Grzegorz Sinko

Description of a theatrical performance: its language and subject

MUZEUM HISTORII POLSKI

Grzegorz Sinko

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The discussion may conveniently be started with the statement that it is impossible to present this article as a dance of its author, a pantomime, a comic strip, a silent movie, a solo concert, or a symphony. On the other hand it is possible to write articles on ballets, pantomimes, paintings, movies and music. The obvious phenomenon is today fully explained by linguistic and semiotic research which clearly speaks in favour of using natural language for the purpose of describing a theatrical performance. Natural language is "the most powerful semiotic device that man has invented"[1] and it is endowed with "qualities [...] that allow its broad application as the basic sign-system of mankind, i.e. as metalanguage in relation to other languages."[2] In other terms, natural language lends itself to the purpose of making communications about all the domains of life; "all the other signs produced by man can be interpreted by signs of language while language itself cannot be interpreted by signs that are limited to specific domains."[3]

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* A modified version of ch. I of the book: G. Sinko, *Opis przedstawienia teatralnego — problem semiotyczny (Description of a Theatrical Performance — A Semiotic Problem)*, Wrocław 1982.
[1] U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington—London 1976, p. 174.
[2] V. V. Ivanov, „Rol semiotiki v kiberneticheskom issledovanii cheloveka i kollektiva," [in:] *Logicheskaya struktura nauchnogo znaniya*, Moskva 1965, p. 99.
[3] J. Trabant, *Elemente der Semiotik*, München 1976, p. 75.

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The miracle of language is explained by its double articulation system: the first system is that of morphemes and lexemes – of meaning-carrying units by means of which we can break up the surrounding world into units of meaning and then connect those units in syntagmatic chains. The second system consists in dividing morphemes and lexemes into a limited number of discreet units which no longer convey meaning – into about forty phonemes which appear in all natural languages.

As to the sign-systems used in a theatrical performance there is full agreement about the absence of a double system of articulation and of discreet units in visual arts[4] and in iconics in general. The situation in kinesics is less clear. R. L. Birdwhistell tried to carry over into his field the methods of American behaviourism of the nineteen--forties and 'fifties. The theoretical outcome is the establishment of kinemorphs (assemblages of movements in one area of the body) which the author compares to morphemes.[5] But the next unit – the kines into which kinemorphs are split – does not correspond to a phoneme. Kines are defined as "abstractions of ranges of behaviour produced by a member of a given social group which, for another member of the same group, stands in perpetual contrast to a different range of such behaviour." Birdwhistell adds that

A kine is not a point or position of articulatory activity; it is a range which the unsophisticated informant reports as the same [...] Each kinesic system will have differently shaped kinic classes.[6]

In spite of the typically structuralist definition by means of contrastive distribution, the notion of kine remains so vague that it cannot serve to establish a second articulation system in kinesic communication. One of the consequences is that in his proposed artificial language of graphic symbols Birdwhistell can produce nothing like a phonemic transcription. What he provides is simply a taxonomic lexicon of actual kinemorphs which, in spite of the author's assurances to the contrary, resembles Meyerhold's or Laban's catalogues of

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[4] E. g. M. Porębski, "Semiotyczny i ikoniczny horyzont badań nad sztuką" (Semiotic and Iconic Perspectives of Researches on Art), *Studia Estetyczne*, X vol. XIII (1975), p. 5.

[5] R. L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context*, Philadelphia 1970, p. 197.

[6] *Ibidem*, pp. 193–194.

movements. The notation of B. Koechlin[7] as presented by A. J. Greimas[8] is a similar case of basic stock-taking which Greimas justly compares to a Basic French vocabulary.

Greimas himself rejects the morphological taxonomy of movements based on the areas of human body. He starts from a semantic basis in search of common meanings manifested in different "lexical items" of movements. His procedure is that of componential analysis of meaning with the sememe as one of its notions. Yet, in spite of his initial design of creating something like the notion of a "gestual pheneme" on the surface level, he is compelled to state after exhaustive research that "the categories and gestual units [...] never constitute a system of signification which might be compared to linguistic systems." His proposal to treat gestual units at the same time as phonemes (i.e. non-meaning units in the surface structure) and sememes (units of the sematic plane)[9] is a roundabout acknowledgment of the lack of double articulation in kinesics which he finally proclaims to be a symbolic and not a linguistic system.

The fundamental characteristics of iconic and kinesic systems bring us from an apology of natural language as metalanguage for these systems to the problem of forming artificial metalanguages. In iconics the situation is clear: there is universal agreement that any possible units of meaning such as motifs and themes[10] must be discussed in natural language. The basic theoretical arguments against the use of artificial languages for dealing with kinesics have been just summarized; lexicons of symbolically noted movements are only more or less intricate stock-lists while the proposed symbols can only be used to supplement the notation of dialogues in natural language (as is the case with Birdwhistell's series of analyses of brief filmed conversations). The investigation of kinesics on an ordered theoretical basis, such as that of Greimas or of Eco when he applies componential analysis of meaning to kinesic pointers,[11] is always carried on in natural language. All this supports the statement of Greimas about the

[7] B. Koechlin, "Techniques corporelles et leur notation symbolique," *Langage*, VII, pp. 36–47.

[8] A. J. Greimas, *Du sens*, Paris 1970, pp. 62–63, 83.

[9] *Ibidem*, pp. 82, 85.

[10] Porębski, *op. cit.*, p. 3 ff.

[11] Eco, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–121.

"basic incapacity of gesticulatory expression to constitute itself as
a code of semiotic communication that would be both autonomous
and complete."[12]

In the field of music the existence of the artificial language
of scores gave birth to many misunderstandings which only recently
begin to disappear owing to advances in semiotics. First of all, the
special position of music among semiotic systems has been formu-
lated as "the problem of a semiotic system without a semantic level
(or content plane)." This feature is, however, coupled with "the
existence of 'musical signs' (or syntagms) with an explicit denotative
value (trumpet signals in the army)," or with the existence of "syntagms
or entire 'texts' possessing preculturalized connotative value ('pastoral'
or 'thrilling' music, etc.)." The sign-vehicle of the artificial language
of music (a note) "denotes a class of sound events which have
for interpretants mathematical values and oscillographic or spectro-
graphic measures."[13] The possible cultural meaning of these events is
always formulated in natural language and the system of notes is
used only by way of quotation. In other words, the "language" of
music is symbolized by notes, but the language of musicology is
natural language.

Against the background of the brief survey of the possibility
(or rather the impossibility) of applying artificial languages to sign-
-systems used in the theatre, the creation of a "theatrical score"—
an artificial language to describe the stage and its events—seems
to be deprived of any foundation. A general argument in favour
of his thesis may be formulated as follows: whether we treat the
theatre as a reflection of the world or as a world in itself, we may
agree that it is received by us in a way that is analogous to our
experience of the world. To enclose the theatre within the limits
of a sign-system is a task that is equivalent to the semiosis of the
surrounding world which is incessantly done by every representative
of our species. Whether natural language is the foremost and original
system of such semiosis is a problem for separate discussion, but
we may agree that it is at least the most universal vehicle for
formulating the results of such a process. To speak about the "language

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[12] Greimas, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
[13] Eco, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 88.

of the theatre" is basically equal to speaking about the "language" in which we are addressed by the world.

The old and new proposals to create an artificial language for dealing with the theatre are haphazard and blind. One of the recent examples is D. Cole's system of 1976 [14]: in order to account for the simultaneous occurrence of events in various sign-systems he introduces, apart from a linear rendering of dialogues in natural language, a "language" of symbols denoting stage-movement. Thus far he repeats Birdwhistell's procedure in which graphic symbols play only a subordinate part. Yet, the author's aim is far more ambitious: his artificial language is to include not only kinesics, but also psychological occurrences which are presented by diagrams modelled upon the notation of Buddhist meditations. The present author is not an expert in Buddhism, but he thinks that even if an artificial language might serve the needs of a philosophical system with a limited number of terms and notions, Cole's attempt to extend such a language beyond one philosophical system is no less than a proposal to create a graphic "language" for all the possible contents of man's spiritual life. There seems to be no need for a detailed refutation of such an idea which negates the biological and historical importance of man's acquisition of the gift of tongue as the most comprehensive and many-sided semiotic system.

A very sound voice in the discussion on the theatrical score came twenty years ago from the leading Polish historian of the theatre, Z. Raszewski. A historical survey of the subject brought him to the conclusion which is in full accordance with the principle of limited application of artificial languages. The highly codified classical ballet with its fixed number of postures and evolutions lent itself to notation; the same applied to acting in the times of Molière when acting was "so precise in word and gesture that a score simply imposed itself as a means of facilitating the work of preparing a performance." In the 19th century "the unstability, or even the disintegration of the performance made this kind of precision impossible." [15] This statement of a historian may be treated

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[14] D. Cole, "The Visual Script," *The Drama Review*, vol. XX (1976), fasc. 4.

[15] Z. Raszewski, "Partytura teatralna" (The Theatrical Score), *Pamiętnik Teatralny*, 1958, fasc. 3–4, pp. 391–392.

as an illustration of the limitation of all artificial languages to certain specific semantic domains.

The present author does not preclude the possibility of working out some sort of auxiliary theatrical score in the future, but he wants to stress that it should be semantically oriented (i.e. starting from meanings and their relations and not from their surface manifestations) and that it should be based upon the general theory of artificial languages. At the present moment there is, however, no option, but to use natural language for describing performances as it is the only sign-system that is capable of accounting for the various sign-systems used in the theatre.

An additional paragraph seems necessary to conclude the remarks on the sign-systems of the theatre and their mutual relations: some light must be thrown on the problem of the so-called "theatrical sign" and "theatrical code." Both notions seem to be relics of the early phase of studies on meaning in the theatre as represented by the Prague school. For scholars of this group the special way of functioning of different sign-systems in the theatre became an inducement to postulate the existence of a special kind of signs. The tangle of the ensuing falsely formulated problems was first cut by R. Barthes: his statement based on Peirce's tripartite theory of sign and the role of the interpretant is that objects, gestures and images which in principle are not meant as vehicles of signification are endowed with meaning by social usage. Barthes calls this phenomenon the assumption of a sign-function by a primarily non-signifying object. [16] Later on, U. Eco gave further explanations by formulating the notions of "ostension" and "square semiosis" as constitutive factors of the theatre in general. [17]

Ostension means that   .

A human body, along with its conventionally recognized properties, surrounded by or supplied with a set of objects, inserted within a physical space, stands for something else to a reacting audience. In order to do so, it has been framed within a sort of performative situation that establishes that it has to be taken as a sign.

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[16] R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, London 1969, p. 41.

[17] U. Eco, "Semiotics of Theatrical Performance," *The drama Review*, vol. XXII (1977), fasc. 1. [French transl.: "Paramètres de la sémiologie théâtrale," — in: *Sémiologie de la représentation*, ed. A. Helbo, Bruxelles 1979.]

The performative situation is created by the actors' implicit speech act: "I am acting," "I am another man." As for square semiosis it applies to all non-verbal elements of the performance:

> With words a phonic object stands for other objects made with different stuff. In the mise-en-scene an object, first recognized as a real object, is then assumed as a sign in order to refer back to another object (or a class of objects) whose constitutive stuff is the same as that of the representing object. [18]

Ostension and square semiosis are, like the very phenomenon of the theatre, a matter of social convention. The particulars of various conventions may differ thus providing different "theatrical codes," but these codes are (to use a term of the Tartu school) only "secondary modelling systems"; in Russian terminology the "first modelling system" is equivalent simply to a sign-system [19]. Now, the sign-systems used in the theatre are essentially the same as in other domains of man's activities; they "map" in the same way between meaning and its expression. Modifications brought about by ostension and by square semiosis are consciously or unconsciously included in the competence of any spectator who belongs to a civilization that has evolved the theatre. These modifications allow for the specifically theatrical conditions of the signifying process, but do not change the very sign-systems and their "mapping" qualities. Instead of speaking about "theatrical signs" one should rather speak of "signs in the theatre."

For example, the secondary modelling systems differ in the theatre of Europe and that of the Far East. They may require learning, but the kind of knowledge that is needed here is certainly part of the cultural competence of the "ideal spectator" whom we are going to postulate as author of description; the notion is discussed in the chapters of the present book dealing with the pragmatics of the text. Briefly speaking, it corresponds to the notion of the "ideal competence" in linguistics and that of the "ideal reader" in literary studies. What is essential for the present chapter is the thesis that culturally conditioned changes of meaning apply only to certain individual signs, but the principles of the respective sign-

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[18] *Ibidem*, pp. 117, 111.

[19] Cf. A. Shukman, *Literature and Semiotics. A Study of the Writings of Yu. M. Lotman*. Amsterdam — New York — Oxford 1977, pp. 3, 14.

-systems do not change; with due allowance for the cultural competence of the translator the problems of their translation into natural language remain unaltered.

Another misunderstanding arose in connection with the fact of overlapping of several sign-systems in the process of creating meaning. It is not a particular feature of the theatre as may be seen e.g. from Birdwhistell's recorded conversations in which linguistic, paralinguistic and kinesic behaviour is presented in parallel lines[20]. The diagrams show that kinesic behaviour, paralinguistic behaviour, and audible speech do not appear simultaneously in given units of time, but appear with regard to one another in an overlapping or intermittent way. It is impossible to cut out any common unit in the surface structures of different sign-systems; the "global theatrical sign" is something that cannot be observed in any actually investigated communicative process. A solution of the problem has been brought by recent advances in the theory of text with which we shall be dealing a few lines below. Let it only be said here that what unites the use of different sign-systems for the purpose of creating and transmitting meaning is their common semantic plane which always has the structure of a text, even if it is only a microtext. As such it is translatable into natural language as a paraphrasing sentence. What we have to deal with both in theatre and in life are not "global signs" but global meanings of semiotically polyphonic texts.

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Polemic remarks about the "global sign" brought us to the crucial notion of text. According to U. Eco's definition it is "a macro--unit, ruled by particular generative rules, in which sometimes the very notion of 'sign'— as an elementary semiotic unit has been annihilated."[21] The annihilation of the sign in a text is further expanded by M. Corti:

The transsentential unity of signifiers and meanings produces a global meaning of the text that is not absolutely the sum of the partial meanings isolable among them; our use of partial meanings is neutralized by the textual law.[22]

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[20] Birdwhistell, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

[21] Eco, *A Theory...*, p. 12.

[22] M. Corti, *An Introduction to Literary Semiotics*, Bloomington—London 1978, p. 79.

Finally, P. Hartmann observes that

> One may call a "text" whatever occurs in language in the way of giving it a communicable social form, i.e. a from that is related to the partners, [and also that] language is observable only in form of a text. [23]

Microtexts in natural language may even consist of a single word like "Fire!" or "Help!"

The creation of texts is not limited to natural language. Eco says that

> An iconic sign is indeed a text, for its verbal equivalent is not a word, but a phrase or indeed a whole story; the iconic representation of a horse does not correspond to the word "horse" but rather to a description (a black horse, standing up, or jumping, etc.), to a mention (this horse is galloping) or to some other different speech act (look, what a beautiful horse!). If inserted in a scientific text, an iconic sign can correspond to the statement of the type: all horses have four legs and such visual properties... [24]

The sign-system of the natural language does not seem to be essential for the notion of the text; what is involved here is the capacity of our species to create texts and not only signs. F. Jameson even proposes to replace the definition of man as *homo loquens* by the term of *homo semioticus*[25]— a being which not only speaks, but is capable of semiosis of the surrounding world and of arranging its results in texts.

If the sign-system of a text is not of primary importance, there is no obstacle to apply the term to the "polysubstantial" phenomenon of the theatre[26] which, according to R. Durand, is a "specific heterogenous combination of several codes which do not have to be specifically theatrical."[27] Such an extension of the term "text" beyond the traditional meaning of a spoken or written utterance in natural language is beginning to spread among students of the theatre. One of the recent purely theatrical studies which follows this

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[23] P. Hartmann, "Text, Texte, Klassen von Texten," [in:] *Strukturelle Textanalyse*, ed. W.A. Koch, Hildesheim – New York 1972, p. 5.

[24] Eco, *A Theory...*, pp. 215–216.

[25] F. Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, Princeton 1972, p. 31.

[26] The term comes from S. Skwarczyńska's book *Wokół teatru i literatury* (*Around Theatre and Literature*), Warszawa 1970, p. 27 ff.

[27] R. Durand, "Problèmes de l'analyse structurale et sémiotique de la forme théâtrale," [in:] *Sémiologie de la représentation*, p. 113.

line is the article of M. De Marinis of 1978—9. What he calls a *testo spettacolare* is a given concrete theatrical performance endowed with two basic characteristics which constitute any text: completeness and coherence. Yet, although both of these qualities are semantic ones, De Marinis (like his predecessor and collaborator G. Bettetini) starts with the study of surface structures by introducing a horizontal division into levels— texts in different sign-systems which he calls *testi parziali*. Consequently, he defines the macrostructure of a text (i.e. of a performance) as an intersection of many *testi parziali*, of the levels of many sign-systems.

The passage from surface to meaning is effected in De Marinis' article by means of the highly doubtful notion of the theatrical code (*codice spettacolare*) which is "the convention that allows us to join the given contents with the given elements of one or several expressive systems"[28]. The trouble with such a notion is that it takes for granted certain assumptions that are still far from being sufficiently established while on the other hand it neglects certain already well--founded theories.

One of the basic assumptions of generative semantics is that "a language is a system that 'maps' between the content of well--formed portions of discourse and their form, i.e. maps between meaning and its expression"[29]. Yet, even in studies on natural language this "mapping", especially when we leave the domain of phrase--grammars and pass to texts, is still very far from being properly known. When we leave natural language we are in a situation that may be summed up in the statement that nothing resembling the work of the American school of generative semantics has been done with texts in other sign-systems. The "joining of contents with given elements of expressive systems" is still virgin ground.

On the other hand, the investigation of semantic structures and of their configurations irrespectively of the forms in which they appear on the surface level has been fairly well advanced in semantic text-grammars (e.g. by T.A. van Dijk). Such approaches are eminently

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[28] M. De Marinis, "Lo spettacolo come testo," P. I, *Versus*, 1978, no. 21, pp. 68, 75, 78—79, 82.
[29] D. G. Frantz, "Generative Semantics—An Introduction," [in:] *Readings in Generative Semantics*, ed. J. Nawrocka-Fisiak, Poznań 1976, p. 7.

suited to deal with the theatre which uses many different sign-systems on the surface plane while the semantic plane is the same for all the systems. The common semantic basis, and not the non-existing "theatrical code," is here the unifying factor.

Having once established that a theatrical performance is a text, the present author does not generalize in the succeeding chapters of his book on the methods of its analysis, but treats the problem in the light of a survey of different text-theories such as classical French structuralism (Barthes, Greimas, Todorov), French post-structuralism (Kristeva and Derrida), the German structuralist school with its Peircean bent and its stress upon the pragmatic component, and finally American generative semantics (mainly Gordon and Lakoff). Inspirations for structuralizing both narrative and non-narrative texts, i.e. theatrical performances of a narrative or non-narrative type, are drawn from the existing attempts at formulating semantic grammars of the text. Yet, for the limited purposes of the present chapter it is enough to agree with De Marinis' notion of the performance as a text while adding that this very text in different sign-systems is the subject of description in natural language which in this case serves as metalanguage.

The subject of description is not any series of linguistic, kinesic and iconic events, but a text which is defined and characterized by semantic coherence producing global meaning. Consequently, the function of description is equal to two tasks: that of translation into and that of paraphrase in natural language. In both of these activities the preservation of the text-constitutive quality of sense is essential; otherwise, there is no translation of a text (i.e. of a theatrical performance), but a catalogue of events in the surface structure. To use a term of Greimas, the description must be isotopic with the performance. Furthermore, once we leave the semantic plane as the basis of description, we deprive ourselves of the hierarchy of meaning of the objects we are describing. Numerous existing descriptions are cloyed with details of secondary importance treated on an equal footing with crucial elements. A semantically-oriented description permits to introduce more or less details according to the technical requirements of its smaller or larger size, but the selection is always done according to the meaning-creative role of these elements. This is the reason for

which the present author is against the so-called "objective," non-
-interpreting descriptions of performances which even in their most
detailed form cannot replace either the "reading" of the actual per-
formance itself, or the use of recorded documentary material, while
on the other hand they lose from sight the most important thing:
the sense of what is being described. To sum the matter up, it
appears that a non-interpreting description of a performance (which
some of its Polish advocates call a "recording" — *zapis*) destroys
its own subject — the text under description, or rather under translation,
by neglecting its constitutive factor — its semantic coherence.

The present author's option in favour of natural language does
not preclude the importance of collecting theatrical documentation.
The subject has already quite a rich literature of its own dealing
mainly with technical problems and with problems of organization [30].

From a theoretical point of view it may only be observed that
audiovisual recordings, however valuable or even indispensable they
may be in supplementing the description, or for the purpose of
historical documentation, leave the task of their semantic interpretation
to their users; under ideal conditions they are replicas and not transla-
tions. Besides, they do not include the pragmatic component — the
influence of the participants in the text upon the meaning of the
text itself (in the theatre it has the physically observable form of
interaction between actors and audiences). In order to allow for this
very difference T. Kowzan reserves the term of "description" for the
results of observing an actual performance from the seats while
proposing to use the term of "recordings" for all the written materials
coming from the authors of the performance [31].

It may be worth while to observe in this connection that
promptbooks, however useful they may be as subsidiary documenta-

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[30] In Polish there is the basic work of Z. Raszewski, "Dokumentacja
przedstawienia teatralnego" (The Records of the Theatrical Performance), [in:]
Dokumentacja w badaniach literackich i teatralnych, ed. J. Czachowska, Wrocław
1971. Cf. also: S. Skwarczyńska, "Sprawa dokumentacji widowiska teatralnego"
(Problems of the Theatrical Performance's Records), *Dialog*, 1973, no. 7; Z. Osiński,
"Z problematyki scenariusza teatralnego" (From the Problematics of Theatrical
Scenario), *Miesięcznik Literacki*, 1972, no. 1.

[31] T. Kowzan, "Spektakl teatralny pod mikroskopem" (The Theatrical Spectacle
under the Microscope), *Dialog*, 1971, no. 8.

tion, are only a sort of fragmentary catalogues of events. The logbooks of rehearsals throw light upon the process of creation or upon the intended meanings, but do not necessarily present the actual meanings of the text (i.e. of the performance) as offered to the audiences. The most interesting problem seems to be that of directors' copies of plays and scenarios. Kowzan made the apt observation that director's materials are normative and not analytical [32] while Z. Hübner added that a theatrical scenario is not a description, but only a proposal, just like the scriptbook of a motion picture [33]. Briefly speaking, both authors point to the fact that a director's ideas and intentions are not identical with the actual performance. The fact has an obvious explanation: texts in natural language and iconic texts have usually but one single author who provides perceptible surface-structures for his intended contents whereas semiotically polyphonic texts like theatrical performances have a number of coauthors; meanings are created and expressed by their common work.

3

Having established the language and the subject of the descritpion, the present author would like to conclude the chapter by at least a few remarks on the object which appears as the result of describing. It is a text in natural language which is an intersemiotic translation (a translation from a number of different sign-systems). By the fact of its being a translation it retains the semantic coherence of the original while rendering its surface manifestations of meaning in one sign-system only – the natural language. An important warning is required at this point: the fact that natural language is in most cases one of the systems used in the original (i.e. the performance) often leads to the error of first paraphrasing the dramatic texts and then of comparing them with theatrical performances, instead of treating the performances as separate subjects in their own right. A comparison of the text of a play and the text of a performance seems to be only a second step for which it is necessary to have

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[32] *Ibidem*, p. 144.

[33] Z. Hübner, "Pisane na scenie" (Written on the Scene), *Dialog*, 1973, no. 4.

two terms at one's disposal; it is the function of the description
to furnish one of these terms. What is actually being compared in
books, articles and reviews is not a dramatic work and its performan-
ce at the theatre, but always a dramatic work and a description
of the performance. The second term of comparison is not established
by taking readers to the theatre, but by writing about what happened
at the theatre. Comparison is always being made between two texts,
both of them in natural language, one of these texts being a translation.
To be conscious of what is being compared seems as important
as to know what is being described and what is the essential
process involved in the description. The present chapter was meant
as an answer to these two questions.