

Freddie Rokem

Philosophers & Thespians: Thinking Performance.

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Freddie Rokem's book *Philosophers and Thespians* (*P&T* in short) breaks with the scientifically oriented study of theater and—more generally—of human action originated with Aristotle. It focuses, instead, on dramatic forms of human reflection and expression. For the author of *P&T*, theater is not merely a literary genre, instead, it is understood more broadly as covering all kinds of artistic performative activities (3). Rokem elaborates a view presented earlier (especially in *Performing History*, which studied the relation between the history of theater and the major historical and political transformations): *P&T* broadens the scope by including perspectives from ancient history and philosophy.

The first part, titled 'Encounters', covers the period from antiquity to the time preceding WWII. It opens with a study of Plato's *Symposium* (in particular, the dialogue of Socrates with Diotima), which is permeated by a multidimensional combination of real and fictitious worlds. For Rokem, Plato is a paradigmatic ancient philosopher who embodies the thespian ideal. Being a philosopher for Rokem means being concerned with human happiness, the nature of reality, the essence of beauty, and the principles of human cognition.

Plato, however, is also a thespian—a follower of Thespis, a legendary inventor of theatrical form as an on-stage actor's spoken dialogue with choir. Thus, thespians are artists who express themselves theatrically. Accordingly, on Rokem's account, drama is not only a genre of literature, but also an artistic performative activity.

Plato, in a sense, has a dual existence as both a historically documented individual and a personage represented in the dialogues by Socrates. He is both artistic philosopher and philosophizing artist. This kind of connectedness, Rokem's 'encounter', consolidates the first part of the book. It is exemplified by different figures—from fictional to historical, ranging from antiquity to WWII—who manifest their dual identity in a struggle with philosophical problems and in the bodily expression of themselves. Rokem reflects upon how philosophers adopted thespian ways of expression and conversely, how thespians engaged philosophical style in theatrical activities (2).

'Discursive practices' constitute the fundamental interpretative category of *P&T*. They "involve some form of direct contact between the [...] individuals engaged in" the relevant discursive activities, e.g. philosophy and 'theater/performance'. The 'direct contacts', called 'encounters', "consist of meetings, correspondences, cooperations—even parties—or any other form of direct exchange and dialogue between representatives of these two disciplines, and in one case an interior 'dialogue' within a dramatic character" (1). Discursive practices constitute an alternative method to "raising general issues, on a wide-ranging theoretical level, concerning the multifaceted and extremely complex relationships, sometimes even competition and confrontation, between these discursive practices" (1). Nonetheless, the rationale for 'encounters' as an alternative to comprehensive theoretical studies of the two 'discursive practices' is not explicitly addressed.

Rokem exemplifies discursive practice in chapter 1 with Sophocles' drama *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Aristophanes' oration in the *Symposium*. Intertextual study of both pieces leads Rokem to set up the question: "What is a human?" as a common platform for philosophical discourse and artistic activities. *P&T*, however, refrains from answering it on its own terms.

Chapter 2 studies a fictitious character, Shakespeare's Hamlet, who embodies the eternal human search for identity. Hamlet seeks an answer to the question "What is a human?" and its authentication by creating an artistic drama within the play and through determining the moral values of actions. The borderline between the real and fictitious worlds ceases to be obvious: Hamlet is both a cognizing subject and a dramatic writer ('theater within theater')—having a real (fictitious) life, but also performing a role of his own projection. As Shakespeare creatively experimented with the phenomenon of madness, the audience would lack a point of reference to distinguish creative from factual truth, had Shakespeare not invented the character of Ophelia, who truly loses all sense of reality and subsequently ends up dead.

Hamlet also exemplifies the discursive practice of a philosophizing thespian. Shakespeare creates dialectical relations between the distanced and engaged perspectives of an actor, who plays with the modes of existence and emotionality, both on the level of the drama's plot (as a character) and on-stage performance (as an actor) (71).

The second part of the chapter devoted to Hamlet discusses 'the paradoxical gap' between speech and silence, saying and doing. The gap is expressed metaphorically by the ineffability of Hamlet's experience during his encounter with the ghost of his father; it is verbalized in the form of the question, "Who's there?" The question not only embodies a paradoxical interplay between the discursive practices of philosophy and theater, but also—according to subsequent interpretations of *Hamlet*—transgresses it towards shaping the actual history: "the ghost of Hamlet's father is the <worthy pioneer> that has come to signify both the different versions of the past as well as a Utopian future. [...] Looking backward at this genealogy of worthy pioneers, from Derrida to Marx and from there back to Hegel and Shakespeare himself, we become <involved> in a <revolving> motion, in the sense of a repeated revolutionary movement. We therefore are gesturing toward Utopia by looking forward through the figure that represents the past" (78–81). The transgression is expressed by the final 'the rest' in *Hamlet*. 'The rest' symbolizes not only 'Utopia', but also philosophical thinking and theatrical activities which transform and 'perform' history.

The third chapter studies two historical figures of the late 19th century: philosopher F. Nietzsche and thespian A. Strindberg. Mainly at issue is their brief correspondence, complemented by their personal connections through close relatives. The correspondence in particular concerns the topic discussed in *Hamlet*, i.e., madness as an interplay between sickness and health, juxtaposed with the issue of being vs. playing oneself. Rokem studies in detail Nietzsche's and Strindberg's "epistolary <stagings> of themselves for the other" (8). He also analyzes daydreams, particularly relevant for Strindberg, especially those concerning his relations with his future wife, Siri von Essen. Rokem also examines in detail a single allusion in *A Dream Play* to S. Kierkegaard's book *Repetition* (1843). He uses thought and artistic experiments intended to reveal the recurrence of historical events.

The main point of the third chapter is a modified interpretation of Nietzsche's aesthetic work as "a text about the birth of the philosophy". Rokem argues that both Nietzsche and Socrates "create a mechanism of <generational> bridges between the

philosophical and the thespian discursive practices” (113). Through ‘revaluing values’ it may ultimately accomplish a ‘Cultural Revolution’ in history (117).

The last chapter of ‘Encounters’ opens with discussion of multidimensional relations between Brecht, a thespian, and Benjamin, a philosopher, spotlighting their chess play (photo, 120). Rokem focuses on them debating Kafka’s essay *The Next Village* on 29 August 1934. This small work, according to Rokem, verifies their understanding of the history of philosophy. Benjamin articulates it in *On the Concept of History*. Brecht, by contrast, embraces his idea in the narrative form of performing dramas, whose central picture, e.g., in *Mother Courage and Her Children* becomes a carriage—a symbol of the passage of time, of social environments and individuals, but also of the change of place. The topic of change reappears in Brecht’s *The Life of Galileo*, emphasizing the difference between life in the world of theoretical (geometrical) models and the real world (135).

The second, substantially smaller, part of *P&T* is titled ‘Constellations’. It is largely continuous with Benjamin’s understanding of the philosophy of history and of performativity (inspired by P. Klee’s ‘angel’ of history), and is also an attempt at constituting a theory of performative storytelling as continuously actualized and necessary for culture.

Chapter 1 focuses on Benjamin’s categories of accident and catastrophe as situations that reveal the simultaneity of past and present (141). Rokem’s analysis of Brecht’s car accident in 1929 is influenced by Kafka’s essay, which combines different dimensions of discursive practices from the literary and dramatic, through the philosophical, up to the historical. ‘The accident’, which from an individual event is projected onto new dimensions up to a historical catastrophe, reveals a continuous passage of events. Kafka’s picture of ‘the journey is another expression of performance and performativity as scripted embodiment that is repeatedly activated in the encounters between philosophers and thespians’ (15).

In the remainder of *P&T* Rokem continues his reflection upon the experience of the accidental participant, an experience which has a dual character: philosophical and thespian. He arrives at a new version of understanding of performativity in the context of linguistic applications. Contrary to J. Austin, Rokem—inspired by J. Butler’s conception of the inseparability of words from actions—considers the usage of performatives in theatre legitimate. He reexamines linguistic performativity in the context of historical events and the categories of ‘accident’ and ‘catastrophe’. Austin’s ‘wishes’, ‘promises,’ and ‘threats’ (as performatives) are interpreted by Rokem from the perspective of the recurrent, present, and future time. The three perspectives are incorporated into ‘a thought-picture’, the baroque emblem which Benjamin applies in *Denkbild* (178). ‘The thought-picture’ in Rokem’s reflection turns out to constitute an outcome of ‘a complete storytelling’, i.e. an integral combination and constant interplay of a withdrawn and engaged perspectives.

Philosophers & Thespians is a cultural-studies discourse on human life as a journey. Rokem’s book embraces wide-ranging cultural contexts that complement his philosophy of history. In contrast to the proponents of new historicism, Rokem supplements his subjective narration with substantive intertextual and historical research. The practical and detailed applications of the concept of performativity make this book a valuable companion to graduate cultural studies and philosophy programs.

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