

Theatre for Ritual 1

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Question #1: Describe the origins of the theatre and how it relates to ritual in at least one ancient Indo-European culture. (300 words min.)

The history of ancient Greek theatre is essentially the history of theatre in Athens, for this is what we know about. To all intents and purposes, it seems to appear, fully formed, when Piesistratus organizes a competition for tragic plays (plus one comic satyr play) late in the 6th century BCE. In 534 BCE the competition was won by a shadowy figure named Thespis (from which our modern word, thespian, comes). The festival this competition took place in became known as the City Dionysia. (Wickham, 31)

But nothing springs from nothing, and just as in later times, particularly Elizabethan England, where the theatre seems to spring fully mature, but which was actually based on centuries of experimentation with shepherd and miracle plays in churches and marketplaces, so the same must have happened in ancient Athens. Before the City Dionysia came into existence there were centuries of religious, agricultural festivals, where singing, dancing, and mystical ceremonies took place, blending religion with sex and ecstasy. (Wickham, 32)

Song and dance were very primitive forms of theatre that didn't rely on literacy, but rather on simple rhythm created by simple instrumentation (pipes, drums), which allowed for ecstatic experience which can have religious overtones.

Dance rituals in the more primitive times may have been propitiatory rituals, growing out of warrior dances and other games designed to protect the community from various chaotic evils (such as wild animals imbued with some spiritual power) and to gain the aid of other Powers (such as gods). As time went on, a person who innately possessed the tact, inspiration and skills to lead such rituals might emerge as a priest. And when the priest's prayers were deemed to be effective, the others in the dancing rite might start to echo his words, creating the interplay between soloist and chorus that is seen so vividly in later Greek drama and comedy. (Wickham, 16-17)

We see such interplay between soloist and chorus in our rites today. It could be the orator leading the litany, echoed by the people, or seen in the sharing of ritual parts among the various celebrants. And in our less formal, more ecstatic rites, we often seem to return to the dancing and singing of our more ancient forebears.

Question #2: Explain 'intentional movement' and why it is important in ritual. (100 words min.)

The entire idea of intentional movement is based on intention and focus, and is where the celebrant only moves or gestures when there is a reason to do so, and not because of a lack of attention. Often, when folks aren't sure of exactly what they're doing, or when they are thinking on the fly, they will start aimlessly wandering around the ritual space. Not only does this scatter the ritual energy and focus, it also gives the impression that the ritualist doesn't know what he or she is doing. And the attendees will find this very distracting.

Moving with intention, on the other hand, will give what you are doing emphasis and focus. A movement or gesture before a word or phrase will emphasize the word. A movement or gesture after the word or phrase will be emphasized. Moving and speaking at the same time will tend to

give both equal weight. When movement is intentional, it will help with communication. When it is not intentional, it can hinder communication. (Thomas, "Well-Trained Liturgist", 13)

Question #3: Explain your understanding of the circles of concentration. (200 words min.)

During any rite, the ritualist needs to be able to focus on many levels at one time. S/he must know where and when he or she is in space at any given moment (so s/he doesn't fall in the fire, if nothing else). The ritualist must also be able to focus on the other people performing in the same rite. The ritualist must be able to keep track of all the attendees in the rite, even those behind his or her back, and the ritualist must be able to clearly experience the Otherworlds and the Spirits within them. Each one of these levels (or circles, or bubbles, however one wishes to see them) lies within the next higher level, like Russian Nesting Dolls lie each inside another.

The 1st Circle (called 'The Critic') is the one closest to the ritualist. This is just the person and the space immediately around him or her. This circle is important because this one focuses on the things that can easily be forgotten in the course of a rite, like how the robe is fitting, where the holes in the ground in the ritual space are, how close the person is getting to the fire, etc. This is about personal safety and not falling over.

The 2nd Circle (called 'The Connection') is about the relationship and focus between the ritualist and the other people performing the rite. It's about maintaining eye contact when necessary, about not upstaging the others when they are performing their parts in the rite, and about supporting each other.

The 3rd Circle (called 'Awareness') concerns the ritualist being aware of what is going on with the attendees, the audience, if you will. Is that little old lady in the back row able to hear you? Are people starting to cough, a sure sign of boredom and a slow pace? Are you giving your focus and attention equally to everyone, focusing on various areas in the ritual space?

The 4th Circle (called 'Boundaries') is about crossing the boundaries between this world and the Otherworlds, so that in addition to maintaining all the focuses of the first three circles, the ritualist is also able to open the Gates, call on the Spirits, and clearly see, feel and hear Them in order to help the others present at the rite do the same.

This skill is difficult at first, but will become second nature with practice. (Thomas, "Concentration in Ritual", 1-7)

Question #4: Describe the advantages and disadvantages of the three ritual configurations (proscenium, thrust and round). Note how a ritualist can maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of each configuration. Offer at least one type of ritual that would work best in each configuration. (100 words min. for each configuration)

Proscenium

With a proscenium stage, the audience is lined up in rows all facing in one direction, where the action is taking place, often on a raised stage. This is the layout that one usually sees in churches and auditoriums, cinemas and many theatres.

The greatest advantage of this layout is that the audience is already looking in the correct direction, and it is fairly easy for the ritualist to hold their focus. However, all movement must take place in a lateral direction, and if there is more than one ritualist on the stage they must be careful not to block each other from the view of the audience, or block themselves by turning their backs on the audience, making it difficult for them to hear what is going on.

Ways to minimize these problems is for each ritualist to stand either in a full front position, facing the audience (which, however, can look quite stilted and stiff) or face ¼ inwards towards each other. They may even face each other, giving the audience a profile, as long as the voices of the ritualists are strong enough to carry to the front and not just out the wings. Also, anyone standing behind other ritualists must take care to focus on the person performing their part and do nothing to draw attention to themselves (this is called 'upstaging').

Most Pagan rituals don't use this arrangement unless they are renting churches that are already set up in this way, or when performing some weddings, which have a presentational element to them. (Thomas, "Well-Trained Ritualist", 14-15)

Thrust

The thrust type of stage is one where the audience sits on three sides of the ritual space, leaving one side open for the ritualists to gather and to put their altar and ritual items.

One major advantage of the thrust arrangement is that it allows the ritualist to engage with almost everyone simultaneously, as in proscenium staging, without turning his back on them, while at the same time allowing the ritualist to interact more fully with them. Having a place for an altar table at one end also allows it to not block anyone's view so that everyone can see everything going on.

The ritualist must still take care, however, not to turn his back on any of the attendees for very long. Directed, intentional movement can be used to share the action with as many folks as possible, crossing from area to area and delivering various parts to different people. One problem that must be noted is that the voice does not carry well to the rear of the speaker – it is best to stay on the edges of the circle and face inward so that the ritualist is facing most of the folks while speaking, even if this means momentarily turning his back on those nearest him, so that all may hear his words. Turning the head from side to side will also spread the voice around and allow those behind him to at least see his profile for a moment.

This type of staging arrangement is suitable for large group rituals – almost any kind will work well here, particularly High Day rites. (Thomas, "Well-Trained Ritualist", 15-16)

Round

In the round arrangement, the attendees gather in a full circle and all action happens within that circle. This is a very common arrangement in large, non-ADF gatherings, and people will just tend to take up this configuration. There are ways that this can be made to work, however, for just about any type of ritual (other than weddings, which require a more formal staging).

One major disadvantage of this arrangement is that any hallows, ritual items, etc. must be placed within the circle, and they may block someone's view of the action. Also, it is almost impossible for a ritualist to perform within the circle without having his back to someone at all times, since there is no 'dead' area without attendees.

One very good way to handle this is for the various ritualists to stand with everyone else in the circle, and then take a step or two into the circle when their turn to work comes. This way they are facing almost everyone, at least tangentially, and have their backs to but the barest few folks. This way they can be heard by everyone, and seen by almost everyone (and even those standing next to them will have a profile or something to see). When it is important for actions to take place in the center of the circle, the ritualists need to remember to 'share the wealth', that is, to focus on as many folks in as many parts of the circle as they can when they speak or perform an action, such as lifting ritual items high in the air, etc.

This type of ritual space arrangement can work quite well in large Neopagan rites where it is less important to formalize the rite, or where most of the attendees are used to the format. It is more difficult for the ritualist, however. (Thomas, "Well-Trained Ritualist", 15-16)

Question #5: Choose a being of the occasion appropriate to a specific high day of your choosing and describe a theatrical method of conveying that story to others during a public performance. (300 words min.)

It has long been my custom to celebrate the Winter Solstice in the Welsh hearth culture under the name of Alban Gaef (Welsh for 'winter solstice'), calling upon the god Llew Llaw Gyffes.

In the 4th Branch of the Mabinogi, Aranrhod, Llew's mother, lays a curse on him that he will never have a wife "from any race that is on this earth now." (Ford, 102) Llew's uncles, Gwydion and Math, then create a wife for him out of the flowers of oak, broom and meadow sweet and name her Blodeuedd ("Flower Face"). Some time after they are married, Blodeuedd falls in love with another man, Gronw Pebr, and they plot to destroy Llew, which isn't easy since it's difficult to kill a God. He has his weak points, however, and they take advantage of them to strike at Llew, mortally wounding him. He transforms into a wounded eagle and flies to the top of a large oak tree on a hill, where he is eventually found by his uncle Gwydion, who coaxes him down from the tree and then heals him. I see this myth as symbolic of the near death and recovery of the sun at the winter solstice.

When I lived in Tucson I had a stone circle where we performed our rites that was nestled up against a retaining wall that had a staircase coming down it to the ritual area. The ritualist playing Llew stood upon a raised section of the circle, taking the pose that he had described to his wife as being the only dangerous one, and another ritualist playing Gronw Pebr then struck Llew with a spear. He screamed, clutched his side, and ran up the stairs and hid from sight.

Then the ritualist playing Gwydion appeared and searched the entire ritual area, looking for his nephew. After being told by a farmer that a sow went into the woods each morning and then returned each evening, Gwydion looked up to the retaining wall, and there would see Llew, wrapped in a feathered cloak with a bird's mask on, standing on the wall and writhing with pain.

As in the tale, Gwydion sits on a rock near the wall and then sings three short poems (*englyns*) to him (Ford, 107):

*There's an oak that grows between two lakes,
Gloomy is the air and the glen;
If I speak no lie,
This comes from Llew's flowers.*

The eagle man responds to the song and comes part-way down the stairs.

*There's an oak that grows on a high plain;
Rain wets it not; nor does it melt;
It nourished a score of torments.
In its top is Llew Llaw Gyffes.*

The eagle responds again and come almost to the bottom of the stairs.

*There's an oak that grows along a slope;
Stately prince in his temple.
If I speak no lie,
Llew will come to my lap.*

At this point the eagle man comes all the way down the stairs and lays his head in Gwydion's lap. Gwydion 'heals' him by saying,

Dear nephew, change back into your manly shape!

while pulling off Lleu's bird mask. Lleu stands up shakily, dropping his bird cloak to the ground. Then Gwydion stands and holds Lleu, explaining to the People,

And so Lleu Llaw Gyffes was healed, just as the sun will be healed on this Solstice day, growing in strength over time. Bydded felly! So be it.

Question #6: Explain how you would prepare three of the following pieces for public performance, and include an audio or video clip of your performance of each. (50 words min. each explanation)

- a. **Strong Meter and Strong Rhythm: see appendix, selection 1**
- b. **Uncertain Meter: see appendix, selection 2**
- c. **Complex Thought with Complex Meter: see appendix, selection 3**
- d. **Prose: see appendix, selection 4**
- e. **Strong Meter and Strong Rhyme: see appendix, selection 5**

For this question I'll be doing c., d. and e.

c. **Complex Thought with Complex Meter** ("Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" from 'Hamlet').

This speech is both famous and emotional, which makes it doubly difficult to perform. It is important first to break it up based on its emotional content, noting what the transitions are and where they take place.

When the speech first starts, Hamlet is amazed by and incredulous of the ability of the Player to apparently feel great emotion over the death of someone that the Player doesn't actually know – Hecuba, Queen of Troy. Then, ("What would he do...") Hamlet drops into mocking self-pity, comparing the Player's fictional motivations to his own, very real ones, imagining that the Player would truly 'amaze indeed the very faculty of eyes and ears' of all those listening if he could only feel what Hamlet was feeling. The next transition ("Yet I, a dull and muddy-headed rascal...") is when Hamlet then turns his anger and disgust upon himself, wallowing in self-hatred for his inability to do anything about his father's death.

Each transition would require me to 'change gears', as it were, so I would need to be clear about his feelings at each moment. All the punctuation in the piece is very important, but again, it's literary punctuation and there will be moments when it might be best to pause when there isn't a comma, and perhaps not pause when there is one.

One important thing here is that it is very important to take the time necessary to feel these transitions. Anything else would be forced, and might show.

The audio recording of me doing this speech can be found on my website at

d. **Prose** (from 'Skaldskaparmal' in the Prose Edda)

This is the tale of Skadi, a giantess whose father, Thiassi, had been killed, and in revenge she forces the Gods to grant her boons. The story fragment in this course is actually quite self-explanatory. It also begins on an ominous note, as she is setting off for Asgard to get her revenge as the piece begins.

The biggest challenges in this piece are not rhythmic or have anything to do with rhyme. Rather, the challenges involve making the piece lively, interesting, and fun. Skaldi actually has a line in this piece, and this line must be vocally bracketed in such a way that it is clear that the character is speaking, not the narrator. I will be doing this by pausing just before the line, lifting my voice and speaking matter-of-factly, just as she would have done, followed by another pause.

There is also less punctuation in the piece that I wanted for vocal and emphasis reasons, so I found a few places to pause that were not indicated by commas. The second sentence is quite a complex thought, actually, and a bit of pausing would be necessary to be sure that anyone hearing it (as opposed to reading it) would understand what was going on.

I also decided to emphasize Loki tying one end of the rope around his own testicles, since that passage might surprise a lot of people, and I felt it needed to be emphasized for its entertainment value.

The audio recording of me telling this tale can be found on my website at

e. **Strong Meter and Strong Rhyme** (excerpt from "The Raven" by E.A. Poe)

This selection is probably the most difficult of the three for me. It has a relentless rhythm and a rhyme scheme of A, B, C, B, B, B, so four out of the six lines in each stanza rhyme. This poem is also quite famous and often read in ways to emphasize the rhythm, for the exercise we are to work against that rhythm. To do this, I decided to aim for clarity of thought, and let some of the rhythm show through for balance.

For clarity of understanding it would be necessary to strongly emphasize some words, even bracketing them with pauses to bring out the meaning. Also, I would only pause at the end of a line when indicated by a comma, and not otherwise. This alone would tend to break the poem's relentless rhythm.

As in the Skadi piece above, the narrator has lines in this poem as well, and these, too, would need to be set off from the rest of the text. I used a different tone of voice for this.

The poem is also about bleak despair, of the author's mourning for his dead wife, and this would have to be the emotional background of the performance. The poem also indicates that the writer is also nervous, even frightened, by the tapping at the door – for who would be visiting at midnight? There is a feel of suppressed terror at one point, and I also wanted to make that clear.

The audio recording of me speaking this poem can be found on my website at

Question #7: Write a statement of purpose for a rite of your choosing and one invitation for each of the Three Kindreds. Submit a video (of no more than ten minutes of total length) of your performance of all four pieces.

The video recordings of me performing the following four pieces can be found on my website at

Statement of Purpose

Children of the Earth, we are here to celebrate the Feast of Alban Gaef, the Winter Solstice, when the days are short, and the nights are long, and the sun is weak.

Winter is upon us, and our days grow colder. So we shall call for the sun to return!

We also remember another winter of the world, when Lleu Llaw Gyffes was mortally wounded, and flew in eagle form, and took refuge at the top of a tall oak tree. There, His uncle Gwydion restored Him to health, and to His rightful place in the Cosmos.

And at the Sacred Center of the Worlds, we may do the same.

So let us join together as one Folk and make our sacrifices in joy and reverence.

Bydded felly! So be it!

Ancestors

The Children of Earth call out to our human kin who came before.

We call to our Ancestors of blood – Without you we would not be here. You are our parents and grandparents, from all generations.

We call to our Ancestors of heart – you whom we have loved and lost, and whom we hold dear in our lives.

We call to the Ancient Wise – you Mighty Dead of fame and skill who smile upon us and aid our ways.

Mighty Ones! Come to us, we pray!

Rise though the Waters of the Earth our Mother and join us at the Well.

Bask once again in the heat of our Fire as in elder days.

Join us, and whisper true wisdom in our ears, that we may shape our lives.
Let there be peace between us,
Let all prosper in our warm friendship.

Ancestors, accept our sacrifice!

(Beer is poured out at the Well)

Close your eyes, Children of Earth. See our Ancestors as they come to the Well. Hear their whispers and feel the love they have for us.

(pause)

Ancestors, we welcome you.

Land Spirits

The Children of Earth call out to all those Spirits who share this world with us.

We call to the Spirits of Motion – You who crawl, who run, who swim, who fly.

We call to the Spirits of Place – You trees, You rock, You plants.

We call to the Spirits under the Mound – You cousins of the Gods, You mightiest spirits of the Midworld.

We call to our Spirit Allies – You who aid and guide us in our work.

Noble Ones! Come to us, we pray!

Let the Waters of the Earth our Mother rise up and guide you with its gurgling voice and quench Your thirst –

Let the Light of the Heavens, burning in our Fire, guide You with its glow and give you warmth.

Join us, and renew the Old Bargain,
Let there be peace between us,
And let **all** prosper in our warm friendship.

Land Spirits, accept our sacrifice!

(Seed and grain are offered to the bowl)

Close your eyes, Children of Earth. See the Land Spirits as they approach, their strange faces turning our way. Hear them as they crawl, swim, and fly to us here. Feel the wonder in their hearts.

(pause)

Land Spirits, we welcome you.

Gods and Goddesses

The Children of Earth call out to the Gods and Goddesses of all our peoples!

We call to You in the Heavens, shining in the skies!

We call to You in the Midworld, striding across the land!

We call to You in the Underworld, guiding and guarding our Dead.

Shining Ones, come to us, we pray!

Let our love bring You to our Fire!

Let our devotion bring You to our Well!

Join us, that we may give to You as You give to all.
Let there be peace between us,
And let all prosper in our warm friendship.

Shining Ones, accept our sacrifice!

(Whiskey is offered to the Fire)

Close your eyes, Children of Earth. See the Gods and Goddesses, fully 60 feet tall, as they come and join us here! Hear their laughter on the wind and feel their heavy footfalls as they walk upon the ground.

(pause)

Shining Ones, we welcome you.

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