

The Ring Entrance & The Soul of Professional Wrestling

La hija del teatro
January 2013

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Professional wrestling

Professional wrestling is the art of telling elemental, human stories through staged fighting. It is a folk tradition that has grown, like an untended rose bush, into a pyrotechnics-fueled stage show, featuring heavily muscled performers under colored lights. Its organic evolution has resulted in a rich, many-layered tradition. To appreciate professional wrestling is to peel back its layers and discover what this unique form reveals about storytelling and human nature.

Unlike most theatre arts, professional wrestling does not cherish the fourth wall. There is no invisible barrier of decorum separating the performers' world from spectators'; the audience is free to join in the fun, to be a part of the act. It is an improvised dialog between performer and audience, with each building off what the other has brought. Despite criticism that this dialog is resolved through one of humankind's most base negotiations—hand-to-hand combat—it is inarguable that the simplicity of two humans fighting lends itself well to a conversation between a handful of performers and a stadium full of tens of thousands.

Professional wrestling is about suspending disbelief, but beneath that, it is about wanting to suspend disbelief. It is about encountering characters so convincing, that you want them to be real, like a child that plays with imaginary friends based on a story they've read or movie they've seen. Humans want to have their imaginations stoked, to be provoked and have emotions riled that everyday life rarely requires. The spectacle of wrestling, a few illuminated performers surrounded by thousands of uninhibited onlookers, mimics moments of purpose and clarity that may appear only once or twice in a lifetime. Like an army roaring their support of their leader, or a nation united in hatred of those they war against, or a society bestowing its collective adoration and trust on its heroes, the professional wrestling audience aspires to be united by a common cry. Professional wrestling is an outlet for unexpressed emotion, which, like stretching a tensed muscle, is a wonderful release.

Though however noble or ignoble its purpose, professional wrestling is a business that puts money first. In its contemporary form, professional wrestling is engineered to draw people in and extract money from them. Its audience's obligations are not as well defined as in theatre, where a ticket purchase is all that's asked. To reference Disney, another master of commercialized engagement, professional wrestling is like Peter Pan, promising that if you just clap your hands Tinker Bell will be healed. But in this world, you must buy pay-per-views and event tickets and merchandise for your favorite wrestler to advance toward the championship. In exchange, promoters promise a desired emotional experience.

How it came to be

Professional wrestling was born of a centuries old tradition: fighting as spectacle. Many ancient civilizations entertained themselves with athletic competition, among the most famous were the Greeks and Romans, who are both acknowledged in the name of professional wrestling's oldest ancestor, Greco-Roman wrestling. Professional wrestling in its contemporary form emerged in the late 19th century in carnivals and circuses around the United States as simple exhibition wrestling. Carnival promoters soon realized that compelling storylines, not competitive matches, sold tickets, and professional wrestling began its evolution toward what World Wrestling Entertainment CEO Vince McMahon famously called "action soap operas."

McMahon's opinion is worth noting because his promotion, also known as the WWE, dominates the professional wrestling industry. There are also many small, independent promoters, colloquially called 'the indies.' For the sake of succinct analysis, this essay focuses on the WWE because its diverse followership demands diverse creative material and its long history simplifies comparison over time.

The tools of the trade

Possibly because of its "low-brow" status among the performing arts, the language and tools of the professional wrestler remain largely inaccessible to the average observer. This inaccessibility divides the audience into two groups. Audience members that enjoy the story without questioning the performers' methods are called 'marks,' while those who aim

to understand the art from the performers' perspective and piece together what takes place behind the curtain are called 'smart marks.' Overly simplified, marks desire an emotional experience, while smart marks desire an intellectual experience. To appreciate the entirety of professional wrestling, both approaches must be considered. While a mark's mindset may come naturally, true understanding of a smart mark's perspective would be incomplete without mastery of professional wrestling terminology.

The building blocks of professional wrestling are characters, who are broadly categorized as either a 'face,' a good guy, or a 'heel,' a bad guy. Secondly, these characters interact in two ways, a 'work,' a pre-planned or choreographed interaction, or a 'shoot,' an improvisation. The value of a character is determined by how 'over' it is, or how well the audience has embraced or reacted to it. A measure of how 'over' a character is his or her ability to 'draw' people in to watch a show or buy a pay-per-view. It is easy to understand how a face draws—fans tune in to see their hero victorious—but drawing as a heel can be counterintuitive because viewers must detest the character and tune in to see them lose. This dynamic is called 'heat,' when heels evoke true negative emotions.

Examining core elements

Though professional wrestling's primary expressive tool is physical conflict, this is merely the medium for fulfilling its true purpose: storytelling. At the core of these stories, whose scripts span the breadth of the human experience, are characters. The characters are what captivate and thrill the audience, drawing them in to the spectacle, making the performance more than just two men dancing. Each characters' essence is captured in a single moment, their critical introduction: the ring entrance. This ritual also illuminates the priorities, traditions, and tools of this art form from beneath its many physical and conceptual layers. Just as one appreciates the complexity of anatomy by dissecting its structure, so too can the pivotal role of the ring entrance be revealed by a trip through the elements of the wrestling performance.

Professional wrestling stories and characters

McMahon's comparison of wrestling to soap operas is particularly true for the structure and pacing of the two forms' storylines. Much like soap operas, wrestling storylines are long and winding, full of improbable twists to keep viewers interested. Heavily shaped by commercial considerations, stories typically escalate immediately before pay-per-views, and plot twists coincide neatly with new merchandise releases.

As characters progress through these roller coaster-like stories, their traits and behaviors adapt. Each character is a fluid concept, so he or she may look and sound very different across storylines and opponents, while maintaining a few consistent character traits. Professional wrestling characters are far more malleable than is realistic, their hyper-flexible personalities made possible by the collective short memory of the mark audience. This fluidity magnifies the importance of each characters' stable traits, by which they eventually come to be defined.

For example, in the summer of 2011, CM Punk established himself as a disgruntled, overlooked wrestler that wanted to wreak havoc on the organization that had wronged him. He took on the symbolic face of the WWE and current World Champion, John Cena, by accusing him of being a sellout that played to the crowd to make money. Punk presented himself as "the best wrestler in the world" who should be appreciated for his in-ring skill instead of his ability to sell merchandise. This storyline received massive fan support and mainstream media attention, resulting in Punk winning the World Championship in July 2011. Now no longer the underdog, Punk's character needed to evolve to keep viewers engaged. He continued to tout his status as the best wrestler in the world, but did so as a hardened heel that insisted he was constantly disrespected by under qualified opponents. This character continued to draw, but now as someone the audience resented and wanted to lose the belt. Throughout this evolution, Punk maintained a consistent character entity by pivoting around the core belief that he was the best wrestler in the world.

Elements of the performance

It is helpful to understand that wrestling matches, though many are televised, are not like television shows that tell a sequential story. Wrestling matches come in three varieties: pay-per-view matches, which are often the crescendo of a storyline, televised matches, which build and develop feuds, and house shows, which are not recorded or broadcast but performed only for a live audience, and typically ignore or do not progress storylines. At the WWE, matches take place almost daily, with storyline-progressing televised matches are broadcast several times a week.

Consequently, many wrestling fans consume only a small fraction of a given story's telling, and must be updated on past plot points before each match. Observing this constant cycle of engagement and disengagement through the hyper-fluid evolution of professional wrestling stories reveals the importance of purposeful, consistent character development.

The flow of the event

After trading verbal attacks for weeks, the two wrestlers will finally face each other. At the event they both introduce themselves with a ring entrance, come to blows in the match, and dramatically exit the stage.

Promos and build up

'Promos,' or character monologues, are the primary driver of storyline development as each conflict progresses toward a culminating match. In a classic, two wrestler storyline, several promos will be delivered by each character in the weeks leading up to their match. Promos, which are typically delivered with great emotion and directly to the camera, establish the conflict between the players and ideally, teach the viewer something new about the character. Promos are typically less than a minute long, but replayed ad nauseam in the build up for a match.

Ring entrances

On the evening of the event, before the match begins, the performers must engage the particular crowd in this arena. Some viewers have seen every promo, while others don't

know the characters' names. The ring entrances introduce the players and tell the audience how to feel about them.

Match opening

This transitory moment is when the performers turn their attention from the audience to their opponent. For viewers at home, camera angles change and focus in on the ring, for viewers in the arena, the lights dim and music fades. This is a clear signal to all that the stage has been set and the match will begin.

Match story arc

Deserving of many descriptive papers itself, the match story arc commences, crescendos, and concludes. While some in-ring action may be improvised, the match (almost) always ends as planned.

Ring exit

After the match, both characters return backstage. Typically, the loser will exit first, either in wounded retreat or fleeing like a coward—a popular exit for a heel. Then, the victor will slowly return backstage, lingering to celebrate with the crowd. The ring exit reminds the audience of the importance of this victory or loss to each character.

Ring entrance as constant

Every performing art has certain constants, like a familiar envelope that surrounds the story. From play bills to curtain calls, the audience relies on these constants to introduce the players and signal when the story begins and ends. In wrestling, the most important constant is the ring entrance. Since the ring is in the center of the arena, every wrestler must travel from backstage to the ring, making this ritual unavoidable. Thousands of wrestlers over many decades have made the exact same journey, making the ring entrance an ideal variable for comparing characters and archetypes over time.

Entrances set the stage

However, this ritual would be meaningless if it was simply a transition from place to place. The ring entrance is the last opportunity before a match begins to engage each viewer. The ring entrance is the solution to previously introduced problem with professional wrestling stories: asymmetrical information and engagement across audience members. No matter whether a viewer has been tracking a feud for months, or has never heard of the characters before, the ring entrance is a final opportunity to make viewers care about the outcome of the match. To do so, the ring entrance aims to express two ideas: who this person is and how you should feel about them.

Who is this person— character building

In this brief introduction, usually no longer than a few minutes, there is no time for nuance. Characters are introduced by their gimmick and status as face or heel. Beyond the performer's actions during the entrance, clothes or costumes that are removed after entering the ring are a key character building tool, as are carried props.

The ring entrance also offers a glimpse of a wrestler's movement style. If they tower and lumber their way to the ring, they'll use plenty of "big man" moves like lifting an opponent above one's head, or simply sitting on someone to injure them. Similarly, if they run and jump during the entrance, they'll wrestle an exciting, fast-paced style.

How you should feel — emotional management

The emotional response of the crowd is what makes professional wrestling a conversation between performer and audience. Mark audiences in particular depend on ring entrances to cue emotional shifts. Consequently, ring entrances are an opportunity for performers to "work the crowd," or rile the appropriate emotions for the match. Ring entrances can also be very awkward if there is a mismatch between the emotions the performer intends to evoke, and the emotions the crowd expresses, as in the case of a detested face that works hard to be cheered but is booed instead, or worse still, met with silent apathy.

Working the crowd requires a cooperative audience, which means a mostly mark audience, because smart marks often delight in subverting a performer's intended dialog. As a result, wrestlers that begin their careers in the indies are increasingly inexperienced at working the crowd, because these promotions' smart mark audiences afford them few opportunities to practice.

Entrances as folk tradition

Performers do not typically enter with microphones, so these introductions are delivered through dance and pantomime. There is a limited movement vocabulary that can be understood by an untrained audience, so conveying a character's unique essence demands creativity and patience from the wrestlers. Some may execute a certain motion for years before it is acknowledged by the crowd and understood to be part of their character. Objectively, ring entrances are a beautiful communal dance, a tradition and a celebration of the match that is to come. Wrestling is a conversational art, and the ring entrance is like a familiar handshake between performer and audience.

Elements of the ring entrance

To appreciate how a ring entrance builds character and drives emotions, one must appreciate the sequence of the entrance and the variables within a performer's control.

Chronologically

Music

A wrestler's music is the first announcement of their entrance. Many characters have ring entrance music that is composed specifically for them, with lyrics that match their gimmick or personality.

Pop

The pop begins when the music hits, but reaches its climax when the performer appears. The pop is the crowd's reaction, which sounds like a primal roar. This reaction is a pure reflection of how the audience feels about the character, not something they've said or

done. A pop's tone, meaning its composition of boos and cheers, is a clear indicator of whether the wrestler is a heel or face at this moment.

Appearance

The performer appears from behind a curtain or partition onto the entrance stage. In the WWE, this stage is directly in front of a massive LCD screen, and surrounded by pyrotechnic equipment. Every wrestler has a highlight video that plays during their entrance, and many have custom pyrotechnic displays.

Procession to the ring

The performer transitions from the entrance stage to the ring, often making a loop around the ring before entering. The time and space that this transition requires allows wrestlers to pantomime, perform signature actions, and interact with the crowd.

Ring entry

The way in which the wrestler actually enters the ring is significant and deserves closer examination. Traditionally, ring entry matches wrestling style. If a performer is meant to be considered a giant or unusually powerful, he must step over the top rope. 'High fliers,' or performers known for their acrobatics will often flip or jump into the ring. Particularly cocky or confident characters may run up to the ring and slide in under the bottom rope.

The ring entry clarifies relationships and allows performers to display respect or disrespect for others. If a male performer is accompanied to the ring by a woman, he shows respect or affection by holding the top and middle rope apart for her to enter the ring. If he does not hold open the ropes for her, this signals that she is strong and should be considered his equal. Furthermore, any wrestler that would like to reference tradition or past wrestling generations will wipe his or her feet on the ring apron before stepping into the ring.

For female wrestlers, ring entry is often the only ring entrance element that varies by character. This is likely due to the relatively shorter entrances and matches for female wrestlers, and highlights the ring entry's significance.

These ring entry rules may not be consciously observed by marks, but are powerful communicative tools between wrestlers and smart marks. Subtle twists and cleverly broken rules are a silent acknowledgement of the smart mark audience, and will earn praise from these hard-won fans.

Match preparations

After entering the ring, wrestlers go through a preparatory routine. The length of this routine varies by character and match importance. In a championship match, the current champion will remove the belt (all championships are symbolized by large metal and leather belts) and hand it to the referee, who will display it's face to the opponent and audience before handing it out of the ring.

Some characters use this time to remind the audience of their gimmick or generate heat. An effeminate character, like Rick Martel, may spray himself with perfume, or remove a glamorous robe like Ric Flair. Characters with specific props may place them just outside the ring, like Jake "The Snake" Roberts' live python, which he stored in a menacing burlap bag on the ring apron. Finally, heels may use this time to foreshadow future sabotage by hiding a weapon while the face is busy with preparing for the match.

Throughout

Engaging the crowd

The ring entrance is a critical moment of engagement between performer and audience. The emotional foundation of a ring entrance is driven by the performer's engagement—or lack thereof—with the crowd. Observationally, it appears that every audience, whether it is composed of marks or smart marks, wants to be acknowledged. The most beloved and reviled wrestlers use the time and distance between entering the arena and beginning the match to engage with the crowd as much as possible, often by mirroring the crowd's

emotions. The vast majority of face characters greet and touch hands with fans on their way to the ring, though this does little to engage the majority of the audience. To open the conversation, some performers use call and response by using a gesture to trigger a chant or pop from the crowd.

However, hatred is just as powerful as adoration. Heel characters also amplify the crowd's emotions by arguing with fans near the ring, ignoring friendly faces and outstretched hands, and making lewd gestures. Ted DiBiase, known as the Million Dollar Man, drew incredible heat by inviting audience members into the ring to perform simple tasks for money only to humiliate and degrade them. On one infamous occasion he invited a boy to bounce a ball 15 times for \$500; on the 14th bounce he kicked the ball out of the ring and sent the boy back to his seat with no reward.

It is interesting to note that expectations of engagement vary by audience type. While marks behave like a traditional audience until provoked, smart marks take pride in eliciting a response from performers. Ring entrances are the ideal time to do this, before the performer's attention is devoted to his or her opponent. Smart marks take particular pride in engagement that displays their deep understanding of the art form. For example, smart marks may throw streamers into the ring for a wrestler that has worked in Japan, where they symbolize respect.

Engaging the camera

While professional wrestling was first established as a traveling live show, its growth boom coincided with the introduction of television and televised wrestling. Thus, the art form has evolved to satisfy both local and remote audiences.

The ring entrance offers a brief glimpse of the cinematographic tricks used to capture professional wrestling, and belies the camera's importance to the art form. In wrestling, the camera is not an objective lens, as it would be at a sporting event, but an emotional filter for viewers at home. The camera is always on the crowd during the pop, to show viewers how excited the crowd is to see this wrestler. Then the camera transitions to a close-up for

the appearance and follows the wrestler through to the ring entry. Some wrestlers will gesture toward or speak to the camera during their entrance, an engagement tactic for viewers at home.

Engaging the opponent

Wrestlers that enter second, who are often the bigger draw or reigning champion, may choose to engage their waiting opponent instead. However, extensive opponent engagement—beyond a pointed finger and a few shouted words—is unusual, but sometimes used to make a story seem more real by stripping away the most performative aspects of the match to make it look more like a real fight. Alternatively, some feuds rage on for so long that they come to define the characters themselves. These ring entrances, heavy with opponent engagement, reflect the interdependency of the players.

Product give away

In 2011, 33% of WWE's annual profit came from consumer products sales; which includes the sale of t-shirts, sweatbands, and masks, all items that performers can wear on their way to the ring. Consequently, product give-aways have become a staple of face and heel ring entrances alike. At the very least, performers will wear their character's t-shirt out to the ring, and throw it into the crowd during their final preparations.

Ring entrance archetypes

A ring entrance does not define a character; it is the core traits and attitudes of a character, packaged into a brief performance. In the black and white world of professional wrestling, these fundamental traits overlap considerably and result in certain character archetypes, and thus, ring entrance archetypes.

Faces

Every man

As the name suggests, this character is the likable, down-to-earth hero. These characters always side with the crowd and often spring to their defense when a heel lashes out at the character of a city or demographic. This affinity for the audience is obvious during the ring

entrance. Most every man faces have long but simple entrances with plenty of high-fives and waves to the crowd. These characters rely on their pop, which is louder and longer than most, for emotional impact. The best contemporary example of the every man face is John Cena.

High flyer

Another crowd favorite, the high flyer is a consummate showman. Known for his or her flashy in-ring style, with plenty of flips, twists, and leaps, a high flyer will almost always end a ring entrance with an acrobatic ring entry. Kevin Von Erich, a wrestler from the 70s and 80s, used a simple hop over the top rope, very exciting relative to the ring entrances of the time, to elicit a pop from the crowd.

Heels

Arrogant heel

The arrogant heel is the perfect foil for the every man. His or her distaste for the crowd is the central focus of the ring entrance. Arrogant heels yell at or mock the crowd, and will engage particularly vehement audience members in screaming matches for the camera's benefit. Arrogant heels may also choose to ignore the crowd in favor of demonstrating their strength and prowess with exercises and tricks.

The arrogant heel was the first character archetype to leverage the ring entrance for character development. Gorgeous George, who wrestled in the 1940s and 1950s, developed the first arrogant heel persona, and arguably the first character in professional wrestling. His famous ring entrance, where his valet or wife would spray the ring with perfume before he appeared, was met with such heat that it touched off the evolution of professional wrestling from staged sport to theatrical performance. Hence, all contemporary wrestling characters have sprung from the ring entrance tradition of this one man.

Mr. Perfect, an arrogant heel whose gimmick is obvious, performed a simple, nearly invisible trick at the end of each ring entrance; he spat his chewing gum into the air and swatted it away with his hand. This signature move reinforced the core of his gimmick:

perfection in everything he does. Ravishing Rick Rude, whose entire identity was his sex appeal, put a different stamp on the arrogant heel entrance by punctuating his ring entry with an alluring hip swivel. Immediately before this move, he would remove a crimson robe to expose his constantly changing ring attire, which was often airbrushed with inflammatory images of his opponent. This sequence reminds the viewer of Rick Rude's gimmick, incenses them with vulgar actions, and brings the focus back to the current storyline, achieving the goals of the ring entrance and then some.

Monster heel

Monster heels seem to live in a different world than other wrestling characters; much like the antagonists of horror films, they share little in common with humankind. Monster heels' ring entrances portray isolation, rage, proclivity for violence, and, importantly, a lack of regard for or engagement with their surroundings. These ring entrances are the most similar of any archetype, because they must evoke a difficult to summon emotion: fear. Kane, a contemporary monster heel, uses expensive parlor tricks like blinding pyrotechnics and loud, surprising sounds, to generate the desired adrenaline rush.

But before these theatrical tools were available, some monster heels breached the delicate division between work and shoot to remind audiences of their fearsome nature. Bruiser Brody, a monster heel that found great success in Japan, would come crashing through the crowd slinging a long steel chain. His wild look, complete with animal pelt jacket, and history of injuring audience members inspired true fear.

Mysterious foreigner

Bruiser Brody exemplifies a sub-category of monster heel: the mysterious foreigner. This archetype's cultural implications are too fascinating to leave unexplored. As art mirrors life, so too does the mysterious foreigner reflect recent wars, racism, and prevailing audience attitudes. Serving as enemies in effigy, these characters are always exaggerated parodies, dehumanized by their cartoonish appearance, uncivilized behavior, and limited movement vocabulary in the ring. In post-WWII Japan, barbaric white male characters, such as Bruiser

Brody, surged in popularity, affording national champions the chance to symbolically do what their army could not, and conquer the Westerners.

Similarly, wars have inspired the creation of many mysterious foreigner characters in the US. One of Bruiser Brody's counterparts was the Great Kabuki. Kabuki, like most mysterious foreigners, had a heavily costumed appearance and physical gimmick that he displayed during his entrance. Kabuki was the first in a long line of mysterious foreigners to use blown mist, deployed by spitting colored liquid into a plume of mist that blinds his opponent. Other interesting variations on the mysterious foreigner include the Iron Sheik, an Iranian with villainous curled boot tips, and Abdullah the Butcher, a giant Sudanese madman who was led to the ring with a black sack over his head.

Face/heel non-specific

It is possible for ring entrance archetypes to be shared among disparate character types. This overlap is acceptable when the ring entrance centers on a neutral, shared characteristic.

Uncontrollable

Uncontrollable characters are remarkably similar, whether they are heels or faces. The same holds true for their ring entrances, which are characterized by wildness and extreme anger or excitement. The Ultimate Warrior is a perfect example. His whirlwind entrance began when he came running out from backstage and ended when he dove into the ring and wildly shook the ropes. Throughout the Warrior's career, during which he was both a face and a heel, his entrance remained unchanged. This archetype's versatility suggests that there is a fine line between wildness that is exciting and wildness that is frightening.

Comedy character

Comedy characters, who usually appeal to children, use vaudevillian antics and sight gags during the ring entrance to establish themselves as humorous. These sight gags reappear during the match, following a similar story arc as animated cartoons. Santino, a contemporary comedy character, speed walks to the ring while displaying his secret

weapon, the Cobra, which is just his hand and forearm cocked in a snake-like shape. Comedy entrances follow familiar patterns but demand less of the audience's emotions, since they only request relatively easy to achieve laughter and applause. Even comedy heel entrances are meant to solicit laughter, like that of R Truth, who holds the ropes open for his small, imaginary friend Little Jimmy.

Showman

Showman characters can be either faces or heels, which is perhaps a reflection of our society's conflicted relationship with narcissism. Showmen, as the name suggests, believe themselves to be superior and worthy of the crowd's adoration. Almost all Showmen solicit cheers from the crowd (regardless of whether they are actually cheered or booed), and spend plenty of time posing for the camera. "The Heart Break Kid" Shawn Michaels, now known as HBK, enjoyed a decades long career as a Showman. His entrance movements also changed very little when he pivoted between face and heel, but took on a different tone; in-ring posing that was once charming was now egotistical.

Outliers and interesting deviations

Tweener

Tweeners are called such because they are 'between heel and face'; this ambiguity makes tweeners appear to be the most 'real' of any wrestling character, because they are not bound by the bright lines of good and evil that divide the professional wrestling world. These characters' personalities are typically similar to those of the performer themselves, which allows tweeners to slip between work and shoot with relative ease. Like Every man faces, tweeners are loved by the crowd and have relatively simple ring entrances. However, unlike faces, tweeners must alert the audience whether they will be acting as a heel or face in the match—or intentionally leave them in suspense. Hence, the ring entrance is even more critical for character definition, and tweener entrances develop more meaningful nuances as a result.

CM Punk, a contemporary tweener, flits between heel and face within a single promo. His character, like his name, is inspired by punk culture and driven to rebel against popular

sentiment. Punk is favored by the crowd because of his bluntly honest, shoot-like promos. At its core, this counter-culture figure is a heel, as he is sharply critical of the audience and their Every man heroes. CM Punk reminds the audience that he is fundamentally a heel by subverting movements traditionally favored by faces during their ring entrances. Instead of pointing to the sky, or raising his arms triumphantly during the appearance, Punk crouches and feels the floor of the stage. After entering the ring, when most faces would climb the ropes to engage and be seen by the crowd, Punk takes a seat, cross-legged, in the middle of the ring.

Retired wrestler

Retired wrestlers often weave in and out of storylines, cutting promos and making brief in-ring appearances. Their entrances, are interesting for two reasons. First, even very recently retired wrestlers perform heavily diluted versions of their character's traditional entrance. On the surface, this may simply be to alert the audience that this character will not be wrestling. Upon further consideration, it also seems to signal something about the relationship between the character and the performer that brought it to life. When wrestling, each character is portrayed as inseparable from the person themselves. In retirement, these performers seem to be acting the part of the character, often choosing to drop the character's speech and movement styles shortly after entering the ring.

It is a curious tradition, as non-characters do not fit neatly into the imaginary world of most performing arts except at the very end, the curtain call, when performers are applauded for their work. This analogy aligns perfectly with the second interesting deviation of retired wrestler entrances: they always appear as faces, no matter how vile they may have been during their careers. Stuck in a never ending curtain call, these retired performers appear again and again, soaking up the applause for their years of entertaining. Ric Flair's post-retirement transformation illustrates this phenomenon well. His character's ring entrance, complete with loud robe and jeers from the crowd, was replaced by a conservative suit and cheering fans in retirement.

Supernatural

Supernatural characters have recently faded in popularity, but were common during the 1980s and 1990s, when advances in special effects and stagecraft encouraged more ambitious illusions. Supernatural entrances were by far the most produced, and often the most expensive. Like mysterious foreigners, supernatural characters are heavily costumed with an obvious, physical gimmick. To evoke awe and mystery, their entrances are laden with stage tricks and pyrotechnics. The Undertaker, an undead wrestler whose gimmick was introduced in 1990, is one of the few remaining supernatural characters. His entrance, a slow march to the ring through dark fog, is one of the most iconic entrances in wrestling.

Appreciating the art form

I have called professional wrestling the highest form of American theatre and our greatest folk tradition. Stripped of the expectation of status that burdens contemporary theatre and ballet and unapologetically commercialized, professional wrestling is true drama for our time. My husband calls it the business of putting an asshole every eighteen inches.

Dear reader, regardless of your past experience with wrestling I invite you to approach it with new eyes, to consider its dramatic merits or revile its commercial dilution, and do so wholeheartedly. Whatever your reaction, savor the emotion and appreciate its clarity to pay homage to this uniquely human art form.

Video accompaniment

Most ring entrances referenced in the essay are illustrated in the following video, and explained in the following narrative.

vimeo.com/58301373

Password: marvin

Rick Martel mugs for the camera while ignoring the crowd, then enters the ring with his perfume atomizer, carrying his signature scent: Arrogance.

Ric Flair enters in his resplendent robe to boos from the crowd.

Ted DiBiase incenses the crowd by introducing his own diamond incusted belt during a ring entrance.

John Cena appears to the delight of the crowd, engages the camera with subtle gestures, and mirrors the crowd's excitement once he enters the ring.

Kevin Von Erich fights his way through the crowd and springs nimbly over the ropes.

Gorgeous George regally enters the ring and waits patiently while his valet sprays the ring with perfume, to the crowd's displeasure.

Mr. Perfect, appearing here as a face, performs his signature gum flick.

Rick Rude removes his robe and swivels his hips while being mocked by the crowd.

Kane enters the ring, bathed in red light and accompanied by loud pyrotechnics.

Bruiser Brody swings his chain wildly as he makes his way to the ring.

Great Kabuki removes his elaborate costume and displays his green mist.

Iron Sheik tries a typical heel ploy by skipping his ring entrance and hoping to ambush his opponent in the ring. His opponent, clad in military garb, shreds the Sheik's head scarf to the delight of the crowd.

Abdullah the Butcher is restrained by his manager and he waits with a black sack over his head.

The Ultimate Warrior runs out to the ring and wildly shakes the ropes.

Santino Marella speed walks to the ring and prepares his "Cobra" weapon.

R Truth who is here accompanying Kofi Kingston to the ring, pauses to help his imaginary friend Little Jimmy up the steps to the ring and between the ropes.

Shawn Michaels dances his way to the ring, then poses and struts while he prepares for his match.

CM Punk appears, feels the ground, then proceeds to the ring and sits cross-legged in the center.

Retired **Ric Flair** appears in a suit, in sharp contrast with the glamorous ring entrance robes he wore during his career, to a cheering crowd.

The Undertaker makes his way to the ring through dark fog, backlit by pyrotechnics.