

SUSTAINABLE CANONS: GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS AND THEATRE

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Abstract

This essay investigates Gadamer's hermeneutic theory and its application to theatre. Attention to Gadamer's views of theatre and performative interpretation provides a foundation to theorize a more sustainable canon. Classics that constitute a sustainable canon operate within a tradition through a community of interpretation that continually returns to interpret them anew. This structure also describes the theatrical repertoire. Several of Gadamer's central themes find easy analogues on stage: play, the history of effect (Wirkungsgeschichte), the participation of an audience in the fusion of horizons, and art's making present continuity the past. Gadamer provides a framework for understanding the work of interpretation of a dramatic text as a shared participatory event. In particular, Gadamer's hermeneutic theory can make sense of the how performance history makes discoveries that "sticks" to a script, particularly as when and how it enters and influences the canon. Gadamer's hermeneutics help to interpret how innovative performance choices and stage spectacle are part of a play's meaning; these interpretive interventions in drama's reception history are significant and not simply ornamentation to some "truth of the play" accessed only via the reenactment of the original compositional context. Occasional reparative interpretations of the canon, in turn, help to sustain the community.

Keywords: Hans-Georg Gadamer, canon, play, theatre, interpretation, performance, history

1. Introduction

Gadamerian hermeneutics can underwrite a sustainable canon – both for artists and scholars – through a consideration of theatre.¹ Classics that constitute a sustainable canon operate within a tradition through a community of interpretation that continually returns to interpret those texts anew. Performance history (a theatrical expression for Gadamer's notion of the history of effect) becomes a part

¹ I follow theatre studies conventions using "theatre" for the art of theatrical drama and "theater" for the spaces and buildings where such art usually happens. I will not change direct quotations.

of the play's tradition, but a sustainable canon invites new horizons to actualize the classic's inexhaustible potential for meaning. Occasional and reparative interpretations of scripts in the repertoire, in turn, help to sustain the community by linking its past to its present in the festive event of performance. But choices about what sorts of plays enter into the canon are themselves interpretive. Gadamer discloses not only the hermeneutic foundation of theatre-making but also the crucial role for the meaning of drama played by its ongoing tradition.

This essay has two goals. The first elevates Gadamer as a key resource for theorizing theatre as a hermeneutic situation and for theorizing the hermeneutic situation theatrically. The second applies Gadamer's insights to the phenomenon of the theatrical canon. Several of Gadamer's central themes find easy analogues on stage: play, the history of effect, the participation of an audience in the fusion of horizons, and art's making present continuity the past. The essay will look towards Gadamer's idea that play offers a "clue" to the ontology of a work of art that grounds performative interpretations of dramatic literature. Theatre, like an orchestral score, properly exists in the co-constructive event of interpretive performance. Theatre *is* in its playing. Gadamer provides a framework for understanding the work of interpretation of a dramatic text as a shared participatory event. In particular, Gadamer's hermeneutic theory can make sense of the how performance history makes discoveries that "sticks" to a script, particularly as when and how it enters and influences the canon. Gadamer's hermeneutics can help to interpret how innovative performance choices and stage spectacle as *part* of a play's meaning; these interpretive interventions in drama's reception history are significant and not simply ornamentation. I proceed in three parts. The first section examines Gadamer's only major piece of writing explicitly dedicated to theatre – his short essay, "The Festive Character of Theater" (Gadamer 1986). The second section highlights Gadamer's comments on performative interpretation from *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1989). The third section develops a theory of a sustainable theatrical canon in light of Gadamer's work.

2. "A grateful friend of theatrical life": Gadamer on Theatre

Few phenomena more clearly demonstrate Gadamer's hermeneutic theory in a concrete situation than the theatre. Though he calls himself a "grateful friend of

contemporary theatrical life" (Gadamer 1986, 63), Gadamer centers only one major essay on theatre itself: "The Festive Character of Theater." Perhaps his general avoidance displays the awkwardness of theatricality for philosophy, aesthetics, religious, and literary study. Theatre causes problem for thought: where does "theatrical drama" subsist between ritual actions and ephemeral performances (i.e., a performance studies approach), written scripts and records of performance history (i.e., drama as literature), and a technical art best understood practically (i.e., a theatre studies approaches mixing scholarship and creative praxis)? Should a philosopher consider theatre in the abstract, apart from any production apparatus or story? Or is theatre, as phenomenon, only manifest in the concrete particularity of a given performance of a play? The problem quickly becomes one of theatrical truth and theatrical method. The hermeneutical attitude (historical consciousness) cannot disregard that theatre manifests itself, always, in a social event of interpretation embedded in its own traditions and performance history. Indeed, Gadamer originally delivered these reflections as a celebratory address for the 175th anniversary of the National Theater of Mannheim. As he writes about "occasionality" in *Truth and Method*, "This is seen most clearly in the performing arts, especially theater and music, which wait for the occasion in order to exist and define themselves only through that occasion" (Gadamer 1989, 147). Even philosophical analyses of theatre will never stray too far from its lived expression.

Gadamer's theater essay is short but remains remarkable for its application of many key themes in his thought to "contemporary theatrical life." The occasion of the essay, a celebration of a permanent state and city theater, explains the arc of its central argument. The essay reflects on the relatively recent transformation of theatre from a moving festival that arrives to interrupts ordinary life to a permanent location to which audiences need to travel. "Once it was the members of theatrical troupes visiting permanent seats of aristocratic and bourgeois culture who were 'traveling players.' Today it is the audience, friends of theater like ourselves, who have become travelers, assembling in the festive security of the theatre" (Gadamer 1986, 58). For Gadamer, the theatre has not lost its festival quality by becoming fixed in place. The suspension of ordinary temporality once achieved by the traveling troupe transfers to the permanent theater. The practical result is clear. Formerly nomadic theatre-makers become permanent residents in the ecosystem of a city; theatre-goers must make pilgrimage.

Gadamer's essay appeared originally in 1954 and was later reprinted as part of his *Kleine Schriften II* in 1967.² This period, itself, was a time of tumultuous change in theatrical art. Gadamer divides theatre history into three unequal periods. First comes an age of "elevated religious presence" stretching from the ancients to the nineteenth century. Following Schiller, Gadamer then identifies an age of what he calls "moral transcendence or moral sublimity" roughly coterminous with the reign of the theatrical naturalism, the strict aesthetic and physical separation between actors mimicking real life and silent audience. Finally, Gadamer invokes an unnamed contemporary age where "the unity of onlooker and player is acquiring new significance."

The "as yet unwritten, emerging chapter in the history of theater" identifies the major mid-century innovations brought to the stage by its contrast (and competition) with cinema (Gadamer 1986, 63). Like many other theories of the post-war European theatre, allusions to Brecht and Artaud loom large over this third age in Gadamer's typology. Gadamer waxes poetic with unsigned references to "the alien shock that shakes our comfortable bourgeois self-confidence and puts at risk the reality in which we feel secure" (Gadamer 1986, 64). Here, Gadamer invokes the vocabulary and social dimension of Bertolt Brecht's techniques of alienation, the so-called *Verfremdungseffekt* (Brecht 1992). These strategies undermine the audience's capacity to be caught up in the performed illusion and, instead, call attention to the mechanical labor of actors and stagehands. The character is *played* by an actor; the sunshine filtering through the scenery windows comes from a spotlight.

The shift from Romantic naturalism and its harsh division between audience and actors represented by the "fourth wall" gives way. The magic of the stage is not ruined by breaking the spell. Instead, a "communal spirit that supports us all and transcends each of us individually represents the real power of theater and brings us back to the ancient religious sources of the cultic festival" (Gadamer 1986, 63). Gadamer identifies this spiritual power in reawakening awareness of the gathered community. In fact, Gadamer sees that "theater has the enormous and lasting advantage" (Gadamer 1986, 64) *because* its mode of production is

² According to the bibliographic data in the English edition (*Relevance of the Beautiful*, xxii), the text of the lecture "Über die Festlichkeit des Theaters" was first published in *Mannheimer Hefte*, III (1954, 26-30), and later reprinted in *Kleine Schriften II* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1967, 170-177).

always live and embodied performance. Gadamer carefully admits that "Scholars cannot play the role of prophets here," (Gadamer 1986, 63) but he nonetheless accurately predicts the trend in professional theatre-making toward immersive and participatory performance (consider the example of Punchdrunk's 2011 *Sleep No More*).

Gadamer praises this modern theatre's capacity to link onlooker with performer. He sees the turn to participation as a positive development in theatrical artistry that creates more, not less, space for spirituality. The essay concludes with a striking summary and poetic flourish:

The theater has become more spiritual than it ever was when the audience was encouraged to sit back and simply enjoy the spectacle. There is an immediacy to theater that we rarely encounter in our thoroughly specialized existence, obscured as it is for us by a thousand different mediations. The genuine experience of the enduring festive character of the theater seems to me to lie in the immediate communal experience of what we are and how things stand with us in the vital interchange between player and onlooker. As Rilke says, "Above, beyond us, the angel plays." (Gadamer 1986, 65).

Characteristically, Gadamer's understanding of contemporary theatre important for the way it fuses theatrical past in spiritual origins and theatre's future in immersive participation as two sides of the same coin. Gadamer, the great theorist of tradition, thus rejects a simplistic secularization hypothesis or narrative of religious decline. Theatre's mythic and cultic origins endure *precisely* in how contemporary theatre embraces what Brecht calls a "theatre for a scientific age" (Brecht 1992). That is, on stage, spirit and presence materialize (Carlson 2003, Dox 2016). This is nothing new, but it does recover conventions from before the domination of stylistic naturalism. Ghostly presences on stage might not be fantastic or spooky: the *deus ex machina* that delivers Medea, the ghost of Hamlet's father, or that angel playing above us crashing down into Tony Kushner's play about America are all *obvious* about the theatrical performance of ordinarily unseen realities. The ghost of King Hamlet is not a literal poltergeist (despite the fact that the name of another Shakespearean King from Scotland carries a tradition of theatrical superstition).³ For Gadamer, the stage does not need to be illusory or even convincing in its imitations in order to be entertaining or revelatory.

³ For a reflection on theatrical superstitions in the context of religious ritual (see Bouchard and Gillespie 2021).

Indeed, naturalistic representations of middle-class morality – the height of theatrical art in the nineteenth century – feel stultifying to theatrical power in the contemporary era.⁴ Rather, theatre demonstrates the spiritual power of presence sustained in its festive character.

The theatrical achievement is as much a recovery of ancient ritual co-presence as it is the emancipation of the audience from their role as silent witness. Contemporary theatre thrives in its willingness to leverage the obvious and evident the relationship between audience and performers in a shared time and place. Rather than reinforce walls of aesthetic distance between giver and receiver, contemporary theatre maximizes the power of mutual co-presence, what Gadamer highlights as the theatrical communal experience. Theatre (by extension all sorts of spectacular performances) seek to be integrated across the whole sensorium; Gadamer contrasts this to the dis-integrated condition of "our thoroughly specialized existence." Theatre provides an alternative to the fragmentations of a "thousand different mediations" in its human and temporal immediacy. Indeed, Gadamer identifies how popular entertainment will increasingly aim to become, in a word that continues to drive aesthetic debate in our time, *immersive*. In his attention to the audience, Gadamer seems to anticipate the work of Brazilian theatre-maker and theorist Augusto Boal working around the same time. Boal similarly reframes the contemporary stage as one of communion rather than stratification. Gadamer's attention to the social realities of *live* theatre-making – "the vital interchange between player and onlooker" – recalls Boal's neologism for a member of the audience aware and ready to become part of the event: the "spect-actor" (Boal 1985). Everyone, who is present participates in the act of theatre-making.

Gadamer therefore tracks a familiar genealogy of European theatre that finds dramatic origins in the ancient religious cult of Dionysius. Theatre moves through the spectacular culture of the Roman empire to the medieval pageantry of Christian liturgies that then spill out from cathedral into streets. Eventually, those street and local religious celebrations (for example, the mystery plays medieval York in England or the *passionsspiel* at Oberammergau in Bavaria). As

⁴ As Gadamer writes, "the whole naturalistic ideal that once succeeded that hollow pathos of the neoclassical stage, the psychological orientation and the atmospheric realistic stage picture – everything that made up the magical world of theater – all this strikes us today as a flight from reality" (Gadamer 1986, 64).

Gadamer notes, the age of "elevated religious presence" becomes an age of "moral transcendence or moral sublimity" in the bourgeois drama of nineteenth century naturalism. Then, concomitant with the rise of cinema and television, theatre more self-consciously enters its current era where "the unity of onlooker and player is acquiring new significance." Gadamer is not alone highlighting the movement from ritualistic origin through distanced Romantic naturalism to the mid-century immersive turn. A similar religiously inflected vision of theatrical development can be found in the theological dramatic theory of the Swiss Catholic writer Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Theo-Drama* (Balthasar 1988) or the American theologian and theatre critic Tom Driver (Driver 1970, 2012). Drama's Greek origins – "Theater is a product of Greece, both in name and nature" (Gadamer 1986, 58) – hold open space for fundamental human questions about shared spirit. The elegance of the simplicity of this framework risks the limitations of Eurocentrism. Gadamer's essay does not engage the ancient performance styles of India or the rich tradition of Japanese Noh drama or the theatricality of non-European dance spiritualities (e.g., the Javanese performances favored by Artaud 1958 or indigenous dance rituals in the Americas as described in Wenger 2009).⁵ While Gadamer's approach offers a culturally limited genealogy rather than a critical or global history, his threefold eras are nonetheless informative for theorizing theatre as a hermeneutic endeavor. To play any play means interpreting it. Most importantly, Gadamer highlights the continuities in the development of the European theatrical tradition over time. While the social situations, artistic styles, stage technologies, and performance techniques all change and develop, the essence of theatre remains: living co-presence.

But Gadamer could have said more. The modern theatre's turn to immersive participation not only rekindles theatre's ancient festivals of presence but also reshapes how theatre-makers relate to the theatrical repertoire. The earliest forms of European theatre were almost indistinguishable from religious ritual because such category distinctions belong to later eras that more clearly demarcate sacred from profane theatricality. Gadamer's theory of the festival highlights that elevated religious presence does not necessarily mean the inclusion of gods or spirits

⁵ Gadamer is not alone in such a Eurocentric point of reference, but other theorists who favor a ritual genealogy for theatrical drama and treat the subject at greater length are more self-conscious about whether and how they may be imposing cultural boundaries. For a contrasting approach (see Mason 2019).

or religious themes in dramatic plots. Gadamer, instead, comments on the mode of theatrical production. He locates the decisive shift between traveling players and established playhouses to be a hinge between his first and second eras. "The new permanent theater takes over this festive character, linking it to works that are performed and enacted there in ever new ways" (Gadamer 1986, 60). An established playhouse provides theatre all year round, but each and every production brings forth theatre's festive character as an interruption to ordinary temporality and expectation. Dramas can be played again, but in such a way that something, however subtle, changes about its meaning because "every repetition is as original as the work itself" (Gadamer 1989, 122).

But what sorts of plays constitute a sustainable repertoire that can endure the tests of time? The existence and persistence of permanent theaters raise new hermeneutic questions about what sorts of plays enter into the canon to be repeated as part of the theatrical tradition. Not only are these repetitions interpretations, the *construction* of the repertoire is also a dynamic set of interpretive choices. Before turning to treat the hermeneutic situation framed by the restaging of classic plays, it becomes necessary to shine greater light on Gadamer's understanding of performative interpretation and its history of effect.

3. Theatrical Truth and Theatrical Method

Drama never becomes the central subject matter in Gadamer's *magnum opus* because the quest for a philosophical understanding of hermeneutics necessarily avoids the limitations of special circumstances. But theatre's status as an obvious analogue for a generalizable hermeneutic situation hides in plain sight throughout the volume. Theatre makes evident the event of understanding as an open interchange between art and audience, a fusion of horizons. Over and over again, Gadamer will appeal to the performing arts to demonstrate his insight into *play* as a clue to the work of art's ontology and therefore a model for interpretation, understanding, and application. (Gadamer 1989, 101-134)⁶ Play seeks its own end. The activity of play presents *itself* because it points to no meaning or purpose outside of itself. That is, one encounters art as art in its self-presentation

⁶ Some parallels to themes in his theatre essay are most evident in its discussion of temporality, drama, religion, and festival (Gadamer 1989, 122-125). He explicitly comments on Greek tragic drama (*ibid.*, 129-134).

through play. The performing arts make that manifestation of their being particularly transparent: there is no play apart from its playing. And, in the case of the theatre, the playing of a scene is an event of interpretation. The "work" of a theatrical work of art is interpretation; in other words, the players play the play.

Actors do hermeneutics when they play a scene. That is, the actor, as a reader, performs the script's meaning into the world: "Interpreting music or a play by performing it is not basically different from understanding a text by reading it: understanding always includes interpretation" (Gadamer 1989, 399). The truth of a play is in its playing – here and now – not in some historical event theoretically reconstructed. Indeed, even the identity of the people doing the work become transparent to the meaning of the play: "Everybody asks what is supposed to be represented, what is 'meant.' The players (or playwright) no longer exist, only what they are playing" (Gadamer 1989, 112). Play brings about what Gadamer calls the "transformation into structure" (Gadamer 1989, 110ff) in the transition from script to performance.

Importantly, any meaning generated by an actor's play with the script does not replace, negate, or deplete the potential meanings of the text that were present prior to the act of interpretation. This potential for more meaning remains present after playing. The playscript retains an infinite reservoir of potentiality to make meaning. All the excesses of meaning made by playing the script is, in Paul Ricoeur's phrase, a surplus (Ricoeur 1976). The freedom for actualization of surplus meaning via the performative interpretation of play must remain inextricably connected to the text as *that* text's surplus. As Gadamer notes, good interpretations do not allow for "arbitrary, ad-lib effects" that go so far astray from the original object as to constitute some wholly new artistic phenomenon (Gadamer 1989, 119). As an act of play, interpretations come to be judged ethically as human praxis. Good interpretations, especially those in theatre, manifest that which is true in the work of the playwright. But there might be as many true ways to play a scene as there are virtuosic actors to perform. So too, an infinite number of readers can encounter any given text for the first time. "There cannot, therefore, be any single interpretation that is correct 'in itself,' precisely because every interpretation is concerned with the text itself" (Gadamer 1989, 387). Such a vast plurality for potential interpretations can be seen all the more clearly in the context of theatrical performance.

For Gadamer, the play of performance is a species of interpretation. He writes:

Interpretation does not try to replace the interpreted work. It does not, for example, try to draw attention to itself by the poetic power of its own utterance. Rather, [interpretation] remains *fundamentally* accidental. This is true not only of the interpreting word but also of performative interpretation. The interpreting word always has something accidental about it insofar as it is motivated by the hermeneutic question, not just for pedagogical purposes to which it was limited in the Enlightenment but because understanding is always a genuine event. Similarly, performative interpretation is accidental in a fundamental sense – i.e., not just when something is played, imitated, translated, or read aloud for didactic purposes. These cases – where performance is interpretation in a special demonstrative sense, where it includes demonstrative exaggeration and highlighting – in fact differ only in degree, and not in kind, from other sorts of reproductive interpretation. However much it is the literary work or musical composition itself that acquires its mimic presence through the performance, every performance still has its own emphasis. There is little difference between this emphasis and using emphasis for didactic ends. All performance is interpretation. All interpretation is highlighting. (Gadamer 1989, 400, emphasis original)

In some respects, this paragraph strongly defends the notion that performance reflects a hermeneutic act. As Gadamer identifies, all performative interpretations "highlight." Problems arise because Gadamer contends understanding to be the precondition for performing any text, score, script, choreography, recipe, set of instructions, etc. In order to perform something – that is, in order to enact that "transformation into structure" that occurs in interpretative play – one must first possess some basic understanding of the text to be played.

Gadamer's construal of performative interpretation as "*fundamentally* accidental" can be clarified to indicate the infinite potentiality for performative interpretation rather than the extreme limits of aesthetic ornamentation. To say that performative interpretation is accidental, in the strictest sense as mutable and ultimately arbitrary, would contradict Gadamer's breakthrough in citing play as the clue to the ontology of the work of art. Performance does not decorate the substance of theatre. In some ways, limitation to aesthetic ornamentation demonstrates Gadamer's hesitation to allow the free play of interpretation to influence his transcendental theory of language, particularly if *logos* offers the sole objective and shared point of contact for mutual human understanding. On the one hand,

Gadamer rightfully finds in language the capacity for real events of mutual understanding. Gadamer avers "The guiding idea of the following discussion is *that the fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language*" (Gadamer 1989, 378, emphasis original). On the other hand, Gadamer's reliance on an ideal dialogue in mutually and perfectly understood language creates problems for non-linguistic communications and performances.⁷

Consider the following example. Gadamer writes, "Demonstration is interpretation in much the same sense as in a translation that embodies an interpretation, or the correct reading aloud of a text that has already decided the questions of interpretation, because one can only read aloud what one has understood. Understanding and interpretation are indissolubly bound together" (Gadamer 1989, 399). Here, Gadamer loads "reading" with the hermeneutic priority of understanding and interpretation in application. The example disregards the reality of trained performers who can correctly *intone* a text (that is, perform a reading) without necessarily understanding the words' meaning.⁸ Interpretation seems to bypass understanding and arrive immediately at application. This reading could very strongly imply an interpretation of the text via tone. Many singers, for instance, are trained to correctly decipher the pronunciation of languages they do not speak. Such an exercise in reading would be fundamentally accidental to the meaningful content of the text read, but the text would be "read aloud" nonetheless. But Gadamer's focus is not on performative interpretation. Even so, an actor's interpretation will be much richer, fuller, and more likely to be received as true when the player or singer actually understands the words being said rather than merely intoning them. A text might very well be performed by a professional without much understanding of the content, but such understanding will greatly improve the reading's aesthetic quality and capacity to speak truth to an audience.

Instead, it would be better to say that performative interpretations are accidental insofar as they do not change anything essential about the object of in-

⁷ Bennett 1990 addresses the irreconcilable difficulties in a distinction between "understanding" and "interpretation" in the context of performance by contrasting Gadamer with E.D. Hirsch (see especially 76-85).

⁸ That a reading could produce differing degrees of understanding seems to be a possibility implied by an earlier sentence on the similarities between reading silently and reading aloud: "Reading with understanding is always a kind of reproduction, performance, and interpretation" (Gadamer 1989, 160).

terpretation. Dubbing performative interpretation accidental shows that performative interpretations do not transubstantiate the work of art interpreted as an act of permanent ontological change. For actors, playing a wedding scene is not sacramental or efficacious in the same sense as believers playing the very same lines in the context of a religious ritual. Any text might be reinterpreted an infinite number of times as if for the first time. These reinterpretations complicate and add but do not negate previous actualizations and applications of meaning for the present. A long running production will require its actors to be married multiple times – sometimes more than once in a single day!

Gadamer's hermeneutics, however, showcase how performative interpretation – that is, the interpretive work of a performance – constitutes an *increase* in meaning over time in the form of an ever-expanding being. In the case of drama, the fusion of horizons affects both player and play. Theatrical interpretations are always reflexive: performative interpretations add an excess of meaning *and* (trans)form the interpreter as a subject. Something of the excessive meaning that is generated by the work of interpretation ontologically "sticks" to the being of the object of interpretation, but this does not limit or prescribe future re-interpretations.

Over time, these choices constitute a tradition. Drama carries its own history of effect, what Gadamer calls *Wirkungsgeschichte* (Gadamer 1989, Knight 2010). In theatrical terms, *Wirkungsgeschichte* is performance history. "Although the tradition created by a great actor, director, or musician remains effective as a model, it is not a brake on free creation, but has become so fused with the work that concern with this model stimulates an artist's creative interpretative powers no less than does concern with the work itself" (Gadamer 1989, 119). Performative interpretations foreground the history of effect because later performative interpretations will intentionally or unintentionally draw on previous interpretations, be they scientific or artistic. Every subsequent interpretative performance thus participates in the *historical* process of interpretation. Playing a dramatic script or a musical score "is scarcely an independent mode of interpretation" (Gadamer 1989, 310). It bears all the more importance when interpretations connect by means a community of interpretation and across time through a tradition that hands on the so-called accidents of performance history alongside the so-called substance of the meaning of the original text. The obvious example would be the lists of the names of performers and designers that appear at the

beginning of printed editions of recent plays. These "accidents" of performative interpretation get retained in the play's written record. Later productions will necessarily make different choices, different performative interpretations, within the horizon of the given play's tradition of performance history.

This comes as no surprise for the Gadamerian approach. The tradition of interpretive history matters for interpretation, so too does the historical context in which the text is interpreted. "Consciousness of being affected by history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is primary consciousness of the hermeneutical situation" (Gadamer 1989, 301, emphasis original). Performance itself demonstrates the historically affected consciousness in the hermeneutical situation of the players who do interpretive work. As evidenced in Gadamer's understanding of contemporary theatre, player indicates both *actor* and *audience* because both have roles to play in theatre-making. Gadamer agrees with both Aristotle and Boal "that spectator belongs essentially to the playing of the play. The way the spectator belongs makes apparent why it is meaningful to figure art as play" (Gadamer 1989, 130). Contemporary, immersive theatre exploits the cooperation of co-presence. Cooperative interpretive work welcomes the performance event given as part of a living tradition that provokes lasting and efficacious meaning *in the present*.

Actors thus play the play into the present. So theatre-makers might return again and again to the great lights of the theatrical repertoire without fear that their brilliance will dull over time. Great drama – like the classics of the humanities – highlight a truth that carries across time. "This is shown by the fact that the great achievements in the human sciences almost never become outdated. [...] [T]he subject matter appears truly significant only when it is properly portrayed for us. Thus we are certainly interested in the subject matter, but it acquires its life only from the light in which it is presented to us" (Gadamer 1989, 284). Play brings drama to life. In a literal sense, actors lend breath and body to the playwright's words. But Gadamer also identifies that this "making present" via performative interpretation renders even an old and over-performed play perpetually relevant to contemporary human experience. So while the discrete interpretations of various artists (e.g., casting decisions, the delivery of certain lines, the emotional tone of a given scene) remain fundamentally accidental to the play, theatre's essential being might be accessed only via its transformation into struc-

ture via performance. Drama must be interpreted in order to be theatre. The lineage of accidents in a play's performance history cannot be avoided. To play any play enters into its *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

These comments on the accidental accrual of interpretive meaning builds on two components of Gadamer's hermeneutic theory (a) his notion of play as a transformation into structure and (b) his account of the event-character of understanding articulated with reference to the experience of the beautiful. The first is Gadamer's account of a transformation into structure that occurs when play presents itself as a work of art. For Gadamer, "play itself is a transformation of such a kind that the identity of the player does not continue to exist for anybody. Everybody asks instead what is supposed to be represented, what is 'meant.' The players (or playwright) no longer exist, only what they are playing" (Gadamer 1989, 112). The *meaning* of the work of art can be located only in its performance, as played by a performing interpreter. Play is its own activity, an event in time. The being of any character or dramatic situation gets presented – both spatially manifest and brought into the temporal present – in its play. Once played, drama transforms into a structure able to be recognized as theatre. The play does not recover some lost memory of its reality; theatre's being is performative in that it exists only so long as it is played. In its playing, which is an act of interpretation, the real being of theatre emerges. The central comparison remains religion: theatre, reaching back to its cultic origins, is most true in its performance.

But Gadamer, again, implies something beautiful and strange about performance. Play's transformation into structure renders the players fully transparent to the meaning of theatre as the play's meaning presents itself. The underlying logic unveils play's auto-telic self-sufficiency. Play points toward no purpose or end other than itself. Gadamer borrows this position from Johan Huizinga's philosophy of play. Play constitutes a fundamental element of culture that seeks no purpose outside of itself (Huizinga 1955). In an aesthetic register, Gadamer's claim is reminiscent of Kant's definition of aesthetic experience as the free interplay of imagination and intellect regarding art's reflection of nature's purposiveness without any purpose of its own (Kant 1987, §58, 220ff). The players have not irrevocably changed into their characters nor do musicians stop existing as individuated people while playing a symphony. Rather, ordinary being lends itself over to the truth of the structure of the event played: the composite and played *drama* realizes theatrical meaning more extensively than any description of its

component parts. For Gadamer, the players and set and script do not combine their being into some composite citation of likeness to reality; in his words, "It no longer permits any comparison with reality as the secret measure of all verisimilitude" (Gadamer 1989, 112). Instead, theatre's real being emerges through the event of interpretation, its playing. It thus becomes impossible to speak about the *being* of drama (its essence actualized only through play) without reference to the particular play of any given production, what Gadamer highlights as the fundamentally accidental quality of any given performance.

Theatrical reality, whose being is created and attested to by play, emerges through this excessive meaning generated by the players. Playing out performative interpretation makes manifest dramatic meaning that might be witnessed by an onlooker. The most basic structure of theatre is, after all, a set of interlocking interpretations: the playwright interprets the world into a script; the production team (e.g., actors, directors, designers, etc.) interprets the dramatic text of the script via their performance; the audience interprets meaning from the ritual action on stage. Each interlocking interpretive surplus adds *something* on to the text without depleting or overwriting it, at least insofar as interpretation adds to the meaning of any text by focusing on certain aspects and downplaying others. Gadamer seems to have "traditional" theatre in mind: the staging of a written script. This standard approach most closely approximates the hermeneutic situation, but it would also be possible to map more experimental approaches onto this structure. Improvisation, for instance, can begin with an established game that receives its first suggestion from the audience (this approximates the written script). The players then engage in spontaneous play building off one and others theatrical choices and suggestions (this approximates the interpretation of the script by a given company). Finally, the audience works to interpret the improvised performance (matching the ordinary interpretive role of an audience, but often requiring even more imaginative work on their part due to mimed props and a lack of clear costumes).

Performative interpretation generates meanings that contribute to the tradition of performance histories. "Although the tradition created by a great actor, director, or musician remains effective as a model, it is not a brake on free creation, but has become so fused with the work that concern with this model stimulates an artist's creative interpretive powers no less than does concern with the work itself. The performing arts have this special quality: that the works they deal

with are explicitly left open to such re-creation and thus visibly hold the identity and continuity of the work of art open towards its future" (Gadamer 1989, 119). Every act of interpretation, therefore, expands not only a kind of basic access to the being of the work of art by transforming it into a recognizable structure but also generates ever more surpluses of meaning. One sees this process clearly in the act of translation: "A new light falls on the text from the other language and for the reader of it. [...] Translation, like all interpretation, is a highlighting" (Gadamer 1989, 386). Even here, my interpretation of Gadamer constructs meaning in excess by squeezing together two shorter sentences that appear six lines apart on the printed page. This spatial movement of words – although none of the "original" text has been changed – is an act of interpretation *in addition* to the interpretive work of Gadamer's translators. My interpretive work does not negate the capacity for another reader to return to the work with different hermeneutic questions that actualize (apply and perform), and so disclose, new meanings.

Drama specifies the point somewhat, though not without genre confusions because this style of art-making holds dual citizenship in the realm of texts (e.g., literary dramas, playscripts, plotlines) and consequential and interesting action (e.g., dramas of everyday life, dramatic moments, the drama of a wave or stock market crashing). Theatre, however, narrows consideration from any piece of writing to those texts that hold inherently theatrical potential for performance. Almost any piece of writing can be "dramatized," that is, played as if a theatrical script. I limit my consideration to dramatic playscripts, written texts that self-consciously intend theatrical performance as the structure for their mode of actualization. *In this way, theatre anticipates performance as its meaningful realization.* In other words, the event of performance actualizes drama's meaning because drama exists (has its being) in the self-presentation of play (Gadamer 1989, 310). So the interpretive work of theatre is a human and co-creative endeavor that actualizes meaning in the present as a surplus superadded to the drama through an aesthetic event of play, its performance. "A drama really only exists when it is played, and ultimately music must resound" (Gadamer 1989, 116).⁹ To truly encounter drama's meaning requires performing it or witnessing a performance. Drama has no being as theatre apart from the play of performative interpretation.

⁹ Earlier in the same page paragraph he makes explicit connections to religion and divine revelation in and through ritual: "it is in the performance and only in it – as we see most

The being of drama occurs in the event of its self-presentation through play. Only in its playing can drama be encountered as meaningful in and for the present. Gadamer goes on to show – by linking *Truth and Method's* review of play, the aesthetic tradition, and a transcendental theory of language – that the event of understanding is aesthetic and immediate: sensual, existential, and arresting. "In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we are supposed to believe" (Gadamer 1989, 490). Understanding ambushes.

The freedom and temporality in Gadamer's account of understanding are important. This is the constructive payout to Gadamer's comprehension of the fore-structures of knowledge and inescapable prejudice (Gadamer 1989, 270). Play cannot be applied as a tool or method any more than a real, mutually vulnerable conversation might predetermine its outcome. "No one knows beforehand what will 'hit home' and what will have no impact. Every performance is an event, but not one in any way separate from the work – the work itself is what 'takes place'" (Gadamer 1989, 147). The event of understanding does not predestine the solution of the hermeneutic encounter as if following a recipe or algorithm. Interpretation, in the human sciences, begins with an open-ended question rather than a testable hypothesis. Gadamer concludes that there is no possibility for any unifying sure and certain method for interpreting truth in the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*). He distinguishes a positive view of the scientific method as a technique of certainty from a position on the scientific method as a pathway to truth. As the final sentence of *Truth and Method* promises, "what the tool of method does not achieve must – and really can – be achieved by a discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees truth" (Gadamer 1989, 491). For Gadamer, the event of understanding is an existential encounter towards truth. Truth emerges freely in dialogue, inquiry, and discovery. Questioning reveals the spontaneous and self-sufficient character of truth that reflects (but is not co-identical with) the freedom and autotelic nature of play.

In the theatre – particularly when the theatre turns to re-stage classic plays – questioning applies itself in the form of an actor's choices, how the scene gets played. These interpretive questions and performance explorations *must* exceed the intentionality of the play's author. As a performing art, theatre exists in its

clearly in the case of music—that we encounter the work itself, as the divine is encountered in a religious rite" (Gadamer 1989, 116).

playing; so the play, as performed, manifests the fullest being of a playscript in the present. Gadamer rightfully shows that understanding finds free and spontaneous (i.e., playful) expression through the immediacy of an event (Gadamer 1989, 485). The self-presentation of being playing out in the world generates opportunity for an event of understanding that invites more meaning. Crucially, the artistic choices of actors, directors, and designers *increase* the being of the play as written by a playwright. When a theatre company returns to stage drama anew – in new times, with new audiences – those choices and conditions could not have been anticipated by an author. Performative interpretations, therefore, enliven meaning as more than what could ever have been intended by the play's author. "The meaning of a text surpasses its author not occasionally, but always. Thus understanding is not a reproductive procedure, but rather always a productive one." (Gadamer 1989, 280) In play, theatre comes to life, and the performance presents itself through the play of interpretive work with an immediacy and a relevance here and now.

4. Theatre as a Clue for a Sustainable Canons

Gadamer provides a route to highlight the play of performative interpretation and how it accesses a necessary but inexhaustible potentiality for meaning in any given dramatic script. For Gadamer, the play of theatrical performance is an interpretation that makes present this excess of meaning. Over time, these performances form a history that effect how future performers approach the play; what theatre practitioners and scholars call performance history is Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte*. So long as one presumes a situation where a playwright offers a script to be interpreted by the performance of a company, *every* production of a play interprets anew as part of a dynamic tradition. The hermeneutic situation becomes especially clear in the case of the re-staging of a classic play.

I argue that this capacity to continually renew the performance potential of theatrical resources promises a more sustainable approach. "To be sustainable means to live on income not capital. The word 'sustainable,' however, conceals as much as it reveals" (Orr 1992, 23). Gadamer identifies that the establishment of the permanent theater liberates theatre-makers from the need to create brand new scripts for each performance. The re-interpretation of the classic shifts theatrical play toward enlivening theatrical inheritances. Further, the contemporary

era's emphasis on immersive theatre underscores the distinctive quality of dramatic art amongst virtual media: its liveness (Auslander 2008). Inspired by Gadamer, the sustainable canon, therefore, will both make space for the renewable resource of theatrical classics and their power of presence *and* embrace the self-critical attitude of the humanistic sciences toward a dynamic theatrical tradition.

It now becomes possible to return to Gadamer's consideration of theatre with a new set of questions about the repertoire. Rather than view the canon as an eternally fixed inevitability, Gadamer's hermeneutics provide a strong sense for how the theatrical canon gets formulated. He further provides a framework for how to resist the canon's calcification into "merely historical" relics and how theatre's mode of performative interpretation need not be exclusively tied to reenacting the historical conditions of the play's compositional situation. In other words, Gadamer offers the philosophical foundations to make sense of how one might revise, expand, critique, and reimagine what counts as a theatrical classic worthy of entrance into the repertoire, the canon. Gadamer's theory might be applied to the theatre to clarify the interpretive choices that construct and maintain the repertoire, to sustain the canon.

Recall that in Gadamer's threefold eras for theatre history, the transition from traveling theatre companies to permanent theatre institutions created the conditions for the re-staging of old plays. As he writes,

Now, for the first time in the history of theatre, we see the repetition of performances and the revival of preciously performed stageworks as standard practice. Now, for the first time, in the addition to the newly created works by contemporary writers, we find a whole classical repertoire. Now, for the first time, we are faced with the task of mediating between the contemporaneity of the present and the presence of our historical cultural heritage. (Gadamer 1986, 62)

The permanent theater grapples with the very same problems of aesthetic and historical consciousness that Gadamer attempts to resolve throughout *Truth and Method*. The sorts of plays retrieved for performance at the permanent theater enter into what Gadamer calls the repertoire.

The classical repertoire that inspired Gadamer's theatre essay continue to present their repertoires in the form of theatrical seasons. But "The concept of sustainability implies a radical change in the institutions and patterns we have come to accept as normal" (Orr 1992, 94). The notion of repertoire, however, represents an artistic application of the notion of a canon far more familiar to philosophers and literary critics. Those "classical" plays that feature in the theatrical canon are also

the plays that appear within the repertoire of an established theatre. This is all the more evident for smaller university, regional, or state theaters that make it a point to include a particular genre (e.g., a musical) or playwright (e.g., Shakespeare) within the programming of a given season. The process by which a community establishes its repertoire reflects the same hermeneutic process that determines what "classical" plays deserve a place in the theatrical canon. But a look toward the theatrical situation reveals that theatre *always* operates within a dynamic tradition of performance history (Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte*). The classical regards those elements of the tradition "raised above the vicissitudes of changing times and changing tastes" (Gadamer 1989, 288) and so continue to make meaning as if directly relevant today. "Thus the classical epitomizes a general characteristic of historical being: preservation amid the ruins of time." (Gadamer 1989, 289) Those plays that enter the canon or repertoire are the ones that can still demonstrate the power of presence.

Gadamer's essay arrives at the turn toward immersive experience that continues to distinguish the live performing arts from their virtual, recorded, streamed, and cinematic counterparts in our own century. But theatre's occasionality sits between different artistic and interpretive institutions. Permanent theaters, such as the National Theater of Mannheim, find analogues in the consolidation of commercial theatre into geographic regions like Broadway in New York City or London's West End or even smaller, regional theaters. Pressed further, university theatre departments perform the very same plays that will be studied as part of a liberal arts curriculum. The canon of classical theatre and theatre history will also be the shining lights of the artistic repertoire.

The same can be said for any fixed canon of texts. And so, perhaps surprisingly, Gadamer's clarifications about theatrical hermeneutics may be applied to current debates about how to expand a canon's geographic and cultural limitations. Many scholars and critics have identified the colonial underpinnings to the established classics of the "Western" canon passed on as part of the European tradition. As Toni Morrison asserts, "Canon building is empire building" (Morrison 1988). The inherited theatrical canon tends to over-represent a particular horizon of human experience characterized by the prejudgments and identity-markers drawn from European culture, whiteness, and masculinity. In the theatre, that canon becomes a monument to itself.

The canon's presumptions must first be overcome in order to achieve the self-critical re-discovery that Gadamer sees to be the hallmark of studies of the classical.

But that ultimately means that the classical preserves itself precisely *because* it is significant in itself and interprets itself; i.e., it speaks in such a way that it is not a statement about what is past – documentary evidence that still needs to be interpreted – rather, it says something to the present as if it were said specifically to it. What we call 'classical' does not first require the overcoming of historical distance, for in its own constant mediation it overcomes this distance by itself. The classical, then, is certainly 'timeless,' but this timelessness is a mode of historical being. (Gadamer 1989, 289-290)

But the over-representation of one horizon across a fixed canon injects an arbitrary limitation to understanding. Such over-representation can conflate the aesthetic experience of timelessness with an escape from historical consciousness. Instead, Gadamer shows that a classical text appears timeless in its immediacy and relevance as it speaks to the present. Understanding a play *always* involves the dynamism of an event and its *present* occasion. The classical need not be equated with an axiom about "doing the plays we always do in the ways we always do them." On Gadamer's terms, the classical proves its merit as classic precisely in its openness towards new performative interpretations.

The inadequacy of the classical to include *all* of human experience reflects a problem of finitude. There will *always* be more untapped human horizons of inquiry with which to fuse. The repertoire could *always* be larger, more diverse, more global. One solution might be to jettison the aspirations of a canon all-together, but theatre and its history call for a different answer.¹⁰ Gadamer's hermeneutic theory highlights the unique continuities between human experiences possible on stage. "The fact that works stretch out of a past into the present as enduring monuments still does not mean that their being is an object of aesthetic or historical consciousness. As long as they still fulfill their function, they are contemporaneous with every age." (Gadamer 1989, 120) Just as a classic play speaks across history and culture, so too does theatre and its traditions continue to make manifest communal experience.

¹⁰ Scholars are also asking similar questions to artists. A premier example is the reconsideration of Shakespeare's plays as evidenced in Brown and Young 2021. For an approach to these questions in light of Gadamer (see Forsyth 2002).

Gadamer's theory could be applied to the formation of a *sustainable* canon. Sustainability regards a capacity to draw upon a limited set of resources without depleting or irrevocably altering them for future generations. While the term most frequently operates at the intersections of economics, social justice, and ecology, the humanities play a critical role in framing discussions about sustainability (Phillipon 2012). A sustainable theatrical canon, then, will be one that takes seriously the infinite potential for a play to make new meaning via new interpretations, and one that is consistently open to the contemporary occasion of a need for new horizons of inquiry. That is, theatre fails when it seeks *only* to re-enact its previous modes of production. A more sustainable canon emphasizes new ways to interact and play with the inexhaustible resources of its classics. Gadamer's hermeneutics articulate how.

Akin to the work of interpretation drawing present meaning from an ancient source, theatrical performance continuously holds its mirror up to human life and provides self-critical commentary. Play transforms theatre into its realest structure; theatre exists only insofar as dramas are played. Drama escapes imprisonment in the past, however, precisely via being made manifest in the present through performance. Gadamer makes this point explicitly in his theatre essay: "Theater does not, indeed cannot ever, simply become 'historical.' Whenever a theater performs a piece of merely historical interest, it has already to discharge its proper and preeminent function: to represent presence and nothing but presence." (Gadamer 1986, 62). Awareness of the hermeneutic situation resolves the thorny differences between the various questions that might be posed about the meaning of an ancient play. For Gadamer, performative interpretation and interpretation according to historical hermeneutics do not differ ontologically (they are both interpretations) but, rather, in terms of teleology. "Similarly, working out the hermeneutical situations means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition" (Gadamer 1989, 302). Performative interpretation seeks to understand the truth of the play by rendering its relevance present *again* by actualizing theatre's existence through play. Strictly speaking, playing the play serves no end other than its own self-demonstration. To re-play a theatrical classic means re-self-demonstration, another opportunity for its truth to be manifest in dynamic relations between new players, new audiences, new situations. Every playing of the play fuses new horizons. What Gadamer might call the simply "historical" interpretation seeks to

simulate the original conditions of performative interpretation: a reenactment. Performance and theatre studies clarify without resolving this overlapping distinction through terminology: one performs a traditioned text as *theatre* by playing it, one performs a traditioned text as *history* by reenacting it (Schneider 2014). Theatre, the art of presence, finds meaning in an application for the present. Reenactment seeks to re-apply what would have made meaning in the past. Reenactment projects a hypothetical audience and situation that matches more closely the historical conditions of an original performance. Gadamer astutely recognizes both styles of performative interpretation to be fusions of horizons between past and present and events of understanding via interpretation.

5. Conclusion via Application

If all understanding appears in application, it seems best to conclude with the concerns about performance style. Citing one of Friedrich Schlegel's *Fragmente*, Gadamer writes, "This is just what the word 'classical' means: that the duration of a work's power to speak directly is fundamentally unlimited." (Gadamer 1989, 290) I contend that direct speech is what makes a staple of the theatrical canon like *Oedipus the King* an enduring presence on stages and in classrooms. On Gadamerian grounds, Sophocles' tragedy need not be performed (interpreted) according to the conventions of the Dionysian festival in order to speak directly to the human experience of social roles that feel dictated by fate, civil order and unrest, the impact of generational and religious trauma, struggles of identity and disability, the complexities of human sexuality and family systems. Indeed, the play's inciting action regards a city plagued by famine. But any contemporary production of *Oedipus the King* would be unable to escape its performance history both on stage and in literary theory. How could a performance avoid echoes Aristotle's theory of tragedy or Freud's Oedipal complex in the minds of the audience? Gadamerian hermeneutics offers a better solution than a fool's errand for historical purity immune from the prejudice of tradition and its performance history.

Gadamer's theory might not be able to resolve *what* scripts deserve space in the limited time of a theatrical season, a scholarly bibliography, or a course curriculum. Instead, Gadamer illuminates the fact that the formation of the repertoire is *also* a set of revisable interpretive choices that are part of a tradition. As he writes, "*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in*

an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated" (Gadamer 1989, 290, emphasis original). Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics offers new routes to apply this distinction between theatrical play and historical reenactment. Even the most "historical" productions, however, tend to make concessions to the needs of the contemporary audience. Even the most strident historical reenactors – as in a version of *Oedipus* where contemporary actors don current invocations of the ancient theatrical mask – will capitulate to a felt need for electric lighting and sound amplification. Contemporary audiences tend to desire historically minded casting, technique, and aesthetics (e.g., costumes, staging, setting) over the concomitant historical technologies and means of production. Calls for "historically accurate" performative interpretations mistake the free interpretive play of theatre-making for its cousin, reenactment.

Gadamer reveals that a sustainable canon will be one that can withstand and invite the *new* interpretations that add to an ongoing tradition. These interpretations increase the being of the play itself. And contemporary interpretations will need to grapple with a given play's performance history as well as its placement into our own cultural and historical occasion.¹¹ A classic must be able to be transferred to new situations and contexts and so be confronted with questions from new horizons of inquiry. On Gadamer's grounds, each performance serves to increase the being of a given text. The same can be said for all hermeneutic activities engaged in by a community. Gadamer, therefore, vitiates the sorts of interpretations that seem "against the intent" of the original interpreting community. Rather, as Gadamer astutely argues in a short essay, theatre sustains the power of human co-presence through immediate communal experiences as well as an intimate connection with the legacy of human creativity. Collective re-interpretations reveal new possibilities for renewal and development that form the foundations of a sustainable canon.

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¹¹ For an example of professional theatre practitioners doing such an investigation into performance history and contemporary means of theatrical production, see the Untitled Othello Project (www.untitledothello.com).

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