

THE DOUBLE : TRACING THE CRACKS OF DUAL IDENTITY IN BALINESE AND EUROPEAN RITUA- LIZED PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

The Balinese dance *legong* is compared with two European plays, Jean Genet's *The Maids* and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in order to examine different approaches to the function and characterization of the Double. All three contain ritual performance in which the pairs exchange their roles, but for different purposes and with different levels of fluidity. All three play with alternating in presentation between exact mirror images and distinguishable individual characteristics. In the two European examples, the Doubles are socially marginalized characters—servants whose double identity hardly equals a full single identity as even together they cannot combat the power of the Master or Mistress. In the *legong*, however, the servant is a single character and it is the mistress who is played in double. The splitting of an identity that externally communes with itself is one source of alienation, but in the *legong*, the performance also alienates the story of rape and revenge by being enacted by pre-adolescent girls; Genet's maids achieves a similar alienation by being played by young

men, and Stoppard's courtiers step in and out of the well-known text, *Hamlet*. Within the contexts of ritual and game-playing, the three sets of Double perhaps demonstrate different cultural notions of identity vis a vis the concepts individuality and one's role within a social structure.

The Double: Tracing the Cracks of Dual Identity in Balinese and European Ritualized Performance

On the island of Bali, the *legong* dance is performed by three prepubescent girls; the maidservant (*tjongdong*) dances an introductory solo that is then followed by the entrance of the princess (*legong*), danced in double by the other two girls. When all three meet, they perform the same movements but the maidservant, her back to the audience, is the mirror image of the other two. After a few minutes she departs and two *legong dancers* begin the narrative portion of the dance. Many stories can be depicted in this section but the tale of the *King of Lasem* has become the predominant one.

In brief, this king abducts a princess and when her brother comes seeking her, the king denies having any knowledge of her. The prince then declares war against the king. Meanwhile the king attempts in vain to seduce the princess, takes leave of his wife and prepares for war. At this point, the dancer who formerly performed the role of maidservant returns dressed as the bird of evil omen and attack the king. After they fight, all three dancers depart, leaving it to the imagination of the audience to understand that this evil omen forebodes

the king's death in battle.

In addition to scintillating dance movement, what intrigues outsiders who observe this dance is the manner in which the princess, danced in double, fluidly assumes the various roles in the narrative- -the king, the wife, the princess, the prince- -so that with a few symbolic gestures, each role is clear and distinct. These signs, as referred to by Artaud, are also interwoven into the fabric of the purely abstract elements of the dance; the gestures never break into realistic mime. The dance never descends into literalness, or, as Artaud called it, "perverted mime" (Artaud 1958, 39)

What makes the dance even more extraordinary is the impersonal mask-like expressions the girls adopt to disclose the feelings of the characters they momentarily become--the pleading of the king, the indignation of the princess, the sorrow and affection of the queen. To see these sophisticated stylized expressions on the faces of twelve-year old village girls is to experience a sense of an eternal ritual which transforms the dancer into another being and transports the audience into another world.

Several modern Western playwrights have experimented with the concept of the double in which physical resemblance is irrelevant (unlike Shakespeare's comedies based on the mistaken identities of twins). Instead, the emphasis is on the lack of any stable and fixed identity of either one of the two characters- -they assume identity as if it were a costume and when one particular identity is "taken off," the one

revealed beneath it is no more definitive or stable than the discarded one; they, as characters, are interchangeable but always distinguishable; they form a symbiotic composite that sometimes operates as one and sometimes as two. This destabilized identity of the double is particularly evident in Jean Genet's *The Maids* and is also operative element in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

If one were to schematize the relationship of the double in these two plays with that of the *legong*, one could say that the identity of double of the *legong* is predetermined by ritual; there is no written text, only custom. Innovation is introduced only in the context of the stage setting. In *The Maids*, the identities of Solange and Claire are created by the sisters themselves; they both decide who will play what role and what the nature and the limits of the role will be. However, the roles, though well-defined, are so flexible and permeable they can be swapped and altered mid-way in a scene; that is, the roles have predetermined variables but are themselves palimpsests of perpetually shifting surfaces, always revealing further layers underneath. The sisters are superb masters of improvisation, giving and taking cues so smoothly the audience cannot discern who is leading and who is following.

The dual identity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is determined by a previous text, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The countries are acquainted with their own lives and roles only as far as they have been *written*. However, they are not familiar enough with the text to know

what is going to happen in advance, and therefore they feel helpless to alter it in anyway, since even an attempt at alteration might end up being a divergence already accounted for in the text itself. They are victimized by their roles of uncertain identity and function because they play no part in the creation of them. In addition to being defined by Shakespeare's text- -which determines all the other characters as well- -the two courtiers are further defined by the roles given them by other characters in Stoppard's text- -they have no identity outside of their function to spy upon Hamlet on Claudius' behalf. They have no memory prior to the messenger calling them into the service of the play; they exist only from that moment on, and because the messenger never clarifies which one is Rosencrantz and which is Guildenstern, they themselves (or at least Rosencrantz) are plagued by this fundamental uncertainty.

The question remains as to whether the partners in these two couples, are as interchangeable as the two *legong*. As they function in Shakespeare's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are virtually indistinguishable, although in Stoppard's version, it is obvious to the audience as well as the Player, that Guildenstern is the more intellectual, the more savvy of the two, while Rosencrantz is the more intuitive, following the model of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. Claire and Solange, too, are distinguishable by both their mistress and the audience. Yet, in both cases, for the purposes of the play-within-the-play- -Stoppard's Danish court and the maid's ritual impersonations -the two are interchangeable. The Danish royalty cannot

tell the courtiers apart because both men are expendable servants and there is no need to distinguish between them. The maids slip into each other's identity because it does not matter who is playing whom as long as their drama is perpetuated.

The major difference between the two couples themselves is that Claire and Solange, although nonentities in the context of the larger world, exert control over their play and are comfortable with their fluid exchange of identities, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are disturbed by it. The two men desire certainty and the only certainty allowed them is the belated discovery that they are going to be killed upon reaching England. Reading the two letters- -the first ordering Hamlet's execution and the second ordering their own- -they, for the first time, know what is going to happen before it occurs. The first letter leaves them wondering what they will do after Hamlet is dispensed with, while the second answers all their questions.

Their death, however, like everything else in their lives, is an event, which will be acted upon them, not one, which they motivate, direct or deflect. Never are they in a position to initiate action; they always obey, an appropriate stance for their role as glorified servants to both king and playwright. Even in their moments alone on stage, they are still incapable of initiating action, and they can only devise puerile games to kill time while waiting for instructions. Although Guildenstern manages to speculate on the nature of their coin tossing game, both he and his partner are imaginatively too impoverished to

recreate themselves. They remain trapped inside the text, both Shakespeare's and Stoppard's. Claire and Solange, however, immediately take advantage of being alone to recreate themselves. The play begins with them in their assumed roles of maid and mistress, and while the audience may be put in some uncertainty about the relationship, Claire and Solange are in complete control. Verbal slips, reversals of sado-masochistic relations, implied incestuous and homoerotic yearnings, abrupt shifts in power--nothing interrupts their ritual except the appearance of Madame herself. She is the one outside factor which they must take into account. Her presence disrupts their illusion and forces the two of them back into their roles as maidservants, and her abrupt departure before they can induce her to drink the poisoned tea they have prepared for her compels them to readjust their plans. Since their purpose is to kill her, and she eludes them, they make a magnificent adjustment: they must kill her role even if it means the one playing Madame must die.

Claire and Solange have a consciously created goal toward which they drive themselves, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no purpose other than what has been devised for them. The maids can re-script their own play extemporaneously to take into consideration any outside contingencies that impinge upon it, while the bumbling courtiers stumble over their scripted lines when they do have them, and are otherwise at a loss of what to do or say. The men desire only consistency which they are consistently denied until they learn of their deaths.

Although Claire and Solange are generally not troubled by their fluid exchange of identities, there is one point after Madame's departure at which Solange balks and is unable to make the proper adjustment. After Solange gives her long self-glorifying soliloquy in which she alone plays several parts--that of Madame, the murderer, and Solange the maid--Claire, in the role of Madame, challenges her right to the role of murderer, and requests tea. Solange refuses until she is reminded by Claire that it is her responsibility to play the other whatever the other may be:

Claire: Pour me a cup of tea

Solange: But...

Claire: I said a cup of tea.

Solange: We're dead tired. We've got to stop.

Claire: Ah, by no means! Poor servant girl, you think you'll get out of it easily as that? It would be too simple to conspire with the wind, to make the night one's accomplice. Solange, you will contain me within you. Now pay close attention.

Solange: Claire....

Claire: Do as I tell you. I'm going to help you. I've decided to take the lead. Your role is to keep me from backing out, nothing more.

Solange: What more do you want? We're at the end.

Claire: We're at the beginning
(Genet 1961, 18-19).

In both plays death is the interface of reality and illusion as well as the culmination of the action and the inaction. When Guildenstern stabs the Player with the retractable knife, he is

attempting to put an end to artifice only to have artifice strike back at him with redoubled force. The actors watch the Player's death with an appreciation of his art; only the two courtiers are deceived by its "reality". Claire and Solange are solemnly dedicated to their ritual that climaxes in death because they are motivated by the idea that no game in life is worth the trouble unless one is fully committed to it, the test of total commitment being death.

In contrast to Claire's and Solange's adept manipulation of their game, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are comically inept when they attempt to use role-playing to find the reason for Hamlet's peculiar behavior. Guildenstern says he will pretend to be Hamlet but Rosencrantz does not understand whether he should be himself or Guildenstern, never recognizing that it does not matter either way:

Guil: You question, I'll answer.

Ros: He's not himself, you know.

Guil: I'm him, you see.

Ros: Who am I then?

Guil: You're yourself.

Ros: And he's you?

Guil: Not a bit

(Stoppard 1967,46).

When the befuddled Rosencrantz finally gets the hang of this question-and-answer series, the result is unsatisfactory because neither of them enjoyed their new roles, and the information thus gleaned turns out to be no more than well-known public property, the written text. Unlike Claire and Solange, they cannot gain control of their roles even when they consciously assume them.

Only once do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fully commit themselves to their own game of role-playing. On the boat to England, Rosencrantz thinks of jumping overboard to put a spoke in the wheel of the inexorable text. He then decides instead to remain on board when they reach England. This leads to a dialogue about their purpose in England, in which Rosencrantz impersonates the interrogating King of England and Guildenstern defends their right to be there with—"We have a letter." At that moment, Rosencrantz as the King grabs the letter and reads it to learn that it contains orders for Hamlet's execution. This is the closest they come to seizing the situation, but instead of taking advantage of it and, for example, warning Hamlet, They rationalize their position and once more submit to the tyranny of the text.

It would seem perhaps that Claire and Solange also become entrapped by their script when its ultimate purpose leads to the death of one of them, and the apparent impossibility of the continuation of the game. But Claire, having once grasped the necessity of her death and then committing herself to it, transcends it. Solange, instead of feeling bereft of a partner, transcends her solitude. The role of Madame is killed but her two maids are not only alive but joyous and free. Even death is overcome by the force of Solange's imagination. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz find certainty in death but Claire and Solange also find liberation.

Both couples are composed of socially marginal characters, who, in a social context, would have no reason to be distinguished individually. Shakespeare

creates two comic non-entities; Stoppard retains their status as non-entities but then proceeds to tell the tale from their point of view rather than Hamlet's, and thus, the tragedy becomes an absurdist one. Moreover, the two non-entities never add up to one full identity. Their words echo in each other's mouths, vacuous and repetitious. They are beings that remain in a limbo of two-dimensional semi-awareness, and even they recognize that they are not able to command three-dimensionality for themselves.

Claire and Solange, as domestics, have no life outside of Madame's house and lead a marginal life in their garret. But again, the former convention of the maidservant cum go-between in romantic comedies is inverted by foregrounding the revenge of the maids and relegating the traditional focus—the courtship of the beautiful Madame by her lover—to a minor subplot. By playing both the mistress and maid, the sisters reveal all the aspects of this socially determined hierarchy of which they are at the bottom. They depict their own self-hatred, their envy of Madame, Madame's condescension toward them and their hatred of Madame. They seize what opportunity they can in order to be major players and acquire power over their mean social status, and in the process achieve a kind of apotheosis. Moreover, Genet's intention of having the three women played by young boys to heighten the awareness of multiple role-playing corresponds to the alienating effect of watching a rape and revenge of a princess being played with utmost seriousness by little girls. The double maid and single Madame is also inverse of the Balinese single maid and

double princess.

In both plays, the marginal figure in duo has been pushed to center stage. The dual representation heightens rather than lessens their marginality because it is only in the eternal confrontation with the double of themselves that the impossibility of identity is revealed:

Each of the two maids has no other function than to be the other, to be—for the other—herself-as-other. Whereas the unity of the mind is constantly haunted by a phantom duality, the dyad of the maids is, on the contrary, haunted by phantom of unity. Each sees in the other only herself at a distance from herself. Each bears witness to the other of the impossibility of *being* herself...The mainspring of this new whirligig is the perfect interchangeability of Solange and Claire (Sartre 1961, 18)

The *legong* slide imperceptibly in and out of their various roles without any shift or break. Gesture determines role and role determines character and character dissolves back into dance. The symbolic abstraction of the movement allows for this seamlessness that any claims to realism would have rent. Whereas in the modern spoken dramas, the interchangeability of the couples is more contrived, more self-conscious, more close to being an act trickery to give the audience a delightful sense of aesthetic giddiness. While the two modern plays are “playing” with notions of reality vs. illusion, role-playing vs. fixed identity, the *legong* dance has incorporated all such dualities, regarding them as so natural to all being that the dance itself need no legerdemain gimmicks to point out the

obvious. Perhaps Artaud, when contemplating the differences between European and Balinese theater, wondered why the Western drama seems to favor, or even require, the ironic perspective or marginal characters on the outer fringe of the social hierarchy—the servant, fools, soubrettes, buffos, zannis, graciosos—to present this double vision, while Balinese theater assumes it as the very core of its aesthetic *raison d'être*.

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