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“Get the Tables:” A Metatheatrical Analysis of Professional Wrestling

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Abstract

The "Dudley Boyz" stand in the middle of the ring, their muscles throbbing, sweat beading on their hulking foreheads. Their opponent lays in the center of the ring, crumpled by their brute strength. In spite of the rules, the brothers scream out once again "get the tables." The crowd explodes, chanting and reeling at their favorite wrestlers, ready to smash another victim with the cold, hard wood and metal. Though they've seen the boys break these rules many times before, the thrill never ceases. Wrestling is characterized by its scripted fights, use of ridiculous props (ranging from tennis rackets to barbed wire), and, most of all, its crowd participation. A notable match is between "Invisible Man" and "Invisible Stan" in which an entire audience watched a referee flop around the ring, shouting as he announced calls for people that did not exist. Here, metatheatricality is born as the lines between what is real and play are blurred, and as the audience volunteers so much trust within the script that they themselves create the play through a self-awareness that is present not only in their attitudes, but the attitudes of the performers they're watching. This essay investigates not only wrestling as metatheatre, but the culture that sustains it.

Keywords: Metatheatre, Performance Theory, Wrestling, Suspension of Disbelief, Anti-Art, Deep Play, Performative Fighting

I never knew about the Dudley Boyz until I started dating a man who was obsessed with professional wrestling. I remember the day Ian sat me on the couch to watch a fight in which two men beat each other mercilessly with clubs wrapped in (real) barbed wire. I gaped in horror at the screen as these titans hurled objects at each other, sweat and blood mingling on their marred bodies. I asked him how this was allowed, and he explained to me that it initially wasn't. The Dudley Boyz pioneered the event with their iconic catchphrase "get the tables," written to insist that, in spite of the rule that no props were to be used in the ring, they would use wooden folding tables to throw or smash onto people in a variety of unspeakable ways. I was aghast. I had no idea that wrestlers were going to these extents in the name of written fights. In fact, I didn't know anything about professional wrestling. Upon being introduced into professional wrestling, one can find themselves overwhelmed. In the mere brutalization of opponents in the ring, it becomes easy to write wrestlers off as modern-day gladiators and their audience a turbulent sea of belligerent hillbillies. It wasn't until I was introduced to wrestling that I began to understand it, not for the fake fighting and the roaring crowds, but for the theatre and genuine art that it produces.

Wrestling has been difficult to classify as a sport because it is scripted. There is a winner and a loser before the competitors even fight. How, then, can we classify a predetermined competition as a sport? In many ways, professional wrestling is closer to ballet than it is to basketball. There are costumes, props, and incredible athleticism involved in the performance and production of both mediums. Both utilize scripted movement to tell a story that is predicated on the ultimate confrontation between the protagonist and the antagonist. (These are predetermined by the writers for both as well; the actions of a "bad guy" in wrestling are decided by writers who encourage the crowd to feel one way or the other about them through plot

manipulation.) So, then what is the difference between ballet and wrestling? What is the difference in how they are produced?

I saw Joyce Carol Oates speak at a conference at the beginning of 2020, not on wrestling, but on boxing. Boxing and wrestling are far apart in their practice and performance. (The theatricality of wrestling speaks for itself) I believe, however, that Oates's comments on boxing were much in the same spirit of wrestling. Oates noted that boxing and fighting are not the same. One may lead into the other, but the two are not mutually exclusive (Oates) So, then, what is the difference between boxing and fighting? Oates argued that there is play in boxing, a deep play. The nature of boxing is still for sport, whereas fighting is something much more primal and dependent on instinct (Oates). Just as in a play, the two players in boxing must not only engage with but listen to the body language and action of their partner. In many ways, this may be comparable to dance. As the ballerina extends her leg into arabesque, her partner knows to lift her delicate frame. As the boxer swings a right hook, his partner should be able to read his body to dodge.

In Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*, Wright recounts an instance in which his white boss and other white superiors attempted to goad him into fighting another black man. The two men found out they were being pitted against each other but decided to fool the white men and pretend to fight in order to get money. Wright recounts how their play fight quickly transforms into something much more sinister:

Harrison shot a blow to my nose. The fight was on, was against our will. I felt trapped and ashamed. I lashed out even harder, and the harder I fought the harder Harrison fought. Our plans and promises now meant nothing. We fought four hard rounds, stabbing, slugging, grunting, spitting, cursing, crying, bleeding. The shame and anger we

felt for having allowed ourselves to be duped crept into our blows and blood ran into our eyes, half blinding us (Wright 243).

Here, we watch as the pact between these two men falls apart. They begin in jest, Wright notes throwing light punches at one another, but once he catches the blow to the nose, their play unravels into a sick primordial instinct to *fight*. So, then, what does this distinction between play and fight have to do with wrestling? While often perceived as a brutal and bloody *fight*, professional wrestling is actually much more similar to Wright's intentions than one would think.

Wrestling is prewritten fake fighting. I don't believe anyone would dispute that. In this sense, Wright sets out with the intention to engage in this art of deep play, which is the same type of performance that Oates finds in her observations of boxing. All these forms of fighting for sport engage in an art of movement, but wrestling is set apart with the added element of plot, costume, lighting, props, and character. Whereas, in a sport like boxing, who will come out on top is unknown, and, while fighters have their own personal brands, there isn't the white hat, black hat tradition that wrestling supposes, allowing their audiences to cheer for the good guys and boo for the bad. As audience members, we must be careful to distinguish between fight and play; if we do that, the realization of wrestling as an artform is quick to reveal itself.

For me, the realization happened when I begrudgingly sat down to watch yet another match on the same grey woven couch in the upstairs loft, a prime wrestling-watching spot for its giant television and high-tech sound bar. The match clicked on; I watched as the wrestlers "Invisible Man" and "Invisible Stan" were introduced into the ring. I quickly realized that their names were fitting, as they were anything but real. There simply was no one there. The match I was watching had no props, no smashing, no sweat, no blood, no costumes, not even real people. It merely consisted of one referee flopping around in the middle of an empty ring, a roaring

crowd pulsating at the visual and auditory signals, telling them which “fighter” landed what blow and when. Eventually, Invisible Man and Invisible Stan fought their way onto the top of a balcony, and as their invisible bodies cascaded over the partition and into the ground floor crowd, audience members toppled over at the weight of the imaginary bodies.

So, then, where does this match fit into the world of Wright and Oates? How does the art of deep play happen when there are not physical fighters to engage in play? This is where the theatre of wrestling is transformed into metatheatre. Wrestling, by design, is at an intersection between theatre and sport. While both boxing and wrestling engage in deep play and the art of movement rather than instinctual fighting, wrestling is elevated even beyond that, including elements of music, costume, and character. Though we have established that all forms of sport fighting are beyond fighting for survival or emotion, wrestling is the only one of these that can be pushed into the realm of literal theatre. If wrestling is art, then the Invisible Man/ Invisible Stan match is Dadaistic in form, the basis of the anti-art movement. By posing two imaginary fighters in the ring, the level of performance is not only elevated, but the awareness that wrestling *is a type of performance* that is written and predetermined becomes the obvious keystone in watching the match.

When discussing wrestling in terms of play (the way Oates and Wright demonstrate) we can easily pick through and decipher the meaning of movement as theatre and art. In examining what the fighters are doing, we can decipher an artisanal language unique to wrestling. The decoding of play establishes wrestling as theatre, but the decoding of audience participation reveals it as metatheatre. As referenced above, the anti-art movement posed the question “what is art?” I would argue that the match between Invisible Man and Invisible Stan does much of the same, though in a more relegated artform. Here, the question of “what is wrestling” is posed. It is

impossible to perform any other type of combative sport with no opponents. The play that has been so integral to understanding how to interpret combative sport is now absent, and, yet, the sport is still being performed. So, then, if wrestling doesn't require combatants to be created, then what is required of it? The answer to this is in the audience.

C.W.E Bigsby, in an article on metatheatre, says “with theatre the stage remains clearly in evidence and the audience recognises its own role in the events” (188). Wrestling provides a unique set of circumstances that lends itself to Bigsby's requirements for metatheatrical practice. The “ring” of wrestling acts as a stage, resembling the practice of performing theatre in the round (a notoriously revealing type of theatre). When the Dudley Boyz want to “get the tables,” we all see where the tables come from, as they are stolen from commentators or ripped from beneath the ring. The ropes around the ring act as an established barrier between audience and performers, but as wrestlers bound out of the ropes, into the audience, off of platforms, and into commentator's faces, this physical barrier is eliminated, exposing the performers to the audience. Naturally, wrestling is quite revealing, as there is no way to hide where props come from, where bodies are thrown, how punches and kicks land, etc.

Suspension of disbelief becomes a burden put on an audience who are already asked to accept that fights are prewritten, and storylines injected with caricatures of the people performing. The temperament, however, of both groups going into performances of both theatre and wrestling could be seen as quite similar. Both wrestling audiences and theatrical audiences approach their respective arenas with the knowledge that what they are about to see is a performance. The difference is that when the theatre-goer watches a (non-meta) play, they forget that what they are watching is performance. Meanwhile, everything in wrestling (by design) makes it impossible to forget that you are watching a performance. Meta pieces make strides to

reveal to their audience that they are watching a play, whether that be in the form of direct audience address (as in Aaron Posner's *Stupid Fucking Bird*) or by the use of title cards revealing what will happen at the end of the scene (as used by Bertolt Brecht in *Mother Courage and Her Children*). The metatheatricality of a piece is not purely contingent upon the nature of how it is written or performed, but also reliant on its audience. For a piece of theatre to be meta, it must be self-aware and self-reflective, and the intention of metatheatre is to draw attention to its own creation and level of production.

Turning back to *Invisible Man* and *Invisible Stan*, the crowd is more than fully participant in the creation of the fight. As the announcer claims that the two fighters have toppled into the audience, the crowd's willing participation to fall to the floor as if they had been hit by the brawling duo suggests more than meets the eye. For one, they are actively admitting that this "fight" is performative in nature. Here, the audience takes the role of performer into their own hands, actively participating in the performance that they are watching.

To say, however, that there are no active performers beyond the audience in this invisible brawl would be wholly incorrect and unfair. The announcer and the referee work in conjunction to clue the audience in to what is happening in the ring and amongst themselves, much as the actors in a play guide their audience to understand the performance they are attending. As the audience participates with the announcer and the referee, they are acknowledging that this is a level of theatre and so the suspension of disbelief is broken. Wrestling creates an environment in which metatheatre can be very obviously produced, and because of this, there is ample room for examination of the communicative techniques exchanged between performer and audience member. The referee and the announcer must communicate with each other to create the illusion of play, but the audience's reactions to the opponents and their imagined moves are equally

important for creating that illusion. Most notably, is the instance in which the fighters “fell” into the crowd. This move in particular is so significant because it is the only point at which the audience comes into physical contact with the fake performers. Just as real performers jumping into the crowd blurs the line between performer and observer, participation in imagined circumstance blurs the line between audience and performer, so much so that it may be argued that the entire audience becomes performers themselves. Normally, in a theatrical context, this would be the opposite of the desired effect, but because wrestling is nonexistent without its audience, the break in the suspension of disbelief is necessary for this fight to happen. Not only are they acknowledging the performance, but they are actively participating in the creation of it.

For metatheatre to work, the audience has to accept and actively acknowledge that what they are watching is not reality, but performance. Typically, the goal of theatre is to create a world in which the audience is coerced to suspend their disbelief, what happens on the stage is inescapable, it is real. In metatheatre, the objective is the opposite. In order to be self-aware, the work must also be overtly performance, making no point to suspend the audience’s disbelief. As many artforms may be meta, it is sometimes enough for a text on its own to be self-aware, but because of theatre’s intimate and personal setting, the audience must be active in the creation of metatheatre. Relationships between performers and their audiences *must* be examined in order to understand how performance works. Just as a writer and a reader must collaborate to create a story, the performer and the audience must interact to create theatre. Wrestling is an excellent example of this interplay, and in examining how wrestling works as performance, we can understand how theatre is created in other “more sophisticated” spaces as well. The mere fact that there are no fighters in the ring for the “invisible” match and wrestling is still being

produced reaffirms that the audience is the keystone in the creation of wrestling, not the performers.

The example of Invisible Man and Invisible Stan is obvious metatheatre because suspension of disbelief evaporates at the idea that two invisible men may be fighting each other. It may be arguable that the audience is suspending their disbelief for the duo, but their active participation in the fight makes them culpable in its performance. This is a great example because the fact that the performers are imaginary makes the audience's acknowledgement that the sport is performative overt, but these elements of metatheatre are obvious in many (non-invisible) matches. Turning back to the Dudley Boyz and their catchphrase "get the tables" we see the use of props contributing to wrestling's metatheatrical practices. Props are one of the largest reasons that wrestling is set closer to dance than to sport. In the practice of utilizing prop, the writers, creators, and performers of the sport are showing to their audience an intent to entertain rather than compete. The practice of utilizing props and costumes becomes integral to how wrestlers are viewed and the storylines that writers create.

In order to properly examine how the use of props contributes to a culture of meta performance, it is important to return to the idea that the stage must be obvious to the viewer. The practice of clearly removing objects from beneath the ring or in obvious hiding spots seems Brechtian in nature. Bertolt Brecht wanted to make his audience aware of the performance. In order to do this, he would often have actors roam about the stage in costume before performance and during intermission, the idea being that this would remove the illusion of performance. His practices show how facades may be broken simply through movement and production detail. Brecht is constantly reminding the viewer that they are not watching anything real, but rather a performance. The revealing nature and clear staging of wrestling produces the same effect. The

fighters cannot hide anything from their audience, and the raw nature of production breaks the fourth wall.

Any other type of combative sport—boxing, (the other) wrestling, MMA—there aren't props. Pulling a table from underneath the ring and being allowed the time to set up a ladder so you can climb to the top and slam someone through it is a highly performative act. If nothing else, it is further proof that the culture surrounding wrestling is what sustains it, not the athletics. But why is it so important to acknowledge and examine wrestling as metatheatre? The more we can glean from performances of any kind, the more we can use those interactions as a meaningful way to hold a mirror to ourselves, what we value, who we are.

The point of metatheatre has always been to hold a mirror to the human condition and examine it through the lens of self-awareness. Operating under the assumption that wrestling is metatheatrical and perpetuated by the culture that surrounds it, one is forced to ask themselves the question of what that means for our values and what we desire in human interaction. Often, it is easy to write off or cast away forms of entertainment because they are not seen as “sophisticated” and so we assume nothing may be learned from them. Wrestling, though, is a prime example that we have so much to learn from different artforms that have not been considered as such. From wrestling, we can learn a new type of performance and physical intimacy that is otherwise inaccessible to performance theorists and artists. Invisible or not, wrestling fans have proven themselves to be the ultimate creators of their artform, proving that it is not the audience's willingness to suspend their disbelief that makes wrestling such an interesting amalgamation of sport and play; it is their willingness to accept the performance.

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