The Birth Ritual of a New Theatre
Richard Schechner’s *Dionysus in 69* in New York (1968)

Richard Schechner and the Performance Group’s adaptation of *The Bacchae* entitled *Dionysus in 69* premiered in June 1968, the day after Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles. It closed in July 1969 after a total run of 163 performances and one month before the Woodstock Festival, one of the first major events of the hippie movement. Suspended between the manifestations of politically motivated violence and a new youth culture, the production responded to both by placing itself within this new context.

In his essay “The Politics of Ecstasy,” written for an anthology about revolution and completed in March 1968 while the rehearsals of the Performance Group were still under way, Schechner deals with the question of whether and how art, particularly theatre, can contribute to revolutionary changes—especially of a cultural kind. He proceeds from the assumption that “our culture is presently in transition. It is not simply the movement from one base to another, but a process of dislocation and rearticulation” (Schechner 1969: 214). According to Schechner, this state of liminality, as Turner would call it, is caused by the inability of modern societies, particularly in the US, to reconcile individualism with communality, because, as he writes, even “Western art is individualized” (Schechner 1969: 218). Theatre, however, by its very nature as a collective art “can be celebratory, even orgiastic, and communal . . . In its communal forms, theatre is both socially constructive
and personally ‘transcendent’ or ecstatic” (Schechner 1969: 213, 218). However, Western theatre has “emphasized story and character at the expense of dance, spectacle, ritual and communal celebration” (Schechner 1969: 213). If modern theatre in the United States were able to regain these lost qualities, it would be in a position to bring about a cultural revolution, to reconcile individualism and communality. This is what the Performance Group’s adaptation of *The Bacchae* was meant to accomplish:

The event will be dance, an ecstasy, and the audience will perform along with members of the Group. Our Bacchanale will not be completely celebratory: that would not be true to our social context. We hope to explore the ‘politics of ecstasy’, which is so important to many young people today.

(Schechner 1969: 228)

The production remained a work-in-progress throughout its run of over one year, constantly undergoing changes. It was not intended to conjure up Dionysus’ presence in the United States but paid tribute to the fact that he had arrived there already. “Dionysus’ presence,” which could no longer be ignored,

...can be beautiful or ugly or both. It seems quite clear that he is present in today’s America – showing himself in the hippies, in the ‘carnival spirit’ of black insurrectionists, on campuses; and even in disguise, on the patios and in the living-rooms of suburbia. There is a qualitative link between the Orokolo Fire Fight, the Greek chorus, and our own folk-rock discothèques. LSD is contemporary chemistry, but freaking out is ancient. I take this special, ecstatic quality to be essentially theatrical.

(Schechner 1969: 217–218)

Clearly, it is Dionysus, the god of wine – or LSD – of ecstasy, of communality and the theatre, who is being addressed here. Is this the god who is worshipped in the performance and expected to bring about social and individual change in US society? The following passage from a review might suggest such an idea:

Finley is the play’s catalyst. Around Dionysus in his near nudity and pulsating rhythm the frenzy grows. Playing music and dancing both in front of and among the audience, the actors respond to their god, Dionysus. The beat quickens. Some of the audience clap their hands, some get up and dance . . . Everyone worships Finley, even to the extent of a few actresses disrobing until they are nude from the waist up. At this point there are no actors, there is no audience, there are only Orphics.

(DeBroske 1968: 10)
The review seems to suggest the realization of a hippie utopia, i.e., of the god of ecstasy “personally transcendent” and of the worshipping of communality. However, a few paragraphs further down we read:

The climax of this Euripides-Schechner play leaves a horrifying imprint. The final scene, the dismemberment of Pentheus by his own mother and sisters [sic], is carried out with such precision and such emotion that parts of the audience and even one of the players objected.

While the degenerated Bill “Pentheus” Shephard . . . is being chased by the Bacchants, fearful gasps escape from the spectators. One man who had previously danced and revelled in the cult of Dionysus, sprang into the midst of the violence shrieking: “Don’t kill him! Don’t kill him! Animals, you’re all animals!”

(DeBroske 1968: 13)

Here, the “ugly” Dionysus seems to have appeared – the god who encourages the human drive to overpower the opponent with aggressive and brutal acts of violence, invoking their beastly side. What some spectators experienced in this moment might have been the very phenomenon against which Schechner warns at the end of his essay when he writes: “Are we ready for the liberty we have grasped? Can we cope with Dionysus’ dances and not end up – as Agave did – with our sons’ heads on our dancing sticks?” In this scene, the “hidden fear about the new expression . . . that its forms come perilously close to ecstatic fascism” (Schechner 1969: 228) had, at least for some spectators, come true.

In the following, the abundant material on the production will be analyzed with regard to three closely interrelated questions:

1. What kind of cultural revolution did Dionysus in 69 intend to bring about?
2. What artistic means and strategies were employed to create the conditions for this cultural revolution to come about, at least for the duration of the performance?
3. What impact did participating in the performance have on the spectators?

Lastly, I wish to explore how the ambiguity of Dionysus’ “beautiful” and “ugly” presence, of liberating ecstasy and “ecstatic fascism,” worked.

In his essay, Schechner emphasizes that theatre is capable of contributing to a cultural revolution when it becomes communal. Then it will be both “socially constructive and personally ‘transcendent’ or ecstatic” (Schechner 1969: 218). As long as it continues to be individualistic, however, it will even be unable to contribute to the unfolding of an individual’s potential. In his
later writings Schechner elaborates on how people in industrial, individualistic societies lack essential dimensions, which define humanity as such: “Wholeness, process/organic growth, concreteness, religious, transcendental experience” (Schechner 1973: 197). Such dimensions can only be regained by reconciling individualism with communality:

Links must be discovered or forged between industrial societies and non-industrial ones, between individualistic and communal cultures. And a vast reform in the direction of communality – or at least a revision of individualism – is necessary. This reform and revision will leave no aspect of our modern society untouched: not economics, government, social life, personal life, aesthetics, or anything else. Theatre takes a pivotal position in these movements because these movements are histrionic: a way of focusing attention and demanding change. The marches, demonstrations, street and guerrilla theatres, arrests of well-known and unknown people were for show: symbolic gestures.

(Schechner 1973: 197–198)

If theatre is to bring about or at least contribute to such “a vast reform in the direction of communality,” it must “discover” and realize two such “links.” The first is entailed by a turn from “verbal stories” to the “event” (Schechner 1969: 227), from texts by individuals about individuals to performance. In Schechner’s view, the extreme individualism of modern Western societies that robs people of dimensions defining their humanity is closely related to textual culture in general: “Because our tradition is written, it has become a burden. An oral tradition quite naturally takes its shape from the changing culture, which transmits it. A written tradition, however, tends to solidify and becomes reactionary” (Schechner 1969: 227). Schechner was here advocating a performative turn to transform the solid and fixed textual culture of the past into a fluid, ever-changing performative culture of the present and the future, which would provide the missing dimensions. Theatre could contribute to this performative turn when it set out “to treat the text as if it were part of an oral tradition” (Schechner 1969: 227). The fixed text had to be dismembered in order to allow the ever-changing performance to emerge.

The second “link” is provided by the transference or invention of particular ritualistic structures. This is why Schechner describes in detail the ritual of the Fire Fight of the Orokolo and the adoption ritual of the Asmat tribe, the first living in South and the latter in Western New Guinea.

Elaborating that such rituals bring forth communality by reaffirming the community in each repetition, he concludes “that the structure of performance is universal, that differences between ‘ritual’ and ‘theatre’ are of social function, not of performance credibility or repeatability”
(Schechner 1969: 227). If theatre is intended to bring about a reconciliation of individualism and communality, it must adopt a ritualistic form.

These two guidelines did, in fact, serve as the basis for Dionysus in 69 to redefine individualism and to create communities of a special kind, as personal growth and communality are interdependent.

The first guideline – treating “the text as if it were part of an oral tradition” – was realized in a unique way. Schechner felt a close affinity to Jerzy Grotowski’s ideas of the relationship between the textual role and the actor/performer. In Grotowski’s view, the actor cannot serve the purpose of portraying and thus embodying a dramatic character. Rather, he sees the role created by the playwright as a tool: “[the actor] must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon’s scalpel, to dissect himself” (Grotowski 1968: 37). Thus, the relationship between role and actor is reversed. The role serves as a tool to help the actor “grow,” to restore “wholeness” and, thus, to be transformed. “It is a serious and solemn act of revelation – it is like a step towards the summit of the actor’s organism in which consciousness and instinct are united” (Grotowski 1968: 210).

In line with Grotowski’s thinking, Schechner rejected the tacit assumption underlying realistic psychological acting, i.e., that the actor has to represent the role and, in this sense, embody it. “Rather, there is the role and the person of the performer; both role and performer are plainly perceivable by the spectator. The feelings are those of the performer as stimulated by the actions of the role at the moment of performance” (Schechner 1973: 166). This distinction does not allude to the Brechtian alienation effect. In contrast also to Grotowski’s ideas, the performers should instead use the role in order to incorporate their own, wholly personal, problems and feelings into the acting. One of the performers described the process as follows:

I am not interested in acting. I am involved in the life process of becoming whole. I do many technical exercises, which organically suit that process. They act as a catalyst for my ability to let essence flow, to let my soul speak through my mind and body . . . I am acting out my disease, the disease that plagues my inner being, that stops the flow . . . Dionysus is not a play to me. I do not act in Dionysus. Dionysus is my ritual.

(Schechner 1970: n.p.)

Here, performing meant undergoing a rite of passage that might lead to a new individual identity which could encompass all the dimensions Schechner listed as lacking in people living in industrial societies. In order to make this happen, the text had to be dismembered. Of the over 1,300 lines in Arrowsmith’s translation of The Bacchae only 600 were used, some more than once. Sixteen lines from Elizabeth Wyoff’s translation of Antigone as well as six lines from David Grene’s translation of Hippolytus were included.
The rest of the text – i.e., most of it – was written by the performers, either at home or in workshops. The focus was on the performers’ individuality, their personal problems and expression, in order to enable the release of personal energy.

One might ask why, then, was it necessary to refer to a given text at all, especially one so far removed as an ancient Greek tragedy? Why not just use one’s own texts? In his essay Schechner emphasizes that the theatre of fifth century BCE Athens – as was the case later with medieval theatre – was “community expression. We understand now that nothing the Greeks did in their arts was separate from the fabric of city life” (Schechner 1969: 219). This came close to Schechner’s ideal of communal theatre. Moreover, following in the footsteps of the Cambridge Ritualists, the classics scholars of the 1960s were discovering and elaborating the ritual structure of Greek tragedy, in particular of The Bacchae. Ritualistic structures were needed in order to channel the enactment of personal problems and emotions should individualism and communality ever be reconciled.

On the other hand, long before staging the production, Schechner had expressed his fascination with The Bacchae. In his reading of the tragedy he comes to the following conclusion: “The analogues between the situation in The Bacchae and our own times are obvious” (Schechner 1967: 107). All members of the Performance Group responded to the tragedy more or less in the same way, as Shephard reports:

When we first read The Bacchae together out loud, we were amazed how well it suited the Group. To begin with, the basic themes of the play – violence, madness, ecstasy, challenge of authority, moral choice – were all issues of great concern in American society at the time, and they seemed particularly suited to the Group’s extremely physical, impulse oriented way of working. Moreover, the basic conflict in the play (in Nietzschean terms, the Appollonian / Dionysian conflict) seemed remarkably similar to the Group dynamic which fluctuated between precision and order on one hand and impulsive abandon on the other. In both, the play and the structure of the Group, the dramatic tension between social order and anarchy, discipline and impulse, created a highly charged atmosphere of social instability poised between change into a new society and self-destruction.

(Shephard 1991: 52)

As Schechner did in his essays from 1967/1968, so Shephard emphasizes the Dionysian ambiguity which, on the one hand, bears the potential to create a new society while, on the other, can lead to self-destruction. As such, the text of The Bacchae was not perceived as being historically so far removed that a huge distance had to be overcome or bridged. Rather, it could easily be appropriated and adapted. In fact, it seemed to set free and channel personal as well as social energy.
In order to allow the performers not only to incorporate their own issues and emotions into the text but also to mark them as their own, they introduced themselves to the audience by using their proper names. As William Finley had done in the passage quoted in the introduction to this book, so did all the others. When Jason Bosseau took over the part of Dionysus, his first words were:

My name is Jason Bosseau. I am the son of Damar Bosseau and Jessie Bartoletti. I was born twenty-seven years ago in a small boring, typical Midwestern town in south eastern Kansas called Pittsburgh... I’ve come here tonight for three very important reasons. Number one is to announce my divinity. I mean: I am a god. Number two is to establish my rites and rituals... And number three is to be born – in this, my birth ritual, if you’ll excuse me.

(Schechner 1970)

Although the performers wrote their own dialogues, there was a formal pattern underlying the creation of the text. While those taking over the part of Dionysus were free to work with their own texts right from the beginning and, over the course of the performance, moved closer and closer to Arrowsmith’s translation, Pentheus had to stick to it from the start until the scene in which he is seduced/threatened by Dionysus. From then on he was allowed to speak his own lines. In both cases, the relationship between the performer and his role changed over time, allowing for ever-new identity factors to emerge or to disappear.

During the performance the performers called each other by their proper names as well as by the names of the dramatic figures they portrayed. This brought about a particular shift in their identities. The audience no longer perceived the people on stage as the actors perhaps familiar to them from before, nor could they see them as the dramatic characters alone. They had adopted another identity through the process of performing – an in-between identity that was neither clearly one nor the other. It had elements from both. It came into being by permanently crisscrossing the boundaries between the person and the dramatic character without ever completely identifying one with the other, but leaving them blurred. In addition, the performers exchanged parts over the thirteen-month run of the production, thus also swapping their in-between identities. The transformations they underwent during this time did not proceed in a linear fashion from identity A to identity B, as would have been the case in a traditional rite of passage. Rather, it was a permanent process of being transformed from one in-between identity into another. The in-between identity that emerged and disappeared in a continuous loop was the result of the performative acts carried out over the course of the performance, which suspended the actors in a liminal state and rendered the idea of the individual’s stable, fixed identity and that of a
definite, unambiguous text obsolete. This could potentially lead to an identity that would be individual as well as communal, thus providing the prerequisite, the *conditio sine qua non*, for a new society. However, it could just as well end up in the total loss of any kind of individual identity and pave the way for self-destruction and “ecstatic fascism.”

The second guideline, the realization of given ritualistic structures – those of the play and the inclusion of certain rituals derived from other cultures, e.g., from the Asmat tribe – was applied in order to bring about a sense of communality while also minimizing the risk of self-destruction and ecstatic fascism.

The performance as a whole was structured according to the three phases of a rite of passage as elaborated by van Gennep, thus indicating that some kind of a transformation was going to take place. The first phase, determining a separation, was realized in such a way that each spectator had to enter the performance space individually. One of the performers announced to the waiting crowd:

Ladies and gentlemen! May I have your attention, please. We are going to start letting you in now. You will be admitted to the theatre one at a time, and if you’re with someone you may be split up. But you can find each other again once you’re inside. Take your time to explore the environment. It’s a very interesting space, and there are all different kinds of places you can sit. We recommend going up high on the towers and platforms, or down underneath them.

(Schechner 1970)

The performance itself can be regarded as the liminal or transformational phase. It was structured by a sequence of rituals and ritualized events that, later on, will be analyzed more closely.

The incorporation phase began when the doors of the Performance Garage opened and the performers began to march out into the streets, often followed by a large number of spectators. Were all of those participating in the incorporation phase actually transformed during the liminal or transformational phase, so that they had to be accepted by and incorporated into society with their new identities? And, if so, what kind of transformation did they undergo?

The most important rituals, in which the performers and some of the spectators were involved, were the birth ritual of Dionysus in the beginning (which corresponded to the death ritual Pentheus underwent in the end); the so-called Dionysus Game which replaced the scene after Dionysus was arrested by Pentheus’ guards, when the king’s palace collapsed because of an earthquake; and the “Total Caress,” which took place towards the end of the play (and after Pentheus and Dionysus had left the scene for a homoerotic
encounter inside the palace). All these rituals were meant to establish a community or strengthen the sense of communality either among the members of the Group only or among all participants, including the spectators.

Although not in agreement with David Cooper’s overall description of communes (Cooper 1970: 44–45), Schechner uses his definition of communal groups as “a viable dialectic between solitude and being with others” (Cooper 1970: 44). This definition may serve us as a yardstick for trying to assess whether communities were established and whether communality was actually celebrated over the course of the performance.

Among the rituals mentioned above the only one clearly involving only members of the Group was the Dionysus Game:

We turned to exercises from the workshop. We had been playing an encounter game in which one performer challenges another. A question or statement is made which, according to the rule of the exercise, must ‘cost something’. An answer is given which is equally revealing and difficult. And so on, until every one has contributed at least once...After every one in the group had participated in the encounter, people could turn on Shephard, who was playing Pentheus at this time. Shephard had to answer the questions, but could not ask any. The game continued until Shephard’s opacity was sufficiently pierced so that he could not respond to the question. Then he said, ‘This is mortifying’, and the game was over. Once the questioning went on for more than an hour.

(Schechner 1970)

At first glance, it may seem that the conditions were the same for all the participants. The question-and-answer game challenged everybody taking part in it equally, for it must always “cost something.” Each member of the group became vulnerable. Secondly, it was officially declared a game, which meant that whoever was intended as the victim, so to speak, only took over that role for the duration of the game. Thirdly, the game was part of a fictitious story. The chosen victim played the role of Pentheus, the ruler and man of law and order who brutally suppressed the others. In this scenario the game oscillated and blurred the boundaries between the social reality of the Group, the reality of the game, and the fictitious reality of the play. Everyone involved in the game permanently transgressed the boundaries between different realities and found themselves poised in between.

However, this in-betweenness did allow for varied perceptions regarding individual participants. While most members might have focused their attention on the ludic aspect or the storyline of the play, Bill Shephard experienced it as something like Girard’s ur-scene: a victim is identified in order to be expelled from the community (of the Group) and sacrificed. Despite the rule that everyone at least once take on the role of the victim,
Shephard–Pentheus experienced the situation as a kind of exclusion from the Group. More than twenty years later, he still states:

I believe that I was the only person in the Group . . . who had misgivings about the performance strategy we had adopted . . . I began to feel more and more separated from the rest of the Group in my role as Pentheus.

(Shephard 1991: 114, 116)

In this sense, Shephard/Pentheus was “sacrificed” for the sake of the rest of the Group so that they could see themselves and act as a community. Even here, the ambiguity of the performance strategy comes to the fore.

This experience might have prompted Shephard to change his role (Shephard 1991: 181). The critic Stefan Brecht, who went to see the production several times in the spring of 1968, the fall of 1968, and in the winter of 1968/69, writes about a change he witnessed in the fall:

The story of Pentheus has become central to the production. Bill Shephard from being no actor has become a good one; his experiences over the summer led him to reject his initial authoritarian interpretation of Pentheus. He now starts out playing him as a reasonable, responsible, mildly conservative ruler. His counsellors Cadmus & Teiresias have become strident rebels. This sets Pentheus as a juvenile victim. Thus, the play has become apolitical. The theme of resistance to authority has been dropped. (Brecht 1969: 166)

This change seems also to have affected the Dionysus Game, turning it from a kind of sacrificial ritual into a playful game.

All the other ritualistic structures were meant as opportunities for the performers and spectators to experience themselves as members of a community and to celebrate communality. Of great importance was the birth ritual as the beginning of the performance. It was modeled after the adoption ritual of the Asmat people of New Guinea, which Schechner describes at some length in his essay “The Politics of Ecstasy.” Its main features were kept. Five men lay side by side on the floor, while four women stood over them with splayed legs, leaning forward slightly so that their bodies formed a tunnel representing the birth canal.

At the beginning of the performance, the performer playing Dionysus was reborn as a god – he was pushed through the “birth canal” by the rhythmic gyrations of the men. As Shephard reports, the birth ritual was essential “not only in our work but also in our collective existence because it gave us the opportunity of experiencing and expressing our common bonds in non-rational symbolic forms.” Shephard states that because of the “highly charged libidinal bonds between members of the group . . . the birth ritual became a symbolic expression of the Group dynamic” (Shephard 1991: 88).
In May 1968 a critic wrote about the Group’s performances of the birth ritual and the opening speeches of Finley/Dionysus and of Shephard/Pentheus at a festival of short theatre pieces in New York:

Schechner’s ritual is perhaps more Greek than tribal in inspiration, and more erotic than natal. But that is really beside the point, for Schechner . . . is primarily concerned with breaking down the barriers between art and life, symbol and event, through the techniques of environmental theatre, confrontation and ritual . . . The reality of the moment is living flesh touching living flesh as a deeply felt experience, quite apart from the symbol. Community is thus experienced and affirmed, though at what level of consciousness is uncertain. The actors, and perhaps the audience, are liberated, but of what? If we do not know the answer, can we say there has been a liberation?

(Velde 1968)

According to the review, the “cultural revolution” brought about here was, in fact, the “revolution in the flesh” (Schechner 1969: 219) which
Schechner advocated and celebrated so passionately in his quoted essay. The critic also establishes that “community is experienced and affirmed” in the birth ritual. However, the question of liberation remains open for him – not only with regard to the spectators but also concerning the performers.

In the performance, the birth ritual was followed by a dance. The spectators were expressly asked to join in:

You shall have an extraordinary experience tonight. Something you won’t forget. Together we can make one community. We can celebrate together. Reach ecstasy together. So join us in what we do next. It’s a circle dance around the sacred spot of my birth. It’s a celebration of me, of my nativity.

(Joan MacIntosh as Dionysus in Schechner 1970)

In order to allow, indeed enable and encourage, the audience to participate, the space of the Performance Garage was designed so that all divisions between the stage and the auditorium were abolished. This turned the whole theatre into a performance space – into an “environment.” The spectators could choose their own spots to sit – high up on a tower, at a relative distance on the scaffolding surrounding the walls, or close to the action on the carpeted floor, either near the center or hiding behind the scaffolding. All these places could be and were used by the performers as well. The audience could change their seats during the two-hour performance, which always also meant a shift in perspective and in the relationship to the performers and the other spectators. It was up to the individual spectator, for example, whether to join the circle dance or other actions.

In Brian de Palma’s film version of this production, the dance scene, accompanied by live music played by members of the Group, takes more than ten minutes. Many spectators join in – performers and spectators alike disrobe until they are dancing naked. This kind of audience participation was new and uncommon at the time. According to Schechner and the Group, enabling the spectators to carry out the same actions alongside the performers would be conducive to letting a community emerge out of actors and spectators, which could be defined as a “viable dialectic between solitude and being with others.” It was for this reason that audience participation was encouraged. According to Schechner, it was dependent on two conditions:

First, participation occurred at those points where the play stopped being a play and became a social event – when spectators felt that they were free to enter the performance as equals . . . The second point is that most of the participation in Dionysus was according to the democratic model: letting people into the play to do as the performers were doing, to ‘join the story’.

(Schechner 1973: 44)
This would at least answer the question of liberation with regard to the spectators: they were free “to do as the performers were doing.” Judging by the film version, it seems that for the Group and for at least a few members of the audience a kind of community as described by Schechner did come into being. However, this performative opportunity was not seen as a liberation by everybody, and several critics took up the issue. Walter Kerr in his \textit{New York Times} review, for instance, objected that

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it is only the actors who are liberated in this sort of meeting, and there is something arrogant, condescending, and self-indulgent about that. Clearly, they enjoy the unleashing of their own inhibitions. During an impromptu aside on the opening night, an actress was asked by another how she felt about dancing on the night of Senator Kennedy’s death. She thought intensely for a moment, then answered, ‘I have to. It’s my statement.’ But it is her statement, not ours. She and her colleagues are in control of the master plan. They are free to do what they wish to do. We are only free to do what they wish us to do or invite us to do. That is not engagement. It is surrender. I’m still uptight.
\end{quote}

(Kerr 1968)

He was not the only one who felt manipulated. While Kerr blamed the performers, Stefan Brecht directed his critique at Schechner. He saw his \textit{mise en scène} as

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a staging of the whole theatrical event, the reactions or rather predicaments of the audience included. He has directed the Group with view to controlling the audience . . . The audience can only be responsive & that only feebly & making a fool of itself. No stimuli for audience initiative, no opportunities for creative participation or spontaneous interference.
\end{quote}

(Brecht 1969: 162)

By the fall performance, however, Brecht appreciated that “the hold of the show has increased considerably,” but he was still unable to see any participatory or even liberating effect with reference to the spectators. The performers themselves would

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destroy the illusion of participation they create. Presupposed: the willingness of an American audience to actively cooperate in producing an appearance of participation. This willingness to take co-managerial status is indispensable to the democratic process & corporate economy of this country. The production’s calling on them is not fascist but simply modern America.
\end{quote}

(Brecht 1969: 164)

Thus, Brecht concludes: “The only free reaction & thus the only genuine participation possible is a gesture of refusal to participate. If genuine
audience participation is excluded, is a liberation effect possible?” (Brecht 1969: 164).

Another ritual segment which called for audience participation was the so-called Total Caress. It was meant as a substitute for the peaceful unification of the women of Thebes with nature as reported by the messenger (v. 696–712). While the chorus began to sing “When shall I dance once more with bare feet all night dances/tossing my head for joy in the damp air, in the dew?” (v. 862–5), the performers moved slowly into the audience, sometimes individually, mostly in groups of two, three, or four. They were supposed to select audience members at random, avoiding anyone they knew, selecting strangers who seemed responsive.

The caress began with touching, erotic but not passionate... It is an exquisitely polymorphous experience, full of smells and difficult sensations. But soon resistances fell away, a basic animal-comfort trust arises, and one flows with the touching. (Schechner 1970)

The spectators’ reactions varied strongly. Some, mostly female, simply put up with it. Most, if not all, men reciprocated the caresses and extended them to body parts which the performers had deliberately avoided. These spectators ignored the implicit rules that aimed at a playful “dialogue” and redefined them as a real situation of intimacy beyond the pretense of “play.” The performers, for their part, understood the breakdown of rules as an indecent infringement and an unseemly definition of the situation, which degraded them to objects of lust.

In his fall 1968 review, Stefan Brecht characterized this scene as a “sex show”:

The lovemaking is now intimate & passionate, muscular and to the point. Except for Finley–Dionysus’ seduction of Shephard–Pentheus, it is neither tender nor personal... The choreography of these anonymous couplings suggests the impersonality of street prostitution... The play... has become a simulated enactment/glorification of erotic passion... telling the spectator to free himself “as a person” by fucking – fucking freely... The spectators, of course, are unfree and fuck unfreely. (Brecht 1969: 163–164)

In November 1968 Grotowski attended the performance. His criticism centered mainly on two points. The first concerned the acting, which he deemed hysterical. He felt that it confused the touching of skin with psychic contact. The second referred to the costumes. In his view, the red chitons and black underpants of the women and the black jockstraps of the men smacked too much of striptease. He suggested either performing naked as “a sacred
act” or letting the nakedness be revealed through everyday clothes. A few days later Schechner decided that the performers would do sections of the performance naked. This, however, only led to more problems with the Total Caress scene, as the female performers felt prostituted. In December it was decided to take it out and to replace it with the so-called moiety dance.

On the one hand, the critics complained that the spectators were not “free,” that they could only take part in certain actions at the performers’ invitation or behest. On the other hand, the performers complained that the spectators did not respond to them according to their rules and instead abused the situation by imposing their own ideas of “liberation” on them. Both parties blamed the other for robbing them of their freedom and self-determination. The concept of freedom underlying and nurturing the perception of the situation as well as the problems connected to it are closely related to the dichotomy between the idea of an autonomous subject and that of a subject determined by others. Both parties overlooked that within a performance or any other kind of communal gathering as well as in society as a whole the idea of an autonomous subject is delusive. Our actions in such situations are always co-determined by others just as they co-determine the actions and the behavior of others. Therefore, it is not so much the question of “a viable dialectic between solitude and being with others” but rather of a viable dialectic between co-determining the actions and the behavior of others and letting one’s own actions and behavior be co-determined by others (Seel 2002a; 2002b).

A performance is never constituted by one person alone and always requires at least one member of each group – performers and spectators – to be present. The performance comes into being out of their encounter and interaction – whatever its nature may be (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 38–74). The audience always participates in one form or another. This new and explicit kind of audience participation developed in the 1960s, however, shifted the focus to the fact that in a performance they have to negotiate their relationship, which indicates that the rules cannot be set up by one party alone. When Schechner and his performers set out to “liberate” the spectators from the tired theatrical conventions which seemed to offer certain possibilities of behavior and action while excluding many others (even though theatre scandals demonstrate that spectators were always also “free” to break these rules), they went no further than simply to replace one set of rules by another. Ultimately, the spectators were expected to follow and so it comes as no surprise that they tried to set up their own rules whenever the opportunity presented itself.

At least some spectators experienced the performers’ effort to “liberate” them as manipulation, which reduced them to objects. On the other hand, the reifying attempts by some spectators – for instance, during the Total Caress – to “liberate” themselves and live out their sexual drive made the
performers feel degraded as objects of lust. In both cases the so-called liberation meant exerting power over others against their own will. There was no balance between co-determining the actions and the behavior of others and letting one’s own actions and behavior be co-determined by others. What was proclaimed as liberation was, in many cases, experienced as violence – as was the liberation through Dionysus by the women of Thebes.

This violence was openly acted out in the killing of Pentheus. It was performed as a mob action, as later described by Girard. After the Caress, Dionysus and Pentheus reappeared from the pit and Dionysus pulled the two Agaves – played by Joan MacIntosh and Ciel Smith during the first months – from the body piles formed in the preceding scene and handed Pentheus over to them: “Agave! Joan! Ciel! There’s a boy in the woods. A young boy. I’ve marked him for you. I want you to find him, and caress him and kiss him, and love him, and kill him for me!” (quoted from Shephard 1991: 127). When the tender caresses turned into clawing and biting, Pentheus broke away and the chase began. It was spread out all over the entire space and involved loud screaming, biting, and scratching. As Schechner reports, the women learnt to make their “bodies into those of animals, especially big cats” for the “animal chase.” This had the effect that “pandemonium filled the room, with screams of the audience joining our own” (Schechner 1970). Finally, Pentheus was tracked down and mortally wounded by being gouged in the gut.

Now the death ritual began. The dismemberment of Pentheus was performed in slow motion as a reversal of the birth ritual. Before assembling in the ritual formation, the women dipped their hands and forearms into a marble basin filled with stage blood, so that everyone in the formation became smeared with “blood.” There were other small changes – during the scene the women held up their bloodstained hands, this time facing the opposite direction so that they could see Pentheus as he entered the death canal. In this manner, Pentheus was symbolically swallowed by the community that, as an individual, he had tried to dominate.

The death ritual thus accomplished several different goals simultaneously. On the one hand, by closely mimicking the birth ritual and thus allowing for very similar physiological, affective, motoric, and energetic experiences, it affirmed the communal nature of the Performance Group, including Shephard. On the other hand, it performed the sacrifice of Pentheus not as an expulsion from and dismemberment of the community, but as a symbolic act of incorporation as he physically became one with the community he had terrorized. It could be said, then, that the Performance Group was not confirmed as a community through the sacrifice but by performing particular bodily actions together and by sharing the same experiences. The sacrifice was of a theatrical nature – it was a symbolic gesture.
However, such a conclusion does not do justice to the cruelty with which the scene was performed. Because of it, Brecht interpreted the vicious hunting and the death ritual according to the model later elaborated by Girard:

An intruder is killed, a man is dealt with as an animal, there is gang action, blind passion. Crime in the streets, riot, lynch justice, the slaying of lovers in boiler rooms, the stabbing of a pusher, ghetto pogroms – all that’s as American as cherry pie.

(Brecht 1969: 161)

However, the scene did not end with Pentheus’ death. After killing him, the women attacked all the men in the formation and slew them, too.

The staging & acting hardly prepares us for this: the slaying is a shocking surprise & as allegory a puzzle. In any case, a passionate visceral a- & anti-social (though intensely communal) violence is shown & though the spectators are supposed to empathize they are not to sympathize with the maenads.

(Brecht 1969: 161)

In my view, this scene enacted the “ecstatic fascism” of the followers of Dionysus, i.e., the women, and was directed at all those who did not belong to their group, i.e., the men in the formation. Here, the performance made a political statement. During the following recognition scene between Cadmus and the Agaves, Dionysus/Finley wiped the blood from his hands, combed his hair, and dressed in a blue suit and tie. He carried a red, white, and blue bag filled with Dionysus in 69 buttons. Delivering his curse from the top of one of the towers, he threw the buttons down to the spectators, many of whom scrambled to get one. As the performance was taking place during the pre-presidential elections of 1968, the curse clearly alluded to the ongoing election speeches. Even if he brought the members of the Group on the mats below him back to life and onto their feet by calling their names (Shephard 1991: 129), the curse could clearly be identified as a “Dionysus for President” campaign. This was highlighted when Finley opened the doors of the Performance Garage to reveal a poster with his picture on it. Thus, Dionysus, who was responsible for the slaying of all those who did not “believe” in him through his own hysterical followers, was revealed as a tyrant and fascist. In this context, the slaying of the men, which happened without any preparation or warning, made perfect sense, intimating the Group’s anticipation of fascism taking over in the United States.

According to Brecht, however, the end had become “meaningless, but humorous” in the fall. Dionysus’ “jolly speech to the audience” and his scattering of the campaign buttons now “suggests only that platform: ‘let’s
make this country free – sexually’” (Brecht 1969: 163). In the fall performance Brecht identifies the theme of gynophobia in the slaying “as this production’s latent content.”

The theme of gynophobia is carried by the slaying. Though the love-making has now become passionate rather than gentle, the transformation of passionate caresses into castrating gestures of dismemberment is a purely visual device. The scene does not so much project the wildness of women as the fear of the victims . . . we respond to it but weakly. Weakly, because mise-en-scène & acting, being hopelessly concerned with making the women seem predatory, fail to compel either a dominant mood of terror or an evolution of mood from passion to terror.

(Brecht 1969: 165)

The production, Brecht claims, thus also lost its political meaning and relevance over the course of its thirteen-month run: “The Group transformed what had turned out a manual for (hip) civil disobedience into a sex manual: a retreat from politics into the personal. But personal life is also a place of fear & violence – particularly for those fleeing to it from the aggressions of institutional repression (parental, economic or political).” Moreover, he accuses the Group of “a desperate thrashing about in search of authenticity that the Group so far has denied itself, settling instead for a socially & commercially successful appealingness” (Brecht 1969: 168).

Brecht’s review and, if to a lesser degree and only implicitly, the history of the production’s run as told and interpreted by Shephard, allow for the conclusion that the changes which it underwent over the thirteen months were essential. They not only concern details but also its overall meaning and impact. The initial goal had been to reflect on and trigger a cultural revolution that would reconcile individualism and communalism. Such a reconciliation was to be realized by liberating the individual participants, performers and spectators alike, from all kinds of institutional repression, in particular those inherent in politics and in society at large, and by allowing them to experience themselves as members of a community, especially through states of ecstasy. This was to be made possible mostly through audience participation. As a number of reviews suggest, this goal was not achieved, mainly because spectators did not feel liberated but manipulated, even repressed, by the “demand” for a specific kind of participation. With regard to the ambiguity of Dionysus’ ecstasy as communal ecstasy, the possibility of turning it into ecstatic fascism was enacted in the killing of Pentheus and the men. With the changes in Pentheus, the determination to challenge political authority disappeared over the course of the production’s run; moreover, the reflection on fascism as an imminent threat was reduced to the acting out of gynophobic fantasies comparable to that of the
vagina dentata. Initially a critically refined production, Dionysus in 69 ended up as a pleasing and entertaining performance that was socially and commercially successful. The cultural revolution it proclaimed and to which it wanted to contribute turned out to be a sexual revolution only, epitomized in the invitation, the mandate even, “to fuck freely.”

While there are other views on the production, mostly by critics and other spectators who participated in the early performances, all agree on the ambiguity of the performance itself. It allowed everyone, actors and spectators alike, to attribute meaning to their individual experiences. It is almost impossible to assess now whether or not the performance contributed to a cultural revolution and, if so, what kind of a cultural revolution this was. However, when it comes to the question of the historical significance of Dionysus in 69, we are in a better position to determine that it considerably contributed to, indeed initiated, a theatrical revolution. Dionysus in 69 is a landmark in the establishment of US neo-avant-garde theatre.

It may seem strange that an adaptation of The Bacchae – Euripides’ last tragedy which, in a way, marked the end of the Greek polis and thus of Athenian democracy, and, as a tragedy on tragedy, also marked the end of Greek tragic theatre – also indicated the spread, if not the beginning, of a new theatre in the United States. With theatre always embedded in society in many different ways, the production also heralded the beginning of a new era in US society. The Performance Group was by no means the first experimental theatre group in the United States. Apart from happenings, dance groups such as Merce Cunningham’s, or John Cage’s pioneering music performances from the 1950s, there were experimental theatre groups such as the Living Theatre, founded in 1947 by Julian Beck and Judith Malina. However, after their arrest in 1965, they performed mostly in Europe. Key productions such as Antigone (Krefeld, Germany 1967) or Paradise Now! (Festival d’Avignon, France 1968) aimed at a “transformation of the demonic forces into the celestial” (program notes to Paradise Now! quoted in Innes 1981: 187) by a particular use of ritualistic group actions, nudity, and audience participation.

Nonetheless, the Performance Group and, in particular, Dionysus in 69 stand out in the landscape of the US avant-garde movements. Its impact on the collective memory was stronger and lasted longer because of its long run, the fact that it was shown not only in New York but also in other parts of the country (where it caused an even greater sensation – in Ann Arbor in January 1969, the Group was arrested and put into prison for a night on the charge of “corrupting the morals of the good people of the State of Michigan” (Shephard 1991: 201)) and, not least, because of its excellent documentation. Through this production a broader public was made aware of a new era in US theatre that seriously questioned its accepted “essential” characteristics: the rigid spatial division between actors and spectators, precluding any
physical contact; the primacy of the dramatic text that was regarded as the controlling instance and authority; the body of the actor as a sign for a single dramatic figure – as a semiotic body. Instead, here was an environment which was shared by actors and spectators and allowed for audience participation, perhaps even for a temporary community between actors and spectators; the text was merely a tool to be used by the actors in order to fulfill specific tasks; the phenomenal bodies of the performers – in particular, their naked bodies – emanated an energy; they had to be touched and experienced, not interpreted.

While performances of traditional theatre had until that point always been regarded primarily as works of art that had to be analyzed with regard to the particular meanings they conveyed, avant-garde performances were seen as aesthetic and, at the same time, social processes that had an impact on the spectators and bore the potential to transform them, even if not for the entire duration of the performance but only temporarily. Theatre turned into a site where communality was not represented but negotiated and new forms of community building were tried out. In Dionysus in 69 Dionysus, the god of theatre, performed the dismemberment of the theatre in its old, traditional form so that it could be reborn in a new shape and function.

Notes

1. The performances, which I did not see myself, are very well documented. Besides the reviews and Schechner’s (1973) long deliberations, see also Schechner (1970: n.p. – approx. 350 pages and many photographs), as well as the film by Brian de Palma, available on video. The film was made from the recording of two different performances appearing on a split screen, so that the differences between the two stand out quite clearly. Bill (W. H.) Shephard, who played Pentheus most of the time, wrote his Ph.D. dissertation (Shephard 1991) on the performance. See also Puchner (2006); Van den Heuvel (2006); and Zeitlin (2004).


References


**Further Reading**
