Performance theory and the documentary act

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For thirty-five years, in American folklore, a single idea has dominated our thought. We call it performance. The word is imperfect, misleading, but we use it because a brilliant theorist, Dell Hymes, made it central to his argument when he was developing a new concept of sociolinguistics in a series of articles in 1964 and 1965. His ideas have become basic to folklore as well as linguistics. Any American folklorist would hold that the theory of performance lies beneath and behind the folkloristic scholarship of the contemporary United States. Performance is a theory of creativity. For thirty-five years, American folklore has been primarily dedicated to an understanding of creativity. This workshop, in Jaisalmer, has been given to creativity and its documentation, and the theory of performance is, I believe, necessary to our practice. To say it schematically, performance unifies structure and function, reconciling two anthropological schools, structuralism and functionalism. Philosophically speaking, performance merges the aesthetic with the instrumental. From the standpoint of communication, it conjoins self-expression with social action. Performance is a generalising theory that works as well for high art as for folk art, for written literature as well as oral literature.

A liberating dimension of performance theory is that it tasks the folklorist with the development of an approach to the world that is useful far beyond the customary limits of the folklorist’s discipline. We are developing a superior theory of creativity beneficial to art historians and literary historians, to anthropologists and sociologists, as much as to folklorists. No matter the realm, the most complete and effective theory of creativity available, I believe, is the idea Dell Hymes has given us, which folklorists in the United States call performance. My topic is how performance theory historically, so that you will understand the enthusiasm of American folklorists. I am not coming to you as a colonial agent, demanding that you adopt our paradigm. Instead, I am saying that if you make the mistake of inviting American scholars into your midst, then they will, inevitably, speak in terms of the theory called performance. And the reason performance theory interests us is that it is based upon a view of human nature, situated in the existential philosophy of the twentieth-century. The theory promises to account for human beings, how they exist in the world, how they are doomed through their humanity, their genetic makeup and material circumstances, to create. In America, we accepted the idea quickly but we have not brought it to full maturity. The reason for our failing is that we have not effectively linked theory to method. We have not adequately considered performance theory in relation to documentary protocols. That is my mission today.

The chief issues are two, and the two lie in the title of our workshop. Our topics are creativity and how creativity can be documented. Let us return to history to understand the significance of our enthusiasm. We can describe folklore scholarship as having been based, through time, on three views of humanity. The first one, an old one, is no longer seriously to be considered. It reduced people to bearers of tradition. People were seen as carrying folklore as though it were a burden on their backs. The metaphor suited an elite view of the poor who led their nasty lives, trudging witlessly under the weight of ancient traditions. The scholar’s job was like that of a tax collector, to intercept the bearers of tradition and take valuables from them. They wandered the world unknowingly carrying stuff the scholar knew to be folklore. Our job was to stop them in their tracks, gain something we called rapport, distracting and tricking them, so that we would rifle their burdens, extracting the bits that would prove useful to our schemes. Folklore scholarship was collection, a taxing by the rich of the poor, an extractive industry. The documentary task, when we thought of people as tradition-bearers, was text collection. We wished to pluck from people texts that were examples of folklore, and our documentary responsibility was nothing more
or less than the accurate recording of texts. I think, and I will always think, that one of the most important missions of the folklorist is the accurate recording of texts. As a survival from our earliest days, as a responsibility to the future, we are dedicated to the precise recording of texts. The latest stage in this progressive trajectory is ethno poetics, an improved means of the representation of the accurate and exact text. This responsibility is ancient in our practice. One of the great, forgotten masters of the discipline is Charlotte Brooke, who had effectively argued before the end of the eighteenth century that folklorists are obliged to record lovingly and scientifically, accurately and completely. That was our model, more than two hundred years ago. People had received texts from an earlier generation. We lifted the texts from them and rendered them on paper as well as we could. In time, folklorists would use and invent more and more elaborate machinery, devices that enabled us to fulfill our responsibility of accuracy with greater and greater precision. Thus, we advance along the old track. But when we think of people as bearers of tradition and our task as collecting and recording and representing texts, then creativity is not part of the picture. There is no creative energy in the people we study; they are human, forgetful, confused, and best when they are passively, non-consciously carrying and transferring texts through time.

The more that we did fieldwork, getting to know real people, the more it became obvious that our notion of passive bearing was wrong and our task of accurate recording was insufficient. As we began to understand the singers and dancers, the weavers and storytellers, we learned that they were reworking, redeveloping, and reinventing the folklore they had received. They learned from many sources, combined in many ways; they were always improvising and innovating. Folklore, we came to understand, is always in a state of change, and tradition, the key term in folklore, was ever in a fluid state of transition. Not long ago, my colleagues in Indiana's Folklore Institute were asked to make a statement to represent folklore. Most chose some version of the sentence, Tradition is not static; it exists in a fluid state of change. That notion, I guess, seemed original, though William Morris had fully articulated the same idea in the 1880s. As soon as we describe tradition as fluid, we need a source. Why is tradition fluid? Because it exists only in the mind, and the mind is perpetually awake, active.

The folklore we study is the consequence of mental activity. And the second historical vision of humanity in folklore holds that people are not passive bearers but active creators. In the second phase, we folklorists became interested in the human process that generated folklore. Now we have creativity in the picture. Instead of people bearing from the past a text for us to extract and commit to paper, we have people who are creative. Our task is to record texts and to understand the process of creation that leads to the acts we record as texts. So the student of art would not only study the resultant object, but as well the creative process. So the student of stories would understand that every story is unique, that stories are not texts in the mind that pop out of the mouth. Stories result from people learning, processing, composing, and performing into the world a tale that is at once traditional, fresh, and fit to the moment.

The text always differs from other texts. Texts are always in some ways like other texts. Texts in analysis urge us to the simple, yet profound idea that every creation combines the variable and the invariant. Something has changed, because all people and events are unique. Something has not changed, because people shape their thought for social exchange. If, in the text, all were new, communication would be impossible. It is axiomatic that in creation, there must be at once change and stability. I cannot say to you something I have said before, in exactly the way I have said it before, or I would not be adjusting my thoughts and words to suit my needs and yours. At the same time, I cannot say something absolutely new, with thoughts never before thought, words never uttered, or I would not be communicating. So, in every created text, there is something new, something old; it can be described as a merging of the variable and the invariant. Recently, you and I have shared a marvellous musical experience in this room. When the singers were performing, all of them accepted and repeated a single melodic line. But, in order to make the event exciting, each singer varied the ornamentation of that line, so that we could follow as the men and boys played back and forth, copying, transforming, and innovating. The thrill of innovation was built upon the stability of the melody. The melody was invariant but the ornamentation was variable. The performance blended the old and the new, the stable and emergent. There was no other possibility. Every time the melody appeared it was the same, and it was not the same. You understand the paradox. And this is not merely the nature of folk performance. If there were not something stable, some deep essence or flicker of style, in every French impressionist painting, we would not be able (as we surely are) to locate the pictures in time and place. Stand far away, and every tradition-French painting or African sculpture or Indian music-seems repetitive. Go close up, and every work is the peculiar creation of an individual in motion in place.

When, in folklore, we begin to understand people as processing and reinventing their traditions, we have begun to move toward a full idea of creativity. In folklore's third phase, which is the phase I will call performance, we understand that the individual is processing folklore information in the mind, changing and rearranging, but we also understand that the individual is processing information, altering and inventing, so as to place a new creation back into the
world. The individual creator is the one who takes ideas from the world and cycles ideas back into the world. The individual artist operates at the nexus where the world is created. Performance is an existential proposition, which establishes people as intelligent, sentient beings who receive and process and compose, and as beings who occupy and act upon the real world with all of its pain and wonder.

I realise the abstraction in all of these words, but the abstractions are nearly over. Here is my point: the idea we call performance represents the third and latest stage in the evolution of a folkloristic vision of human nature. It situates real people in the real world. When we ponder our documentary work, performance can be understood as the unification or two processes. One is a process of design. It is the way the mind gets and transforms information. The second is a process of situating. It is the way the human being, existing in the world, composes the information to suit the scene, to alter circumstance for the better. Every folklore text can be imagined as the result of two, simultaneous, intermeshed processes. One of those processes is the mind's process of learning, storing, and reworking experience. The other is the human process by which the old and the new, the remembered and imagined, the fantastic and pragmatic unify in the things that come new to the world. Everything we study-story or song, pot or temple-depends upon the human being's capacity to transform, and to transform in such a way as to have impact upon the world.

Every object of folklore study is doubly unique. It is unique because it is the result of a particular mental process of design. It is unique because it is situated in a new scene. Creation sets the creator in the world, as receiver, as transmitter, as performer. The process of creation situates folklore in the world, solidly, inescapably, so the creator, you will understand, is necessarily involved with the world during creation.

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with the environment, with the economy, with politics. Life unifies tremendously in the act of performance. When we thought of people as tradition-bearers, they could be isolated from the world, set away from historic forces. But if folklore is the natural result of the existential location of human beings in the world, as actors in situations, then folklore can no longer be conceived as a collection of items, of texts in isolation.

Instead, texts must be understood as the consequence of a double process. One is a process of design, or expression; as I express myself, I express my ability to grasp and transform. The second follows: as I express my transformative ability, I am in a scene, communicating, and in communication, I entangle myself in webs of connection that ramify to the ends of the earth.

We might say that performance theory has as its goal the complete understanding of the text. Every proverb or story, every textile woven, every puppet carved and stitched, every object of folkloristic study expresses the self, the individual, the one who processed received materials; and it expresses the society among whom, and for or against whom, the individual operates; and it expresses the world, the place the society occupies; and it expresses some relation to the ultimate, the cosmological ground upon which all moves. Maybe the cosmological is expressed in scientific terms, more often it is framed religiously, but it is the case that the creation we take as the object of folklore study must bear within it an individual, a society, a world, and some transcendent possibility that relates the thing we study to principles of the ultimate.

How does all this fancy talk relate to documentation? We wish to be complete and systematic, at once scientific and properly connected to an acceptable concept of human nature. Suppose I were to document Kherati Ram Bhatt, master puppeteer of Jaisalmer. These are the things I would have to document, being an adherent of the performance school. First, I would document the text. In his case, the text would be a puppet. He makes puppets. I would record them accurately; the goal of accuracy being that the record is so complete that a new puppet, exactly like the old one, could be created from the recording. A digression might be necessary. Why call a puppet a text? Why call a stream of words a text? Text means textile, something woven together out of distinct threads. When we call a story a text, we employ a metaphor form the weaver's world. It is less strain to think of a puppet as a text than it is to think of a string of words as a text. A text is an object composed of parts that we perceive to have been the unified creation of another person. It is what we are obliged to document: units other people compose out of discrete parts, units that are limited bits of the real world.

In the case of Kherati Ram, he takes wood, carves it, paints it, he takes cloth, he takes different elements and puts them together in such a way that in the end there is a thing, a creation that had not been there before, an object with edges, separable from its situation. You can pick the puppet up and take it elsewhere. That is a text: a unit made of parts by someone else that can be moved from one situation to another, an entity apprehensible as separable. So for me, for him, the text is a puppet. My job is to record it. That was the main command in the days of tradition-bearers. I take
a photograph, but a picture is never enough. I take measurements. I draw details. I sample the wood, the cloth. I make a representation so accurate it could be used to reproduce the original. That is the goal, but it is only the beginning.

The second thing to document is space. Where does the puppet happen? We talk of things as being out of context, but all things are in context, always, and that context must be described. Let us say, Kherati Ram’s puppet is in a museum exhibition. Well, we would document it, recording where the puppet is hung, how it relates to labelling, lighting, and the other exhibits. If we chance to be at his home where the puppet is made, then I would not only record his puppet, I would record its situation, making a measured plan of his house, the courtyards front and back, to locate the puppet in space, carved by the front gate, painted in the courtyard behind, stored in a chest beneath the front window in the bedroom. Spatial positioning is my second documentary job.

It sounds simple, but I find many of my friends in folklore still do not understand. They talk about context but forget to document context. They record stories but do not record with the same interest the place where stories are told. Performance theory remains unaccomplished. So we record the puppet, and we record the places where the puppet exists, the place of making, the place of storage, the place where it is put into action. That leads us forward, but let us pause at step two: the puppet, a puppet of certain materials and form and colour, is in a box, the box is in a room, the room is in a house, the house has a yard in front where Kherati Ram’s little daughters are sanding the heads of other puppets.

The text, the puppet, is not floating in the air. It is in the world, exactly here. The third things I must document are the social arrangements that surround the text in its place. Kherati is carving. Near him sits Papu, his brother and colleague. They collaborate in puppetry, and now they chat while Kherati hacks a face out of wood. He works as the leader of a familial unit. I need to situate Kherati among people as I situate the puppet in space, so I document who is present, where they sit or stand, how they move, while he moves, carving a puppet’s head. The fourth thing I need is a complete biography of Kherati Ram Bhatt. Not a few facts, but an autobiography that will permit rich interpretation. I need to know where he was born, when and how he learned his trade, how he improved his work. I need his understanding of the history of this tradition, his understanding of the aesthetic and economic and social aspects of his practice. I need, in short, to have a long discussion with him about his life.

The first things that I must document are sensate. I see the puppet, I see its physical setting, and I see its social setting. These things are visible. A camera would catch them. Often we think all documentation can be done by technological magic, but the most important documentary acts elude technology. They are ultimately invisible. We have to know the interior of Kherati Ram’s skull if we are going to understand that puppet. So having recorded the text, its physical, and then its social settings, we record the fullness of the creator’s biography. By that I do not mean a few facts as in a census—father’s name, mother’s name, birth date. I mean a conversation of, say, three hours in two separate sessions. During that time, stories emerge, and slowly the distance between the parties, the one being documented and the one doing the documentation, breaks down. Friendship becomes possible, collaboration becomes possible, and the ethical dimensions of ethnography gain natural, human shape.

The next thing I must document is the artist’s vision, not my vision, but the creator’s vision of creation. Generally, this involves at least three different aspects. The first is the process by which the text has been created. Obviously in the case of the puppet, I watch while Kherati Ram makes one. I watch several times. At last I think I understand the process, and I ask questions to be sure I understand and to learn things, such as the name of the wood, that are not visible. This is the easiest step: the documentation would allow someone to use my words and images to replicate Kherati Ram’s process. And my questions allow us to understand with his understanding. His wood is found only in a certain part of Rajasthan. Called aakre lakri, it has ideal properties for puppet-making: it is soft when green, easy to carve, and it dries hard and light, so the puppet can be moved easily and confidently by the puppeteer. Studying a craft seems easy. The process is externalised, visible. How could such a thing be done for a storyteller? One of our failings as analysts of performance is that we have theorised much but rarely asked the performers about their theory of performance. I have found that storytellers can talk abstractly about story telling, and it is a pitiful bit of arrogance that leads us to believe that we understand performance better than the performers. Many American analysts seem to me to be meditating upon their own failed careers as folksingers more than they are investigating the mature performance of the accomplished artists they write about. I abandon that digression to say that when I question traditional artists they seem to have already solved many of the problems that have bedevilled a century of American folklore scholars.

Is folklore stable or changing? Once we said stable, now we say changing, but the creators know what is variable, what is invariant in their performance. Artists know their art, and we must be patient enough to learn the language in which deep discussions can occur. First in our documentation of the artist’s vision is process. By
watching and talking, we develop a full account of the way in which the creation is created. Second is form. In some areas of folklore scholarship, this would be subsumed as an issue of genre, and it connects to the crucial matter of repertory. In the old days, we thought we understood genre, but the performers did not. Then, at last, we asked and very often we found that tellers of tale had ideas of genre superior to those of the academy. The artists know what they are doing. Often they have conducted a kind of structured analysis on their own repertoires enabling subtle judgments. That is surely what I found in ten years of research in a community in Ireland. The tellers of tale had developed their versions of the theories we consider to be the rare possessions of professional folklorists and anthropologists.

We must document form, genre, and repertory. And I have found that the people we are studying can help us, for among them there are thoughtful individuals who have understandings concerning those very issues. They can speak of form, genre, and repertory. In working with women who weave carpets in Turkey, I found a few who could talk aesthetic theory at the level of the trained art historian. I am not overstating it, but it does take a long time to learn the language the artists use, even when we think we are speaking the same mother tongue. Once communication has become effective, then our informants become our teachers. I recall one young woman, Nezihe Ozkan, a weaver in a remote mountain village. I had known her for years when at last I asked her for the key to the aesthetics of the oriental carpet, unquestionably one of the greatest creations of humankind. She was a master weaver, and did not pause, but responded quickly that the key was the development of an interesting relation between a busy, active border and a quiet, serene centre. Look at an oriental carpet. Why are one good, one poor, and one splendid? It is the alternation between action and repose, excitement and serenity. Nezihe, the traditional artist, knew, and she put quickly into words the aesthetic key to one of the world's great creations. In all their books, the art historians have never written it so clearly as the village woman spoke it. But, remember, I had known her for years. We were comfortable with each other, had developed a way to speak Turkish that suited us.

In documenting the artist's vision, we watch and listen, learning about process, about form, and then we come to the hardest task. We must learn the artist's interpretation. We have entered the realm of meaning. Generally, scholars have seized the right to interpret, reducing artists to suppliers of materials, making them play the role of the working classes with respect to the elite position of the interpreting scholar. They make things, but we know the history, we know the meaning, we do the interpretation. You have learned my position, my politics, so it will not surprise you when I say that I have found among the artists some people whose interpretations are subtler, richer, and finer than those of scholars. Mehmet Gursoy in Turkey, Haripada Pal in Bangladesh are the two of the artists I could name who surpass the thinkers of the academy in their interpretive panache. That is, if I take the time to get to really know the artists of a place, I will find one, maybe two, whose courageous interpretations sail beyond my own tepid imaginings. My job is only to stay long enough, to know the language well enough, to have developed a sufficiently affectionate relationship, and then, at the right moment to make the right request. I do not undervalue my role in the work. So, let me recapitulate. There are physical things to record. There is a text, an object that occupies the sensate world. It has dimension, size, duration, shape; it has a beginning, an end; it has parts, segments, notes and episodes. It needs to be recorded, documented completely and accurately. The text is a puppet of wood, paint, cloth and string. It only exists in some physical setting. It is separable, yes, but it is always somewhere, and that place must be documented. It has a physical environment, the puppet is in a box, or it is hanging on the back of a stage, ready to be put into play. In a physical location, it is in a social location. Someone is there. Maybe it is only the observer, maybe it is the man, Kherati Ram, bent and carving, who made it, or maybe it is Kherati Ram, turbaned for performance, who picks the puppet from a post and drops it, whistling, to dance on the stage, while his brother seated to the left, sings a welcome. Now the text, object, puppet, is in its physical and social scenes, and we are documenting them. The people who comprise the text's social context are not stones or birds. They are human beings, and since they are, since they are beings of memory, imagination, and will, they have biographies. The biographies must be recorded so the objects we study can be understood as the products of intention, of retention and innovation, and not as the natural spill of instinctual behaviour. Once these people have biographies, and we have recorded them, we have begun to connect with them on the basis of a shared humanity. Kherati Ram is a man as I am a man. He is the yield of his past, and dreams, as I am. A man with a biography, he is a man of attitude and opinion, of information and theoretical insight. I need to learn from him at least these three things: Process; how is the text created? Form; what are the forms and categories in his full repertory of creation? Interpretation; what are the meanings of the puppets, who is portrayed and why, how do they combine in the drama? Watching his amazing play, I am stirred to a wild assembly of interpretations, and I expect they would prove amusing to other scholars, but taking my documentary role seriously, and working toward the fulfillment of the performance theory, I would want to ask Kherati Ram for his interpretation, puppet by puppet, scene by scene.
in the drama, and I would want to accept him as a critic and colleague, soliciting his opinion of my interpretations. I have the right to develop my own interpretations, but I have the obligation to test them against the richer knowledge of the creators themselves. Not by simple interviewing, but through colloquy, through trades of insight in a collaborative frame, the artist and the scholar come toward the deepest levels of meaning.

The last thing to be documented might be called culture in general. Culture as entailed by performance theory differs from the culture spread through the classic ethnography. When I was trained in anthropology, the idea of ethnography involved going among a group of people, treated as a collective. The assumption was that they were alike in fact and attitude. From them you recorded data that fit in master categories, facts about the economy, about social structure, about religion. Then you came home. Now I think of culture as an array of issues toward which people orient in performance. The texts created in performance raise the issues, and the problem for the analyst is to relate the issue in the text back to the experience of the participants. So we need to know as much as possible about their experience, what it is like to live where they do, as they do, with their terrors, their delights, in their economic and political circumstances. Our hope is to catch their references, understanding their creations, as much as it is humanly possible to do, as they understand them. There is no limit to this work. But every minute in the field with the creators, eating their food, feeling the itch of their place, is an invaluable addition to our effort at understanding. In essence, we must trust our human intuitions, recording everything that strikes us, taking photos, rolling tape, and above all filling page after page of our notebooks. The most important of all documentary technologies is the cheap pen and the cheap notebook, tools for recording our own reactions, which, it is to be hoped, are parallel enough in fellow feeling to provide us a ground for mutual understanding and interpretation.

Other people create the things, stories or puppets that we record as texts. The texts refer to their experience. Sharing experience, joining the artists in talk about process, form, and meaning, we gain the right to create our own texts. Our texts must be full of their texts. Our interpretations must be chastened by their interpretations. But our texts will be, at last, ours. The hope is that our texts will be worthy of the people we have struggled to understand.

A few simple notions can I believe, advance that struggle. Creativity can be imagined as a combination of two processes. One is the mental process by which form is designed. The second is the bodily process of putting form into the world, adjusting it to have positive impact. To make the distinction clear in folklore terms, consider the proverb that is, as proverbs generally are, repeated verbatim. In repetition, apparently, there is no creativity. But there is creativity in situating the proverb in the world in the right way, locating it in the flux of the instant so that it has consequence, function. By contrast, let us say, the creativity of the epic is the creativity of the mind soaring beyond mere memorisation, winging free while the eyes are closed, the audience forgotten, and the problem of creation is sufficient unto itself. I sketch the extremes, one of repetition in a new context, one of a creation breaking free of contextual constraint. In the telling of a story, the creativity might be in composing the tale, or it might be in fitting the tale to its scene. Most likely it lies in both at once.

In most creativity, in most of that which draws the folklorist, the two processes fuse. The mind’s capacity to make form becomes one with the desire to situate form in the world as a communication, so that the creation will usefully rearrange the conditions of human existence. The creation is structured to function, and the double process is essential to performance theory. The processual conjunction might be called situated intention or competence in context or art. The language does not matter, so long as the idea is clear, and if it is, then the implications for documentation should be clear. As has been the case for more than two centuries, our first job is to record texts, but now recognizing that texts do not travel on their own through space and time, recognizing that texts are created by individuals who use their unique skills of learning and transformation in order to compose, and their unique sensitivity to situation, as well as their own opinions about social order political purpose, to put their compositions into the world, then we must do much more than record texts, completely and precisely.

And I suggest, as a start, a little documentary list to check off while you do your work. Document the text. Document its physical setting. Document its social setting. Record the biographies, in their words, of the people involved, members of the audience, consumers as well as creators. With the creator, you need to document the process of creation, the forms that make up the full repertory, and you need to document particular meanings and general interpretations. Then you need to document, intuitively, emotionally, as fully as possible, the experience you share with the creator, gaining a general feel for culture. At last the goal is to know enough to be able to understand the text, so as to derive a full account of its creation, and you do that, we do that, so as to live with respect, usefully and honourably among the people with whom we share this earth.