ABSTRACT: Something extraordinary has happened to metaphysics. At the very moment when philosophy is focusing its efforts at bringing metaphysics to an 'end,' metaphysics finds itself flourishing in the theatre, which speaks of itself as 'metaphysics-in-action' and publishes treatises carrying such titles as *The Act of Being: Toward a Theory of Acting*. The irony of the situation appears to have been lost on postmodern philosophers. What this paper sets out to do is explore the potential consequences of the metaphysical weight that has been acquired by the theatre for the practice of philosophy. It argues that the theatrical performance is in fact an 'enactment' of the performance of being and that, as such, it is possible to extend our understanding of this performance from the theatrical stage to the 'theatre of the world.' Finally, in doing so, we can establish the context for a metaphysics that does not privilege presence.

The world of the stage, of roles, masks, parts to play has been one of the most enduring ways of speaking about life and the world we live in. In fact, until four hundred years ago, the *theatrum mundi* metaphor was the dominant image in Western thinking. God was conceived on the analogy of a playwright who had created the script of the play that was being performed on the stage called the world. "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players ..."

No sooner had Shakespeare penned these lines than the theatre metaphor was emptied of its metaphysical charge. In very short order, it found itself functioning under the aegis of a new and more powerful image of the world: "the book of the world." It was Galileo and Descartes who gave this metaphor its currency, which was to have far reaching consequences for the history of metaphysical thinking in the West.

To engage the world as a stage is to find oneself articulating what is at bottom an inherently unstable view of the world. As anyone who is familiar with the theatre knows, if it takes a performance to bring a world to presence, then the intelligibility or meaning of what transpires cannot be guaranteed in advance. And, if God is conceived of in terms of being a playwright, then he faces the predicament that every playwright finds himself in. He is constrained to address the *continuing* instability that attaches itself to his creation by virtue of the fact that a performance intervenes between himself and what transpires onstage.

All of this changes when we think of the world as a book. We get a God who, in authoring the world, is more to the liking of modern philosophy: that is to say, a God who can
guarantee the stability of the world. The intelligibility of what transpires is already present in the book that he has written. It doesn't take a performance, as is the case with a script, in order to establish its meaning. The performance does nothing more than "play out" what is already present in the text: it re-presents it in perceptual form. This view also changed the West's notion of the theatre, which now came to signify a replication of the social and psychological conflicts that were present in society. The theatre, and the metaphysics it called forth, had in essence become domesticated. Its performance, like the one in nature which it imitated, was now under control.

Two things have happened that has changed all of this. First, our conception of a book has shifted dramatically. The notion of where and how the meaning of a text arises, not to mention the question of the author itself, have become problematic. The potential consequences of this shift in our application of the book metaphor to the world has received the exclusive attention of the philosophical community where it continues to facilitate the so-called "end of metaphysics."

What has gone unnoticed, however, is the second thing that has taken place. Theatre has redefined itself in the last hundred years. It has resolutely rejected all the conventions that have sought to control its performance in advance, in effect bypassing the book metaphor. The theatre has once again taken on metaphysical weight. It speaks of itself as "metaphysics-in-action," declaring its goal to be one of "reconciling us philosophically with Becoming."(Artaud, 44, 109) What is astonishing is the fact that these words, which come from essays written on the theatre, are fairly typical of the language contained in acting manuals and treatises on the nature of theatre.

It would seem that at the time when metaphysics appears to be coming to an "end" in philosophy, it finds itself flourishing in the theatre. What I want to do in this paper is to explore the potential consequences of this return of metaphysics to the theatre for the practice of philosophy.

Let me begin by briefly discussing the way in which metaphysical questions arise at the heart of what the contemporary theatre calls performance. Over the past hundred years a number of acting methods have arisen, each addressing itself to what has come to be known as "the actor's problem." Namely, although it is clear that the performance the actors give onstage is in the nature of an impersonation, nevertheless, in order to succeed in the practice of their craft actors must avoid all pretense. Stanislavski, the father of method acting, insisted that the difference between the new theatre and the one it hoped to replace was "the difference between 'seeming' and 'being'." (Stanislavski, 91)

To be sure, impersonation as it takes place outside the theatre is a matter of pretending to be what one is not: that is to say, of using one's body in such a way as to refer the spectator to someone else. In the theatre, however, impersonation is a matter of becoming what one is not. The actor's body is used as the site of a metamorphosis. In order to accomplish this, the actor engages in a number of preparatory exercises directed at breaking down the body's tendency to become a referential site during the acting situation. In other words, the goal to be achieved in the theatrical performance is one where the character in the play appears onstage not as someone the actor refers us to, but rather as someone who has come to full-blooded presence in the actor's body. The primordial function of the theatre performance, then, is to bring this character to presence, using the actor's body as a threshold.

Here we can see the metaphysical quest that lies behind these acting methods. In living our lives, our bodies function as the threshold across which the someone we call our selves comes to presence in the world. What the actor does in preparing for a role is to reach down within himself and attempt to capture this function "in the act," so to speak. His objective is to access what a recent treatise on acting theory describes as "the world before it became
his world and himself before he became his self."(Marowitz, 27) The actor is, in effect, attempting to reach that state of affairs where his body can be used as a threshold across which he can bring *someone else*, the character in the play, to presence on the stage.

The performance that does this "enacts" the performance which is bringing us and the events surrounding us to presence in the world. What takes place in the theatre is an imitation of the "performance of being" which is taking place in nature. The theatre imitates this performance not by referring to it but by doing it -- the word "drama" comes from the Greek word *dran* which signifies "something that is done." The actor makes contact with the performance which is producing himself and the events he belongs to in the offstage world and, by virtue of his craft, reshapes it into a performance that produces the world onstage. What transpires onstage may indeed resemble what exists offstage: it may even be a replication. But resemblance or replication is not the point of the theatre performance. This could be accomplished any number of other ways: in a painting, for example. The point of the theatre performance is to make characters and events appear in person. The "live" performance of reality is imitated in the "live" performance of theatre. As Aristotle puts it: theatre imitates an action in the form of action and not, as literature does, in the form of narration.

The theatrical stage, therefore, is first and foremost a place that has been cleared out in the perceptual world. As an enactment, the theatrical performance deflects, so to speak, the presencing act of being which is taking place in nature and makes it happen at this new site. Accordingly, its activity cuts deeper than the socio-political landscape. Of course, it includes this landscape. But, in theatre at its best, there is always more at stake than the social, political, or even the moral, meaning of what transpires onstage. What the theatre sets before us is a stage which functions as a threshold: a threshold across which a world of characters and events comes to presence. And the theatrical performance which negotiates this crossing makes happen on the theatrical stage what happens on the stage of the world: namely, things come to be.

As such, the theatre supplies us with an apt metaphor for a discourse on what has traditionally been the subject matter of metaphysics. The point of metaphysics, let us recall, is to articulate intellectually being *qua* being: that is to say, things and events as they are caught up in the act, or the performance, which brings them to presence. In nature, as in the theatre, what comes to presence does so together with the performance that presences it. And what metaphysics attempts to do is to thematize this performance. In essence, metaphysics is a reflection on what theatre enacts.

To be sure, in both the theatre and in life, the act which presences "that-which-is" remains elusive. Herein lies the importance of the theatre experience to philosophy, especially at this particular time in the latter's history. The theatre serves to reminds us that, elusive though it may be, the performance which brings to presence is something with which we are always in contact along with that which it brings to presence. There is no confusing the two in the theatre. This fact is attested to by the phenomenon of the curtain call where the performance is singled out for special attention. In applauding the actors, we are explicitly acknowledging the fact of our having been aware of the presencing act together with what it made present onstage *at the time it was taking place*.

The performance which is taking place on the stage of the world, however, does not admit of a curtain call. We are not offered a vantage point from which the performance of being exhibits itself as having anything like a beginning, a middle and an end. Herein lies philosophy's problem. And, for this reason, it is constrained to use a "borrowed" language: that is to say, a language which the performance has fashioned for itself during its time in the theatre. Borrowed though it may be, it is nevertheless a language that articulates the act which presences.
If we think, for example, of the performance of being as a theatrical performance which has no beginning or end, thereby removing all traces of an offstage, we find that we can speak of the performance as something that "is" in the absolute sense of that term: that is to say, as something that is not conditional or relative to anything else. Everything else -- namely, that which appears onstage -- "is" conditional or relative to the performance which is bringing it forth. Parmenides was essentially correct when he said that otherness, or the negation which establishes distance, must not be attributed to being in its primary sense. Such categories attach themselves not to the performance of being, but to that which the performance makes present. They form part of the constellation of characteristics which define the nature of presence.

What the theatre experience teaches us, then, is that whenever a metaphysical discourse allows the notion of presence to enter into its inquiry into being qua being its subject matter will inevitably be deformed. To speak of the performance as if it were controlled by a prior presence (ideal or otherwise) is to end up with a specious performance, a performance which is not the act that is bringing things to presence in person. This is what happens in the theatre when the performance is an act of pretending. What comes to presence on the stage is a representation of something and not the thing itself. The metaphysical notion of presence, then, turns out not to be an originary notion. It is determined by our prior understanding of the presencing act. Whenever this relationship is reversed, the result is a metaphysical deformity.

The theatre experience also teaches us something more. It shows us that if we engage the world intellectually as a threshold (as a stage) it becomes possible to do metaphysics in a way that does not issue into anything like a discourse that privileges presence. The world conceived of as a stage opens itself up to us as a temporal state of affairs: that state of affairs which lies beneath, so to speak, that spatial arrangement which makes up the totality of being. Like the theatrical stage, the world exhibits the kind of temporality which enables it to be the site of a performance. The notion of time which enters into the fabric of this performance contains a "thickness" that we rarely associate with time. The performance which the theatre enacts is not only a flow which is being held together by a present that constitutes it as something live and on-going, but it is also a flow whose present confers on things their ontic capacity to be that-which-is-present. In other words, the passing present of this performance is a present which brings to presence.

Philosophy, then, reveals itself to be a discourse on what transpires in the "theatre of the world," and metaphysics a reflection on the performance that gives us the play which is coming to pass on the world's stage. I am not suggesting that metaphysics is bereft of its own resources. Clearly it brings to the discourse notions which it has not borrowed from the theatre: notions such as substance, form, unity, identity, even the notion of God. What I am suggesting, however, is that by re-interpreting these notions as elements of a theatre, they afford us the means of articulating the nature of the temporality which underlies the realm of presence.

It is the theatre metaphor which makes this discourse on being as performance possible. It not only enables us to construct an ontology of presence on whose stage the totality of being appears. But it does this as a product of a metaphysics which moves beyond presence itself to the performance of being which maintains this stage as an on-going threshold. And finally, if we find ourselves called to do so, the theatre metaphor makes it possible for us to reach even beyond the stage, to an abiding summons to which the performance is responding.
Works Cited

