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The Squared Circle Stage: Professional Wrestling and Historical Theatre Styles

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ABSTRACT

Though largely unknown to the public or the academic community, the aspects, technical stylings, and performance structure of professional wrestling have been firmly established throughout the late-20th and early 21st Century. The artistic medium has existed largely in its current form since the 1920's. The stalwart aspects of the performance are therefore the institutions of the subgenre and are therefore apt examples for comparative analysis with other styles of theatre. However, due to decades of myth and attempted public deception, professional wrestling is seldom culturally considered, studied, or respected as artistic performance. This study will provide comparative analyses of professional wrestling with the following three theatrical styles: Italy's Commedia Dell'arte, ancient Greek drama, and Japanese Kabuki theatre. Reliable primary and secondary sources will be consulted in the establishment of the norms of professional wrestling and the theatrical styles discussed herein. This the paper will also include a subsection dedicated to a competing theory of professional wrestling as demonstration martial arts or another performance field tentatively titled "performance sport." This article will demonstrate the amalgamation of performance styles already present in professional wrestling. Finally, this study will refute the persistent myth of professional wrestling as an exhibition sport and recontextualize it as theatrical performance.

Keywords: Performance theory, theatre, world drama, sports, American studies.

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1. The squared-circle stage: Professional wrestling and historical theatre styles

Professional wrestling is a style of performance that has undergone relatively little academic study, despite its commercial success and cultural impact. This study will conduct a comparative analysis of the elements of professional wrestling and those of long studied and well-respected forms of theater. As a control group, this study will also conduct a comparative analysis to a modern exhibition-style combat sport to determine whether professional wrestling is indeed a sport. This study demonstrated both that professional wrestling is a form or performance that amalgamates key elements present in several well-established forms of theater. The study also demonstrates that despite the shared aspects of professional wrestling and exhibition combat sport, it is solely a performance style in its current iteration.

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The uniqueness of this study is that it measures professional wrestling objectively in a comparative analysis of several forms of theater and the modern sport that is most similar to it in practice. While there is no real debate that professional wrestling is purely sport, it is argued by many within the professional wrestling industry that it is a form of sport analogous to exhibition combat sports demonstration, while despite the well-known scripted nature of the performance style, the theater community is hesitant to embrace professional wrestling. In the hinterlands between sport and theater, professional wrestling languishes, understudied, and therefore often misunderstood. This study fills that research gap by shedding light on the athletic theater of violent melodrama by properly contextualizing its relationship to other forms of performance and the undeniable barriers between it and pure sport.

The study introduces several historically studied and lauded theatrical styles and examines their shared performative, presentational and technical similarities with professional wrestling. The style of Commedia Dell'arte, Kabuki and Greek Drama were selected for several reasons. Firstly, the most significant among them being the use of theatrical elements shared with professional wrestling the contextualize the performance of the latter. Secondly, the selected forms of theater represent diverse standards of theatrical performance from different cultures, further contextualizing the global appeal of professional wrestling across cultural divides. Finally, while professional wrestling is rarely (if ever) counted readily among the fine arts, these traditional theatrical styles with whom it shares key elements are widely lauded. This contrast further demonstrates the importance of properly recontextualizing professional wrestling culturally. The study also addresses the competing hypothesis that professional wrestling is an as-yet unestablished exhibition sport with theatrical qualities, as shared with competitive martial arts demonstration.

The background literature used to conduct this analysis comes from a variety of reliable primary and secondary resources. Chief among them is the personal interview of an internationally acclaimed, world's champion professional wrestling named Jason "The Gift" Kincaid by the author. This gives direct insight into the craft and presentation of the elements of professional wrestling from a renowned source. Further, this paper uses podcast interviews from luminaries Jim Ross and Bruce Prichard who serve/served as top WWE/professional wrestling executives from the latter 20th Century to today as key sources to give further information about the production and evolution of professional wrestling. The study also uses a number of reliable secondary sources to provide the long-established norms of performance in Commedia Dell'Arte, Kabuki, and Greek Drama respectively. The study also provides the official competition rules for martial arts demonstration performance from a major American federation. Finally, the study uses a litany of reliable historians, journalists, and databases for general information and factual verification.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that the apparent gladiators stepping onto the hallow squared circle of the professional wrestling ring, are/were/will always be actors stepping upon the stage to play their part in a wildly popular niche drama. This paper contributes and provides evidence for professional wrestling to be categorized, studied, and analyzed properly in academic and cultural contexts. Firstly, the reality of professional wrestling as theater is contextualized in sections analyzing it alongside a diverse array of traditional theatrical styles. The myth of professional wrestling as any manner of pure sport is finally put to bed after nearly a century of unnecessarily stubborn debate by analyzing it in a section alongside exhibition martial arts, the most similar modern sport. Finally, the paper will address its final conclusions, along with any gaps or limitations in the research. A reference section is also provided.

2. Commedia Dell'arte

Of the existing genres of theatre that have been acknowledged by the theatrical and artistic community, commedia dell'arte is most similar in its practice and presentation to professional wrestling. Aside from the superficial similarities of being a touring performance or colorful costumes, the amount of crossover between professional wrestling and commedia dell'arte is staggering. The most prominent similarities are the uses of stock characters, the use of improvisation in performance along an established narrative arch, the audience-centric performance, and the use of exaggerated physical gestures in storytelling.

Commedia dell'arte emerged in Italy in the 16th century, and remained prominent until the 18th century (Hale, 2019). Also called "Italian Comedy," the style featured an engaging amalgamation of the most visibly stimulating aspects of other forms of theatre. These visual stimuli were presented alongside consistent audience engagement through partially improvised performance scenarios. These scenarios were interspersed with stock characters, and proven crowd-pleasing jokes, dialogues, or musical interludes. This style of theatre is viewed as widely influential in several genres. Masked actors playing an array of stock characters would, in a given performance, play out a rough scenario of events. The stock characters would improvise their way through the set segments of the story, creating replicative, while not duplicative performances.

There is tremendous overlap between the standards of commedia dell'arte and professional wrestling (Hale, 2019). The most important similarity is that both forms of performance are built around a pre-set narrative structure, though that structure can be filled in through improvisation alongside rehearsed segments that are proven crowd-pleasers. Traditional American wrestling operates very similarly with in-ring action, dialogue, and storylines. American professional wrestling matches generally follow along a fundamental 7-Phase structure: Introduction, Shine, Cut-Off, Heat/Hope Spots, Comeback, Finish, Exit), with a common 9-Act variant that adds additional back-and-forth surrounding the Cut-Off (Tate & Kincaid, 2022). However, there are dozens of well-known variations on this structure that are used in different matches and styles of match. For example, a tag-team match, or a scramble match will have a structure that wrestlers are familiar with. No two professional wrestling matches are the same, just as no two commedia dell'arte performances are identical. This structure has general plot points, filled in by improvisation was the norm of professional wrestling throughout most of its history. Improvising the specifics of a pre-structured story to most interest the crowd was a staple of professional wrestling and of commedia dell'arte. This allowed performers in both to gauge what the crowd was responding to and tailor the performance as it happened to be most engaging. Veteran wrestlers describe this as the biggest benefit of "calling a match on the fly" (Tate & Kincaid, 2022).

Of course, on occasion, the audience will need a rehearsed-and-ready segment of the narrative to keep their attention; in commedia dell'arte, this is called *lazzi* (Hale, 2019). In professional wrestling, *lazzi* is called a "spot." In commedia dell'arte, the performers might break into an entertaining song, a dance number, a rehearsed dialogue exchange, or a physical gag called *burle*. Whereas professional wrestlers will go through a series of cooperative maneuvers to re-engaging waning crowd interest or to pop a reaction. *Lazzi* and *burle* are important aspects of professional wrestling, as they often refer to physical comedy, or obscene gestures. Whether Ric Flair is having his tights unceremoniously yanked down mid-match, or if Stone Cold Steve Austin is brandishing his middle fingers to the crowd, the physical language of professional wrestling is overlapping with its 5-century-old Italian cousin. Physicality is essential in both theatrical styles, particularly because in commedia dell'arte, the performers wear masks, forcing them to use exaggerated movements. This is also true in professional wrestling, particularly in the *lucha libre* subgenre where masked wrestlers perform the most acrobatic style of wrestling. Masked wrestlers are compelled to perform exaggerated gestures with their body because they cannot sell maneuvers to the audience with just their facial expressions. Exaggerated gestures by unmasked wrestlers are also common, as wrestlers are encouraged to "play to the cheapest seats," meaning to perform gestures that can be seen from the very farthest away seats in the building.

This is also present in professional wrestling promos and interview segments, as they were mostly improvised along one or more general bullet points up until recent years (Thompson & Ross, 2019). In recent years and most notably in the WWE, both matches and promos have become more heavily scripted to avoid televised botches or poor performance, though this development has caused many fans to feel that the presentation feels unnatural. Other professional wrestling organizations allow the performers more freedom in their presentation, and though their broadcasts are sometimes checkered with perplexing rants and meandering conjecture, the unpredictability is engaging to the viewers. Commedia dell'arte used these loose plot structures for similar reasons. Importantly, both genres make wildly liberal use of direct address to the audience as a plot device and tactic to encourage audience engagement.

Another important aspect of both genres is the use of stock characters. These familiar styles of characters, tweaked and shaped for the performer, allow for audiences to easily understand the role this character will play (Hale, 2019). As with professional wrestling, the stock characters in commedia dell'arte

are seldom fully formed, three-dimensional. Ostensibly, both commedia dell'arte deal in caricature and gimmickry in their stock characters. Commedia dell'arte featured archetypes like the swaggering coward *Il Capitano*, the amorous childlike acrobat *Arlecchino*, the roguish villain *Brighella* who serves as *Arlecchino*'s today, the anti-hero *Scarramuccia*, or the handsome lover *Inamorato* and his beautiful would-be lover *La Ruffiana* (Hale, 2019). These are but a few of the many common stock characters within commedia dell'arte. While there are several direct correlations to professional wrestlers who present similar qualities to those archetypes (in the order of the above-mentioned archetypes, Seth Rollins, Shawn Michaels with Diesel, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, John Cena and Nikki Bella), the use of known stock characters familiar to audiences is also important to professional wrestling. Here are some examples of stock characters within professional wrestling: *monster heel* (Kane, Vader, Brock Lesnar), *white-meat babyface* (Hulk Hogan, John Cena, Bruno Sammartino, George Hackenschmidt), *underdog babyface* (Rey Mysterio, Brian Danielson, "Diamond" Dallas Page), *cool heel/tweener/anti-hero* (the nWo, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, Degeneration X), *narcissist heel* (Rick Rude, The Miz, Austin Theory), *wealthy heel* (Ted DiBiase, Ric Flair, Mr. McMahon), *odd couple* (William Regal & Tajiri, Booker T & Goldust, Owen Hart & Yokozuna, The Rock & Mankind), among many others.

Both genres rely on these tropes to fill the roles of familiar narratives. It should be noted that individual performers often bounce between characters and archetypes over time in both genres. Due to the episodic nature of professional wrestling, a character or performer may go through several iterations of their archetype over the years. For example, Brian Danielson would often be a scrappy underdog upon his debut with a promotion, then develop into a pompous heel later. Hulk Hogan was the most famous babyface in the world, until he became a sleazy anti-hero as his "Hollywood Hogan" alter ego. Mick Foley played a wild heel named Cactus Jack, before becoming a deranged monster heel named Mankind, then becoming a goofy ladies-man babyface called Dude Love, then a babyface version of himself who could slip into whichever of his personae best suited his situation in the narrative.

Costuming is also a major factor in both genres. The ornate harlequin costumes of commedia dell'arte are perhaps the most visually recognizable aspect of the genre, as are the skin-tight, brightly colored, often-barely-there, iconic costumes for professional wrestlers. While commedia dell'arte use of white make-up with the *Pedrolino* archetype gave birth to the modern clown, professional wrestlers like Sting, the Great Muta, and the Road Warriors used face paint to seem more interesting or more menacing as needed (Hale, 2019). Both genres make use of props, particularly as weapons, though commedia dell'arte much more often tended towards comedic use of those objects (including the original namesake "slapstick"), while they were often used solely as improvised weapons.

Commedia dell'arte shares more narrative style with professional wrestling than any other genre of theatre. Direct address to the audience, loose narrative structures, stock characters, reliable rehearsed segments of an otherwise improvised performance, exaggerated physicality, as well as similar uses of props, colorful costumes, and masks; all combine to describe either and both performance styles. Indeed, professional wrestling serves as proof that the premises which commedia dell'arte was built upon during its peak years remain culturally viable today. It should also be noted that the respected place of commedia dell'arte in performance history and academia serves as evidence that American professional wrestling belongs in that same category.

3. Greek drama

Greek Drama, as with most traditional forms of theatre, shares many superficial similarities with professional wrestling. These mostly include the essential elements of performance shared by all forms of theatre. Indeed, the Hellenic tradition of keeping graphic violence off-stage so as not to offend the gods is largely antithetical to the presentation of professional wrestling (Jaramillo, 2022). However, the element which is most fascinatingly shared between the genres is the use of the chorus as a narrative device. In the theater of Hellenic and Hellenistic Greece, the chorus acted as a narrative device to help the one, two or three actors on-stage to tell the story (Haamer, 2015). The chorus would sing hymns to the Greek theatre god Dionysius. Famed ancient actor Thespis is believed to have been the first actor to interact directly with the chorus, which could range from 12-50 actor-singers depending on the genre. While the character on stage in Greek tragedy and comedy represented the triumph and folly of royalty, the chorus served the dual role of representing the laypeople's relation to events, and of being the

historical judge of the events taking place (Haamer, 2015). The genres of comedy, tragedy and short-form satire emerged, and each of the genres interacted differently with the chorus. The chorus influenced the reactions of the audience to the events onstage through their odes.

This use of the chorus is tremendously important in traditional and modern professional wrestling, with the distinct caveat being that in professional wrestling, the live audience is used as the chorus (Tate & Kincaid, 2022). In professional wrestling the live audience serves the same purposes as the Greek choruses by being both the historical judge and representing the reaction of the laypeople. This is somewhat self-evident, as the audiences almost invariably chant in response to, or sing along at different aspects and incidents with the performance, much as Greek choruses would. With top competitors and executives in a fictitious wrestling league standing in for the royal courts of Hellenic poleis, the live audience's reactions are designed to move the story forward. However, the challenge of this is that live audiences often have their own agendas, and unlike a designated chorus, cannot be counted on to express their designed feelings automatically. The techniques of controlling crowd reactions are a stalwart standard of the subgenre and are generally considered the master skill of performers. In televised or broadcast professional wrestling, the live crowd serves as the chorus to paint the emotions of the viewing audience at home. The reactions of the live crowd inform the home audience of the atmosphere of the events within the theatre. To augment this, many professional wrestling promotions engage in "crowd noise sweetening" by playing canned cheers, jeers, and crowd reactions through the sounds systems of the live show to influence both the television sound and to nudge the live crowd toward the desired reactions.

This use of the audience as a chorus to paint the narrative of the live performance to the viewing audience became more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The WWE created the "Capitol Wrestling Center" as a bio-secure bubble for their performers (Okafor, 2021). Within this center was the "WWE Thunderdome" a tiered collection of LED screens where select fans could apply to live broadcast their fans live through video call. More than a thousand of these boards were installed in the area around the ring in tiers like those of an arena. This created the illusion of normalcy within the arena. The production gave prompts for positive or negative gestures for the live fans displayed on the Thunderdome screens to make, while artificial crowd noise was broadcast throughout the matches. In the early days of the pandemic, the WWE also tried having the employees at their Performance Center sit in the ringside area and give the desired reactions to the events of the show. AEW had their own biosecure bubble with familiar faces during the pandemic during their residence at Daily's Place in Jacksonville (Doyle, 2021).

Professional wrestling audiences do, however, sometimes reject what is presented to them. While this appears to counter the point that it is a point-for-point counterpart to the Greek chorus, as the chorus has a set reaction as part of the presentation, professional wrestling audiences acting as an independent live judge of the events in the ring reinforces the notion that they serve as both the gauge of the laypeople's reactions and the historical judge of the events presented. Despite the familiar standards and formulas of the art form, audiences sometimes will reject a storyline, a character, or a performer for any number of reasons.

There have been many famous instances of this over the years. Notable modern examples often feature the live crowds' rejection of a chosen white meat babyface. This led to the audience rejecting notable top stars John Cena, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, and Roman Reigns (Thompson & Ross, 2019). In each of these cases different creative approaches were taken. The Rock was famously turned heel, during which time his overpowering charisma and catchphrase-laden sing-along style promos made him popular and eventually the top babyface in both professional wrestling and entertainment. John Cena was kept as a youth-oriented babyface and top star, while being regarded as a heel by older and die-hard fans; for years dueling chants of "Let's go Cena!" and "Cena Sucks!" would echo through arenas across the country. Despite one of the hardest babyface pushes in the history of professional wrestling and surviving a bout with Leukemia at the peak of his powers, audiences rejected Roman Reigns as a hero. Eventually, he turned heel and at the time of this writing is amid the longest continuous title reign of a heel champion in WWE history and has sat at the top for the consecutive top two revenue years (including the first \$1 billion plus revenue year) in company history (Thurston, 2023).

Likewise, the live chorus of professional wrestling often chooses an unlikely hero whose popularity is too great to ignore (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Notable examples of this include Brian

Danielson, Mick Foley, and Eddie Guerrero. Danielson, performing as Daniel Bryan, was too small, too unimposing, and too often vegan to be a prototypical top star. However, Danielson's engaging interviews, unparalleled in-ring performance, and ability to get any angle he participated in over, won over the crowd and propelled him to an unplanned main event victory at Wrestlemania 30. Guerrero was also undersized, Hispanic and struggling with drug addiction at the midpoint of his career; however, his charismatic "Latino Heat" character, world-renowned ringwork, and alternating lay passionate and comedic promos saw him rise to prominence as arguably in American professional wrestling history. Mick Foley was the resident daredevil of professional wrestling, whose utter disregard for his own well-being in the name of entertainment endeared him to fans; despite the pudgy Long Island grappler not fitting any previous mold of champion, the articulate wild man with a penchant for method acting and in-ring self-flagellation won rode a years-long wave of collective goodwill to becoming one of the unlikeliest top stars in professional wrestling history.

In Greek theatre, the chorus acts as a stand-in for lay people and history (Haamer, 2015). In professional wrestling, the fans act as a chorus of laypeople and have a hand in writing the history of a character. While the ultimate skill in professional wrestling is to proverbially "hold the audience in the palm of your hand," the chorus always has their say (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Famed commentator and talent relations executive Jim Ross said on his Grillin' JR podcast, "Professional wrestling gives you immediate market research if what you're doing is working. If you're giving them something they want to see, and by God, they'll tell you, and vice versa. If you're willing to listen. They vote with their dollar." (Thompson & Ross, 2019) So when Danielson points two fingers to the sky and shouts "Yes!" With 20,000 voices at his back, or when the crowd shouts "Hell Yeah!" To affirm their support for Steve Austin's proposed actions, the chorus speaks to and for the audience at large.

4. Kabuki

A full dissertation could perhaps be written on the relationship between the conventions of kabuki theatre and the norms of Japanese professional wrestling. This section will briefly examine the similarities of kabuki theatre and American professional wrestling across various elements of the performances. Audience interaction, costuming, staging, and technical theatrics are shared elements of both. These shared elements serve as further evidence that professional wrestling is holistically a style of performance as acknowledged by the criteria of other forms of accepted theatre & performance.

The term "kabuki" is made up of three characters: *ka*, meaning sing, *bu* meaning dance, and *ki* meaning skill; taken they mean "the art of song and dance." (Culture, 2022) Kabuki is noted to have emerged in the 17th century in and around the Japanese city of Kyoto, where troupes of female prostitutes performed satirical plays about the absurdities of everyday life. The innovator who created kabuki was a Shinto priestess named Izumi no Okuni. This style of raunchy and suggestive style of theatre became popular and was often performed at or near Japanese bordellos. With the sexual services of some performers available for sale following performances, women were outlawed from performing in 1629 and replaced with young boys for a time before it came to light that many of those boys were also engaged in prostitution. Eventually, only grown men were legally allowed to perform in kabuki theatre, making it a curious eastern precursor to modern drag. Kabuki's three main subgenres dealt with mythic tales (*jidaimono*), contemporary stories (*sewamono*) and dance dramas (*shosagoto*); none of which overly relied on realism in their presentation. Many kabuki stories depicted the tragic clash between emotion, temptation, revenge, forbidden sexual desire, betrayal, and the morals of 17th century Japanese culture. Kabuki theatre became an iconic part of Japanese culture, permeating cultural iconography, regularly appearing in various artistic forms of media in Japan and eventually being acknowledged as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. Kabuki's use of "abstractionism," in this case a kaleidoscopic view of the absurdities of contemporary morality, is believed to have heavily influenced western theatre across many genres.

Like professional wrestling's roots inside shows and vaudeville, kabuki was considered a bizarre theatrical niche (Culture, 2022). As with kabuki, professional wrestling does not require strict realism in storytelling (if it did, every wrestling feud would end in Human Resources arbitration over workplace violence); merely the plausible affectation of real relationships and emotions played out through a colorful medium. Kabuki has its own style of stage combat called *Tachimawari*. The use of iconic colorful

costuming in both genres is largely a superficial shared element. Also like in professional wrestling, characters often address the audience directly in kabuki. In a counter-intuitive norm, normally reserved Japanese fans of kabuki are permitted to cheer at dramatic moments or at the appearances of their favorite characters. The use of complex technical theatre elements with lighting, stunts, rigging, sound effects, pyrotechnics, trap doors, and costume changes, performed by dedicated *koken* (stagehands) are used heavily in traditional kabuki and modern major professional wrestling productions. Kabuki's abstractionist view of morality is similarly demonstrated in the caricatures of professional wrestling's ethical binary, and constant engagement in mythologized stage combat over every interpersonal conflict.

It should be noted that many Japanese wrestlers have adopted elements of kabuki theatre to success in American wrestling (Herzog, 2019). Throughout the mid-20th century Japanese wrestlers across the United States would don kimonos and kabuki masks to establish their foreign identity. This character was first innovated by Akihisa Yone Yosemite Mero, who would take his place in professional wrestling history as "The Great Kabuki." The Great Kabuki would enter the performance area in traditional garb and perform some semblance of a kabuki dance routine. This made him a hated heel in the United States in the decades after the Second World War. Mera would also innovate the "Asian mist" attack, where he would spit apparently mystic green mist into his opponent's eyes to blind them during the match. This attack became iconic in both the United States and Japan. In the United States, it is widely associated with and used by Japanese professional wrestlers as an homage to Mera. Mera would become an NWA world television champion in the United States, a world tag-team champion for All-Japan, and an NWA United National Champion for the Japan Wrestling Association. The green mist has also been used in the United States by wrestlers like Masashi "Killer Khan" Ogawa, Yoshihiro Tajiri, and Keiji "The Great Mutoh" Mutoh (who also uses the attack in Japan). In 1989, The Great Muta debuted as the son of the Great Kabuki. Mutoh would go on to become inarguably one of the greatest and most highly regarded Japanese professional wrestlers of all time by critics, fans, producers, and performers. Perhaps the most prominent contemporary use of kabuki imagery in professional wrestling is WWE performer Kanako "Asuka" Urai. The character of Asuka enters the arena in kabuki garb, wearing a kabuki mask. She also uses the green mist attack. Asuka is currently one of the most accomplished and respected female professional wrestlers in the world, having won all three iterations of the WWE's women's championship. As the *prima donna* of women's professional wrestling, Asuka would win the first women's Royal Rumble (alongside countryman Shinsuke Nakamura who won the men's Royal rumble that year) and carried a 917-day undefeated streak. Asuka would form "The Kabuki Warriors" tag-team with fellow female Japanese professional wrestling star Kairi Sane. The tandem would claim the promotion's world women's tag-team titles.

Kabuki has influenced western theatre broadly, and professional wrestling specifically. Perhaps the most significant shared element of kabuki and American professional wrestling is the relevance of cultural morality to the art form. In kabuki theatre, the absurdity of morality measured against desire is often on display, thereby creating a discussion of cultural values. Meanwhile, this paper has already established that American professional wrestling is a device for telling morality tales from the perspective of cultural values. As art is reflective of culture, kabuki's place as a subversive mirror to Japanese morality in the 17th century is most like reflected in the counterculture-driven professional wrestling boom of the late-1990's wherein the traditional values exhaled in early iterations of the violent masculine melodrama were spurn in lieu of complex ethical ambiguity.

5. Modern exhibition sport

Scripted narrative stage combat is the core of professional wrestling's presentation. The episodic melodrama of storytelling is the hallmark of the performance art. Beyond the simple display of stage combat, there are interactions and competing desires of distinct characters and constantly developing relationships. The stage combat aspect is a device for expressing character arcs.

However, due to the generations long and thousands strong kayfabe conspiracy, professional wrestling was presented as a legitimate sport for over a century. The periodic revelations that these events were professional performance, rather than professional catch-as-catch-can wrestling created a perception that professional wrestling is fake. Indeed, any wrestling fan who has ever brought out their fandom is inevitably met with that revelation from someone nearby. It should also be noted that

professional wrestling is still presented as a sport by many within the industry, particularly in Japan. This section will differentiate choreographed sport stage combat, and the performance art of professional wrestling.

Modern professional wrestling follows some distant facsimile of the rules for catch wrestling, though many traditional rules codified in the 1904 official creation of catch wrestling in England have been abandoned (Pashayev, 2021). Even though some modern catch wrestling organizations attempt to shape their rules to reflect those of professional wrestling, there is no exact sport that corresponds to professional wrestling rules. The crossovers between professional wrestling, and boxing or mixed martial arts evidence the relation of legitimate combat sportsmen in the performance of combat sport.

There is a large subsection of sports which are choreographed exhibitions competing for the title of best performance. These include gymnastics, dance-sport, figure skating and cheerleading, among others. Many among this category are even Olympic sports governed the world over, and nationally by legitimate sporting federations. While professional wrestling is clearly an athletic exhibition, there is an even more closely related subcategory of exhibition sports which demonstrate stage combat. It is notable that staged combat is a sport. Most specifically, it is a sub-style of martial arts demonstration competition. These demonstrations have different names depending on the organization, which is presenting the event, but they are most often called “Self-Defense Demonstrations.” (USJJF, 2018) These demonstration competitions are most often seen at karate, sport jujitsu, or multi-martial art events. Alternate names include “Duo Kumite,” or “Duo Jujitsu.” These demonstrations vary in their rules. According to the rules of the United States Jujitsu Federation (USJJF), there are separate subcategories of these competitions for “Duo” and “Self-Defense” competition. In Duo competition, teams of two will take turns making spectacular displays of stage combat with choreographed attacks and a predetermined winner of the stage combat. Self-defense demonstration competitions see a designated martial artist or martial artists fend off one or more attackers in a free form display that must end by the designated time. In other instances, these demonstrations include the use of traditional and/or modern weapons. In all of these instances, after the groups have completed their routine, the designated judges score the performances and determine the winner or winners. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these competitions were made remote and allowed competitors to submit videos of their routines in virtual martial arts. These demonstrations often include elaborate and exciting moves either taken from, or which also appear in, professional wrestling. Acrobatics are also a recurring feature of both demonstration martial arts and professional wrestling. These types of competitions are overseen by local, regional, national, and international sporting organizations like the World Karate Federation, the International Wushu Federation, Jiu-Jitsu International Federation, the International Sport Karate Association, among dozens of others.

This type of system to judge professional wrestling as an exhibition sport was experimented with. The closest to competitive performance of matches as performance exhibitions in mainstream professional wrestling came in 1992 (Oliva, 2021). In 1992, Turner executive Kip Frey was placed as the head of the promotion and instituted several changes to improve WCW’s artistic and television production. To incentivize wrestlers on guaranteed contracts to perform their best in the ring, Frey instituted a “Match of the Night” bonus policy, which would give the wrestlers in the best match of the evening \$2,500 in prize money. This policy was well-received by the roster and was honored throughout Frey’s abbreviated time at the promotion. After only four months, Frey was replaced by miserly executive “Cowboy” Bill Watts who eliminated the program. Though it was short-lived, such a model of reward structure could theoretically be applied to existing professional wrestling companies to both optimize in-ring performance and establish an exhibition sport concurrent to the episodic theatrical performance. It is also possible that such a system could also be assigned some structure of points to determine season or year-end awards for top in-ring performers. Though professional wrestling is not the sport of wrestling, it is entirely possible for professional wrestling to be a sport all its own.

One example of this was the competition reality show *Hulk Hogan’s Celebrity Championship Wrestling*, which saw a litany of celebrities trained to compete in professional wrestling, and a board of judges including Hogan, former WCW President Eric Bischoff, and famed manager Jimmy Hart (IMDb, 2008). Former NBA star and WCW performer Dennis Rodman won the competition over former boxer-turned-WWF performer Eric “Butterbean” Esch, and a litany of actors. The series ran for a single eight-

episode season on Country Music Television (CMT) in 2008. In 2017, innovative Tennessee promoter Jerry Jarrett funded the filming of a pilot for a reality show titled *Olympus Wrestling*, where aspiring professional wrestlers would compete before a panel of judges (Jarrett, 2019). This version of the concept uses trained professional wrestlers from minor professional wrestling leagues across the country. Though the pilot was not picked up, the judging panel included a series of wrestling personalities including Jim Cornette, Robert Fuller and Stacy “Miss Kitty” Carter. At this competition, wrestlers were paired off and given both microphone time and equally timed out matches, though judges had the authority to stop any performances they deemed truly awful. These competitions demonstrated that though professional wrestling originated as fixed catch-as-catch-can wrestling matches, it has evolved into performative martial arts demonstrations. Professional wrestling could theoretically be an actual sport if: a scoring system like demonstration martial arts were used by impartial judges, competing teams of performers showcased equally time-limited performances, and if judging criteria was created to highlight the different aspects of the performances.

There are three key differences between professional wrestling and demonstration martial arts. Firstly, professional wrestling is meant to be a purely commercial endeavor wherein the performers are paid for their services, and sporting martial arts demonstrations are ostensibly a completely amateur affair, despite prize money being offered to black belt champions in some divisions in some contests. Secondly, martial arts demonstration contests are by-nature competitive on equal footing with the other demonstrations, while professional wrestling is not. Professional wrestling matches in different portions of the card are designated to allow uneven levels of time, importance, seriousness, and allowed performance tactics. Because of this inequality of presentation, though wrestlers will often strive to have the best match on the card, the absence of an expectation of fairness in that informal competition prevents it from being empirically quantifiable. Thirdly, while sport is a contest of performance that exists from the beginning of the designated time on stage until the end with no narrative throughlines before or afterward, whereas professional wrestling is an ongoing episodic narrative within the world of the play that extends into both past and future performances. Martial arts combat demonstrations are static and stand-alone performances that typically have no defined characters other than *tori* (person completing techniques) and *uke* (person receiving techniques) (USJJF, 2018). Much the same way that the Harlem Globetrotters contest a fixed basketball game against the long-suffering Washington Generals, or how the champion figure skaters at Disney on Ice use their sporting skills to retell *Finding Nemo*; professional wrestling applies narrative storytelling to a demonstration of an existing sport. If a sport version of competitive professional wrestling was created, the assessment apparatus for and acceptance of competitive stage combat demonstrations would already exist. As it exists now, professional wrestling is a style of performance art which uses melodrama to propel non-competitive narrative stage combat to the paying audience. It is, however, the narrative thread that connects extended stories that separate professional wrestling from its adjacent martial arts contests.

6. Conclusions & limitations

American professional wrestling is a global phenomenon. It is a massively popular touring live show. It occupies between 9 hours of live primetime television in the United States every week of the year, with additional content provided through international syndication, streaming broadcasts, and an ever-growing ecosystem of web-based media dedicated to its history and fandom. Professional wrestling is a multi-billion-dollar international industry. It is also not the sport of wrestling. There is no athletic competition, the winner of every match is scripted, and the performers don personae different from themselves for each performance. A decades-long conspiracy to maintain the open secret of professional wrestling’s theatrical nature was perpetuated under threat of violent reprisals and industry blacklisting (Thompson & Ross, 2019). However, on 10 February 1989 Vince McMahon confirmed the long held public suspicions that professional wrestling is scripted in his testimony to the New Jersey State Senate as part of a successful effort to lobby that state into deregulating professional wrestling, divorcing it from the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board, and saving promoters significant taxation by the NJSACB (Kerr, 1989). In the 30-odd years since, professional wrestling has remained a fringe curiosity in the academic sphere, being granted only occasional study and zero funding from the academia, theatrical patronage, or any state endowment for the arts.

This paper has demonstrated through comparative analysis that the conventions of professional wrestling justify its classification as a form of theater. Its study in the field of academia as an art form has been limited since the field of Performance Studies emerged in the 1940's/1950's. The decades-long conspiracy among performers in professional wrestling to keep the theatrical nature of the art form relatively secret is partly responsible for this. However, with over 30 years having passed (at the time of this writing) since it was established publicly beyond dispute that professional wrestling was a performance medium, academic analysis of it in that context has been limited. This comparative analysis examined several of the conventions of professional wrestling alongside the norms of other theatrical styles. The stylistic overlap of professional wrestling with these traditional theater forms has proven to be more than the superficial similarity of being scripted. Rather, this examination has shown that professional wrestling and traditional styles of theater share fundamental standards of performance technique, storytelling, presentation, costuming, theater tech, character archetypes, improvisation, audience interaction, and the socio-cultural perception of performers. This has also been demonstrated from multiple cultural perspectives.

Further, this examination has addressed the competing theory of professional wrestling as demonstration martial arts or "performance sport." While there is sufficient precedent to establish sport professional wrestling as such, objective criteria for judgement, transparent sanctioning organizations, and public interest in non-theatrical professional wrestling has not emerged at the time of this writing.

This research is limited in scope. The analysis measures the conventions of only three styles of theatre, meaning that further comparative analysis of professional wrestling and theatrical styles is possible and necessary to expand the field of research. Another limitation of this article is detail, as it has also not provided an in-depth analysis of the cultural significance or influence of professional wrestling, or of the other theatrical forms discussed herein. Rather, this article focuses on the comparative analysis of storytelling devices shared by professional wrestling, Kabuki, Greek Drama and Commedia Dell'arte. These and other limitations are addressed in the expanded dissertation of which this piece is an excerpt (specifically, Chapter 4, Section 1, Subsections a-d).

This study can have a positive influence on policies relating to the funding, study, and performance of professional wrestling. By academically establishing the artistic methodology of professional wrestling performance, it allows for the creation of complex, coherent, artistic analyses to be performed, thus establishing a holistic understanding of the art, which may yield revolutionary approaches and due credit to both traditions and innovations in its history. Further, the association of professional wrestling with established/respected theatrical genres may yield greater prestige for the creators of professional wrestling as artists, rather than as pseudo-sportsmen with no games to play. This study can also potentially lead to grants for funding performances or ongoing promotions in the professional wrestling space. The establishment of the performers as actors and producers as technicians will also hopefully allow and/or encourage those individuals to receive or seek proper training in those crafts, thus improving overall production and performance within professional wrestling. Furthermore, the norms of such training and of such artistic appreciation, may normalize the organization of laborers within professional wrestling as actors, producers, writers, and technicians to seek out and received membership in appropriate labor guilds and unions for stage and screen professionals. In turn, unionization would create safer workplaces for the workers within the professional wrestling industry. All of the aforementioned potential benefits of the academic study of professional wrestling begin with properly recontextualizing out of the fringe world of exhibition fixed sports, and into its rightful place in the compendium of theatrical styles.

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