

***Competence in Performance:* Ethnography for the Nineties**

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Charles L. Briggs. **Competence in Performance: The Creativity of Tradition in Mexicano Verbal Art.** Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988. Pp. xix + 427, photographs, bibliography, index. Paperback \$19.95.

It has been nearly two decades since the goals of performance theory entered the folkloristic discourse. Today the performance-centered perspective continues to broaden its theoretical concerns as new problems become articulated through ethnographic research. Charles Briggs' book, *Competence in Performance: The Creativity of Tradition in Mexicano Verbal Art*, proves to be a crucial contribution to those studies that emphasize the performance dimension as central to the folklorist's enterprise. In this work, Briggs makes three prominent contributions to performance theory: (1) An abundance of texts (and contextual descriptions) permit readers to scrutinize his interpretations of the performances; (2) The ethnographic detail not only makes the performances more understandable, but his detailed presentation of the formal features that constitute the performances strongly argues for the role of stylistics in the creation and interpretation of meaning; and (3) He breathes a historical perspective into performance theory traditionally dominated by a synchronic approach. Briggs' rich corpus of texts, detailed ethnography and historical perspective further a performance-oriented perspective in folklore studies.

Briggs presents a dense survey of Mexicano performance traditions in Córdova, a small community in northern New Mexico. He dedicates a chapter to each genre, its internal features, contextual dimensions of use, and most significantly, its place within the total communicative system of performance genres. These genres include "Historical Discourse," "Proverbs," "Scriptural Allusions," "Jests,

Anecdotes, and Humorous Tales," "Legends and Treasure Tales," and "Hymns and Prayers." Briggs presents the genres in the above order for a reason: it is his thesis that we can see a shift of emphasis along a continuum between contextual and textual orientations. In other words, with "Historical Discourse" we find the highest degree of context-determined performances and meaning, whereas with "Hymns and Prayers," greater emphasis is placed on a textual orientation. It is not that contextual rootedness or textual focus are mutually exclusive, but that one or the other orientation will predominate in the performance of a given genre. In the middle of the continuum, neither orientation clearly predominates, and we see most markedly the interaction between the textual and contextual spheres. The interrelationship of performance genres can be seen as a movement between conversational genres (i.e. Historical Discourse, Proverbs) and more fully framed narrative performances (i.e. Legends), wherein performance ability involves the isolation of texts from conversational contexts. Competence in performance can be viewed as the ability to select from traditional resources (performances of the past), interpret their meaning, and perform in such a way that a "synthesis" is created between the contextual and textual realms. But competence is more than this, according to Briggs: it is the "critical reading of the ongoing social interaction," larger dimensions of society and history, and an understanding of performance frames and genre structures (357).

Briggs clearly locates himself in the camps of ethnopoetics and performance theory. He is thus concerned with three general dimensions of performance. The first follows Richard Bauman's concept of responsibility, or how a performer assumes accountability for knowing the genre, and understanding its structure and use (1977). Performers are judged competent by their ability to responsibly bear a tradition and perform it in appropriate contexts and in accordance with aesthetic criteria.

The second dimension of performance Briggs addresses concerns the ethnopoetic school's focus on formal and stylistic patterns. Such qualities of performance not only constitute and decorate its form, but for Briggs, they signal meaning, or in Hymes' terms, signal how the performance is to be taken (1981). Briggs describes these features as "sign-posts" that orient participants, invite interpretation, and "point to the speaker's (performer's) interpretation" (288). Formal structures not only frame a performance but may in fact be embedded with as much semantic capacity as the referential meaning of the texts themselves.

The third dimension of performance is another longstanding topic of performance theory, that of emergence (e.g. Lord 1960). Because performance is rooted in interactional settings, it is context-sensitive; in other words, social, cultural, environmental, and generic contexts shape the performance (Briggs finds context a problematic issue and questions how to delineate it and by what factors). The relation of performance to context can be reversed as Bauman (1977/1986) and others have suggested; performance is "contextualization" or context-creating, and can also function, as Abrahams has asserted (1985/1986), to advance the performer's point of view. Thus, performance concerns pragmatic issues as well. For Briggs, then, performance entails the interplay of individual competence, traditional forms and stylistic resources, and the unique interactional environment. He assumes a phenomenological stance to assert that text and context are not separate, but that through active interaction they work toward the "contextualization of discourse" (14).

A pragmatic approach to performance is certainly encouraging, but although Briggs sets as part of his agenda performance in the context of social relations, he falls short of telling us just how this is worked out in the Córdoba community. We see how the immediate situation of the performance can be affected, altered, and encompassed by a performance, but we are left wanting for how social relations or social structure are affected. Until performance-oriented folklorists can address social structure with some ethnographic sophistication and develop methods for its analysis, the pragmatic and rhetorical dimensions of performance will be limited. Moreover, Briggs' refreshing historical perspective loses its potency if social structure and its change does not become a central concern of performance theory. The historical genres Briggs discusses are embedded in past performances which involved human relationships, which continue to involve contemporary relationships that have a history, and which index those relationships past and present. I suggest that performance-oriented ethnographies must go beyond cultural and performance contexts to become more detailed and specific in the social context of relations. We need to ask: does performance have a pragmatic dimension outside of the context of a performance? And, if so, in what ways is social reality structured and restructured through performance?

I think three issues addressed by Briggs will prove their distance for performance theory. The first is his appreciation not only of the performance of history, but also of how history is made meaningful through performance, how performances exist within historical contexts

of past performances, and how a historical perspective contributes meaning to performance. In the Córdoba community, performance involves the juxtaposition of conceptualizations of "bygone days" and "nowadays." The textual data forces Briggs to narrow the unfortunate gap between synchrony and diachrony, a gap created by early structuralism and adopted by performance theory. Briggs does not delimit his texts to a synchronic analysis but forms a vantage point from which we can see that performance involves an interaction between synchronic and diachronic dimensions. If we do not bring history into performance, we may fail to gain the understanding we desire for how people experience and make meaningful their performances. It is also suggestive to consider that history and historical constructions not only inform performance, but that a performance-oriented perspective can inform our historical understanding (cf. Glassie 1982). If performance transforms context, then our understanding of how communicative interaction is accomplished may reveal insight into past historical creating situations. Performance may tell us something about the past.

The second and third useful issues Briggs addresses are closely interrelated. Like other scholars such as Bauman, Abrahams, and especially Bakhtin (1981), Briggs develops the concept of dialogism and polyphony. These concepts seem to work efficiently for Briggs as he clearly demonstrates how dialogue in performance operates at two levels. First, within the performance interaction itself, dialogism assumes a pedagogical role through the juxtaposition of "bygone days" with "nowadays" so that each is interpreted vis-a-vis each other. The movement between "antes" and "ahora" creates a dialectic within the context of performance. The second kind of dialogism is created through stylistic features in the texts (such as reported speech etc.). These features provide an "internal" dialectic, a focus on the "texture" and polyphony of voices in the "bygone days," that in turn provides a perspective on the present. Recognition of the several levels of dialogism within the performance context and text is important for two fundamental reasons: first, and most importantly, it gives us an entry point into the dialectical relationship between ideology, culture, and history and how these things are "shaped and give shape to communicative processes" (222); and second, it may get us closer to how performance, especially historical performances, are experienced by its participants.

This second reason for the usefulness of a dialectic theory in performance studies is really the third great contribution I see in Briggs' work. For instance, I think Briggs profoundly argues and

demonstrates how, through grammatical resources, narrative texts permit performers and audience different relations to "phenomenological realms" (277). Using Mauricio Molho's terms (1975), these realms include a "sphere of transcendence" which provides an interpretive stance for juxtaposing "antes" and "ahora" in a "temporal sequence," and a "sphere of immanence" or being drawn into the action of the narrative as it unfolds. These experiential perspectives are achieved through the manipulation of Spanish tense-aspects. I think this kind of work will prove productive in permitting us to view how stylistics serves an interpretive function at the level of phenomenological meaning. Again, we see clear evidence that form is intimately interrelated with levels of meaning.

Lastly, Briggs does not ignore the politics of performance. Here again, style and competence in performance have profound resonances. Borrowing from the Prague school linguists and Bakhtin (1981), Briggs discusses how style itself is ideological and how performance competence, within a dominated community such as the Mexicano by the Anglo-American, can be central to a counter-hegemonic movement. Performance can provide alternative views of experience, and in the Córdova case, the "talk of the elders of bygone days" can provide alternative meanings to social life and reveal "elements that the dominant hegemony has overlooked or suppressed" (368). Briggs demonstrates that the political dimension of performance involves other levels of dialogue, one internal to the community and another intercommunal. Briggs argues convincingly that politics cannot be overlooked in performance studies.

Competence in Performance moves performance theory ahead with its ethnographic and textual depth. It is a brilliantly comprehensive discussion of a specific culture and its performance traditions. But most importantly, Briggs has pushed forward new conceptions of competence, context, text, and the dialectic between the past and present. In the history of performance theory, history now becomes the other necessary component of a truly dialectical theory, one between past/present, structure/process, tradition/creativity.

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