CHAPTER - IV

STASIS IN PERFORMANCE / NON-PERFORMANCE

In the two previous chapters, I have tried to read the patterns of stasis in the plays of Albee. But the negotiations have been, due to obvious reasons, constrained to a text-based, readerly approach. In so far as the reading itself is concerned, there can be no quarrel with such a negotiation in hermeneutics. But in actual praxis, when the play is in progress in the theatre, the entire phenomenological structure is bound to undergo innumerable alterations. Hence, even as a play is in progress, one may be witness to radical revisions in the hermeneutic process. This is the basic problem that I aim to tackle in this chapter.

The terms ‘drama’ for a textual approach and ‘theatre’ for a stage oriented approach are somewhat arbitrarily used in the study: the very existence of such mutually exclusive terms indicate the rift between ‘text’ and ‘performance’. Drawing from a somewhat random selection of theory on the concerned issues, I shall try to establish our own situation so far as applicability / non-applicability of these issues are concerned.

Unquestionably, a play is first written. But it is written on purpose that it be performed. Two distinct phenomena, though inter-related, can be seen here: the written text and performance, the concepts of drama and theatre, the stage and the page. Priorising the text in hierarchy, accepting the position of the writer’s ‘greatness’ and the ‘organic’ quality of their writing, its
‘mysterious inner unity’ that accounts for their success, as propounded by the German romantics such as Schlegel have led dramaturgs like Tieck to absolutely refuse to edit out any part of the Shakespearean text. This questions the very root of theatrical performance, subverting its very raison de être, and making it redundant. If the reverse were true, and performance be taken as the organic ‘whole’, then that would marginalize the importance of the text to only being an incidental part of that whole. By the same logic, Shakespeare’s genius could be undermined by the director’s or the actor’s genius, and cultural relativism would also play its own part. Charles Lamb had not for nothing objected to performance – “how much Hamlet is made another thing by being acted”¹ and how the text should speak for itself. Edward Gordon Craig in On the Art of the Theatre too, accepts the position that Shakespeare’s plays do not need to be staged as they are ‘complete’ in themselves. Further, he suggests that theatre reject traditional texts to which performance can add nothing significant, and develop its own independent art of colour, light, rhythm and abstract form.² (This is reminiscent of Antonin Artaud’s work to which the avante garde has really taken, as we shall see later).

Julian Hilton leaves out both audience and text when he considers performance –

... in the theatre any plot or action exists only in the moment of performance and has no stable meaning or identity outside of the performance process .... there is no single or necessary definition of what plot or action is, even in the case of a play with an authoritative source ‘text’, for every performance redefines,
however marginally, the nature of the performed. The purpose of performing this becomes one of generating an intensified experience for all who participate in it rather than the representation of some pre-existing action or state of feeling according to some immanent ideal in its poetic textual source.

Be it as it may, drama as a literary type itself has been called to question: without the necessary reference to the extra-literary institution of the theatre, it would be seen to lack the very vehicle of its reception. Anne Ubersfeld says:

Theatre is a paradoxical art, or can be seen in the fact as the very art of paradox, at once both literary product and concrete representation, at once both eternal (indefinitely reproducible and renewable) and momentary (never reproducible as identical to itself). When Antonin Artaud insists that the literary or the textual violates the theatre’s real cultural business, even he is perhaps aware that the connection may never be actually severed: drama is a culturally accepted literary type. It is also then, the intense focus of paradox, a singularly disruptive force defying generalisations.

It is from Theatre semiotics that we may derive some interesting formulations regarding the problem. Acting scripts are sometimes referred to as holes to be filled by another message text – *mise-en-scene*. Theatre semiotics views performance and text as two different communication systems
between which certain messages may be 'translated' – the spectacle as a sort of 'text' with its own signifying systems separate from those of the written text. But the word 'translation' again, automatically prioritizes the written text. Says Pirandello, "So many actors, so many translations, more or less fortunate, but like any translation, always and necessarily inferior to the original."6

When theatre semiotics pretends not to privilege the linguistic sign, but to study drama as a whole theatrical happening, we can see the reasons why such a stance in actually untenable:

... It is only because we already know our paradoxical situation with respect to language, only because the situation already reveals itself in the practise of literature, that we undertake the "semiotic" project in the first place. A semiotics that seeks to circumvent the literary altogether, or to avoid strictly the recognition of the uniqueness of the linguistic sign -- as semiotics of the theatre sometimes pretends to, is therefore a semiotics that makes a nonsense of itself.7

That is why we have largely separate groups of semioticians working either on performance and its codes or on the dramatic text and its rules. However, it is really impossible to be mutually exclusive, and Keir Elam in The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama suggests that "the written text / performance text relationship is not one of simple priority but a complex of reciprocal constraints constituting a powerful intertextuality."8, each bearing the trace of the other. But this is problematic too, as performance is only limitedly constrained by the text, and text does not usually bear traces of any
actual performance. Joseph Melancon, a French drama / theatre critic seeks to show that theatricality can create "a positional semiotics syntactically dissociated from the discourse which semiotically invests it." Rejecting as imprecise the commonly accepted definition of semiotics as a 'language of signs', and the Bartheian notion of theatre as "informational polyphony", Melancon sources French critic Benveniste, who postulates that a semiotic system" which has "significance" implies not a code, nor a prescribed usage, nor a construct, nor an "already there" sign system, or a language – but a setting into signs, a construction, a process of signification, a "to be". "A semiotic (sign) must be RECOGNIZED; the semiotic (discourse) must be UNDERSTOOD". Language is both semiotic and semantic. But he also points out that autonomy of semiotics can exist in the "figurative arts". "The artist creates his own semiotics: he institutes his oppositions into distinctive features which he himself renders significant by their ordering. ..." Hence, semiotics, in its expression in theatre may be a repertory of signs dissociated from language – semiotics minus the semantic. In theatre, two levels of representation come into play, the verbal and the scenic – the double articulation problematizing (or capable of doing so) language. "In theatre, semiotic practice is nothing less than a setting into signs, a delicate shadowing forth, a setting into figures. Perhaps one should speak of theatre as a language of figurativity...." 

Artaud and The Theatre of Cruelty would have drama as non-literature, non-textual art, as already mentioned elsewhere. Derrida points out, in his critique of Artaud in Writing and Difference, his rejection of representation; of
mimesis. Theatre is marked by the labor of total representation and domination of the text - the prompter being symbolic of the power of the script - "the hidden but indispensable centre of representative structure"14. This is non theatre, its perversion, and mise-en-scene must overthrow the tyranny of the text. The stage will become prior to the present which it is to represent. Non-representation means primordial presentation. The spectacle will be supreme and the author's dictatorship will end. Speech and diction will end too, and with it the superstition that a play 'read' is at par with the play 'performed'. These will become gestures again - a cry, a shout, onomatopoeia. This is not a mute stage: only prior to language. Here the "word has not yet been born, when articulation is no longer a shout but not yet a discourse ...."15.

Artaud would arrive by affirmation, at a kind of pure performance-oriented theatre that could be pitted against the assumptions of what we know as the theatre of the Absurd - which, for all the inspiration that it derives from the Theatre of Cruelty, remains a text-oriented, scripto-centric, speech and word privileging form. Here, we have speech that is self annihilating, destructive and negative to itself, and theatre conventions that are nihilistic. But all are dominated by speech, language, text. In other words, the theatre of the Absurd would arrive at the same void after traversing the vast, language dominated world. Albee, as a so-called exponent of the form, fits very well into the scheme of things as we shall discuss later.

Of course, the important point to keep in mind as we speak of these polarities is that we speak from the standpoint of not traditional, conventional dramatic genres, but from the perspective of a post avant-garde theatre.
Theatre artists of this mode often protest against the decades-old coercive system of the poetics of Aristotle that have shaped realist drama, practices and audience habits — what Derrida refers to as the "theological stage", which translates the "primary logos" of the author-creator who is able to control and monitor its language and meaning, and guides the representation through to the unfluctuating and given superstructure of the text through speech. This old-fashioned kind of drama, earlier admired as 'classically constructed' or 'well-made' is nowadays suspect both aesthetically and politically. 'Enclosed' — not 'open' texts; 'scriptible and writerly' — not 'lisible and readerly'; 'monologic and logocentric' — not 'dialogic and playful'; 'oedipal and oppressive' — not 'liminal and ludic': such are the bones of contention at a time when pluralistic values of 'decentrement', 'deferral' and 'difference' are strongly in the foreground. The text-performance dichotomy seems to have also become tethered to the realist, script-bound 'drama' (or 'work' or 'classic text' or 'theological stage') as opposed to the auto 'performance-text', performance art and so on. Text and performance nowadays connote the polarities in cognition, ontology, representation and the cultural praxis. Indeed, the two terms often stand for separate networks of artistic and social critique that either subscribe to or subvert the most rooted ideological and cultural practices of the West. To privilege the realist text, one begins to promote Cartesian/positivist activities to invent master-narratives of history, assume superiority over language and to establish stable boundaries of power and 'truth'. On the other hand, the privileging of the 'performance' would suggest erasure of the unified subject, the opening up of language, plurality.
dispersal, and 'play', the recognition of uncertainty and human powerlessness in confrontation with the contingent nature of postmodern reality.

Naturally, such aggressive dichotomizing between ontological paradigms of text and performance leave no room for mutual co-operation – while it is also itself against the pluralist agenda of the postmodernists. Dualisms such as modernist / postmodernist, traditional / experimental, representational / non-representational, realist / nonrealist are ultimately non-productive. Hence, to quote Michael Vanden Heuvel,

Text and performance may exist, then, in what quantum scientists would call a state of complementarity: like waves and particles, the two terms represent mutually exclusive and contradictory definitions of the basis of nature, which are both nevertheless necessary for the most complete picture of that nature.... not 'whether' a theatrical work expresses a textualist and determinist episteme or a performative and indeterminate one: that only produces another atomistic model of cognition built on dominance and hierarchy. Instead what is productive to note are the generative interactions between the two complements, where new and increasingly complex fields of relationship are latent.17

Apart, each loses; only the relationships tugging in opposite ways – but necessarily related, that makes for yielding fertile sites where newer meanings and effects in the course of such a dialogic intercourse.

In a significant shift of focus, Vesna Pistotnik seeks to redefine the entire question of dramatic genre itself, completely undermining the text /
performance polarity as besides the point. "...text and performance are not inherently characteristic aspects of drama as a genre; but they have been accorded a privileged position as a result of particular critical assumptions and can be easily displaced."18 Hence the focus is shifted elsewhere – in stage history itself. A play is written not entirely through the free choices of the author (with constraints such as theatrical conventions of the time, material-man availability, censorship etc.). Then, the factor of business, since it involves money generation, is to be considered. Again, the theatre must be seen as a social machine, producing public and popular meanings. In practicality, the entire gamut of these issues and their relationships – advertisers, repertoire, patronage, audience, rehearsals, legal and other concerns are actually not evaluated at all. Semiotics, perhaps, in a sense does ignore the question of spectatorship, in all its socio-cultural-economic diversity – "... the main virtue of theatre semiotics – the rigour and clarity of its methods in applying precise code systems – is achieved at the expense of excluding numerous other factors which determine a theatrical performance and also 'potentialize' meaning."19 Patrice Pavis, another leading French theatre critic also recognizes this, and calling for the study of preparations, training, and rehearsals, says, "... a performance text is only decipherable in its intertextual relationship with a social discourse"20. He insists that performance can have no pre-existing textual message, emerging as a site for meanings generated by both theatrical and extra-theatrical discourses and relations. Pistonik and Pavis both suggest that the way to go for theatre
theorists is not just through text or performance, but the audience and its
associated pragmatics that need further investigation.

From the phenomenological standpoint, the text is not a prior
document; it is the animating current to which the actor submits
his body and refines himself into a illusionary being. In other
words, it is by virtue of the absent text that the actor becomes a
real person living, as Sartre puts it in an unreal way.\(^\text{21}\)

Bert O. States in his book on the phenomenology of the theatre explores the
complicated situation. His explication of relations between actor and audience
peak on an interesting conception of the curtain call and is sensitive to shifts in
convention, denaturing of images and complexities of the self-consciousness
that mark recent developments. The phenomena of the body itself is returned
to the field of subjectivity when drama is considered thus. Phenomenology
offers a way to “re embody the discourse of the theatre”\(^\text{22}\) as another theorist
points out, citing the work of French existentialist Merleau-Ponty as applied to
the theatre of Samuel Beckett.\(^\text{23}\) Reinvestigating phenomenologically would
allow us to address the antitheatricality that runs through much of post
structuralist reading strategies as well as its unease with the body “as a site of
corporeal and subjective elements that always resist reduction to the merely
textual.”\(^\text{24}\) Husserlian phenomenology suspends the materiality of an ‘outside’
(including the body) to privilege ideal self presence, but Merleau-Ponty
postulates a consciousness caught up in the obscurity of corporeality, directing
it to a world of which it is inescapably a part. “To perceive is to render oneself
to something through the body.... consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body"\textsuperscript{25}. Hence the phenomenology is existentialized: the body becomes “our general medium for having a world”\textsuperscript{26}. He speaks of lived bodiliness or \textit{Leiblichkeit}. Sartre and Heidegger have also a great deal to say on the role of the body in their philosophy, given their phenomenological-existentialist standpoints; but Merleau-Ponty makes it the most important focus for his own discussions. The other important, theatrically relevant issue he deals with is the phenomenology of visibility\textsuperscript{27}, which along with embodiment, forms the nucleus of his importance in drama studies. Theatre, the most ‘bodied’ of all genres would add to the ‘always already’ of signification, the ‘always also’ of its corporeality.

Before tackling the question of understanding and hermeneutics, we must first try to situate the audience / spectator / reader vis à vis the text - performance dialogicality of drama. Theatre pragmatics, that takes into account more than just text or performance, keeping in view the entire \textit{bricolage} that contributes to the making of a drama must make sufficient use of reader-response / reception theory before actually arriving at its conclusions. Important work has been done here, although still scanty, and semiotics has remained a major way of looking at audience response.

At the receiver’s end too, we come face to face with the initial dichotomy – that between the reader and the spectator, corresponding to the text-performance distinction. Here also we find an obvious hegemony of the textual – the reader. Reader-response theory and even semioticians like Umberto Eco have set out detailed criterion for the ‘model reader’\textsuperscript{28},
Wolfgang Iser’s ‘implied reader’29; or Stanley Fish’s theories30 have all prioritized the reader of the printed word, and have very little to say of the ‘reader’ of drama, much less of the spectator. Drama is conspicuously absent from their arena. It is only with critics like Patrice Pavis that the situation now seems to be remedying itself. He too, points out —

..... the question of its reception by the spectator seems to have been totally neglected, except for the famous instance of catharsis or its Brechtian counterpoint, alienation. Such is the paradox of theatre criticism: more than any other art, theatre demands, through the connecting link of the actor, an active mediation on the part of the spectator confronted by the performance; this happens only during the event of aesthetic reception. Nonetheless, the modalities of reception and the work of interpreting the performance are very poorly understood.31.

The reasons for such a lack are mystifying, and need a deeper analysis. At first hand the problem that immediately arises is that there may be at least two ‘addressees’ in drama criticism, while a poem or a novel is unambiguously addressed to the reader (although contextually different) the play is addressed to spectators through performers. While dramatic texts may also be read, the issue is a little problematized. Benjamin Bennett has shown in his book how the dramatic text suffers from certain inherent ontological defects as merely written / printed and merely read. We do not receive the ‘whole’ work, one crucial element is missing as “solitary readers conjuring up mental images in response to the words, rather than spectators dealing with
read, palpable images and sounds in the festive atmosphere of the theatre.”

And, further,

- our sense of exclusion, as readers, from the beckoning world of a novel’s fiction, is a normal and expected feature of the genre, ...
- Our exclusion from the theatre as mere readers... is not a normal feature of the genre. It is for us an ontological defect of the text.

This basic defect separates the dramatic from the other genres by “not a boundary but by a gulf.”

Reception oriented drama criticism and the pragmatic problems involved therein are complex and yet unexplored. Eco’s notion that “every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself...” does not very well fit the drama / theatre scheme of things simply because of awkward terminology. (we cannot ‘perform’ a play) Of course this performance is a mental event, the actual performance being physical – and there are several such performances – the actor’s, the director’s and so on. Hence all strategies of deciphering, decoding and interpreting are problematized, by the plurality of ‘reading’. Perhaps there could broadly be two ways of spectator-response assessment; one by means of studying the processes – psychological, semiotic and ideological – through which the spectator grasps at the meaning, and the other, more codified precise tradition of studying the historical fortunes of the play.
Having seen the complexities of the situation, then, if we look at exactly what is to be mapped when one is trying to chart spectator response, the first important factor that comes to mind is that theatre is a communal activity. It is not a solitary response we are referring to, but one necessarily reverberates through others: that it is contagious. Next, it is what Barthes has aptly referred to as a ‘polyphony’ of multiform activities, objects, sounds and sights – very often contradictory ones. The signs then generated are both opaque and transparent in terms of meaning. All objects are obviously not seen / recognized simultaneously, only part by part. Anne Ubersfeld aptly puts it

..... there is no time to waste: the image is snatched from the torrent of signs, stolen from time; it is being done and undone at the same time, and the construction of the theatrical image (audio-visual) is an acrobatic pleasure ... The performance is ever in flight, and in the work of staging a play there is perhaps the dialectic between the wealth of signs and the perceptive capacities of the spectator: if the spectator drowns, his pleasure stops.36

Ubersfeld catalogues the kinds of pleasure that a spectator may derive from theatre, and comments,

like any pleasure, it has a odour of sin about it: voyeurism is not a nice word; catharsis is a more refined one. But clearly, something happens in the theatre which satisfies the spectator while at the
same time leaving him unsatisfied, something in which pleasure
and dissatisfaction are conjoined.\textsuperscript{37}

While we shall return to the question of spectator / audience pleasure
elsewhere, what needs to be clearly looked into is the question of the
relationship between production and reception that forms the basis of any
dramaturgical analysis, and the dialectical relationship between the two
processes is essential to dramatic theory.

The Prague Structuralist\textsuperscript{38} school, in its application of semiology which
suggests an integrating scheme for the production of the work’s signifiers and
signifieds: reception tied to the changes of the social context. The suggestion
therefore is to bridge the gap between production and reception and to
recognize the value of the dialectic between the two, as Patrice Pavis
demonstrates.\textsuperscript{39}

Pragmatics, used in theatre to analyze dramatic discourse, addresses
itself to the meaning of words – who is talking to whom, to what end, what is
implicit, and so on. Dramatic texts and \textit{mise-en-scene} can both utilize theatre
pragmatics, whereas speech act theory (established by Austin and Searle upon
communication and language games\textsuperscript{40}) poses certain old tautological problems
as it would assume \textit{mise-en-scene} to be merely a kind of translation of the
dramatic text in the quest for the correct way to stage the text. But pragmatics
would show how dramatic and performance texts \textit{lack} specificity, and no
single element may be considered alone. It would however, be wrong to think
that “the dramatic text produces acts on stage, losing itself in them, from the
moment that it is staged: the text remains audible as a verbal structure in spite of the stage event with which its emission coincides.41 In the process of 'concretization', description and interpretation, we are grounded by inherent difficulties. Again, as Pavis puts it,

Once the spectator forms his own concretization it is stricto sensu a 'concretization of a concretization of a concretization'. This series of interlocked interpretation does not necessarily lead to a confusion of levels, but it is indeed accompanied by a certain difficulty when it comes to separating (1) the reading of text (accomplished in the literal act of reading) from (2) the stage transposition carried out in mise-en-scene, and (3) the links between this reading and its stage enunciation.42

Ubersfeld’s formula reads thus - (a) ‘listening to the text’ or reading the dramatic text as played,

(b) reading the performance text into which the dramatic text is inserted, and

(c) reading the reading of the dramatic text by dramaturgs.43

Brecht, in his observation upon the variables of performance-reception points out, “The effect of an artistic performance on the spectator is not independent of the effect of the spectator on the artist. In the theatre, the public regulates the performance.”44

As recipients of performance, they regulate its perception, ensuring feedback, by responding to social, cultural, political implications, ideologies and allusions.
Mise-en-scene is, again highly coloured by what is generally referred to as enunciation or the actor's diction (along with gesture, settings and lighting). As to diction, Patrice Pavis notes,

\[\text{It}...\text{is situated at the inter-section of the materially offered text and the 'intellectually interpreted text; it is the vocalization and embodiment of the textual meaning and the actor is always the final spokesman for the instances that have produced the text, from its writing to its dramatic reading.}...\text{... diction is a hermeneutic act imposing upon the text its volume, its vocal colouring, its physicality, its modalisation -- all responsible for its meaning.}\]^{45}

However, the meta-text for drama is formed by the range of texts situated on the borders of dramatic and performance texts whose confrontation gives meaning to the mise-en-scene. Between the meta-text of the director and the meta-text of the spectator is, as we suggested before, a dialectic -- even a hermeneutic circle -- leading to stage concretization or mise-en-scene. The spectator may now not be able to discern the differences between the two texts, and indeed, his own meta-text of reading will come into play.

Increasingly, even as the role of the audience has been seen to be the key player in any theatrical effort / event, dramatic texts too have responded by involving, even making physical contact with the spectators during performance. Constant avant-garde attempts at this may be seen -- actors flirting with spectators before they take their seats, audiences may even write down questions on slips that are later raised by the performers -- hence
involving the spectators as playwright. The actors may suddenly descend upon the audience and sprinkle tinsel on them literally grabbing for attention. Peter Handke’s *Insulting the Audience* (1966) bluntly announces, ‘You are the agenda’ and the audience’s frustrations, expectations, attitudes and mannerisms are shown. Four actors scold the audience for not reacting, not contributing anything to the performance. Interestingly during a performance of the same play, some spectators did react—shouting back at the insults—and that confused the actors who continued as if nothing had happened. Hence was illustrated the basic contradiction in the experiment, “.... genuine and unrestricted audience participation prevents fully effective performance from taking place, even in a play whose subject is the audience”46 points out Heinz Fisher. Edward Albee, for his part, is also seen to ‘flirt’ thus with his audience in plays such as *The Lady from Dubuque* and *The Man Who Had Three Arms*. It could also be pointed out that both these experiments were commercial failures, and that theatre pragmatics has its own separate significance.

Marco de Marinis, in the same vein, shows how production and reception are reciprocal activities, dividing performance into open (addressed to a receiver who is not precise, definite and ideologically shut) and closed (addressed to a competent, precise and ideologically defined receiver47) The avant garde is experimental theatre, with open and highly indeterminate reading strategies that requires the receiver to possess a range of encyclopaedic, intertextual and ideological competence (in which sense the performance is more closed than open) Traditional Indian theatre for that matter, as treated by Bharata’s *Natyashastra* is devised to facilitate individual
spectators to look for whatever interests them without misunderstanding or abusing the drama in the process.\(^48\) Eugenio Barba’s ‘Third Theatre’ aimed at supercompetent theatergoers – though he tried to create performances which might allow real plurality of reception or viewings which are equal to one another. Theatrical space and the placing of spectators within it is crucial to the performance.\(^49\) After the dispensing of naturalistic settings and ‘closed’ performances, the neat spacing / division between the audience and the performers was dissolved until Antonin Artaud could surround the spectators with the performance at the theatre Alfred Jarry.\(^50\) This changing spatial relationship between audience and performer also led to performance itself passing literally from view. The spectators had acknowledge the irredeemably partial and subjective nature of their experience of the performance which was now conditioned by their material position. Similar to Handke’s experiment, is the Living Theatre Group’s\(^51\) involvement of the audience at the emotional and intellectual level that gave them a marginal role to shape the performance itself. In their production of *Antigone* (1967) the audience became the people of Argus at war with the Thebans played by the performers. Jerzy Grotowsky for some time contributed to such a theatre of participation in the ’60s in *Faust* (1960), *Kordian* (1962) and *Akropolis* (1962) : but discovered it to be blocking and inhibiting the audience. He therefore reversed back to the theatre of testimony that retained some distance, materially from the audience.\(^52\)

To Barthe’s ‘polyphony of information’\(^53\), Marco de Marinis adds to the performance-text’s dense signifying surface, the characteristics of non-discreteness, instability and impermanence. These features, he asserts, leads to
the audience’s rejection of some of the various stimuli around him (this is nearly always automatic and unconsciously done) ‘seeing’ and ‘watching’ are distinguished from each other and through selection and ‘decoupage’ are able to work out their ‘reading’ strategies.54

Aesthetic phenomena like anything else, may be, according to Heribert Schälzky, measured – and quantified. Social scientists have compiled audience profiles, details of age-sex-social background-education-financial status and ‘laughing habits’. Applause itself has been sought to be measured, responses of each member of the audience recorded and analyzed through a spectrum of tools such as computerized infra red photographs and telemetry installations recording the course of biological functions in the audience (skin temperature, pulse, perspiration and so on)55. Hence, Schalzky’s experiments have shown that though certain ‘scientific’ data may possibly be available, much may not be said about scope, intention, art or beauty of a play. But we now know that the spectator’s breathing is at times at synchrony with the actors. We also know other relevant audience details (socio-economic ones) as well as how often and how loud he laughs. There is the discovery of “a correlation between the frequency and intensity of audience laughter and the total number of spectators present”56 Categories of laughing have also been researched – some have found seven, and some upto eleven ‘non-overlapping processes of laughter.’57 All this ‘scientific’ activity notwithstanding, the essential theatrical activity, the give and take between the audience and the performer and their inherent, irretrievable paradoxes during performance remain: we may only approximate, never arriving at the final solution.
Amidst this background thick with the dialectic involving performance, the dramatic text and audiences response, assessment of the work of one particular American playwright is undertaken: always keeping in mind the one basic lack in our interpretative strategies – that of performance itself. Seen against the above context, we are to come to terms with this lack due to various factors such as cultural distance, alien milieu, cross-cultural pedagogical implications and so forth. While we shall deal with Albee’s biography, and the hermeneutic problems of his texts vis à vis our own pedagogical context in the next chapter, it would be worthwhile to make a few notes of Albee’s theory regarding his own art, and also the plays in the context of the text / performance dialectic. While the plays have already been ‘read’ in the earlier two chapters, it is important to set them against these theoretical standpoints. Stasis as we have traced through Albee’s corpus is to be read within a stasis too, as it were, of the basic ontological defect of the dramatic text – minus the performance.

Albee has been interviewed so often that any bibliography is necessarily not completely up-to-date. However, there are a few standpoints that Albee takes which he sticks by through the gamut of the interviews. Although production is an essential feature of the ‘wholeness’ of the ‘playwrighting’ process, Albee says – “I’ve gotten to a point now where I don’t care whether a play goes into production or not, the experience for me is completed when I’ve written it....”58. Then again, in a reply to a question regarding the public character of a play with its heterogeneous elements as opposed to the ‘private’ character of the reading of a novel, Albee says,
I would rather that a person who knows how to read a play read a play of mine and see the performance in his head when he reads it than see a mediocre performance on stage. As opposed to many other people who feel that plays are complete only when they are performed, I am convinced that they are complete as a literary act which one can understand merely by reading. The performance is gravy, it seems to me: it's not the proof of the play.\textsuperscript{59}

While we shall look into Albee's claim on the reader's 'understanding' of the play elsewhere, it must be pointed out that such a comment lays itself gapingly open to wideranging criticism from various sides, especially since the drama/theatre, stage/page divide is such a polemical issue. In a counter question the interviewer then, was bound to ask Albee - "If performance is not really necessary, how necessary is the audience?" Albee bluntly replies:

\ldots in my case, less and less \ldots It depends upon your audience, of course. Now when a person reads a play, he's reading it by himself. I'm convinced he can have the complete experience of the play without having to be in the community of a lot of other people. Your informed reader is going to be doing exactly the same things as an audience is doing who is watching the play.\textsuperscript{60}

But, at the same time, elsewhere, Albee says that he would like to direct his own plays because "when I write a play, I see it and hear it on a stage. I therefore have the closest vision of what I the author want the play to
Apart from emphasizing on authorial ‘ownership’ of the play, Albee makes a futile attempt at remaining in control of his meanings, sounds and sights: this is absolutely beyond the ken of any dramatist’s power, as he himself acknowledges in another interview.

Albee’s views on audience/reception of his plays are likewise contradictory and make for paradoxic readings in tandem with his acid comments on critics of his plays.

One is basically writing for – when I say for one’s self I mean for one’s self in relation to the historical continuation of the theatre, which has nothing to do with the response of any particular critic or any particular audience, in any given year .... One of the desperately bad things that happens to so many playwrights is they try to accommodate themselves to the status quo .... to what the critics want, and to what the critics tell the audience they want. And the audiences in turn think that what they really want is what the critics tell them they want.

In terms of breaking down the actor/audience divide, Albee is known to have time and again in his plays, made extremely avant garde innovations, sometimes nearly Artaudian in scale. In a post existentialist world, nearly everything being informed by its philosophy, Albee says,

All drama goes for blood in one way or another. Some drama, which contains itself behind the invisible fourth wall, does it by giving the audience the illusion that it is the spectator. This in not
always true: if the drama succeeds the audience is bloodied, but in a different way .... this is why I try very hard to involve the audience ... to participate in the dramatic experience. In this sense, I agree with Artaud. Voyeurism in the theatre lets people off the hook. Sometimes the playwright should draw blood.63

Indeed, Albee’s continuous attempts at ‘drawing blood’ as he puts it are apparent in his more recent experiments although even early plays like Box-Mao-Box show a tendency towards this.

As for Albee’s reaction to the text / performance divide, it is one thing to see the authorial claims to his meaning in his play, it is quite another that the play itself sends out entirely different signals so far as performance needs are concerned. To go through the entire corpus chronologically at this juncture would show that such an argument does not hold water. The earlier detailed analysis of stasis in his plays are readings that are after all, made post-performance. The ontological problem of Albee’s plays – the fact that they are all post-absurdist, post-existentialist, post-Artaudian ‘conversation’ pieces that lead nowhere and remain stuck in their own mire may perhaps not show the same quality of stasis read than performed has also been discussed. How is each play to be dealt with in such a lack?

The Zoo Story purports to be absurdist, and the two characters rile each other (more Jerry than Peter) until one of them dies. There is a building up of tension in the play that otherwise shows no movement and shock at the end when Jerry dies. Reading such a play would mean no concretization at all, no
pent up tension, no conflagration, some surprise and perhaps no shock. But the *bricolage* of the play – Jerry’s constant movement (as suggested) his taking over Peter’s seat completely, and his self imposed murder contrasted with Peter’s stasis in the park bench, his self fashioning and consequent subversion, ‘gentlemanliness’ turning into hysteria and his non-compliant homicide are all paradoxes that may be exposed through the lived stage experience – to which we have no access. Hence the sketching of stasis in / within stasis.

*The American Dream* pulls apart American myths and complacencies in an almost grotesque manner, still in the absurdist mode, dismembering one by one, the entire body of American beliefs until a completely inert metaphor for nothingness remains. Again the reading of the text provides partial information, and none at all that is visual.

*Tiny Alice*, widely held as the most obscure Albee play, has within it the device of the set within the set, the play within the play, and one set of characters on stage being repeated inside the next set and so on. The effect is one that distances the audience from the characters, and also makes them ‘absurdly’ uncomfortable. Any ‘reading’ of the text will hardly yield similar results – though Albee himself recommended a reading prior to the ‘seeing’ of the play to make it more transparent – as all we ‘eye’ is the stage direction and exegesis of the play in performance.

*The Sand Box*, what Albee referred to as a ‘perfect play’ lasts about fourteen minutes, and features the same characters as *The American Dream*. Grandma buried deep in sand waits for death. Now, this play would be difficult to extract from its visual context of sand, barrenness and other
The Death of Bessie Smith is about racism, but its language suggests its concern with stasis, fixity, inertia and misdirected action. There is promise of action, but no action happens. Presumably this could be a play which could dispense with performance to get across its point. But the overtones, the texture and the supremely important emblematic signifier – the colour of the skin would not be materially visualized and hence the impact would become deadened – stasis within a vacuum. A Delicate Balance talks in a circular manner, about a crisis in the family due to the arrival of two uninvited guests. Working through a plethora of dialogue, language is of paramount importance here. Performed, it has often been denounced as being concerned with ‘nothing’ and suffers from pointlessness. Clearly the reader is at advantage, able to drown in the abundance of syntax, at the cost of theatrical ‘livedness’ and semiotic cognizance. Stasis works very well here, even without performance.

“All that is on stage is a sign” remarked Jiri Veltruský, one of the Prague Structuralists. The moment a woman is put on a stage – she becomes significant, the focus of all eyes. The event of Marcel Duchamp putting a urinal onto a pedestal and exhibiting it at an art gallery, has already been cited to illustrate the magical quality that a stage assumes and bestows upon all that step upon it. As a play is staged, such signs are unleashed in multiplicity, and the spectator has to pick and chose his stimuli to form his ‘reading’ of the performance.

The semiotic capacities of Albee’s theatre become apparent in Box where we have an elaborate box-like set and a single character / non character
Voice. This would make for bad drama, good theatre. Says Albee — “I like the sense immediacy, of the present. I’m not a very good poet, and my prose is tortured. You can get nice tensions going on the stage.”

To recount again the important example of Dario Fo, the illustrious Italian dramatist, whose simple but devastating experiment with the mono-act succeeded in creating an icon out of the absent ‘other’ character. Yet the playscript that is being read by the reader would have two actors / signifiers, while materially (bodily and physically) they would both be essentially absent.

Plays like *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, now amongst one of the world’s most successful modern plays could not even begin to actualize their potential without the mechanism of the stage. Although based on arguments and pages of syntax, it is only through the iconic play through performance that the play becomes itself. Sparkling chemistry through the bitterest of duels makes up for the lack of any dramatic action as such. The plot only unravels itself to reveal(?) an absence – the imaginary son – and status quo is achieved because that is the Albeean method of going about the progress / non progress of his plays: stasis.

*Quotations from Mao Tse Tung* parenthesised by Box is of course, topical: with the west’s interest in China of the time. But the play is one of the most avante garde in technique, with its four characters each declaiming his / her lines (one is silent throughout) having nothing at all to do with each other. One character delivers quotes from Mao, another some poetry of a contemporary American poet, and only one character has Albee’s lines. The
entire effect of the play lies in the playing: otherwise the quotes remains just that—dead and clichéd—not resonant with refracted meanings.

*Seascape* and *All Over*, supposedly companion pieces, on ‘life’, and ‘death’ respectively, are again both experimental pieces: one set on the beach, and the other at the deathbed. *Seascape* features a couple; freshly retired, sunning themselves on the beach, and another ‘humanoid lizard’ couple who arise from the sea, and a conversation ensues. The very conception of lizards demands a visualization on stage, and especially so when they begin to question, radically, everything: feet being different from hand, and other explorations of the human body, the subversions are brilliantly expository and not merely epistemological. *All Over* is drawn from a completely static situation, people waiting at the deathbed for a man to die; the living people too, in their own stasis are partially dead and the whole ambience of the play hangs in suspension at no man’s land: dying, but not dead. This kind of vacuum, and claustrophobia cannot be merely read about, but evoked on stage.

*Counting the Ways*, described as a vaudeville by Albee has just two characters talking on stage, and some farcical action, completely baffling on the page and bewildering the spectator too. The play however resonates with the icons it uses—the flowers, the descending placards and direct addresses to the audience. *Listening* was originally meant for the radio, hence it is language intensive. But here too, the visual impact of slit-open wrists dripping red blood is not to be overlooked. The set itself (later added by Albee) sends out its own structural semiotic signals that would remain unrealized through mere readings, without live performance.
The Lady from Dubuque is almost a kind of repeat of the deathwatch in All Over, only here, a woman waits for death and the rest of the characters play games. Games that, however, seek to explore the core question – 'Who Am I?' Here too there are direct-to-audience lines that do not let the reader escape the defect of his own situation. Himself in The Man Who Had Three Arms talks throughout the play, directly to the spectators – raving, nagging and ranting at them for his unasked-for celebrity-hood (upon growing a third arm) and its disappearance (when the arm vanishes). Exactly what Albee explained as 'drawing blood', removing the audience as voyeur and making it actually participate in the action – however static it may be.

Looking at dramatic experience without the performance, it is to be remembered that we function only in time (the page), not in space (of the stage) We deal with Albee’s art as literature (which drama will always remain) not merely as performance art. We crave, however, to fill up the gaps, the 'holes' with performance, the spectator, the mise-en-scene. We miss out on the communal activity that we would have shared with other members of the audience that would have shaped and altered our own reception of the play. Seeing the dramatic methods of Edward Albee, his tendency to the condition of stasis both ontologically, as well as in method of dramatic manipulation, we remain visually and culturally divorced from our concretizations and interpretations and in our 'understanding' of the plays. Deprived of performance, performed stasis as we have 'read' in them does not materialize visually / phenomenologically for us. This leads to virtually a situation of stasis-in-stasis as far as our understanding of the plays is concerned. In the
next chapter we shall tackle these questions of interpretation and understanding in terms of our own situationality.

Notes


2. E. Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre (Chicago: Brownes, 1911) 143-44.


5. Ibid 24


10. Roland Barthes, (as quoted in Melancon, ibid.) in “Litterature et signification” in Essais critiques (Paris 1964) 258. Barthe’s by now classic formulation that semiotics cannot avoid privileging language is the “Presentation” by Roland
Barthes in *Communications* 4 (1964) that is also reflected in Benjamin Bennett's work, *op. cit.*


25. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "*The Primacy of Perception*" Trans. James M. Edie in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological*
Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics ed. James M Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 42.


31. Patrice Pavis, Languages of the Stage 130.

32. Benjamin Bennett, Theatre as Problem 61

33. Ibid. 62.

34. Ibid. 63.

35. Umberto Eco, The Role of the Reader 49.


37. Ibid. 134.

38. The Prague School, mainly linguists such as R. Jakobson and others in the late 1920s and early 1930s, have more recently made use of semiology and Saussurean linguistics in theatre studies.


41. Pavis, *Production and Reception* 35.

42. Ibid. 47.


49. Eugenio Barba was one of Jerzy Grotowski’s closest collaborators in Polish Theatre, the ‘Theatre Laboratory’ since 1959.


51. The Living Theatre is an experimental, Off-Broadway group in New York, formed in 1951 by Julian Beck (1925-85) and Judith Malina (1926-).

52. Jerzy Grotowski (1933-), founder of ‘Theatre Laboratory’ in Poland and a theoretician; author of *Towards or Poor Theatre* (1968).


55. This was reported by J.M. Bordewijk-Knotter in “Empiric Audience Research, its Relevance and Applicability” in Das Theatre und sein Publikum conference proceedings, Institute für Publikumsforschung der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften and Commission Universitaire de la Federation Internationale pour la Recherche Théâtrale, Vienna (1977) 389.

56. Ibid. 390.

57. Ibid.


60. Ibid. 6-9.


63. P.C. Kolin op. cit. 195.

64. Edward Albee in New Yorker 19 December 1964.