

A Letter to the Editor

8 August 1976
Calcutta, India

Dear TDR:

In T70 Michael Kirby interrogates my production of *The Marilyn Project* (TMP). Is it structuralist? Is the doubling of cast and environment a metaphor? Is there characterization, thematic emphasis, humor, meaning? After describing the production accurately (though unfortunately not mentioning any of the performers), and

noting that it has both narrative and abstract elements, he concludes: "If theatrical structuralism is defined as the primacy of performance structure rather than meaning, it is probably most accurate to say that for some TMP was a Structuralist play; for others it was not." This non-conclusion focuses one of the difficulties of Kirby's theory: his insistence on either/or—on univocal responses: either "structure" or "meaning" is primary; some will find the play structuralist, others will not but presumably nobody will have an ambivalent response or a multivocal response; and if they did this would be a shortcoming either in the spectator or the production. In his brief essay "Structuralism Redefined" (*Soho Weekly News*, 22 July 1976) Kirby writes: "The answer to the question 'Is it structuralist?' can be felt rather than deduced. If you can feel your mind working primarily in certain ways—understanding the arrangements and interrelationships of a performance—the piece is structuralist." This focuses another difficulty: the subjectivism of Kirby's theory. Note: he doesn't say "your approach to the piece is structuralist" or "your reaction or response to the piece is structuralist" but "the piece is structuralist." Thus according to Kirby, what's "out there" is what you "feel your mind working" on. This of course leads to the conclusion about TMP: those who worked on it mentally as a structuralist piece thought it was, and those who didn't didn't.

Both of Kirby's tendencies—toward either/or univocalism and towards subjectivism—set his kind of structuralism worlds apart from that developed by Claude Levi-Strauss and his followers. Levi-Strauss's approach is adapted from linguistics and phenomenology and is holistic: that is, it deals with "bundles of relations" which are examined both diachronically (as an unfolding in time) and synchronically (as a completed self-contained system). In this widely-known method of structuralism "meaning" and "significance"—and all the other things Kirby so scrupulously excludes—are definitely included; not as affects pertaining to the examiner or spectator but as important aspects of the "bundles of relations" which comprise the structure being examined. Although not strictly a follower of Levi-Strauss, Victor Turner—whose books *The Ritual Process* and *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* are of value to theatre theorists—also uses a structuralist approach, which he calls "processual." Structuralism has been applied mostly to anthropological material—but in areas where this discipline converges on theatre: myth, ritual, and art (including performances).

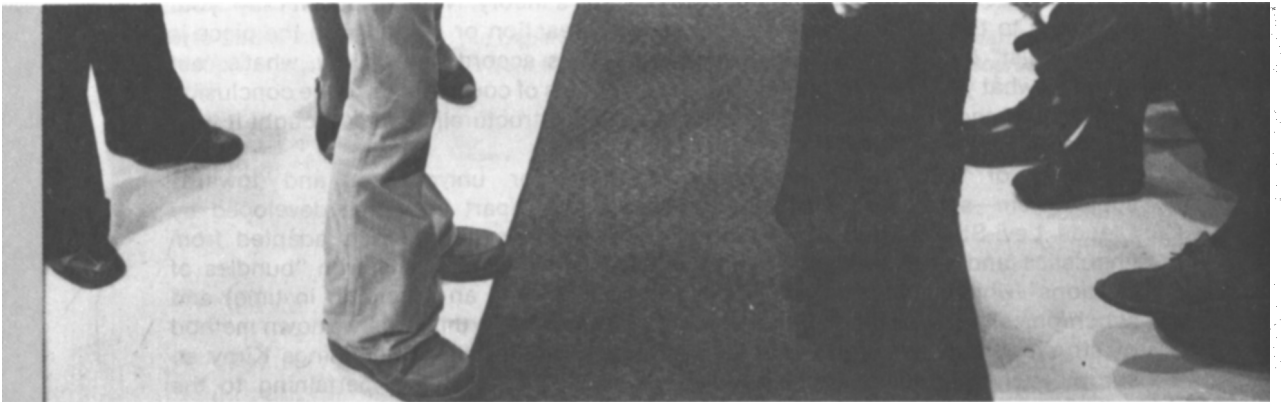
I think it's necessary to separate the Levi-Straussian structuralist school which is now more than 30 years old (with roots going back to the early part of the century) from Kirby's idiosyncratic use of the word. Of course no one can patent a word—but



Kirby's views are late and offbeat; and a danger exists that theatre people not familiar with Levi-Strauss and Turner might confuse their work and Kirby's. This is not an academic cavil: for I think Kirby's theatre practice is important but his theory misleading. In explaining why, I will also say a few things about *The Marilyn Project*.

In his piece about TMP Kirby writes:

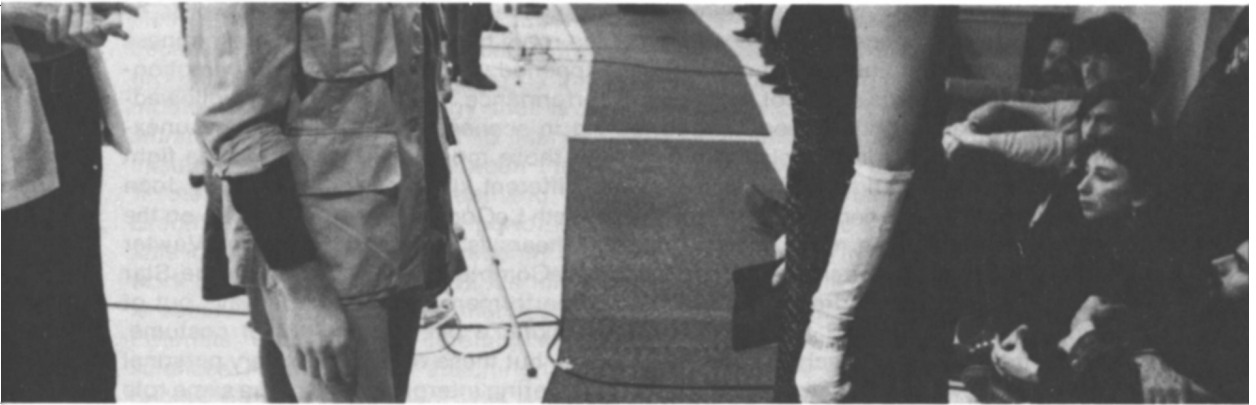
In traditional drama meaning is the most important thing. . . . We could diagram the experience of traditional theatre as a triangle with meaning at the upper vortex. Figuratively it rises over all the other elements or aspects of presentation. . . . Or, to change the metaphor, we might say the spectator looks through the base of the triangle, through all the material that is the performance, and behind it all is the meaning, which is the most important.



Now in his article I can't find where Kirby defines what he means by meaning. I think he means everything he doesn't call structure—that is, themes, characterization, story, humor, emphasis. Whatever he does mean he shifts grounds in discussing its "importance" to "traditional drama." He begins by talking about texts, "drama," quickly shifts to the "experience of traditional theatre" which might mean either texts or performance, and ends speaking of the performance. When he does speak about

performance he asserts that the “most important” thing—meaning—is “behind it”—that is, not in the performance but—as his diagram indicates, over it, or on the other side of it. In short, Kirby applies a John Gassner type of thematic literary criticism to the performance taken as a whole; this approach is inadequate. Kirby casts the theatregoer in the role of problem-solver: ‘What does the play mean?’ asks the spectator; while the seeing-hearing-experiencing-participating in the performance is reduced to a secondary activity: evidence-gathering with its goal being a comprehension of meaning.

One can take a broad view of meaning—everything that Kirby doesn’t call structure, or a narrow view—themes and significance. In either case, even in “traditional drama or theatre” (another usage I disagree with Kirby about, and will explain later), meaning and structure cannot be separated in the way that Kirby wants to separate them. This is because—as Levi-Strauss has shown—meaning is a function of the *relationship among structures*. Kirby views structure and meaning as separate entities—one can “look at” either one, or both. But the structuralist argument is that a structure is an *arrangement of all the elements of a global system* including cognitive, narrative, affective, humorous, etc. etc. elements; and that there is no hard-edged or



univocal meaning and/or structure that can be set down in so many words; to do so would be like trying to write down all mathematical operations: you can show particular operations as examples of the system, and deduce from these operations the *rules of the system*, but the system itself is inexpressible because it is relational. This fundamental ambivalence, multivocalism, and relationalism disturbs Kirby who likes to take definitions from Webster; but classic structuralism as a method, to use a decisive set of metaphors, lays out roadworks, communications’ systems, links, connections, grids, and maps—not all of which may be used at a given moment, or be used by the same person at different moments. The system is potential as well as actual. The classic structuralist approach *discerns a system of relationships among bundles of relations*; it is the links between things, ideas, sentiments, actions, etc., *anything that is* that occupies the structuralist. Compared to this approach Kirby’s theory is simplistic. In fact, Kirby’s approach is *not a theory but a style of theatrical production*. As such it is important; and as such it is a function of a theory—but not the one Kirby claims for it.

Before discussing the theoretical basis for Kirby’s theatre work I want to clarify a few points about TMP. In TMP, which is structuralist in the classic sense (but so is everything else: that is, *any phenomenon can be examined from a structuralist perspective*), there is no question whether “meaning” or “structure” predominates; the

two are part of one bundle of relations that I, as director, consciously made multivocal and ambivalent. In fact ambivalence is at the heart of TPG's TMP. The doubling of the cast, the synchronization and non-synchronization of lines, the mirror-image environment and action, disturbed at several points by two male-female pairs (which of course could have been a male-male and female-female pair by simply switching roles in the existing cast) and other "anomalies" were all meant to make a "perfect double, almost." Also, the TV cameras were not identical, and several props and items of costume diverged. More importantly, during rehearsals I told the performers many times that although they should always try to be in synch inevitably during each performance they would get out of synch many times. The rule was for the person or team ahead to stop as soon as she/they were conscious of the divergence and let the other side catch up. Thus a musical structure, a kind of modified round, was inherent in the performance. There was no need to plan when these rounds would occur—they were random, but inevitable. I was pleased that in an environment that appeared to be so totally "controlled" a strong chance element was also there.

At the same time both I and the performers were aware of the emotional ramifications of this method. If a particularly moving speech was being spoken, and suddenly a silence developed where only one speaker was heard for several words, or a sentence; or a scene in which one side of the room became still, a kind of emptiness descended on the lines; or an echo-effect happened which is very different emotionally from the chorus-effect of most of the performance. This out-of-synch-followed-by-one-person-speaking even created feeling in scenes where feelings were unexpected: a definite focus replaced business at those moments. And during the fight between the Star and the Director the very different kinds of acting done by Joan MacIntosh-Ron Vawter on one side and Elizabeth LeCompte-Robert Fuhrman on the other was made even more different during rehearsals. Fuhrman got louder, Vawter quieter; MacIntosh often would shed tears, LeCompte rarely wept. When the Star stumbles back to her dressing room the two performers were almost always out of synch—each performed the same gestures: taking a pill, getting out of costume, falling into the chair, reaching for the telephone, but these were done in very personal ways: clearly the audience was being offered differing interpretations of the same role and scene. Far from trying to "correct" these differences, I let them happen.

Kirby points out that spectators at one end or the other of the room see one cast in foreground and the other in background while those in the middle of the room could more easily compare casts, shift attention back-and-forth. Of this arrangement he says that "the staging of TMP . . . does not give a definitive answer to our question" [is the play structuralist?] He notes that I asked the Actors' Studio audience to move around, but this wasn't possible. Kirby saw TMP during open rehearsals (that's when Actors' Studio was there); during the run I dropped that instruction to the audience. Only people along the "back wall" could move, and they sparingly. Of course the production gave no "definitive answer" to Kirby's question—there isn't any such answer possible. But Kirby's question itself is a mask for another question: he is asking how far TMP conformed to his style of staging. It is a question comparable to mine of *A Chorus Line* or *Equus*—"How much are these productions 'environmental'?" It's a perfectly legitimate question—but it has nothing to do with theory. Kirby's "structuralism" as a style of production is present in TMP: that is, on many occasions (though different for each spectator) spectators are "taken away" from the story and induced to make the comparisons of a technical nature between casts, etc. that Kirby outlines in his article. But I insist that this "structuralist" style is compatible with many other styles, and can be successfully combined with them: as TMP combined naturalistic

acting, “abstract” or “iconographic” acting, environmental staging, and “structuralism.” TMP also has themes or meaning in the old-fashioned sense—out of story comes a particular set of dilemmas: between individualism and being absorbed in stereotype, between “live persons” (even if they are actors playing roles) and “film images” (even if they are documentaries), between the reproducibility of prints from a master negative versus the inability to produce even one identical copy of a live performance. I said that the technique could be used for any play—and actually Brian de Palma and Bruce Fiore used a split screen in their movie of *Dionysus in 69* (as did Andy Warhol in *Chelsea Hotel*)—but there the mechanics of film achieved easily what in TMP was attempted “raw.”

I come now to a decisive point: If Kirby’s “structuralism” is not a theory but a style of production, on what theory does that style rest? And by what means can it be analyzed? First and obviously: it can be analyzed from the perspective of any theory, classic structuralism, Marxism, Freudianism—you name it. There are two kinds of theory in question here, although Kirby in his writings confuses them: (1) theory as a method used to understand anything that is or happens (including “structuralist” performances); and (2) theory as a basis or matrix for making performances. Examples of the first kind of theory abound. Examples of the second are harder to ground because it is only relatively recently that theatre workers have wanted consciously to ground their work in theory. At first this grounding was nothing more than being the mouthpiece for the ideology that is itself based on a theory. Such are Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* in their relation to Marxism. But whenever one deals with ideology misunderstandings arise between the “official custodians” of the ideology and the “Protestants”—those who demand direct access to the theoretical basis. Thus Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* were not performed in the USSR because they were not acceptable ideologically. But more recently a new kind of grounding in theory emerges in the work of Cage, the *nouvelle vague* filmmakers, Foreman. This new kind of grounding is somewhere between the manifesto-proclamations of faith of the Surrealists and Futurists, etc., and the carefully worked out theories of the physical and social sciences. And instead of attaching themselves to someone else’s theory, artists have begun to devise their own. This is exactly what Kirby has tried to do. His theorizing is, in plain fact, traceable to the activities of Futurists, Surrealists, Cage, and Foreman. I cannot from this distance readily identify the theoretical basis of Kirby’s “structuralism.”

But I’ll try. From the work of his I’ve seen over the years, and from what I’ve read, I’d say his theatre arises from theories of “psychology of perception.” He is interested in how things are perceived, and in the nature of perception itself. Kirby’s “structuralism” emphasizes two extremes—and he points up these extremes by excluding all the middle terms that might link them. These extremes are the perceiving-I and the doing-It. The perceiving-I is the spectator, absolutely free to experience whatever reactions the performance evokes, or doesn’t evoke (the negative, the absence of something, the pause, etc. are very important in Kirby’s work). No effect or affect is strived for, no reaction is asked, or barred (except, possibly, those that disrupt the performance). The doing-It is the arrangement in/of time-space of items, actions, routines, things, people (the performer has no special status)—whatever is “in” the performance. The performers are free to react just as the spectators are, so long as these reactions don’t upset the score. But they are not free to “interpret” their roles—that is, they cannot mark their roles, or the performance as a whole, with the middle terms of narrative, characterization, concept, meaning, etc. All of these would inflict a tyranny of the doing-It over the perceiving-I, and this kind of control Kirby avoids. A radical

neutrality permeates Kirby's works (not only his theatre but his writings too), an abhorrence of "judgments" (qualitative rankings and comparisons) and a passion for "descriptions." He especially rejects narrative—arranging the incidents in a story so that the spectator gets interested in "what will happen next" or swept away by feelings aroused by what is happening. Now listen: Kirby is for the release of feelings, but not in an orchestrated way, not in a group or crowd way, not in a way controlled by the performance—as, for example, I can predict that spectators will feel saddened by the deaths of the lovers in *Romeo and Juliet* or judge Iago's actions in *Othello* to be "bad" or "wrong." Kirby does everything he can to purge his performances of sequences that would arouse such *uniform* feelings or judgments. What the individual spectator feels as the single perceiving-I is another matter. Kirby forces the performance to the two extremes: the I stripped of all conceptual supports; the I associating/reacting freely. His work uncannily pushes the "objective" (It) up against the "subjective" (I) with no reason or meliorating idea between them justifying their "collision." And a collision is what happens in a Kirby piece. Far from trying to create a collective experience or reaction among the audience, Kirby tries to keep each to himself, so that each can say, "My view is the only view (for me)." That Kirby does this without violating basic theatrical conventions (dialog, actions, groupings of performers, etc.) gives his pieces weird echoes of naturalism, theatre of the absurd, and other styles. But his work is more closely related to Foreman's than anyone else in today's scene. It is also connected to Kirby's earlier work in Happenings and his continuing work as a photo-sculptor.

All theatre, including Kirby's, is *multivocal, ambivalent, experiential*. These words precis my performance theory: theatre says-does more than one thing at a time; the things said-done lead in different directions, many of them beyond the control of the director or performers; as a system the theatre hinges on the performer-audience encounter, what in common language is called the "live theatre." This encounter is where-when the ambivalence and multivocality have their greatest play. While Kirby tries to focus his audience on time-and-space patterns, repetitive gestures, iconographic images, and other techniques of staging, all heightened by flat or non-acting, these actions set off associations in me of the most personal kind; and I don't think I'm unique in this. His plays have a ceremonial quality—something I noted as early as 1968 (see *Public Domain*) and which I still see in his recent work: *Eight People* and, from what I can gather by reading, *Revolutionary Dance*. Kirby might argue that these effects are random and not part of his work—and I reply: such randomness is inherent in theatre and part of what I mean by its multivocality and ambivalence. And the more abstract the structure the more people will read into it, or take from it, their own associations. Kirby's style is spare and idiosyncratic—those who follow him in this style are forming a "school" in the artistic sense. I admire his work, and wish only that he'd find a less confusing name for it.

One last point before I close this long letter. Kirby uses the terms "traditional drama" and "traditional theatre" to mean narrative plays staged in a more or less realistic style in theatres with fixed seating and fixed stages. But yesterday's avant-garde is today's tradition—I need remind no one of the reviews that greeted *Hedda Gabler* in the 1880s. But a great seismic shift has again happened in Western theatre—a change comparable to the decline of Romanticism and the rise of Naturalism. This time the "new tradition" is not gathered under one flag or name because its most salient feature is its rejection of any single set of conventions as binding. So don't refer to the old theatre as traditional thus neglecting the fact that *experimentation is the dominant mode of 20th century theatre*. Our period is the Experimental, and Kirby's Structuralist Workshop is one more example of this traditional theatre.

Richard Schechner