

## **Informing Performance: Producing the *Coloquio* in Tierra Blanca**

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The attractions of performance as a focus of anthropological and folkloristic analysis are many, but in general terms they derive from four characteristic properties of performance: 1. performances are *artful*, the locus of aesthetic behaviors, forms, responses, and values, as enacted in social life; 2. performances are *reflexive*, cultural forms about culture, social forms about society, communicative forms about communication, in which meanings and values are cast in symbolic form and placed on display before an audience; 3. performances are *performative*, in J. L. Austin's (1962) sense of the term: they are consequential and efficacious ways of accomplishing social ends; 4. performances are both *traditional* and *emergent*, contexts in which the already done is done anew, recontextualized, shaped by and shaping the unfolding agendas of the here and now. In simple terms, then, we look to performances as sources of insight into art, meaning, values, social efficacy, and the dynamics of tradition and creativity (Bauman 1992; Bauman and Briggs 1990). Little wonder, given our investment in all these sociological, epistemological, axiological, and textual resonances of performance, that we concentrate our attention overwhelmingly on full, finished performances. If it is aesthetics we are after, we want behaviors and forms at their artful best, open to critical evaluation for the skill and effectiveness with which they are done. If it is the reflexive display of meaning and value that we intend to

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interpret, we want them in their public guise, on view before an engaged audience; if it is efficacy and consequentiality that are at issue, we want enactments that are intended to count fully; and if it is the dynamics of recontextualization that are of interest, we want the fullest performed texts we can record.

But while the logic of this preoccupation with full, finished performance is to this extent readily apparent, the consequent privileging of fully performed texts and/or bounded performance events as our analytical frames of reference has largely precluded *systematic* attention to other significant dimensions of performance as a mode of social action. It is one of those dimensions that we wish to address here: if performances are all that resonant with artfulness, meaning, value, efficacy, and so on, how do they get that way? Performances are *crafted* productions, implicating displays of virtuosic skill and/or the effective marshalling of affecting symbols, and that requires work to accomplish. Yet it is surprising how little systematic and integrative attention has been paid to the production process by which performances are made.

Certainly, in the aggregate, there has been significant work on one or another aspect of the production of performance. There is, for example, a sizeable body of literature on the social organization of performance, treated largely as a problem in social or political anthropology, but with relatively little analytical attention to the performances themselves (e.g., de la Peña 1981; Smith 1977). Ethnomusicologists, for their part, have pointed to the significance of practice in perfecting one's musical skills in the service of performance (e.g., Merriam 1964:158-61), and a number of students of oral poetics have traced the process by which performers in various societies acquire the communicative competence required for artistic verbal performance (e.g., Abrahams 1983:55-66; Gossen 1974:239; Lord 1960:13-29). And part of the orality-literacy debates that have burgeoned in recent years has directed attention to forms of oral poetry that involve composition, polishing, and memorization before they are brought before an audience in performance (e.g., Finnegan 1977). What we do not find, however, with very few exceptions (e.g., Fabian 1990; Tedlock 1980), is work that focuses close ethnographic attention on the stage-by-stage process by which a performance is produced, examining each phase in terms of the same kinds of form-function-meaning interrelationships we seek in the full performance.

Richard Schechner has taken the lead among performance scholars in

insisting that our examination of performance extend in both directions beyond the performance event itself to comprehend what he calls “the whole performance sequence,” consisting, in his view, of seven parts: training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down, and aftermath (Schechner 1985:16-21). While this sequence may accord well with Western theatrical practice, especially the practice of Schechner’s own avant-garde theater, one would certainly not want to generalize it *a priori* to other cultures, either in its overall contour or in terms of Schechner’s delineation of the characteristics of the individual stages in the sequence, which also betrays a Western theatrical bias. Rather, the phase structure of the production process and the configuration of each phase should be taken as to be discovered. What are the locally defined stages in the production of performance? How are they interrelated?

One principle of interrelationship that offers a useful vantage point on the process rests on a view of the production process as being in the service of informing—in the sense of giving form to—the eventual performance. There is a teleology governing the production process and it is that end-orientation that organizes the system. This is the framework that has shaped our ethnographic investigation of festival drama in Mexico, of which this paper offers a general summary. We will give special attention to the rehearsal stage of the process, as the most elaborate and complex of the pre-performance phases. First, some background on the *coloquio* in Tierra Blanca.

### **The *Coloquio* in Tierra Blanca**

Central among the ritual events in festivals celebrated in the municipality of Allende, Guanajuato, are nightlong performances of the traditional Nativity play, or *coloquio*, *Tesoro Escondido* (*Hidden Treasure*), a folk drama that dates back to the sixteenth century in Mexico and has roots even earlier in medieval Spanish drama. The *coloquio* has been assumed by most literary scholars to have disappeared from active performance in Mexico at least a generation ago, but in fact the *coloquio* performance tradition is alive and reasonably well in parts of the state of Guanajuato. We have been engaged since 1985 in the ethnographic study of *coloquio* production in several communities, with special attention to Tierra Blanca de Abajo, a relatively isolated *ejido* community that lies northwest

of San Miguel de Allende.

*Tesoro Escondido* is a traditional shepherds' play (called *pastorela* in other regions of Greater Mexico),<sup>2</sup> which centers on the journey of a group of shepherds to Bethlehem to adore the Christ child and the efforts of Lucifer, eventually vanquished by Saint Michael, to keep them from doing so. The *coloquios* are widely associated with the Christmas season, but in the region around San Miguel de Allende at least, they have been detached from Christmas and are performed as the climactic event of community festivals, the greatest number of which occur in this region in mid-May in honor of San Isidoro Labrador, the patron saint of the peasant villagers, or in early June in honor of the Santa Cruz.

Tierra Blanca's fiesta is also in honor of San Isidoro, but is celebrated not on May 15th, but on January 15th, with the *coloquio* performance beginning on the night of the 15th and running through the morning of January 16th. When asked why they honor San Isidoro on this date, the people of Tierra Blanca give two answers: (1) they have a kind of sister-city relationship with another nearby community that holds its fiesta on May 15th and having theirs on a different date allows the members of both communities to enjoy each others' celebrations; and (2) January 15th is an advantageous date because the crops are all in, there is relatively less work to do, migrant workers from the community are home from their travels, and money for the fiesta is relatively more available than in mid-May.

*Coloquio* performances in Tierra Blanca are lengthy and elaborate productions, twelve to fourteen hours in duration, involving forty-three actors, a band of hired musicians, and a corps of other functionaries (curtain pullers, special effects people, and so on). The play is produced each year by a shifting group of men, *los encargados* (persons in charge), who take

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<sup>2</sup> The *pastorela* in Greater Mexico has been the focus of extensive research, dating back to the early investigations of Bourke (1893) in the Rio Grande Valley at the end of the nineteenth century. The most important works on the *pastorela* in the Republic of Mexico are Barker (1953), Litvak (1973), Mendoza and Mendoza (1952), Rael (1965), and Robe (1954). On the *pastorela/coloquio* in Guanajuato, see Castillo Robles and Alonso Tejeda (1977), Chamorro (1980), Litvak (1973), and Michel (1932). Few scholars have concerned themselves centrally with *pastorela* performance; Flores (1989) and Castillo Robles and Alonso Tejeda (1977) are the principal exceptions. The history of *pastorela* scholarship is reviewed in Cantú (1982) and Stowell (1970), the latter focused on work in the American Southwest.

on the task voluntarily as a communal and devotional responsibility. One man serves as the *primer encargado* (first *encargado*) and is primarily in charge of organizing the production. In addition to the six official *encargados*, there is an additional individual who directs the rehearsals and serves as prompter during the rehearsals and the performance.

The production process begins in early November, around All Saints' Day, proceeds through the selection of actors, the distribution and learning of the parts (*papeles*), a series of five to seven rehearsals (*ensayos*) ending with the *ensayo real* (grand or true rehearsal), and culminates in the performance on January 15th. But before discussing the rehearsal process itself, it will be useful to fill in some preliminary information concerning the script that is the basic resource for the production and to account for two prior stages in the production process, namely, copying out the sides and learning the parts.

### **The script**

We begin with the script, called the *libro*, or book, in which the *coloquio* resides between productions; the term *coloquio* can refer either to the written text or to the performed play. The script represents an authoritative textual frame of reference for the production of the play, and each community that wishes to produce a *coloquio* must have one.

The *coloquio* is composed in verse and in the version performed in Tierra Blanca it runs to more than 8,200 lines. The verse for the spoken dialogue of the *coloquio* is built on the classic Hispanic octosyllabic line, for the most part with assonant endings on the even numbered lines. In addition to the spoken or sung lines, the script gives the name of the character to whom each speech is assigned plus stage directions, such as "The Virgin appears and is seated," "Susana and Arminda dance and sing," "The Vices exit," or "The curtain is lowered."

### **The sides**

From the script, the first transformation that the text undergoes toward performance occurs in the writing out of the parts for the actors that have been recruited for the play. The cast members receive their parts in

written form, copied out speech by speech by the *primer encargado*, sometimes with the help of the prompter.

The copied parts take the form of a small booklet, for which we will employ the theatrical term “sides.” Each set of sides consists of the speeches (*declamaciones*) or entrances (*entradas*) of one character only, with each speech numbered consecutively; there are no cues or stage directions. In effect, then, the copying out of the sides disassembles the play into sets consisting of the speeches of individual characters and decouples the words of each character from all others, so that each speech in the sides stands in relation to the preceding and subsequent ones of that character alone. There is thus a time-line incorporated into the sides, which bears a synecdochic, elliptical relation to the temporal structure of the *coloquio* plot. Moreover, some of the speeches index adjacent ones by means of terms of address or response, such as “All right, Lindor, don’t get excited.” And, of course, calling each numbered speech an entrance anticipates its realization as performed action. In the aggregate, each set of sides constitutes a part (*papel*). When the sides are actually distributed to the actors who will play the respective parts, bringing together part and player, the part becomes a role.

### **Learning the part**

When the sides are distributed to the actors by the *encargado* during the month of November, the process of intersemiotic translation that transforms the written word into the voiced word begins. Actors employ a variety of methods in learning their lines. Some individuals study the sides alone as time is available, in the evening, on Sunday, while out watching the livestock. The lines are read aloud, short speeches in their entirety, longer ones in sections (usually two lines at a time, which constitute an intonational and rhyming unit), until they can be recited from memory. Family members or friends may also be pressed into service at various points in the process, feeding lines to the actors from the sides to aid in the learning process and testing them in their recitations. In addition to these individual or cooperative efforts, the *encargado* offers his assistance to those actors who desire his help and otherwise assists in much the same manner as family members and friends.

It is at this learning point in the production process that certain

characteristic features of *coloquio* performance style come into play. In particular, there is a highly conventionalized style of delivery that marks *coloquio* performance, keyed to the poetic structure of the text. The basic unit, as noted, is the end-stopped octosyllabic line. Each line characteristically receives three or four regular stresses, depending upon the syllabic and accentual structure of the given line, though the three-stress lines are marked by a breath pause at the end to allow for an empty beat that normalizes a four-stress pattern. Some actors maintain a regular line-by-line intonational pattern characterized by a slightly rising inflection on the final stressed syllable, usually the penultimate syllable in the line, followed by a return to the normal tone on the final unstressed syllable. Others group the lines into longer four-line units, with a rising intonation at the end of the second line and a falling intonation at the end of the fourth. While this delivery style is in part conditioned by the formal features of the line and verse structure in which the play is composed, there are additional factors that play a role as well, factors that do not reside in the written forms of the text.

First, virtually all the actors have seen other *coloquio* performances before they set foot on the stage. From earliest infancy, when mothers bring their babies to *colocios*, through childhood, when children excitedly crowd the front margin of the stage, through adolescence and adulthood, members of the community attend the *coloquio* year after year; it is the culmination of an already heightened festival experience. Accordingly, every actor—even the youngest Virtue—has internalized the recitational style of delivery. This extends as well to those non-actors who are enlisted in the learning process, some of whom have taken part in earlier productions. Thus the recitational style is learned in effect before the lines, as part of the conventions by which a *coloquio* is done, and is brought into play from the very beginning of the process of learning a part.

### **The rehearsals**

A week or so after distributing the sides, usually toward the latter part of November, the *encargado* calls the first of a series of weekly rehearsals, or *ensayos*. The stated rationale for the rehearsals makes clear that these events are in the service of the performance. The rehearsals, according to various *encargados* and prompters, are “oriented toward

presenting a better performance” (*spectaculo*), undertaken “so there will be a better show.” Toward this end, the actors must be “helped” or “corrected.” Those who need help include especially those with “complex parts,” “those who lack orientation,” and “those who are a bit uneven.” Correction, of course, implies a presentational standard; the *encargados* define their task as one of correcting unacceptable deviations from that standard in rehearsal, before the public performance. We will examine shortly how this task is addressed in practice.

Altogether, in any given year, there are six or seven rehearsals of the *coloquio*, the last of which is the *ensayo real*, the grand (or true) rehearsal, different in significant respects from the preceding ones. The number of rehearsals is keyed both to the calendar, that is, the number of weeks available between late November and January 15, and to the number of cooperating *encargados*, as each *encargado* bears the expenses for one rehearsal.

Rehearsals are held on Saturday nights and run through the night to Sunday morning. As all rehearsals are full run-throughs (as we will discuss more fully a bit later), they last approximately as long as the performance itself, that is, around twelve hours or more. Variation in the length of the rehearsals depends upon how many people show up, how well they know their lines, and how closely they stick around the rehearsal area so that it is not necessary to go looking for them when it is time for their next entrance. Rehearsals are called for 9:00 p.m., and are signalled by ringing the church bells to summon the participants. The bells are rung again about twenty minutes later, and the actual rehearsal starts anywhere from 9:20 to 10:00 p.m. when the prompter and enough members of the cast are present to begin. The prompter is essential, and, being a responsible figure in the community, is usually relatively on time. Cast members continue to arrive after the rehearsal is under way and the *encargado* may send messengers to summon latecomers.

The rehearsals—all but the *ensayo real*—are held in the courtyard of the village church, a rectangular walled enclosure with the church closing off one end and a gate in the wall at the opposite end. A short flight of steps leads up the the church entrance, flanked on both sides by a concrete bench built into the church facade. Opposite the church entrance is a small, free-standing niche for religious offerings and in one corner of the yard opposite frontstage-right is a tree with a wooden bench beneath it. During the rehearsals, the prompter sits on the church steps with the rehearsal

musicians to his right. The position occupied by the prompter and the musicians defines the upstage end of the rehearsal space, with the downstage area extending approximately thirty feet toward the opposite wall, terminating about ten feet in front of the niche.

The prompter, as suggested, is the functional center of the rehearsal; he controls the event, backed up in certain directorial functions by the *primer encargado* and perhaps one or two additional *encargados*. The prompter and the *primer encargado* are always present. Also considered essential to the conduct of the rehearsal are musicians to accompany the songs and dances that are part of the play; music and dance are introduced into the production process at this stage. Minimally, a single musician will do, but usually there are more—some combination of violin, guitar, string bass, and bajo sexto. The rehearsal band, drawn from the community, is paid a small sum for its work; they are the only paid participants. Their labors extend to the rehearsals only, as a more prestigious professional band from outside the community is hired for the performance.

As regards the cast, they are never all present at the regular rehearsals and some may be missing even from the *ensayo real*. First, the full cast may not be recruited at the time the rehearsals commence in late November. Some roles may not be filled until the fourth or even the fifth rehearsal. Second, not everyone shows up for every rehearsal. Scheduling is one factor affecting attendance: when a rehearsal fell on New Year's Eve, for example, attendance was notably thin. Scheduling aside, there are differences of motivation, responsibility, and sense of commitment that make for differential participation. The female cast members, in our experience, are the most reliable; they attend faithfully and show up on time. Least regular are the Vices, all adult men. Some of them never participate until the *ensayo real*, to the extent that other cast members may not even know who they are in any given year. There is a sense, especially among the younger shepherds, that the rehearsals are mostly for them, though even their ranks may not be filled out until the rehearsal process is well along. Of those cast members who do attend rehearsals, one in particular who was good and experienced at his role showed an occasional tendency to disappear after a while, the rehearsals being at cross-purposes with his Saturday-night drinking.

Absences are handled in two ways. If a particular cast member is expected at the rehearsal but has not yet arrived, someone else may be asked to stand in for him until he arrives—the prompter, an *encargado*, or another

actor or bystander drafted by the prompter. If a cast member is not expected to attend, his part is skipped over—more on this shortly.

All rehearsals have some spectators, ranging from as few as half a dozen on New Year's Eve to approximately eighty-five at the *ensayo real*. The average at the regular rehearsals is around twenty-five or thirty. These are relatives and friends of the cast members, devotees of the *coloquio*, and a complement of young boys simply hanging around where the action is on a Saturday night. The most stable set of spectators consists of women with their babies and young girl children, sitting on blankets against the churchyard wall beyond that portion of the rehearsal space that corresponds to stage left. In other words, they sit not where a regular audience would be, but off to the side, spectators of a different order. The male onlookers, *encargados* and others, shift positions around the periphery, congregating at times on the bench under the tree opposite frontstage-right, at times near the musicians, joined by the male cast members when they are not onstage. The teen-aged girls—friends of the shepherdesses, who join them between scenes—cluster together on the concrete bench to the prompter's left, or on the bench under the tree when it is not occupied by men. And the young boys run around wherever they like. Occasionally, a woman sets up a taco stand outside the gate, selling food and drink to the participants to carry them through the night. And finally, there is us, standing or sitting around with notebooks, tape recorders, cameras, beer, coffee, and other essential equipment. To what effect, we'll indicate a little later on. Notwithstanding their spatial displacement and the framing of the rehearsals as not-performance, the spectators do fulfill some of the functions of an audience. They laugh at the humorous words and actions of the various comic characters and a few of them applaud at those points where applause conventionally occurs—not at the end of the play, but after the *dispensas* offered by certain of the actors, scripted but frame-breaking appeals to the audience to excuse the flaws in the performance.

In their broadest scope, all rehearsals of the *coloquio* are full run-throughs, from the beginning of the play to the end. There is no deviation from this format, no selection of portions of the play to work on. With very few exceptions, to be discussed in a moment, everything is done once, in sequence. Nothing is repeated, gone back over, tried out again, no matter how imperfectly it is done. On the other hand, there are certain portions of the *coloquio*, especially the *caminata*, the dance that represents in stylized form the shepherd's travel toward Bethlehem, that recur over

and over again in just the same form, and they are done fully each time they occur. As a rule, again with a few exceptions, if an actor is absent, his part (we use the masculine pronoun because the female members of the cast attend faithfully) is skipped, and the run-through continues with the next available actor. The exceptions have to do with those instances when an actor is late to the rehearsal but is expected to attend. In those cases, as mentioned, the prompter or *encargado* may stand in or draft another person for the purpose until the latecomer arrives. In the rehearsals, then, the separate speeches of the sides are reconstituted as dramatic dialogue and the entrances are actualized, becoming elements for the realization of the plot.

While waiting for the rehearsal to begin, the assembled participants greet each other and visit, many of the men smoke (as they do throughout the rehearsal) and sip a beer or a cup of *canela* (cinnamon-flavored coffee), and the young men engage in horseplay. The prompter may use this interlude to dictate some lines to a late-recruited cast member and to dispatch some of the small boys who hang around the edges of the group after missing participants. When the prompter considers that enough of the cast and musicians have arrived, he begins the rehearsal proper by calling out “*Formense! Formense bien!*” ‘Form up! Form up well!’ which summons the shepherds to take their places for the *caminata* that opens the play. He then signals the musicians to play and the run-through begins. From this point through to the end, each actor or group of actors comes forward in turn to do their parts, coordinated throughout by the prompter and guided by the script of which he is the custodian.

The figure we have been calling the prompter, after one of his major functions, is not called *el apuntador* in Tierra Blanca as he is in some other communities, but *el encargado de letras*; *letra* can mean both letter (as in arts and letters) and poetic verse. As the rehearsal is conducted, the prompter’s principal tasks, identified as giving the actors their lines and their entrances, assume the status of major directorial functions, coordinating the rehearsal process and providing it with momentum and continuity. As reported to us by participants, the rehearsal is “dedicated to giving the actors their *letras*,” especially “those who are a bit weak.” “[Memory] fails us; he responds with the word on which we leave off. He tells them, ‘here we leave off and here...’ [he] comes back with the following word.”

In practice, the prompter keeps the rehearsal moving along by summoning and cuing the actors as their lines and other actions come up in

turn. This he does by some combination of: character name(s) or general term of address (e.g., *muchachos*), first line of the speech or song (occasionally several lines, if a song), genre (for generically identified sections), stage direction(s), and other directives to move things along (most frequently *andele* ‘go on,’ *venganse* ‘come on,’ *orale* ‘now then,’ ‘get on with it’). Only two or three times have we heard the prompter address a cast member by his or her real name, and those occurred in the course of sorting out a dance figure that had gotten confused and needed disentangling. Thus, the run-through is kept in motion by a succession of coordinating utterances by the prompter on the order of:

- Lindor, “*Compañeros muy amados*” [role name, first line of speech];
- Everyone speaks, “*Capitanes estimados*”;
- Exit the Vices, now then, the Vices;
- Lindor and Galin, to the *avecillas* [a series of songs beginning “*Avecillas cantan*”];
- Play it, *caminata*, *caminata* of the shepherds [so labeled in the script];

or, in a more complex version:

- Now then, boys and girls, get up on the stage. Throw away the cigarettes, put them out. Ready? “*Todos los pastores/vamos caminando.*”

Some of these—character names, stage directions, lines—come from the script, which the prompter has always before him throughout the rehearsal. The remainder come from his own directorial initiative. Occasionally, when a cast member does not answer the prompter’s summons promptly, other cast members will pick it up and reinforce it: “Bartolo! Bartolome, go on!” Or “Shepherds! Youngsters! Boys!” Likewise, the *encargado* may supply further reinforcement: “Kids, quickly, quickly, because it’s urgent. Get on with it, youngsters, let’s go quickly, kiddos. Youngsters!” When the actor playing a particular character is missing and thus does not answer the prompter’s call, the prompter simply moves on to the next character in the scene.

The characters are called up, as noted, in the order dictated by the script, and come to the front of the “stage” area to deliver their lines, cued by the first line of the speech. Those who have memorized their lines recite them straight through and then return to their places “upstage” if the scene requires their continued presence or leave the stage area if called upon to

exit, whereupon the next character is summoned, and so on through the end of the scene.

In actual practice, many of the actors do not have their scripted lines perfectly memorized, but if they proceed fluently through some semblance of their speeches they are not interrupted or corrected by the prompter, even if they misspeak or skip a line or lines, as long as they conclude with the last one. If, however, an actor falters or stops in mid-speech, the prompter feeds him or her with the next line. Even here, the actor may not repeat the offered line exactly, but if the prompt leads to a resumption of fluent recitation, that is sufficient. If not, a further prompt is offered at the next breakdown, and so on through to the end of the speech. In extreme cases, though this is not uncommon, especially for certain male actors who never bother to learn their parts, the prompter feeds an actor the whole speech line by line, setting up a kind of echoic doubling of the dialogue. It is especially noteworthy in this connection that notwithstanding the standard of full memorization, the prompter and *encargado* never take the actors to task for not knowing their lines. They may remark on it to each other, in asides like:

*Encargado*: It still isn't memorized, right?

Prompter: Nothing. It's that he doesn't study, I believe.

Or, they may observe to an actor that he has skipped a portion of his speech:

*Encargado*: You left out a little bit, but that's OK for now.

But the run-through marches on.

There are, we should mention, certain breakdowns in the delivery of lines that are ultimately beyond the prompter's intervention. In one rehearsal we observed, for example, one of the actors was so drunk that he took off on a wild improvisation that was impervious to the prompter's attempts to feed the correct lines. The prompter simply sat back until the actor ran out of steam and then picked up with the entrance of the next actor.

There is one other exception to the general pattern. The Hermit, whose scripted speeches are pious expressions of his holy character, is traditionally in performance a vigorously burlesque figure. The man who

plays the Hermit in *Tierra Blanca* has a great comic sense, but is notably lax in learning his lines. As the prompter feeds him his speeches line by line from the script, the Hermit transforms them into punning parody. For example, for “*mi cuerpo ya sin aliento*” ‘my body now without courage,’ given him by the prompter, he may come back with “*mi puerco ya sin aliento*” ‘now my pig has no courage’; for “*y por otro lado un fuerte collado*” ‘and on the other side a rough hill,’ he says “*y por acá esta mi otro cuñado*” ‘and over here is my other brother-in-law.’ The Hermit deserves far closer attention, but suffice it to say here that both in rehearsals and in performance the Hermit has license to parody his lines and that there is no expectation that he will repeat them as offered from the script.

While the prompter is the functionary charged with feeding lines to faltering actors, others occasionally assist him in his efforts. Some members of the community know the *coloquio*—or parts of it—well, as former actors, *encargados*, or devotees of the play, and may be seen mouthing speeches from the sidelines along with actors. If the prompter is a bit slow in offering a line to a stalled actor, one of these others may do so from memory.

This collaborative effort extends to other aspects of direction during the rehearsal in the “correction” of the actors. What is corrected are certain features of vocal delivery, movement, and blocking (that is, the management of space), which are introduced into the production process at the rehearsal stage. Here the *encargados*, onlookers, and other actors, who are not seated in a fixed spot like the prompter but can move about closer to the action, are usually in a better position to intervene. From the vantage point of the *encargado*, “correction” is the principal task: “We deal with nothing more than correcting all the people.”

As regards delivery style, while there is a conventionalized, declamatory mode of delivery, learned by observation, and certain roles have special styles associated with them, the actors are allowed a degree of latitude. Thus, actors who deviate from the declamatory style, which is shaped by the prosody of their versified lines, and instead rattle off their lines with little or no attention to versification, receive no coaching or correction. Volume, however, is another matter. There is a clear concern that actors deliver their lines sufficiently loudly to be heard by the audience. The young, adolescent, and pre-adolescent actors who play the roles calling for sexually pure individuals (Mary, Joseph, the Virtues, Saint Michael) are often shy and nervous, which leads them to deliver their lines softly. This

is one major area in which coaching is offered. For example:

*Encargado*: Speak loudly, Chabelo.

Bystander: Don't be afraid.

Or,

*Encargado* [to Virgin]: Tell him, "*Sí, padre,*" but say it to him without fear.

For the sung parts of the play—the music too is introduced at the rehearsal stage—some of the corrections are of the same order as those addressed to the spoken lines: speak more loudly, more forcefully. Singing raises other problems as well, having to do with voice quality and coordination of multiple voices. Some of the younger males employ a strained falsetto voice in singing, which cuts through choral singing, and if the singer's musical abilities are low this can have jarring effects. In these cases, the offending singers are urged to sing in a lower register. Likewise, if singers get too far out of unison, they are urged to get it together. The very few times that we have heard the prompter deviate from the linear run-through organization of the rehearsal and require the actors to repeat a portion of the play involved correction of singing, with special regard to voice quality and vigor. For example:

[Tadeo and Ruben enter]

Ruben: I can't sing like him.

Prompter: Yes, you can. Why not? Now, then, "*esta noche nace nuestro redentor.*" You go ahead with it.

Tadeo and Ruben: [sing].

Prompter: Again. Do it with more fullness, much more fullness, not so thin. Do it: "*Avecillas cantan con crecido y amor/que esta noche nace nuestro redentor.*"

The *encargados* are most engaged with stance, blocking, and movement, considering these physical aspects of staging as their chief responsibility. While the script does contain stage directions, these are not included in the sides distributed to the actors; they are cued by the prompter from the script, sometimes relayed to the actors by the *encargados*. The script contains no blocking guidelines, which are learned for the most part in rehearsal by observation and the teaching of the *encargados* from

custom; the standard is the way it was done *antes*, in the past.

Overall, the blocking of the play is quite simple and varies little. A few scenes, however, especially those involving Joseph and Mary, are more complex and the actors in them are among the youngest in the cast. In those scenes, the *encargado*(s) coach the actors where necessary, pointing out where they should stand and how they should move, modeling the basic dance step, and the like. Thus the *encargado*—and occasionally the prompter—will tell an actor to hold his head up, not to turn his back to the public (that is, the anticipated public, out front), to be more animated, and so on. Exhortations to be more animated occur especially when an actor lapses into perfunctory participation, walking rather than dancing the *caminata*; recall that this dance occurs many times in the course of the play and is done fully in the rehearsal each time it occurs. As the night wears on and fatigue or boredom set in, an actor may key down a level in this manner, at which point the prompter or an *encargado* may urge him or her to dance correctly, with more animation, though this is not done consistently.

The prompter's contribution most often deals with the coordination of the verbal and the physical components of the action, how to articulate the spoken lines with movement, a problem that only comes into play at the rehearsal stage. For example:

Prompter: "*Pero sentado, señor....*" Now come over this way.

Or,

Prompter: [to Joseph] Kneel and stand up. Soon, soon. Now remain kneeling. [to Virgin] Virgin, you have to lift him up. Virgin, lift him up.  
"*Levantate, padre mio.*"

Another task shared by the prompter and the *encargado* is keeping actors ready and available for their entrances, holding them from wandering off and getting them back into place if they do, as in "Galin, don't go away; you stay put there too," or "Stay, Gila," or "Stay there, Bartolo."

Finally, a minor function of the *encargado* in the rehearsals involves a few efforts toward coordinating props. Props figure only minimally in the rehearsal process in any event. Much of the action involving props in the performance is mimed in the rehearsals, but there are a few exceptions. The Hermit, for example, brings his cane to every rehearsal as it is an

essential part of his way of moving. Likewise, a shepherdess may borrow a hat from one of the men at the point where she is supposed to wave at the audience, or the *encargado* may call for a stone to be brought over to serve as a chair in the scenes that require one.

One further feature of the rehearsals requires comment; this concerns the overall tone of the rehearsal event. From the foregoing discussion, it should be clear that the rehearsals are framed in multiple ways that mark them as different from performance. We will discuss this in more detail in a moment, but for now we want to highlight one dimension of framing in particular. The performance frame rests on an assumption of accountability to an audience for an artistic display that is well and effectively done, subject to evaluation (Bauman 1977). Performance counts. Rehearsals, however, represent a different framing of enactment: they are doings that explicitly do not count, even when, as here, they are on view by spectators. In rehearsals of the *coloquio* in Tierra Blanca, one significant means of marking the enactment as not counting fully is the undercurrent of play that runs through the event. This is not the sort of play that Schechner identifies with rehearsal, which manifests itself as a spirit of open experimentation out of which the shape of the performance emerges (1985:20). Nor are we referring here to the striking parodic license that is accorded to the Hermit to transform his scripted lines into bawdy burlesque. Rather, we mean to identify a stream of joking and horseplay that bubbles up on the margins of rehearsal activity. Much of the cast is made up of young people, teenagers and young adults, and joking helps lighten the burden of rehearsing all through the night.

One form of expression by which this joking spirit is realized is punning on the names of characters as they are summoned by the prompter. Thus, when the prompter calls “Indio and Galateo,” one of the shepherds mimics the call as “Indio and Pataleo,” the latter meaning kicking or stamping. In like manner, we hear Lija (sandpaper) for Gila, Pescado (fish) for Pecado (Sin, one of the Vices), Martes (Tuesday) for Marte, and Bueyes (oxen, stupid ones) for Reyes (Kings), and so on. In addition to speech play, the course of the rehearsal is marked by other playful interludes, as illustrated by exchanges of the kind that follow:

Prompter: Gila, come on!

Shepherd: Gila, come on girl!

Prompter: Gila's not with you?

Shepherd: Come on, girl!  
 Shepherd: We just sold her.  
 Shepherd: They gave us five bucks for her.  
 Shepherd: They just carried her off.  
 Gila (arriving): What do I say?  
 Prompter: [gives her the line.]

Or,

Prompter: "They sing the song of the shepherds" [direction from the script.] Come on.  
 Shepherd: Are you singing also, Mario?  
 Shepherd: Now that Bartolo is stopping.  
 Shepherd: No, Bartolo, don't stop. He's not stopping. Bartolo is staying here in the cold till it kills him.

Or, at the point in the action where Bartolo is to lie down to sleep:

Prompter: Lie down for a little while, Bartolo. It's bed time.

Playful insults are also bandied about:

Prompter: Indio!  
 Shepherd: Dumb Indio!

Or,

*Encargado*: Get on with it, fatheads!

The verbal play is accompanied by physical horseplay, the shepherds jostling each other, treading on each others' heels in the *caminata*, grabbing at each others' hats, and the like. Only rarely does the play reach a point where the prompter or *encargado* intervenes, when the horseplay is delaying the progress of the rehearsal.

Prompter: Enough! Shape up there!  
 Shepherd: No, they're fucking with me.  
 Prompter: Let's consider reprimanding him, *compadre*, because he's going to go on doing it.

One additional and irresistible resource for play is the gringo ethnographer. During the course of the rehearsals, a number of opportunities to needle or play with us offered themselves. At one point in the play, Bartolo describes Pecado, Lucifer's sidekick, in the following terms: baggy eyes, head of a badger, hands of a dog, ears of a lion, fingernails of Judas, paunch of a scorpion, feet of a burro, buttocks of a rat, nostrils of a pig. During the rehearsals, Bauman generally stood near the frontstage space with his tape recorder and it became a general shtick for Bartolo to direct the grotesque description at him, pointing out the corresponding parts of his anatomy as he reeled off the descriptive elements. The tape recorder also figured in another bit. In one scene, the Indian offers to trade his dog to the shepherds, and in the middle of the speech, at the point where he says, "now let's make a trade," he turned to Bauman and said, "my dog for your radio." And as one might expect, the Hermit took advantage of our presence as well. During a scene in which he is lost in a craggy mountain wilderness, he has the line, "I see another vision more horrible," which he transformed into "here is this one more horrible," looking pointedly at Ritch.

### **Ensayo real**

The *ensayo real* 'grand rehearsal' is the last rehearsal before the performance. In most ways—scheduling, organization, participation, framing—it is similar to the ordinary rehearsals, though there are important dimensions of difference that set the *ensayo real* apart from the others.

The *ensayo real* is definitely framed as a rehearsal, as a doing of the play that does not count as performance but rather as practice, but it is keyed a bit higher than those that precede it. The most tangible shift resides in the move from the church courtyard to the wooden platform stage newly constructed each year in the public space adjacent to the church. At the time of the *ensayo real*, only the bare platform has been prepared; the brush screens along the sides are not yet in place and the curtains and backdrops are not set up until the day of the performance itself.

The second most apparent difference is in the number and placement of the onlookers at this last rehearsal. Something on the order of eighty or eighty-five people gather to watch the *ensayo real*, and they sit or stand head on to the stage in the area to be occupied by the full audience of

around four hundred on the night of the performance, women and children on blankets, men standing or moving around the fringes, small boys alternating between hanging on the edge of the stage and racing around all over the place. Thus, while this is not a full audience, it represents a step in that direction.

A third difference is that the prompter is now positioned off to the side of the stage. Although he is still *functionally* central to the *ensayo real*, he is no longer so *physically* central.

The run-through of the *coloquio* also moves closer in several respects to the enactment of the play in performance. To begin with, the cast is more nearly complete, with at most only one or two members of the forty-three-person cast missing. Thus, the run-through is also more nearly complete, with essentially all the lines being delivered. In addition, a number of the actors wear parts of their costumes; at a given *ensayo real*, one or two of the Vices will wear their black capes, a handful of shepherds will wear their flower-adorned hats, and the Hermit will wear his tall, peaked hat. Correspondingly, a few more props are in evidence at the *ensayo real*: a real chair instead of the makeshift rock of earlier rehearsals, one or two shepherd's crooks, and so on. The move may be only a partial one. In one *ensayo real* we observed, the Vices picked up sticks from the nearby brush to use as swords, midway between the empty-handed miming of swordplay in the earlier rehearsals and the clashing of real swords and cutlasses in the performance. Likewise, the chair—primarily Lucifer's throne—stands in also as an altar. Although the full complement of props is not employed in the *ensayo real*, this is the first stage in the production process in which we saw accountability for bringing a prop arise. The Indian is supposed to carry a staff in one scene, and when he didn't have it at an *ensayo real* the prompter queried him about it, but then said, "Well, skip it."

Finally, while we might expect the *ensayo real* to get more "serious" than the earlier rehearsals, given the imminence of the performance, the range of play may actually broaden. For example, in one *ensayo real*, during a brief lull in the wedding scene in which Joseph and the Virgin Mary are married, the boy playing Joseph jumped off the side of the stage, ran over to the taco vendor who had set up a small stand, bought two tacos, jumped back up on the stage, sat down on the chair that represented the makeshift altar, and ate the tacos—altogether a bigger playful departure from the scripted action than anything that takes place in the regular

rehearsals, made possible here by the stage, the chair, the accessibility of the taco vendor, and other features of the *ensayo real* as an event.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we want to suggest some more general implications of the framework we have sketched out for the analysis of the process by which the *coloquio* is produced in Tierra Blanca. One of the principal concerns that has motivated performance-centered analysis in its various guises from the beginning has been to carry our understanding of symbolic forms beyond the traditional conceptions of them as cultural objects, the collective products of social groups, to an understanding of how they are employed as equipment for living, resources for the conduct of social life. This led first—under the impetus of the ethnography of communication—to a focus on the performance event, the situational context of use (Paredes and Bauman 1972), a unit of analysis that was ultimately very productive in illuminating in close processual terms how communicative practice works in the telling of a tale or the enactment of a ritual or the conduct of a show trial, toward the discovery of form-function-meaning interrelationships. But the focus on bounded performance events has proven to have its own limitations: it is conducive to reification of context (Briggs 1988:12-15), it inhibits the investigation of social processes that transcend individual events, and so on. This has led more recently to efforts to identify and illuminate larger fields of discursive practice that span performance events and link them to broader social and historical processes (Bauman and Briggs 1990).

In the study of theatrical performances, there have been a number of well established problems that might be seen as relevant to this effort. Perhaps the most classic framing of such concerns is the enduring problem of the relationship between script and performance, which does, after all, set up an elementary discursive field. Most often, however, this framing of the problem calls forth a comparison between the playscript as a written text, a foundational but partial resource for performance, and the performance itself as a semiotically more complex physical enactment, variously shaped by directorial imagination and effort, actors' competence and creativity, the interpretive insights of various participants, both past and present, and so on (see, e.g., Hornby 1977). The actual process that

mediates between and effects the transformation from script to performance is seldom the focus of full, close analysis. A more nuanced but still notably abstract version of the problem is represented by the attempt to distinguish among various orders of text that make up the field of performance, such as Patrice Pavis's enumeration of six kinds of text employed in the theater (dramatic text, theatrical text, performance, *mise-en-scène*, theater event, performance text (1982:160)), or Jean Alter's discrimination among literary text, total text, and staged text in relation to virtual performance and actual performance (1981). More recently, but still maintaining the textual frame of reference, the problem has been cast in terms of intertextuality, opening up the investigation to repeated doings of particular performance forms (performance as never for the first time; Schechner 1985:36), as past doings resonate with, impinge upon, or shape performance in the here and now (Briggs and Bauman 1992). One claim is that this intertextual perspective historicizes performance, and well it can, provided that the intertextual field is in fact grounded in a succession of actual performances in real time to which participants actually orient themselves, and not simply a set of analytically derivable resonances among a set of abstracted texts. Even at its best, however, the perspective by intertextuality links up a succession of full performances, and we submit that that set makes up only a part of the field in which people engage with performed forms.

What we are striving toward here is a broader, fuller, more substantively processual vantage point on the discursive field within which performances are constituted. The production process offers such a vantage point, organized in locally grounded terms that are experientially real for the participants involved. The sequence encompassed by the copying of the sides, the learning of the parts, the general rehearsals, the *ensayo real*, and the full performance represents a series of engagements by the participants with the resources out of which the performance is fashioned, including not only the script and the semiotic building blocks of the *coloquio*, but past experience with the *coloquio* and the emergent shapings and reshapings of action within each stage. Nor is the perspective limited to what will eventually appear on stage within the performance frame; it comprehends as well the accompanying discourse that surrounds, enables, coordinates, comments upon, and plays with the ongoing activity. The framework thus fills in an additional dimension of the history of performances, the historical production of specific performances in particular communities.

Moreover, to underscore the point once again, it does so in locally

defined terms. In regard to the *coloquio*, each of the stages, elements, and actions that we have examined is named, talked about, and oriented to by participants. These are not externally imposed terms or concepts, nor are they analytical objectifications—Mexican *campesinos* objectify things too. Taken all together, the constituent elements and phase structure of the production process allow us to delineate ethnographically a locally defined, processual semiotics of *coloquio* performance. Each stage in the process, from the copying of the sides to the full performance, involves the progressive integration of additional systems of signification and/or the proliferation of signifiers within systems of signification previously introduced. And again, this semiotic process shapes the engagement of participants with the *coloquio*; participants do orient to the production process in terms of these semiotic transformations.

In this essay we have stopped our account short of the full performance because of practical limitations and a concern to fill in the less often described aspects of the production process. What we hope to have conveyed, however, is a sense of how the performance is informed in the course of that process, “*orientando para que se presentarse en un espectáculo mejor*,” oriented toward presenting a better performance.<sup>3</sup>

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