now in some cases also starts to refer to a condition opposed to 'culture' and artificial restrictions on man's natural freedom. But however the word is used, and no matter how vaguely it is sometimes defined, it generally appears as something essentially unambiguous and determinable. In fact at the beginning of the 18th century a new kind of rational system was emerging that would rely very heavily on 'nature' as a source of truth, namely empiricism. A major difference between this new empiricism and the rationalism it to a degree replaced would be that the local, concrete and individual would no longer be quite as suspect. Through empiricism particulars could be assimilated into a general idea and provide its substance.

It would seem possible that one of the factors contributing to system-building's loss of favour was the fact that Descartes' system was so quickly overshadowed by rival systems. Jonathan Israel shows that while the philosophy of Descartes had immense influence in the late 17th century, even in France where its teaching was banned, this influence began to wane in the early 18th century. This was at least partly due to the fact that his followers, like Locke in England and Leibniz in Germany, began to develop systems of their own (Israel 2001:18-19). In this way Cartesianism was supplanted, in England and France at least, by the experimentalism promoted by Locke and Newton (Israel 2001:477).

Locke is generally considered to be a primary influence on 18<sup>th</sup> century thought. James Sambrook, for example, describes him as the starting point of 18<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics, in spite of the fact that Locke wrote very little on aesthetics itself, and was very disturbed by art's potential to mislead judgment and reason. His influence originated from the way in which he directed philosophy towards psychological investigation as well as the constant appeals to experience rather than to reason. Also influential was his doctrine that knowledge derived from sensation (Sambrook 1986:101).

Locke advanced the notion that knowledge derives form experience rather than innate ideas. He does not dismiss innate ideas entirely; experience is in his view constituted by sensation as well as reflection on sensation (Cragg 1964:7). Although empiricism, the idea that all knowledge is derived from sense impressions, was influenced by Locke, he was not a pure empiricist himself. His thought was pervasively rationalist, although he did acknowledge that some truths were beyond reason.

> He was a rationalist in that he insisted that all truths must be ultimately judged by reason, and he viewed with deep distrust any attempt to override its verdict.
>
> (Cragg 1964:8)
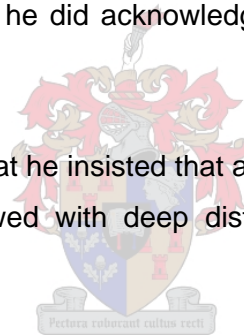
Many thinkers, inspired by Locke, did develop his ideas in the direction of pure empiricism. So 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy did exhibit a conflict between empiricism and rationalism. Where empiricists believe that everything we know about the world is derived from sensory impressions, rationalists hold that our knowledge of the world is guided by innate ideas and reasoned argument. Thomas Munck writes that the conflict between those who gave prominence to metaphysical ideas, rationalists, and the sensationists (empiricists) persisted throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century with metaphysical thought becoming typical of Germanic countries, while empiricism was prevalent in France and England (Munck 2000:6).

Descartes was a rationalist and this study has mostly focussed on this tradition so far. When applied to theatre criticism it means that the principles underlying drama are seen to exist *a priori*; critics don't derive them from examining examples, but determine them logically and abstractly. We have seen how this type of thinking

informs Neo-classicism[1]. This kind of rationalism also apparently encouraged theorists and critics to dismiss the performance as a factor when examining theatre, because they are thinking of theatre in ideal terms removed from its actual practice.

Empiricism, where knowledge is derived from experience rather than abstract ideals, was not incompatible with Neo-classicism and its growth did not in itself constitute a threat to its basic premises. It did, however, promote greater individualism and so it undermined the idea that only certain experts had claims to real knowledge. The empiricist idea of reason promoted individualism, since it allowed the individual to trust his own rational ability. 18th century thinkers

> were inclined to place the *individual's* opinion, whether it proceeded from his discursive reason or from his instincts, over the collective wisdom of the past.
>
> (Stock 1973:xvi)

But 'common sense' was still seen as better, for it would be irrational to prefer one's own 'private sense' to it. It was a duty to think in universal terms. Importantly, reason was not intricate or difficult to understand. This idea of reason is also anti-authoritarian, the reasonable individual's actions did not necessarily have to be legislated externally by some higher authority; he could trust his own judgment, as long as he stayed within the limits of reasonable common sense.

No 18th century theorist would claim that art did not have rules or that the artist could afford to transgress these in any but the most exceptional circumstances. The difference was that within a view that leaned towards empiricism the individual could glean the true principles of the art through experience and his good sense and it did not have to be legislated by experts.

---

[1] Wellek warns that the term 'rationalist' as applied to Neo-classicism could be misleading if it is interpreted to mean that Neo-classicists conceived of art itself as wholly rational intelligence to the exclusion of feeling, imagination, and even the unconscious.

> The theory of literature is a matter of the conscious mind, but no reputable critic has ever held that artistic creation itself is nothing but conscious rational process. The terms 'genius', 'inspiration', *poeta vates*, *furor poeticus* are the stock in trade of Renaissance poetics, and even the most rigid critics of the most formalistic kind never forgot to say that poets need 'inspiration', 'imagination', 'invention', this last a term which covers much that later criticism would have called creative imagination. They believed in a rational theory of poetry, but not that poetry was entirely rational. But, of course, neither did they believe that poetry was a merely subconscious process. … They constantly stressed the share of judgment, discrimination, and design in the composition of poetry. Imagination needs the guide and bridle of reason.
>
> (Wellek 1970:14)

A growing confidence in man's powers suggested that he should rely more exclusively on his native capacities.

(Cragg 1964:10)

Empiricism can thus to a certain extent be described as a democratisation of thinking and a significant degree of individualism is implied by its basic approach. Many of the contradictions of 18th century thought spring from this trend towards individualism. 'Taste', a concept closely connected to 'reason' brings many of these contradictions to light. Taste, as Sherburne and Bond point out, was controlled by judgment, i.e. reason, and reason was supposed to be "uniform in all men who are uncorrupted by bad education, false religion, or faulty social institutions" (Sherburne & Bond 1993:827). Ideally, taste was thus constant, universal and uniform. At the same time it was not that simple, because, as Wellek points out, in practice 'taste' was not exclusively an intellectual concept (Wellek 1970:24).

They [18th century critics] defended the view that taste was both acquired and spontaneous, innate and cultivated, 'sentimental' and intellectual. But these reconciliations of opposites raised a problem which proved dangerous to the basic assumptions of Neo-classicism, which demanded, after all, an objective standard of value and beauty.
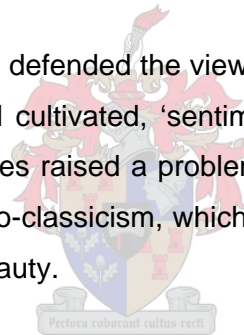
(Wellek 1970:24)

In the early 18th century "an aspiration towards 'taste' helped to define the 18th century citizen as part of the 'polite' public" (Craske 1997:13). This 'polite' public, Craske writes, had, in the context of a broadening accessibility of the arts, to be distinct from the 'crowd' or 'threatening mob'. The distinction was initially largely made on the basis of the polite citizen's rational abilities. This distinction could not, however, completely survive the growing tendency to put the emphasis on emotion rather than on reason and the emerging spirit of democracy.

A strong tendency arose in mid 18th century France and England to define the public in different terms; as part of the population with a capacity for 'feeling', 'sympathy', or 'sensibility'. New publics for the visual arts and literature were

created through the invention of types of art which appealed strongly to 'the passions' thus cutting out the requirement for elite learning which had acted as a barrier to the appreciation of the arts.

(Craske 1997:14)

The effect was that the arts became more egalitarian: anyone with a modicum of learning and some public credibility could claim to be an arbiter of taste (Craske 1997:16).

R.D. Stock discerns two distinct attitudes to the concept of 'taste' in the 18th century. He distinguishes between those that seek to methodise the concept (uncover aesthetic principles) and those who are quite happy to see it as subjective (Stock 1973:14). While some were thus quite happy with 'taste' being a nebulous and subjective concept, others sought to clarify and objectivise it. Some writers, like David Hume, negotiate between these extremes. In 'Of the Standards of Taste' (1757), Hume acknowledges that tastes vary, but still claims that common sense suggests that there are standards of taste similar to the principles of science. While sentiment is always right, and all feelings equally valid, it is still possible that feeling may mislead a person if he is in the wrong frame of mind. The rules of art can be said to be based on universal principles.

It is evident that none of the rules of composition are fixed by reasoning *a priori*, or can be esteemed abstract conclusions of the understanding, from comparing those habititudes and relations of ideas, which are eternal and immutable. Their foundation is the same with that of all the practical sciences, experience; nor are they anything but general observations, concerning what has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages.

(Hume 1998:137-8)

Many thus continued to resist the idea that taste could be wholly individual and felt that "[d]emocracy was an idea which should be applied to political life, but not the exalted realms of art" (Craske 1997:17). But it was hardly as easy as Hume might make it seem. The problem is that universality that Hume so casually evokes. One of the inherent contradictions in the 18th century concept of taste, Wellek points out, was that the universal audience supposedly appealed to was actually becoming more and more narrowed down (Wellek 1970:24).

> When the critics appealed to general human nature, they often had in mind only the man of their own time, the man of taste, the civilised man educated in the classics and trained since childhood to distinguish the good from the bad. In practice the ideal reader became the self-consciously modern man, very proud of his exalted position at the pinnacle of civilization.
>
> (Wellek 1970:23)

In the 18th century public culture was becoming less homogenous and more pluralistic. A variety of art forms was proliferating and with them publics for those forms. To maintain the idea of the universal was beginning to be a very conscious attempt to discount experiences that did not fit the model. Such attempts of course in themselves start to undermine the concept of the universal. By the end of the century, Craske writes, the idea of *the* art public was no longer tenable and the idea of universal and uniform good taste could no longer hold either (Craske 1997:20).

It was on at least two interconnected fronts that the stability of 'taste' and eventually 'reason' was undermined during the course of the 18th century. On the one hand emotion and feeling, what was called sensibility, steadily began to overshadow the importance of rationality. On the other hand the rejection of authority promoted democracy and individualism. The anti-authoritarianism characteristic of the 18th century view of reason would begin to work against it.

> [T]he exaggerated claims advanced on behalf of reason provoked a reaction. Scholars and thinkers of great eminence contended that its powers were much less extensive than its champions had claimed. Hume argued that reliance on reason led, not to absolute certainty but to complete scepticism. John Wesley [the founder of the Methodist church] insisted that an adequate account of human experience will allow reason a valid but a very restricted role, and will assign to faith the principal part in integrating the scattered forces of man's personal life.
>
> (Cragg 1964:vii-viii)

So during the course of the 18th century the individualism and anti-authoritarianism inherent in the 18th century idea of reason gradually grew into philosophical positions that could confront the authority of reason itself. Gerald Cragg writes that it gradually became clear that a confident rationalism was not the natural form of human thought if it was allowed to go its own way, and that not all subjects admitted of logical proof

(Cragg 1964:276-7). Thought in this era may thus also be characterised by increased interest in and appreciation of emotion. Locke's psychology as well as his philosophy's emphasis on experience rather than reason, created a theoretical space wherein subsequent theorists could argue against the view that emotion or passionate feelings were in themselves dangerous that we see in the majority of 17th century thinkers.

Lord Shaftesbury, Locke's pupil, equated ethics and aesthetics, beauty and good were for him the same (Sambrook 1986:103). Shaftesbury saw feeling rather than reason as the source of morality, and believed that people were naturally good. Shaftesbury's ideas are one aspect of the doctrine of benevolism that became a major trend in 18th century England (Sherburne & Bond 1993:827) and also reared its head on the continent. Benevolism is a moral theory in which morality is seen to spring from feeling rather than reasoning. Possibly derived from Locke's idea that moral essences are mental constructions, "archetypes of the mind's own making" (Jolley 1999:4), benevolism posits that man is naturally inclined to be good. But benevolism should not be seen as a rejection of reason. It was religion or morality made reasonable.

> This was doctrine acceptable to the Age of Reason, and it was effectively reinforced by the conviction that happiness is the reward of morality.
>
> (Cragg 1964:22)
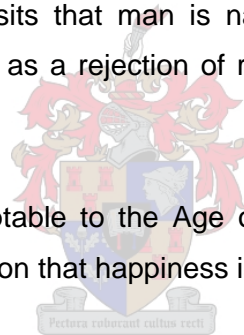
In general, benevolism promoted emphasis on sociability and sensibility. And it allowed wider definitions of rationality to gain ground, while still keeping reason central. In aesthetics its most concrete contribution was probably the way in which emphasis on emotional response to art fostered the rise of forms like sentimental comedy.

> In mid-century criticism, both English and French, the classical conception of poetry as an imitation of moral or ideal nature is yielding to the notion that it is primarily an affective form of art. The interest is turning from what it represents to the sentiments aroused by what it represents.
>
> (Stock 1973:42)

At the end of the previous section of this chapter Richard Steele, Denis Diderot, Beaumarchais and Sebastien Mercier were identified as some advocates of these

new affective forms. Although the rise of these forms will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter it seems worthwhile to mention again here the apparent connection between an affinity for such new forms and a specific understanding of performance. Various factors may be at the root of this. In the first place empiricism as the foundation of sentimentalism, leads thinkers to examine the thing itself rather than what has been said about it in the past. The performed nature of theatre becomes more apparent as theorists and critics are liberated from entrenched attitudes and dogma about the nature of theatre.

In the second place the individualism and democratic spirit of empiricism and sentimentalism may work similarly to undermine the authority of ancient experts and empower contemporary theorists to explore new directions. In addition this democratic spirit leads to a new attitude to the audience as well as to the actors which makes the whole context of performance less suspect. With the development of new ideas on taste, a theatre audience or company of actors are as able to judge the worth of a play as a learned expert.

Finally, an important aspect of the dogmatic Neo-classical theorists' attitude to performance was their conviction that spectacle appealed primarily to the emotions or passions. For the new sentimentalists this could be a good rather than a bad thing. For extreme sentimentalists arousing the emotions was the whole point of art and if a performance could encourage this it was to be valued highly. Richard Steele, in the passage from his preface to *The Conscious Lovers* quoted before, writes of how the performance improves the moral effectiveness of the play because it stimulates the emotions of the audience.

In some ways sentimentalism also, at least initially, steered drama in the direction of a more literal moralism. Initially benevolists could argue that art could be moral by appealing to the right kind of feelings. As such it extended Neo-classicism's insistence that art be moral, while abandoning its premise that emotion is necessarily dangerous and has to be moderated and controlled. But in the second half of the 18th century sentiment was no longer praised exclusively for its moral purpose; sensations were now glorified even if they were merely thrilling (Sherburne & Bond 1993:967-8). Even truth was not what it used to be:

doubts arose as to whether truth – poetic truth at least – was 'one clear, unchanged, and universal light', and the belief in uniformity and universality gave way to a love of diversity that led to revolution.

(Sherburne & Bond 1993:971)

This revolution came in the form of Romanticism. By the end of the 18th century it would be possible to identify rejections of Neo-classicism and its basic assumptions that cohered into a distinctly new movement. Now emotion would be championed over reason, the individual over the general and expression over imitation. It sometimes seems as if this movement appeared from nowhere as a sudden reversal of a century and a half's steady Neo-classicism. A closer look at criticism in the 18th century shows, however, that Neo-classicism was being undermined from within and that during the course of the 18th century its internal contradictions were becoming increasingly apparent. On the one hand, Wellek points out, Neo-classicism was being undermined by the success of genres for which its theory did not provide, like the novel and the sentimental comedy (Wellek 1970:20). On the other hand the shift of critical concern to the reaction of the audience led to a dissolution of Neo-classicism into emotionalism and sentimentalism (Wellek 1970:26).

> Neo-classicism … had many contradictions concealed in its system. What happened in the 18th century was not anything like a unified romantic or pre-romantic revolt; rather, individual issues concealed in the current theory were brought into the open, critics pushed this or that position to its logical or illogical extreme, and theories became established which kept up connections with the past only uneasily and formally.
>
> (Wellek 1970:25)

While the romantics scoffed at everything that had to do with 'The Age of Reason' (the most common, if problematic, epithet applied to the 18th century), Romanticism is clearly the result of directions embarked on in this 'Age of Reason'. Some of the critics that will be discussed in this chapter, like Diderot and Lessing, provided in their pursuit of Enlightenment the foundations for Romanticism. Generally it was what was earlier referred to as the ethos of Enlightenment that allowed for a movement to emerge that apparently rejects the idea of Enlightenment. Romanticism as a kind of counter-Enlightenment was a reaction against many of the excesses of Enlightenment dogma. The next section of this chapter will look at how these themes from 18th century philosophy inform particular trends in 18th century dramatic

criticism. The Enlightenment pursuit of general and universal truths, as well as the era's new attitude to emotion manifested itself in critical works that still attempted to establish the fundamental principles of drama, but also had to deal with some of the difficulties generated by the tension between reason and emotion and the general and the particular.

## 3.3    Trends in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Criticism in England, France and Germany

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century English dramatic criticism comes into its own. English Neo-classic critics no longer feel that they have to defer to the French. While it was really only Dryden that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century made a significant contribution to criticism, the 18<sup>th</sup> century produced a host of critics like Lord Shaftesbury, John Denis, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and of course Samuel Johnson, who between them stake out valuable critical territory for the English. 18<sup>th</sup> century criticism also offers greater thematic integration with British philosophy. Themes pioneered by Hobbes and Locke become significant issues for criticism and the native empiricism assumes greater significance in debates about drama.

The French critics also continued along the lines established by 17<sup>th</sup> century criticism well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Around mid-century things would start to change as many critics embraced the new domestic drama, or *drame*, and rejected Neo-classicism's strict hierarchy of genres; but in the 1720s and 1730s Voltaire was still looking back to the great days of Boilleau (Voltaire in Clark 1965:230). Soon afterwards, however, Denis Diderot would start making arguments for the importance of the new forms as well as greater realism. Others, like Beaumarchais and Sebastien Mercier would follow his lead in this regard.

In Germany Johann Gottsched and Caroline Neuber launched a concerted effort to reform the stage in accordance with Neo-classic principles from the 1730s onwards. While Neo-classicism, as elsewhere in Europe, made a definite impact, the conservative version did not really take hold in Germany, even though Gottsched was very rigid about the rules (Carlson 1993:165). Gotthold Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy* of the late 1760s represents a more moderate, and more typically 18<sup>th</sup> century, version of Neo-classicism. Lessing disagrees with the French interpretation of Neo-classicism, without abandoning the Neo-classic impulse to think about theatre in general terms and to argue for its efficacy in moral terms. Lessing's critique of the

French did, however, inspire a more profound break with Neo-classic rationalism in critics that followed.

In spite of some of his initial intentions Lessing produced a general theory of drama in which most of the general principles of 18th century Neo-classicism are brought together. Lessing rejects dogmatic Neo-classicism, he dismisses arbitrary French rules. But Lessing was no romantic, he did not reject the philosophical foundation of Neo-classicism, he in fact wanted to reform the criticism built on that foundation.

> Lessing's attacks on the French theatre were undertaken in a spirit at once philological and moral: the true meaning of Aristotle's notions of tragedy was to be recovered from its French perverters, and a more profound and dynamic understanding was thus to be gained of the efficacy of the drama, the highest form, as he was convinced of artistic creation as the most telling mirror of the moral life.
>
> (Lange 1962:xi)

Although the rules continued to have supporters, 17th century criticism's continual emphasis of specific rules, like the unities, was no longer typical. But critics did not necessarily reject the idea of rules as much as their dogmatic application. During the 18th century the rules came under attack on various fronts. In the first place many had begun to distinguish between rules based on reason and those based only on authority. They distinguished between essential principles and arbitrary rules. Secondly the idea of 'genius' provided a model whereby no external authority was needed to regulate the creation of drama. With the idea of 'genius' the imagination also became increasingly important. In the third place a growing interest in feeling and sentiment as opposed to pure reason promoted the development of new forms of drama for which the 17th century rules had less relevance. Realism in drama became increasingly important and more specific than 17th century verisimilitude: encouraging the emergence of forms that did not fit Neo-classicism's strict hierarchy of genres.

In England this was the age of the great Garrick and his popularity prompted more theoretical speculation on the art of acting. This new theoretical interest was not, however, limited to England. In France a body of theory on acting was also developing. The rest of this section will look at these trends in more detail. In terms of the question of performance, we see that these trends in different ways contribute to a general increase in the extent to which performance is regarded as an important

factor in the theatre. The following pages will examine these trends in more detail so that a clearer picture may emerge of this increase in the extent to which performance is regarded as important.

### 3.3.1 The distinction between Reason and False Authority

Towards the end of the 17th century a distinction between essential principles and arbitrary rules became more and more established (Wellek 1970:20). In the 18th century the distinction would become even more important, and reason is more often opposed to false authority. George Farquhar's 'A Discourse upon Comedy in Reference to the English Stage' (1702), may serve as an early 18th century example of the opposition between reason and false authority (Carlson 1993:126). Farquhar begins by questioning Aristotle's infallibility; he does not see it as reasonable that those who have never written any poetry themselves (like Aristotle) should prescribe to poets (Farquhar in Clark 1965:170). Moreover, it is not necessary to call on Aristotle since practical experience may also make someone an authority in his field:

> All arts and professions are compounded of these two parts, a speculative knowledge, and a practical use; and from an excellency in both these, any person is raised to eminence and authority in his calling.
>
> (Farquhar in Clark 1965:170)
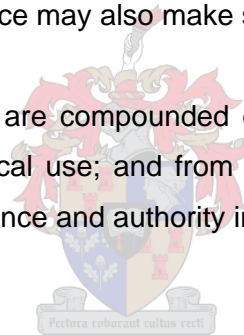
Farquhar then proposes that he, without resorting to quoting Aristotle, will enquire after the true nature of comedy. Farquhar, like an experimental scientist, wants to go back to the beginnings of comedy to determine what it really is. Once this is determined it is possible to determine how to best serve this essence and these are the "just rules of comedy and the true art of the stage". It is not that there are no rules, but that good sense can recognise these as much as the critics can. Rules like the unities are arbitrary, because the stage consists of many necessary impossibilities and improbabilities. Farquhar says that poets should only be criticised if they offend against the essential ends or means of comedy (Farquhar in Clark 1965:172-3).

Samuel Johnson wrote widely and prolifically on literature as well as more general matters. In *The Rambler* of 14 September 1751, Johnson distinguishes, like Farquhar earlier, between reason and false authority, even if he does not actually reject Neo-classicism to the degree that Farquhar does. Johnson believes in rules, but does not

consider all rules to be based on reason. Rules like the Greek three-actor rules, the five act rule and unity of time have no reasonable basis. Others, like those prohibiting the mixing of genres, governing unity of action and the tragic hero, are, on the other hand, essential.

> It ought to be the first endeavour of a writer to distinguish nature from custom, or that which is established because it is right, from that which is right because it is established; that he may neither violate essential principles by a desire of novelty, nor debar himself from the attainment of beauties within his view by a needless fear of breaking rules which no literary dictator had authority to enact.
>
> (Johnson 1969:70)

As shown in the previous chapter, in 17th century criticism references to Aristotle and the rules derived from his *Poetics* was usually accompanied by a kind of disclaimer that said that the author was not calling on the authority of Aristotle but on his reason. These statements usually had a hollow ring to them, partly because Aristotle's ideas were hardly ever subjected to any kind of proof or logical argument, but were taken to be self-evidently reasonable. This was possibly due to the fact that many 17th century conceptions of reason were normative rather than discursive (Stock 1973:xvii). As Neo-classicism moves into the 18th century the distinction between reason and authority generally becomes more forceful, and less like lip-service. The examples above suggest that in the 18th century the distinction could be used to with greater freedom to criticise Aristotle, or even, as in the case of Farquhar, discount him altogether. Even a relatively conservative critic like Samuel Johnson admits that some of the rules do not have a reasonable basis, and it seems clear that reason in the 18th century does, finally, surpass the authority of Aristotle.

The distinction between reason and false authority is closely connected to another distinction which is of some importance in 18th century thought; the distinction between what is essential and rooted in nature and that which is merely conventional, in Dr Johnson's words, that which seems "right because it is established" (Johnson 1969:70). In the context of this distinction 'nature' was beginning to mean something more than the generalised 'way things should be' of Neo-classicism. This was an age of disguise, Mathew Craske writes, social interaction was heavily conventionalised, and 'nature' now also denoted the opposite of such artifice.

> Defining what it meant to be 'natural', or speculating upon the condition of man before the evolution of civic society with all its intriguing artifice, luxurious comforts, and polite manners, became a veritable intellectual hobby horse.
>
> (Craske 1997:146)

This distinction of course carries its own inherent problems, not the least of which is epistemological. How do we *know* what is right and true and natural and what is convention, habit and merely cultural? For someone like Farquhar, experience is the key. Aristotle was not a poet and his opinions on poetry can therefore not be trusted. Farquhar wants to establish the essential principles of poetry afresh, through empirical method. Unshackled by awe of authority he begins at the beginning and considers the evidence. Experimental science steps into the epistemological vacuum created by the distrust of authority. Furthermore, "good genuine reason" is now to be found everywhere and it is not only learned critics that can detect faults in dramas (Farquhar in Clark 1965:176). Proficiency in creating drama, practical experience, now also counts towards authority. Thus the author is no longer subjected to the authority of the critic or savant.

### 3.3.2   Genius

In Farquhar we see the development of the idea of individual genius, an important aspect of 18th century criticism. Almost every 18th century critic would at some point refer to the notion of genius, but widely different things were meant by it, sometimes directly opposite. This concept is closely linked to the imaginative aspect of art and literature. In the most general way it referred to the poet's ability to invent.

Initially critics would, like Dryden in the previous century, argue that the imagination and genius were essential to art, but that rules were necessary to steer and discipline the artist's imagination. Voltaire is a good example in this regard. In his 'Letter to Father Porée' (1730), Voltaire defends the rules, arguing that the unities are immutable precepts of nature (Voltaire in Clark 1965:233). He does not, however, discount the imagination completely:

> The principles of all the arts, which depend upon imagination, are simple and easy; they are based upon nature and reason.
>
> (Voltaire in Clark 1965:232)

Imagination or genius always still has to be tempered by rules. In his letter to Horace Walpole (1768), Voltaire also writes about English drama. He finds Shakespeare's work beautiful, but uncivilised. He generally faults the English for ignoring the unities and verisimilitude. Genius is here still a kind of necessary evil. In a critic closely influenced by Voltaire, Jean François Marmontel, genius is discussed favourably, but definitely not as an alternative to rules.

> [Marmontel's] compliments to genius, even to 'original' genius, do not mean sympathy with art outside of the Latin tradition. Genius is merely the inventive faculty, while the actual composition of a work of art is due to talent and taste and to the observance of the rules.
>
> (Wellek 1970:65-6)

So we see that genius is opposed to rules and taste which, for critics that are more conservatively Neo-classical, are the true building blocks of good art. Later in the century this opposition will be reversed. In the work of Beaumarchais, the early Diderot and Sebastien Mercier, genius will be opposed to rules and taste with the former term being the true mark of the artist.

> Diderot contrasts genius, the 'pure gift of nature', with taste. Genius is above the rules: it can break any rule and all of them, even though rules may be useful in an age of decadence.
>
> (Wellek 1970:53)

Mercier also opposes genius to 'good taste' and calls the critics with their rules the assassins of genius (Wellek 1970:73). Beaumarchais considers the spectators to be the sole judges of plays written to amuse them. Those who champion the rules have inverted the natural order of things. Great works have served as the basis for rules, not rules as the basis of great works. If rules are blindly followed no progress can be made in art. Genius is what is important:

> Genius that is ever on the alert for something new, that is impatient, that chafes under the restrictions of what is already known, suspects something more, something beyond the known; agitated and set in motion by this impelling force, the genius, his mind in torment, impatient, struggling to free himself, impatient, struggling to free himself, grows; and finally, breaking

down the barrier of prejudice, he presses forward, out beyond the known borders. Sometimes he loses his way, but still it is he alone who carries the beacon far into the night of the possible, toward which others strive to follow him. He has made a giant stride, and the outposts of art are advanced.

(Beaumarchais in Clark 1965:255)

In this description of the genius we see a hint of what is to come. Beaumarchais describes the quintessential romantic genius and artist. This genius is an outsider, struggling against convention, his mind in *Sturm und Drang*-like torment, pushing his art into new territory. But Craske warns that we should not read too much into this kind of apparent romanticism. Such artists were not necessarily typical, 'self-expression' was a statement of a minority; these ideas were more margin than centre. They also weren't necessarily constructing a 'romantic revolution'.

The historic significance of artists who showed an overt interest in self-expression has, perhaps, been exaggerated. This aspect of their works seems important and representative in hindsight largely because it happens to represent the beginnings of an aesthetic ideal that went on to become predominant in the 20$^{th}$ century.

(Craske 1997:37)

What is true, however, is that definitions of genius were coloured by general trends that shaped 18$^{th}$ century thought. As such the increasing emphasis on sensibility and emotion would necessarily change the genius from someone with a potential for undisciplined barbarity to someone with sensitivity and insight. According to Craske the more typical mid 18$^{th}$ century notion of the genius was connected to the idea of sociability. The culture of sociability was derived from philosophical optimism. To be civilised was, in the view of David Hume and others, to be naturally sympathetic to one's fellow man (Craske 1997:40). The genius was an essential part of the moral community and not an individual. The genius was rather a superior perceiver of nature.

In this way Lessing's idea of the genius is probably finally the most typical of the 18$^{th}$ century. As Lamport points out, Lessing takes care to distinguish true genius from the gratuitous and anarchic self-expression often identified with it by some of his younger contemporaries. In Lessing genius is a conscious activity and as such rules and

principles help and support it (Lamport 1981:128). Central to Lessing's conception of genius is the ability to have a grasp of causality, of the true structure of nature.

> Genius is only busied with events that are rooted in one another, that form a chain of cause and effect. To reduce the latter to the former, to weigh the latter against the former, everywhere to exclude chance, to cause everything that occurs to occurs so that it could not have happened otherwise, this is the part of genius when it works in the domains of history and converts the useless treasures of memory into nourishment for the soul.
>
> (Lessing 1962:83)

Lessing opposes genius to wit. Wit does not depend on cause and effect, but on similarity and dissimilarity; it causes something to happen for its own sake, while genius connects events to each other. Lessing cites the axiom: "Genius loves simplicity, and wit complication" (1962:83). This opposition clearly reflects the distinction between nature and artifice referred to before. But it also relates to the opposition between the particular and the general. Wit creates an artificial connection between particularities that do not naturally add up to a general truth.

> Genius [for Lessing] is a more creative disposition than that of wit or *esprit* which merely imposes a precarious intellectual unity upon a haphazard variety of facts and attitudes.
>
> (Lange 1962:xiv)

Lessing criticises those who want to throw rules away in the name of genius. Genius, he says, cannot be oppressed by rules.

> Not every critic is a genius, but every genius is a born critic. He has the proof of all rules within himself. He comprehends, remembers and follows only those that express his feelings in words.
>
> (Lessing 1962:254)

For Lessing the opposition between rules and genius is false. He thus differs both from the early 18th century position that rules have to control genius and the later idea that rules oppress genius. Genius is knowing what the true rules are. It is thus in Lessing's concept of genius that we may most clearly detect the role that the notion of 'genius' has to play in the distinction between convention and nature (although it is

also clearly the basis of Beaumarchais's description). 'Wit' as the opposite of genius is artificial and complicated, genius is straightforward and natural.

The love of simplicity and plain language is nothing new. Neo-classicism has always eschewed excessive ornament. Samuel Johnson also argues for it (Johnson 1986:269). It is also the basis of Locke's distrust of the arts. Locke was very negative about art, because it could mislead the judgment, in other words the rational faculty of comprehending the world. He sees figurative speeches as an abuse of language, undermining its function to convey ideas clearly.

> But yet, if we would speak of Things as they are, we must allow, that all the Arts of Rhetorick besides Order and Clearness, all the artificial and figurative applications of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment, and so indeed are perfect cheat: and therefore however laudable or allowable Oratory may render them in Harangues and popular Addresses, they are certainly, in all Discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided.
>
> (Locke 1975:508)

Locke's mistrust of figurative language evokes Plato's denial that art can be a truthful and instructive. A platonic distrust of art and especially theatre will continue to haunt Western thinking for the following centuries. It emerges again in Rousseau, who also feels that the artifice and dependence on illusion that characterises theatre is dangerous and may mislead the people. Others believed that theatre could avoid these potential pitfalls (the following two sections will cover this). Generally, however, the preference for simplicity and straightforwardness was an important part of 18<sup>th</sup> century culture.

Israel describes the development of a new public sphere in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. This new public sphere undermined old social hierarchies and divisions. A new reading culture, conversational style and intellectual framework was generated and Latin was receding (Israel 2001:60-1). This was the sphere of the new coffee houses and periodicals like *The Spectator* in England.

> Especially esteemed in the new arena were clear, concise, readily grasped proofs, stripped of the pedantry and academic terminology and jargon of traditional scholarly discourse.
>
> (Israel 2001:61)

This was the sphere of Lessing's genius as well as the genius that Craske describes as sociable and part of the moral community. The culture of sociability with its basic benevolism produces a genius that is not an elitist, is kindly disposed to his fellow man and does not seek to confuse or mislead them with jargon or inaccessible ideas. This genius is also then a kind of natural and moderate empiricist. His authority derives from experience and his rational ability to understand nature. This culture also requires a new kind of drama; its basic democratic disposition, its distrust of wit and belief in good will needs forms that are not inherently aristocratic or heroic and in which ridicule is not a driving force. The culture of sociability requires forms that will not celebrate artificiality, but will in a natural and simple way promote morality and good will. The 18$^{th}$ century then sees the rise of alternatives to tragedy (driven by aristocratic heroism) and comedy (driven by ridicule and satire): like the sentimental comedy and the domestic drama[2], that are aimed at promoting good will.

### 3.3.3 Sentiment and Sensibility

In England, one of the first expressions of the new benevolism was a tract by Reverend Jeremy Collier criticising the contemporary theatre for its immodesty. His 'A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage' (1698), deals like much of 17$^{th}$ century criticism with the moral purpose of theatre, but in such a way that it appears qualitatively different from 17$^{th}$ century attempts to justify and ensure theatre's basic moral function. This is probably due to the fact that Collier seems closer to Plato than Aristotle. Collier criticises contemporary theatre for its smuttiness, swearing and profanity, lewd application of scripture, abuse of the clergy and its rewarding characters for their debauchery (Collier in Dukore 1974:352). Collier's view seems to be, like that of Plato, that the theatre offers an infinite variety of ways to corrupt the impressionable. The immodesty of the stage, Collier says, stains the imagination, awakens folly and weakens the defences of virtue. Although

---

[2] These new forms are called by various names. Those that lean more towards comedy are usually called the sentimental comedy, although it also sometimes appears as the serious comedy. Those that lean more towards tragedy are called variously the domestic drama, the domestic tragedy or the *drame*. For the purpose of this study it will be assumed that these all share the same basic aims and that these names may be used as synonyms.

abuse is not necessarily an argument against use, Collier feels we cannot trust in our own virtue too far. He is not only concerned about the danger this immodesty poses, he feels it may also degrade human nature, it

> sinks reason into appetite, and breaks down the distinctions between man and beast…

(Collier in Dukore 1974:353)

This essay unleashed a flurry of defences of the English stage. William Congreve responded directly, accusing Collier of being dirty-minded and "accusing the virgins that he has himself deflowered" (Congreve in Dukore 1974:359). Congreve defends comedy by calling on Aristotle:

> The business of comedy is to delight as well as to instruct, and as vicious people are made ashamed of their follies or faults by seeing them exposed in a ridiculous manner, so are good people at once both warned and diverted at their expense.

(Congreve in Dukore 1974:360)

For Congreve ridicule is a basic function of comedy, comedy is not, in essence, a form designed to create good will. For Collier these characteristics are unacceptable because they do not express sociability. Other responses to Collier do, however, give a clearer indication of where English criticism was heading, particularly with regards to a growing occupation with the emotional effects of theatre. John Dennis responded to Collier with 'The Usefulness of the Stage to the Happiness of Mankind, to Government and to Religion' (1698). Dennis argues that theatre contributes to the happiness of mankind. What makes us happy is passion, being moved, and theatre moves us like nothing else (Dennis in Dukore 1974:364). Passion is not enough however, reason is still essential:

> but though we can never be happy by the force of reason, yet while we are in this life we cannot possibly be happy without it or against it, for since man is by his nature a reasonable creature, to suppose man happy against reason is to suppose him happy against nature, which is absurd and monstrous.

(Dennis in Dukore 1974:364)

Tragedy teaches virtue by moderating the passions through catharsis. It is thus the passions made reasonable. Dennis then goes on to show specifically how the stage can be useful for the government. On the one hand tragedy checks the vices of those that govern, their potential ambition and immoderate love of pleasure. On the other hand tragedy moderates the emotions that may lead to disobedience and even rebelliousness in the populace.

> Tragedy too diverts their apprehension of grievances by the delight which it gives them.

> (Dennis in Dukore 1974:366)

Dennis thus argues for the essential sociability of theatre. Dennis idea of the contribution that theatre may make to general happiness almost exactly corresponds with Craske's definition of the sociable mid-18th century genius, described as follows:

> The Genius, these theorists held, was defined by an extraordinary capability for invoking pleasing harmonious sensations which were, in general terms, useful to society and consistent with the maintenance of decorum and public order. Wildness and uncontrollable flights of the 'imagination' were largely frowned upon as displeasing to the world at large.

> (Craske 1997:42)

The moral function of art is thus defined in terms of the pleasing sensations it generates rather than its specific rational message. Dennis acknowledges the power of the emotions, while reason is still central. His argument is similar to that of the late 17th century critic Rapin; he is not a proponent of emotionalism. But already here it is clear that the idea that reason is not enough is gaining ground. Carlson notes that Dennis put more emphasis on emotion than critics that came before him, but that he was still too firmly under Dryden's influence to let this allow him to abandon the idea of rules.

> Thus he argued that the greatest geniuses were always scrupulous in their observance of the rules of art. If the purpose of tragedy was to "instruct and reform the World, that is to bring Mankind from Irregularity, Extravagance and Confusion, to Rule and Order," then it naturally followed that rule and order

must characterise poetry itself. Indifferent observance of the rules, Dennis concluded, was the cause of the low state of poetry in his own day.

(Carlson 1993:126)

James Sambrook puts more emphasis on the emotional aspects of Dennis' thought, especially the idea of the sublime that Dennis gets from Longinus. The sublime is that which has an immediate, overwhelming effect on the spectator in both nature and art (Sambrook 1986:105). This leads Sambrook to say that

> The importance Dennis ascribes to violent emotion as the source of aesthetic pleasure and his general psychological approach to criticism helped to lay down the lines upon which eighteenth century aesthetics were to develop.

(Sambrook 1986:106)

But Sambrook also says that Dennis' analysis was never completed. Dennis did not follow through on his concern with emotion. Sherburne and Bond point out that he combines a rationalist tradition with a love for the sublime and enthusiastic passion (Sherburne & Bond 1993:835). So Dennis is still relatively conservative in this regard and his rationalism will be challenged by more radical advocates of the new benevolism and Lockian psychology, notably Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele. Many of these challenges were, appropriately enough, played out on the pages of the periodical *The Spectator* (1711-1715).

Dennis and Addison locked horns on the question of poetic justice. In *The Spectator* of April 16 1711, Addison wrote that he found the 'rule' of poetic justice ridiculous. He is sure it has no foundation in nature, reason or ancient practice. In life, good and bad befall all men. The raising of fear, the great aim of tragedy, is undermined if innocence is always made happy (Addison in Smith 1906:147).

> Terror and commiseration leave a pleasing anguish in the mind, and fix the audience in such a serious composure of thought, as is much more lasting and delightful than any little transient starts of joy and satisfaction.

(Addison in Smith 1906:148)

Dennis responded by saying that poetic justice derived from Aristotle.

This contemptible doctrine of poetical justice is not only founded in reason and nature, but is itself the foundation of all the rules and even of tragedy itself, for what tragedy can there be without a fable, or what fable without a moral, or what moral without poetical justice?

(Dennis in Dukore 1974:370)

What this exchange shows is that while the basic terms of criticism had not changed, the criteria still being what is founded on 'reason', 'nature' and 'ancient practice', the real issue is becoming the spectator's emotional interaction with the play and how that may promote morality. Dennis is clinging to the idea of rules, for him it is logical that art has to be legislated externally to conform to its moral purpose. Addison thinks it is ridiculous to suggest that there is only one way in which a play can end. Rules of this sort make no sense; the important thing is how to impress the audience's feelings; how to create those pleasant sensations that Dennis himself would admit to be important.

Dennis and Steele approached the theatre in very different ways. Steele, manager of Drury Lane, was a dramatist and man of the theatre rather than a literary critic. In contrast John Dennis was a literary critic who defended Neo-classicism. Lottis adds that Steele generally avoids sustained and reasoned critical argument (Lottis 1961:xviii). Amongst other things Dennis and Steele disagreed about the so-called laughing comedy. Dennis defended *Sir Fopling Flutter* (1722) where Steele attacked it, and Dennis attacked Steele's preface to his sentimental comedy *The Conscious Lovers* (1723). Steele said of his play that it was designed to be an innocent performance. Steele feels that anything that has its foundation in happiness and success is suitable for comedy. He feels the play introduced "a joy too exquisite for laughter" (Steele 1969:83). Weeping, he says, is not to be laughed at.

To be apt to give way to the impressions of humanity is the excellence of a right disposition and the natural working of a well-turned spirit.

(Steele 1969:83)

Dennis does not see *The Conscious Lovers* as a comedy at all, for him there is no joy in comedy without laughter and he refers Steele to the example of Molière (Dennis in Dukore 1974:375). The disagreement concerns the rise of Steele's type of sentimental comedy versus the old 'laughing comedy' of the Restoration. Dennis believes that ridicule is essential to comedy. It is how its morality works (Dennis in

Dukore 1974:373). Because laughter has the potential to be cruel, Steele has problems with it. He wanted to create drama in which characters would set positive moral examples and where no wit or bawdry would soil the stimulation of noble emotions. Steele believes in the basic goodness of mankind, goodness brought to its full potential through the right kind of emotional experience.

The trend for a type of moral comedy based on good will rather than ridicule and a type of tragedy that was not aristocratic also took hold in France. Beaumarchais considers the serious drama (the domestic tragedy) to have the potential to be more moral than heroic tragedy, and specifically more moral than comedy where, he says, the morality is very shallow. He believes that laughter is the enemy of reflection while pity promotes it (Beamarchais in Clark 1965:257).

> Sympathy has this advantage over the spirit of ridicule, that it is never aroused in us without the concomitant quality of realization, which is made all the more powerful as it appeals to us directly, on the stage.
>
> (Beaumarchais in Clark 1965:257)

Sebastien Mercier also believes that the serious drama is more useful, truthful and interesting than comedy or tragedy (Mercier in Dukore 1974:311). He argues that the proper effect of theatre is emotional; its function resides in impressions rather than lessons. These impressions must accord to a general sociability and sensibility. He writes that "the wise laugh is seen and not heard…" and that "[i]mmoderate laughter indicates only extravagance of the soul, pushed beyond the limits of reason…" (Mercier in Dukore 1974:310). In France thus, as in England, advocates of the new types of comedy and tragedy put emphasis on the emotional effect of theatre, were distrustful of laughter and enthusiastic about tears as an expression of sensibility, while also praising the power of the performance in achieving the desired emotional effects.

The defenders of the old 'laughing comedy' and the supporters of the new serious drama or sentimental comedy ostensibly wanted the same thing. Theatre had to useful to society and should thus promote morality. Their paths split on the issue of how emotion should specifically work and which emotions were appropriate. They also did not agree on how specifically the theatre was to achieve its moral aims. Carlson explains the philosophical basis of the differences between Dennis and

Addison and Steele. He ascribes the disagreement over poetic justice to Dennis' emphasis on reason and Addison's on emotion.

> Each saw differently what could be learned from tragedy. Dennis felt that we learn virtue by seeing its rewards; Addison (and Steele) believed that the spectacle of tragedy teaches, more obliquely, such things as humility, forbearance, and distrust of worldly success.
>
> (Carlson 1993:128)

When it comes to their understanding of the complex concept of tragic pleasure, their differences become even more fundamental. According to Carlson, Dennis derives his understanding of this concept from Descartes, while Addison and Steele follow Hobbes. Descartes believed that the emotions were pleasurable as such, since they were various stimulations of the animal spirits. They had, however, to be held in check by the brain to be fully pleasurable. The knowledge that we are in the theatre would provide the safety that would allow all emotions to be pleasurable.

> Nevertheless the controlling element remains the reason or will, and the depiction of unwarranted suffering or unmerited reward could overcome the distancing effect of artifice and let free the passions to cause us displeasure. Thus poetic justice for Dennis related necessarily to Cartesian pleasure.
>
> (Carlson 1993:129)

For Hobbes the pleasure arises from seeing others experience danger or misfortune in the knowledge that we ourselves are safe. Carlson believes that Addison and Steele accepted this view, but had to add an element of moral improvement to it (Carlson 1993:129-30). In terms of this view there is no real reason why the passions have to be checked by reason, if they are of the right sort. Reason does not make passion virtuous; passion may be virtuous in itself. These views formed the basis of the rise of the sentimental comedy as well as domestic drama.

In his essay on tragedy (1757), David Hume addresses the issue of tragic pleasure, which is, he says, very difficult to account for. He looks at some theories and determines that Fontanelle's suggestion that the fictional circumstance of the drama allows us to enjoy feelings in the moderation that makes them pleasurable is valid, but needs to be extended to show that eloquence has the power to make all passions, of whatever degree, pleasurable.

By this means, the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind; but the whole impulse of those passions is converted into pleasure and swells the delight which the eloquence raises in us.

(Hume 1998:129)

Thus tragic pleasure is not so paradoxical after all. Feelings which in real life may be painful to experience are aestheticised in the theatre and raised by the fine arts to give pleasure (Hume 1998:131). At the same time a tragedy may be too bloody for the aestheticisation to occur. It is still possible to overstep the limits of the pleasurable in art. A bit of jealousy may increase love, too much will extinguish it.

Here thus is a theory of tragedy which rests entirely on emotion. There is no mention of rules in this essay and morality does not seem to be much of a factor. Vice is condemned only in so far as it interferes with aesthetics. Carlson says that Hume anticipates Kant

and the romantics in the concept that art offers its own realm of experience, attained by a disengagement of worldly interest, in which the emotions of everyday life are significantly transformed.

(Carlson 1993:134)

This does not mean, however, that Hume turned his back on the idea of universal principles. Apart from the fact that he formulates his account of tragic pleasure as a general, abstract and universal theory (this is how tragic pleasure works at all times and under all circumstances), he, as we have seen, argues elsewhere for objective standards of taste. The emotions that 18th century critics are beginning to value, the pleasurable sensations, are still a generalised even abstract idea of how the audience will respond. They are interested in audience psychology, but not in the specific responses generated by specific performances. They derive their notion of how the audience responds from the text and a general idea of what may elicit what kind of response. Their 'audience' appears homogenous in a time when real audiences were becoming less and less so.

The basic principles of 17th century rationalism, the privileging of the universal over the particular and general over the local were not seriously challenged by the 18th

century move towards sensibility. The terms were broadened, but the hierarchy not reversed or broken down. 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers are generally more inclusive, but still unwilling to let go of universal principles and standards that could be objectively determined. Their idea of audience response is thus an idealised audience response, how the cultivated gentleman, the man of sensibility and rational ability would respond. The emphasis is on promoting forms that elicit this response such as sentimental comedies and serious dramas, texts, in other words, that are correctly interpreted by such a response.

At the same time the interest in audience psychology necessarily implies an awareness of the actual situation in which that response is generated. Furthermore we have seen here how new approaches to the idea of 'tragic pleasure' may allow for the pleasure derived from the actual performance in so far as 'tragic pleasure' is no longer only intellectual. This new idea of 'tragic pleasure' is also tentatively taking criticism in the direction of a concept of art as autonomous, a concept fundamental to performance discourse of the 20th century.

Sentimental comedy and the serious drama are forms that reflect the trend towards realism in European theatre that will finally establish itself as a full-blown movement in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The realism these forms demanded existed not only on the level of story and themes, but also required a type of staging that would create the illusion of reality on the stage. This creation of an illusion of reality was, by some, seen as a fundamental part of how the drama would create the desired response. In this trend we may see how the extent to which performance is considered important is moving to a new level.

### 3.3.4   Realism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

A certain degree of realism was inherent in Neo-classic critics' emphasis of verisimilitude and their distrust of the marvellous or supernatural. The real was, however, always subordinate to idealisation and morality. The marvellous may really exist, they conceded, but only that which was probable, typical as well as moral may be represented by good drama. The particular and the individual had to be avoided in favour of the general and universal. The 18<sup>th</sup> century inherited this model, but during the course of the century the tension between the requirements of faithfully mirroring life, on the one hand, and representing metaphysical truth on the other, became

more and more apparent. By the same measure the tension between the universal and the general was also becoming more intense.

Although the general was mostly still favoured over the particular, the idea that art must copy life and not just idealise it, was steadily gaining ground throughout the 18th century. The terms that Samuel Johnson uses to praise Shakespeare clearly illustrate how the importance of the particular is acknowledged, while the general is still ultimately preferred. In his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765), Johnson argues that time has proven Shakespeare to have the dignity of an ancient (Johnson 1986:262). This is because Shakespeare is above all other writers, "the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life" (Johnson 1986:263). His characters are universal, "the genuine progeny of common humanity."

> In the writings of others poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species.
>
> (Johnson 1986:263)

For Johnson, Shakespeare's work is also instructive, it is "a system of civil and economical prudence" (Johnson 1986:263). His real power, however, is in plot development and dialogue. His dialogue and portrayed manners are true to life and his characters distinct enough so that a piece of dialogue could only have been spoken by particular character (Johnson 1986:264-5).

> But Shakespeare always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preserves the essential character, is not very careful of distinctions superinduced and adventitious. His story requires Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men.
>
> (Johnson 1986:266)

Johnson's idea of art as a mirror to nature, his appreciation of the general and his sense of the moral function of theatre is not in essence very different from Neo-classical verisimilitude. The only thing that would have surprised a dogmatic 17th century Neo-classicist would have been that Shakespeare may serve as an example of these principles. For such a dogmatic Neo-classicist, mirroring nature was synonymous with the rules, especially the unities of time, action and space. Johnson may sound like a realist, but as R.D. Stock points out, is really not at all. "He does not say, these things occur in real life, hence the poet may imitate them" (Stock 1973:51)

and his idea of the 'common man' is certainly not 'the man on the street' (Stock 1973:55). Johnson's 'real' is thus closer to Neo-classic verisimilitude than 19th century Realism.

For many 17th century Neo-classicists critics Shakespeare's worst fault was his tendency to mix genres. For Johnson, in this essay at least, the mixing of comedy and tragedy may hold up a more faithful mirror to nature than pure comedy or tragedy. In this essay Johnson in fact appears to hold Shakespeare up as an early example of the new genres between comedy and tragedy: the genres in which the trend towards Realism is most apparent.

> Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; …
>
> (Johnson 1986:266)

It is of course only in retrospect that we interpret certain 18th century critical tendencies as realist. Our contemporary idea of what constitutes realism in theatre derives from 19th century dramatists and theatre artists who proclaimed that Realism consisted of depictions of everyday and material reality, psychologically complex characters and certain stage conventions that makes the work of art look like life. 19th century Realism is quite specific and self-conscious, much more so than the 18th century idea that art should be true to nature. But many of the particularities of 19th century Realism were developing in the 18th century, specifically the idea for a type of drama that deals with ordinary people in contemporary situations.

A variety of factors motivated the movement towards what, in the light of 19th century developments, can be recognised as Realism. Some of these are: the development of democratic ideals, an emerging consciousness of the historical and the distinction between the artificial and the natural. The rest of this section will examine specifically how realism emerges as a theme in 18th century theatre criticism and how these factors generally shape the specific requirements. It is in the development of the alternatives to comedy and tragedy, the sentimental comedy and the domestic tragedy, serious drama or *drame* that the move towards realism can be most clearly

detected. The *drame* in many ways anticipates 19<sup>th</sup> century realist dramas. Critics who support it ask for representation of the suffering of ordinary people, not only aristocrats. They reject the heroic view of life and embrace an idea of the world that is benevolist.

George Lillo, in his **'**Dedication to *The London Merchant'* (1731), argues against reserving tragedy for aristocratic characters, he says princes are not the only people who suffer misfortune. Serious drama speaks to the experience of many people and can so be not only more democratic, but also more moral.

> What I would infer is this, I think, evident truth; that tragedy is so far from losing its dignity, by being accommodated to the circumstances of the generality of mankind, that it is more truly august in proportion to the extent of its influence, and the numbers that are properly affected by it. As it is more truly great to be the instrument of good to many, who stand in need of our assistance, than to a very small part of that number.
>
> (Lillo in Dukore 1974:398)

In Lillo we see how the development of the serious drama is an expression of the growth of democratic ideals in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 17<sup>th</sup> century drama the aim was also to create a picture of generalised human nature. In practice it was an aristocratic theatre; tragedy represented aristocrats largely for aristocrats. It was not so much that Neo-classic drama was fundamentally elitist; there was no reason to suppose that an aristocratic character could not represent a humanity bridging all social classes. In traditional Neo-classic thinking there was no contradiction inherent in the idea that queens and princes stand for all men and women. For 18<sup>th</sup> century theorists like Lillo, however, such a contradiction is becoming evident.

Lillo's comment about the 'generality of mankind' reflects two shifts in thinking. In the first place 18<sup>th</sup> century social developments like the rise of the middle class and the creation of a public sphere independent of the absolute state (Munck 2000:14), obligated theorists to give new content to a 'general human nature' which was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century really only aristocratic. The 'generality of mankind' in Lillo, thus, is the majority of people, rather than an abstract and idealised 'human nature' as exemplified by queens and princes. It refers to particular people rather than an abstract human nature.

In the second place Lillo, like other 18th century theorists believes that drama's morality functions through identification. The spectator does not identify with some abstract generalised humanity, but with the actual circumstances of the character. Characters should therefore, to be most morally instructive, operate within circumstances that are recognisable to a majority of spectators. This is why most proponents of the serious drama or sentimental comedy stress that it can be more moral than pure comedy and tragedy. Theories of audience psychology leads to the idea that the audience has to identify with the characters they see on stage. There it is best if these characters are ordinary people. Beaumarchais describes this identification with character as an absolute principle of theatre.

> This sentiment lies in the heart of every man; it serves as basis to this absolute principle of art, that there can be neither interest nor moral appeal on the stage without some sort of connection existing between the subject of the play and ourselves.
>
> (Beaumarchais in Dukore 1974:256)

The 18th century approach to character involves a significant shift. Aristotle regarded character as an important element of tragedy, but he ranked it second to plot which he regarded as the soul of tragedy. R.D. Stock points out that in the mid 18th century character took over plot's position. Character was now also considered as more than a dramatic construction but was becoming personalities, psychological beings. Characters were thus increasingly considered to as corporeal human beings possessed of an inner life and feelings not necessarily communicated to the audience directly (Stock 1973:23). This new development relates to how the idea of real is changing in the 18th century and is specifically connected to the question of the general and the particular. Stock explains:

> Behind this shift in emphasis lies a growing interest in *particular* nature, the specific images, with all their associations, which were believed to form elementary and personal mental patterns; and accompanying this preoccupation was a diminishing interest in abstract, general, or ideal nature.
>
> (Stock 1973:29)

In the entries on comedy and tragedy in Diderot's encyclopaedia it is also said that drama that deals with ordinary people can be more moral than heroic tragedy. Comedy, because it deals with everyday occurrences and provides true to life

models of good and evil, teaches practical morality, which is more useful than speculative wisdom (Diderot in Dukore 1974:288). In 'On Dramatic Poetry' (1758), Diderot continues this argument for new forms between tragedy and comedy, serious comedy and domestic tragedy. These forms, Diderot says, would address the condition of mankind, human nature as well as the social system. He believes that man is fundamentally good, but perverted by social custom (Diderot in Clark 1965:241). In such statements we can see how calls for realism express a growing awareness of class as well as the basic benevolist assumption that people are fundamentally good.

Diderot also illustrates the 18th century rejection of rationalism when he claims that practical morality is better than speculative wisdom. This shows a new attitude towards the real. In Neo-classicism the 'real' or 'nature' is always generalised and idealised, in short rationalist; for Diderot the 'real' is 'true to life', it is derived from the physical world around us, in other words empiricist. The 'real' is becoming the 'actual'. Social convention, human systems of organisation and meaning, is imposed on this basic physical world, threatening to pervert and corrupt it. Again we see the distinction between an inherently good nature and threatening social convention.

Diderot does not value the rules, but does feel that unity of action is important. He says that the writer should understand how incidents relate to one another (Diderot in Clark 1965:245). A good plot is thus structured causally and plausibly. "Dramatic art rejects miracles" (Diderot in Clark 1965:249). In 'Conversations on *The Natural Son*' (1757), Diderot makes the same kind of argument for realism.

> Dramatic art only prepares incidents in order to link them together, and it only links in plays because they are linked in reality. Art even imitates the subtle way in which nature hides from us the connections between effects.
>
> (Diderot 1994:42)

The encyclopaedia entry on tragedy also makes the point that modern tragedy, like that of Corneille, is better than ancient tragedy in that the misfortune depicted springs from complex causes (Diderot in Dukore 1974:290). This is another important aspect of Diderot's idea of the 'real'. Nature is complex, sometimes beyond our immediate comprehension, but is always governed by causality. To represent nature in a true to life way the artist must take both these aspects into account: the fact that nature is ruled by cause and effect and the fact that this causality may not be immediately

apparent. 19th century Realism develops this idea into characters that are motivated through a complex psychology. Diderot is, however, not thinking in such terms. His proposal for characters who are social types (Diderot 1994:60) shows that that kind of realist character is not on his agenda. What he is concerned with is that art represent the truth of nature, specifically the truth that nature is ruled by the universal principle of causality that is generally discernible, even if not always obvious. But the art work may also 'hide the connections between effects'. In this sense the depiction of actual reality is taking precedence over the depiction of the true nature of reality. This statement thus indicates that Diderot is committed to a realism that exceeds Neo-classic verisimilitude. While he continues to say that the general is preferable to the particular, he is implying the kind of realism that is not abstract, but derives its substance from particulars.

In Germany, realism was also emerging. Carlson, for example, says the demand for the virtual identity of dramatic and empirical reality was one of the otherwise strictly Neo-classical Gottsched's main concerns (Carlson 1993:15). It is Lessing, however, that does most to promote realism in Germany. Lessing wrote some very successful domestic dramas himself and it is clear from the *Dramaturgy* that Diderot had quite an impact on his thought, even if he does not always agree with him. Lamport says that Lessing contributed to creating a programme for the kind of realistic, middle-class drama that dominated the 19th century European stage and continues to appeal today (Lamport 1981:152). Lessing generally agrees that characters do not have to have titles for an audience to feel for them. He says this specifically with regard to his *Miss Sarah Sampson* in Chapter 13 and 14 of his *Dramaturgy*. The stress, as with many proponents of the domestic tragedy or serious drama is on identification with the characters as well as moral effect.

Lessing retains the Neo-classic disdain for the exceptional and the miraculous. Miracles may happen, but they do not teach morality.

> We can only tolerate miracles in the physical world; in the moral everything must retain its natural cause, because the theatre is to be the school of the moral world.
>
> (Lessing 1962:8)

Lessing thus shares Diderot's concept of reality as causal. The artist's task is to create a representation that is true to this causal structure of reality, rather than

particularities that do not appear to confirm it. This is why he criticises Corneille's Cleopatra in *Rodogune*. She is an unnatural character, because as a woman she should not be so ambitious and predisposed towards violence. Such a woman may have existed, but only as an exception.

> And whoever paints an exception, unquestionably paints that which is against nature.
>
> (Lessing 1966:84)

Lamport shows how Lessing in his discussion of Corneille's *Rodogune*, insists on subordinating the principle of fidelity to historically established character to a principle of higher generality (Lamport 1981:131). Corneille's Cleopatra is unacceptable not because she is not drawn accurately from history, but because she offends Lessing's idea of femininity and his moral sense of character. From Lessing's point of view the audience cannot identify with Cleopatra and cannot learn from her.

> [F]or Lessing and his eighteenth century contemporaries, the elaboration of psychology, the stress on identification between audience and dramatic character, was … necessary as a means of making accessible the events of tragedy, which for other ages seemed significant and moving *because* they were outsize, remarkable, and even monstrous.
>
> (Lamport 1981:133)

Lessing is not convinced of Diderot's understanding of character. He does not think that comedy should represent classes rather than the traditional character types. He finds the characters of Diderot's *Fils Naturel* unconvincing because characters that are true to their class in ideal terms are not natural. Also Diderot's characters are not always as universal as he claims a comic character should be, but are sometimes formed through exceptional and singular circumstances (Dorval of *Fils Naturel)* (Lessing 1962:230). The criticism is thus on two fronts: in some cases the characters are too general, in others they are not general enough. On the one hand truth is general; that which applies to a particular case, but is exceptional, is not true. To make his point Lessing quotes Hurd:

> *Truth* in Poetry, means such an expression, as conforms to the general

nature of things; *falsehood*, that which however suitable to the particular instance in view, doth yet not correspond to such general nature.

<div align="right">(Hurd in Lessing 1962:244)</div>

On the other hand, truth has to be recognisable and convincing and therefore sometimes specific. Lessing says that the inclusion of native customs may through their familiarity improve the probability of the play (Lessing 1962:254). Specific local details may thus improve the play's creation of the appearance of truth. In Lessing's realism the tension between the general and the particular is thus quite clear. 17th century critics for the most part simply discounted the particular altogether, but for 18th century critics it is not that easy, even when they still believe that the general is more true than the particular. The difficulty partly arises from a new awareness of history born in the 18th century. Wellek understands the 18th century trends towards realism, emotionalism and highly imaginative art as closely involved with the awakening of the modern sense of history.

> [T]he historical sense should be defined as a combination of the recognition of individuality with a sense of change and development in history. These two ideas are complementary, since there is no proper understanding of historical individuality without a knowledge of its development, while on the other hand there is no true historical development beyond a series of individualities. We must not, of course, think of individuality as restricted to the person of the poet. Rather, with the increased sense for the peculiarities of different human beings in different ages, the sense of individuality and its value begin to be extended also to types of art: the national peculiarities of one literary tradition in opposition to another, one type of drama clearly contrasted with another. The individuality of different epochs became recognised; the 'spirit of the age' was a new term used for the analysis of the peculiar characteristics of each successive period in history.

<div align="right">(Wellek 1970:27)</div>

The implications of this historicism were manifold. In the first place national character could be identified as a determining factor in literary creation. Interest in literature of other nations, with its unique characteristics, increased; even the French began to show some interest in the English. These developments made the vague Renaissance idea of progress more historical and precise (Wellek 1970:27-9). The literature of the past was now re-evaluated in its historical context. This means that

there was increasing awareness of the fact that all things are not equally true in the exact same way under all circumstances and in all situations. Context was becoming important, and also, as Wellek says, the peculiarities of different human beings in different ages.

The realist representation is thus pressurised from two directions, it must show the general structure of nature and also take particular historical and national details into account; it has to be both universally and historically true. For Lessing and other 18th century critics, universal truth still mostly takes precedence over historical truth. It is only later, when Romanticism develops that the implications of historicism will seriously begin to reverse this hierarchical opposition. For the moment the tension between the particular and the general was not as important as the tension created by having to use the artificial and the conventional to represent a nature defined as distinct from artifice and convention.

### 3.3.5   Art and Nature: Realism and the Problem of Representation

René Wellek complains that Samuel Johnson, Diderot and Lessing all fail to grasp the difference between art and life and so prepare the way for the social and psychological Realism of the 19th century (Wellek 1970:175). While this says as much of Wellek's critical assumptions as it does of Johnson, Diderot and Lessing, it does point to one of the key themes that can be derived from the increasing interest in realism: how to reconcile the inherent artifice of the work of art with the need to truthfully depict nature as distinct from such artifice. Wellek's objection is that these theorists, in their demand for realism, do not acknowledge art as art, as distinct from life and not in its service. In other words these writers do not view art as autonomous.

It would not really appear that these or any other 18th century critics seriously fail to grasp the difference between art and life. Certainly many of the arguments against the unities of time and space suggest the opposite. Early in the 18th century George Farquhar writes that art can never be exactly like life, theatre has many fundamental and necessary improbabilities and even impossibilities, like that of an actor pretending to be someone else, representation time never being equal to story time, and the place being represented being different from the place where it is represented. It is therefore absurd to insist on arbitrary unities of space and time (Farquhar in Clark 1965:176-7). Samuel Johnson also says that insistence on the

unities is based on the false assumption that representation may be mistaken for reality:

> The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players.
>
> (Johnson 1986:275)

Furthermore it is only through understanding the fiction as fiction that tragic pleasure is at all possible. Real murders cause pain and distress, it is not pleasurable to view them if we think they are real (Johnson 1986:276). The entry on 'Illusion' in Diderot's encyclopaedia makes the same point. We are always aware that we are in the theatre, so the illusion can never be complete. Also, if the illusion were complete, the spectator would not experience the essential pleasure of the theatre that comes from the illusion itself. We delight also in the *art* of the theatre as it goes hand in hand with nature.

> In the arts of imitation the truth is nothing, verisimilitude everything, and not only does one not ask them to be real, one does not even want the pretence to be the exact resemblance.
>
> (Diderot in Dukore 1974:289)
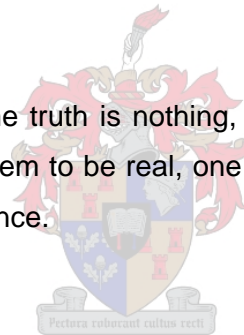
For Jones and Nicol, Diderot makes a very clear distinction between life and art. They see this in his essay 'The Paradox of the Actor'; the paradox, they say, lies precisely in this separation of art and life.

> He is discovering that there is a truth of nature and a truth of convention, but that they are not the same truth. The most truthful kind of drama is the most artificial. The honest actor is the actor who knows he is telling lies and who coolly reflects on the most effective way of telling them. This is the paradox, to seek truth though an imitation of truth.
>
> (Jones & Nicol: 1976:161)

It is in the light of this need to present truth through an imitation of truth that Diderot asks for the kind of realism that has as its foundation fourth wall staging. In other words he asks for the kind of staging that attempts to make a spectator forget that he or she is in the theatre.

> If it were only understood that, although a drama is made to be produced, it was still necessary that both author and actor forget the spectator, and that all the interest should be centred in the characters, there would be less reading of Poetics. If 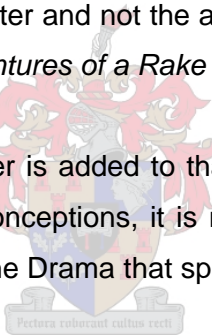you do this or that, you will produce this or that effect. They should say: If you do this or that, this is what will happen to your characters.
>
> (Diderot in Clark 1965:250)

This principle of forgetting the spectator will not only turn out to be an almost essential condition of 19th century Realism, accomplished through conventions such as the box set, the darkened auditorium and acting techniques that were not known in Diderot's time, it is also an explicit acknowledgement of theatre as a performed art. It is the specific conditions of the performance that govern the audience's response, not just the story or characters as they appear in the text. At the same time the performance must preserve those characters as they were created by the author. The spectator must see the character and not the actor, the world of the play and not the stage. The author of *The Adventures of a Rake* (1759) says something similar:

> When the Skill of the Player is added to that of the Poet, and the one gives Utterance to the other's Conceptions, it is not the Actor or the Poet that we hear, 'tis the Character of the Drama that speaks to us.
>
> (in Stock 1973:210)

We see here explicit acknowledgement of theatre as a performed art and a simultaneous attempt to close off some of its possibilities, for example that the situation of performance, the theatre event may generate meanings through its theatricality. This tension can be seen elsewhere in Diderot's work as well. In 'Conversations on *The Natural Son*' (1757), Diderot has his character Dorval say:

> A Play is not so much made to be read as to be performed.
>
> (Diderot 1994:5)

But Dorval also says the actor must not address the audience directly as in a tirade, it should be as if the spectator is not there. Addressing the spectator undermines the unity of the performance (Diderot 1994:22). In other words the play must be performed as if it isn't being performed. There is an interesting contradiction here. This acknowledgement of theatre as performed art is a critique of contemporary

stage practice that draws too much attention to the performance as performance. Conventions that draw attention to theatricality like the aside and direct address are explicit, they are obvious examples of the agreements that spectators and actors reach to allow theatre to happen. Diderot wants to replace these with conventions that do not look like conventions but resemble natural truth. Conventions appeared suspect in the light of the 18th century oppositions between reason and false authority and nature and artifice, but unfortunately they are also an essential part of theatre, as Diderot himself admits in 'The Paradox of the Actor'. This does not indicate a failure to distinguish between art and life, it rather implies that art must through the highest artifice achieve the impression of no artifice at all.

It is thus in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons that 18th century critics do distinguish between art and life. They firmly understand that theatre is artifice and acknowledge that this artifice may be essential to it. What they generally do not want is that this necessary artifice be celebrated for its own sake, overly adorned or merely fanciful. Both Johnson and Lessing recommend the use of plain language. Johnson says if there is one style that is never obsolete, one phraseology that remains unaltered, it is the style of those "who speak only to be understood, without ambition or elegance" (Johnson 1986:269). Lessing criticises the notion that tragedy must be pompous and written in complex and elevated language. Modern characters, he says, should speak naturally.
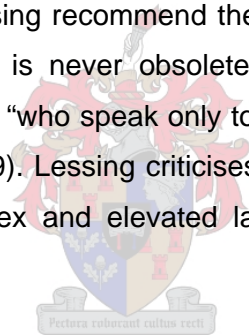
> There never can be feeling with a stilted, chosen, pompous language. It is not born of feeling, it cannot evoke it. But feeling agrees with the simplest, commonest, plainest words and expressions.
>
> (Lessing 1962:166)

Appeals for clarity and order are of course not new, but really quite typical in Neo-classicism. Neo-classicists did, however, always insist that the language of tragedy must be dignified and more elevated than ordinary speech. On the one hand we may in these statements recognise an echo of Locke's dislike for poetry, where florid language and figurative speech mislead the judgment. In 18th century philosophy the plainest and most straightforward language was closest to truth and reason. The scientific worldview demands unadorned objective language that does not encourage multiple interpretations. And as we have seen, the scientific worldview also insists that art be mimetic, it is a representation of life and so serves it. On the other hand,

as Lessing's statement demonstrates, the demand for plain language goes hand in hand with the rise of sensibility and the new serious drama.

The preference for plain language is at the same time also a result of the 18th century opposition between nature and convention in which nature is the privileged term. As we saw in Diderot this opposition generates contradictory objectives in theatre practice. The theatrical presentation must be as natural as possible, but to create an illusion of nature requires a certain degree of artifice. The closest that Diderot can come to a solution for this paradox is to make the stage presentation as real as possible, with as little explicit conventions as is feasible. For Jean Jacques Rousseau, however, the inherent artificiality of the stage cannot be overcome. For him theatre is illusion, artifice and convention and can therefore not teach us anything about nature, which is none of these things. In 'Politics and the Arts' (1758), he writes that theatre can teach nothing that nature and reason cannot teach better. The theatre serves only itself.

> The theatre has rules, principles, and a morality apart, just as it has a language and a style of dress that is its own. We say to ourselves that none of this is suitable for us.
>
> (Rousseau in Dukore 1974:296)
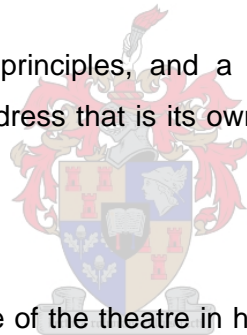
Rousseau continued this critique of the theatre in his *Letttre à M. d'Alembert* (1758). Theatre's profit motive particularly disturbs him, because it causes theatre to conform to public opinion. Like Plato, Rousseau finds theatre's emotional effects troublesome and notes that since reason has no place in theatre, theatre cannot teach people anything. Apart from that the actor lies and puts forward false appearances and is therefore inevitably corrupt. Instead of theatre, Rousseau proposes public spectacles held in the open air involving the entire population (Carlson 1993:151-2).

Rousseau's comments on theatre have not in themselves been very influential on the subsequent development of theatre, although his writings did inspire the French Republic's public festivals and some later calls for populist theatres (Carlson 1993:152). The letter is interesting, however, because it goes to the heart of the problem with theatre that Diderot and others wanted to solve through greater realism. The problem is that theatre claims truth through lying. The problem is that however faithfully dramas mirror nature, the stage presentation can never be anything but a *representation* of nature, never nature itself. As a representation, as an illusion of

reality, theatre is always necessarily artificial and conventional. For some the solution was to make the representation as faithful as possible. Sebastien Mercier, for example, agrees with Rousseau that theatre is a lie, but feels that the thing to do is to bring it as close as possible to truthfulness (Mercier in Dukore 1974:309). The theatre should attempt

> [t]o interweave and link the facts in accordance with the truth, in the choice of events to follow the ordinary course of things, to avoid all that has any trace of being fiction …
>
> (Mercier in Dukore 1974:313)

For Rousseau, however, the only solution is to reject representation altogether. Jacques Derrida sheds some light on Rousseau's rejection of representation in his commentary on this letter in *Of Gramatology* (1976). Theatre is a form of public speech, which Rousseau finds unacceptable because it takes place within the frame of representation, the mimesis so dangerous in the Platonic view. Derrida explains:

> But the theatre itself is shaped and undermined by the profound evil of representation. It is that corruption itself. For the stage is not threatened by anything but itself. Theatrical representation, in the sense of exposition, of production, of that which is placed out there (that which the German *Darstellung* translates) is contaminated by supplementary re-presentation. The latter is inscribed in the structure of representation, in the space of the stage.
>
> (Derrida 1976:304)

Derrida means that the theatre cannot escape representation. The stage itself frames what is presented as representation. For Plato artistic representation is dangerous because it is twice removed from the truth; it is a copy of a copy (Plato 1974:425). In representation the immediate connection between truth and its manifestation is severed. But for Plato dramatic representation contains an added danger. The actor pretends to be someone else, he is lying, but is at the same time absolved of responsibility for his words. It is thus not only the content of the representation that Rousseau finds suspect, it is the act of representation itself. This has the consequence that the *representer*, in other words the actor, is also corrupt. The actor is corrupt because he does not speak his own words, but the character's.

> There are two sorts of public persons, two men of spectacle: on the one hand
> the orator or preacher, on the other the actor. The former represents himself,
> in him the representer and the represented are one. But the actor is born out
> of the rift between the representer and the represented. Like the alphabetic
> signifier, like the letter, the actor is not inspired or animated by any particular
> language. He signifies nothing. He hardly lives, he lends his voice. It is a
> mouthpiece.

> (Derrida 1976:305)

In *Of Gramatology* (1976) Derrida argues that Western philosophy has been built on an opposition between speech and writing that privileges speech. Writing is seen as a mere representation of speech and, even more particularly, as a dangerous representation that separates the utterance from its author and his intentions. Philosophy wanted to define itself against writing to protect the intentional relationship between an author and his words. Jonathan Culler explains that philosophy, because it tries to define itself as what transcends writing, sets writing aside as simply an artificial substitute for speech (Culler 1983: 89-92). This process Culler and Derrida call logocentrism.

Rousseau's rejection of theatre can thus be understood as deriving from his insight that speech in the theatre is not speech at all, but writing. Theatre speech is artificial speech. A slippage of meaning occurs when the author's words are removed from his physical presence, when that presence is in fact obscured and dispersed by the presence of the actor. Representation allows the author's intention to be lost and makes meaning uncertain. It is only in a type of performance that does not depend on representation that this, in Rousseau's way of thinking, can be avoided. The open air spectacles that Rousseau calls for are festivals without representation and thus without signifiers. In this kind of spectacle there is no longer any difference between actor and spectator, the represented and the representer, the object seen and the seeing subject (Derrida 1976:306).

> In his description of the festival, for example, there are propositions which
> could very well have been interpreted in the sense of Antonin Artaud's theatre
> of cruelty or of the festival and sovereignty of which Georges Bataille has
> proposed the concepts.

> (Derrida 1976:307)

Rousseau's critique of the theatre can thus also be understood as prefiguring certain types of 20<sup>th</sup> century performance art. Some performance artists and theorists, influenced by Artaud, oppose performance to theatricality on the basis that performance avoids the representation fundamental to theatre (see Chapter One). It is however only after the idea of art for art's sake has been accepted that Rousseau's ideas can truly inspire performance art. Rousseau asserts that art is a separate realm with its own principles, but he still wants art to serve life, and rejects it because it does not. Rousseau believes that representation cannot do what it claims to do because it is necessarily false. He is therefore tentatively exploring alternatives to representation that are able to serve moral and social life where theatre fails.

These issues were of course not new. Rousseau, clearly, in his critique of theatre resurrects Plato's original rejection of theatre as false. Diderot's arguments, on the other hand, are more Aristotelian; the lie might convey something which is generally and universally true and therefore on a higher level of truth than mere facts. The problem of representation is thus almost as old as Western theatre itself. What is modern about how this issue is argued in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is firstly Rousseau's idea for a performance without a text and without the separation between performers and spectator. In other words for performance without representation, that can function like speech rather than writing. It will, however, be another century and a half before this idea really starts to develop into a reversal of the text-performance hierarchy. It is therefore, at this stage, more useful to focus on another way in which 18<sup>th</sup> century theory and criticism approaches the problem of representation.

Secondly, Diderot and Lessing, in their own way, are also attempting to bring theatre closer to speech than writing. Their approach is not to reject representation altogether, but rather to have it more carefully controlled. Through a stage presentation that is as life-like as possible they wish to minimise the artificiality, the *writtenness* of theatre. What sets them apart form earlier theorists who arguably wanted the same thing is their awareness that the performance itself matters. Both acknowledge theatre as a performed art, they are beginning to understand that everything on the stage contributes to how theatre communicates.

Lessing and Diderot argue for realism partly because they want to minimise the artificiality of theatre and partly because they want the message of the play to match the author's intentions as closely as possible. The realist performance is a performance in which the situation in which it is taking place does not have an

impact. The spectators are not acknowledged, the illusion of reality is never broken. In this way the message of the play is not mediated by the moment of its communication, but made fully present. To achieve this Diderot and Lessing both have to compromise with the artificiality of theatre, they have to accept that a high degree of artificiality may be needed for theatre to be as natural as possible. Their theoretical explorations of the art of acting, not only illustrates the degree to which they understand that all aspects of theatre matter, but also shows how this compromise is a fundamental part of their theatre theory.

### 3.3.6 Theories of Acting

Actors and the profession of acting were generally viewed with suspicion in the 17th and early 18th centuries, but there were some defenders of the art. Sir Richard Steele and John Dennis, for example, vehemently disagreed on the question of actors (Lottis 1961:xvii). In *The Theatre* no.2, Steele, controversially, defended the acting profession against attacks by Dennis (Steele 1961:5). So the art of acting rose considerably in critical acclaim during the 18th century. Carlson notes that this was partly due to the success of David Garrick. The first writings on the art of the actor and some general theories thus start to appear during Garrick's career (Carlson 1993:138). R.D. Stock also writes of how Garrick stimulated interest in dramatic performances. He points out that Garrick was often used to illustrate the superiority of the performance over the written play. The author of *The Adventures of a Rake* (1759) provides an example, paying tribute, not only to Garrick , but to performance itself:

> *Shakespear's Macbeth* is scarcely intelligible to the Learned; Garrick's *Macbeth* lives, and is intelligible to the Vulgar. This proves to an evident Demonstration, that acting any Piece is preferable to reading it.
>
> (in Stock 1973:210)

George Taylor writes that the development of theories of acting went hand in hand with a revolution in the understanding of speech and the nature of communication (Taylor 1972:52). The work on elocution falls mainly into two categories. Some, like William Cockin (*Art of Delivering Language* (1775)), who was supported by Garrick, argue for declamation in order to make poetry dignified (Taylor 1972:55). Others like Thomas Sheridan (father of the playwright), argue for natural delivery. In his *Letters*

*on Elocution* (1762) Sheridan says that in order to persuade, the speaker has to at least appear to believe what he says,

> This can never be the case, where there are any evident marks of affectation, or art. On the contrary, when a man delivers himself in his usual manner, and with the same tones and gestures that he is accustomed to use, when he speaks from his heart, however ill-regulated his tones, he will still have the advantage, of being thought sincere, which of all others, is the most necessary article, towards securing attention and belief, as affectation of any kind, is the surest way to destroy both.
>
> (Sheridan in Taylor 1972:55)

A common thread, however, in discussions on acting is that it is supposed to be a representation of the passions. It is almost entirely, Taylor says, in terms of the passions that the creative and psychological techniques of acting are discussed (Taylor 1972:56). Taylor shows that 18th century theorists, influenced by Locke, thought of passion as a mental state, not an emotional motive (Taylor 1972:60). Thus acting was approached with a scientific spirit, recreating the passions rationally through the observation of outward symbols. The passions were thought of as stable and universal states of mind. There were thought to be ten types: joy, grief, fear, anger, pity, scorn, hatred, jealousy, wonder and love. Each had its own outward sign (Taylor 1972:64). The recreation of these would apparently not differ from play to play or be adapted to the particular character experiencing them.

The representation of individual states of mind, fitting these types, took precedence over character development. The changes between different passions were decisive, even abrupt as the actor strove to clearly illustrate the individual passions rather than demonstrate character development through the gradual changes of states of mind (Taylor 1972:61). Taylor claims that the new generation of actors after Garrick, notably Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble, had a greater sense of character development and worked with the idea of a ruling passion tying the individual passions together in a coherent basic character (Taylor 1972:62-3). But in the late 18th century the basis of a scientific approach to acting was a taxonomy of gestures and expressions that represented states of mind and not the psychology of individual characters. In this theory of acting unified meaning is achieved through the universality of the passion, rather than a consistent character.

But it is finally this scientific spirit that would be the lasting legacy of acting theories of the 18th century. It is clear that Locke's empiricism and the rise of the scientific worldview, as well as the notion of system-building, contributed to the developments discussed by Taylor. Scientific jargon abounded and some writers were very explicit about the need for actors to approach acting scientifically. John Hill (*The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing* (1750)), writes the following:

> Playing is a science, and is to be studied as a science; and he who, with all that nature ever did, or can do for a man, expects to succeed wholly without the effects of that study, deceives himself extremely.
>
> (Hill in Taylor 1972:65)

This scientific approach to acting paved the way for later systematic theoretical exploration of all aspects of the art of acting and the idea that an objectively formulated method could guide its practice. It was not, however, only in England that this new critical consideration of acting surfaced. In France the same trend may be observed. Jean Dubos is a significant pioneer in this regard. His ideal is predominantly classical. The actor should be highly trained in voice and movement and his performance controlled by musical notation. Although he allows for some freedom of interpretation, Dubos argues for the subordination of the actor to music, a suggestion similar to what Wagner would later propose. The function of this notation is to ensure that even a mediocre actor can perform acceptably, as well as to unify the work of art (Carlson 1993:143).

Pierre Rémond de Saint-Albine in 1749 also made a contribution to theories of acting. He sees the gifts of the actor as wit, feeling and enthusiasm. He argues that the actor will never possess these gifts in equal measure, but must possess them in the proper measure for each type of role (Carlson 1993:159-60). Saint-Albine thus proposes the general application of the Horatian rule of decorum in character types to their portrayal. The goal is as always verisimilitude (Carlson 1993:160). But Saint-Albine then turns to a more modern issue. The actor must not only be a faithful copier, but a creator as well.

> Fidelity to nature is still essential, but the best actors will embellish the text or correct its deficiencies with individual touches uniquely their own in order to add richness, variety, grace and depth to the truth.
>
> (Carlson 1993:160)

Carlson sees acting theories in France falling into two distinct critical positions. On the one hand acting is seen as a rational process, "a study of the technical means of obtaining a graceful depiction of idealised reality." On the other emotion and imagination is stressed "demanding that the actor go beyond reason to tap the inner springs of feeling" (Carlson 1993:161-2). These two positions corresponded roughly to the tension between critics advocating reason and those championing sensibility.

> Obviously these positions reflected in a general way the contemporary conflict in criticism between those who looked backward to the classical tradition stressing reason, rules and *bienséance* and those who anticipated romanticism by championing inspiration, genius and particularised reality.
>
> (Carlson 1993:161-2)

It is the second position that begins to allow for the actor to make an original contribution to the performance. In a theorist like Saint-Albine we see that critics are admitting the possibility that the truth of the feelings of the actor adds something to the performance. But this is still not in any way a truth independent of the text, it adds variety and depth to what is still a general truth. The particular still serves the general.

By the time Diderot wrote his treatise on the art of acting, 'The Paradox of the Actor' (written 1770-1784, published 1830), he had left behind much of his earlier enthusiasm for emotion. Now he argues that the actor should be detached, and that excess of sensibility is detrimental to the art of acting.

> I want him [the actor] to have a lot of judgment, for me there needs to be a cool calm spectator inside this man, so I demand sagacity and no feeling, the power to imitate anything, or, what amounts to the same thing, an equal aptitude for all characters and parts.
>
> (Diderot 1994:103)

In this essay acting is for Diderot the imitation of the external signs of emotion, rather than the recreation of emotion by the actor. It is only if the actor acts through rational technique that his performance can be constant and repeatable. Above all, acting should contribute to the idealisation and generalisation of nature that Diderot at this stage sees as the fundamental function of representation.

> Just think for a moment about what on stage is called *truth*. Does it mean showing things as they are in nature? Not at all. Truth in this sense would simply be the ordinary. What then is the truth of the stage? It's the conformity of the actions, the speeches, the face, the voice, the movement, the gesture, with an ideal model imagined by the poet and often exaggerated by the actor.
>
> (Diderot 1994:111)

In the conflict in criticism that Carlson identifies, Diderot thus finally sides with reason and technique. His actor as 'cool calm spectator' evokes Brecht's epic actor, but it is for very different reasons that Diderot demands it. The function of epic acting is to disrupt the performance, the actor distances himself from his character in order to destabilise meaning, to open it to critical reflection and to undermine its claim to universal truth. Diderot wants the opposite. Technique and rational distance is meant to control the performance, to guarantee that its meaning is generally and universally true. Truth in theatre, finally, comes down to the idealised model of nature that is created by the author.

The performance has the potential to pervert this model, to steal from the author his words and change their meaning. Performance creates a gap between intended and received meaning. Diderot argues that everything related to the art of acting is important: voice, facial expression, gesture and movement; all of these convey meaning. And it is only when these aspects are controlled by technique that the actor fulfils his ultimate function, which is to serve the text. At the same time this is an admission that it is only through artifice, rational control and accepted conventions that theatre can come close to truth at all. Diderot's theory of acting is thus very similar to his theory of realism; artifice must serve the natural through the highest artificiality.

Gotthold Lessing includes consideration of the art of acting in his *Dramaturgy*. He does not attempt a systematic overview of acting method, which is probably why Robertson feels that "no aspect of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* fails more disappointingly short of expectations than that which is concerned with the actor's art" (Robertson 1965:471). Instead Lessing concentrates on the most effective way for the actor to pronounce moral maxims. Although this may seem like a rather curious starting point from a contemporary perspective, Lessing's statements do

have wider implications. The first of which is the fact that he considers the contribution of the actor as essential to the effect of the drama.

> But never before Lessing had a critic so convincingly insisted on the absolute interdependence of the word of the poet and the speech, expression and gestures of the actor.
>
> (Lange 1962:xviii)

Lessing acknowledges that it would be good if the actor could actually feel what he is portraying, but

> Feeling is altogether the most controverted among the talents of the actor. It may be present where we do not recognise it, and we can fancy we recognise it where it does not exist. For feeling is something internal of which we can only judge by its external signs.
>
> (Lessing 1962:12)

As with Diderot the emphasis is on external signs. These external signs, Lessing acknowledges, could possibly not communicate exactly what the actor means to express. Lessing says that it is better to create recognisable external signs while feeling nothing, than to act with feeling conveyed through unrecognisable signs. Furthermore Lessing believes that the execution of external signs may stimulate some feeling in the actor. While simulating anger through external signs, for example, the actor may begin to feel something like anger.

> His face will glow, his eyes will sparkle, his muscles will dilate, in that he will seem to be truly furious without being so, without comprehending in the least why he should be so.
>
> (Lessing 1962:13-4)

Although Lessing rates gesture high, he is sceptical of pantomime. He says the actor and pantomimest must never be confused. With the actor, gesture supplements speech and in the pantomimest replaces it. In pantomime gestures are not only natural signs, conventional signs are used as well. Actors should refrain from conventional gestures, it makes them marionettes. Actors should thus confine themselves to natural signs. But it is precisely because gesture is so important that conventionality must be avoided. The gesture must prevent the moral axiom, being a

general pronouncement, from becoming too abstract. Gesture must keep its truth present.

> The moral is a general axiom extracted from the particular circumstances of the acting personages; by means of its generality it becomes foreign to the action, it becomes a digression whose connection with the actual present is not comprehended or noticed by the less acute spectators. If consequently a means exists to make this connection evident, to bring back the symbolical of the moral to the visible, and if this means lies in certain gestures, the actor must on no account omit making them.

> (Lessing 1962:17)

Lessing, like Diderot, has to let technique take precedence over feeling in his theory of acting. This is not because he sees anything wrong with feeling as such, on the contrary, the ideal situation would be that the actor really feel what he is saying and gesturing. Lessing's actor must be expressive, not just a marionette. Lessing upholds the privileging of the natural over the artificial. This is clear from the way he distinguishes between natural and conventional signs. According to Lessing the actor must avoid conventional signs; that is signs that have lost their absolute connection to reality and in a sense have become arbitrary. Speech, moreover, must never be replaced by physical signs, gestures should merely supplement speech. Otherwise the entire performance becomes subjected to the arbitrariness of conventional signs; to what Derrida calls the 'evil of representation'.

The performance must always remain connected to the moral axiom, in other words to what is generally, absolutely and universally true. The particular, that is the performance, may illuminate the general or make it present, but may not exist for its own sake. The connection between the particular performance and the moral axiom will, when it is clear enough, bring back the 'symbolical of the moral to the visible'. In other words it will give the moral presence. The symbolical is always absent; this is the problem with writing. Lessing's insight is that it might be through the performance, through the actor, that meaning can be made present; that theatre can be turned into speech. But because he at the same time insists on upholding the general over the particular, the performance must still serve the text, it cannot be autonomous.

In general, then, the theories of acting that developed in the 18th century touch on the themes we have discussed in terms of other trends in criticism in a variety of ways. In

the first place, the debate on natural delivery versus declamation directly relates to the distinctions between nature and artifice and speech and writing. In the 17th century Moliére was virtually the only exception to the general conviction that it is inappropriate that speech in the theatre resemble ordinary speech. Now Sheridan states that the actor must 'speak from the heart', as naturally as possible. It must be, in other words, as if the words the actor speaks are in all ways his own, or maybe more specifically that of the character whom he has become, rather than the playwright's. Speech in the theatre should be natural rather than theatrical, speech as opposed to writing. The arguments for natural delivery can thus be understood as an attempt, like that we have identified in Diderot's argument for realism, to overcome the problem of representation by making the representation as natural as possible. In his theory of acting, we see that Diderot argues for technique and rationality as the way to counteract the slippage of meaning in representation.

Dubos's idea of acting as musical notation may be viewed in the same light. The idea is to control the actor's performance, to make that performance a consistent expression of the author's words and meanings. It means to close the gap between intention and received meaning caused by the dispersal of the author's presence into character and actor. This, however, also makes for a theory of acting that relies heavily on technique. Other theorists felt that technique, being artificial and relying on conventions, might in fact reaffirm that gap. So they argue instead that the actor 'tap the inner springs of feeling' in performance; in other words, actually feel and thus actually mean what he says. The gap between intended and received meaning is thus closed through the presence of the actor as author. Lessing agrees that this would be ideal, but realises that feeling alone can not ultimately guarantee a consistent and meaningful performance. He thus tries to reconcile feeling with technique in order to guarantee that the performance conveys its meanings consistently. If the actor relied only on feeling, the performance would be different every night and meaning would be completely subject to its particular context rather than timeless, general and universal.

## 3.4 Conclusion

In 18th century criticism one can detect traces of a general mistrust of art and specifically of theatre. It emerges in the beginning of the century with Collier's view that theatre promotes immorality and in Locke's dislike of florid and poetic language. Collier's criticism is more specifically of Restoration comedy and functions chiefly on

the level of content. So although his ideas were part of the trend towards the sentimental comedy, his specific approach is not really a typical expression of the suspicion mentioned above. Locke's comment on the ability of art to mislead judgement, although nothing like a thorough critique of the arts, provides the basic framework.

The general wariness of the arts is one aspect of a general opposition between nature and artifice, truth and what is contrived to appear true. Art is suspect because there is always a gap between the real and a depiction of it, even more so because a depiction can be made to seem true without being so. An important part of this equation is the concept of truth with which 18$^{th}$ century thinkers worked. As in the 17$^{th}$ century, truth had to be general, transcending context and not dependant on particulars. This is the basis of the distinction that Lessing makes between wit and genius, wit is the artful drawing together of particulars to give the appearance of truth, while genius understands the true structure of a general reality.

At the same time 18$^{th}$ century theorists were moving away from the unlocalised general reality usually prescribed by 17$^{th}$ century Neo-classicists, towards a more particular realism. This shift was brought about for a variety of reasons: for example an idea of audience psychology that stressed identification with the characters depicted, and also the idea that the inclusion of local detail or context related particulars might assist verisimilitude. Particulars thus assisted in making the representation convincing and recognisable. One of the motivating factors behind the trend towards realism is thus the attempt to bridge the gap between reality and its representation. Put another way, it is an attempt to overcome what Derrida calls 'the evil of representation'.

While most theorists attempted to reconcile their distrust of art and the artificial with their belief that if approached correctly theatre does have the potential to be instructive and moral, Jean Jacques Rousseau felt that any kind of attempt to create an illusion of reality was bound to fail. His suspicion of art was not compromised into a call for greater realism (although someone like Mercier used Rousseau's position to justify the need for greater realism), but led him to reject theatre all together. The evil of representation could not, for Rousseau, be overcome by realism, all that could be done would be to banish representation completely and replace theatre with a kind of activity that did not involve pretence.

Although there are important differences, Rousseau's argument is quite similar to the Artaud inspired rejection of the text to be found in 20<sup>th</sup> century avant garde theatre. Some performance theorists believe that performance, as an art form, also resists representation and the idea that the actor should pretend to be someone else, speaking in a voice not his or her own. But where 20<sup>th</sup> century theorists very often couch this argument in terms of liberating the actor from enslavement by the text and absent author, Rousseau is more concerned with protecting the audience from the lies of the actor. Both of these positions may be said to stem from a kind of anti-theatrical prejudice, and in both cases theatricality is associated with illusion, with a text and with the basic conceit that actors speak words fundamentally not their own.
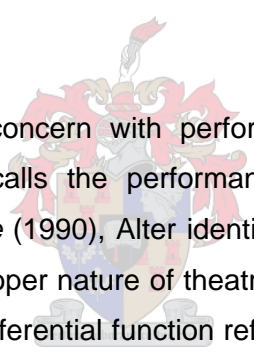
Moderate and mainstream drama critics of the 18<sup>th</sup> century like Lessing and Diderot would at first glance not appear to share this prejudice. Both champion theatre's contribution to moral life. At the same time it is clear that they are also uncomfortable with theatricality. Neither wants a theatre that flaunts its artificiality. Both want a kind of theatre that seems as natural as possible, while recognising that theatre also fundamentally depends on illusion and artifice. They maintain that as long as the illusion serves the truth and artifice is not celebrated for its own sake, theatre may continue to facilitate truth and a general morality.

Realism thus appears to flow from one of the oldest critical problems in theatre and drama, the problem of representation. Aided in its specific formation by issues particular to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, like the need to portray people that an audience might identify with and the portrayal of exemplary sentiments, realism (as we understand it after the 19<sup>th</sup> century) in its 18<sup>th</sup> century manifestation, the domestic *drame*, is also an answer to problems generated by the basic theatrical contradiction (that theatre claims truth through lying) and the problem caused by the fact that the author is removed from his words through representation. It is thus a result of the logocentrism that privileges speech over writing.

Neo-classicists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century do not seem overly aware of any problems with representation. They are chiefly concerned with the moral content of the drama and how to ensure that its presentation is convincing. They were also hardly concerned with performance, except in so far as spectacular elements might detract from the moral message and stimulate the passions of the audience. They did not pay much attention to performance because firstly their focus was on the message, secondly they favoured the universal over the particular and the performance as particular

manifestation of a text did not matter so much. Thirdly, they associated elements specific to the performance with the passions. The passions and emotion in general were considered dangerous. Their approach to theatre is thus quite literally logocentric, it was focussed on the words of the author. Any slippage of meaning was to be contained by rules that governed the transmission of the message.

In the 18th century Neo-classicism leaves behind some of these assumptions. For example, emotion is no longer just seen as dangerous, but is now, by some, considered a source of moral goodness. Theatre can thus fulfil its moral function by stimulating emotion in the audience. If certain aspects of theatre were associated primarily with emotion, it would no longer be necessary to disregard or attempt to avoid them. So we see in the 18th century that performance becomes more of a factor for critics. This concern with performance can not only be seen in explicit statements like Diderot's declaration that a play is made primarily to be performed, but also emerges in the calls for realist type staging and the new concern with the art of acting.

Ironically, however, this new concern with performance is at the same time a rejection of what Jean Alter calls the performant function of drama. In his *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre* (1990), Alter identifies two functions that according to him define the distinct and proper nature of theatre: the referential and performant functions (Alter 1990:31). The referential function refers to the communicative aspect of theatre, the fact that it most often involves a story being told and information being imparted. The performant function refers to the audience's desire to witness something extraordinary and the fact that theatre also involves display for its own sake (Alter 1990:32).

Alter points out that theories of theatre tend to favour one function over the other. Aristotle's theory, for example, because Aristotle held that the basis of theatre is imitation, favours the referential function over the performant (Alter 1990:33). We could therefore expect the Neo-classic theory of drama, because it is so closely based on Aristotle to exhibit the same prejudice. On top of that, the Neo-classicists also insist that theatre teach morality to its audience, making the referential function even more important.

Actual 17th century French theatre was a form of drama in which the performant function was often quite prominent. Although Neo-classicism was already

discouraging conventions like the aside and soliloquies, the declamatory style of acting and the high level of interaction between stage and auditorium promoted a type of theatre experience in which the performant function plays an important part. These types of practises do not square with the main aims and concerns of Neo-classicism, in which the message must take absolute precedence. But 17th century Neo-classic critics did not generally pay much attention to such factors. They do not appear to recognise the effect that the performant function may have on the referential function. This is why we can say that for 17th century critics performance did not matter. How the story was told, did not for them have much of an effect on the story told.

Neo-classicists of the 18th century do, on the other hand, appear to be starting to realise that the performant affects the referential function, performance is, for them, starting to matter. When Diderot proposes what will become recognisable as Realist fourth wall staging, he rejects the kind of conventions that made 17th and 18th century theatre a theatre with a strong performant function. Diderot acknowledges that a play is made primarily to be performed, but he makes this statement in order to argue for the type of staging that hides its artificiality, that draws as little attention as possible to the fact that it is being performed. Diderot recognises that the performant has an impact on the story told, and therefore he proposes that the theatre artist make it serve the referential function absolutely.
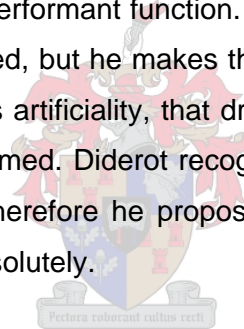
In the theories of acting that emerged in the 18th century the most common debate is on whether the actor should work primarily with feeling or with technique. Those who champion feeling often also allow that the actor may make some degree of original contribution to the drama. Lessing and Diderot, however, both ultimately want the performance to correspond exactly with the intentions of the author of the play. They recognise that the actor who truly feels may be convincing and natural, but ultimately they prefer technique, because it guarantees a performance that is both consistent (thus the same night after night) and recognisable (the external signs of feeling may be more recognisable to the audience than actual feeling).

Diderot and Lessing do not want actors that are showing off. They want actors that transmit the message of the play without a self consciousness that may interfere or take precedence over the message. The actor must not draw attention to the situation of the performance, but act as if he were really the character inhabiting the represented time and place. He should act as if the audience was not there. Thus the

performant function is made as far as is possible to serve the text and its moral message. When the performant is made to serve the referential function in this way, the message is protected from the variable nature of theatre. The idea is that the same message can be delivered and received in the same way night after night.

This type of thinking prohibits both the autonomy of the actor and the autonomy of theatre as an art form. These two types of autonomy will be crucial in the development of 20th century theories of theatre that favour the performant over the referential function of theatre. In the model of theatre promoted by Diderot, Lessing and other 18th century theorists of theatre, theatre always serves something that exists outside of itself, specifically a general truth that is taken to underlie life and that is expressed in the text.

The performant is problematic for these thinkers, not only because they prefer the general over the particular like 17th century Neo-classicists, but also because they are suspicious of art and aware of the problem of representation. The performant draws attention to the performance as performance, it makes visible the lie of theatre, while it at the same time opens up the possibility that theatre need not really be a representation at all, it can be enjoyable for its own sake, without story or characters it can merely satisfy the audience's desire to witness something extraordinary. While this possibility could provide a solution to the problem of representation, it is not viable solution for 18th century theorists. In this transition from a worldview prescribed by the church to a scientific and rational worldview, theatre remains suspicious and an activity that needs to be justified in terms of the contribution it may make to society. Theorists feel the need to explain that theatre serves life, it teaches citizens good morals. The fact that it is enjoyable may contribute to its moral function, but it should not be enjoyable for its own sake, or without its imparting some message.

In the 18th century, thus, critics cannot be accused of disregarding performance or not realising that it is an important part of theatre. What they can, however, be charged with, is privileging the referential function of theatre over the performant function. In other words they do favour the text over the performance. This tendency is visible both in their continuing insistence that theatre serve morality as well as the trend towards realism. It will only be after Kant and the Romantics that the idea of art as being autonomous will begin to gain general ground and only after more than a century of developing modernism that the performant function will begin to dominate in thinking about theatre.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## CONCLUSION

### 4.1    Questions raised at the start of this dissertation

The first part of Chapter One consisted of an overview of the different ways in which a text-performance dichotomy featured in 20$^{th}$ century theatre theory. From the late 19$^{th}$ century onwards the new generation of theatre directors asserted that theatre was a performed art and should not be considered a genre of literature. Most of these directors felt that traditionally dialogue, narrative and character were employed at the expense of movement, visual elements or spectacle in general, even though the latter elements constituted the real building blocks of theatre. In practice this meant a re-evaluation of the place of text or words in the theatre. Although some questioned the necessity of a text, it was usually a question of textual elements considered as just one part of the performance. The point was that the performance is not merely a vehicle for the communication of textual elements.

There was a connection between this re-evaluation of the text and the question of the autonomy of art. These writers hoped to establish not only that theatre existed as an art form in its own right, in other words that theatre should not be judged according to principles outside of itself (e.g. those of literature), but also that art should not be dependent on life in the sense that it is only a representation of it. The rejection of the text is in many ways also a rejection of representation as a primary function of art or theatre.

Performance critics such as J. L. Styan also emphasised that theatre is a performed art and that a strictly literary approach was inadequate and necessarily failed to interpret a play adequately. Only when considered as a performance could the intentions of the playwright be realised and the play come into its own. Theatre semioticians took a similar approach, although they were less concerned with the intentions of the playwright. Crucial here was a distinction between a dramatic text and a performance text with the latter including visual and aural signs that cannot be part of the play if read or imagined as literature. Semioticians identified the performance text as their proper object of study. Semioticians also look at a hierarchy

of signifying elements in such a performance text and identify a tendency in traditional critical approaches to rank dialogue as the pinnacle of this hierarchy. Again, it is thus an issue of the place of words or textual elements in the theatre.

This also raises the question of how the relationship between the dramatic text and the performance is defined. Does the dramatic text already contain all the potential meanings of actual performances? Is it, in other words, an ideal prototype for performances that are of necessity imperfect manifestations of its potential? Or, is the dramatic text a starting point for a performance that exists in its own right? Is the relationship thus defined as metonymy or metaphor? Semioticians usually reject the idea of the performance as a metaphor for the text in favour of a metonymical relationship.

Performance critics and semioticians generally condemn approaches that fail to understand theatre as a performed art, but they do not really challenge accepted notions of what theatre is. Performance theorists since the 1960s, on the other hand, appear to reject theatre completely or at least wish to radically redefine it. Many of these performance theorists also defined performance as an alternative form to theatre: a form free of the elements that tie theatre to literature such as character, narrative and dialogue. 'Performance' is generally seen as fluid, playful and ambiguous, characteristics performance theorists often claim are suppressed in traditional Western theatre.

It is in the writings of such performance theorists that the dichotomy between text and performance is often at its most distinct and intense. Post-structuralist critiques of this trend in theatre (or performance) studies also draw attention to the relation between this dichotomy and issues of authority. Post-structuralists see this emphasis on performance rather than the text as an attempt to fix the locus of authority in the body of the performer, in his or her physical presence. For these theorists this is a function of the same kind of logocentrism that underlies an opposition where the text is considered to be more authoritative than the performance.

The text-performance dichotomy is, according to W.B. Worthen (1997), a result of the 19th century rise of literature as an institution. The theorists who use the dichotomy imply, however, that the problem is far older and that a reversed text-performance dichotomy existed in theatre long before the 19th century. The fact is that it is not only a question of specific pronouncements on 'text' and 'performance', but also an

assortment of underlying issues that have to do with autonomy, authority and the way theatre and its elements are defined, both as a whole and in relation to each other.

These issues, summarised in Chapter One, translate into a number of questions that may be asked of historical theatre criticism and theory. Such questions are:

1. Did theorists of this era consider the performance unimportant in their study of theatre?
2. Did they consider non-textual elements when discussing the effects of drama?
3. Did these theorists make a distinction between theatre and other literary forms?
4. Did they relate theatre to other forms that would currently be labelled performance?
5. Did they define the performance-text relationship as metaphor or as metonymy?
6. To what extent did they treat theatre as an autonomous form?
7. What was the source of authority in interpreting drama?
8. How much importance did they attach to the intentions of the dramatist?
9. Could the approach of these theorists be described as logocentric?

## 4.2    Chapters Two and Three
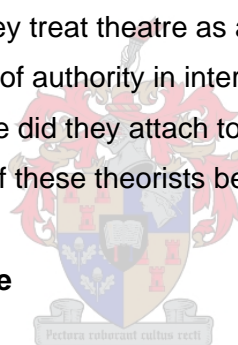
In Chapters Two and Three I undertook a survey of selected works of Neo-classic theory and criticism. Chapter Two covered English and French theatre criticism and theory in the 17th century. This period thus covers the rise of Neo-classicism from the 1630s until the period where one can say it became firmly established. This period is also roughly concurrent with the rise of modern philosophy and the new sciences; what may be called the birth of modernity.

Chapter Two concluded that Neo-classicism became so dominant in the 17th century partly because its aims coincided with the general philosophical trend to establish authoritative systems of thought based on reason and Cartesian method. Neo-classicism with its rules and strict moral foundation, as well as its idealist and universalist tendencies accorded perfectly with the shifts in philosophy towards the abstract, the general and the universal – which is the foundation of modernist thinking in Europe. For Bakhtin this type of thinking is the foundation of monologic literature. The ideal Neo-classic theatre is therefore monologic. It is clear that the

wariness of performative elements we see in Neo-classic theory and criticism in this era relates to its pursuit of such modernist principles and its attempt to legislate for a monologic theatre.

Chapter Three covered theatre criticism and theory from the beginning of the 18th century up to 1780, before the rise of Romanticism. This was the period of the dominance of Neo-classicism as critical paradigm up to the time it began to crumble from within. Generally, this period is described as the age of Enlightenment. New intellectual currents like empiricism and benevolism now stimulated the development of trends in Neo-classicism that allowed it to become less rigid and more genuinely scientific.

From the chief themes in criticism and theory we see that Neo-classic theorists were mostly still interested in general statements about theatre, but were at the same time less in awe of external authority and rules, more individualistic and historically aware. They were also more accepting of emotion, both as an expression of moral feeling and as an effect in the theatre. These new themes went hand in hand with an increasing awareness of the importance of the performance. This increased awareness of theatre as a performed art did not mean, however, that the performative function of theatre now came into its own. It was rather that through greater awareness of the problem of representation, theorists were attempting to find ways to ensure that the unity of speaker and message is preserved. As such the attentiveness to performance was thus in fact a function of a logocentric attitude in modern theatre.

Chapters Two and Three discussed the attitude to 'performance' and the issues underlying the text-performance dichotomy in a general way, exploring some of the key parameters. In this final chapter, I want to conclude with a concise, but more systematic investigation of how the questions raised in Chapter One relate to 17th and 18th century criticism and theory. To avoid unnecessary overlap the nine questions listed above have been narrowed down and organised into six topics.

## 4.3 Discussion of the questions

### 4.3.1 Importance of performance and consideration of non-textual elements

Critics and theorists of the 17th century generally followed Aristotle's lead when it came to their treatment of the elements of theatre: they ranked spectacle lowest. They did not define theatre in such a way as to make much of the fact that it is meant to be performed rather than read. They acknowledged the performative aspects of theatre, such as spectacle, but in most cases also emphasised the potential of these aspects to undermine the message of the play.

There was consensus that spectacle appealed to the non-rational aspects of the audience and may in that way mislead spectators and 'cheat sense'. The rules were their solution to this prospective problem. Critics hoped that the rules would keep spectacular effects in modest proportion, specifically because of the demands of verisimilitude. In this way, what is reasonable would always triumph over the fanciful or emotionally stimulating. The rules thus ensured that the performance did not subvert the message of the play.

The audience certainly had no part in creating the message of the play. It was important that spectators interpret the moral message of the play correctly, but as long as the rules had been adhered to, there was no consideration of how the specific situation of reception affected this interpretation. Where there was, in other words, a potential for things to go wrong the problem could be fixed in the *text*, through its faithfulness to the rules: no extra measures were called for in the performance.

In the 17th century, critics treated acting in much the same way as they did spectacle. They paid very little attention to it and where they mentioned actors, it was often to warn against their ability to undermine the message of the play or mislead the audience. They also wrote about acting almost exclusively in terms of the delivery of lines; there was no question of any supplementary contribution by the actor in the form of movement, for example. Such critics clearly understood acting only in terms of its function to communicate the message of the play. Critics appeared to have ignored any effect that the presence of the actor may have on that message, with the exception of instances where he or she made particular mistakes in the delivery of the lines or perverted the message through over-dramatisation.

While some conservative 18th century critics continued to express these attitudes, we find that as a whole, definite changes arose in 18th century criticism and theory. These changes derived from two factors. On the one hand, the spirit of empiricism stimulated a decrease in emphasis on tradition and authority; this meant that theorists were now free to write about theatre in terms of their own observations and experience rather than continue along the same line of argument as their predecessors.

On the other hand, the new attitude to emotion made performance, insofar as it was still associated with impact on the emotions rather than rationality, less suspect. Where performance was previously only written about in terms of its dangers, it now became a factor that may contribute positively to the effect of theatre. Because it stimulated the emotions of the audience, the performance might enhance the moral message of the play. The same went for the actor, he might now make a specific contribution by inspiring compassion in the audience.

Although theorising about acting had become significantly more sophisticated, it was still mostly written about in terms of the delivery of lines. We do see, however, that someone like Diderot had begun to think about other aspects of the art of acting such as movement etc. as well. Diderot may in fact be considered something of a revolutionary in this context. His idea of fourth wall staging was not only absolutely fundamental to the development of 19th century Realism, it in many ways represents one of the first coherent statements on how the theatrical experience should be treated holistically: as a performance that includes a text, rather than a text with concomitants.

### 4.3.2   Theatre, Literature and other forms of performance

Like Aristotle, 17th century critics treated drama as a genus of the imitative arts and saw it as related to other forms of what they called poetry, such as the epic. Aristotle did not classify theatre arts together with other types of public display like athletics, so it would be strange to find that those who rely primarily on his authority should do so[1]. At the same time, poetry was quite a loose category and in the 17th century it

---

[1] Bernard Beckerman cites the example of a 15th century writer who did put theatre in the wider category of public shows rather than in the category of literature. Leone Battista Alberti cites Moses, as opposed to Aristotle, as his authority in his discussion of theatre as a public show related to wrestling, boxing and the like (Beckerman 1990:x).

was still far from the kind of authoritative institution that literature would become in the 19th century. Theatre's relation to other literary forms was thus not yet the kind of threat that inspired the need to assert its validity as an independent form, thus leading to the rise of the text-performance dichotomy (see Worthen 1997). Tragedy was rated very highly, even highest, among the forms of poetry and as a result, none of the other forms was subject to as many rules.

17th century critics did not really take into account the performant as a principle operating in drama along side a referential principle. It is through the performant that theatre connects to other forms of public display and through the referential function that theatre connects to other literary forms. In the Neo-classicist view of theatre, the referential function is dominant and in fact there seems to have been no place in this discourse for art that was not referential or, in other words, not a form of representation.

There was no major change in this situation in 18th century criticism and theory. Although the new attitude to emotion and experience would theoretically begin to make it possible to value theatre as an experience rather than only as a form of communication, critics still wrote about the experience of theatre only in terms of its moral benefits or dangers. This means that the referential function continued to dominate even if the performant had gained some status.

The most coherent theory of staging that emerged from the 18th century was one in which the performance is carefully considered and meticulously planned in order to protect the referential function. Diderot's fourth wall staging was, even though it acknowledged the importance of the performance, really an ironic call for a performance that denied that it was a performance and continued to privilege the referential function over the performant.

There was also no reclassification of theatre as a type of public display in this century and drama was still considered primarily a form of poetry. Rousseau's idea for public festivals to replace theatre and overcome its evils was the closest idea we find to connecting theatre with public display. However, Rousseau wanted to make this replacement because he was concerned for the referential function, not because he wants to champion the performant. He was not interested in celebrating performance, but in creating something that taught morality and civic duty more effectively than theatre. Even if Rousseau was not such an outsider in this regard, his statements did

not indicate a shift in thinking even if he does appear to prefigure later experiments with non-representational theatre.

### 4.3.3   The relationship between text and performance

The way that 17th century critics treated the performative aspects of theatre such as acting and spectacle implies that they defined the performance, insofar as they thought of it at all, as a metaphor for the text. This means that they measured the success of the performance in terms of its fidelity to the text. The message of the performance was the message of the text as long as something did not go wrong during the performance.

This view of performance was related to the philosophical shifts that characterised the 17th century birth of modernity. The rise of the new philosophy and science constituted a rejection of contextual thinking in favour of abstract theorising. Science and philosophy, and by extension literary or dramatic theory, aimed to discover and establish universal and absolute truth through system-building. Neo-classic theatre theorists, insofar as Neo-classicism is an expression of these ideals, ignored the particular, time- and context-bound manifestation of a text that is the performance because they were interested in the message that transcends its context, what may ostensibly be found in the text.
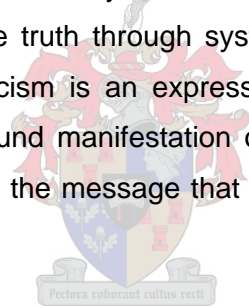
When theorists define the performance as a metaphor for the text it does not necessarily mean that they do not think of theatre as a performed art. The 20th century performance critics who specifically argued that theatre should be considered as a performed art tended to use such a metaphorical definition because they were concerned with protecting the intentions of the dramatist. We do not see, however, many instances of sensitivity to theatre as performed art in 17th century criticism. This situation changed in the 18th century, even though the definition of the relationship between text and performance did not really change substantially. System-building had lost favour, and with it the dismissive attitude that critics had towards the performance as concrete manifestation of an ideal text. However, 18th century thinking continued to tend towards a search for the kind of general and universal truths that is the heart of system-building. As a result, there was still a tendency to write about theatre in general abstract terms rather than about specific performances.

The definition of the relationship between text and performance did change to the extent that it became more explicit. Performance was more often now included in a general definition of theatre and stressed as an important part of it. Some even argued that it was better to see a play performed than to read it. Critics were moving closer and closer to the position of 20th century performance critics. They were beginning to acknowledge that it is only when it is performed that the play fulfilled its true potential. However, for them this potential was already part of the text. A chief aspect of their concern with performance was to fulfil the intentions of the dramatist. They measured the success of the performance against its fidelity to these intentions.

### 4.3.4  Autonomy

The fact that the different genres of drama were governed by their own principles, which were different from that of other literary forms, did not mean that theatre in the Neo-classic view can be described as autonomous. These principles were formulated to keep the performant function in check and ensure that the message of the play was not lost in the performance, thus protecting the referential function.

As I have said, the Neo-classic concept of art was that its function was representation; Neo-classicists defined art as an imitation of idealised nature. Insofar as the call by the director-theorists for an autonomous theatre was also a rejection of representation (which was also in many ways a championing of the performant over the referential) 17th and 18th century theatre is obviously not autonomous. The referential function dominated and art was expected to provide a mirror of life.

In fact, the lack of autonomy of art in the Neo-classic paradigm extended even further than that. Not only was art dependent on life in that it had to imitate it, it also had to serve life. Neo-classicism required that art be moral as well as teach morality. The moral function of art in this view justified and legitimised it. Prior to the 17th century with its scientific revolution, the church viewed theatre as dangerous and immoral. Theatre was defended as something that could actually teach morality and in this way, its continuing existence was ensured. Although the church had lost some of its power in the 17th century, theatre was not immediately liberated from the demands of morality.

It was not only because the church was still very powerful in the 17th century that theatre had to continue to justify itself through its service to morality. When the new

style of philosophy, i.e. system-building, emerged in the 17th century, it aimed to provide a new kind of certainty in the face of what has been called 'the crisis of the European mind' (Israel 2001). To achieve this aim philosophy or theory had to be able to claim that it was the basis of absolute truth. The authoritarianism of science, what I have called the dogma of the Enlightenment in Chapter Three, replaced the authoritarianism of the church. Within the framework of this dogmatic rationalism, art could only be valuable as long as it was *not* autonomous; it always had to be legitimised by the system. Poetry and art in general was subordinate to the absolute truth of the philosophical system.

In the 18th century, we find less of this kind of dogmatic rationalism. System-building had become suspect as well as difficult to sustain. This did not mean, however, that art was suddenly liberated from the burden of legitimising itself and its subordination to morality and representation. Philosophy laid the foundation for the idea of autonomous art, but in practice, this was not yet possible. As long as Neo-classicism persisted as a critical paradigm this aspect could not change; the essence of Neo-classicism was largely its function as a legitimising structure.

Representation is central to the question of autonomy. In the 17th century, representation was quite straightforwardly the main function of art. 18th century criticism challenged not only the content of this function (moving away from the representation of idealised reality towards particularised actual reality), but also began to show a more acute awareness of problems associated with representation. Awareness of such problems was fundamental to the 20th century rejection of representation that was an adjunct to privileging performance in a text-performance dichotomy. The 18th century response to these problems was, however, not to reject representation (a rejection of representation is in the 18th century tantamount to a rejection of art in its entirety, as we see with Rousseau), but to explore ways that the problems may be overcome, for example through fourth wall staging. These solutions, however, tended to reinforce art's lack of autonomy rather than make it more autonomous.

### 4.3.5   Authority

Authority is a very important issue in 17th and 18th century criticism and theory. According to Worthen (1997) authority is also at the heart of the 20th century text-performance dichotomy. It may therefore be useful to compare the way the issue

features in the different eras. At first glace, however, the issue in the 17<sup>th</sup> century seems to have very little in common with how it features in the 20<sup>th</sup> century text-performance dichotomy.

In terms of the issue of authority, the 17<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as a transitional period. From a situation where an external authority such as Aristotle, Plato or even Moses was essential as a foundation for any kind of pronouncement, theorists were moving to a situation where reason supplanted such external authority as legitimising force. The idea was that the method whereby a statement was arrived at might guarantee its validity. Rational method thus ideally became a kind of internal authority that took the place of the external authority of tradition. In practice we find, however, that writers paid lip service to this idea, while still clinging to the authority of the ancients.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, reason was opposed to authority more convincingly. Art in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was legitimised not only by its moral function, but also by its faithfulness to tradition and the extent to which it followed the example of the ancients. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we find not only that critics and theorists no longer had to substantiate their statements with reference to the ancients, the plays themselves did not need to conform to the example of ancient plays or the prescriptions of ancient theorists. This presented critics with the challenge of finding a new structure to lend authority and legitimisation to theoretical statements and plays. Where pure rationalism proved insufficient, empiricism provided some opportunities; authority may now also derive from experience and the elusive property called genius.

As a concept, 18<sup>th</sup> century 'genius', was not so much a vehicle of imaginative expression as indicative of insightfulness and understanding, a natural sensitivity and sociability. While the 18<sup>th</sup> century genius was thus not the sovereign author of Romanticism, he represented a definite move away from the idea that authority derived from expert knowledge drawn from tradition rather than from experience. Practical experience was beginning to count for much more and increasingly people believed that authors might be trusted to use their own judgement.

18<sup>th</sup> century writers were thus claiming greater freedom to explore new forms and new theories. They were also beginning to assert that their practical experience with writing and producing plays made them more authoritative than critics without such experience. Here we thus find the roots of an opposition still found today between

features in the different eras. At first glace, however, the issue in the 17th century seems to have very little in common with how it features in the 20th century text-performance dichotomy.

In terms of the issue of authority, the 17th century can be seen as a transitional period. From a situation where an external authority such as Aristotle, Plato or even Moses was essential as a foundation for any kind of pronouncement, theorists were moving to a situation where reason supplanted such external authority as legitimising force. The idea was that the method whereby a statement was arrived at might guarantee its validity. Rational method thus ideally became a kind of internal authority that took the place of the external authority of tradition. In practice we find, however, that writers paid lip service to this idea, while still clinging to the authority of the ancients.

In the 18th century, reason was opposed to authority more convincingly. Art in the 17th century was legitimised not only by its moral function, but also by its faithfulness to tradition and the extent to which it followed the example of the ancients. In the 18th century, we find not only that critics and theorists no longer had to substantiate their statements with reference to the ancients, the plays themselves did not need to conform to the example of ancient plays or the prescriptions of ancient theorists. This presented critics with the challenge of finding a new structure to lend authority and legitimisation to theoretical statements and plays. Where pure rationalism proved insufficient, empiricism provided some opportunities; authority may now also derive from experience and the elusive property called genius.

As a concept, 18th century 'genius', was not so much a vehicle of imaginative expression as indicative of insightfulness and understanding, a natural sensitivity and sociability. While the 18th century genius was thus not the sovereign author of Romanticism, he represented a definite move away from the idea that authority derived from expert knowledge drawn from tradition rather than from experience. Practical experience was beginning to count for much more and increasingly people believed that authors might be trusted to use their own judgement.

18th century writers were thus claiming greater freedom to explore new forms and new theories. They were also beginning to assert that their practical experience with writing and producing plays made them more authoritative than critics without such experience. Here we thus find the roots of an opposition still found today between

creatives and critics, or theorists and practitioners. This opposition came into its own when a new type of theatre theory appeared in the 19th century with the rise of the modern director. This new type of theory, our starting point in Chapter One, was then specifically concerned with distancing theatre from literature and introduced the text-performance dichotomy into theatre discourse.

The modern construct of the intending author has its roots in 18th century theory, but does not really take shape until the rise of Romanticism and the 19th century development of literature as institution. The 20th century performance theorists' application of this construct to the performer rather than the dramatist is crucial to the way they reverse the text-performance dichotomy. However, it is impossible to discuss this form of the issue of authority properly by merely looking at the roots of its development in the 18th century. A complete discussion of how 'authority' as a concept transforms itself from the 17th to the 20th century, if there is a direct link, thus falls outside of the limits that this study set itself. Here we can only suggest that such a discussion might fruitfully serve as the basis of further study.

## 4.3.6 Theatre and logocentrism

When post-structuralist performance theorists look at the 20th century text-performance discourse, they see it as an expression of a logocentric tendency in theatre studies. They thus see it as an example of the more general attitude in Western thinking that privileges speech over writing. Writing is seen as a dangerous supplement to speech rather than an original mode of expression or communication. Writing as representation of speech undermines the truth value of the statement because it separates it from its author and its immediate context, and ultimately its absolute meaning, letting it become part of the free flow of signifiers. This opposition between speech and writing relates directly to more than one of the issues upon which the text-performance discourse is based: the issues of authority in and autonomy of art as well as the problem of representation. In this way, the concept of logocentrism functions like a key to this discourse, demonstrating some of its central aims and objectives.

For Derrida and other post-structuralists the opposition between speech and writing serves as a starting point and organising principle for other binary oppositions in which one term is privileged over the other. Although a text-performance opposition was not an explicit issue in 17th and 18th century dramatic criticism and theory, there

was a definite tendency to formulate binary oppositions. These were frequently related to the text-performance question. While the most visible binary opposition operating in 17<sup>th</sup> century theatre theory was the ancients versus the moderns, the opposition most relevant for this study is that between the general and particular, derived from Aristotle's opposition between history and philosophy, epic and tragedy. For Aristotle the universal, abstract statement was preferable to the particular local truth because it transcended its context; for him philosophy deals with such general statements and history with particular truths. This was his answer to Plato's condemnation of the arts as a form of lying. Neo-classicists agreed with Aristotle that art, because it deals with general truths, may use lies to be more truthful.

The privileging of the general over the particular supported the monologism of the Neo-classic theatre ideal. The ambition to formulate general abstract truths and communicate them through the medium of theatre necessitated a monologic theatre. This is because the truth statements' claim to transcendence and absoluteness is undermined when it is interrupted, made provisional or relative by factors that constitute dialogism, like breaking the dramatic illusion or creating a separation between the voices of the characters and that of the author.

There is a connection between monologism and logocentrism. Both concepts describe the attempt to secure and ground meaning. Monologic theatre or literature attempts this by using the invisible but all pervasive author, a figure from which all statements originate and to whom all other voices are subordinate. Monologism preserves the authority of the voice of the author. A plurality of voices is deconstructive, it reveals the writtenness of theatre; such plurality severs the connection between author and statement and undermines the absolute authority of the author. Dialogism is thus the deconstruction of logocentrism in action. The performative is classified with writing because it undermines monologism and draws attention to the facticity of theatre. A performance that represses performativity such as the realist performance that pretends it is not one, hides this facticity and thus resembles speech.

The meaning of the concept 'truth' changed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A major part of this shift was that the opposition between the general and the particular became strained. The 18<sup>th</sup> century idea of truth was moving towards the factual. This implies a reversal of the opposition between general and particular, but this was not quite the case: philosophy and theory still tended toward the general statement. Theorists

were still building systems in spite of some of their intentions. We thus see that the opposition was not so much reversed as put under strain, partly because of a contradiction that is part of its basic construction. This contradiction derives from the following: for a statement to claim absolute truth it needs to transcend its context, but the moment is does so it becomes subject to interpretation in other contexts and the stability of its original meaning is threatened. Author and statement are separated and the message becomes a form of writing in the Derridean sense. As this contradiction becomes more obvious and priorities change, we find that other oppositions become more prominent in 18th century criticism.

While speech was not opposed to writing as such in 18th century criticism and theory, how critics wrote about it does relate to the present discussion. English critics of the 17th century generally agreed that plays should be written in rhyme. Dryden and Howard debated the issue with Dryden arguing that rhyme is necessary because it keeps the imagination under control and his brother-in-law arguing that theatre speech should resemble natural speech. In the next century, the idea that tragedy requires heightened speech and that plays should be written in rhyme generally lost favour. Many of the new theorists of acting and speech now prescribed natural, unadorned speech. Sheridan, for example, argued that affectation destroyed the credibility of the actor. This theme in acting theory obviously related to the general trend to prefer the straightforward, unadorned and uncomplicated to the artificial and baroque, seen in Locke's fundamental mistrust of the arts. This trend is also the foundation of the other debate in this field about whether genuine feeling or technique should lead the actor.

The idea that genuine feeling should be the basis of an actor's performance likely contributed to the later development of the idea that the actor could also be an author of the dramatic event. While there seems no evidence that this notion had any currency in the 18th century, the accent on actual feeling certainly indicates a willingness to acknowledge that the actor could make an independent contribution to the communication of the play. It was more specifically an expression, however, of the necessity that this communication of the play, in other words the performance, should appear as natural as possible. Even those that argued against feeling acknowledged that it would be best if it appeared as if genuine feeling inspired the actor, because it would look most natural. They did recognise, however, that true feeling could make for an inconsistent performance and may not be recognisable as such. Thus the paradox of acting: to appear most natural it has to achieve a high

level of technical proficiency, in other words artifice; to be recognisable, the performance has to be conventional to some extent.

This paradox is similar to the paradox inherent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century approach to realism: to achieve the illusion of nature it is necessary to use a high level of artifice. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the idea of what the real is had shifted from the general and idealised 17<sup>th</sup> century verisimilitude towards a representation of actuality in its particulars. This new kind of realism was an expression of the degree to which the truth as embodied by particulars in a specific context was replacing the idea of truth as universal and abstract, one might say modern scientific truth was replacing philosophical truth. At the same time, the new kind of realism also expressed the anti-theatrical predisposition that claimed that to be true something had to be as natural and unadorned as possible.

This brings us to the problem of representation. Because an artwork can never *be* nature, but can only ever be a *representation* of nature, its truth claim is compromised. Art in general is thus seen as an attempt to tell the truth through lying. Because of the actor, this is particularly true of theatre. The actor is almost per definition a liar, because his words are not his own and he is pretending to be someone else. The actor embodies the separation between author and statement that is fundamental to the problem of representation. As such the actor (and by implication the performance) complicates the logocentric attempt to stabilise meaning in the theatre. One possible response would be to make the actor (as himself) author of the performance rather than some absent dramatist. The 18<sup>th</sup> century response, however, was to insist on identity between actor and character so that the person of the actor in no way intruded on the expression of the author's words. The actor who is subsumed by his character and the performance that pretends it is not one are thus expressions of a logocentric and monologic theatre and as such one that ultimately does privilege text over performance.

## 4.4    Concluding remarks

20<sup>th</sup> century theatre theorists charged critics of the past with ignoring the performance as part of theatre in various ways. An examination of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century theatre criticism and theory shows that while these charges are legitimate in some respects, they are less valid in other ways. If the performance as event is distinguished from the performant as a function, one can definitely say that these critics ignore or try to

underplay the performant, but that they often do acknowledge the importance of the performance. This recognition of performance, however, functions largely in terms of how the performance may serve the transmission of the play. In this sense, there is thus validity in the claim that the text is privileged over the performance, even if this clearly does not have to mean that theatre is not thought of as a performed art or considered just another branch of literature.

What we also see is that performance becomes more important as critics become more aware of the problem of representation. In the 18th century, critics addressed the problem through paying greater attention to the performance, while 17th critics addressed it by pretending that the performance did not matter or could make no positive contribution to the communication of the play. The 18th century attention to performance in essence minimised the performant function as critics attempted to make the performance seem as much like life as possible. The 20th century saw very different responses to this problem. Some theorists argued that emphasising performativity could expose the theatre as representation and in this way bring the theatre back to telling the truth. Others tried to banish representation from the theatre altogether and create pure performance without referentiality. This study finds that all of these responses exhibit the same need to address the problem of representation and truth telling in theatre (in most cases the same logocentrism) and that as early as the 17th century it is critics' and theorists' attitude to 'performance' that indicates an awareness of and an attempt to respond to this problem.

Many of the questions raised in this study cannot be exhaustively addressed within the limits that this study set itself. I have already mentioned the issue of authority, which can only be definitively answered through additional exploration of 19th century thought, in particular the development of the modern sovereign individual or subject and the construction of the author. To a certain extent, this is true of all the issues discussed here. Without necessarily implying a linear development from the 17th to the 20th century, there are links between how these issues feature in the period that falls between the eras discussed here. It might be fruitful to explore how these issues and ideas made the transition from the 18th to the 20th century through the 19th century. Such explorations would have to, however, proceed along very different methodological lines than those followed here. As pointed out in Chapter One, criticism after the 18th century becomes progressively more diverse and we never again find the relative coherence of theory that Neo-classicism exhibits. Further

explorations of criticism closer to the present would thus have to substitute the broad type of survey undertaken here for a more specific focus and rigorous selection.

Such further studies could look at how the issue of autonomy emerges out of 19th century modernism to allow for experiments with performances without representation, or compare the 18th and 19th century conceptions of realism. There is also potential for studies that look further back, examining these issues in the pre-modern or Renaissance era. For example, the extent to which the problem of representation features in that era and how critics attempt to address it. The implications of the transition from a rhetorical to a theoretical approach to theatre that was mentioned in Chapter Two might also provide material for closer examination, especially in how that transition really did affect the critical treatment of and attitude to performance.

The energetic theorising of the text-performance dichotomy may have largely spent itself in the 1990s, but the issues that informed it will most likely persist. Theatre and related forms will continue to face questions about interpretation, authority, how theatre should be defined, problems with representation as well as theatre's responsibility to society. In the late 20th century, the term 'performance' functioned like a keyword to explorations of these questions. It would be interesting to see whether 'performance' continues to function in this way, if it attracts explorations of new kinds of questions relating to theatre or whether some other keyword emerges to take its place in this regard.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alter, Jean. 1990. *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Aristotle. 1965. "On the Art of Poetry." In Dorsch, T.S. (ed.). *Classical Literary Criticism.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Arnott, Peter. 1977. *An Introduction to the French Theatre.* London: Macmillan.

Artaud, Antonin. 1995. *The Theatre and its Double.* Trans. Victor Corti. Montreuil: Calder.

Aston, Elaine & Savona, George. 1991. *Theatre as Sign-system: A Semiotics of Text and Performance.* London: Routledge.

Auslander, Philip. 1994. *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Auslander, Philip. 1997. *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism.* London: Routledge.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1995. "The Grotesque image of the Body and its Sources." In Dentith, Simon (ed.). *Bakhtinian Thought: an Introductory Reader.* London: Routledge.

Barthes, Roland. 1979. "From Work to Text." In Harari, J.V. (ed.). *Textual strategies: Perspectives in Post-structuralist Criticism.* London: Methuen.

Barthes, Roland. 1981. "Theory of the Text". In Young, Robert (ed.). *Untying the text: A Post-structuralist reader.* Boston: Routledge & Paul.

Bassnett-McGuire, Susan. 1980. "An Introduction to Theatre Semiotics." *Theatre Quarterly* 38: 47-53.

Beckerman, Bernard. 1990. *Theatrical Presentation: Performer, Audience and Act*. New York: Routledge.

Benamou, Michel & Carmello, Charles (eds.). 1977. *Performance in Postmodern Culture*. Milwaukee: Center for Twentieth Century Studies.

Brewer, Marcia Mària Minich. 1985. "Performing Theory," *Theatre Journal* 37(1):13-30.

Carlson, Marvin. 1990. *Theatre Semiotics – Signs of Life*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Carlson, Marvin. 1992. "Theater and Dialogism." In J.G. Reinelt and J.R. Roach (eds.). *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Carlson, Marvin. 1993. *Theories of the Theatre* (expanded edition). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Carlson, Marvin. 1996. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Cascardi, Anthony J. 1992. *The Subject of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clark, Barrett H (ed.). 1965. *European Theories of the Drama*. Revised Henry Popkin. New York: Crown Publishers.

Cottingham, J. 1995. "Descartes." In Honderich, Ted (ed.). *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cragg, Gerald R. 1964. *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Craig, Edward Gordon. 1983. *Craig on Theatre*. Walton, J. Michael (ed.). London: Methuen.

Craske, Matthew. 1997. *Art in Europe 1700-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Culler, Jonathan. 1983. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*. London: Routledge.

De Marinis, Marco. 1987. "Dramaturgy of the Spectator." *The Drama Review* 31(2): 100-114.

Dentith, Simon. 1995. "Bakhtin's Carival." In Dentith, Simon (ed.). *Bakhtinian Thought: an Introductory Reader*. London: Routledge.

Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Gramatology.* Trans. Spivak, Gayatri (ed.). Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1978. *Writing and Difference.* Trans. Bass, Alan. New York: Routledge.

Derrida, Jacques. 1988. "Letter to a Japanese Friend." In Wood, David & Bernasconi, Robert (eds.). *Derrida and Différance*. Evanston: North Western University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1995. *Points … Interviews 1974-1994.* Weber, Elizabeth (ed.). Trans. Kamuf, Peggy et al. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Descartes, Rene. 1960. *Discourse on Method and Meditations*. Trans. Lafleur, Laurence. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Diamond, Elin. 1996. "Introduction." In Diamond, Elin (ed.). *Performance and Cultural Politics.* London: Routledge.

Diderot, Denis. 1994. *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*. Trans. Bremner, Geoffrey. London: Penguin Books.

Dolan, Jill. 1993. "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the Performative." *Theatre Journal* 45(4):417-441.

Dryden, John. 1962*. Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays, Volume I.* Watson, George (ed.). London: J. M. Dent & Sons.

Dukore, Bernard F. (ed.). 1974. *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Eco, Umberto. 1977. "Semiotics of Theatrical Performance." *The Drama Review* 21(1): 107-117.

Elam, Keir. 1980. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama.* London: Methuen.

Foucault, Michel. 1992. "What is Enlightenment?" In Waugh, Patricia (ed.). *Postmodernism: A Reader.* London: Edward Arnold.

Fuchs, Elinor. 1985. "Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Rethinking Theatre after Derrida." *Performing Arts Journal* 9(2-3):163-172.

George, David. 1989. "On Ambiguity: Towards a Post-Modern Performance Theory." *Theatre Research International* 14(1):71-85.

Grotowski, Jerzy. 1968. *Towards A Poor Theatre.* London: Methuen.

Hamera, Judith. 1986. "Postmodern Performance, Postmodern Criticism." *Literature in Performance* 7(1):13-20.

Hartnoll, Phyllis. 1998. *The Theatre: A Concise History* (3$^{rd}$ ed.). Singapore: Thames and Hudson.

Hollinger, Robert.1994. *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences: A Thematic Approach.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Hume, David. 1998. *Selected Essays.* Copley, Stephen & Edgar, Andrew (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hutcheon, Linda & Valdés, Mario J. (eds.). 2002. *Rethinking Literary History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Israel, Jonathan I. 2001. *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, Samuel. 1969. *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson Volume V: The Rambler.* Bate, W.J. & Strauss, Albrecht B. (eds.). London: Yale University Press.

Johnson, Samuel. 1986. *Selected Writings.* Cruttwell, Patrick. (ed.). London: Penguin.

Jolley, Nicholas. 1999. *Locke: His Philosophical Thought.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jones, Thora Burnley & Nicol, Bernard de Bear. 1976. *Neo-Classical Dramatic Criticism 1560-1770.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kaye, Nick. 1994. *Postmodernism and Performance.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Lamport, F.J. 1981. *Lessing and the Drama.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Lange, Victor. 1962. 'Introduction.' In Lessing, G. E. *Hamburg Dramaturgy.* New York: Dover.

Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. 1962. *Hamburg Dramaturgy.* Trans. Zimmern, Helen. New York: Dover.

Locke, John. 1975. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.* Nidditch, Peter H. (ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Lottis, John. 1961. 'Introduction' In Steele, Richard. *The Theatre.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

MacDonald, Erik. 1993. *Theatre at the Margins: Text and the Post-Structured Stage.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

McAuley, Gay. 1996. "Theatre Practice and Critical Theory." *Australian Drama Studies* 28:140-145.

Meyerhold, V. 1969. *Meyerhold on Theatre.* Trans. Braun, Edward (ed.). London: Eyre Methuen.

Morris, Pam, 1994. "The Banquet, The Body and the Underworld." In Morris, P. (ed.). *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov.* London: Arnold.

Munck, Thomas. 2000. The *Enlightenment: A Comparative Social History 1721-1794.* London: Arnold.

Pavis, Patrice. 1982. *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of Theatre.* New York: PAJ publications.

Phelan Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance.* London: Routledge.

Plato. 1974. *The Republic.* Trans. Lee, Desmond. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Pocock, Gordon. 1980. *Boileau and the Nature of Neo-Classicism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robertson, J.G. 1965. *Lessing's Dramatic Theory.* New York: Benjamin Blom.

Sambrook, James. 1986. *The Eighteenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1700-1789.* London: Longman.

Sayre, Henry. 1983. "The Object of Performance: Aesthetics in the Seventies." *The Georgia Review* 37:169-188.

Sayre, Henry. 1990. "Performance." In Lentrichia, F. & McLaughlin, T. (eds.). *Critical Terms for Literary Study.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schechner, Richard. 1982. *The End of Humanism.* New York: PAJ publications.

Schechner, Richard. 1985. *Between Theatre and Anthropology.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Schechner, Richard. 1988. *Performance Theory.* New York: Routledge.

Schmitt, Natalie Cohn. 1990. *Actors and Onlookers: Theatre and Twentieth Century Scientific Views of Nature.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Sherburne, George & Bond, Donald F. 1993. *Literary History of England III: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*. London: Routledge.

Smith, G. Gregory (ed.). 1906. *The Spectator Vol. 1*. London: J.M. Dent & co.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1976. 'Translator's Preface.' In Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

States, Bert O. 1996. "Performance as a Metaphor." *Theatre Journal* 48(1): 1-26.

Steele, Richard. 1961. *The Theatre*. Lottis, John (ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Steele, Richard. 1969. "The Preface to *The Conscious Lovers*." In Taylor, W.D. & Trussler, Simon (eds.). *Eighteenth Century Comedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stock, R.D. 1973. *Samuel Johnson and Neoclassical Dramatic Theory*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Strine, M., Long, B.W. & Hopkins, M.F. 1990. "Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities." In Phillips, G. & Wood, J.T. (eds.). *Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the 75th anniversary of The Speech Communication Association*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Styan, J.L. 1987. "The Discipline of Performance Criticism." *SATJ* 1(2):4-19

Styan, J.L. 2000. *Perspectives on Shakespeare in Performance*. New York: Peter Lang.

Taylor, George. 1972. "'A Just Delineation of the Passions': Theories of Acting in the Age of Garrick." In Richards, K. & Thomson, P. (eds*.). The Eighteenth Century English Stage*. London: Methuen.

Toulmin, Stephen. 1990. *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity.* New York: Free Press.

Vanden Heuvel, Michael. 1991. *Performing Drama / Dramatising Performance: Alternative Theater and the Dramatic Text*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Wardle, Irving. 1992. *Theatre Criticism*. London: Routledge.

Wellek, René. 1970. *A History of Modern Criticism: The Later Eighteenth Century*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Wellek, R. 1982. *The Attack on Literature and Other Essays*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Worthen, W.B. 1997. *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.