

careful separation of back and front stage, the constraints involved in controlling the performance, and its cast of characters. Funerals are likened to "morality plays which weave social commentary into the ritual." The theater that is the funeral home affords the stage upon which the final performance of the deceased is played.

Boles, Davis, and Tatro apply a dramaturgical analysis of the con game as a form of occupational false pretense among fortune tellers. Viewing con games as an especially systematic variation of everyday deception, the authors examine six routines of false pretense utilized by fortune tellers in their efforts to convert their clients to an occult definition of both trouble and remedy. The social organization of this "psychic service" occupation emerges in the relation between the fortune teller's backstage manipulation and the client's alignment activities. How the con is established and whether the victim is serviced or exploited are treated as problematic outcomes of the interaction between the fortune teller and an active participating client. The importance of dramaturgical awareness is underscored in the author's discussion of fakes, true believers, and the dramaturgy of "unfinished business" that is such a prominent feature of work in the service sector of our society.

Kolb's participant observation study of federal negotiators shows how structural matters such as rules, procedures, and actual conditions of work are dramaturgically negotiated. She argues that the expressive dimensions of activity become particularly salient for the mediators, since being members of the human relations profession, their "legitimacy must be proven in action and is not automatically confirmed by role." Kolb also articulates the importance of observation to the dramaturgical analyst in those situations where dramaturgical awareness by the actors is limited. Although "mediators espouse the requirements of trust, rapport, and confidence. . . . They are less sure . . . about the explicit ways in which they communicate these impressions." A role of the dramaturgist as observer, is "to fill the gap between espoused value and action."

In the final selection, Mangham and Overington, using Burke's pentad (act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose) propose a much broader method for dramatic analysis. Dramatism is viewed as both an interactional analytic technique and a method for assessing theories of interaction. "Any dramatic analysis is inherently critical and demystifying in examining *all* elements of social action, in inquiring as to the priority attached to one or another aspect of the pentad, and in trying to 'round out' accounts of social actions to give due weight to all five elements and their relative consistency." The role of the dramatic researcher and consultant is examined in a case study of an organization where a single element of social action, the scene, constitutes the explanation for everything else. The authors adopt a controversial pragmatic notion of "plausibility" as the criterion for evaluating the merit of dramatic understanding, "insisting on the rights and obligations of specific audiences to establish what should be taken as plausible."

Soc PSYC

## Chapter 16

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## DEATH AS THEATER: A DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE AMERICAN FUNERAL\*

Ronny E. Turner and Charles Edgley

"They told me, Francis Hinley, they told  
me you were hung  
With red protruding eye-balls and black  
protruding tongue  
I wept as I remembered how often you  
and I  
Had laughed about Los Angeles and now  
'tis here you'll lie;  
Here pickled in formaldehyde and painted  
like a whore,  
Shrimp-pink incorruptible, not lost but  
gone before."  
Evelyn Waugh  
*The Loved One*

### Introduction

The notion that life is rather like a theater, of actors playing their parts to audiences, sometimes within the bounds of roles, and sometimes with considerable distance from them, is an ancient metaphor recently resurrected by social psychology as a device for analyzing behavior. Although sometimes associated almost exclusively with the pioneering work of Erving Goffman,<sup>1</sup> the dra-

\*Ronny Turner and Charles Edgley, "Death as Theater: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the American Funeral." *Sociology and Social Research*, 60 (4):377-392. Copyright © 1976. Reprinted by permission of the University of Southern California.

maturgical point of view<sup>2</sup> is more precisely traced to the prolific writings of literary critic Kenneth Burke.<sup>3</sup> Like the pragmatists before him, Burke stressed that the cause of understanding social behavior is best served by beginning with theories of action rather than theories of knowledge. He further claimed that all investigation proceeds through the use of metaphor and that human social life is best seen through the metaphor of drama. "Men relate as actors playing roles to create satisfactions which only other human actors can give them" (Duncan, 1962:112). Our study uses the dramaturgical metaphor to understand some of the relationships and interactions that comprise the American funeral.

The study is based on unobtrusive observations of and information obtained from fifteen mortuaries in three cities. Funeral directors were interviewed, "in-house" manuals on how to successfully perform a funeral were subjected to content analysis, and both national and local advertising material were studied. Only funeral services performed in mortuary chapels (a growing trend) were studied; however, the techniques we describe are probably also applicable to services held in churches of various denominations. No memorial services in which the deceased had been cremated were included in our observations, and all of the funerals we observed were open-casket.

### The Performative Nature of Funeral Directing

Funeral directors and allied members of their team may be seen as actors whose job it is to stage a performance in such a way so that the audience to it (the bereaved family and friends) will impute competence, sincerity, dignity, respect, and concern to their actions. Given the one-shot nature of the funeral service, and the impossibility of doing it over in the event of mistakes, the funeral director must necessarily be concerned with those performative aspects of his business which will lead the audience to be impressed favorably by his effective staging of the show. As in any other performance, the concern is likely to be with whether the show comes off or falls flat, and consequently, to use Goffman's phrase, the expressions given off must be arranged in such a way so that the images and impressions formed are favorable ones.

From the standpoint of the sociology of work, the funeral director is in a unique business.<sup>4</sup> He draws his living from a relatively fixed resource, the death rate in a community. He cannot increase the amount of business available to him by increasing the number of deaths in the community, and he must be very careful of how he advertises lest someone gain the impression that the wants more people to die. (One does not, for example, see funeral homes sponsoring such risky events as the Indianapolis 500.) His choices for increasing the flow of money, then, are limited and center basically around two options: (1) Getting more than his share of the business from deaths that do occur in the community; and (2) merchandizing up, so that the average cost of funeral rises. In short, his

opportunities to make money stem from his performative ability to stage dramas which are meaningful to his audience, and will leave them with an impression favorable enough to contribute to the all-important "reputation" which funeral homes find is in many respects their most marketable, if not tangible quality.

### Role-Distance: The Sacred and the Profane

The performative necessities of his work are, however, made more difficult by another aspect of the relationship between the funeral director and his audience which has been pointed out repeatedly by various studies: the amount of social distance that exists both between him and his clients and between the object of his work (death), and the public he undertakes to perform before. He deals with objects which are both sacred and profane; simultaneously loved and loathed. As a result, the funeral director often attempts to separate the body work from the directive work, thereby putting distance between himself and his traditionally assigned role. Sometimes this is accomplished in the same routine as when he dresses out differently for embalming and for directing; at other times role-distance is accomplished by simply hiring separate functionaries to do the body work so that he can concentrate on staging the show without being seen as someone who has been contaminated by contact with the dead. What is separated here by the funeral director is not so much himself from his role, but rather himself from a loathsomeness ordinarily attributed to certain aspects of that role by his audience.<sup>5</sup>

As in other occupations (the medical profession being the most salient example), some emotional detachment from the objects one is manipulating is desirable. Funeral directors and their staff, therefore, tend to separate their own personal identify from the task of embalming bodies. The language and nonverbal conduct in the preparation room, then, demonstrate a type of role-distance which effectively communicates detachment and sometimes even disdainful alienation from the role one is performing.

### Backstage Regions: Preparation and Rehearsal

A successful funeral is a sequence of activities performed by the funeral director and his staff that are later seen by the bereaved as a respectful, appropriate tribute to the life and memory of the deceased. It requires an extensive series of preparations backstage, or behind the scene that will later be used for the performance. A backregion or backstage is simply the space and the enclosed activities strategically hidden from the audience. It is ordinarily a place, but it may also be constituted simply by the shielding and masking of information in an interpersonal situation so that the audience does not realize certain things that

would conflict with the performance as staged. A backstage region, whether a place, or an interpersonal strategy is "bounded to some degree by barriers to perception."<sup>6</sup>

The necessity of backregions is due, obviously, to the fact that preparations for performances, if seen, may contradict, alter, qualify, or destroy the impressions fostered frontstage. Because people seem to have a limited capacity for seeing ritual as ritual, and since funerals, like any other drama, are prepared for, the viewing of the preparations may undercut the impressions fostered frontstage. Similarly, those who have worked in the backregions of a restaurant, in the kitchen or afterhours, and have participated in the preparation of food, the classification of customers by the staff, and so forth, may have difficulty seeing the frontstage performances in the same manner again.

In the backstage, equipment and props used to produce the performance are stored, the behavior within the area is considered "private," and the scenes that go on are protected from public observance by various territorial imperatives socially constructed and enforced: doors, curtains, locks, and "employees only" signs.

### *The Backstage Setting*

What we have said about backstage regions are generally applicable with few qualifications to the dramas of the American funeral. The preparation room, referred to by some morticians as a "medical laboratory" is spatially segregated from the funeral chapel, visitation rooms, viewing rooms, offices, and other regions the public frequents. It may be noted that the awesome and sacrosanct qualities of such places may be heightened by successfully identifying them with medicine, a line of endeavor which seems to establish particularly esoteric meanings for the bulk of Americans.

The social and physical boundaries that separate the preparation room from other parts of the home are essential to the ceremonial performances that will be given later. Here the corpse is washed, shaved, sprayed with disinfectant, sliced, pierced, creamed, powdered, waxed, stitched, painted, manicured, dressed, and positioned in a casket. Embalming involves the draining of blood *via* the major arteries while simultaneously refilling them through an injection point in the neck or armpit with fluid. Through the use of other chemicals the flesh is softened, stretched, shrunk, restored, colored, and even replaced.

Obviously, these procedures would be likely to shock "nonprofessionals" such as the friends and family of the deceased (Goffman, 1959:106). But more than that, such viewing would tend to present the audience with an impression that would contradict that being fostered frontstage. As Goffman notes, "if the bereaved are to be given the impression that the loved one is really in a deep and tranquil sleep, they will have to be kept away from the area where the corpse is drained, stuffed, and painted for its final performance."<sup>7</sup> In the presence of

family and friends the casketed body is never touched by mortuary personnel; they honor a distance of two to three feet from the body. However, the preparation room is characterized by handling of the body (a naked body in some procedures) in ways that would appear disrespectful and even inhuman, even if one were unaware of the identity of the deceased. One might respond to all of these by asking just how it is possible to talk about inhumanity when the object is a corpse, and yet it is precisely this "human identity" conception of the enterprise that supports the funeral profession, and indeed, becomes the basic polarity between which the mortician must balance his act. At any rate, the embalming, restoration, and other preparatory procedures requiring manual labor might appear to the layman as morbidly intimate, repulsive, and a violation of dignity, even to the dead. Virtually all of the amenities persons accord to each other in everyday life are violated by the attendants who prepare a corpse for the service.

In order to maintain the historically hard-won image as a legitimate professional and counselor rather than an "undertaker," with all of its attendant morbid stereotypes, a funeral director must seclude the backstage by utilizing rhetoric less suggestive of what transpires behind closed doors. Here we come to the interpersonal shielding we discussed earlier that is at least as important as the barriers formed by physical space. It should be noted that backstage regions are protected not only by the funeral director, but also by others; most people, except some curious sociologists of everyday life, voluntarily avoid areas where they are uninvited. They exercise the sort of tact regarding settings that constitutes "discretion" (Goffman, 1959:229). In this sense, the audience actively, rather than passively, participates in the distinctions we have drawn. They want to be put on by the show as much as the producers of it, and they seem to recognize that part of the meaning of any performance will be diluted with disenchantment if one knows too much.

Even though the specifics of the preparation room are a mystery, most people know enough to choose acceptable ignorance and avoid trespassing into the region. Once again, the audience is a party to the stage production, avoiding asking questions about embalming procedures, and generally managing their behavior in such a way as to suggest they know nothing of such preparations, and want to keep it that way.

### *The Rhetoric of Backstage Regions*

Both the technical and the informal nomenclature which mark the universe of discourse of backstage regions serve a number of functions, but they are sufficiently different from the language characterizing the frontstage production itself that they must be segregated from clients who seek funeral services. There exists quite clearly in the funeral business a backstage language and other rubric entirely for those occasions in which the performance that has been so la-

boriously prepared as being staged. A superb example of frontstage rhetoric is a sign on the door of the embalming room at one of the establishments we studied:

REMEMBER

This preparation room becomes sacred when a family entrusts us with one of its most precious possessions. Keep faith with *them* by conducting *yourself* as though the family were present. The body is dear to them . . . Treat it reverently.

Backstage, however, morticians develop a very different set of behaviors toward their activities. Rather than being a person, the body becomes an object upon which one performs restorative art. And while the deceased is a dearly beloved, Mr. Doe, a father, loved one, etc., during frontstage encounters with the bereaved family, backstage references are to various types of bodies such as "floaters" (one who has drowned and was not recovered until the body floated to the surface), "Mr. Crispy" (one who burned to death in an airplane crash), a "fresh" or "warm" one (a body received shortly after death), a "cold" one (a frozen body) are encountered in the conversations of the backstage crew. References to restorative art in the information materials given the public may in fact be referred to in the preparation room as "pickling" or "curing a ham." The use of "bod" instead of "body," especially with younger female corpses, is not uncommon. Joking, singing, the discussion of political issues, and (infrequently) open sexual remarks, racial slurs, complaints about the size of some bodies, profanity, and other rhetoric inconsistent with the frontstage regions are employed as ways of distancing the embalmer from the role he is performing.

Similarly, frontstage references to the burial containers such as casket, gift to the deceased, home, place of rest, and so on, are referred backstage as coffins, stuffing boxes, tin cans, containers, stove pipes (a cheap metal over wood casket), or brand names given to caskets by manufacturers.

Such role-distance behavior may manifest alienation from the role "but the opposite can well be true: in some cases only those who feel secure in their attachment may be able to chance the expression of distance" (Goffman, 1959:128). Expression of distance may serve also to relax those attending the task and/or convey an atmosphere of "just another job" in what otherwise would be a situation permeated by anxiety and tension. As in other occupations, role-distance behavior can be noted in the many instances where the actor does "two things at once," singing, joking, and using the aforementioned backstage rhetoric while preparing the body.

The preparation room is a scene constructed in such a way as to establish the impression of a sterile medical atmosphere. Even though the backstage crew may humorously refer to themselves as a "bod squad," they more often refer to themselves and their behavior in medical rhetoric, thereby borrowing credence and legitimacy from that professional most esteemed in American society: the medical doctor. The medical atmosphere and terminology is also a part of ongoing role-distance; the white surgical garb, the white walls, and the operating

table help the practitioner to see and present himself as at least a quasi-medical professional rather than simply a handler of corpses.

Just as theaters have their make-up rooms, the preparation room serves as a setting for the cosmetology that will turn the corpse into the star of the show. As make-up-artists, morticians are unsurpassed, and have elevated their skill to a high art. Given the various causes of death and subsequent kinds of bodily disfigurement, "restorative art" is designed to make the deceased look natural and, in a sense, "alive." Cosmetics in the hands of a skilled mortician can cover a multitude of wounds, bruises, ravages of long-term disease and discoloration, and even major forms of disfigurement. (One funeral director told us with pride of a suicide he had reconstructed, even though the man had succeeded in blowing the top of his head off.) When successful, an unblemished star is born for a magnificent final performance.

As with other performers, the actor is not supposed to appear "made up," but rather the make-up is applied to convey "natural" impressions rather than the artificiality the make-up room as a backstage region implies. (One is reminded of the cosmetic company that advertises that women can achieve the "natural look" only by using their new line of cosmetics.) Funeral directors take as a compliment remarks that the deceased looked natural, at peace, younger than before, asleep, etc., apparently because his art is being validated by the very audience at which it is directed. What might seem as "art-for-art's sake" is justified by funeral directors as a vital element in what has come to be known as "grief therapy," a vocabulary of motives (Mills, 1940) which most practitioners in the industry now espouse. Such a set of rationales hold that the viewing of the body by the bereaved is a necessary step in the acceptance of death. It is of interest to note that an economic vocabulary of motives might also apply (open-casket funerals usually generate a larger expenditure of money because the interior designations of the casket become significant to the buyer), although it is, of course, never mentioned to the audience. Instead of such economic motives, the following rationale from a handbook on successful funeral practice is presented:

Perhaps the most important function of the art of viewing the remains is the confrontation of the emotional fact that one is so anxious to deny. Seeing the dead body seems to break through the defenses more effectively and more completely than any other part of the funeral process (Raether, 1971:140).

### Frontstage Performances: Bringing Off the Show

The change of titles from "undertaker" to "funeral director" has been perhaps the largest single clue to the dramaturgical functions the industry now sees itself as performing. He is indeed a "director," controlling a dramatic production. The staged performance is supported by elaborate backstage preparations of the body; equipment, and props, and the immediate family is rehearsed

as to the schedule of events and protocol. In order to preclude any miscues in the performance, the rehearsal covers entrance cues, exit, places to sit, and timing of events; special requests by the family can also be included in the script and program.

The funeral director and his crew continue backstage activities during the funeral service: automobile drivers, pallbearers, ministers, and musicians must all be orchestrated in a smooth and uninterrupted performance. As a skilled director, the mortician is available but largely unnoticed, particularly by the audience of friends and acquaintances who come to pay their respects. He is often acutely sensitive to matters of "promptness, overall courtesy, ushering, and other tasks involving a sizable number of people" (Raether, 1971:121). His demeanor, of course, establishes a model of appropriate behavior in a funeral setting:

The funeral director should not strut, nor should he appear to be mousey. His demeanor should show dignity, concern, and confidence . . . [he] should not talk loud, nor should he whisper secretly. He should speak in a subdued voice . . . should not walk around unnecessarily . . . should not snap his fingers or hiss to get attention (Raether, 1971:121).

In addition, he constantly checks the floral pieces for placement, fallen petals, water leakage, and all such tidying is made prior to the family's arrival.

#### *Controlling the Situation: The Cast of Characters*

The funeral as a staged performance features a marquee listing a well-respected director affiliated with National Funeral Directors Association; a star, the deceased, whose life and attributes comprise the plot; a supporting cast of the bereaved (one of whom usually takes charge of managing details); supporters of the bereaved; ministers; musicians; and pallbearers; and, of course, the audience of friends and acquaintances. The bereaved are themselves supporting actors and actresses, for they too are part of the performance. They are "on-stage" in that their behavior is reviewed and judged by others whose comments on how well the family "held up" at the funeral will later be taken into account. Observations of funerals and especially postfuneral gatherings show that such evaluations comprise much of the conversation, and the bereaved who shows too little emotion for the audience's conception of their relationship to the deceased, or those who show too much when it is known that the relationship did not warrant it, are likely to be judged negatively. Mourners are aware of this, and may construct their performances accordingly. Sometimes, in fact, part of the directing task is coaching mourners on how to act.

Cast members must also be controlled: one of the most potentially troublesome of these is the minister. As such, he may, if not carefully managed, act in such a way as to construct a counter-reality<sup>8</sup> which can cast doubt on the entire show. Historically, the undertaker was a minor functionary whose role was under the

direct supervision of the minister (Vernon, 1970:246-247; Haberstein, 1955). However, with the emergence of the professional "funeral director" the minister has been increasingly shunted to the background, and now it may be properly said that *he* is the minor functionary. The counter-reality that the minister may establish is the idea that all of this funeral business is really nonsense because the body is a shell and the "soul" has departed. In addition, he may feel that there is too much emphasis on rituals involving the body, and that these smack of paganism and status seeking, as well as being a waste of money. The minister may have long years of close association with the family, and if allowed to operate unmanaged, can be a significantly moderating influence on the family's choice. Consequently, trade journals devote occasional space to giving helpful advice on how to control this potentially truculent member of the cast. *Mortuary Management*, for example, suggests the following when a minister comes with the family to make arrangements:

We tell the family to go ahead and look over the caskets in the display room, and that the minister . . . will join them later. We tell the minister that we have something we would like to talk to him about privately, and we've found that if we have some questions to ask him, he seems to be flattered that his advice is being sought, and we can keep him in the private office until the family has actually made its selection (Vernon, 1970:265).

#### *The Funeral Home as Theater and Stage*

Seldom are funeral homes space-age in architectural design; rather they present themselves with traditional white columns, Colonial style, or even proudly as older structures. They are usually decorated profusely with flowers, the walkways are carefully landscaped, the grass must be sprayed green during the winter months and, of course, the interiors are meticulously decorated. Such appearances are ways of establishing other meanings besides the usual ones of death and morbidity. Brightly colored drapes, curtains, and fixtures seem to breathe life; black hues are out, for they conspicuously betray the image of "undertaker." Even the traditional black limousine is no longer fashionable among more modern funeral homes; colors such as grey, white, and blue are now seen as more appropriate to death-free imagery.

The stage itself, the funeral chapel, is a model of theatrical perfection; many chapels would make a Broadway star envious. The chapel is usually arranged with ample entrances and exits, and may be served by back doors, halls, tunnels, and passageways that lead from the preparation room without ever trespassing frontstage areas. Equipment and props such as flower holders, religious symbols, and decorative roping are used to set the stage for the performance. In addition, the basic stage area is often neutral so that appropriate props can be used to establish the correct symbols for the various religious types of funerals common in our society.

If all of this background is successfully arranged, the funeral director—like

other persons responsible for the direction of performances in our society—is in a position to control the kind of definitions that arise in the situation. Having had little opportunity to rehearse for such rituals, the majority of mourners face a highly problematic, tense, and relatively undefined situation. Consequently, monitoring the director's cues become a way of apprehending what the situation calls for.

Despite the best of scheduling, however, the inevitable “mistakes at work” occur.<sup>9</sup> But while every funeral director can unreel a series of atrocity-stories about things that go wrong, ordinarily his recovery techniques are successful in salvaging the show. Caskets are rarely dropped, leak, or have their contents spilled onto the floor, especially since the troublesome role of “pallbearer” has been successfully turned into an honorary position, with the actual carrying of the casket done by members of the staff. Expected contingencies such as “excessive” displays of grief are managed smoothly with cues being given to the clergyman who may then minister to the person (Raether, 1971:21).

#### † *Establishing the Mood*

A crucial, and therefore precarious, feature of virtually all human affairs is mood. And it is important to remember that actions establish mood. The putting on of certain conduct will lead the reviewer to feel this way or that; and, as we have already shown, the review of the funeral director's show is in many ways the most tangible product he sells.

Probably the single most effective way of establishing the right mood for a funeral is the judicious use of music. Emanating usually from a veiled location, “appropriate” organ music (as opposed to “inappropriate” music such as amplified guitar) is the vital medium through which the atmosphere of the funeral is created. In counsel with the family, the musical selections are planned to set the mood for serenity, beauty, respect, or whatever values are desired. Many mortuaries offer lists of musicians upon which the family can call, and who will perform for a fee; other establishments have their own musicians available for hire. As in other shows, the selection, volume, tone, and timing of the music provide cues for the series of events or acts that are presented. With the aid of a printed program, music cues the audience in sequence: be respectfully quiet; the service is beginning; the choir is about to sing; a prayer is forthcoming; a minister is about to speak; the eulogy is being delivered; it is time for the processional view of the deceased; the service is over—you may leave. Mood management, then, is a major means by which the director controls the situation.

#### *Frontstage Rhetoric and the Denial of Death*

Although one of the consensually stated objectives, of funerals is the acceptance of death by the family, the rhetoric of the frontstage as well as the social

and physical setting of the funeral service itself tends to contradict such claims. Despite the many criticisms and subsequent industry denials and changes in procedure, the metaphors used in the American funeral continue to be those of sleep, transition to other worlds, and eternal life, rather than death. Much of this denial, of course, stems from religious traditions which tend to treat death as a kind of minor nuisance on the way to glory.<sup>10</sup> And there is little in the funeral to contradict such ideas. “Mr. Jones” reposes in a “Slumber room” in casket whose mattress rivals the posturepedics designed for those of us still alive but suffering from back trouble. The titles and words of songs frequently sung at a funeral (“Death is only a Dream,” “Asleep in Jesus,” “It is not Death to Die”) pointedly do not say “death has occurred, I am sorry” but rather “he or she is still with us.”

In addition to this socially established denial of death, funerals serve as morality plays which weave social commentary into the rituals. Eulogies to the deceased will ordinarily contain references to his community service, character, righteousness, and approved identities. Certain behaviors are validated as noble, while others are by implication denounced. The audience is thereby advised to take note, for they too will someday be reviewed in such a public ceremony. One comforting aspect of such eulogizing, however, is that the deceased is usually given the benefit of the doubt; the eulogizer selectively parades his various careers. The dramaturgical necessity of such selectivity, of course, makes for considerable juggling of the available facts of a person's life, especially when dealing with those whose lives have been less than sterling. When mentioned at all, such elements will almost always be placed in contexts that were not used while he was alive: recalcitrance being redefined as “independence,” or purposelessness as a “restless spirit,” for example. Such rhetoric underscores Burke's (1937) contention that all dramas are essentially morality plays with the themes of deviance and respectability playing large parts.

## Conclusion

The dramaturgical metaphor we have employed in this chapter offers an alternative way of viewing the interactions and relationships comprising the American funeral. Death and dying obviously involve ritual and ceremony; without these much of what we take for granted among the living such as respect, character, and substance would likely vanish. “Ritual is then theatre: an assured way of communicating significations . . . funerals are dramas of death and living with death—they involve transformation of identify for the living and the dead” (Perinbanayagam, 1974:538). Nevertheless, because social relationships involve ritual communication, much of it of a covert nature, care must be taken that performances be given “in character.” For the more the audience wishes to see

deeper than the appearances of a given situation, the more they wind up concentrating on those very appearances (Goffman, 1959:249).

We also wish to enter a *caveat* regarding our use of a metaphorical argument. To say that funerals may be seen as performances does not suggest that they *are* performances. Rather, the dramaturgical metaphor offers an interpretive framework that serves to illuminate what is often obscured by those perspectives that center on either the structural apparatus of the society in which death occurs or on the alleged psychological characteristics and states of the participants. Dramas can, of course, be viewed as expressions of either psychological or social determinants, but what we have suggested here is that there may be value in viewing them as fundamental realities in their own right. For no matter how standard the ritual expression becomes, each drama must still be brought off on its own with all the attendant opportunities for error. It is this possibility that makes our dramas at once precarious and satisfying.

### Notes

1. Goffman's work which seems to us to be most influenced by a dramaturgical conception of social life includes: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959); *Behavior in Public Places* (1962); his essays on "role-distance" in *Encounters* (1963); and his numerous writings on mental disorder, especially *Asylums* (1961); *Interaction Ritual* (1967); and "The Insanity of Place," appendix to *Relations in Public* (1970). We take the term dramaturgy from Kenneth Burke's work, cited below, from Manford Kuhn's references to the dramaturgical school in his 1964 article, "Major trends in symbolic interactionist theory in the past 25 years" and, of course, the association with the work of Goffman. There exist several unpublished pieces on dramaturgy, an excellent comparison between dramaturgy and traditional theories of collective behavior by Dennis Brissett, "Collective Behavior: The Sense of a Rubric" (1968); and a recent book by Elizabeth Burns entitled *Theatricality* (1972). The first systematic attempt to present the dramaturgical framework is in Dennis Brissett and Charles Edgley, *Life as Theater: A Dramaturgical Sourcebook* (1975). Other works which refer to the dramaturgical model seem to use the term ambiguously, or, like Sheldon Messinger's "Life as Theater: Some Notes on the Dramaturgic Approach to Social Reality" (1962), restrict themselves almost entirely to an examination of the theatrical analogy. (In Messinger's case from the standpoint of phenomenological assumptions.)

2. We take dramaturgy to be a metaphor, perspective, and strategy for viewing life, not as life itself.

3. Burke's dramatic view of social relationships has been developed most comprehensively in three books: *Permanence and Change* (1937); *A Grammar of Motives* (1945); and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950). Dramaturgy's concern with the role that audience reactions play in producing meaningful behavior has come to be a major part of what is widely known (often derisively) as "labeling theory," the major applications of which have been in the area of deviance and mental disorder. See Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders* (1963); Edwin Schur, *Labeling Deviant Behavior* (1971); and David Matza, *Becoming Deviant* (1969).

4. Robert Habenstein (1955, 1963) has extensively researched funeral customs the world over and has documented a sociological and historical account of the American undertaker, mortician, or funeral director. He describes and analyzes funerals in different regions of the United States, funeral practices of various ethnic groups, and the organizational and business aspects of the profession.

In his work, Habenstein (1955) suggests that the funeral is comparable in many ways to a performance on stage. This research extends and exploits Habenstein's suggestion of a theatrical or

dramaturgical metaphor to understand the ritualized behavior of the American funeral by viewing both the front- and backstage preparations and performances.

5. Although Goffman in his initial discussion of role distance (1961b) illustrates the use of the term through examples of frontstage behavior employed to communicate detachment, a comprehensive reading of Goffman's work shows that role-distance can have reference to management of impressions or self whether it be a front- or backstage performance. What is a backstage to one audience may be a frontstage to another. In the case of the embalmer, his use of impersonal language about bodies and treating a corpse as a body rather than a person is a process of role-distance revealing detachment from the role he is performing or from the loathsomeness ordinarily attributed to certain aspects of the role of embalmer by his audience. Even in the embalming room, the embalmer is on-stage whether the audience be the other assistants or he be his own audience, the objective "me" in Mead's (1934) use of the idea.

6. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959:106-140) for an elaboration of the notion of back regions.

7. The most difficult part of this research, predictably, was gaining access to the backstage regions of mortuaries. Funeral directors, like other performers, are very protective of their back regions and are reluctant to permit anyone to observe the procedures carried out there.

8. We are indebted to Joan Emerson (1970) for the notion of counter-realities.

9. Everett C. Hughes has shown how "mistakes at work" are an inevitable, and therefore routinized, part of any world of work.

10. This point as well as a number of related ones are discussed skillfully in Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (1974).

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