

# Introduction

## Introduction: “How Theatre Means”

As I write this introduction, I am in rehearsal in Toronto for a new play, *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, a devised piece by Guna and Rappahannock playwright/performer Monique Mojica and the Chocolate Woman Collective. The creative team comes from Toronto, New York, Panama City, Guna Yala, Illinois, Montreal, and a few smaller centres in Ontario. There are several languages in the room – Spanish, English, and *Dule Gaya* (the language of the Indigenous people of Guna Yala, an autonomous territory on coastal Panama), plus snatches of French, Cree, and Anishinabe – and no one person speaks more than two of them. The theatrical and cultural codes at play are even more complex, as we try to weave together a new play based on dramaturgical principles derived from Guna women’s textile arts and on theatrical languages based on Guna pictographs, all deeply informed by Guna cosmology and epistemology (ways of knowing). How do we create this play? How will audiences read it? The project of this book is to ask how such theatre, or any other theatre, produces its meanings.

How does theatre mean? What kind of question is that? In a Euro-American context it is common to be concerned with matters of interpretation and explanation (hermeneutics and exegesis). It is common, that is, to ask, interpret, and explicate *what* something means. But for students, researchers, and practitioners of theatre in the 21st century, a question that precedes these has to do with the *means* of meaning production, and this question is a semiotic one. Semiotics is concerned not with *what* a particular work means, but with *how* meaning

is produced in the process of creating, viewing, analysing, and recording a piece of theatre. It is concerned with the *languages* of the theatre and the ways in which theatrical signification and communication occur. These languages are many, multiple, and intersecting. They include written and spoken languages, but they also include the complex languages of sound, music, gesture, design, and visual communication, all working in consort or in tension with one another, and they increasingly include the languages of a vast array of global “cultural texts,” as Juri Lotman calls “any carrier of integral (‘textual’) meaning including ceremonies, works of art, as well as ‘genres’ such as ‘prayer,’ ‘law,’ ‘novel,’ etc.” (“Theses” 6).

To mean is not the only thing that theatre does – it also entertains, and moves – but it is one of the most important things. This is so because one of theatre’s primary functions is to serve as a live forum for the negotiation of values within and between cultures. It is a place where communication happens, and for students of the theatre from the elementary to the most advanced level, to understand how this communication and these negotiations occur – how meanings are encoded and decoded – is essential.

Encoding and decoding are neither simple nor stable. Meaning is not something inherent in a play script or theatrical production, nor is it something that is simply expressed by autonomous (independent) individuals – playwrights, directors, designers, and actors – and understood by autonomous audience members. The meaning of a particular work is neither constant nor universal. Like those who produce and interpret it, a work of theatre is subject to different historical and cultural forces. It is produced *by* cultures, and it is *productive* of culture. As meanings come into being, they change cultures, however subtly, and they change the ways in which future meanings can be produced and read.

Meaning, then, is best understood as a process, something that is provisionally produced by communities, technologies, and cultures engaged in various kinds of social,

economic, technological, and pedagogical relationships with one another – including relationships between theatre artists, between audience members, and between the audience and the stage. One of the implications of this is that meaning is less a product for consumption than something that is always *in* production through processes of negotiation across many different codes. And those negotiations can often consist of struggles over who controls the codes.

Over history stories of conquest, colonialism, imperialism, and globalization are in large parts stories of struggle over meaning, as one cultural system seeks to dominate, control, and fix meaning, representing other meaning systems as imprecise, ignorant, primitive, weird, superstitious – or just “other.” Indeed, representation – one thing (a word, an image) standing in for another – is at the heart of meaning production: we come to particular understandings of the world by representing it to ourselves and others through words, images, and stories in ways that are necessarily selective, imprecise, and partial, in both senses of the word (incomplete and biased). And we come to recognize things *through* their familiar representations: we learn from representations, including theatrical ones, both what exists (what is worthy of representation, of being noticed), and what to expect of it, what its essential features are.

But all representations are misrepresentations; if they weren't they would be the thing itself, and would be unnecessary. Representations are useful only insofar as they *do* substitute for the “real thing”; that is, they are useful only insofar as they are misrepresentations. That is the work they do. Even what are thought of as realistic or “life-like” representations select, direct focus, draw attention to, or emerge from a particular position or viewpoint, depending on their purpose: the representation of a tree in a forest industry manual will differ from one in an environmentalist text, a landscape painting, or a seed catalogue. A landscape as represented in a geological survey looks very different from

the same landscape in a road map; neither coincides in any meaningful way with a photograph of the same landscape, and photographs of the scene from different points of view will be equally inscrutable to one another. Some representations are only recognizable as such by specialists – people who are well versed in a specific language – as when a chemical formula represents a substance that is more familiarly and more frequently represented by a simple word or image: “Table salt” is usually only represented as “NaCl” for chemists, for whom the formula is uniquely useful. But one would never know from the formulaic representation that table salt is white, granular, or helpful in enhancing the flavour of all sorts of food.

Similarly, all recognitions are misrecognitions: when we see a drawing and recognize it as, for example, a tree – (what does it mean to say of a piece of paper with marks on it, “that’s a tree?”) – we are giving assent to the depiction in pencil on paper of some general elements of “treeness” standing in for the real thing. (The fact that the paper the sketch is drawn on is actually made from trees plays no part in what we are recognizing, unless of course we work in the pulp and paper industry and are making a special point.) Without such misrecognition communication could not happen.

Accepting or assenting to such misrecognitions always risks operating in the realms of cliché and stereotype, risks participating in a representational economy that values some aspects of what is represented over others, and risks universalizing certain traits. Indeed, we risk policing the “appropriate,” “normal,” or valued characteristics of elements of the world and of humanity each time we say of a representation, “yes, I recognize that.” Even so simple a representation as a stick figure asserts that a “normal” human being has four limbs, as we “recognize” this as a key part of what makes humans human. But *do* all humans have four limbs? A stick figure with a skirt and long hair makes a similar case for what “normal” women look like and what differentiates them from a fall-back

standard for humanity that is thereby constructed as male, short-haired, and skirtless.

But trees and humans are not represented in the same ways in all cultures. The representation of a tree in one culture may be totally unrecognizable as such to someone from another. This adds an extra and essential wrinkle to questions of representation, and therefore of meaning production. In cultures north of the tree line, trees may not be the normal objects of representation at all, any more than lions or platypuses are. For all intents and purposes they do not exist. And many cultures have no way of representing their own unique “ethnicity”: they are, in their own languages, people, or humans, *tout court*, and when other peoples emerge into representation in those cultures, they do so as something else, something marked as “other.” Euro-American attempts in postmodern and postdramatic theory and practice to move *away* from representational ways of making meaning, moreover, come at precisely the time when peoples from historically “othered” cultures are beginning to seize control of their own representation, in theatre and elsewhere, and this is a problem. At a moment in history in which encounters across cultures (and therefore across meaning systems) are increasingly quotidian and increasingly complex, particularly in the large urban centres where theatre most often takes place, it is increasingly urgent to come to a better understanding of how communication happens across difference, and how representation normalizes, “others,” or “disappears” its objects.

It is the purpose of this book to provide a brief history and summary of the study of meaning production in the theatre, to map some ways in which the application of a semiotic approach can be useful in both the study and production of theatre and performance, and to consider the value of such an approach to the production and study of theatrical work across social, cultural, and historical difference. The three chapters that constitute Part I foreground theory. Chapter 1 introduces the basic concepts and histories of semiotics as the

study of meaning production generally, focusing primarily on the contributions of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and American logician and structural linguist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). Key to Saussure’s work is his account of the sign as the basic unit of communication, its relationship to the “sign system” within which it gets its meaning, and the relationship of sign systems to the social and cultural contexts that control that meaning. His work has major implications for the ways in which texts and cultural texts speak to one another, the ways in which different sign systems are established and controlled, and what interests they serve. Saussure’s understanding of languages as sign systems became the foundation for a paradigm shift in fields ranging from anthropology through psychoanalysis and historiography to literary studies that became known as Structuralism. His understanding of sign systems as at once arbitrary and structured around relations rather than absolutes subsequently fuelled a movement in architecture, art, philosophy, and literary studies that came to be known as poststructuralism.

Sharing with Saussure a concern with the nature of signs and insights about their relationality, Charles Peirce is important here largely for his focus on the *interpretation*, rather than simply the production, of signs. He also significantly moved the discussion of meaning production beyond spoken language, the almost exclusive focus of his Swiss contemporary, towards a study of different types of signs in which the relationships between signifier and signified, sign and referent are not always or exclusively arbitrary, and in which the signifier is not always verbal. Peirce allows us to begin to focus on meaning production by audiences, specifically in theatre, and to begin to map out the relationships between the different types of sign that he identifies – particularly the icon, index, and symbol – and different types of theatrical representation in which those signs might most effectively be used.

The second chapter focuses exclusively on the semiotics of drama and theatre, providing a brief history from important

early explorations by the Prague School semioticians in the 1930s, through 1980s “scientism,” to the present state of the field. The focus here is on laying the groundwork for more applied analysis in later chapters by clarifying key concepts such as those of estrangement, foregrounding, and showing, the *mise en scène* and the performance text, key methods such as actantial analysis, and key issues such as performativity, the role of time, space, spectating, and the impact of theatrical and cultural context on meaning making. This chapter draws examples from specific plays and contemporary productions in order to demonstrate the ways in which conditions of production, conditions of reception, and “the performance itself” function in constantly shifting ways as the intersecting technologies of theatrical meaning making.

Chapter 3 concludes Part I by examining current and proposed future uses of a semiotic approach in intersection with other methods, including feminist, materialist, ethnographic, anthropological, phenomenological, intercultural, and postcolonial. A particular focus is on the benefits and drawbacks of the semiotic approach for the purposes of intercultural analysis, where performances operate at the intersection of cultures that can themselves be understood as sign systems, and most particularly in the performance of contemporary multicultural societies that are understood to be complex ecologies operating at the intersection of such systems.

Along with a resistance to a purely Structuralist or narrowly scientific approach to a semiotics of performance comes a pragmatism that lives at once with postmodern uncertainties, multicultural complexities, and the sheer messiness of theatrical production, where on-set signs can reveal their materiality by crashing down like badly built flats, and the copulation of signs can issue in real-life pregnancies. This chapter grounds its generalizations in local theatrical practices, demonstrating, for example, the ways in which “things” get roped into serving as “signs” without surrendering – or

indeed, while enhancing – the *frisson* of their phenomenological *thingness*, which precedes or exceeds meaning, representation, and interpretation, and which produces powerful emotional affects. And it probes the ways in which materialist and ethnographic semiotics – “sociosemiotics” – can usefully complicate traditional monocultural communication models and introduce ways of positioning the spectator/critic in relation to the theatrical work without assuming structuralist mastery or scientific objectivity.

Part II turns from (mainly) theory to practice, both theatrical and scholarly. Chapter 4 serves as a guide to the application of a semiotic approach to the analysis of scripts and, in the case of devised theatre, performance plans, programs, “scenarios,” and resources. It considers the script or scenario, not as a blueprint for performance, an object of interpretation, or a reservoir of meaning to be realized on stage, but as an element of production that participates on relatively equal terms with the many other ingredients that combine in the creation of a performance. The chapter begins with a discussion of analytical method and reading practices, works through ways of identifying the primary modes of meaning-making employed in a given script or performance scenario, and considers what theatrical sign systems might resonate with them. Is character primary? Action? Narrative? Imagery? Rhythm? Gesture? What kinds of signs are employed, and what sign systems do they evoke? What cultural contexts do they emerge from or refer to, and what belief systems do they invoke? Are these systems working in mutually reinforcing or productively conflicting ways? In what ways can directors, dramaturges, actors, designers, theatre historians, scholars, and critics read the same scripts and differently practice what Michael Sidnell has recently called the “semiotic arts of theatre” (Sidnell)? The chapter incorporates two provisional case studies by drawing examples from a translation of Ibsen’s classic, *A Doll House*, and from the new “intercultural” devised performance with which I began, *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*.



While Chapter 4 begins with a script or scenario and ends with a performance or a scholarly analysis, the fifth chapter begins with the performance “itself” and considers how it might be understood. This chapter focuses on the purposes and limitations of “reading” a performance. In doing so it takes into account the ephemeral nature of performance that, unlike most other art forms, won’t sit still for analysis. It therefore considers Marco de Marinis’s understanding of the construction of “the performance text” as a “theoretical object” (*The Semiotics of Performance 2*), one that stands in for the performance as the object of analysis, replacing a fleeting *event* with a more stable textual *object*. For directors, dramaturges, designers, and actors, “reading” a performance can involve the ongoing reflective analysis of their own work as part of the creation and rehearsal process, its purpose being to evaluate and modify the work-in-progress or to move on to produce further work. “Reading” a performance might also involve theatre practitioners using semiotic analysis as a way of understanding the work of other artists in order to enrich their own. For scholars such analysis involves, among other things, asking how live performance can be translated into archives and histories, and how the reading process shapes future attempts to recuperate or extend the cultural work done by a given performance or body of work.

In each case the intention is to model ways in which a performance can be read by focusing, again, on primary modes of communication used in the performance “itself,” the signs employed and the sign systems evoked, and the nature of their intersection. This chapter distinguishes between a “purely” semiotic approach that assumes, as Jiří Veltruský does (“Man” 84), that everything on stage is a sign (and by implication nothing else), and other approaches (such as the phenomenological) that remind us that objects or actions can and do exceed their sign value, and it considers the application, in consort with a semiotic approach, of other theories and methods appropriate to a specific performance analysis.

The chapter moves through issues of representation and recognition, considers the onstage “world” of the play, and focuses on the semiotics of reception in order to help readers understand the active role of live audiences in the production (not just the interpretation) of meaning. This involves, for example, looking at the ways in which a production that tours changes meaning in the different contexts in which it is received. The chapter returns to *A Doll House* and *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, focusing this time on the plays in production.

The purpose of *How Theatre Means*, then, is threefold: to introduce, summarize, and critique the history and current state of semiotics as a means of understanding meaning production in the theatre; to build upon the semiotic method as currently understood by putting it into conversation with other modes of theatrical analysis and extending its reach into a renewed interculturalism; and to describe and model some applied uses of this expanded semiotic method for both scholars and practitioners of “the semiotic arts of theatre.”