

UC Berkeley

University of California, Berkeley, Miscellaneous Papers and Publications

Title

Present Theatre

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5637043s>

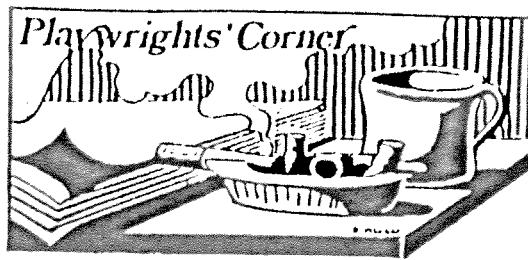
Authors

Lakoff, George
Coates, George

Publication Date

1982

Peer reviewed



PRESENT THEATRE

by George Coates & George Lakeoff

George Coates is a Bay Area director whose work includes creation of *The Way of How*, and George Lakeoff is a writer and Professor of Linguistics at UC Berkeley.

In "Some Thoughts on Non-Representational Theatre," a recent 2-part essay in *Playwrights' Corner* (see *Call Board*, April and May), tv scriptwriter, playwright and critic Hal Gelb seemed threatened by developments in contemporary performance art. We'd like to set his mind at ease.

Gelb approaches theatre with a common-enough traditional perspective. The audience has expectations, and it is the job of the performers to meet them: "A theatre audience expects symbolic experience and some representation of the world." There are supposed to be identifiable characters, locales, time frames and objects, and a single overall coherence (typically a plot). Through a shared "public language," theatre should exercise its "social function" (to cherish ideals and identify evils) and be an artform of objectively apparent meaningfulness and relevance. The question "What is it about?" should be able to be answered. Gelb assumes that there is an objective reality, and only through it can theatre achieve "a shared experience of our common humanity."

Given his perspective, it isn't surprising that Gelb has problems making sense of performance art, which starts with other premises — not merely about theatre, but about meaning, reality and what constitutes a social function. Social and interpersonal reality are not completely objective — nor completely subjective. Our experiences have meanings that are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated, framed and reframed, always in metaphorical terms.

A marriage, for instance, is not simply an objective entity. Each spouse understands, or frames, the marriage in terms of a differing set of metaphors: marriage as partnership (we each have our jobs), as union (we should do things together), as a struggle (frustration is inevitable), as a resource (what am I getting out of it) and many more. Metaphors are not things you "escape into," as Gelb claims, but are a principal means for comprehending our experience and creating diverse social realities.

We view as dangerous the idea that there is only one correct social reality. To deny multiplicity comes very close to trying to enforce a single reality, one that fits *your* world view. Such attempts are commonly referred to as fascism. In a free society, multiplicity must be acknowledged and encouraged, not censored or purged.

Much contemporary performance art celebrates the diversity of social and interpersonal realities. This is done in *The Way of How* (one of two performance pieces cited by Gelb) through the technique of continuous reframing.

To understand any situation requires "framing" it in terms of recognizable objects, characters,

images, events. In an effort to view our lives as coherent we strive to maintain a single, consistent way of framing our experiences. The fear of incoherence leads us to reframe our lives when unfamiliar experiences don't fit. This can be traumatic, but more often it goes unnoticed. People constantly revise their life stories, the same way history is rewritten by succeeding generations. Each life story is viewed as the "real" life story, just as each history is promoted as the "real" history.

This kind of reframing occurs naturally over a long period of time. In *The Way of How* a vast amount of reframing is condensed into 80 minutes by means of a very tight structuring, with events, characters, and objects flowing into one another. At each instance one or more partial framings is possible: certain objects, characters and activities are recognizable, others are not. An attempt is made to have the reframing be smooth and imperceptible. Each partial frame, as it dissolves, melts into the next.

The concept of "meaning" that emerges here is very different from the concept of meaning in traditional theatre. We challenge the idea that one can speak sensibly and objectively of "the meaning of the _____," where the blank can be filled in by the word "play," "action," "image" or "text." An art of constant reframing requires that the audience find new and fragmentary meaning in the work as it progresses.

This kind of art is centered around the discovery of meaning. Its social function is to sensitize the audience to the social construction, and regular reconstruction, of reality. We ought to be aware of such reconstruction, both in the political and social arenas, and in our personal lives. The capacity to recognize framing, and to reframe, opens up enormous possibilities. To live only according to world views that are inherited, or accept things without noticing or questioning them limits our possibilities.

The view of reality and of the theatre that Gelb takes for granted is part of a world view that he (and most of us) have inherited through the Western Tradition. It is not surprising for him to misinterpret performance theatre, including *The Way of How*, in a number of ways: 1) to misinterpret a tightly structured sequence of coherences (partial framings) as having "no coherence greater than a sequence of events"; 2) to view "the conceptual intellect (as) silenced" when there is a constant engagement of mind and perception; 3) to castigate as 'mere' form highly-charged subject matter that does not conform to his sense of coherence; 4) to see the development of an artform promoting additional ways of understanding as a "withdrawal from public language."

Such misunderstandings are common — and innocent. To misunderstand a work of art and therefore not like it is fair enough. But there is a disturbing moralistic undertone to Gelb's remarks.

What he mistakenly takes for "solipsism" he also views as "escape" (into metaphor) and "withdrawal" (from public language). He equates this with amorality, which he implies leads to immoral behavior. Gelb claims there are correct "taboos essential to society's health" and condemns the nonreferential use of a violent image in a performance piece because it "neutralizes moral prohibitions, opening the door to thought and behavior unrestrained by such taboos."

In short, Gelb comes down on the side of

ensorship in the arts, all for the good of a healthy society. He sees a "shared experience of our common humanity" as "intrinsic" to theatre. God forbid there should be an *unshared* experience of a *separate* humanity.

Gelb presents a vision of benign aesthetic imperialism. He is certain about what is intrinsic to theatre and what theatre's social function should be. We should all toe to the line. Luckily, he is not in a position to say "Or else!"

A COMPANY interested in performing new plays seeks writers. 469-4845.

ONE-ACT THEATRE ENSEMBLE (LA) seeks all types of one acts, unproduced in LA area, for 82/83 season. MS and SASE to Kevin Carr, Producing/Artistic Director, New One-Act Theatre Ensemble, 513 S. Atlantic Blvd, Suite 684, Monterey Park CA 91754.

INNER CITY CULTURAL CENTER OF THE BAY AREA PLAYWRIGHT'S THEATRE is seeking new plays by local minority playwrights for staged readings and future prodns. Ms. to Victor Payne, I.C.C.C. Bay Area, 762 Fulton, San Francisco 94102.

L WALKER, 3649 Market St, San Francisco 94131, wants original full lengths with leading female 16-25 yrs old for professional prdn. SASE.

SHOW BUSINESS FOUNDATION AWARD. Eighteen awards, ranging from \$500 to \$1000, will be given in a campaign to discover new talent. Do not send scripts. At most, a 200 word synopsis. For application and instructions, send SASE to Show Business Foundation Award, 134 W. 44th St, NYC 10036.

CRISPIN LARANGEIRA is reading works by Hispanic-American authors for public tv's *American Playhouse* series. Screenplays, teleplays, stage plays, as well as novels, short stories or poem sequences which could be adapted to dramatic form. Crispin Larangeira, American Playhouse, Public Television Playhouse, 356 W. 58th St, 5th fl, NYC 10019.

LA ACTORS' THEATRE seeks scripts which call for a variety of forms of communication including, but not limited to, speech and sign language, for a cast of hearing actors and actors who have trouble hearing. NEA-funded project. LAAT, 1089 N. Oxford Ave, LA 90020.

ROBERTO MONTICELLO is looking for short plays on anti-nuke theme for European tour. Advance pay. Synopsis only to Roberto Monticello, PO Box 372, Village Station, NYC 10014.



The following publications have been added to the TCCBA office library. Purchase and order information are included for your convenience.

NEW PLAYS USA: 1 (Ed. by Jim Leverett) is an impressive 6-play volume, with heralded recent dramatic works first produced at theatres throughout the US. Included are two from Bay Area playwrights: *Winterplay* by Adele Shank (first seen at Magic Theatre), and *FOB* by David Henry Hwang. The book also includes *A Prelude to Death in Venice* by Lee Breuer, *Dead Souls* by Tom Cole, *Still Life* by Emily Mann and *The Resurrection of Lady Lester* by Oyamo. For a copy, send \$9.95 to Theatre Communications Group, 355 Lexington Ave, New York 10017.

CENTER STAGE: An Anthology of 21 Contemporary Black American Plays (Edited by Eileen Ostrow) is a recently published collection of scripts by black playwrights. Included are several plays by Bay Area writers, including Robert Alexander, Cherry Jackson, Joan "California" Cooper, and Kenneth Alan Wesson. The subject matter and dramatic styles vary, and most importantly, says Dr. Sandra L. Richards in her introduction, "this anthology is proud testament to the valuable developmental work Black (theatre) companies have been doing nationwide." The anthology costs \$11.95, and is available from Sea Urchin Press, PO Box 10503, Oakland 94610.

MASK CHARACTERIZATION: An Acting Process (Libby Appel) describes an approach to developing characterization through masks. Dr. Appel divides the manual into two parts: a guide for instructors and a guide for actors. She offers detailed suggestions for maskwork in the form of exercises, review questions and scene suggestions. The text, illustrated with many photographs, costs \$12.95 and is available from Southern Illinois University Press, PO Box 3697, Carbondale, Illinois 62901.

STAGE MANAGEMENT: A Guidebook of Practical Techniques (Lawrence Stern) is a revised handbook which concentrates on efficient procedures for professional stage managers. It is arranged in a clear, concise manner and includes sample diagrams, master calendars, rehearsal logs and other aids. It is published in paperback by Allyn and Bacon, Inc, Longwood Division, 470 Atlantic Avenue, Boston 02210.