

# The Performative Structure of Social Action: Theatre as a Model Field of Social Order

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**Abstract:** This study reconceptualizes theatrical performance not as a representation of social reality but as a model field for understanding the structural mechanisms of social action. Drawing on social interaction theory and theories of performativity, the article argues that social order is not sustained solely by abstract institutional structures but is produced through ongoing acts of presentation. A tri-layer framework of performative social action is proposed, consisting of role presentation, norm presentation, and visibility presentation. At the level of role presentation, identities are constituted through the continuous enactment of recognizable behavioral patterns. At the level of norm presentation, social rules operate through patterned modes of action rather than exclusively through cognitive adherence. At the level of visibility presentation, social interaction unfolds within a structure of observation in which anticipated evaluation shapes self-regulation. Theatre, as a highly condensed and institutionalized environment of presentation, renders these otherwise dispersed mechanisms observable. By conceptualizing the stage as a structural model of social interaction, this study demonstrates how identity, normativity, and power relations are generated through visible practices. The framework positions theatre studies as a methodological resource for social theory and advances a performative understanding of the production of social order.

**Keywords:** performativity; social interaction; theatrical performance; social identity; normativity; visibility; social order

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## 1. Introduction

Human social life is not sustained solely by institutional arrangements, normative systems, or macro-structures; it also depends on individuals' ongoing acts of presentation within concrete interactional contexts. Social actors do not simply

possess fixed identities. Rather, through posture, speech, emotional expression, and spatial positioning, they continuously enact themselves in ways that enable social relations to be constituted and recognized. Social order, therefore, is not the automatic product of abstract rules but is concretized and stabilized through visible and

embodied practices of action. Society, in this sense, operates not only as an institutional system but also as an interactional field in which behavior is continuously staged.

However, social scientific research has long prioritized institutional structures, power relations, and value systems, while paying comparatively less attention to the mechanisms through which social behavior is produced as presentation. By contrast, theatrical performance represents a domain in which acts of presentation are concentrated and highly formalized. In the theatrical situation, role identity, modes of action, emotional expression, and spatial organization must all be realized in forms designed to be seen and interpreted. Theatre thus functions as a highly compressed model of social interaction. Rather than merely representing social reality, theatrical performance serves as a field in which the structural principles of social action become visible. Analyzing theatrical “presentation” therefore allows us to reconsider how social behavior is generated, regulated, and normalized under conditions of visibility.

In this sense, the present study does not treat theatre as an object of social representation but as an analytical model for understanding the mechanisms of social action. The central question is not how theatre depicts society, but how social behavior itself follows a performative structure of presentation. Social interaction is not a direct expression of internal intention; rather, it is organized and adjusted within frameworks of situational norms, anticipated expectations, and relations of observation (Goffman, 1959). From this perspective, performativity does not refer to artistic technique but to a generative mode of social action. As performativity theory suggests, identity is not an inner essence that is expressed, but is continuously constituted through repeated social acts (Butler, 1990). Because action is always oriented toward actual or potential observers, social behavior is inherently structured like a stage: actors manage impressions, follow patterned modes of conduct, and maintain recognizable role positions within normative frameworks (Goffman, 1967).

Theatrical performance, as a highly codified practice premised upon spectatorship, renders these mechanisms—often implicit in everyday life—concentrated and observable. On stage, identity, action, emotion, and spatial relations must all be realized in visible forms, creating a condensed interactional system. Theatre therefore functions not merely as a medium of social reflection but as a model field that reveals the structural logic of social action. By analyzing theatrical performativity, this article demonstrates how social order is produced and maintained through ongoing acts of presentation and argues that theatre studies can contribute to social theory by offering a mechanism-based perspective on social behavior.

The aim of this study is not to propose a new definition of performativity, nor to revise existing interactional or performativity theories. Rather, it seeks to specify the structural level at which presentation operates in the generation of social action. By treating role enactment, normative organization, and visibility as analytically distinct yet interrelated dimensions, the article reconfigures presentation from a descriptive feature of interaction into a set of observable mechanisms through which social order is practically accomplished.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Presentation and Social Action in Social Science

In social science, understandings of social behavior have moved beyond viewing action as the direct externalization of individual psychological motives. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that the meaning of action is not pre-given but is produced and confirmed through interaction and situational interpretation (Blumer, 1969). Social action thus exhibits strong contextual dependency and relational orientation: individual behavior unfolds under the constraints of others’ responses, social expectations, and interactional rules, and its meaning can only be established within chains of interaction.

Research on interaction order further suggests that social order is not the automatic outcome of abstract norms but depends on actors' visible implementation and reproduction of norms in specific situations. Studies of interaction rituals argue that social bonds and group solidarity are reinforced through repeated interactional procedures, in which norms are embedded in rhythms of action, emotional coordination, and bodily collaboration rather than existing as external principles (Collins, 2004). This line of research provides a micro-mechanistic view of order: order is not simply prescribed but actively accomplished.

Within this theoretical shift, "presentation" has increasingly been recognized as a key dimension of social behavior. Individuals in social settings are not only performing tasks but also making their behavior intelligible, evaluable, and responsive to others. Visibility involves not only speech but also posture, emotional expression, and spatial positioning. Social action therefore displays clear performative features: actors manage impressions, adjust behavioral styles, and modulate self-presentation according to situational expectations (Goffman, 1959). Social order, in this sense, is not a static structure but an interactional outcome maintained through ongoing practices of presentation.

Yet despite recognizing the presentational dimension of behavior, social theory often remains at an abstract level and lacks a structured analytical entry point for observing how presentational mechanisms operate in concrete settings. In this context, the highly codified presentational structure of theatrical performance offers a model environment for systematically examining the mechanisms of social action.

## 2.2 Performativity in Theatre Studies

In theatre studies, performativity has long been a core concept for understanding stage practice, though early discussions focused primarily on aesthetic form and acting technique. Traditions of actor training emphasized how performers use bodily discipline, vocal control, and movement

design to construct roles, viewing performance as both technical labor and creative activity (Stanislavski, 1936). Within this framework, performativity referred mainly to the expressive capacity of stage action—how emotions, character, and narrative meaning are made visible. The body functioned as a medium of expression, and the stage as a symbolic space of meaning production.

Late twentieth-century theoretical shifts placed performance within broader cultural contexts. Scholars began to examine performance as cultural practice involved in identity construction, memory production, and symbolic systems, understanding performance as an event-producing mode of action (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Performance studies further blurred the boundary between theatre and everyday life, extending the concept of performance to rituals, festivals, sports, and political events, thereby expanding its social scope at the conceptual level (Schechner, 2003).

Nevertheless, even within these interdisciplinary approaches, theatrical performance has often been treated as a vehicle of social representation or symbolic practice. Its social significance has been discussed mainly at the level of representational content rather than as a model environment of social action structure. Many studies emphasize what theatre presents rather than how presentation itself operates—how action is organized into recognizable social behavior through rules, roles, and relations of spectatorship.

Audience studies exhibit a similar tendency. Although recognizing the centrality of spectatorship in theatrical experience, such research often focuses on aesthetic reception and participation rather than systematically linking the structure of "being-watched action" to mechanisms of self-regulation in everyday social interaction (Bennett, 1997). In fact, actors on stage continuously perform under the potential gaze of spectators, and this orientation toward observation closely parallels impression management, role maintenance, and normative conduct in social interaction (Goffman, 1967).

### 2.3 Research Gap: The Missing Mechanism of Social Performativity

Across both social science and theatre studies, performativity has become a key concept, yet its application reveals a structural gap. Social behavior theories acknowledge the situational and relational nature of action and recognize that social order depends on visible forms of behavior. However, such discussions often remain abstract and lack a concrete model environment for analyzing how behavior becomes social action through presentation.

Conversely, theatre studies offer a rich tradition of analyzing presentational practices but tend to focus on artistic expression, aesthetic experience, or symbolic meaning production. Stage performance is often discussed in terms of thematic or narrative content rather than as a paradigm of action structure. Even when performance studies adopt the proposition that “society is like performance,” the discussion frequently remains metaphorical and does not fully explain why social action itself exhibits a structure homologous to theatrical performance (Schechner, 2003).

This dual tendency produces a key gap: social theory lacks a model field for analyzing presentational mechanisms, while theatre studies lack a mechanistic explanation of presentation as a structure of social action. As a result, performativity becomes a widely used but under-structured cross-disciplinary concept.

It is precisely at this juncture that this study proposes to conceptualize the theatrical stage as a model field of social action mechanisms. The stage is not a representation of society but a highly compressed and rule-explicit interactional system, in which role allocation, behavioral patterns, spatial organization, and spectatorship constitute core structural elements of social action. By treating theatrical presentation as a structural model rather than an artistic metaphor, this study seeks to bridge theatre studies and social behavior theory and to

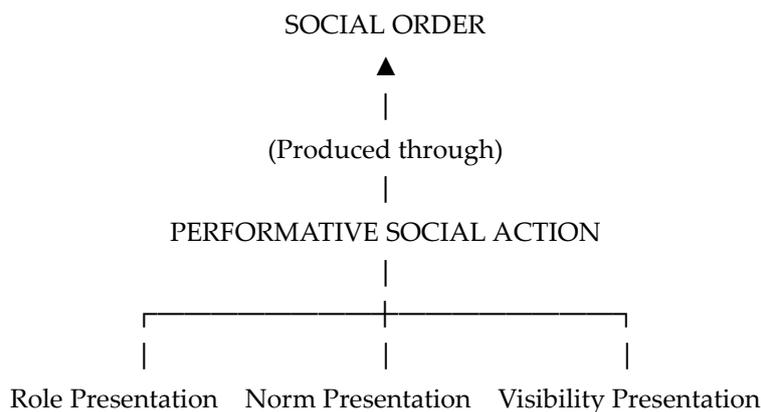
reveal how social action is generated, regulated, and stabilized under conditions of being seen. When theatrical performance is approached merely as metaphor or representation, visibility remains an illustrative theme rather than an analytical condition of action. Conceptualizing the stage as a model field, by contrast, makes it possible to examine how being seen functions as a constitutive constraint in the organization of social behavior.

### 3. Theoretical Framework: Performativity as a Structure of Social Action

To bridge the gap between theatre studies and social behavior theory at the level of presentational mechanisms, this study proposes that performativity is not an artistic mode of expression but a structural condition for the generation of social action. Social behavior becomes recognizable, evaluable, and incorporable into order not through internal intention but through the enactment of action in visible form. Actions must be carried out in ways that can be perceived, interpreted, and responded to by others. Social order, therefore, is not directly sustained by abstract norms but is produced and stabilized through ongoing acts of presentation.

On this basis, the presentational structure of social action can be summarized in three interrelated dimensions: role presentation, norm presentation, and visibility presentation. These mechanisms are not exclusive to the stage but are structural elements of social behavior more generally. Theatre has theoretical value precisely because it condenses, renders explicit, and institutionalizes these mechanisms, providing an observable model environment of social action structure.

The tri-layer structure outlined above can be summarized in a conceptual model (see Figure 1), which illustrates how social order is produced through role enactment, the behavioralization of norms, and the regulation of action under conditions of visibility.



**Figure 1.** The Performative Structure of Social Action: Theatre as a Model Field.

### Figure Description

Figure 1 illustrates the performative structure of social action proposed in this study. The model conceptualizes social order as an outcome of three interrelated layers of performative mechanisms: role presentation, norm presentation, and visibility presentation. At the first level, social identities are constituted through the continuous enactment of recognizable behavioral patterns rather than through essential attributes. At the second level, social norms are not external constraints but are embedded in patterned modes of action, becoming operative through embodied practices. At the third level, social interaction unfolds within a structure of visibility, where the anticipation of being observed shapes self-regulation and behavioral adjustment. Theatre serves as a model field in which these otherwise dispersed and implicit mechanisms are institutionally condensed and rendered observable. By situating theatrical performance within this tri-layer structure, the model demonstrates how social order is generated through the ongoing presentation of action rather than through abstract institutional imposition.

### 3.1 Role Presentation: The Enactment of Identity

In contemporary social theory, identity is no longer understood as an inner essence of the individual but as a relational product continuously confirmed and maintained in interaction. Individuals are recognized as “teachers,” “leaders,” or “friends” not because they possess stable attributes, but because their behavior persistently conforms to expectations

associated with particular roles. The stability of identity therefore depends on the repeatability and recognizability of forms of action rather than on psychological authenticity (Goffman, 1959).

This implies that social identity exists through an ongoing process of role enactment. Through styles of speech, bodily posture, emotional management, and interactional conduct, individuals align their behavior with role patterns so that others can interpret who they are within interaction. Identity thus acquires a distinctly performative character: it is not expressed but generated through action. Without the maintenance of role-appropriate behavior at the level of action, interaction would struggle to sustain coherent meaning structures.

The theatrical stage institutionalizes and makes visible this mechanism. Stage roles have no psychological “truth” that guarantees their existence; they are sustained entirely through the continuous enactment of visible action. Role identity is not established by declaration but is gradually constituted through rhythms of movement, patterns of speech, and calibrated emotional intensity. Audience recognition of a character does not depend on an assumed inner essence but on whether behavior conforms to a recognizable role logic. The stage therefore reveals a fundamental structure of social identity: identity is an effect of action rather than a precondition of it.

### 3.2 Norm Presentation: The Behavioralization of Social Rules

Social norms are often conceived as external rule systems that regulate behavior. From the perspective of action, however, norms do not operate in abstract form but are implemented through behavioral patterns. In concrete situations, individuals do not simply “follow rules”; they select modes of conduct deemed appropriate so that their actions align with situational expectations. Norms thus reside in styles of behavior, interactional rhythms, emotional regulation, and bodily positioning rather than solely in consciousness or institutional texts (Collins, 2004).

From the viewpoint of interaction order, the stability of social rules relies not primarily on external enforcement but on continuous self-adjustment in micro-situations. Actors constantly calibrate their conduct in response to others’ reactions to avoid impropriety or transgression. Such subtle behavioral adjustments constitute the core mechanism through which norms are reproduced. Norms are not maintained through explicit declaration but are “performed” through countless interactional details.

The theatrical stage similarly operates through highly codified behavioral rules. The timing of action, spatial positioning, emotional intensity, and vocal delivery are all subject to structured constraints. Deviations are immediately perceived as disruptions of the interactional frame. The explicitness of stage conventions reveals a sociological insight: rules are not merely external constraints on action but conditions that render action intelligible.

### 3.3 Visibility Presentation: Observation and the Regulation of Action

Social action is never produced in a vacuum. Behavior is always oriented toward the presence, potential evaluation, and consequences of others, giving social interaction an intrinsic structure of visibility. Actors are not observed only after acting; they act under the condition of already being

observable. This structure gives social behavior a continuous character of self-monitoring, as individuals anticipate others’ interpretations and adjust conduct accordingly (Goffman, 1967).

Visibility is not merely a perceptual process but a structural force. While this analysis remains grounded in an interactional understanding of action coordination, the visibility dimension also indicates the point at which interactional regulation intersects with broader mechanisms of discipline, as anticipated observation begins to organize conduct beyond immediate situational exchange. Behavioral styles vary according to anticipated audiences: public settings emphasize normativity, intimate contexts permit familiarity, and hierarchical relations shape displays of authority or compliance. Action is thus organized under conditions of being seen, and social order depends upon this ongoing display-based regulation. As analyses of modern power have shown, visibility functions as a mechanism of social control, structuring how individuals conduct themselves (Foucault, 1977).

The theatrical stage institutionalizes this visibility mechanism in the form of spectatorship. Every action performed by actors unfolds under the gaze of the audience and is organized around the question of how it will be seen. The stage therefore demonstrates that action acquires social meaning because it occurs within a structure of visibility. Theatre condenses and makes explicit a condition that is pervasive yet often unnoticed in everyday social interaction.

## 4. The Stage as a Model Field of Social Behavior

If social life itself is structured by presentation, the distinctiveness of the theatrical stage does not lie in its resemblance to society, but in its institutionalized condensation and explicitness of presentational mechanisms. In everyday life, role construction, normative compliance, and relations of observation are dispersed across situations and often remain implicit. The stage, by contrast, organizes these mechanisms within bounded space, limited time, and structured rules of conduct, intensifying their visibility in a controllable environment. The stage is

therefore not a miniature of society but a revealing device for the structure of social action.

First, the stage extracts role mechanisms from the fluidity of everyday interaction and stabilizes them. In daily life, identities shift across contexts, and role boundaries are flexible. In theatre, however, role allocation is formalized, and actors must sustain role coherence throughout the performance. This institutional continuity of role makes visible how identity depends on the persistence of action. For example, in rehearsal situations, when an actor momentarily steps out of character and speaks as themselves, interactional rhythm often falters, requiring others to prompt a return to the role to restore coherence. Such moments illustrate that a role is not a psychological state but an action position necessary for maintaining the interactional frame. The stage thus magnifies the logic of identity construction: identity exists in the continuity of behavior rather than in internal attributes.

Second, the stage renders explicit the behavioralization of norms through performance conventions. In everyday settings, rules often operate implicitly, and individuals rely on situational judgments of appropriateness. On stage, however, the timing of action, spatial coordination, vocal delivery, and emotional intensity are subject to explicit organization. An actor may deliver lines correctly yet still be judged “wrong” if rhythm, movement timing, or emotional calibration deviates from the established frame. This demonstrates that norms reside less in semantic content than in the organization of action. Stage conventions reveal a fundamental social mechanism: social rules are enacted through behavioral styles rather than merely upheld through cognitive recognition.

Most importantly, the stage institutionalizes the mechanism of visibility through spectatorship. In everyday life, relations of observation are mobile and asymmetrical; on stage, spatial arrangement and focal organization make “who watches” and “who is watched” structurally explicit. Actors’ conduct is continuously oriented toward audience interpretation and often adjusted in response to audience reactions. For instance, variations in

audience response—laughter, silence, emotional shifts—frequently lead actors to modulate pacing, pauses, or intensity. Such adjustments show that action unfolds under conditions of being seen, and that spectatorship directly participates in shaping performance. The stage thus makes visible a condition of social interaction that is ubiquitous yet often unnoticed: action is regulated within structures of visibility.

The stage, therefore, should not be understood as an artistic sphere isolated from reality but as a model environment that renders the mechanisms of social action structurally observable. Through analysis of stage structures, we can examine how identity is generated through action, how norms are enacted behaviorally, and how interaction is organized under conditions of visibility. Theatre’s theoretical value lies in providing a structured “laboratory” of presentation, where mechanisms dispersed in everyday life are concentrated and made analyzable.

## 5. Implications: What Theatre Reveals About Social Order

Conceptualizing the theatrical stage as a model field of social action mechanisms is not merely a way of assigning sociological relevance to theatre; it provides a new analytical perspective for understanding the production of social order itself. Interaction theory has already emphasized that social order is not an automatic outcome of abstract structures but is continuously maintained in situated interaction (Goffman, 1967; Collins, 2004). The tri-layer framework proposed here specifies how this maintenance operates: order is not simply the result of normative compliance but is generated through the visible enactment of roles, the behavioralization of rules, and the regulation of action under conditions of visibility.

First, this perspective reconfigures the understanding of identity stability. Identity is not treated as an intrinsic attribute of individuals but as an effect of action within interactional structures. Individuals become recognizable not because of inner essences but because their behavior

consistently aligns with role logics (Goffman, 1959). This aligns with performativity theory's view of identity as the outcome of repeated enactment (Butler, 1990), while extending it from the domain of identity politics to the broader question of social order. The theatrical stage, by making role construction explicit, demonstrates that identity is the institutionalization of action trajectories rather than a pre-social property.

Second, the framework reframes the operation of social norms. Interaction ritual theory has shown that rules are reproduced through practice rather than merely upheld through shared values (Collins, 2004). Stage performance renders this mechanism visible: conventions function as patterned modes of action that make interaction intelligible. Norms, therefore, do not simply constrain behavior from the outside but are embedded in the formal organization of conduct. This insight shifts the understanding of social order from institutional enforcement to practical accomplishment.

Third, the analysis of visibility highlights the role of observation in the generation of order. Visibility has been theorized as a mechanism of power that structures conduct (Foucault, 1977). The present framework shows that social order depends on individuals' anticipation of being seen and evaluated, which produces ongoing self-regulation. The theatrical configuration of spectatorship makes this dynamic explicit, revealing how the distribution of visibility contributes to the maintenance of hierarchy, normativity, and behavioral coordination.

Taken together, these implications suggest that social order can be understood as a continuously enacted system of action. Institutions, norms, and identities acquire reality only insofar as they are performed in visible practices. Theatre studies, in this sense, moves beyond cultural or artistic analysis and becomes a theoretical resource for examining the structural generation of social behavior. By using the stage as a model field, social science gains

access to mechanisms that remain obscured by their familiarity in everyday life.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has argued that theatrical performance should not be understood primarily as a representation of social reality but as a model field for analyzing the structure of social action. Through the examination of role presentation, norm presentation, and visibility presentation, the article has shown that social behavior itself exhibits a structure homologous to stage performance: identity is generated through action, norms are enacted through behavioral forms, and interaction is organized under conditions of visibility. Social order, therefore, is not the automatic operation of abstract institutions but the outcome of ongoing acts of presentation.

Within this framework, theatre becomes not merely a site of artistic expression but a methodological resource for understanding how social behavior is generated. The stage condenses and renders explicit interactional mechanisms that are dispersed in everyday life, making identity construction, normative maintenance, and the operation of spectatorship analytically visible. This perspective contributes a performative approach to social theory by centering action form rather than institutional structure.

The present study has been primarily theoretical. Its contribution lies in proposing a structural model that treats theatre as a revealing field of social mechanisms. Future research may explore how presentational structures operate across different cultural contexts or social domains, extending this framework into empirical analysis. Through this theoretical reorientation, theatre studies enters into dialogue with core concerns of social science, while social theory gains a new vantage point from which to observe the generative processes of social action.

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