

# 15

## PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY

### A Brief History and Some Advice

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The term *performance* entered art critical and academic discourses in the 1970s, to name a new visual art form and to distinguish dramatic scripts from particular productions of them—that is, from performances on stage.<sup>1</sup> Similar terms were *events* and *happenings* in the 1950s and 1960s and *body art* and *experimental theater* in the 1970s and 1980s. Conventional histories locate the roots of performances, events, happenings, body art, and experimental theater in the futurist, dadaist, and surrealist movements of the early 20th century. Here, in excerpts from two such histories, are an overview and brief descriptions of those movements.

#### *Overview*

Members of the historic avant-garde movement throughout Europe (ca. 1900-1935) wanted to

propose an “other” theatre, different in every way from what had gone before: a theatre freed from the chains of literature, constituted as an autonomous art form; a theatre which did not imitate a reality which actually existed, but which created its own reality; a theatre which nullified the radical split between stage and spectator and which developed new forms of communication between them, so that the chasm between art (theatre) and life, so typical and characteristic of bourgeois society, might be bridged. (Fischer-Lichte, 1997, p. 115)

#### *Futurism*

The launching of futurism in 1909 was a typical example, with a manifesto by Filippo Marinetti in . . . *Le Figaro*. Futurism is in fact rather better known for its manifestos than for its actual artistic achievements, but both contributed importantly to the performance tradition of this century. The interest of the futurists in movement and change drew them away from the static work of art and provided an important impetus

for the general shift in modern artistic interest from product to process, turning even painters and sculptors into performance artists. (Carlson, 1996, p. 89)

### Dadaism

[From the] founding of the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 in Zurich . . . [all] dadaist activities were directed at the spectator. While at first they only aimed to "épater le bourgeois," these ventures occurred increasingly in the form of an organized assault on the audience, a "strategy of revolt" . . . aimed at challenging and reexamining the purely passive attitude of expectation and customary practices of spectator reception. In this way, they attempted to dissolve the discrepancies between art and society for the duration of the performance. (Fischer-Lichte, 1997, pp. 267-268)

### Surrealism

Perhaps the most important contribution of the surrealist movement to subsequent experimental theater and performance was the theoretical writing of Antonin Artaud, which exerted an enormous influence in the 1960s and 1970s. In his visionary *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud advanced his own powerful version of the argument found throughout the early twentieth-century avant-garde that the traditional theatre had lost contact with the deeper and more significant realms of human life by its emphasis on plot, language, and intellectual and psychological concerns. The subjugation of the theatre to the written text must be ended, to be replaced by a spectacle of "direct" and "objective" action: "cries, groans, apparitions, surprises, theatricalities of all kinds, magic beauty of costumes taken from certain ritual models; resplendent lighting, incantational beauty of voices, the charms of harmony, rare notes of music, colors of objects, physical rhythm of movements . . . masks, effigies yards high, sudden changes of light." (Carlson, 1996, pp. 91-92)

### ◆ Events

An *Untitled Event* produced in 1952 at Black Mountain College in North Carolina by composer John Cage, dancer Merce Cunningham, painter Robert Rauschenberg, and others "has

often been cited as the model for the wave of happenings and related performance events that swept the art world in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In many respects, this event recapitulated many of the motifs and practices of earlier avant-gardes," according to one historian (Carlson, 1996, p. 95). In *Untitled Event*, performances, "each timed to the second, took place in and around an arena audience" (Carlson, 1996, p. 95):

Each performer was given a "score" which consisted purely of "time brackets" to indicate moments of action, inaction, and silence that each individual performer was expected to fill. . . . Cage, in a black suit and tie, stood on a stepladder and read a text on "the relation of music to Zen Buddhism" and excerpts from Meister Eckhart. Later he performed a "composition with a radio." At the same time, Rauschenberg played old records on a wind-up gramophone with a trumpet while a dog sat beside it listening, and David Tudor played a "prepared piano." A little later, Tudor started to pour water from one bucket to another. . . . Cunningham and others danced through the aisles chased by the dog. . . . Rauschenberg projected abstract slides (created by colored gelatin sandwiched between the glass) and clips of film onto [his "white paintings"] on the ceiling; the film clips showed first the school cook and then, as they gradually moved from the ceiling down the walls, the setting sun. (Fischer-Lichte, 1997, pp. 233-234)

### ◆ Happenings

In the late 1950s, Allan Kaprow invented "happenings," and this label was applied to all sorts of experimental performances in the 1960s.

A key event in the history of modern performance was the presentation in 1959 of Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* at the Reuben Gallery [in New York City]. This first public demonstration established the "happening" for public and press as a major new avant-garde activity, so much so that a wide range of performance work during the following years was characterized as "happenings," even when many creators of such events specifically denied the term. Audiences at Kaprow's happening were seated in three different rooms where they witnessed six fragmented events, performed simul-

taneously in all three spaces. The events included slides, playing of musical instruments, posed scenes, the reading of fragmentary notes from placards, and artists painting canvas walls. (Carlson, 1996, pp. 95-96)

### ◆ *Body Art and Experimental Theater*

In the 1970s and 1980s, visual and theater artists developed two different forms of "performance art": the "body art" of Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, and other visual artists; and the "elaborate spectacles not based on the body or the psyche of the individual artist but devoted to the display of nonliterary aural and visual images, often involving spectacle, technology, and mixed media" (Carlson, 1996, pp. 104-105; see also Sayre, 1995) of Laurie Anderson, Lee Bruer, Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, and, later, Spalding Gray, Bill Irwin, and other theatrical storytellers, jugglers, and clowns.

According to Amelia Jones (1998), the "body art" of the 1960s and 1970s was a "set of performative practices" that used "passionate and convulsive relationships (often explicitly sexual)" with audiences (whether physically present or viewing documentary photographs, films, videos and other texts), to "instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism" (p. 1). Furthermore, and not incidentally, because it was "dramatically intersubjective," body art undercut the "masculinist and racist ideology of individualism shoring up modernist formalism" in art criticism (p. 3). For example:

*Interior Scroll* [was] originally performed in 1975. . . . Her face and body covered in strokes of paint, [Carolee] Schneemann pulled a long, thin coil of paper from her vagina ("like a ticker tape . . . plumb line . . . the umbilicus and tongue"), unrolling it to read a narrative text to the audience. Part of this text read as follows: "I met a happy man, a structuralist filmmaker . . . he said we are fond of you/ you are charming/ but don't ask us/ to look at your films/. . . we cannot look at/ the personal clutter/ the persis-

*tence of feelings/ the hand-touch sensibility."* (Jones, 1998, p. 3)

In *Transference Zone* (1972), [Vito] Acconci locked himself in a room with a group of photographs and objects owned by seven significant people in his life. One at a time, he let in visitors who knocked on the door, transferring his feelings about these "prime" people onto the unsuspecting recipient. . . . Playing out Freudian notions of transference—a dynamic involving the projection of one's subconscious conflicts and desires onto another—Acconci's piece opens out the contingency and performativity of identity and subjectivity itself. (Jones, 1998, pp. 139-140)

Experimental theater performances, on the other hand, "developed the aesthetic of a new theatre through productions which picked up the program of the historical avant-garde movement . . . and seemed to fulfill it: the 'retheatricalization' of theatre which was to be a radical move away from the literary theatre predominant in Western culture since the eighteenth century" (Fischer-Lichte, 1997, p. 200). An example is Robert Wilson's visual opera of the 1970s:

His manipulation of space and time, his fusion of visual, aural, and performing arts, his utilization of chance and collage techniques in construction, his use of language for sound and evocation rather than discursive meaning, all show his close relationship to earlier experimental work in theatre, music, the visual arts, and dance. Speaking of *Einstein on the Beach* [1976], Wilson advised: "You don't have to think about the story, because there isn't any. You don't have to listen to words, because the words don't mean anything. You just enjoy the scenery, the architectural arrangements in time and space, the music, the feelings they all evoke. Listen to the pictures." (Carlson, 1996, p. 110)

### ◆ *Performance Ethnography*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, sociologists began to turn their ethnographic field notes into performances, and theater artists and academics in performance studies began to produce or

adapt ethnographies in order to perform them (see Becker, McCall, & Morris, 1989; Conquergood, 1985; Denzin, 1997; McCall, 1993; Mienczakowski, 2000; Paget, 1990; Pollock, 1990; Richardson, 1997; Siegel & Conquergood, 1985, 1990; Smith, 1993, 1994). The performance ethnographies of theater artists and people in performance studies were surely informed by the history of "performance art" and "experimental theater" in the 20th century. Ours certainly were not—despite the veiled reference to performance art in "performance science," the name Becker, Morris, and I gave our early pieces (see McCall & Becker, 1990). Our work was very much text based: There was a story, the words did mean something, and there were very few images to "listen to."

We based three performance pieces—*Local Theatrical Communities*; *Theatres and Communities: Three Scenes*; and *Performance Science*—on "formal interviews with seventy actors, directors and other theater workers (playwrights, critics, administrators, and technical people) in three metropolitan areas: Chicago, San Francisco, and Minneapolis/St. Paul" (Becker et al., 1989, p. 93). In performances we carried and read from scripts, did not wear costumes or use props, sat in chairs or stood behind podiums, and moved only to exchange seats or to get from chairs to podiums and back. We played multiple characters: ourselves, as sociologists, and various people one of us had interviewed. In *Theatres and Communities: Three Scenes*, for example, we played a total of 25 characters. We shifted body positions and visual focus, and occasionally stood, to mark character and scene changes and to guide audience attention.

For example, we addressed the audience directly when we were making analytic statements, but turned and looked at one another when we were conversing, as "sociologists" and other characters. In the body of [published] script[s], italicized stage directions indicate[d] who was being addressed in each speech; a longer stage direction at the beginning of the first scene explain[ed] where we sat and looked and how we held our scripts to focus attention on the voices of the people we interviewed. (Becker et al., 1989, p. 96)

Likewise, the parodic ethnography of performance artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña was explicitly not based in the history of "avant-garde" movements, although, like other performance art, Fusco and Gómez-Peña's work depended less on text than on visual images. As Fusco (1995) notes: "Performance Art in the West did not begin with Dadaist 'events.' Since the early days of European 'conquest,' 'aboriginal samples' of people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas were brought to Europe for aesthetic contemplation, scientific analysis, and entertainment" (p. 41). Fusco states, "My collaborator, Guillermo Gómez Peña, and I were intrigued by this legacy of performing the identity of an Other for a white audience, sensing its implications for us as performance artists dealing with cultural identity in the present" (p. 37).

Our plan was to live in a golden cage for three days, presenting ourselves as undiscovered Amerindians from an island in the Gulf of Mexico that had somehow been overlooked by Europeans for five centuries. We called our homeland Guatinau, and ourselves Guatinauis. We performed our "traditional tasks," which ranged from sewing voodoo dolls and lifting weights to watching television and working on a laptop computer. A donation box in front of the cage indicated that, for a small fee, I would dance (to rap music), Guillermo would tell authentic Amerindian stories (in a nonsensical language), and we would pose for Polaroids with visitors. Two "zoo guards" would be on hand to speak to visitors (since we could not understand them), take us to the bathroom on leashes, and feed us sandwiches and fruit. At the Whitney Museum in New York we added sex to our spectacle, offering a peek at authentic Guatinaui male genitals for \$5. A chronology with highlights from the history of exhibiting non-Western peoples was on one didactic panel and a simulated Encyclopedia Britannica entry with a fake map of the Gulf of Mexico showing our island was on another. . .

. . . We did not anticipate that our self-conscious commentary . . . could be believable. We underestimated the public faith in museums as bastions of truth, and institutional investment in that role. Furthermore, we did not anticipate that literalism would dominate the interpretation of our work. Consistently from city to city, more than half of our visitors believed our fic-

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tion and thought we were "real." . . . As we moved our performance from public site to natural history museum, pressure mounted from institutional representatives . . . to correct audience misinterpretation. . . . we were perceived as either noble savages or evil tricksters, dissimulators who discredit museums and betray public trust. (Fusco, 1995, pp. 39, 50)

The ethnographic performances of theater artists and academics in performance studies are more theatrical than those of sociologists and more like performance art. They combine texts and visual elements such as movement, settings, costumes, and props. Emilie Beck's adaptation of a sociological text and Della Pollock's adaptation of an oral history are good examples.

Emilie Beck adapted an article that Marianne Paget (1990) wrote "about the erroneous construction of a medical diagnosis of a woman who was a cancer patient" (p. 136) and directed a performance of it titled *The Work of Talk: Studies in Misunderstandings*. There were seven characters, played by performance studies and theater students: the narrator, the doctor, the patient, and a panel of four experts ("two women, two men)," each of whom "was a rather singular and one-dimensional type. One was rather prim, like our stereotype of the librarian. Another was young and precocious. He was constantly unmasking the doctor and enjoyed it. The third was all business and matter of fact, and the fourth was rather lewd, a guy 'on the make'" (Paget, 1990, p. 144). The narrator was Cancer.

"The doctor and patient enacted dialogue" based on a series of transcripts Paget analyzed in the article. "Sometimes they commented on what they had said or would soon say, just as I had done in the original article. Sometimes they reacted to the panel" (Paget, 1990, p. 138). They also "danced together. They tangoed. . . . Sometimes, as she sat on a small table, he examined or asked her questions. . . . The experts reported the science" of Paget's analysis. "Sometimes they also 'gossiped' about what was going on between the doctor and patient. Sometimes they mimicked their dialogue or

acted like a chorus." Once the "cast acted as a machine, a many levered instrument producing work along a line. Everyone bleated or bayed a mechanical sound and moved synchronously. The machine (cast) surrounded the patient," miming "the physician's oddly mechanical talk" (pp. 139-140).

Cancer wore a long white dress, carried an evening bag and was barefooted.

She was both lovely and flirtatious. . . . Throughout the performance, she pays close attention to the patient. She dresses her up, coming at one point to apply makeup and at another to give her a chocolate. The patient belongs to Cancer. Occasionally panel members also try to help the patient. At one point panel member #1 drops glitter on her back; at another time she massages her back. These attentions to her back foreshadow the final moments when the patient reports that she has gone to another clinic and has been told that she has cancer of the spine. (Paget, 1990, pp. 139-141)

Della Pollock directed performances of *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Hall et al., 1987), an oral history based on 300 interviews with former cotton mill workers in the Carolina Piedmont region. Eleven undergraduates "were selected by application" for "an independent study project that would give [them] credit for learning mill history through performance" (Pollock, 1990, p. 4). Pollock and her students developed the script and the performances together. The students played multiple roles, including themselves, and were costumed in "the long skirts and wool pants of the early twentieth century mill worker." Sets "consisted of chairs borrowed from the audience's seating area and prop pieces (a washboard, a tin kettle) borrowed from a distinctly 'other' era" (Pollock, 1990, p. 18).

[Performances] began with actors in costume ushering audience members to their seats while other actors set up the stage area, tuned guitars, etc. The lights remained bright. A selection of traditional songs buoyed both the actors and audience members. A general hubbub ensued until all of the actors—in both the stage and audience areas—joined in a round of "I Saw the Light." At the song's conclusion, the usher/actors took seats

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in the audience and one of the actors on stage came forward to introduce the performance and herself. She was followed by four others, each telling a brief story about his or her relation to the mill world. . . . As part of their introduction, the actors then recalled questions the *Like a Family* interviewers had asked former mill workers. . . . In a spirit of genuine curiosity, the actors asked, How much free time did you have? Did you go to church? What happened when the union organizers came in?

*Cool*  
 We then gently, playfully blurred the performance frame. Actors stood in the audience to respond to the stage actors' questions. Rather than convincing skills, these were clearly actors: they were the ushers in costume who greeted audience members at the door and then sat next to them or their neighbor. (When the actor stood to declare that she was Icy Norman or that he was Hoyle McCorkle, he or she was quite explicitly acting—representing someone else, expressing a point of view not his or her own. This kind of self-conscious theatricality helped us to confuse conventional distinctions between actor and audience and yet to maintain unconventional distinctions between actor and character. In this way we invited audience members to participate. (Pollock, 1990, p. 21)

At the end of the performance,

*Cool Twist*  
 one of the *Like a Family* authors was invited to join the performers, to tell his or her own story and to invite, in turn, the audiences' stories and comments. Closing applause was thus postponed until after audience members had also assumed the role of performer. . . . When applause did occur, it was mutual: performers clapped for audience members and audience members for performers. Their roles were blurred in the expression of general pleasure. (p. 23)

The performance ethnographies I wrote, performed, and/or cast in the mid-1990s were influenced by Pollock's work. From 1992 through 1998, I worked with a photographer, Linda Gammell, and a sculptor, Sandra M. Taylor, on a study of midwestern women who practiced and/or advocated sustainable agriculture.<sup>2</sup> During that period we held seven daylong "workshops"—group interviews, really—with 52 women farmers

We began the workshops by asking the women to answer the question "Who are you and what is your connection to the land?" After

the introductions, Gammell and Taylor presented a slide lecture on stereotypes of rural women in art and advertising. Next, each woman described the object or objects she had brought to "represent farm life and/or farm women" and added it or them to a "centerpiece" on the table we sat around. Gammell photographed the centerpiece and, later, made portraits of the objects in the women's hands (see Taylor, Gammell, & McCall, 1994). We closed the workshops with open-ended questions such as, "If you were to have a very public opportunity to communicate something about women and rural life and the changes that are happening in rural culture, what would you say?" As the participants left, we gave each a roll of film and asked her to photograph her own landscape and mail the used film back to us; we had the film developed and sent the women copies of their prints. Gammell also made slides from their negatives.

A grant from the Blandin Foundation, which funded our work in the summer of 1993 and allowed us to hire three student research assistants, required that we and the students collaboratively report our findings to foundation officials and other grant recipients at an October conference. I wrote *Not "Just" a Farmer and Not Just a "Farm Wife"* (McCall, 1993) for that purpose. Only five of us could attend the conference, so I based the script on a workshop with four farm women, played by the students and me, and added the role of "questioner" and slide projector operator for Taylor. The performance began and ended with a tape recording of Patty Kakac, a workshop participant, singing "I'm Just a Farmer," a song she wrote. Throughout the performance, Taylor showed slides of the landscape photographs taken by women in four workshops. Although we read from scripts, sitting on stools, and were not costumed, the addition of music and visual images made this performance a bit less "text-bound" and more like Pollock's adaptation of *Like a Family* than my previous work with Becker and Morris.

Like Pollock, I wanted to "return the stories to the communities out of which they emerged." I understood that "telling personal, traditional and historical tales at work, on a front porch, or

during an interview was itself performative action," and I "hoped we could realize their performative nature" by "re-performing these tales" (Pollock, 1990, p. 4). So I arranged three more performances in which women who participated in the workshops played the parts of Michal and Sandra; Sara, Michelle, and Liza (the students); and Patty, Alice, Gloria, and Donna (the farm women) for Minnesota Food Association Board members (our other sponsors) and workshop participants.

### ◆ Some Tips

Performance ethnography requires at least the following from the ethnographer or adapter: He or she must write a script and then cast and/or perform and/or stage it (adding movement, sets, costumes, props). Writing a script is the easiest task for a sociologist/ethnographer, I think, because we always turn our field notes and interview transcripts into written texts—even if these are normally meant for readers and not for performers and audiences. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) call the texts ethnographers usually write "thematic narratives" and explain them as follows:

In coding and memo-writing, the ethnographer has started to create and elaborate analytic themes. In writing an ethnographic text, the writer organizes some of these themes into a coherent "story" about life and events in the setting studied. Such a narrative requires selecting only some small portion of the total set of fieldnotes and then linking them into a coherent text representing some aspect or slice of the world studied. (p. 170)

Emerson et al. explain to student ethnographers how to "jot" notes in the field, how to "write them up" to create "scenes on the page," how to "discover" members' meanings in field notes, and how to "process" field notes through "open coding, focused coding and integrative memos" (pp. v-vii). In a chapter titled "Writing an Ethnography," they explain how to "build up piece by piece a coherent,

fieldnote-centered story" (p. 179). They advise students to write "excerpt-commentary units" using field notes and initial memos; an "excerpt-commentary unit" includes an analytic point, orienting information (e.g., the social statuses of speakers), an excerpt from the field notes, and analytic commentary (pp. 182-183). Next, Emerson et al. tell students to order these units within a section and to order sections within the text and, finally, to write an introduction, a "literature review," and a conclusion to the ethnography.

Writing an ethnographic performance script is very similar, except that "orienting information" and "analytic points and commentary" are unnecessary: The first is embodied, and the second can be done by the "characters." And, of course, dialogue replaces description and narration. Still, ethnographic scriptwriters must read and reread their field notes or transcripts to "create and elaborate analytic themes" and "organize some of these into a coherent story."

To write *Not "Just" a Farmer*, I read and re-read the transcript of a workshop we held in St. Cloud, Minnesota, on August 21, 1993. It was approximately 120 pages long, representing 6 hours of audiotaped conversation. I needed to produce a script that would take 30 minutes to perform (the time allotted to us at the Blandin conference); as it turned out, this meant the script was 10½ pages long—only a "small portion of the total set of fieldnotes."

The St. Cloud workshop was organized by Barb Thomes, who had participated in a 1992 workshop. Barb lived on a farm and worked for Lutheran Social Services, providing crisis counseling and other services to farm families. She invited four women to participate in the 1993 workshop. Donna Johnson and her husband lost their farming operation, but not his maternal grandparents' farm, in the 1980s "farm crisis." Patty Kakac and her husband lived on a 160-acre farm, kept bees and sold honey, and grew their own food, but she earned her living as a folksinger. She and Alice Tripp were political activists; Alice was a retired dairy farmer and former candidate for governor of Minnesota. Gloria Schneider owned a 200-acre dairy farm, which she had farmed alone since 1989, when

her husband died suddenly; she was hoping her son would move back and farm with her. It is not surprising, then, that the dominant themes in the workshop were the difficulties family farmers have earning a living; the vast wealth and power, by comparison, of corporate food processors, retailers, and transportation, seed, and chemical companies; the loss of farmland to urban migration, suburban sprawl, and the depressed rural economy; and our responsibilities, as urban eaters, to learn where our food comes from and, where possible, to buy it from local family farmers who grow it without chemical herbicides, pesticides, or fertilizers. Secondary themes were the importance of women's work on traditional farms, the diversity of rural women's work lives in the present, and the opportunities for women in sustainable agriculture. I organized the script around these themes.

It began with the question, "What is your connection to the land?" directed to the audience and asked in unison by four of us, seated on tall stools, onstage. Next, Sara and I, Michelle and Liza, and Sandra, who was seated in the audience near the slide projector, introduced ourselves by answering that question. Then, Sara, Michelle, Liza, and I changed places and introduced "ourselves" as Donna (Sara), Gloria (me), Patty (Michelle), and Alice (Liza). As we became the other characters, Sandra began to project the slides. She also asked questions and made comments; I used quotes from the transcript, mostly her own words, but I rearranged them to provide transitions from topic to topic and to motivate or explain comments and answers from the other participants. An example is the first segment of the script after the introductions:

*Sandra:* [We've] noticed that there isn't a very true picture of women and land in the media. Or the fine arts. So that's what we're going to talk about today and ask you for your help: to give us better information. About what it means to be a woman associated with the land in the 1990s and beyond. So thank you for coming to help us. . . . And now, if you could, take whatever you brought and put it in the middle [of the table].

*Sandra:* Linda [Gammell] brought some good stuff. [She said] she brought this little cow because she was "interested in the idea of how people depict animals. And how animals then become dolls and toys."

*Patty:* Somehow the cow became really popular in the, you know, cutesy art stuff. Just as farmers [were losing their farms]. . . . And it just kind of made me sick. I go to Craft Fairs, selling for my friend. And people who sold cows—you know, you can make lots of money selling cows! God this is not right! There's something screwy about this. That you can make money selling little cows but you can't make money selling food from it. . . . I've noticed, throughout the country, no matter what product you make if it's for food you can't make a living on it. But if you can entertain people . . . And that's how a lot of farmers are going. Having people come out and they have vacations on the farm.

*Donna:* Uh-huh. Bed and Breakfasts.

*Patty:* To make money.

*Sandra:* Really?

*Patty:* Yeh, that's one alternative to making money [farming].

*Donna:* It's like supplemental income.

*Patty:* Yeh, people raising vegetables go to raising dried flowers. To make money. They can make money on dried flowers but not on vegetables.

*Sandra:* Is it that people don't see a difference between supermarket food and food that's grown on a farm?

*Donna:* I don't think there's any connection left.

*Patty:* There also is, there was a policy in this country, you know, established. That food would be cheap. Which allowed some people to make money on it, but not others.

*Sandra:* Which ones? Who gets to make money?

*Patty:* Those who

*Alice:* process. General Mills.

*Patty:* The supermarkets, the handlers.

*Alice:* Food processors.

[*Sara:* Fertilizer people.

*Patty:* Yeh.

*Donna:* Banks, anybody. I'm not much of a TV person—much at all. But there was just an ad not too long ago, about the price of corn be-



ing, let's say, two dollars in nineteen—pick a number—twenty. And at this point it's two dollars again. And all the costs [have gone up]. Say the newspaper cost a nickel at that time, or whatever it was. Did anybody see that ad?

Patty: I didn't see that ad but I've seen similar things. Yeh.

Alice: There used to be a Department of Agriculture bulletin that said it cost three dollars a bushel to raise corn. So how are you going to make money? Yeh.

Donna: Yeh, but the public doesn't see that.

Alice: Yeh, right.

Patty: Umhuh.

Donna: The public will see this commercial and nice colors and . . .

Patty: Sure.

This script was less artificial than the scripts I wrote with Becker and Morris because it was based on a group interview. Those early scripts were based on individual interviews that were not tape-recorded; we used the information in them as much as we used the interviewers' and interviewees' actual words when we "made up" the dialogue. We also let the "sociologists" make the analytic points and do the commentary. In *Theatres and Communities: Three Scenes*, for example, the "sociologists" made 61% of all 165 speeches and all but 8 of 67 "analytic" speeches. I didn't have to "make up" the dialogue in *Not "Just" a Farmer*—it was already there, recorded in the transcript. The "analytic commentary" was also in the transcript, provided by the women farmers themselves. The "questioner" needed only to introduce the performance and provide context and transitions.

### ◆ Casting

I learned what I know about casting as a "participatory observer" in the community theater world. My husband directed 23 plays, with amateur actors, in 3 years at two community theaters and, as the "director's wife," I observed

auditions, rehearsals, and performances; participated in backstage activities; and listened to endless discussions about the artistic choices and decisions a director makes. I learned there is a discrepancy between actors' casting expectations and directors' casting purposes. Amateur actors think the "best" actor (sometimes simply the highest-status person in the community) should get the "biggest" part. The director, on the other hand, wants to cast a strong, balanced ensemble of actors. As my husband's teacher has explained:

Actors at the point of auditioning should be aware that the director wants to arrive at a comfortable solution of the casting problem. The director wants to do as little work or readjustment as possible, and tries to develop an almost extrasensory awareness as to whether or not the chosen actor will be sympathetic with the character which is to be played. . . .

Certainly it is helpful to have a sprinkling of previously successful experience in the cast, mainly to help create rapport and sympathetic relationships. . . . When I know the pluses and minuses of the actors and the script, it becomes my job to meld them together and put the strong people where they will lend strength—not necessarily in the strongest plot roles. Often the strongest part is so well-written that a person who is adequate will develop the necessary strength while rehearsing and playing. But in the weaker sections of the play, where it could fall apart, the stronger actors may be needed more sorely. (Spayde, 1993, pp. 43-45)

For the original performance of *Not "Just" a Farmer and Not Just a "Farm Wife,"* I had to cast the five of us who conducted the research and could attend the Blandin conference. Indeed, I chose to work with the St. Cloud transcript because it had the right number of characters, including the generic "questioner." However, as I cast the five of us I did try make sure each "actor" would be "sympathetic with the character" she played. Like Donna and her husband, Sara's parents lost their farming operation but still lived on a farm. Both Patty and Michelle were singers. (Michelle's "object" was a tape recording of Minnesota musicians, and she talked about singing when she introduced herself: "My mother and my sister and I always sang. And in Califor-

nia it was something that just *we* did. And when we moved to Fergus Falls [Minnesota], one of the most interesting things was that singing was something that *everyone* did, together. There were so many songs that everyone knew, that we didn't know.") I cast Liza as Alice because Alice was about the same age as Liza's great-grandmother, of whom she said: "I feel like my strongest connection to the land is my great-grandma who lives in a small town in Illinois and we're pretty close. She's eighty-four and she runs greenhouses so she can sell for the Lord." I cast myself as Gloria because I thought she was the least sympathetic character—less politicized than the others and more traditional in her farming and her gender practices, she was boisterous and talked too much, before she left early. Because she was the "outsider" in the workshop the other "actors" participated in, I was afraid they might not give her a sympathetic reading. I thought perhaps I could, because I was aware of the problem.

### ◆ *Directing and Performing*

I won't presume to give the reader acting advice. Instead I will quote from one of hundreds of books of advice to actors, written by experts. According to playwright David Mamet (1997), "To act means to perform an action, to do something" (p. 72). He asserts:

To you, to the actor, it is not the words which carry the meaning—it is the actions. Moment to moment and night to night the play will change, as you and your adversaries onstage change, as your conflicting actions butt up against each other. That play, that interchange, is drama. But the words are set and unchanging. Any worth in them was put there by the author. His or her job is done, and the best service you can do them is accept the words as is, and speak them simply and clearly in an attempt to get what you want from another actor. (pp. 62-63)

Mamet also states:

The plane is designed to fly; the pilot is trained to direct it. Likewise, the play is designed, if cor-

rectly designed, as a series of incidents in which and through which the protagonist struggles toward his or her goal. It is the job of the actor to show up, and use the lines and his or her will and common sense, to attempt to achieve a goal similar to that of the protagonist. And that is the end of the actor's job. (p. 12)

Of course *we* were not acting; we were simply reading aloud the traces of a conversation among ourselves and four women farmers. Instead of "directing" the "actors," I tried to make the words in my script easy to speak "simply and clearly," requiring little interpretive work, by transcribing the *sounds* of words and pauses in our conversations, the music of our speech, and transferring these to the script. This way of working is consistent with Anna Deavere Smith's (1993) idea that you "find a character's psychological reality by 'inhabiting' that character's words" (p. xxvii).

Since the mid-1980s, Smith has created a series of performances "based on actual events" (Smith, 1994, p. xvii) that she calls *On the Road: A Search for American Character*. The best-known performances in the series are *Fires in the Mirror*, about 3 days of riots, marches, and demonstrations that broke out in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, after "one of the cars in a three-car procession carrying the Lubavitcher Hasidic rebbe (spiritual leader) ran a red light, hit another car, and swerved onto a sidewalk," where it "struck and killed Gavin Cato, a seven-year-old Black boy from Guyana, and seriously injured his cousin Angela" and after "a group of young Black men fatally stabbed Yankel Rosenbaum, a 29-year-old Hasidic scholar from Australia" in retaliation (Smith, 1993, p. xliiii); and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, about the civil disturbances in Los Angeles in April 1992.

Each *On the Road* performance evolves from interviews I conduct with individuals directly or indirectly involved in the event I intend to explore. Basing my scripts entirely on this interview material, I perform the interviewees onstage using their own words. *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* is the product of my search for the character of Los Angeles in the wake of the initial Rodney King verdict. (Smith, 1994, p. xvii)

As an acting student, Smith learned "the importance of thinking on the word, rather than between the words in order to discover the character" (Smith, 1993, p. xxiv). Following her Shakespeare teacher's instructions, she said a 14-line speech from *Richard III* "over and over well into the wee hours of the morning." Because she did not try to "control the words," Smith learned "about the power of rhythm and imagery to evoke the spirit of a character, of a play, of a time" (p. xxiv). Later she realized she could "create the illusion of being another person by reenacting something they had said as they had said it" (p. xxvi).

Actors . . . are trained to develop aspects of our memories that are more emotional and sensory than intellectual. The general public often wonders how actors remember their lines. What's more remarkable to me, is how actors remember, recall, and reiterate feelings and sensations. The body has a memory just as the mind does. The heart has a memory, just as the mind does. The act of speech is a physical act. It is powerful enough that it can create, with the rest of the body, a kind of cooperative dance. That dance is a sketch of something that is inside a person, and not fully revealed by the words alone. I came to realize that if I were able to record part of the dance—that is, the spoken part—and reenact it, the rest of the body would follow. (Smith, 1993, pp. xxv-xxvi)

At first, Smith used published interviews to "engage" her "students in putting themselves in other people's shoes" (p. xxvi). Later, she began to conduct her own interviews and, later still, to perform them herself.

I wanted to develop an alternative to the self-based [acting] technique, a technique that would begin with the other and come to the self, a technique that would empower the other to find the actor rather than the other way around. I needed very graphic evidence that the manner of speech could be a mark of individuality. If we were to inhabit the speech pattern of another, and walk in the speech of another, we could find the individuality of the other and experience that individuality viscerally. I became increasingly convinced that the activity of reenactment could tell us as much, if not more, about another individual than the process of learning about the other by using the self as a

frame of reference. The frame of reference for the other would be the other. (Smith, 1993, p. xxvii)

### ◆ Staging

Besides casting and coaching actors, the director of a performance or play also "*stages the event*" by "controlling the *mise-en-scène*": sets, lighting, costumes, props, and movement (Bordwell & Thompson, 1993, p. 145). As I have said, the staging has been minimal in the performances I have done, so I cannot tell the reader "how to" do it. Nor are other published descriptions of performance ethnography very helpful. Staging requires interpretive choices. Anna Deavere Smith works with professional directors, dramaturges, and set, sound, lighting, and costume designers in making these choices. And although they explain their interpretive purposes, neither Pollock nor Paget/Beck tells us how these interpretive choices were made. Pollock (1990) says that she hoped "re-performing" the oral histories of cotton mill workers would "invigorate their claim to self-representation" (p. 4) and "help to recover their historical life" (p. 5). She wanted to avoid "the illusion that the past was present" because she thought this would turn "drama's advantage of immediacy towards the end of time-warp titillation" (p. 6). The interpretive choices she made to achieve her goals included keeping costumes, sets, and props simple (to avoid "the illusion that the past was present") and casting performers in multiple roles, so that "the audience member is liberated from any particular historical position (including his or her own) but constrained within a dialectic of history-making" because the "audience member identifies . . . above all [with] the actor's power to transform him or herself and, in the process, the world" (p. 18).

Because Marianne Paget (1990) has published the description of "On the Work of Talk," we do not know how Emilie Beck, the director, made her interpretive choices. However, in discussing the alternative choices she imagined Beck might have made, Paget does provide one small clue:

I thought of the performed text as Emilie Beck's version. Making Cancer the narrator was a stunning interpretive act which had many implications for the production of the performance's meaning. . . . Excluding the author and investigator was another interpretive act. Including me as the investigator, Emilie Beck argued, interfered with the production of a necessary atmosphere that would engage the audience. Here is one of the conundrums of the performance. [It] made fantastic some of the facts in order to state them. (pp. 144-145)

Performance ethnography is a relatively new form. Perhaps, with time, people who are trained in theater and performance techniques will write books of advice for directors of such ethnographies. In the meantime, I can recommend a book of advice for theater directors. Titled *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays* and written by David Ball (1983), an experienced playwright and director, it "reveals a script not only as literature, but as raw material for theatrical performance," as director Michael Langham (1983, p. vii) says in his foreword to the book.

There is all the difference in the world between literature and drama. A play's sound, music, movement, looks, dynamics—and much more—are to be discovered deep in the script, yet cannot be detected through strictly literary methods of reading and analysis. [In] this little book . . . there is guidance and illumination about the nature of scripts [even for directors with] a lot of experience. (Langham, 1983, pp. vii-viii)

### ■ Notes

1. The distinction was new to theater critics, but not to theater artists (see Mamet, 1997, pp. 62-63).
2. An agriculture more sustainable than the current agribusiness system would rely less on petrochemicals (which, in some cases, "cost" more calories than the food they produce and can cause water, soil, and air pollution and a host of health problems), less on long-distance transportation (buying and selling food locally are basic tenets of sustainable agriculture), and less on "middlemen" (buying directly from farmers at

farmers' markets or through memberships in Community Supported Agriculture is also a basic tenet).

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