

Article

Folk Drama

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of how scholars in the discipline of folklore have approached the topic of folk drama over the past one hundred fifty years, arguing that, despite relative neglect in the field, folk drama is a valuable window into culture and should be taken more seriously. I begin with nineteenth century ideas about ritual drama that stem from Sir James Frazer. I then discuss the growing emphasis on context that emerged in the twentieth century, including overlaps between ideas about folk drama, performance, and theories of play more generally. I conclude by providing a brief overview of the relationship between play, drama, and politics, and suggest that contemporary digital realms, such as YouTube, offer a new ecology of folk drama that brings traditional questions about actors, context, play-frames, audience and transformation to the fore in new and interesting ways.

Keywords: folk drama; folk plays; ritual drama; play

In the Introduction to his book *Rethinking Folk Drama*, Steve Tillis writes, “given the nearly universal impulse toward drama, it might well be that folk drama can teach us something not only about particular cultures, but about humanity at large” (Tillis 1999, p. 11). Tillis’s provocative comment certainly suggests the potential for studies of folk drama to mount a challenge to the humanities, but while the impulse towards drama may well be universal, scholarly ideas about and approaches to folk drama are not. On the one hand the term “folk drama” is an etic term used by scholars in various disciplines to encompass different ideas and applied to a broad range of performance traditions. As an etic term, it easily imposes frameworks of interpretations that are not necessarily grounded in local understandings. When used in non-western contexts, for example, the term imposes western understandings of drama on traditions that may be more profitably understood as something else, such as worship, sacred retellings, or a visitation by deity, thus drawing disparate performance traditions into the same interpretive sphere. Additionally definitions and understandings of what actually constitutes folk drama have changed over time and this understanding is contingent upon a variety of factors that, themselves, have evolved. Folk drama therefore has been applied to a wide range of traditions that may or may not be related, making it difficult to define and universal conclusions unlikely. Yet on the other hand as a vernacular cultural performance intrinsically tied to immediate social, political, and cultural contexts, folk drama offers insights into and transformations of society unavailable in other expressive forms. Folk drama temporarily invokes an alternate world in order to speak about and comment on the real one in aesthetically heightened ways, providing participants with alternate means of viewing and understanding both society and themselves. In doing so folk drama does not merely comment on the world but rather, in its own small way, transforms it.

This article provides an overview of how scholars in the discipline of folklore have approached the topic of folk drama over the past one hundred fifty years, arguing that folk drama is a valuable window into culture and should be taken more seriously. Unfortunately, in the United States folk drama has never been considered to be one of the more important folklore genres. Early folk drama scholarship largely focused on the British folk dramas (loosely known as mumming plays, these generally are categorized into sword dance plays, hero/combat plays, and plough plays), so much so that the term

“folk drama” and “mumming” even today may practically evoke each other.¹ With the exception of the extensive work on Cajun Mardi Gras (Lindhal 2001; Ware 2007), there are few examples of folk dramas or folk plays (an alternative term) in the U.S. that fit this criteria. There also are few American folklore scholars that identify as “folk drama” scholars. Instead, much folk drama scholarship is subsumed under the study of festival, dance, ritual, religion or some other related form. Finally, because folk drama is associated with these other expressive forms, many contemporary scholars (several of whom are discussed below) may publish about a particular type of folk drama but then move on to other related areas of study. These tendencies have made the genre of “folk drama” as a standalone specialization somewhat minor.

There are aspects of folk drama that have captured the interest of folklorists regularly across the decades. There always has been a concern with the relationship of folk drama to other cultural forms, particularly ritual and festival. Early presumptions were that folk drama originated in ritual and festival, and it remains true that folk drama often occurs in religious or celebratory events, such as the Spanish Christmas or Passion plays (Flores 2008) or African American religious productions (Wiggins 1978). It also may perform ritual functions and exist alongside other related activities such as dance, masking, music, speech and song. Therefore, questions of relationships between context, form, and function always have been important in some way. Scholars also have debated the constitution and role of both actors and audience, asking, for example, whether the audience must be local for a drama to be “folk”; whether or not the actors can be paid or trained professionals (Dömötör 1981); and, perhaps most importantly, whether the existence of an audience and the way in which the audience frames the event might be a defining feature (Abrahams 1969; Ellis 1981). Such distinctions frequently have been the basis for differentiating folk from popular and elite drama, although such divisions likely are more of degree than kind (Pettitt 1995).

1. Ritual Origins

In the nineteenth century, scholars were interested in the origins of cultural forms they considered to be “folk drama,” which largely was conceptualized as ancient but degenerated plays that continued to exist in the modern era primarily among the European peasant classes. The plays themselves were presumed to be “survivals,”—that is, leftovers from an earlier era in which fuller, more complete versions had flourished, and where the functions they fulfilled were supposedly more holistically incorporated into society. According to Roger Abrahams (Abrahams 1972) some of the earliest scholarly thinking about folk drama was that it arose out of festival, although many more scholars, influenced by the theories of James Frazer, have attributed ritual origins to folk drama. Early on then, folklorists placed folk drama into an evolutionary and comparative framework. This vein of thought, prominent in other aspects of folklore studies as well, is what Alan Dundes (Dundes 1969) identified as “the devolutionary” premise in folklore studies—that the folklore that could be found in modern society was merely a fragment or shadow of its former self. Examples of this premise include the Grimm’s’ idea that folktales were the broken-down remnants of early Teutonic myths, and the concept in folksong studies that actually singing a folksong contributed to its alteration, and hence, its degeneration. This mode of conceptualizing folklore was quite common until the mid-twentieth century.

As noted above, the most prominent and influential scholar to influence thinking about folk drama in the nineteenth century was Sir James G. Frazer, a comparative anthropologist and folklorist. He was particularly interested in seasonal spring northern European folk customs that dramatized the slaying (and occasional resurrection) of a vegetative character in the form of a short play. Such characters, variously costumed in leaves, moss, bark, ferns, flowers, and other items, usually were executed in the plays by being beheaded, fired upon with blank muskets, or stabbed. Frazer hypothesized

¹ As an example, in his last chapter on a book entitled *Rethinking Folk Drama*, Steve Tillis spends most of the chapter analyzing mumming without a hint of irony (Tillis 1999).

that these folk dramas were remnants of pre-Christian fertility rituals based on the cyclical agrarian calendar and connected to ancient myths. Frazer interpreted the dramatic killing of the vegetative character as a play-version of a real, ancient ritual in which an actual king or priest who embodied a vegetative spirit was killed in order to ensure fertility and new forms of life. As noted in Green (Green 1981, 2016), the basis of Frazer's hypothesis was that so-called "primitive man" relied on a form of magical thinking based on principles of sympathetic magic; that is, that man could influence the cosmos through mimetic action.

Frazer's ideas about folk drama as originating in ritual held sway well into the twentieth century. Abrahams (Abrahams 1972), for example, refers to the work of Baskervill as an example of a scholar who suggests that folk drama originated in pagan ritual, evolved into a festival custom, and then became the provenance of professional performers. Summarizing the vast amount of scholarship done on British mummer's plays done throughout the twentieth century, Green notes that these folk dramas usually were characterized as shadows of earlier activities because "folk drama was presumed to be the detritus of pre-Christian ritual, the rustic re-working of literary material, or a popular survival of liturgical drama" (Green 1981, p. 423; 2016), again illustrating that folk drama was considered to be something that survived as a lesser, degenerate example of an earlier and more full-bodied form.

Concomitant with an interest in the ancient origins of folk drama was a scholarly focus on texts, textual variation, and literary influences. Embracing a tradition that dates to Aristotle, the study of drama largely has been a literary endeavor; folk drama historically has been analyzed as a form of literature and a species of text rather than a variety of performance (Fox 2008). This textual orientation meant historically that the words, and especially the dialogue, have been privileged in studies of folk drama, with scholars generally neglecting more theatrical aspects such as music and details of physical performance (Tillis 1999, pp. 66–67). Articulating this textual interest, Petr Bogatyrev, for example, noted that much folk drama contained literary influences, but that it usually had been reworked by the people themselves (Bogatyrev 1976). How a particular folk drama (or folk play) related to its contemporary cultural or social context was not examined, since folk drama was thought to be a holdover from the past and therefore by definition *not* rooted in modern issues. The text of the play was "the tradition" (Ben-Amos 1984), and it was therefore on the text or script that scholarship focused.

2. Contexts and Performances

Scholars continued to consider issues of origins and texts in thinking about folk drama, but other ideas were taking hold by the mid-twentieth century. One significant vein of influence drew on the metaphorical possibilities of the language of drama and theater in order to understand actual human behavior (Green 1978). Theorists such as Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman, and Victor Turner influenced social theory paradigms by suggesting similarities between everyday life and drama. Burke, a philosopher of language and rhetorician, re-conceptualized communication as a form of symbolic action, and his "dramatist pentad," introduced in 1945, included theatrical terms such as act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose that could be applied to human interactions. Sociologist Erving Goffman, who was influenced by Burke, developed his influential idea of "dramaturgy" in 1959, which suggested that individual identity was a socio-cultural construct and that the presentation of self in everyday life was a kind of "performance" that resulted from the individual putting on of various masks and roles for an interlocutor/audience. Goffman also suggested that these performances of everyday life often were ritualized, an idea picked up by Richard Schechner who argued that because theater drew on everyday life, theater was closely linked to ritual. Finally, Victor Turner, who worked closely with Schechner, developed his idea of "social drama" which also contributed to the expansion of theatrical concepts in social theory. Turner theorized real human conflict as a drama (that is, as a "social drama") consisting of four different phases of collective action, and, reflecting the older idea that drama emerges from ritual, suggested that theater had roots in the redressive (third) phase, which in pre-modern

societies consisted of ritual or juridical actions.² Turner felt that the modern arts, including drama, played this redressive role in contemporary societies, providing a feedback loop/mirror between social drama and aesthetic drama and illustrating the reflexive nature of modern cultural performances (Turner 1982; Schechner 2002).

This language of enactment influenced the development of performance approaches in folklore studies. Performance approaches emphasize the actual “doing” of folklore in lieu of more textual or literary approaches, and the ideas above created complicated theoretical links between everyday life, drama/theater, and ritual, extending older notions of links between folk drama and ritual into new applications.³ The result of this paradigm shift in folklore studies was that folk drama began to be reconceptualized not as a holdover from the ancient past, but rather as syncretic, emergent, and modern productions to be analyzed holistically. Roger Abrahams, for example, was an early advocate for thinking about folklore as a species of rhetoric and therefore as a kind of action (Abrahams 1968) and he examined the adaptation of seasonal house visits in the British West Indies as a live performance that functioned as a political critique of the plantation system (Abrahams 1970). Folk drama therefore was re-envisioned as enactments that not only spoke directly contemporary concerns but also was a species of action designed to articulate relationships for the purposes of accomplishing social change (see below).

Scholars therefore began to use a variety of historical and ethnographic data to examine connections between the performance of folk drama and modern socio-cultural functions. Halpert and Story's (Halpert and Story 1969) edited collection on mumming in Newfoundland, Canada is a classic mid-century example of this approach. The articles provided historic and ethnographic information to illustrate parallels between janneys (mummers) and strangers (Firestone 1969), for example, or to illustrate that some forms of mumming functioned as a cathartic ritual in which hostilities were gratified and social norms reinforced (Szwed 1969). Szwed's article is an example of an approach to mumming that retained the classic focus on relationships between folk drama and ritual, but that envisioned the ritual dimension of folk drama as accomplishing contemporary ritual functions rather than relying on presumed ritual origins. Henry Glassie's well known study of mumming in Northern Ireland in the 1930s is another example (Glassie 1975). He focused on performances reconstructed from the memories of known individual mummers to show a variety of contemporary functions, including earning money, facilitating dating, providing entertainment, and bringing the community together.

Another shift that resulted from the change in orientation from text to performance centered on the nature of the object of study itself. While the texts of the plays remained important, ideas about what constituted “traditional” changed. Anne Burson (Burson 1980) for example, advocated for a more performance-oriented approach by arguing that the traditionality of folk drama lay in a traditional model of performance rather than adherence to any particular script. Previous definitions of folk drama included notions of a “foregone conclusion,” meaning that the ending of the play was already known to the audience. Burson, however, noted that the scripts of the medical school roasts that she argued were folk drama changed from year to year but that annual medical school roasts were still similar to each other because they were based on traditional models. She helped expand ideas about what folk drama might entail to a variety of dramatic performances previously unexamined, including not only medical school roasts, but also skits, school productions, and even Boy Scout campfires (Ellis 1981; Mechling 1980). This notion of a traditional model became the basis for Green's influential definition of folk drama, which he defined as “a scripted performance which incorporates mimesis and role-distribution among two or more players and which adheres to the traditional aesthetic and communicative models of the performing community” (Green 1981, p. 428).

² Turner's four phases of social drama are breach, crisis, redressive phase, and reintegration (Turner 1982).

³ Thomas Green makes the point quite forcefully that these theoretical perspectives have muddled the waters between ordinary life and folk drama, to the point that something like a baseball game could now be perceived as “folk drama,” rendering the term, in his view, rather useless (Green 1981).

The shift to performance meant that organization of the production of folk drama also could now be studied. Earlier presumptions that folk drama was spontaneous or unorganized were cast aside as scholars documented the extensive preparations and rehearsals that preceded an actual performance and shaped its final form. Richard Bauman and Pamela Ritch ([Bauman and Ritch 1994](#)), for example, detailed the organization and sequencing of rehearsals leading up to the performance of a *coloquio*, a traditional Mexican nativity play with roots in medieval Spain. Basing their study on fieldwork conducted in Guanajuato, Mexico, Bauman and Ritch examined various aspects of the rehearsals, such as the copying of sides from the original script for the actors; the ways in which parts were learned and lines memorized (or not); the role of the prompter; and the playful atmosphere surrounding preparations. The villagers' past experiences with the *coloquio* also influenced their conventionalized recitation style. In taking this processual approach to the study of folk drama, Bauman and Ritch illustrated which specific elements and resources gave the final performance its particular form, as well as how local people engaged with those resources, the script or text of the play merely being one. This emphasis was extended in Ray Cashman's article on mumming in Northern Ireland ([Cashman 2000](#)), as he detailed his own participation as a mummer and how specific mumming sessions were organized by the participants themselves, providing an actor-oriented approach to folk drama. Conversely, in his study of mock-ordeals at camp, Bill Ellis took an audience-oriented approach, arguing that mock-ordeals must have an audience that does not participate to be successful. "Central to creating engrossment," he writes, "is the way the mock-ordeal distances the audience from the action" ([Ellis 1981](#), p. 496). This emphasis on audience is a direct result of the emergence of a performance studies approach to folk drama.

Perhaps the most important idea emerging from modern studies of folk drama is the recognition that folk drama is part of something else. Abrahams insisted that folk drama should be considered as part of a larger array of festive activities; that is, one should examine the larger celebratory context in which folk dramas often are situated ([Abrahams 1972](#)). Thomas Pettitt identified "customary drama" as dramas that are part of a larger custom like a seasonal or calendrical celebration, such as holidays, rituals, festivals, or other modes of cultural performance. Pettitt notes that not all folk drama is customary, but identifying a category of folk drama as "customary" calls attention to the close connection between many kinds of folk dramas and the contexts or occasions in which they are traditionally performed. Mumming, for example, is part of winter house visiting custom usually performed during the Christmas season, and Pettitt argues it is the custom itself that should be the unit of analysis. This is a fundamental change in the characterization of how folk dramas commonly are studied: rather than classifying based on the words of the script or some kind of plot, Pettitt suggests categorizing according to custom or larger context. Pettitt then categorizes customary dramas on the basis of spatial and social patternings rather than on the texts of the plays themselves, noting that "a new perspective is acquired . . . once it is appreciated that the mummers' play . . . is not necessarily a single play, or even variant developments of a single original form, but a type of custom, a variety of folk theatre, . . . in which a variety of dramatic sequences . . . could feature" ([Pettitt 1994](#), p. 16). It is this perspective then, that has led Pettitt and others to understanding folk drama as being subordinate to context ([Pettitt 1997](#)).

3. Play, Plays, and Transformation

One of Abrahams's many contributions to the study of folk drama is an understanding of folk drama as a "play activity." He writes that play activities "call[s] for the establishment of a play world that is recognizably removed from the real world and yet in many ways similar to it" ([Abrahams 1972](#), p. 352). There is semantic slippage between the noun form of the word "play" that refers to a script and the verb form of the word "play" that refers to the activity, and so it is no surprise that ideas about play, playfulness, and play frames are important in understanding how folk dramas—and indeed dramatic theater generally—operate.

Play activities create alternative worlds, meaning that participants imagine a world that is different from the mundane one in which they normally exist. Experimentation and transformation occurs in this alternative world, as people become characters, objects, or even ideas in ways that may be limited or even impossible in ordinary life. Bogatyrev, for example, noted in the 1930s that folk theater involved “transformation”, meaning that the actors were transformed into specific characters for the duration of the play (Bogatyrev 1976). This alternative world is what Gregory Bateson called the “playframe,” and generally is considered by participants to be “not real”. Using various cues and makers, participants send meta-communicative messages to others that the alternative world has been invoked and their actions within it should be interpreted accordingly. Paradoxically, however, participants act “as if” the play-frame were real, a stance that allows those play activities to happen. But the actions and behaviors that occur within the play-frame do not signify exactly the same thing as if those actions and behaviors were to occur outside of it.⁴ The actions are imitations of actions, rather than actions themselves. This is why, according to Steve Tillis, “mimesis” is essential to definitions of folk drama. Tillis defines mimesis not merely as “imitation,” but specifically as the establishment of an aesthetic frame between performers and audience where the realm of make-believe is foregrounded. “What matters,” he writes, “in considering whether or not a theatrical form is drama, is the frame that locally obtains between performers and audience” (Tillis 1999, p. 89)—that is, the play-frame must be invoked. Importantly, ordinary rules governing society may be bent or broken in the play-frame, allowing for the enactment and embodiment of an extraordinarily wide range of behaviors with little or no consequence and making the play-frame an important arena for experimentation.

Considering folk drama as a “play activity” illuminates some aspects of the relationships between folk drama, festival, ritual, and other related forms, such as dance and games, although it obscures other aspects of said relationships as well. These activities all involve summoning alternative worlds and engendering transformation. Simplistically speaking, however, ritual (and religion more broadly) is not thought of as “play” in Western/US thought, due in large part to Protestant attitudes towards play as trivial and non-serious. Rites of passage, for example, conventionally are considered a serious activity that produces permanent transformations (for example, by transforming an unmarried person into a married one). The alternative world invoked in ritual is that of religious or supernatural power, or secular power, such as the state. The stance of the participants towards this alternative world is that it is “real,” or at least presumed so for the duration of the ritual. The transformation produced is one that is in accordance with pre-existing social norms and structures, and the outcome is known beforehand. In contrast, the alternative worlds invoked in folk drama, festival, and other art forms are presumed to be fanciful, and the transformations engendered usually are temporary, and done for purposes of entertainment, education, or some other function. Furthermore, the transformations produced are not always in accordance with social norms.

Yet folk drama, ritual, festival and other play genres do overlap and so distinctions between “ritual” and “drama” elide as much as they reveal. Festivals, for example, often have ritual dimensions and such distinctions particularly do not hold up in non-western traditions, where rituals may mix the playful and the serious, and where some aspects of a performance may be ritualistic and other aspects purely for entertainment (Abrahams 1987). Even in Western contexts Richard Schechner notes that ritual and theater both accomplish entertainment and efficacy: the question is which one dominates (Schechner 2002, p. 71). Rituals and other ceremonies may use an array of dramatic devices such as props, masking, staging, aesthetic language and traditional dialogue to accomplish their ends but still may not be considered as “folk drama” per se. Conversely, some folk dramas can be quite funny and entertaining yet still perform ritual functions by engendering permanent transformation.

⁴ Bateson’s famous example is a nip given by animals as they play vs. a real bite. A nip resembles or imitates a bite, but does not mean the same thing.

One such example in Western contexts is the Navy's "Crossing the Line" ceremony. This ritual drama is conducted by the Navy to mark when sailors first cross the equator ([Bronner 2006](#)). The purpose of the ceremony is to transform "pollywogs" (men who have not yet crossed the equator, e.g., inexperienced) into "shellbacks" (men who have crossed the equator and therefore are seasoned sailors). The ceremony involves a skit with characters such as King Neptune and his court, along with Davey Jones. The skit is humorous in that it involves cross-dressing and it certainly is designed for the entertainment of the men, at least the ones who have already crossed the equator. Yet it also is quite serious as the trials the pollywogs endure over the course of the ceremony can be quite painful and humiliating. And, at the end, a permanent transformation has occurred: pollywogs are transformed into shellbacks, and the envisioned outcome is successful. Folk drama here is part of a larger ceremony that accomplishes ritual transformation and so cannot be understood as self-contained unit; it is an example of Pettitt's customary folk drama category, a part of a larger whole.

Ritual dramas such as the Crossing the Line ceremony also illustrate that distinctions between "play" and "not-play" and "real" vs. "not-real" are porous even in Western contexts ([Sutton-Smith 1997](#)). In this case, a make-believe enactment has real effects: no one believes that the sailors who participate in the Crossing the Line Ceremony actually have transformed into King Neptune and his court (as such transformations might happen during more serious religious rituals, as when a loa mounts a devotee in voodoo or a believer receives the Holy Spirit and speaks in tongues), yet the transformation of initiates from pollywog to shellback happens anyway. Conversely, even in solemn rituals in which a "serious" or "real" alternative world is invoked, people may act as if they believed (that is, they play or pretend, as if they were actors) rather than being true believers. A bride and groom may not really believe in the god or the state that marries them, but if they submit themselves to the ritual, they end up as a married couple. After that, they must get a divorce.

Montana Miller ethnographically explores such shifting, overlapping frames between play and reality in her book-length study of "Every 15 Minutes Someone Dies" ([Miller 2012](#)). "Every 15 Minutes" is a school production of a drunk driving accident that is enacted at schools across the country in order to teach teenagers not to drink and drive. Although there is no formal script, it is an elaborate production, complete with wrecked cars, police, ambulances, medical personnel, morticians, and the character of Death. Miller examines in detail the markers that frame "Every 15 Minutes" as "play," and therefore "not real" or "different from ordinary life," but her primary purpose is to document the slippage that occurs between fiction and reality. Taking a participant-oriented perspective, she illustrates how both actors and audience easily step between alternating frames. Like most dramatic productions "Every 15 Minutes Someone Dies" begins and ends at particular times and is staged in a particular location/s, frames that mark the performance as "not real." But Miller also points out the open-ended nature of this folk drama: for example, the media frequently report on it, becoming a type of character as they act as "themselves" but also actually report on the production. As audience members, the students additionally have very real emotional responses, such as tears, to the fictional enactment, demonstrating that even spectators slip in and out of frames. Like all forms of play, an atmosphere of ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning pervades the entire event as students, teachers, and parents laugh, cry, and have fun while viewing body bags, gasping at the wreckage, and learning about the horrors of drinking and driving. Miller's study illustrates that folk drama is best understood as a complex event and that even when we know we are pretending, the line between fiction and reality easily blurs.

4. Politics

It is a truism to say that folk dramas and other cultural performances are reflexive, meaning that they not only reflect or mirror society, but that they reflect on the process of doing so. As a form of play folk drama is actually doubly-reflexive: as noted above, participants engage in actions that are "not-real" but imitations of actions (what [Schechner \(2002\)](#) calls "showing-doing"), and participants also, to varying degrees, step in and out of frames between make-believe and reality in order to test,

evaluate, and better understand what is going on. That folk drama entails a heightened aesthetic dimension only enhances its reflexive nature as it overtly puts on display and calls attention to what it is doing vis-à-vis dramatic devices. While the frame is make-believe then, transformation occurs and so what happens in folk drama is, if not ritualistically efficacious per se, is efficacious nonetheless.

This heightened aesthetic and reflexive mode goes a long way towards explaining the close relationship between folk drama, festival, and politics. It has long been recognized that rebellions may occur during times of festivity. Festivals, which have been described as a “people’s theater” (Borland 2006), can be understood as society’s play events in which ordinary time temporarily is suspended, behaviors don’t count, and people engage in activities that they ordinary would not. Festivals gather people together en masse, tolerate or encourage socially deviant behavior, and frequently encourage masking or costuming and the acting out of parts. As noted above, folk drama usually is tied to festivals and other calendar customs, functioning as an integral part of celebrations, which themselves often have ritual functions. It is little surprise then, that people may use times of festivity to incite protest or incur violence (Santino 2002): a recent, modern example is the terrorist bombing at the Boston Marathon in 2013. Interestingly, Thomas Pettitt has illustrated that rebellion itself may draw from the symbolic language and patterning of seasonal festivity and the folk dramas associated with them. Leaders of rebellions may take on the names of festival or folk drama characters and dress according to a part. According to Pettitt, not only can violence spill out of the frames of containment given to folk festival and drama, but that there can be a “two-way relationship between festivity and rebellion” (Pettitt 1984, p. 3).

Rebellion or revolution are extreme examples, but everyday, ordinary folk drama and the festivals, celebrations, calendar customs or other contexts in which they are situated are a productive arena for the exploration of social change exactly because they are aesthetically heightened reflexive cultural performances. Katherine Borland has documented how the torovenado masquerades and Negras marimba dances found in the St. Jerome festival in Nicaragua are the grounds upon which new indigenous identities, particularly with respect to gender and sexual orientation, are negotiated and formulated in relation to a wider sphere (Borland 2006). Dorothy Noyes explores how the all-encompassing Patum, a Catalan Corpus Christi festival, establishes ideas and beliefs, including political ones, through techniques of embodiment and incorporation (Noyes 2003). Jack Santino examines how a wide variety of public dramatic enactments, such as protests, memorial shrines, parades, and bonfires have instrumental dimensions, enactments he calls “the ritualesque” (Santino 2002, 2009, 2011). I have argued that even presumably authoritative, commodified Chamber of Commerce festivals organized for tourists can become collective think-tanks and vehicles for debates about socioeconomic change, engaging far more people than any meeting at city hall (Gabbert 2011). And, returning to folk drama’s favorite topic of study, Gerald Creed illustrates that contemporary mumming in Bulgaria is a form of civic engagement that directly grapples with post-socialist politics (Creed 2011). Of course, not all of the ideas with which folk drama reflexively engages with are emancipatory. Many examples reinforce established norms, ideologies, and hierarchies: folk drama is neither to the left nor to the right. The point here is that folk drama and related forms are a means by which people grapple, engage, play with, and think about ongoing social issues at levels other than the merely intellectual.

5. Conclusions

In the end, it may be that perhaps there really is no such thing as “folk drama” but only dramatic actions, techniques, and devices that are used by different people in different contexts and for different purposes. Yet having liberated itself from solely examining the texts of plays with Old World antecedents, the study of folk drama is now free to examine a variety of enactments and dimensions of analysis previously excluded from its purview: the scope of materials has widened greatly. The United States may not have a large repertoire of mumming or other “traditional” folk dramas with Old World antecedents, but there is a plethora of contemporary dramatic productions that

remain relatively unexamined but that are ripe for analysis. Many of these can be found in the digital sphere. YouTube alone is full of plays, parodies, sketches, and burlesques. In researching medical humor, for example, I have found extensive video productions made by physicians singing about, dancing to, and acting out parodies of their work environments that speak directly to important issues of bureaucratization and power imbalances that characterize the modern, technological workplace.

Whether or not these materials can be considered as “folk drama” proper is up for debate, since conventional definitions of folk drama presume a live performance tied to immediate situational and contextual contexts. But other traditional folklore genres, notably legends, have made the digital transition. Legends are created and circulate online even more quickly than they do orally, and it has been established that people act ostensibly in response to legends both on and offline. New forms of digital folklore, such as memes, also have emerged. Anthony Buccitelli ([Buccitelli 2012](#)) has argued for a theory of digital performance, noting that even actions such as Facebook posts suggest that people take on the role of performer and become responsible for displays of communicative competence to an audience, even if the time and distance between performer and audience response (in the form of comment threads, repostings, and the embedding of other websites) is vast. What is interesting about the digital sphere for folk drama—the most “performance-oriented” of the folklore genres—is that it brings questions about participant interaction, contexts, audience and transformation to the fore in new and interesting ways. Certainly it behooves scholars to ask questions about the ecology of folk drama in the digital sphere to see where it might lead, as after all, this is the arena where “the folk” are performing.

Unfortunately digital productions, like the folk dramas of old, face the problem of a severe triviality barrier. Theater people have understood the potentially transformative nature of drama all along but unfortunately, (and here, I realize, I sweep with a broad stroke) mainly are concerned with the production of classic plays, the performance of scripts written by desirable or well-known authors, or with the avant garde. It is difficult to take (as an example) YouTube productions seriously exactly because they are framed as amateur, mundane, unimportant, or because they seem so obvious. In this way they are not unlike the more conventionally-conceived traditional folk dramas, which were easily dismissed due to their stock characters, stylized acting, and well-known or even hackneyed plots. But these smaller enactments have as much to say about contemporary concerns and may affect their audience as much as more elite forms such as Shakespeare productions, experimental theater, Broadway musicals, and the like. Folk drama places the power of reflexivity and potential for transformation in the hands of ordinary people. Rather than dismissing such productions out of hand, we should start paying more attention to those arenas of everyday life in which people enter into heightened modes of expression and begin to perform. It remains to be investigated what it is they actually do.

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