Bernhard Reitz (General Editor)

Contemporary Drama in English
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Anthropological Perspectives

Papers given on the occasion
of the sixth annual conference
of the
German Society for Contemporary Theatre and
Drama in English

Edited for the society
by Werner Huber and Martin Middeke

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Preface

Between July 3-6, 1997, the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE) convened at Paderborn for its sixth annual conference. The cloistral character of the conference venue and Paderborn’s notoriety regarding matters ecclesiastical and spiritual was more than apt regarding the apparent ‘bigness’ of the issues raised by the conference theme of “Anthropological Perspectives in/on Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English.” The revised versions of the papers delivered on this occasion have been collected here. However, a record of the proceedings would not be complete without a mention of the fringe events, as it were, and of the various institutions and individuals who made this symposium possible.

Our warmest thanks go to Nicholas Arnold, who, at extremely short notice, agreed to conduct a workshop on the theme of exploring theatrical space, thus not only giving the younger conference delegates the opportunity of a good morning’s workout but also covering slots left blatantly vacant by all too volatile guest speakers.

The usual theatrical entertainment was provided by the TU English Drama Group Berlin, who performed Brian Friel’s Dancing at Lughnasa (under the direction of Peter Zenzinger) and by the Studiobühne Players of the University of Paderborn, who presented their version of Joe Orton’s What the Butler Saw (directed by Heike Haase). The former performance left the audience with feelings of subdued melancholy, while the latter had side-splitting as well as antagonising effects.

As regards general sponsorship, we would like to acknowledge here the truly generous support we have received from the following institutions: Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Tech-
nologie, Bonn; The British Council, Cologne; the Research Committee of the University of Paderborn; the Department of Languages and Literatures (Fachbereich 3) of the University of Paderborn; and Universitätsgesellschaft Paderborn.

Of the many individuals that contributed to the organising of this conference and the publication of these proceedings the following deserve a special mention for their initiative and dedication: Alice Graf, Heike Haase, Miriam Kleine, Kati Stammwitz, and, last but not least, Sr. Stefania of Haus Immaculata and her staff.

March 1998

Werner Huber/Martin Middeke
**Introduction**

If the twentieth century is one of paradigm shifts, then the 'anthropological turn' in literary studies should by all means counted among them. As David Edgar notes in his essay here, new developments take their time to penetrate the masses from the avant-garde down (even in the case of critics and theorists). As early as 1973 Clifford Geertz had given expression to the equivalence in method of the anthropologist and the literary critic, equating ethnography with the reading and interpreting of texts. Twenty-five years on our critical practice and vocabulary find nothing strange in the metaphors when we speak of 'social semantics' and 'culture as text.' Mediated by such critical paragons as Stephen Greenblatt and his cultural poetics or Pierre Bourdieu and his cultural fields, literary criticism (including drama criticism) has not only widened its area of responsibility accordingly, but has adapted its methodology to deal with drama and theatre as one form of expression among many in the field of cultural discourses. In that sense the essays collected here herald the anthropological turn as the 'cultural studies' turn in everyday critical practice.

Anthropology is an inquisitive discipline which offers theories and methods for investigating the issues of human self-definition and the perennial questions of 'What can we know?', 'What can we do?', 'What may we hope for?', and, ultimately, 'Who are we?'. In order to be able to give a concise answer to these questions anthrop-

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pology would have to consider cultural as well as natural facts, in
other words, it would have to examine evolutionary biology and
cognitive psychology just as closely as social science, genes just as
closely as cultural traits. We are born into a culture, internalise its
contents, and would, probably, as readily internalise (any) other
contents had we been born into any other cultural context. Hence,
much of philosophical and cultural anthropology has come to agree
on the fact that we cannot assume a fixed, perpetual, and unchang­
ing essence of any culture or any individual. This is also partly due
to the fact that biological approaches to anthropology such as nine­
teenth century 'scientific' racism (Lombroso, Nordau, and the like)
and social Darwinism have proved lethal in their political conse­
quences. And, of course, there has at last been the truly liberating
force of our knowledge derived from cultural anthropology and
gender studies that human behaviour, gender, sex, authority, his­
torical agency etc. are to a large extent social constructs rather than
biological givens. To emphasise this means to emphasise an envis­
aged potential for change, for difference, for liberation from the
fetters of conventional _mores_, and perhaps even from the fetters of
an evolutionary past. There are, all the same, some observations
which would hint at the possibility that, in some ways at least, our
minds have not changed that much since the genesis of the human
species in the pleistocene. As religious acts, folk-tales, stories, and
other cultural activities such as dancing, artefacts, writing, painting,
etc. reveal in particular, there are commonly stabilised and estab­
lished structures of representation which survive different cultural
and historical contexts. The same stories are re-told again and
again, motifs re-emerge cross-culturally and archetypically, and
these stories survive as long as the patterning of their overall struc­
ture remains identifiable; in case it does not, such stories fall into
decline and are lost. Similarly, as we know, there are, for instance,
different cultural manifestations of the supernatural, and however
much these manifestations may differ in the directions they take
individually, one cannot help thinking that the assumption of cogni­
tive universals and common structures of the human mind underly­
ing these manifestations would go at least some way towards ex­
plaining their intercultural variations. Naturally, no attempt can be made here at resolving the question as to whether and to what extent our identities are both socially constructed and biologically determined. Yet especially with regard to the degrees of social differentiation and pluralisation to which Western post-industrial society has advanced, it becomes obvious that the desire for ‘re-construction,’ repetition, stability, and an existential sense of belonging becomes as strong as the desire for ‘deconstruction,’ for the radically new, for change, difference, and development.

In this, the relationship between anthropology, drama, and the theatre is by no means an arbitrary one. Drama originally denotes human action and, characteristically, interaction between individuals, but also between individuals and their historical, socio-economic, and political environment. In effect, it was precisely the latter kind of interaction which made Hegel look upon drama as the ‘highest stage of poesy and art.’ Like all art, drama and the theatre in our culture have the anthropologically rooted function of (symbolic) representation, and they reflect one of the main characteristics of any culture: the anthropological need for the production of ‘meaning’:

3 This, for instance, is borne out by Erving Goffman’s remarks on the ‘theatre frame,’ which Goffman locates between what he calls a ‘well-mean t illusion’ and a ‘simple modulation.’ Goffman, of course, sees the difference between the stage and real interaction, but he also concedes that there has to be a system of methods of transcription by which real processes are transformed into stage reality; Goffman, Frame Analysis: An Essays on the Organization of Experience (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). “Theatre,” argues Hélène Bouvier, “is a sophisticated, often useful means of access to understanding society, or at least a key to reading the combinator diverseness of a community’s functioning, its history, its material production and technology, its cognitive orientation.” And as regards the relationship between anthropological research and theatrical forms: “Building on the necessary contextual analyses revealing the social, political and economic underpinnings of theatre forms, developing the concept of an expressive and aesthetic system in which theatre is but one element interacting with other artistic productions or practices within a given society, and testing the concept through intercultural comparison, the horizons for theatre anthropology are broad enough”; Theatre Research International, Special Issue: “Anthropological Theatre,” ed. Hélène Bouvier 19.1 (1994): 1.
To make theatre means practising an activity in search of meaning. Considered on its own, the theatre is an archeological relic. And yet this archeological relic, which has lost its immediate utility, is loaded with everchanging values. We can adopt the values of the spirit of the times and of the culture in which we live. Or we can search for our own values.  

Victor Turner argues in a similar vein, when he sees performance, drama, myth, and ritual closely interrelated — especially since Western culture itself requires 'performance,' multiple selves, that is, specific and effective role-behaviour. Indeed, the social-dramas are the stuff which the stage-dramas are made of, which they feed, dwell, and comment upon. "Life itself now becomes a mirror held up to art," and, as Turner points out, such mirroring is grounded in the interrelationship of stage and reality, an exchange by which "something new is added and something old is lost or discarded." And it is in this regard that the theatre has, on the one hand, replaced ritual and myth, yet, on the other hand, bears structural resemblance:

Nonindustrial societies tend to stress immediate context-sensitive ritual; industrial pre-electronic societies tend to stress theatre, which assigns meaning to macroprocesses — economic, political, or generalized familial problems — but remains insensitive to localized, particularized contexts. Yet both ritual and theatre crucially involve liminal events and processes and have an important aspect of social meta-commentary. [...] Liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and anticipating postliminal existence. [...]  

Introduction

Theatre is one of the many inheritors of that great multifaceted system of preindustrial ritual which embraces ideas and images of cosmos and chaos, [...].

Culture, then, is a constellation of texts embodied in written and spoken language as well as in rituals, theatre, festivities, and gestures. These constitute valid forms of expression to reconstruct historical, social, and gender-specific relations between individuals and their cultural environment. Turner's anthropology, as it were, aims at capturing symbols in temporal movement. Rituals are therefore not looked upon as dead, that is, as iterative customs devoid of activity. Rather than that, they are regarded as forms of cultural practice which are open to change and re-interpretation. Of course, the tasks of both innovating and re-interpreting these cultural symbols are particularly dealt with by literature and theatre.

To adapt Turner's phraseology, the articles in this volume set out to explain the 'social meta-commentary' of contemporary plays and playwrights and different fields of social-drama within cultural contexts ranging from England, Ireland, Canada, the United States to Nigeria. Notably, the societies framing these contexts have by now largely joined the 'global village,' that is to say, they have changed to a world-wide 'electronic society,' which makes the question of the relevance of theatrical meta-commentary on society all the more riveting. The topics of these essays cover various aspects of human self-definition within their respective cultural environment: the search for love, religion, history, biography and life-writing, dramatherapy, gender, rave culture, mass media, cyberspace, and information technology. Six of the essays are concerned with theatrical representations of human societies and identities in terms of ritual and myth. Adapting, interpreting, and re-writing myth and ritual clearly hinges on existential tensions between the need for stability, repetition, and tradition, on the one hand, and the competing desire for cultural and individual change, diversification, and
deconstruction on the other. By necessity, re-writing and re-thinking myth and ritual on stage juxtapose a culture's or an individual's past and present and, thus, locate (cultural) identity in a temporal continuum.

Anja Oed's analysis of two plays by Nigerian playwrights Wole Soyinka and Tess Akaeke Onwueme, *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Broken Calabash*, highlights the structural parallel between drama and ritual. Drawing on the incorporation of elements of Yoruba myth and ritual as well as Igbo culture in these plays, Oed emphasises aspects of 'play' within ritual that render ritual in drama a means of both cultural self-assertion and active transformation of society and individuality.

In effect, a similar diagnosis is made by Stuart Marlow in his essay on Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Reminiscent of Artaud's notions of dance as a form of rebellion against social restrictions ritualised dancing in Friel's play can be viewed, Marlow argues, as the vital expression of a repressed oral tradition set against the colonising powers of church, empire, and literacy, which — in England as well as in Ireland — destroyed or 'purified' dance in the name of 'moral improvement.'

Thomas Leuchtenmüller, commenting on a variety of plays by the African American playwright August Wilson, elaborates on the community-building aspects of ritual. Ritualistic elements are a decisive dramaturgical element in Wilson's plays, employed to lead the audience to points of identification with what they see on stage and, furthermore, to a reconsideration of their spiritual past.

How intensely theatre and reality are intertwined and, accordingly, how they influence an anthropological self-definition of man/woman in the twentieth century becomes evident in the social-drama topic of Nicholas Arnold's essay. Arnold points out that the yearning for a ritualistic belonging in the face of isolated segments, fragments, and a *Lebenswelt* which no longer offers models for social integration and organic solidarity among its members underlies one of the most fascinating venues of theatricalisation within contemporary reality: rave culture. Especially young people, whose experience is largely characterised by an increasing loss of utopian belief, turn
Introduction
to the rave as an alternative culture 'to exorcise daily life.' Moreover, seen as versions of a 'new and redemptive theatre' (Artaud), Arnold argues, raves are theatrical events which challenge the seemingly unchanging nature of text-based theatre and, thus, challenge equally rigid concepts of human self-definition in our culture.

As Markus Wessendorf shows, Richard Foreman's *Ontological-Hysteric Theatre* turns away from a theatre anthropology which, like that of Artaud, Grotowski, Turner, and Schechner, is based upon the 'romantic' notion of ritual as producing an experience of *communitas*, unity, presence and oneness. Foreman's anthropological concept is grounded on an observation of difference and, as it were, of disjunction. The resulting permanent 'failure of desire,' however, is seen as the necessary impulse for any creative process both in life and in the theatre.

Margarete Rubik pursues the ways in which the re-writing of the ancient myth and ritual of the *Bacchae* functions in four plays by Joe Orton, Maureen Duffy, Caryl Churchill/David Lan, and Timberlake Wertenbaker. All four plays interrogate the liberating potential of the Bacchantic ritual and the Dionysian spirit, which, especially in Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*, entails a self-conscious analysis of gender roles, patriarchy, and historical agency.

The remaining essays partake of an anthropological perspective in so far as they consider questions of general human concern (sex and gender roles, humankind and technology) against the background of such binary oppositions as permanence vs. change, traditionalism vs. progress.

David Edgar starts from the autobiographical observation of how his reading of anthropological criticism (Turner via Schechner) and his travels in Eastern Europe in the 1990s influenced the writing of *Pentecost*. He elaborates on the manner in which this play exemplifies, as it were, Turner's concept of 'liminality' as a phase of reorientation and reorganisation, as a rite of passage even. At the heart of this process are continuous attempts at redefining and recognising 'otherness.' In the present case such relativism is manifest in the troubled history of the play's Eastern European setting and the apparent Babylonic confounding of the English language. Edgar con-
cludes by stating the play’s intention to celebrate difference, cultural hybridity, and intercultural dialogue. Unity in diversity emerges as the fundamental anthropological principle.

Stefanie Kramer enters a plea for the recognition of an important dramatic subgenre: biographical drama, especially biographical plays by women about women. Her examples, Claire Tomalin’s *The Winter Wife* (on Katherine Mansfield) and Sheila Yeger’s *Variations on a Theme by Clara Schumann* (both first produced in 1991), demonstrate how various contemporary ideas regarding feminism, deconstruction, concepts of identity and history may or may not inform biographical plays which seem to beg these topical questions by their very nature. Despite their aesthetic and structural differences both plays are shown as questioning (and militating against) the sociocultural construction of gender and the sexual determination of human behaviour; both share the common theme of power and love.

Albert-Reiner Glaap examines three plays by Canadian writers Brad Fraser, Judith Thompson, and Diane Warren. Each play is concerned with anguished human relations in the context of a contemporary urban Canada that is in clear contrast to the more conventional pastoral image of that country. Glaap outlines the persistence of archetypal/universal themes such as the relationship between power and love, while at the same time drawing attention to the fact that these plays seem to tackle moral and aesthetic issues beyond the reach of conventional standards.

Richard Allen Cave continues the theme of the deconstruction of conventional gender stereotypes by looking at cross-dressing, gender-bending and drag in postmodern performances. At the centre of his essay are three plays, each of which could be taken as a distinct statement on queer politics: *Belle Reprieve*, a rendering of Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Neil Bartlett’s *Sarrasine*, and Frank McGuinness’s *Carthaginians*. The three plays engender confusion through different forms of gender masquerade and the deliberate de-limitation of sexual identities on and off stage. Cave cites these examples within an anthropological framework in which he relates the function of the drag/queer artist to the exceptional sha-
manic role the androgynous and cross-dressing figure of the *berdache* plays among American Indians.

Johan Callens investigates the role of time and memory in the creative renderings of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* by Elizabeth LeCompte and the Wooster Group. Their self-reflexive performances reveal 'time' as a metaphysical, structural, and cultural factor. The foregrounding of the dynamics of theatre which is meant to reflect the dynamics of memory is achieved by continuous self-reference and the inclusion of all manner of heterogeneous material (such as videos, audience reactions etc.). Callens concludes by establishing affinities between the Wooster Group and Gertrude Stein's avant-garde theatre.

Klaus Stierstorfer explores points of contact between drama-therapy and theatre studies and presents a brief history of the crossover between these two areas. Following the Aesculapian tradition in the history of Western theatre he demonstrates how different concepts of theatre and different theories of acting influenced, and in turn were influenced by, (psycho- and socio-)therapeutic practices. What makes possible these exchanges throughout seems to be a 'common theatrical instinct' which unites such diverse borderline phenomena as Evreinov's 'theatrotherapy,' role therapy, and the general acceptance of the theatricality of modern life, not merely as a critical metaphor but as a paradigmatic perspective.

Fritz-Wilhelm Neumann looks at the impact of information technology on the stage. He speculates on the surprising absence of information technology as a subject or theme in contemporary dramatic literature, i.e. the question is raised from an aesthetic point of view why drama has not kept up with advances in information technology. Neumann discusses theatrical experiments in virtual reality as well as four plays available on the internet which are exclusively concerned with computing. The examples seem to imply a cultural critique of the (imminent) menace of the post-industrial age.

As the essays in this volume show, an anthropological attitude in literary criticism may open up perspectives for a re-consideration of contemporary drama and criticism. On the one hand, such anthropological perspectives go beyond the cul-de-sacs of poststructuralist self-reflexivity. On the other hand, they put an emphasis on the
observation that ethnographic reality and art are interrelated and do mutually pervade each other. Accordingly, in the process of their re-telling the narratives of drama (and of art) render themselves and the cultural experiences they refer to open to re-interpretation and, thus, to change.
Engendering Confusion

A recent study of drag quotes one exponent as claiming that "now drags are seen as the shaman priests of the gay world." The same volume opens with an attempt to situate contemporary cross-dressing in a wide historical context through a series of bullet-points accompanying a spread of illustrations; significantly, the first picture is of an American Indian, a berdache. No name accompanies the photograph of a young Indian beautifully dressed in a garment that leaves the left shoulder bare; the hair is centrally parted and shaped to the sides in bunches with ribbons; (s)he sports earrings, necklace and numerous bracelets and carries an elegant miniature basket; jaw-line, neck, exposed shoulder, forearms and hands are heavily muscular and masculine yet the dominant effect is feminine without being effeminate; the pose and manner suggest total self-possession. From other sources one can supply the missing information: it is Wewha, a Zuni berdache, photographed circa 1885. On the opposing page of Drag Diaries there is reproduced a print of a Japanese onnagata from the Kabuki stage; again there is an exquisitely fashioned garment and an elaborate hairstyle; present, too, about the image is a sense of stillness and self-possession. These two images are surrounded by more recent manifestations of drag and the ensuing pages carry coloured photographs of contemporary drag artists on and off stage, creating and transforming themselves from male to female.

Though the stated intention of the author-editors of the volume is to claim and define a distinct history, there seems a marked difference between Wewha and the Japanese Kabuki-actor on the one hand and the twentieth-century drag artists on the other, which makes one question the terms underpinning that historical agenda. Reading the interviews which comprise most of the text of *Drag Diaries* points up this contrast even more sharply. There is talk of drag as a “wholesome decadence” focused on “style queens” whose “appearance is all about illusion,” “a mask,” “it’s about flawless presentation [...] we’re image-makers”; the ambition is for “fun: it’s theatre.” Gender-bending is here a game with brilliant surfaces, masquerade, an elegant (or tacky) balancing-act between performance and performativity. Interestingly few of the men interviewed cross-dress on a permanent basis as a chosen life-style. While the theatrical contextualising permits parallels to be drawn between the onnagata and the modern drag artist (always allowing for the greater sophistication of the Japanese performer deriving from centuries-old traditions of training in deportment, stylised body-language and vocal delivery), there seems little or no connection between the current practice of drag and the experience of the berdache, which involves total commitment to the crossing of gender borders as a way of life. It is a lived not a performed transmuting of gender categories; other photographs of Wewha (held in the Smithsonian Institute, but not reproduced in *Drag Diaries*) show the berdache within the Zuni community, not as the object of their spectatorship. There is here no cultivated quest for apartness, no frank or joyous embracing of otherness; Wewha has a place within, not apart from Zuni society; for Wewha there would be no point in gender masquerade, since there is no need to challenge the status quo. Walter L. Williams in his anthropological study of the berdache tradition, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*, shows how the berdache undergoes a kind of calling, often accompanied by rites of choice in which the community tests the sincerity of that vocation as spiritually ordained. Williams records that a berdache told a Sioux shaman how “if nature puts a burden on a man by making

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3 *Drag Diaries*, pp. 15, 41, 71, 117 respectively.
4 See Plate 10 in Williams.
Engendering Confusion

him different, it also gives him a power.”5 Analysing his researches, Williams concludes in respect of the berdache that within Indian culture, “the difference is emphasized, becoming a basis for respect rather than stigma.”6 This accounts, I would argue, for that quality of self-possession present in the images of Wewha, beside which urban drag looks forced, effortful, calculated, combative, and, in many instances, deliberately frivolous. The attempt to give drag academic respectability by inferring anthropological (as distinct from theatrical/historical) roots begins to appear somewhat spurious as one surveys the evidence. The claim that drag artists are the shamans within the gay community begins to read like a rhetorical flourish, a grasping for a psycho-social agenda it would be difficult to prove. The key to this issue of critical discrimination (and the focus of this essay) lies in the phrase, “within the community,” and the meanings that can be read into it.

Cross-dressing (as a site for contesting the traditionally opposed binaries, male and female, and for asserting pluralities of gender as personal as distinct from social constructs) has long been a creative force in gay entertainment. It empowered expressions of identity transgressing the gender divide that had previously been judged by the heterosexual hegemony as deviant. The increasing political empowerment of gays and lesbians in England has brought the issue of gender definition into public debate, and theatre in its various manifestations has begun to reflect this widening preoccupation. Interrogations of gender this year permeated even the circus; not as one might perhaps expect in clowning, but in the work of Jeremy Robins, who describes himself as a “gymnast turned queer performance artist.” Through his work he attempts to engage with ideas about masculinity and the games men, gay and straight, play in shaping appearance to endorse, extend or subvert their notions of self; acrobatics is informed by queer theory.

In Primary Object Love (premiered at the 1997 London International Mime Festival under commission from Circus Space) Robins uses his technical skills to investigate contemporary queer

5 Cited in Williams, p. 42.
6 Williams, pp. 61-62.
Richard Allen Cave

identity as a matter of playing with choices of 'look' drawn from
constructions created by the media, pornography, drag show, and
fashion. Cross-dressing features in the show but not to the exclusion of
other fantasised expressions of modern masculinity. The agenda is
seemingly satirical (an exposure of current styles of narcissism), but as
the performance evolved a tension intruded setting the message in
conflict with the chosen medium, since acrobatics has its particular
codes of performance which include the performer’s acceptance of
applause for achieved feats of skill. This courting of applause,
accompanied as it so often is in the circus by a certain satisfaction
suffusing the features of the performer at his or her own
accomplishment, itself hovers precariously on the edge of narcissism.
That it did so here made for a degree of confusion over whether the
performance was endorsing or criticising the posturings depicting the
styles of role-play being investigated. It was difficult, too, as spectator
to reconcile the astonishment and wonder occasioned by the technical
brilliance of the performance as gymnastic display with the critical
detachment required properly to detect and place the very different
kind of self-display within the fantasy life of the ‘character’ which
Jeremy Robins was projecting. The intended agenda was at odds with
the acrobatic accomplishment. One applauded Robins’s desire that his
act should offer more than thrills, but one was left wondering whether
the very nature of his artistry militates against that ambition being
realised.

Further there was the matter of the audience: the performance had
been previewed by a lengthy article in the Gay Section of Time Out,
and the audiences were predominantly gay (theatrical personnel were
prominent). That such a specialised audience could read the
performance as a series of games with homoerotic personae was beyond
doubt; it was exhilarating and empowering to see an artist openly
using his bravura technique as a means to express his own queer
sensibility. Within the gay community Primary Object Love would (and
did) command an immediate rapport; but for queer interrogations of
gender to carry radical political and social weight, they must be
capable of being situated within the community at large beyond the
ghetto. Primary Object Love has to date not played in a genuine circus.
Engendering Confusion

It is instructive in the context of this concern with community to look briefly at the situation respecting the theme of gender interrogations through cross-dressing as it is currently handled by mainstream cinema, which is situated culturally at the opposite extreme from the gay fringe venue with its specialist audience. The intended appeal is consciously to the widest public. Hollywood’s effort, *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), directed by Chris Columbus, stars the kooky but decidedly heterosexual Robin Williams in the cross-dressing role, which promptly takes all the danger out of the experience; and the motive for the drag is a wholly heterosexual one: to gain access as nanny-in-disguise to his children, from whom he has been separated by a cruel divorce settlement. We are never far from the world of nursery tale or pantomime, though in this instance the dame-figure has somehow coalesced with the fairy godmother; as ‘woman’ Williams projects a wholly cosy image of the feminine with amply padded bosom, corset and staid clothes. This is drag that has been domesticated and conveniently de-sexualised. The accoutrements of the drag (the padded bosom particularly) are often the basis of the farcical routines, as when those falsies catch fire during a crisis in the kitchen. What we are offered is family entertainment, and all hint of the transgressive in the donning of drag has been eradicated.

This is not, however, the case with two recent foreign films offered for predominantly Western consumption. Both significantly place time-honoured theatrical traditions of cross-dressing within modern social and political contexts. *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), directed by Chen Kaige, shows the arduous and brutal training of the apprentice actor destined to play transvestite roles in Chinese opera before examining the changing fortunes of that performer and the troupe in which he stars, as modern China moves from feudal to communist state. Continually the actor’s private (homo)sexual identity is compromised by the changing value-systems thrown up by the cycles of social upheaval (the Japanese invasion, the communist seizure of power, the cultural revolution). The life of the particular individual and his chosen means of sexual expression are both the index of social change and a critique of it. The cross-dressing here is exotic and erotic, but continually we are shown the cost psychologically to the
performer; sexual dissidence is the means to expose the continuing brutalism of the society within which the performer has both to learn and to present his artistry.

*The Square Circle* (1997), directed by Amol Palekar, takes a more complex perspective: a transvestite actor saves a woman from exploitation and prostitution by dressing her as a man; they travel India together as a ‘straight’ couple, encountering everywhere manifestations of what is shown to be a staunchly traditionalist society. Sexual identity, as in *Farewell My Concubine*, exists in consequence in a dangerous tension with changing social circumstance. The film rigorously interrogates gender as a social construct on every level, deconstructing the sign-systems connoting heterosexuality, examining the extent to which those perceived sign-systems trigger predictable categories of response, and deploring the want of freedom for the individual to choose whether to adopt or reject prescribed codes of behaviour in order to retain a secure place within Indian society. Cross-dressing in *The Square Circle* is deployed to problematise tradition in its complex social relations to individual need; it allows the central pair of characters to step back from themselves and see where they are situated in their society. While this poses fears and dangers for them in their precarious position as other, the challenge of refusing to conform releases in them an endless creativity; far from being contained within the limits of a prescribed persona, they are required continually to redefine themselves; their carefully sustained social identities are conscious masks behind which they have created room for a different kind of play. They have created for themselves the

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7 I have been much influenced in the terms of my analysis here by the words of Augusto Boal and especially by his outline of the subject of his book, *The Rainbow of Desire*, as recorded in the interview that forms the substance of the chapter on him in *In Contact With The Gods: Directors Talk Theatre*, ed. M.M. Delgado and P. Heritage (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1996). See especially p. 35; and also the observation on p. 32: “To be real is to make images of my life and what I feel, not necessarily the image that someone else can endorse. I don’t want people to be realistic, because to be realistic or naturalistic is to reproduce what we already know. I want to discover new things. […] You should be real, but not realistic.” *The Square Circle* beautifully illustrates the force of Boal’s argument.
circumstance within which they can explore together the distinction between gender and sexuality.

*Primary Object Love* and *The Square Circle* nicely exemplify the extremes within which I wish to pursue my argument respecting gender interrogations through cross-dressing. Robins’s attempt to extend the signification of acrobatics carries many of the hallmarks of postmodern performance: it is technically brilliant, exploits elements of parody and pastiche; it teases with possibilities of meaning without emphatically endorsing any one of these to a degree that would constitute an exactly definable theme; it equally allows a reading of the theatrical event as game, which inevitably defuses any pretension to constructive satire. The film, too, demonstrates the actors’ prodigious skills and their sophisticated artistry in defining the complex levels of gender illusion demanded by the plotline; but the serious questioning of gender identity is placed firmly within precisely defined social contexts. The contrast between these two experiences raises the question often posed by critics adversely disposed to postmodernism: can the radical aesthetic and stylistic disjunctions pursued by such art convey a radical social or political intent or does the self-consciousness of such artistry lead only to indulgence, solipsism and frivolity? In a society that increasingly allows superficial elements of cross-dressing under the guise of fashion, is it possible for theatrical deployments of drag within postmodern performance to command attention as seriously transgressive? If drag engenders confusion, can that confusion be purposefully creative? To pose questions about the relation between drag and postmodern performance is not to ignore the issues raised at the start of this essay about current anthropological perspectives onto cross-dressing but, hopefully, to illuminate them. But it will be necessary first to explore in detail three recent theatrical projects focused on cross-dressing which can be interpreted as addressing this apparent conflict between the postmodern and the purposeful.

*Belle Reprieve*, first staged at the Drill Hall in 1991, brought into collaboration two established gay companies: Bloolips (Paul Shaw and Bette Bourne) and Split Britches (Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw); the script was the outcome of collaborative improvisations; each company
had a record of productions engaging with gender masquerade through cross-dressing and the deconstruction of popular, usually cinematic icons of heterosexuality. Uniting their forces enabled them to broaden their attack into a bolder statement of queer politics than either group had to date achieved alone. The target of their investigations in *Belle Reprieve* was Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* both as stage play and as film, through which Marlon Brando as Stanley and Vivien Leigh as Blanche became cult figures particularly in the gay world. That the four were here questioning the value of role-modelling implicit in the creating of icons is apparent from the very casting: a butch dyke (Peggy Shaw) played Stanley, while Blanche was played by Bette Bourne, a radical sissy (that is a drag artist who engages with the feminine in himself and so, by not resorting to over-elaborate make-up, padded bra and the like, presents a deliberately androgynous image); Mitch’s role fell to Paul Shaw who played the part as a male-dressed gay longing to dare to be a fairy; and Lois Weaver made Stella an exaggeratedly femme dyke. *Belle Reprieve* on several occasions deploys a technique which has become characteristic of performance art, where the artists, often at key moments in the plot, step out of role to comment on the material, the situation, the dialogue that they are required to work with; the performers voice their private dilemma as actors: being what they are, yet playing what they are being asked to play. These moments take on a particular poignancy and edge in *Belle Reprieve*, since the four actors are all playing caricatures of their own life-choices in respect of their off-stage identities. Various consequences derive from the complex significations of the casting.

Firstly, potential undercurrents in Williams’s text are given prominence. When Shaw as Mitch courts the gay transvestite Blanche of Bourne the effect is to foreground what Williams merely intimates about Mitch’s sexuality through his apparent gentleness in contrast with Stanley and his inability to leave the protection of his mother’s home. But when Shaw’s Mitch, dressed in a white ballet skirt like a Christmas-tree fairy, is seen watching and quietly serenading Blanche while she is taking one of her numerous baths, the explicit psychologising begins to take on surprising implications. Does Mitch
as closet gay envy this particular Blanche’s confidence in being ‘out’? And is it Blanche he is idolising exactly, or Leigh in the role of Blanche, who will therefore be required to play being subservient to Brando? It is not card games that this Mitch plays elsewhere with Stanley, but arm-wrestling (Stanley invariably wins). The dialogue shifts rapidly towards the erotic as they grapple together (“STANLEY and MITCH: (in a frenzy) Bite me! Bite me! Suck on me!”8), while the situation shades steadily from homosocial to homosexual, which begins to intimate not only that Mitch wants to play masochist to Stanley’s sadist (Mitch clearly enjoys giving in), but also that there is something decidedly un-heterosexual going on in Stanley. That Stanley is here a butch lesbian begins to give a new edge to the idea of physical competition as macho display. The sequences engender confusion to a degree of complexity where heterosexist claims that gender is a matter of one readily definable binary opposition are exposed as utterly ludicrous. Within the comedy of it all, the queer political stance is exact and exacting. The same is true of another episode where Stella and Blanche reminisce about their days as cheerleaders, which leads into a song-and-tap number about exploring each other physically “under the covers” (“Spreading our knowledge and sharing our thighs”9) where the idea of girlie talk evoked by the lyrics is offset by the stage image of Weaver dancing with Bourne. Is the sissy being accepted within the feminine ranks? If so, the fact that the sequence ends with a vivid visual reference to menstrual blood immediately rehearses one physical reality of being a woman that the sissy cannot experience, however rigorously he searches for the feminine in his psyche. And what of Stella: is she just being naive here? does she long for a lesbian relationship? or, perhaps, for a man with softer, less aggressively masculine traits than Stanley? Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire was once married to a gentler kind of man; but her discovery of the nature of that gentleness (his homosexuality) led inexorably to his suicide. Continually the comedy launches the spectator into darker levels of experience where

one can only ask questions without hoping for precise answers; but in that process Belle Reprieve continually illuminates Williams's play in unexpected ways.

Secondly, and as an extension of this last point, Belle Reprieve systematically deconstructs heterosexual constructions and valuations of masculine and feminine and this beyond the obvious effects of asking spectators to view Peggy Shaw as Brando and Bourne as Leigh. Consider, for example, Stella's reminiscences of her teenage years and her adoration of her older sister Blanche, whose ways she studied meticulously in order herself to be properly feminine:

I used to follow her into the bathroom. I loved the way she touched her cheek with the back of her hand. How she let her hand come to rest just slightly between her breasts as she took one last look in the mirror. I used to study the way she adjusted her hips and twisted her thighs in that funny way when she was changing her shoes. Then she would fling open the bathroom door and sail down the staircase into the front room to receive her gentlemen callers.10

Yet this Blanche is a man in drag who has himself studied women’s mannerisms, watched the ways in which they perform their femininity to the point where he too can act the semiotics of their genderised condition to attract the gaze of her/his particular gentlemen callers.11 Interestingly, the macho arm-wrestling episode for Mitch and Stanley, which opens up such surprising revelations about both individuals, leads directly into an overly assertive song from Peggy Shaw as Stanley in which ‘he’ relentlessly asserts his masculinity for the benefit of the women in the audience through the refrain “I’m a man/ Spelled M...A...N...Man.”12 Blanche succumbs in the next episode to his charisma, but the fact that the scene they play is a parody of the cinder-in-the-eye sequence from the film of Brief Encounter stresses the extent to which both of them are enacting gender stereotypes. Masculinity and femininity are here clearly being performed. As Belle Reprieve develops, Stanley’s confidence in his masculinity begins to

10 “Belle Reprieve,” p. 158.
11 I have been influenced in much of this section of the essay by a reading of Judith Butler’s “Lana’s Imitation: Melodramatic Repetition and the Gender Performative,” Genders 9 (Fall 1990): 1-18.
waver and, noticeably, it is Blanche who warns Stella: “The noises he makes, the way he walks like Mae West, the sensual way he wears his clothes, this is no garage-mechanic working-class boy, this is planned behaviour”; and when Stella retaliates by questioning the authority of such insights, Blanche retorts: “Only someone as skilled as I am at being a woman can pick up these subtle signs.” That meticulous placing of the word “skilled” points up the irony of the remark. This Stanley begins to break under the strain, so that the final ‘rape’ scene with Blanche can be read as a desperate effort to prove himself male. All gender in Belle Reprieve is role-play, in which Stanley is desperate to get at the truth behind the appearance of others and so render them insecure before the force of his masculinist authority, while seeking to protect his own choice of illusion from investigation or analysis. Bourne’s Blanche, unlike Williams’s Blanche or Vivien Leigh’s, was remarkable in performance for a quiet but complete self-possession (there is after all some degree of resemblance with Bourne’s chosen sissy-role in life) which got Peggy Shaw’s Stanley totally rattled; and it was this aspect of Blanche’s lifestyle rather than the lost family wealth and estate that brought out in him an increasing brutality. Acting, even in the context of the performativity of gender, demands absolute commitment. This was one staging of Williams’s play where Stanley was fast losing out; even Stella, to whom he finally clung for support amidst the theatrics, since (as he confides in her) “you are at least who you seem to be,” left him totally fazed with her admission, “Well, Stanley, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you…”

This leads into the last effect of the particular casting for Belle Reprieve which focused on an interrogating of the darker sides of conventional gender stereotyping, particularly that men are innately violent and women as innately passive and victimised. The questioning was most clearly brought to the audience’s attention when Peggy as Stanley began the rape scene from Streetcar with Bette. The biological genders are in this instance reversed; yet Peggy has a gym-honed muscular physique while Bette has in performance a delicately

14 “Belle Reprieve,” p. 182.
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carried torso: (s)he claims at this point that (s)he got the role because (s)he has "the shoulders" for it. To make the issue more challenging still, Peggy like Brando ripped off her pyjama-top to reveal her breasts. Gender confusion abounds here, although, ironically, the whole episode occurs as a consequence of Bette stepping right out of character, criticising the fabricated nature of the group’s performance and demanding greater realism. By what conventional criteria defining realism do we either view or interpret the ensuing rape? Are we watching “a collision between polar extremes of masculinity” or a drag queen becoming “the pathetically raddled victim of a lesbian’s sexual bullying?” If the butch dyke is to play out her masculinity to the full does that necessarily require her to adopt the more brutish aspects of the gender as conventionally characterised, or is that tragically to exchange one kind of stereotyping as female for another as male? Bette’s Blanche actually refuses to play out the role of pathetic victim and threatens violence in return by “pulling off one of her stiletto-heeled shoes”:

STANLEY: If you want to be in this play you’ve got to drop the stiletto.
BLANCHE: If you want to be in this play you’ve got to make me!16

The performance stops right here on the threshold of the rape and the play rapidly concludes with the cast of four singing a paeon in praise of theatre:

I love the theatre, I love it better than all my life, and just because
It’s so entrancing, the song and dancing, to the music of applause,
I love the stage and all about it, it simply goes right to my heart,
I love the glamour, I love the drama,
I love I love I love my art.17

Expectations are raised; yet the potential for a serious interrogation of gender is suddenly diffused, as the sharp intellectual scruple controlling the stage-images till now is abandoned in preference for a cliché about theatre as game, make-believe and excessive congratu-
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lation. Mere entertainment prevails. It could be argued that the confrontation of the rape and its manifold implications in this staging were actually rendered more poignant for being dismissed so lightly. Or again that the games with gender masquerade had suddenly confronted an issue where, if Williams’s script and plot-line were to be followed exactly, the limits of masquerade (on and off stage) would become all too apparent and dangerous subversions of gayness ensue. Belle Reprieve through this conclusion took a challenging stance in relation to Streetcar as situated within a dramatic and theatrical canon that in the last analysis does not speak for or to queers. Tennessee Williams may have been queer himself, but he indulged in self-denials and subterfuges in conceiving the play in the form that he adopts, which Belle Reprieve through its games with realism continually holds up to critical view. It is here that Belle Reprieve is at its strongest in terms of queer politics in deconstructing not only heterosexual constructions of gender but also, and more courageously, varieties of gay constructions of gender, too. What value lies in the fact that Brando and Leigh have revered status as icons to different sections of the gay community? What does gender masquerading actually imply and ultimately entail? What precise motivation lies behind assumptions of butch or femme identity by gay men and lesbians? And if it is all role-play, for how long and into what circumstances should the role be sustained? Can or should the role-play extend beyond the privacies of the bedroom? The breakdowns, the disjunctions begin to occur when the couples (Stella with Stanley; Blanche and Mitch) begin to interact together and the complexities of their private relationships as queers are required by the exigencies of the plotting to go social. Ultimately, in that light-hearted conclusion that frustrates any serious development of the rape scene, it seems as if the company lost its creative and critical nerve: that was the point at which the performance might have carried over the insights it provokes into some form of social engagement. Instead, Belle Reprieve elects to raise questions, myriads of them, and attempt no answers: as post-modernist performance, it remains firmly within the bounds of the self-referential. Its definition and critique of queerness are in the last analysis challenging and meaningful only to the queer audience. (It is significant that in London Belle
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*Reprieve* played in the Drill Hall, a venue catering almost exclusively to the gay community.)

Bette Bourne also took the central role in Neil Bartlett's *Sarrasine*: it was played in 1990 by Gloria Theatre Company at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh and the Drill Hall, London, was taken on tour abroad by the British Council, and revived at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, in 1996. The performance is based on a novella by Balzac which tells of the unconsummated love of Sarrasine for La Zambinella, an opera singer he believes is a woman, but whom he discovers to his fatal cost to be a castrato kept under the patronage of a cardinal who sports a taste for assassinating any rivals for the singer's affections. This story is told within another which acts as narrative frame: a wealthy young woman, Mme. de Rochefide, sees the singer in old age, now dressed with great delicacy as a man, is disturbed by his appearance, and seeks to learn his story; this provides the occasion for the telling of the main narrative. The novella has been the subject of ruthless deconstruction by Barthes in *S/Z* (1973), in which he examines how Balzac deploys authorial rhetorical devices to control subsequent readings of the text; in other words, he demonstrates its contrivances as fiction as a matter of (serious) games with words.

Bartlett engages in a similarly rigorous deconstruction but to draw a spectator's awareness to the nature of the relationship between a drag artist and his/her audience. In his play frame and narrative are in-woven: La Rochefide, a wealthy patron of the arts, who recalls hearing La Zambinella in her youth, is obsessed with hearing that unique voice one last time; she is prepared to pay an exorbitant fee for that pleasure; in the ensuing performance La Rochefide is compelled to assist in the acting-out of Sarrasine's story, herself being required to assume Sarrasine's role as the tale reaches its climax. La Zambinella is played by three performers simultaneously. The sophisticated drag artist, Bourne, appeared as an ancient androgynous figure with gravelly voice till in the closing moments of the piece he was revealed as a middle-aged man in a sumptuous dress. Beverley Klein is an actress-singer with a range that can encompass opera and musical comedy as well as the tones of the *chanteuse* in the manner of Piaf; like many a contralto her voice can, when required, take on
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masculine timbres. François Testory is an actor, dancer and mime whose voice covers a phenomenal range from counter-tenor to baritone; his stage persona shifts between the archly camp and the pathetic or vulnerable. Together as La Zambinella they were enacting pluralities of perception, the endlessly mutiplying ways spectators might choose to read the artistry of a castrato or, by analogy, that of a gay or drag performer.

We are presented with a brilliant display of theatricality, moving rapidly through pastiche of opera styles to dramatised narrative, from meditative sung or spoken monologue-arias from each of the three Zambinellas about the nature of life as a kept performer (musical and sexual) to bitter recriminations against the patrons who toyed with them for their private gratification or who enjoyed putting them on display to excite the envy of other ‘connoisseurs’ while holding their darlings in paid subservience. The story of Sarrasine’s innocent infatuation with La Zambinella is undercut by a mounting anger in all three at the tyranny of circumstance, the loss of what was clearly a sincere affection, and disgust with themselves at rising once again to the lure of La Rochefide’s money. It is the presence throughout of Mme. de Rochefide as privileged, engaged spectator which extends the implications of the story into the theatre and specifically into the relation there of actor with audience. The fact that the stage is possessed by four ‘women,’ of whom two are clearly men cross-dressed, extends the story further into an interrogation of gender as social construct. Klein is dressed always as a woman but often sings with gusto in the male register; Testory possesses a puckish quality in his androgyny, mercurial in his shape-changing from drag to near-naked male display (his genitals always covered); Bourne is generally statuesque, matronly, controlled but is prone to slip precariously into rasping satirical attack or sly music-hall-style innuendo, song or patter. The role of La Rochefide has been played by two different actresses over the space of the two sets of performances. Leah Hausmann (perhaps too young for the part in 1990) was sufficiently dictatorial and aloof and was shamelessly demanding in getting her needs satisfied; she projected a cold but desperate hunger to control. Sara Kestelman in the 1996 revival projected a maturer personality,
imperious, at once passionless yet reckless in pursuit of any prize she lusted after, but most noticeably possessed of an authority that seemed altogether more masculine than feminine. Consequently, in her hands La Rochefide's assumption of the role of Sarrasine had both a logic (the shared fixation for La Zambinella) and a profound irony (middle-aged cynicism impersonating youthful ardour wedded to purity of intent). The interrogation of gender became far more disturbing with Kestelman as La Rochefide (the suggestion was curiously of an apparent femme with the sensibility of a butch dyke): androgyny here was fascinating, bewildering and, if not profoundly threatening, then at least deeply subversive and challenging.

In Balzac's tale Sarrasine is murdered by thugs hired by La Zambinella's protector. In the play the murder weapon — a knife — makes its first appearance during the opera-singer's account of her working week, where nightly her roles seem to exact of her a crime passionelle in all probability followed by madness and suicide; the knife was her stock property. When La Rochefide joins the cast of the play-within-the-play to enact Sarrasine, all three Zambinellas draw a knife on her to compel her compliance; when the narrative demands a playing out of the murder, it is the Zambinella played by Klein who strikes the first blow. As their victim lies seemingly dead upon the forestage, behind her the three Zambinellas take a silent bow together in exaggeratedly slow motion. Mme. de Rochefide will 'recover,' be rewarded with her song from Bourne and make her departure, but La Zambinella in her various manifestations has made her point. The overweening patron has been enticed into playing the victim of another patron's cruelty and met the full fury of La Zambinella's anger and disgust. In Balzac's tale, La Rochefide functions as a surrogate reader, curious about the aged and eerie person glimpsed at a party, anxious to know his story and so to have her questions answered, but repelled when confronted with the truth (she shows no compassion and extends her distaste to the narrator who confided the story to her). La Rochefide in the play is a surrogate spectator, paying to be entertained, insisting her particular contract be fulfilled to the letter. She, too, like her prototype in the tale gets her wish but not before the performers have shown her the truth of her own being.
Her fate forces the theatre audience to question the nature of their response: it is not so much a matter of what today they understand by a castrato as a questioning of the degree to which they read performance as gendered and perceive their response as similarly a product of gendered expectation.

What did an audience one-time perceive when watching a castrato: a manly woman, an effeminised man, a freak, a plaything, a fetish or fantasy, an object of laughter, awe or loathing? Was such a performer gendered at all or as neutered to the perceiver’s psyche as in physical fact? And what does a modern audience see precisely when watching a drag artist or an openly gay performer? How gender-conditioned is that reaction? The castrato had the most terrible of genders imposed by others for purposes of pleasure and aesthetic delight; his identity was definitively shaped to become a theatrical spectacle. How far can the contemporary analogy Bartlett is drawing be carried? Crudely and cruelly marginalised in public (except as entertainment), yet privately coveted and patronised (in the best and worst sense of the word) La Zambinella’s response is to be nothing but a bewildering array of masks that defy any lasting construction. It is for him a form of revenge: circumstance has made this the only possible reality, a reality shaped, motivated and conditioned by anger. Is the like mode of self-defence (the game of masquerade with gender) the one means of expression now available to the gay artist? The postmodernist theatricality of Bartlett’s Sarrasine is fuelled by an aggressive queer political agenda. Making a virtue of necessity, the gay artist is seen here as welcoming his/her victimised status as ‘other’ because it can be a source of personal power. To what extent does the queer spectator understand the politics of drag and see it as more than entertainment? The play uses cross-dressing as an expression of a radical politics: a politics of challenge, born of (and honed by) anger at definable social injustice. Through its interrogation of the nature of spectatorship and of the heterosexual and homosexual gaze, this version of Sarrasine certainly carries gender masquerade into the community; but the community here is an arena entered in a spirit of defiance and outrage.
Carthaginians by Frank McGuinness (first staged at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 1988) is a third work that could be defined as postmodernist: it has no sustained linear development, being structured as a sequence of episodes; games abound within the stage action which lead inexorably to the last word actually to be spoken: “play.” But the game-playing throughout Carthaginians is to some serious, social purpose. While the play may situate itself within the postmodernist style, it also engages with colonial issues and circumstance, since the play is set in Derry in Northern Ireland within a graveyard where the cast of six (three men and three women) are gathered; they are all suffering from psychic wounds that are consequences of the ongoing colonial strife; all are experiencing a kind of death in the spirit; they are the abject embodiments of the ‘other’ in colonial discourse. The events are to be understood as taking place over the week approaching an anniversary of Bloody Sunday (when government troops fired on a crowd engaged in a Peace March, killing thirteen innocent civilians). Seemingly helpless and hopeless, the six have come together to await a miracle: the resurrection of the thirteen dead men, which alone will give each of them some future purpose in living. There is a seventh character: a young man, going by the pseudonym of Dido, a homosexual with transvestite leanings, Catholic and Irish. From an imperialist British standpoint Dido is marginalised to an extreme: he endures the condition of ‘otherness’ at every level of his being; and yet he is the one character who is not to be described as abject, since he creates a dynamic life for himself within the world of the play as artist and arch player of games. He is a creator and his own best creation, whether sporting football gear or a flowing dress and feather boa. Dido never appears twice in the same guise, male or female (once he even contrives to appear as both male and female simultaneously within a play he devises for the group’s entertainment); his constantly changing personae are his defence against ostracism. Traditional forms of protest (pacifist or rebellious) have left the other six psychologically injured. If our last view of them in the play is as a group now sleeping peacefully, it is because Dido has

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effected a healing process amongst them through play masks and participating in games as a means of steadily discovering how to refuse to be defined as abject.

True to the postmodernist manner, McGuinness’s dramatic style undergoes as many transformations as Dido’s appearance: the play starts within the naturalistic mode, but, as Dido’s games begin, this quickly gives place to a witty pastiche of agit-prop theatre with bizarrely placed echoes of O’Casey’s most famous lines, a quiz show, the sustained quotation of a whole poem (“The Listeners” by Walter de la Mare) and the verbal ritualising of the names, ages and addresses of the dead men as a quasi-liturgy, while what seems at first to be background music (Dido’s lament from Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas) gains in time a profound metaphorical intensity. High cultural reference is sharply juxtaposed against the popular; but those juxtapositions are found to be not the aesthetic games designed as in many postmodernist works to defy the extrapolation of any certain meaning, but distinct strategies aimed at alerting audiences to their own place and function within the theatrical event. Consider, for example, the quoting of Purcell’s opera: the Dido of legend was the victim of Aeneas’s colonial ambitions to found Rome; the modern-day Dido is by contrast a queenly survivor within another imperialist situation who resolutely refuses victimised status. Dido’s lament in the opera focuses on the refrain “Remember me!”, which carries an ironic charge given the context of the opera’s first performance: it was initially played in 1689 the year of William and Mary’s accession to the British throne and a matter of months before William’s invasion of Ireland that was to result after the Battle of the Boyne in the expulsion of the Stuarts from the island and the punitive treatment of their Catholic adherents. What is the value of enshrining the opera as a cultural icon, if the circumstances of colonial invasion which inspired its tragic expression still obtain? The dislocations of style bring audiences to a questioning of where they choose to situate themselves within not only the theatrical performance as it unfolds but within the larger cultural processes that that performance continually addresses, particularly when what is being defined as operating behind the surface incidents that make up the play is a manifest and on-going opposition between
politics and art within the historical continuum. The title of the play, *Carthaginians*, aptly takes one straight to the heart of the matter.

*Carthaginians* ends with Dido watching over his six sleeping friends. Enacting Dido’s play, *The Burning Balaclava* (a fierce send-up of the many serious dramas about the Troubles), joining in a riotous, drunken quiz, sharing memories of school lessons and the reciting of poems in class, remembering and naming together the martyrs of Bloody Sunday has given them a sense of community in which they have found peace. For Dido this is the moment to depart and, taking his farewell, he urges them to go on with their “play.” And the word, *play*, does not here convey a camp and frivolous gesture, since the intention behind its usage is clearly neither irresponsible nor trivialising, given what McGuinness has shown play can achieve in a torn and fractured society. Dido as artist cannot affect the political world directly, but through play he shows a way of achieving a measure of distance from political circumstance through which to discover possibilities of social integration. It is significant that, though Dido takes part in the final two expressions of play (the intoning of the names of the men who died on Bloody Sunday and the reciting of “The Listeners,” which evokes a powerful sense of communion between the living and the dead), he does not initiate them; they are a group endeavour springing from a shared inspiration; Dido’s functioning as guide is no longer necessary; he is free to go. *Carthaginians* is a bold defence of the transvestite homosexual, the queer queen, as artist in society: Dido has given what is best in himself to his community, and they have discovered its value experientially. The postmodernist strategies McGuinness pursues of fracturing and juxtaposing styles, of celebrating performance as an end in itself here are invested with a notable social purpose. The objective behind the use of gender masquerade is not openly confrontational, as in Bartlett’s *Sarrasine*, but inspirational, collaborative; and it is at this point that the anthropological focus with which this essay began can profitably be reassumed.

In its quest for legitimating role-models, gay culture has perhaps too easily claimed that the cross-dresser, the drag artist, socially (as distinct from privately) extends the berdache tradition into
Engendering Confusion

contemporary life. That American Indian homosexuals should wish to seek for kindred within their ethnic past is wholly to be respected, but for white gays, American and European, to claim the berdache as their rightful heritage, too, would seem a more questionable pursuit. There are dangers in cultural appropriation.\(^{19}\) Anthropological studies of the berdache by writers such as Walter L. Williams have shown that there is much more involved in the status of berdache than merely transvestism, a man dressing as a woman. Berdaches, according to Williams, "gain social prestige by their spiritual, intellectual or craftwork/artistic contributions and by their reputation for hardwork and generosity. They serve a mediating function between men and women precisely because their character is seen as distinct from either sex."\(^{20}\) In other words: they have a defined role, accepted within the whole community, which is creative, supportive and ameliorating. Far

\(^{19}\) Mark Thompson in offering a preface to his essay "Children of Paradise: A Brief History of Queens" shifts from noting how the drag queen is generally held in contempt by contemporary society to rehearsing how different matters were in the America of the Indian tribes, which allows him to outline some features of the berdache tradition. He continues: "Today the religious role of those who bridge gender has been reduced to a tragic and trivialized cipher, a faint echo of the symbolic importance it once had in human culture." He argues that it is "still possible to scrape away layers of cultivated Christian dogma and glimpse a small example of the useful ways in which cross-dressing can serve a community." In the essay that follows, however, which is a history of two drag ensembles, the Cockettes and the Angels of Light, no further attempt is made to link social and theatrical history to the initial anthropological claims about cross-dressing and this has the effect of reducing such anthropological concern to the status of a "trivialized cipher," a meaningless gesture. Thompson's treat­ment of the subject reproduces the very process of reduction he began by criticising. One wonders why he chose to refer to the berdache tradition at all in the circumstances, since he makes no attempt to develop its implications. It is a spurious claiming of a past history and a present heritage. The essay is included in Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning, ed. Mark Thompson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), pp. 49-68; the quotations are to be found on pp. 49 and 50. Significantly, the next essay in the anthology which is by Will Roscoe, "Living the Tradition: Gay American Indians," takes the form of carefully juxtaposed extracts (with commentary by Roscoe) from his interviews with a group of American Indian lesbians and gay men and is altogether more circumspect in its pursuit of "connections" between the berdache tradition and the sensibility of the modern gay American; he leaves it to the Indians to talk of sharing their role models (see Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning, pp. 69-77.)

\(^{20}\) Williams, p. 2.
from being socially transgressive, the berdache operates to enhance and cohere the social group and in so doing has a respected and powerful status within the community. Williams continues by showing how the berdache “dreams for others, spiritually healing and sorting out a person’s confusion.” They tend to cultivate the arts of memory and to dramatise and foster performance and role-play in order to recall the past for the rest of the group; acting is most developed in those berdaches who also become shamans; they are frequently visionaries and seers. In summary, the berdache is in many ways to be seen as the embodiment as well as the guardian of the community’s culture. Williams movingly concludes that with the berdache “difference is transformed from deviant to exceptional.”

It has been the object of this essay to examine three contemporary performances involving cross-dressing to test the potential validity of this claim for a close link between the modern drag artist and the berdache. All three investigate the psychology and social implications of cross-dressing in some depth. Belle Reprieve confronts an intended gay and lesbian audience with some of the more disturbing implications of gender masquerade when this is set beside the darker modes of expression found in heterosexual gender constructions; the assumption of drag here is problematised once it extends beyond the frivolous; the play provokes questioning and to some degree excites a conscience about shaping one's own gender definition. Sarrasine is directly confrontational, demonstrating the degrees to which the gay performer can and should excite conscience within audiences; it presents the spectator with drag as a radical political statement which rejects any form of patronising amelioration. Neither of these gay performances would appear to subscribe to a concept of drag that meets any of the functions served by the berdache: the first focuses on anxieties about the cross-dressed identity; the second sees it as necessary to argue the need for acceptance of the gay and transvestite sensibility within the larger social community, and it frames its argument with a fierce, combative passion. There are, however,

22 Williams, pp. 33 and 42.
23 Williams, pp. 61-62.
parallels between the functions of the berdache within Indian society and the functions McGuinness gives to Dido within the society shown in *Carthaginians*. Dido demonstrates a complete self-possession as transvestite (even when treated initially as the object of homophobic violence from one of the men in the group); he is wholly at ease with gender masquerade. As the play develops, Dido is seen as both healer and mediator, bringing the group in time to experience an inner centredness akin to his; he offers them inspiration, teaching them how to discover a new social integration. Dido, like the berdache, is an ameliorating, because supportive and creative, presence within the community represented in the play. McGuinness demonstrates the potential for the queer artist to assume a function in contemporary society analogous to that of the berdache. In *Carthaginians* games with gender extend beyond techniques of performance to encompass a radical intent: queer politics engages with colonial discourse and questions of cultural reception to create a postmodernist drama in which *play* (and in particular play with gender) has a deeply serious purpose.

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24 There is, of course, no explicit reference to the berdache within the text of the play; but, interestingly, at the opening of the scene in which the group are to come into a state of community there is talk between the men about role-play as children and in particular games of Cowboys and Indians; it is Dido who initiates the exchange. All admit they preferred to play at being Indians, because “their headdresses were great” and “they had the best words” which the group then intone: “Firewater. Medicine man. Peace pipe.” In the ensuing silence, they honour the experience: “Great words. Like poetry” (see *Carthaginians*, pp. 65-66.)
A little knowledge, so they say, is a dangerous thing. Mine on the subject of this conference is not only too little but too late. Like some but not all writers, I try from time to time to explore aspects of current literary theory that seem applicable to what I am doing. In 1986, for instance, I was writing a piece that one might call carnivalesque and came across the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on that topic a good fifteen years after everyone else had read *Rabelais and his World*, marked, marvelled and moved on. Similarly, I came across Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* when his archetype model of literature was about as currently fashionable a theory as that contained within the collected writings of Erich Honecker. And it is even more embarrassingly recently that I first came across Victor Turner's concept of the liminal zone.

Embarrassing because I now wear another hat, that of a Professor of Playwriting Studies, and because my reading not of Turner direct but Turner via Richard Schechner was not about the usual and perhaps permissably innocent scavenging that writers are wont to indulge in when trying to avoid starting, but part of a sustained and supposedly serious programme of research into dramatic literature as a whole. And on both scores I have to say that, as deeply passé as he doubtlessly is, Victor Turner makes a lot of sense to me.

Turner's anthropological dramaturgy arrived at my door at a crucial moment. I had been thinking for some time about actions, in the 'Aristotelian' sense, and their usefulness to dramatists as a way of focussing the core dialectic of an emergent play (most useful for me, I have to say, between drafts one and two). With my students, the
starting point is the obvious but important distinction between the story of a play (what happens in the story expressed chronologically), its plot (what happens in the way it is told in the play), and its action (an encapsulation of the meaning of the story as expressed in the plot). In this sense, a workable action contains a project (described in a subject, verb, object way) but also a contradiction (as likely as not a clause starting with the word ‘but’; Aristotle’s peripeteia). So the most obvious examples would include “To save the city, a man seeks to discover the author of a crime, but discovers that it is himself.” Or “Tempted by a prediction, a man gains ultimate power through murder, but then discovers that the costs outweigh the gains.” Or “A woman chooses to follow and serve warring armies as the only means to keep her family; in the end, she loses both family and choice.”

As I tried to think this through, I realised that while it is quite easy to do in tragedy, it is harder in comedy, not least because comedies tend to be about groups and tragedies about individuals. However, comedies clearly contain a consistent plotting pattern, and that pattern surely must express a meaning. As the world knows, from the New Athenian comedy onwards, the basic architecture of the genre consists of a young man who wants a young woman, confronts the opposition of an older person (usually a parent), but who gets his way through the machinations of a wily servant and a twist in the plot. Within this basic architecture, elements regular enough to be generic include some kind of act of usurpation or imposturing, or the imposition of a bad law; the bursting of pretension and the humiliation of an unsuitable courtier; and an expedition by some or all of the central characters into some class of rural arcadia, in which some of them may well dress up as other people, sometimes of the opposite sex, before returning to the city or court to be married.

And while the arcadian element is foregrounded in Shakespeare, to a degree which defines it as a distinct sub-genre, it struck me how often it retains a presence in neo-classical comedy, albeit, sometimes, in disguise. Even as urban and urbane a play as The Misanthrope ends with the prospect of the central couple going off into the country to discover themselves. The case of British baroque comedy
is interesting not only for its surprisingly prominent Shakespearian echoes, including the cross-dressing of *The Rover* and *The Recruiting Officer* and the presence of the countryside either as a shift in location (as in *The Relapse*), an invader (as in *The Country Wife*), or as an evoked presence in those crucial scenes — often involving masks and other forms of literal and metaphorical disguise — in the open spaces, parks and walks of London.

It was as I became obsessed with arcadia in comedy that I discovered the writings of the anthropologist Victor Turner and his essentially dramaturgical, four-step model of the development and resolution of social crises which we might easily recognise from the above. First, Turner detects a breach of norm-governed social relations; second, there is a crisis caused by that breach; third, redressive action is taken, leading to the fourth stage, the reintegration of the disturbed group or the recognition that the schism is irreparable. In his own writing Turner sees the drama as emphasising the third stage, the ritualised action of redress, where, in anthropological terms, experience is expressed to other members of a culture for their observation and reflection. Turner defines this space as an area of "liminality" where normally fixed conditions are open to flux and change, and societies as well as individuals undertake periodic mental reorganisations. It is easy to see the liminoid space as a magic forest or island, and what happens there as a rite of passage.

But this model — via the perceptions of another of Turner’s disciples — helped to explain something else. Of the fourteen comedies in Shakespeare’s first folio, five contain actual deaths, five the serious threat of death to a central character or characters, four a central character in mourning, three a war before or during the action and no less than eight an apparent death which turns out to be counterfeited or assumed. And the astonishing number of pretend deaths are by no means the only element of traditional comedy in which we sense that the genre is somehow apeing its opposite. There are those tragic outsiders and losers whose fall serves as a spectre at the final feast. There are situations which turn from comic into tragic: so a funeral turns into a wedding in *Hamlet* and weddings into funerals in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. There
are actual plots that appear in comic and tragic guises: famously, there are two stories of three daughters, with two preferred and nasty ones and one ignored and nice one. Another is the story of a young woman who is promised by her parents to marry an aristocrat. With the aid of a priest and a nurse she seeks to evade this marriage in favour of the young man she loves. This is, of course, the main plot of *Romeo and Juliet*; it is also — with the aristocrat as Lord Foppington — the subplot of *The Relapse*.

But a much more fundamental link is the shared importance of the outside. If the young lovers of comedy are driven out into the magic forest or island in or on which to discover their adulthood, then a significantly large number of tragic heroes end up driven on to the field of battle or the blasted heath. Lear and Timon obviously, but Hamlet also, passing Fortinbras' army on the plain, returning to confront the meaning of mortality in a cemetery. And then there are those tragic heroes who refuse to leave the security of the city, court or castle, and the countryside has to come in and get them, which is the symbolic meaning — it seems to me — both of the ghosts of Richard III's victims traversing Bosworth Field between the tents and of Burnham Wood coming to Dunsinane. It was a colleague, the film writer Michael Eaton, who explained to me how the tragic form of the liminal zone makes anthropological as well as purely symmetrical sense: defining the liminal zone as that in which the protagonist is separated out from society for a period before reincorporation in a changed state, he draws from Turner the insight that all drama is essentially about rites of passage. But while in comedy, the journey is from childhood into adulthood, the tragic passage is from this world to the next. If comedy is sited in the space in which the young confront the responsibilities of adulthood, then tragedy is about men and women coming to terms with that profounder journey. In crude summary, comedy consists of people being driven into the countryside, in which they dress up as other people, re-enter the city and get married. In tragedy, they strip, stay and die.

In the early 1990s, long before I came across these concepts, I began an unintended series of plays about Eastern Europe, which brought me into the liminal zone with a vengeance. The first play,
The Shape of the Table, was based loosely on the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia and began with a dissident being brought from prison during a political crisis, to discuss the terms of his release; it ends with the former General Secretary of the Communist Party being brought from prison to negotiate his pardon with the new President Elect, who is of course the dissident of scene one. The play is set in an Austro-Hungarian palace taken over by the Communists as a government building, in what had been a ballroom and was now called the Great Hall of the 23rd of May. The hall is one of those spaces a bit large for anything but the most formal groups, and so has become willy-nilly a kind of anteroom or caucus room adjoining meetings taking place in the more modest and comfortable March the 10th Suite. This enabled me to represent not only one big actual meeting, but a whole series of breakout and caucus meetings, in which we could read the meeting next door off the arguments of the various delegations as they withdrew, regrouped and re-entered. These configurations not only helped tell the story, they served a connotative purpose, signifying that the divisions within the factions were as important as those between them. But clearly the room had resonances also: in plotting terms, it has been visited as a ballroom by one of the characters and liberated in 1945 by another. Further, it was dominated by a huge central table, covered in a heavy tablecloth, that symbolised the monolithic magnitude of the party’s power. Early on in the play, we discover that the dissident Pavel Prus was jailed for compiling an edition of the country’s fairy tales, clearly intended to paint an unfavourable picture of the pretensions of the regime. Just before the interval, at a point where negotiations are on a knife’s edge, the Communist Prime Minister pulls the tablecloth off the huge table, to reveal that in fact it is a large number of smaller tables of modern manufacture, put together to pretend to be one big one. As he does so, he suggests to the dissident storyteller that perhaps “we have entered, now, your magic land where everything is possible, and things aren’t always what they seem.” This magic land is of course the rest of the play.

By the time I wrote the second play in the series, Pentecost, I was beginning to learn some of the theory that had subconsciously in-
formed the practice of *The Shape of the Table*. I want to talk about the formal aspects of the second play, but before doing so I want to discuss what it was trying to express. If *Shape* began in the frightening and magical days between Tiananmen Square and the death of the Ceaucescus, then *Pentecost* was conceived in that extraordinary spring and summer of the following year, when it seemed the entire youth of Europe was marching, the Ode to Joy on their lips, old Soviet army caps at jaunty angles on their heads, through the great yawning gaps in the Berlin wall.

To the west, the national barriers had already fallen, and there were only a few more pockets of resistance to clean up before the Delours ideal of a frontier-less, supranational Europe was fully and finally realised. To the east, surely, it was only a matter of time before the emergent liberal democracies of the former Soviet empire followed the western powers down the pan-European path. Indeed, were not the events of autumn 1989 the final victory of European humanism, had not the wall been punched through by at least one of Michelangelo’s Sistene ceiling fingers, and would not the former communist countries now happily exchange their sadly failed version of post-Enlightenment utopia for an obviously successful one?

Even two years on, as I began to write the play, things looked very different. Far from the east importing western universalism, the traffic appeared to be the other way, with Catalonia and Lombardy eagerly emulating the emergent separatism of Slovenia, Slovakia and the Baltic states. And instead of being a temporary festivity, the ornaments of new nationhood — all those recomposed national anthems and redesigned banknotes, postage stamps and ceremonial uniforms — were hardening into real statehoods with real controls over the movement of people and capital, having less and less to do with universal humanist values, and more and more with the atavisms of ancient religious and ethnic disputes (virtually the first act of any new east European state appeared to be the delegitimation of their own minorities). The concept of Europeanness itself had changed from one of inclusion to one of exclusivity, less about who you were than what they were not. Even in 1990, I was aware travelling through the then Yugoslavia that for liberal intellectuals,
Europe was a continent that stopped 20 kilometres to the east of wherever one happened to be; even in Romania western-oriented Timisoarians sought to distance themselves from those barbarians down in Bucharest. By Christmas, when I visited Prague, it was clear that the plucky little Czechs too had drawn thick black borders between themselves and the Slovaks, were seriously debating what to do about the gypsics, and were not frankly that sure about the Moravians.

The conversion of 'Europe' from an assertion to a denial of the ideals of rational universalism seemed an urgent subject for a drama. Happily, my sobering journeys through the centre and south-east of the continent provided a number of rich metaphors. First, there was the phenomenon of the restitution of state property to its former owners, with its proverbial anecdotes of rock musicians finding they owned car factories, and Scottish expatriates that they had title to great tracts of the Ukraine. Second, as I had already exploited in \textit{Shape}, was the mordantly checkered history of so many eastern European buildings, as they zigzagged from religious to secular use, from Orthodox to Catholic (and Moslem), and from the prosaic to the unthinkable (the first extermination camp in wartime Poland was a country mansion, one of the concentration camps in northern Bosnia a ceramics factory). Third, there was indeed the determination to see that any new dividing line in Europe was securely policed with 'us' on the right side of it (as someone said in Prague, our greatest fear is not the prices nor the unemployment but "seven million Russians moving west.")

And then finally, in an obscure monastery near Skopje in Macedonia (well, obscure to me) I saw some 12th-century frescoes of the Deposition and the Lamentation that seemed to teeter so tantalisingly on the edge of the painterly naturalism that Giotto was to discover in Tuscany over a hundred years later, that it was irresistible to speculate whether the beginnings of the renaissance, the starting shot of the great relay race from mediaeval obscurantism via the reformation and the enlightenment to the scientific revolution, might have begun not in Europe's heartland but on its eastern edge.
From this came the idea of a church in an unnamed southeast European country, built in the Orthodox faith, but subsequently reconsecrated Catholic, converted to a mosque, and used as (variously) a stable for the Napoleonic armies, an interrogation centre for the Gestapo and a Museum of Socialist Achievement, behind one wall of which is a hitherto unknown fresco that, if painted when it seemed to be, could revolutionaryise the history of western art. Added to that was a bitter contest among art historians, priests and politicians for both literal and historical ownership of the painting, culminating in an invasion by those very forces from the east and south on whose ‘otherness’ the very concept of European culture depends.

Behind what I tried to do with this story is a dialectic which accepts the failure of the universal Communist utopia, but questions whether the only cultural alternative is a return to the exclusive national and religious fundamentalisms of olden times. Communism in essence sought to reveal the universal in humankind by stripping off the bark of the past and clothing the subsequent naked trunks in uniform. The new nationalisms see history as a fancy-dress box from which they can plunder the livery of those old social, cultural and ethnic hierarchies they seek to reestablish. I wanted to posit a different way of looking at culture, dare I say it, even a third way: a model which acknowledged that all cultures are fundamentally hybrids, that we are all clothed in varieties of patchwork, and that if we are not to fall victim to the arid atomisation of nationalism or its mirror-image in postmodernism, we should not just acknowledge but celebrate this fact.

Clothing is not the only analogy for this. In the last two centuries — as the notion of a single and finite world became politically real — language became both a metaphor and an expression of the knottiest and most fundamental questions of the age. However, the use of language as a political metaphor in Western literature goes back to the Babel story in Genesis, when God frustrated man’s presumption in attempting to build a tower from earth to heaven, by confounding the builders’ common language. This story is answered on the Day of Pentecost, when the apostles were blessed with the gift of tongues and spoke to their multilingual congregation with one
voice, as a result of which “all that believed were together, [...] and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.” It is no surprise that utopian communism sought to abolish the divisive (and untidy) languages of the existing world and substitute a universal language as pure and rational as communism itself. Famously, Bernard Shaw combined his socialist politics with the promotion of vegetarianism, bicycling, rational dress, simplified spelling and esperanto. Under actually existing socialism, the story was different. Certainly, ancient tongues were suppressed in the interest of proletarian internationalism, but the substituted lingua franca was not esperanto (nor even Volapuk or Interglossa) but Russian. Often, the language itself was imposed on the subject peoples (as most recently in Bulgaria, where under dying communism Turks were required to slavify not only their own names, but — via the patronymic system — their fathers’). Where this was not practical, Stalin insisted that non-Slavic languages like Moldavian, Uzbek and Tadzhik be written in cyrillic script.

Indeed, the fall of communism can be seen as yet another stern confirmation of the myth of Babel — the inevitable failure to create a universal culture to supersede the irrationally cherished clutter of the past.

Predictably, the first act of the new nationhoods that emerged in 1989 was not to reach out to the common culture of an undivided Europe, but rather to recreate a national culture as distinct as possible from that of their immediate neighbours.

Famously, the new democracies of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania quickly disenfranchised their substantial Russian-speaking minorities. In Minsk, commissions were formed to compile distinctive Belarussian words for printout, postage stamp and traffic jam, while the Croats set with a will to make their language as incomprehensible as possible to the Serbs. For their part, the Serbs insisted on their language as the language of instruction in Kosovo, where 90 per cent of the population is and speaks Albanian. In newly independent Slovakia, Hungarian-language teaching was discouraged, as it was in central Transylvania; though it was announced that, in Bul-
garia, Turkish children could now learn their own language, as an optional subject, on an experimental basis.

And eastern Europe is not alone. After thirty years of suppression, the Catalans of eastern Spain are using their new-found freedom to eliminate the national language from the region’s public discourse. Not only must teachers and public servants know Catalan, but the Catalan they must know is being made harder for other Spaniards to understand (the French ‘quixeta’ for ticket office rather than the Spanish ‘taquilla’; ‘vaixell’ for ship rather than the universal ‘barco’). Perhaps it is no surprise that the radio station in adjacent Valencia is asserting its own linguistic exclusivity and has listed no less than 543 words judged “excesivamente catalanistas” (excessively Catalan) for what they increasingly regard as a distinct language of their own.

But in fact, this is a doomed enterprise. The real contest in the world is not between Belarus and Russian, nor Slovakian and Hungarian, nor even Croatian (and Serbian and Slovenian) and Serbo-Croat, but between mono- and bilingualism. Like the Canute-like attempts of the French and Swedes to stem the tide of Franglais and Swinglish, the newly minted languages of eastern Europe are consistently undermined by the language which has now overtaken mandarin Chinese as the most spoken language in the world. Sometimes it works in secret, as indeed in China, where ‘ga lok si’ — the Cantonese for ‘family happiness’ — is the closest possible transliteration of Kellogg’s.

But mostly it appears in virtually unadulterated form, as le fast-food, le hotmoney and le jogging; as rock, pop, jeans, snack and OK; as biznisman and striptiz in Russian and kempink, mitink and brifink in Czech. Those who speak it as a second language outnumber those who speak it first by two and a half to one, and here in a central German Catholic convent we are speaking it now.

All of which contains a difficulty. What should those of us who doubt that British Imperial rule was the best thing ever to happen to India and Africa think of the fact that the language of colonial subjugation still dominates their culture? That the language first of
Imperial mastery and now of economic and cultural hegemony is drowning out the authentic idioms of the hitherto oppressed?

The answer, of course, is that that is not quite what is happening. The English that is spoken in India and West Africa, and especially in Jamaica, is an English much translated. Far from our English seeping into theirs, the traffic is now the other way.

It is not just the rich seam of vocabulary that Hindi inserted into English (from bungalow via dungaree and loot to shufti and shampoo). It is the fact that the other Englishes are now free-floating, independent of the Mother Tongue. The fury of a Wolverhampton mother on learning that her child is being taught to count in Punjabi is nothing to the reaction of the literary elite to the dub poetry of the Caribbean diaspora: what’s this, English literature that lecturers in English literature can’t understand? Indeed, English is winning the language war not so much via Hollywood, but precisely because it already is a hybrid, it is already massively impure, and thus lends itself effortlessly to the development of those myriad dialects, creoles, pidgins and patois into which it has mutated all over the world.

Various, hybrid, incomplete, corrupt; subject to all kinds of mutual misunderstanding, mistranslation and misreading; but nonetheless the nearest thing we have or ever will have to a universal way of talking to each other, ESL is a vivid metaphor of how cultures actually relate, in the real world, away from the hermetic fantasies of postmodernist and new nationalist alike. Contemporary world culture, for better or worse, is a conversation conducted in broken English. It is not via ancient tradition but freer travel that we imported *commedia dell’arte* from Italy (converting it to Pierrot shows) and Moorish dancing from Madrid (corrupting it to ‘Morris’). The English of Romanians is irreversibly influenced by the popularity of bootleg videos of the comedian Dave Allen and the historic saga *The Onedin Line*. Freud based an entire theory of childhood recollection on the basis of a mistranslation of Leonardo da Vinci’s notebooks. So the Pakistani sisters Salma and Sabina (who sing Abba songs in Hindi) and a Welsh-speaking Cardiff reggae band (called Rasta-Cymru) are but the latest manifestations of a tradition of cultural
hybridity which stretches back to the construction, via North French
gothic naturalism, Byzantine iconography and Islamic geometry and
optics, of what we now call renaissance art.

It was to express these ideas that I wrote Pentecost, finding, once
again, that the concept of the liminal zone was its structural clue.
Although dissimilar in all other respects, the play is in fact con­
structed like The Winter's Tale, with the first act consisting of a trian­
gular struggle between two men and a woman — in this case, three
art historians — culminating in a kind of trial in which an apparent
falsehood is exposed, one of the men is humiliated and the woman
is betrayed. Then just before the interval, there is a huge shift, tak­
ing us into a new and semi-magical location (in the case of the Win­
ter's Tale, separated by time and space), before a final bringing to­
gether of both sides of the story and the resolution of one by the
other. My variant on this model was to remove the time and space
shift, or rather to express it the other way round. The first act is
conducted largely in English and ESL by a group of people either
part of western culture or aspiring towards it — art historians, gov­
ernment ministers, churchmen. Just before the interval, however,
there is a literal invasion of the church by a group of asylum-seekers
— none of whom speak English as a first language, some of whom
do not speak English at all — who take the bitterly divided art histo­
rians and the painting hostage. Then during the two days of the
siege, the captured intellectuals discover through their captors
things about the world and themselves they did not understand be­
fore, which provides the key for the discovery of the truth of the
painting and a solution to the puzzle posed at the beginning of the
play.

The process by which the hostages bond with their captors is
based factually on a phenomenon known in siege parlance as the
Stockholm Syndrome (after the siege of a Swedish bank in which
hostages taken by a group of bank robbers gradually sided with their
captors against their rescuers). Dramatically, it took the form of a
kind of party that occurred in the hours between the setting of a
final ultimatum and the resolution of the conflict. Initially encour­
aged by the leading asylum-seekers to preserve morale, the party
consists essentially of the performance of a series of comic turns by the asylum-seekers, through which we gradually become aware of shared narrative elements in the stories being told. Thus, in the folk tales, rural and urban legends, clean and dirty jokes, and in one case a not immediately obvious summary of the essential components of *Star Trek*, we hear of fathers issuing interdictions against their children which are broken; of villains kidnapping heroines; of heroes departing in their pursuit, delayed by mysterious donors who give them superficially useless but actually magic items with which the villain is successfully defeated; and their return to face a final test of their identity before winning their bride. This succession of stories culminates in a considerably truncated summary of two great myths: the first, the Indian Ramayana, is delivered entirely in Sinhalese, but by now the elements of the plot are so clear to the hostages, the hostage-takers and the audience that they can follow the meaning without understanding the words. And then one of the hostages points out the echoes of all the stories in the legend of a father who forbids his child the forest fruit and whose disobedient children are banished and their own children condemned to wander through the earth. But finally, the father in pity sends his only son for their redemption, who teaches them through parables and tales; who rides unrecognised into the holy city, prophesies his capture and his death, but promises his followers that nonetheless, in three days time he will prove himself the thing he claims to be. Whereupon the theme of death, mourning and the hope of resurrection is applied directly to the experience of the characters and provides the clue that will unlock the secret of the painting in the subsequent scene.

But the significance of both the Ramayana and the Christian story is not, of course, that they are *the same* as each other or the folk tales they so insistently echo. Indeed, the endings of both tales would be unthinkable in each other’s cultures: in one, the hero disbelieves the heroine’s fidelity during her captivity, causing her to immolate herself to prove her innocence; in the other, a God is executed like a common criminal. In the same way that the mushrooming varieties of Englishes are a celebration of difference as much as an expression of homogeneity, what the great stories have
in common is often less interesting than what divides them. But what the liminal zone provides is a space for a conversation to occur, providing the final example of the dialectic I have already posited in terms of clothing and language. No, there is no universal story, underlying all the others, which if we could find it would confirm our common humanity and eliminate all difference. But, no, too, to the idea that there are no common factors at all, that we are inevitably and irrevocably divided by our different histories, herstories, genders, classes and cultures, to a point that we can hardly recognise ourselves as members of a common species at all. Yes rather to the possibility, the necessity, of a conversation between cultures that will be inevitably inadequate, imperfect and incomplete, which may well founder on the rocks of mutual incomprehension, but might as well start with what we share.

The liminal event in *Pentecost* takes the form of a party and in that sense echoes the arcadian section of *The Winter's Tale*. It is a rite of passage in which two groups of people learn about each other and grow thereby. However, it ends with a discussion not of marriage but mourning. Thinking back to *Hamlet* and the plays that Shakespeare wrote around it — the so-called problem plays — it is interesting to note how their liminal sections (usually their fourth acts) are about threatened killings and occur in places (army camps, prisons) in which violent death and its aftermath is a present risk. So at the point of the play in which a comedy would take us into arcadia, tragicomedy invites us into the graveyard. And in retrospect, I observe that in my play, too, which ends in unexpected and chaotic tragedy, one kind of rite of passage, from childhood to adulthood, conceals another, the preparation for death.

Tom Stoppard has a joke about reading criticism of his work: it feels, he says, like having one's luggage inspected at customs and finding it contains all kinds of items one has no recollection of packing. As a teacher of playwriting, I must believe that if you know what you are doing you will do it better. Certainly, that is the reason for reading contemporary literary criticism, however belatedly and selectively, and attending conferences like this. Yes, one can be intimidated, irritated and occasionally frustrated by a consciousness of
precedent. But largely, and certainly this weekend, I feel I am ahead of the game.
The Bacchae in Modern English Drama

Modern English drama has tended to find its intertexts in a powerful native tradition rather than abroad. In comparison with the numerous re-writes of Shakespeare, attempts to re-vision the great plots of classical tragedy have been surprisingly scarce. The Bacchae, however, is an exception. Its subject-matter of women erupting into orgiastic violence and thereby confuting traditional notions of their peacefulness and submission, the very notion of the Dionysiac and its celebration of the anti-rational and instinctual, and the challenge to an unequivocal masculine identity embodied in the god Dionysos have exerted a powerful fascination on at least four (or rather five) playwrights (one of the plays was co-written by two authors) to explore the meaning this haunting myth may hold for our own time.

In its subversion of traditional concepts of femininity, The Bacchae indeed embodies a potentially powerful feminist critique. Critics, however, have not failed to point out that the women's exodus to the mountain is induced by the god Dionysos, as part of his plan to punish both Pentheus and his mother for refusing to worship him, and that the delusion and madness with which the God strikes them devalues the subversive potential of their rebellion against domesticity. Indeed, once her eyes are cleared, Agave is horrified at the murder she has committed and is content to return to the patriarchal fold. It is also important to note that although the women's

1 Valdis Leinieks, The City of Dionysos: A Study of Euripides' Bakchai (Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner, 1996), p. 1, remarks that, although The Bacchae has been extensively edited, explained and commented upon, “the play seems to have become more obscure and challenging with the passage of time.”

2 Allison Hersh, “‘How Sweet the Kill’: Orgiastic Female Violence in Contemporary Revisions of Euripides’ The Bacchae,” Modern Drama 35 (1992): 409-29 (411-12).
dismembering of the voyeur is the best-known scene in the play, the self to be defined is the man, in Euripides, as in Greek tragedy in general,\(^3\) and the bacchants are merely pawns\(^4\) in Dionysos' elaborate plot to lure Pentheus to his death.

All four modern versions of *The Bacchae* I know of, namely Joe Orton's *The Erpingham Camp* (1966), Maureen Duffy's *Rites* (1969), Caryl Churchill and David Lan's *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988)\(^5\) rechannel this emphasis, focussing on the revellers instead and transferring agency to them. Only the latter two explicitly refer to *The Bacchae* or the ritual of the bacchanal in the text, whereas in Orton's and Duffy's black comedies the Greek tragedy is implicit in the action, characters and dramatic technique.

In Orton's *Erpingham Camp*, the Pentheus figure, Erpingham, is still the main character, but Orton's true interest lies with the anarchic outbreak of violence, its causes and the course it runs. The conscious trivialisation of the classical model in setting, plot and characters is a satirical comment on the vulgarity of modern life.

The play, originally intended for TV, was meant as a contribution to a cycle of plays about the seven deadly sins, as an illustration of pride. The mock-heroic parallels to the classical text are plentiful, though not always readily recognizable. Leaving aside the motifs of gender struggle and gender transgression, Orton recasts the conflict in terms of class, transmogrifying the stiff-necked Greek king into a reactionary capitalist who is destroyed by the lower-class holiday-

\(^3\) Cf. Froma Zeitlin, "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality and the Other in Greek Drama," *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, ed. John J. Winkler and Froma Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), pp. 68-69, who claims that women are always cast either as the secret model or antimodel, as catalysts, agents, blockers, destroyers or helpers — despite their high visibility in the texts.

\(^4\) Hersh, p. 412.

makers in his camp when a riot breaks out during the Saturday night entertainments. Like Pentheus in Euripides’ tragedy, Erpingham (as pruriently anxious about aberrant sexuality as his classical model) is brought low by hubris and lack of wisdom: he refuses to compromise and negotiate with the trouble-makers and insists on using force instead: “This is my kingdom. I make the laws” (75). His entertainment officer Riley is a ridiculously inefficient Dionysos, who encourages the holiday-makers to cast aside their inhibitions in the stupid animation games he proposes and unleashes violence by unwisely staging a screaming competition and then hitting one of the hysterical participants to make her stop.6 Kenny in his leopard-skin costume as Tarzan of the Apes is a hilarious counterpart to the Dionysian revellers and their traditional fawnskin, and once invited to drop his pants, he drops his restraints as well, bloodying Riley’s nose because the latter slapped his hysterical wife. His friend Ted, dancing the can-can trouserless, with his shirt-tails flying, is an absurd equivalent to the bacchantic worshippers, who were supposed to don female dress during the rite.

The initial fray sparks off a contagion of aggression and violence leading to the sexual excesses usually associated with bacchantic revelry but played down by Euripides,7 and ending in shop-breaking, arson, and general destruction as counterparts to the bacchants’ attack on villages, cattle and crops. However, the Dionysian spirit does not bring true liberation. Despite their anarchic behaviour the holiday makers never really free themselves from social norms and pathetically justify the outrages they commit by the sacred right to defend their wives and children. Adopting the unctuous rhetoric of the gutter press they have fed them on, they loot and bash in heads

6 René Girard, Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977), p. 8, speaks of the “infection” of violence, and that “the slightest outbreak of violence can bring about a catastrophic escalation [...] there is something infectious about the spectacle of violence.”

7 Euripides excludes all mention of the satyrs, who were traditionally part of the Bacchantic and who stand for drinking and sexual excesses. In this paper I am not concerned with modern attempts by Schechner and others to recapture this spirit of the Dionysian in the theatre, since these plays do not take the plot of Euripides’ Bacchae as their model.
to safeguard the very family values on whose exploitation Erpingham’s camp thrives. The rebellion of the social underdogs thus is not the concerted political act Erpingham suspects it to be; rather, it is a sign of impotent frustration and gratifies a long-suppressed desire for any kind of physical aggression: “I’ve never hit [my wife]. I agreed to waive my rights till she had the baby” (75).

In a conscious imitation of his classical model, Orton structures his action in the traditional triangle of rising action, climax, falling action and catastrophe, relies heavily on the foreshadowing of events unheeded or misinterpreted by the protagonist, extensively resorts to messenger reports to inform us about the havoc wreaked by the vandals, and has Erpingham die off stage, by falling through the floor to his death during the melee — an absurd equivalent to the uprooting of the tree on which Pentheus was hiding. The death of the authority-figure has a sobering effect on the rioters, who are shocked out of their frenzy and face the legal consequences. Like *The Bacchae*, *The Erpingham Camp* thus ends with the reestablishing of order: Riley, of all people, takes over in the spirit of Erpingham, and the system is back in operation.

In her entirely different version of the classical model, called *Rites*, Maureen Duffy concentrates on the women’s story. Ingeniously, Duffy locates the modern tabooed female space men are forbidden to enter as a lady’s public convenience, where the secret rituals of defecation and putting on make-up take place and where suppressed female desire resurfaces. However, whereas Euripides’ bacchants leave their stifling domestic environment to venture into the forest, a challenge to civic, masculine authority, Duffy’s modern maenads congregate in a claustrophobic underground space provided for them by the patriarchal establishment, a space which fails to present a true threat to the established order.

Like Orton, Duffy invents hilarious equations: the toilet attendant and part-time prostitute Ada is the modern Agave. Just as the

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8 In her “Introduction” to the play Duffy says, “The Bacchae is Pentheus’ story, *Rites is Agave’s*” (p. 350).

9 Cf. Hersh, p. 419, who points out that the play starts with workmen erecting the facilities.
latter denied life by rejecting her pregnant sister Semele, Dionysos' mother, Ada denies life "by translating sex and love into money and revenge." The god himself appears as an androgynous baby-boy represented by a giant doll, a complete antithesis to the powerful plotter in the original, making the transferrence of agency to the women all the more obvious. The wild beasts hunted by the bacchants find an equivalent in a roaring incinerator, which, in the end, will be fed with the corpse of the victim. Here, however, Duffy gives a decisive twist to the action. The supposed voyeur torn apart for his transgression of female privacy turns out to be a masculine-looking woman in a trouser suit, so that female aggression has, in fact, turned in on itself.

In Duffy's play the female potential for violence needs no divine inducement to rise to murderous level. The women resent their social, economic and emotional dependence on men, which finds climactic expression in a suicide attempt presumably for unrequited love. They also chafe under the repression of desire considered appropriate for women. Since, however, they have so much internalised social roles that they set up gender fences themselves and think in terms of gender stereotypes, Dionysian liberation is impossible.

Afraid to own up to their own sexuality and anger, the women blame anything from obscenity to sexual aggression exclusively on men. Failing to heed the androgynous appearance of the baby-boy, whom only close inspection reveals to be male, the women identify a masculine-looking figure rushing from a cubicle as a Peeping Tom simply on the grounds of their expectations: "Only men, only men, only men do that" (358), the office girls had chanted earlier when talking about pornography.

The hysterical attack on the supposed male pervert is preceded by a similar threat to an old ragged woman frequenting the toilet to eat her breakfast. This irrational aggression against a harmless old hag constitutes an attempt to exorcise from their lives the repressed

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10 Duffy in her "Introduction" to the play (p. 350).
11 Hersh, p. 413.
12 Cf. Hersh p. 419
fear of old age, ugliness and the transience of sexual attraction, and shows how deeply implicated they all are in patriarchal constructions of femininity.

Like *The Erpingham Camp*, *Rites* closes with a reestablishment of order. Once the women realise that they have mistaken their victim, they quickly and with little remorse dispose of the body and go back to their trivial everyday occupations. Nothing has changed. The murder has engendered neither self-knowledge nor catharsis, though the true voyeurs of the play — we, the spectators — are, as Duffy says, “drained, purged, purified by the emotions we have vicariously suffered in the organized dreamworld of art” (Introduction, 350).  

In *A Mouthful of Birds*, by contrast, a change is enacted through the women’s experience of orgiastic murder. The experimental play is not really a rewrite of *The Bacchae*, but cuts scenes from modern life with snatches from the Greek tragedy, when the twentieth-century characters are possessed by the classical figures. Thus, the woman who wants to drop out and sleeps by the canal is turned into Agave, and the unemployed young man becomes Pentheus. Neither the modern nor the classical scenes form a straightforward narrative sequence or psychological development. The play grew out of an interest in female violence and possession and tries to render these concepts comprehensible in contemporary terms.

The frenzy of the maenads is only one — the most spectacular — manifestation of possession among a variety of other forms of being ‘beside oneself’ — from alcoholism to love and the trance of a medium. All these forms of possession entail lack of control as well as empowerment, horror as well as pleasure, and thus come close to the spirit of the Dionysian as defined in *The Bacchae*. However, while Euripides devalues the women’s rebellion by the delusion affecting their perception, Churchill and Lan take the onus from such

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15 “There is a Peeping Tom in all of us. We should all like to be able to eavesdrop, to know how people behave alone or in groups when they can really be themselves. By watching them we can enjoy the vicarious pleasure of their ‘shameful behaviour’ and the breaking of innumerable taboos. Like Pentheus, we want to be shocked and pained” (Duffy, “Introduction,” p. 349).
inspired madness, celebrating its liberating and blissful as well as its frightening aspects.

Unlike the other plays, A Mouthful of Birds acknowledges the tabooed pleasure of physical destruction and killing. Before we move to the ancient ritual on the mountain, in several transformation practices the pleasure of eating and the attendant horror of being torn apart is explored. The fusion of sensual gratification and death is visualised in Dionysos' deadly dance, which makes both his male and female spectators die of pleasure. Then, on an "un-defended day in which there is nothing to protect you from the forces inside and outside yourself,"¹⁵ the classical story is re-enacted on the mountain¹⁶ in an outbreak of orgiastic violence.

As a modern counterpart to Pentheus' feminisation Churchill and Lan suggest the psychological emasculation produced by long-term unemployment, and also the idea of transsexuality. The point is well taken, since ritual transvestism was part of the Dionysian rite, in which only women or men in female clothing were allowed to take part.¹⁷ The emphasis put on dancing, too, is most appropriate in view of the fact that the Dionysian rites involved, as their main activity, a dance of young and old on the mountain.

In Churchill and Lan’s version, Agave stays on the mountain after the murder, instead of giving up her self-determination to patriarchy. The participation in the ritualistic killing has profound effects on all bacchants, who confess to the sensual pleasure of killing.

I remember I enjoyed doing it. It's nice to make someone alive and it's nice to make someone dead. Either way. That power is what I like best in the world. The struggle is every day not to use it. (70)

So says one of the women who, in her previous life, squirmed at the idea of skinning a dead hare. Another becomes an expert butcher,

¹⁵ Churchill/Lan, “Authors’ Notes,” p. 5.
¹⁶ This dichotomy is reversed in Rites and The Love of the Nightingale, where the murder also happens in a room.
¹⁷ Cf. Leinieks, p. 51, who also refers to Greek pottery painting, in which Dionysos himself is often presented in female dress. In The Bacchae the Stranger as well as Teuresias and Kadmos, and eventually even Pentheus, don female clothes.
enjoying the hacking up of the carcasses, whereas yet another withdraws from society to the loneliness of the sea.

Yet the ending is by no means unequivocal. Gender roles are not simply reversed, and violence is committed by men and women alike (as, for instance, the gruesome news items read out suggest). Agave, in her final monologue, has returned to her secretarial job and is haunted by “horrible images” of “a mouth full of birds which I crunch between my teeth” (71), choking on the bones. The very title of the play, then, suggests both traumatisation and liberation, revulsion and ecstatic bliss.

More than any of the other plays, The Love of the Nightingale, with its Thracian setting, its ritualised language, its use of a male and female chorus and its frequent ironic foreshadowing, is conspicuously placed in the tradition of Greek drama. Yet it is not really a new version of The Bacchae, but the ritual of the bacchanal is grafted on to a story from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, about the rape and mutilation of Philomele at the hands of her brother-in-law. Instead of wreaking vengeance on the rapist by cooking his son and serving the dish to his father, as the wronged sisters do in the original, in The Love of the Nightingale Procne helps her sister slay her son during the annual Dionysian festival, when he is caught spying on the revelling women.

Wertenbaker completely elides the Saturnalian aspects of the rite, though one of the Thracians in the play refers with disgust to the drinking excesses of the half-naked celebrants. Like Pentheus, Tereus and his men regard female lack of inhibition as potentially threatening, and the suspicion of lesbian love-making excites both their furious jealousy and their voyeuristic curiosity. On stage, however, we see little of this exuberance. Indeed, the revelling is neither inspired nor liberating, but is a reluctant concession of the repressive Thracian patriarchy, which allows women to let off steam once a year, expecting them to return to the house sober and contrite the next morning.

It is characteristic of this manipulation of the Dionysian for purposes of sexual politics that in The Love of the Nightingale, alone of all modern rewrites of The Bacchae, the women do not kill in a state
of frenzy or delusion, but know exactly what they are doing. The slaughter of the boy is a conscious act of rebellion against patriarchy. By cutting the chain of inheritance and succession upon which patriarchal rule is based, they symbolically kill and castrate Tereus by depriving him of male issue. Although both sisters perceive their revenge as poetic justice, there is no orgiastic pleasure in violence, and after the deed Procne is tired of life.

Like the other modern dramatists, Wertenbaker realigns the power of agency and reinterprets the concept of guilt. Beyond these revisions, however, rewriting The Bacchae on the whole is not, primarily, a question of contesting the representational authority of a dead white male, but of re-scripting, in contemporary terms, the deconstruction of social role clichés which lies at the heart of Euripides' imposing tragedy and of investigating what the goriest murder in Greek drama, resulting from this role reversal, may mean for our time, in both individual and social terms.

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Imaging/Imagining Women's Lives: Biography in Contemporary Women's Drama

"History is too much about wars; biography too much about great men."¹ This well known passage from A Room of One's Own shows how, in 1929, Virginia Woolf was in search of sources for the lives of women from the past. At the time Woolf was writing, the subjects of biography were still outstanding male figures who were praised for their achievements primarily in the public sphere. Subsequently, these foremost 'great' men were debunked. Nowadays with post-structuralist theory in our minds, the unified subject is believed to be dead. Moreover, new developments in historiographical writing acknowledge subjectivity and partiality in every representation of history and reality.

So why, you may think, should the appropriation of biography in drama still be of any relevance today, when biography and biographical plays are said to be elitist and phallocentric, the last strongholds of individuality and objectivity and the only reason for their popularity is supposedly man's psychological inquisitiveness?² This is, of course, only part of the whole story. Fostered by the women's liberation movement, those who had only been seen by men, searched for female role models and began to study, describe and analyse female experience.

From the 1970s onwards, many feminist biographers and women dramatists have written and dramatised the lives of historical women

in their search for ideologically undistorted identities and have placed the act of self-representation at the centre of their work. Similar to feminist anthropologists they counter traditional assumptions about the relationship between the sexes and call into question the universal category 'woman' by revealing the sociocultural construction as well as the historical variability of gender.

They deal with the question of how a woman's life may be represented and how alternatives to the depiction of women as male adjuncts can be found. Moreover, they doubt the masculine grounds on which the themes and forms of representing women's lives have conventionally been defined and accepted.

In the following I will base my remarks on four statements which I will then explain in more detail:

1. While similar themes can be found in the works of feminist biographers and women dramatists, the latter have a wider range of possibilities when dramatising women's lives.

2. Biographical plays by women can only be explored adequately and comprehensively with the help of a multidisciplinary approach which takes into account feminist theory. By analysing in particular the concepts of female identity underlying these plays, we will arrive at a better understanding of their intentions.

3. Because of different thematic emphases, these plays have been neglected by literary criticism on historical drama: a wider definition

3 Feminist anthropology is, according to Henrietta L. Moore, "the study of gender, of the interrelations between women and men, and of the role of gender in structuring human societies, their histories, ideologies, economic systems and political structures"; see her Feminism and Anthropology (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p. 6.

4 Already as early as 1935 Margaret Mead pointed out the cultural construction of gender and gender relations: "Many, if not all, of the personality traits which we have called masculine or feminine are as lightly linked to sex as are the clothing, the manners, and the form of head-dress that a society at a given period assigns to either sex" (Margaret Mead, Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies [New York: William Morrow, 1963; orig. pub. 1935], p. 280).

of the genre is necessary as well as an exploration of a number of
dramatic categories other than simply the traditional analysis of
references to historical facts.

4. There is no linear development in biographical plays by
women from realist forms in the 1970s to anti-mimetic forms in the
1980s and 1990s or from a unified subject to a deconstruction of the
individual.

To illustrate my statements — in particular statement four — I will
discuss two plays which were produced in the same year, namely in
1991. The plays are *The Winter Wife* by Claire Tomalin and
*Variations on a Theme by Clara Schumann* by Sheila Yeger. In the last section I
will place these plays in the wider context of biography in British
women's drama from the 1970s onwards by giving a short overview
of similar dramatic techniques and thematic concerns in a number
of other plays.

The new themes in feminist biography as well as in plays by
women include the reduced importance of marriage in a woman's
life and its demasking as a myth, a valorisation of the importance of
female friendship and support and the portrayal of “the tragedies
that mark women's lives — rape, incest, emotional victimisation as
well as physical.” But women dramatists have a wider range of
possibilities than a biographer, since they do not have to rely on
factual sources, which tend to be relatively scarce, in order to make
women visible and create alternative realities for contemporary
women. They can freely embellish the dark areas of history. More­
over, they can make use of anachronisms to show the contemporary
relevance of past problems or place real and fictive characters side
by side to reflect our experiences of reality in which the line between
'real,' historical characters and fictional characters blurs because
these fictional characters have become part of our everyday life as
cultural icons.

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Stephanie Kramer

Women dramatists do not claim to create an all-encompassing version of their subjects and their lives or to come up with a conclusive biography. Instead, they aim at counteracting stereotypes and at reflecting on the historical dimensions of the process of constructing identity and reality. The female characters at the centre of their plays have either been misinterpreted by conventional male historiography (Queen Christina, Mary Queen of Scots and Clara Schumann), marginalised (Isabelle Eberhardt in New Anatomies and the painter Gwen John in Self Portrait) or completely forgotten because of different standards in traditional historiography (black, lesbian or 'ordinary' women).

Most women dramatists neither simply create female counter-heroes to those created by men, nor do they give up completely their belief in individuality and female agency. However, there seems to be a misalliance between feminist biographical drama and poststructuralist belief that the "self-contained, authentic subject conceived by humanism to be discoverable below a veneer of cultural and ideological overlay is in reality a construct of that very humanist discourse." Or, as Nicholson puts it, "does not feminism itself depend

10 Liz Lochhead, Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off in Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off and Dracula (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), pp. 9-67.
on a relatively unified notion of the social subject 'woman,' a notion postmodernism would attack?"\textsuperscript{15}

We have to turn to feminist theory for a better understanding of concepts of identity in these plays. Feminist theory has not remained unaffected by the so-called identity crisis. In view of the definitions and categorisations of women by men, a logical consequence for an effective feminism would be the deconstruction of any identity and a refusal to create new images of women which might replace those produced by men.

Waugh argues that the dualist opposition between a realist belief in unique personal identity and "the deconstructionist tenet that the ego must be eradicated or dismembered"\textsuperscript{16} is just another male construct. Instead, women dramatists show in their work what Waugh observes in contemporary feminist fictional writing by Woolf, Drabble, Atwood etc., namely humanist beliefs in individual agency, the necessity and possibility of self-reflection and historical continuity as well as an awareness of the provisionality and positionality of identity and gender.\textsuperscript{17} It is therefore important "to recognize one's identity as always a construction yet also a necessary point of departure."\textsuperscript{18} Subjectivity is gained through ongoing experiences in the world.

The reason for literary criticism's neglect or marginalisation of biographical plays is not only this lack of understanding of the interrelationship between women's biographical drama and feminist theory, but more generally also the critics' definition of historical drama — of which I consider biographical plays to be a subgenre. Moreover, recent developments in historiography and biography are only seldom taken into consideration in an analysis of these plays. Historical drama is generally reduced to its content, i.e. the authentic presentation of the lives of prominent historical subjects,


\textsuperscript{17} See Waugh, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{18} Alcoff, p. 432.
the depiction of historical events and a certain time span between
the epoch dramatised and the writing of the play.

A few attempts have been made, however, by Plath Helle, Höfele,
Neumeier, Schaff, Middeke/Huber and Seidel, to establish biogra­
phical plays as a subgenre and to include a discussion of artist
biographies by male as well as female dramatists.\textsuperscript{19} The acknowl­
ledgement in historiographical writing that every account is subjec­
tive and only partial can help to shift the attention away from the
‘what’ to the ‘how’ when narrating a person’s life.\textsuperscript{20} If we define bi­
ography not only as the presentation of a past life but take into ac­
count its various meanings — first, biography as the presentation of
a number of public or private historical events in an individual’s or a
group’s life, second, as a narrative reconstruction of a life from a
more recent perspective, and, third, as a scholarly discipline where
the writing of biography itself and its problems are foregrounded —
a whole range of new plays, especially by women dramatists, come
into view.\textsuperscript{21} Furthermore, a number of additional aspects need to be
considered when we look at these plays: the selection and configura­
tion of historical, fictional and intertextual references, the double
time structure, dramaturgical choices, the relationship between the
biography dramatised and the audience’s knowledge about the time
presented and possible intentions in relation to feminist theory.

\textsuperscript{19} See Anita Plath Helle, “Re-Presenting Women Writers Onstage: A Retrospective to
the Present,” \textit{Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women’s Theatre}, ed.
Writer on Stage: Some Contemporary British Plays about Authors,” \textit{anglistik & engl­
ischunterricht} 41 (1990): 79-91; Beate Neumeier, “Past Lives in Present Drama:
Feminist Theatres and Intertextuality,” \textit{Frauen- und Frauendarstellung in der englischen
181-98; Barbara Schaff, \textit{Das zeitgenössische britische Künstlerdrama} (Passau: Stutz, 1992);
Werner Huber and Martin Middeke, “Biography in Contemporary Drama,” \textit{Drama

\textsuperscript{20} See Werner Wolf, “Geschichtsfiktion im Kontext dekonstruktivistischer Tendenzen
in neuerer Historik und literarischer Postmoderne: Tom Stoppard’s \textit{Travesties},”

\textsuperscript{21} This definition of biography is used in accordance with Ansgar Nünning’s definition
of history; see Nünning, \textit{Von historischer Fiktion zu historiographischer Metafiktion}, 2 vols.
After this general and theoretical exposition of the appropriation of life-writing in women’s drama, an exploration of these plays is more than due. At first sight, the two plays I am now going to discuss have a lot in common: both have been more or less neglected by literary criticism, both dramatise journeys and more or less start and end on the platform of a train station, both dramatise the life of a female artist (Katherine Mansfield and Clara Schumann), in both plays the protagonists are led into foreign territory (France and Germany) and a doctor/psychiatrist features as analyst of the central female figure. But here the similarities end. Whereas Tomalin predominantly uses a realist staging and on the whole sticks to a unifiable subject, Yeger’s play breaks down conventional dramatic forms, questions fixed identities and focuses on the reconstruction of a past life in the present.

The Winter Wife

In the introduction to her play Tomalin emphasises that the plot and all the characters of The Winter Wife are based on real life. The main plot line has already been described by her in Chapter 16 of her biography Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life. 22 The title of that chapter ‘I am a writer first,’ can even serve as a motto for the whole play. It concentrates on Katherine and Ida’s stay in France at Menton in a villa called Isola Bella from September to December 1920. By concentrating on one aspect of Katherine’s life, her relationship with Ida, the play tells us a good deal about the rest of her life. Katherine went to Menton to recuperate from tuberculosis but instead experienced the consistent deterioration of her health. The Katherine we see is not the “Bohemian and merry adultress”23 of the first years after she left New Zealand, who is attracted by both sexes, as Tomalin describes her in her biography. She is an invalid, a woman whose capricious and despotic behaviour vis-à-vis her

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23 Tomalin, Katherine Mansfield, p. 215.
friend Ida Baker would make every sane human being go berserk. Her doctor and Ida justify her behaviour by her illness.

Alpers gives a very different account of that time in his biography of Katherine Mansfield: “Deeply in love with Murry, living in harmony with L.M. (Ida Baker), enchanted by her surroundings, and free for the time being from feverish attacks, Katherine was at ease with herself that autumn in the Isola Bella.”24 Tomalin’s revisionism is twofold: first, Katherine is presented not as a wife but as an artist who has to come to terms with her approaching death, her husband’s estrangement and Ida’s slavish devotion, yet never loses faith in her vocation as an artist. Second, in the play more space is allocated to Ida Baker than in any biography. She was ‘just’ a friend and not an artistic influence on Katherine as she herself was not an artist. Her talent lay in practical everyday matters. Ida is thus not presented as a woman who fits into the canon of life-writing. Tomalin shows in her play that it was due to Ida Baker’s devotion and support that Katherine was able to write some of her finest short fiction at the end of her life. Although the play’s title does not refer, as one might expect at first, to Katherine but to Ida, whom Katherine accepts in the end as her constant ‘wife’, Ida is in no way at the centre of the drama.

The dominant mode of reference is to historical facts to stress an authentic and realist portrayal and not to Katherine’s literary work or intertextual references to other works. All characters are historical, and even small incidents like Ida’s quarrelling with the cook who had bought a cauliflower which was too expensive can be traced back to Katherine’s journal. Most of the facts about Katherine’s life are narrated or remembered by her in retrospect while talking to her new doctor Bouchage or musing about old times with Ida. These facts are usually mediated by, and integrated into, the plot in a realistic fashion. Their exposition follows as a natural course of the dramatic action.

Although the dominant themes of Mansfield’s fiction are mentioned by herself when she talks about new literary projects, the only

Imaging/Imagining Women's Lives

Quotation is from her short story “The Daughters of the Late Colonel,” which mirrors Ida’s fate as shown at the end of the play: after Katherine’s death she loses her purpose in life and lives on as her widow. The main subject of this short story also becomes one of the central themes of the play: “women’s consciousness of mortality,”25 “the effect of death on the living,”26 and “the impossibility of direct communication between individuals.”27

Scenic presentation predominates. The effect is to create a realistic atmosphere. A linear time structure and a domestic frame as the dominant setting add to this. Only Katherine’s last remark, “Jones! Jones! Get on with it, do” (49), coming as a voice from off-stage long after Katherine’s death, gives an ironic twist to Ida’s account of Katherine’s posthumous fame. Only at the end does Tomalin give this small hint to the audience that the image of Katherine which she has created is neither real nor objective.

Women are clearly at the centre of this play. But in view of the historical Mansfield’s preoccupation with women’s situation in contemporary society the treatment of the female characters in The Winter Wife is very ambiguous, to say the least. For most of the play Katherine and Ida act like a very traditional couple with Ida as the perfect housewife, who does not get any recognition for her services and who is jealous of anyone getting Katherine’s attention, and Katherine as the male breadwinner.28 The deficits in accounting for the cultural conditioning of Mansfield’s behaviour looks at times like a retreat into a Victorian medical case history which defines woman through her body.

Katherine yearns for her husband’s presence and blames Ida for not being Murry. Only after Dr. Bouchage’s advice that Katherine should forgive Ida the fact that she is not Mr Murry does she change her behaviour towards Ida. Katherine is thus unable to analyse her-

26 Fullbrook, p. 118.
27 Fullbrook, p. 106.
28 Only one critic admitted similar feelings to mine in his review for the Independent: “One doesn’t know whether one wants to applaud the Idas of this world for their services to literature or to strangle them for their irritating masochism” (Paul Taylor, “The Winter Wife,” London Theatre Record 27 Feb.–11 March 1991: 277-80 (278).
self but she manages in the end to overcome her male-centredness. She accepts Ida for what she is and concentrates on her artistic work.

Although Tomalin uses stage realism the image she creates of Katherine is manifold. She can be all sorts of persons: a tyrant, an invalid, an angry infant craving for maternal affection and a self-confident writer. The inner conflict Mansfield felt between the desire for a perfect, conventional life, and to break out of this normality is cut short in the play. Tomalin tends to blame Katherine’s behaviour on her illness and not on society’s expectations and the limited social roles available to women. Yet ironically, Mansfield’s uneasiness at accepting a woman as the most important person in her life reflects society’s expectations very well. Nevertheless, I doubt whether the audience’s perception will be acute enough to see this and to agree with Tomalin, who called Mansfield “the most liberated, dazzling and modern of modern women.” What the play does, however, is to give women agency and to call into question assumptions that so-called male and female behaviour is determined by sex.

Variations on a Theme by Clara Schumann or Composing a Life

Variations shows a completely different approach to biographical drama, questioning the concept of a stable, unified subject and changing the perspective from recounting the life of a famous woman artist to the historiographical reflection on reconstructing a past life in the present and getting to know oneself through knowledge of the ‘other’.

A fictional character, Louise, is at the centre of the play which presents in fact a double biography of Clara Schumann and herself. Louise embarks upon two journeys: one starts while she is with her psychoanalyst, where she tries to come to terms with her experience of sexual abuse by her father as a child; the other takes Louise as a feminist academic on a train journey to Berlin where she intends to collect information on the pianist and composer Clara Schumann for a biography on her. In the train she meets Anna Karenina,

Laura, Marilyn Monroe and Rhea, who play out the voices of her own mind in the discovery of her self. The primary objective of Louise's quest is the discovery of love letters between Clara and Brahms, who probably had a love affair with her during the time her husband Robert was in an asylum.

Various problems and difficulties a biographer encounters when working on a biography are mentioned and dramatised in the play as for example the recognition of gaps which necessitates interpretation and makes an objective and 'true' biography impossible, and the biographer's experience of becoming a different person through writing the biography. The play dramatises how the biographer floats in and out of the fantasy that she is her subject, and dissolves the opposition between subject and object: Louise and Clara are both very conscientious and self-disciplined, both have strong ties to an ambitious and severe father and fear to break them. The final product of Louise's research is, however, not a biography on Clara — Louise throws her manuscript into the bin. She has realised that her fascination with Clara was a means of evading her own problems which she has to face and overcome.

At the beginning Louise is convinced that she can write a conclusive biography on Clara Schumann, but her confidence weakens when Clara tells her — during an interesting and ontologically ambiguous conversation — that she will never get to know her, no matter how hard she tries:

CLARA: What do you know and what concern is it of yours anyway? You create nothing. You understand nothing about the pain of creating. You have made no music, neither have you given birth to a single child. You plunder the lives of others only to make sense of your own. You twist every fact to make it mean what you want it to mean. You look for me everywhere and yet you cannot find me. Why? Because your eyes are closed, your heart is closed [...] Sieh dich selber, nicht mich an. Stelle dir selber die Fragen, die beantwortet werden sollen. (203)

Clara accuses her of not even speaking her language. Music, i.e. the fugue, a transcendent language which says everything at once, is revealed as opening up a better interpersonal understanding than words can ever hope to do.
The focus on Clara is on her as an artist and not as the self-sacrificing wife and mother. Her husband does not even appear on stage. Thus, the play revises the traditional view that Clara was only a pianist, an interpreter of her husband’s work. However, she is not shown as self-confident but as a victim of what society expects an artist’s wife to be.

Variations contains documentary elements, such as an extract from the journal Clara kept as a child and a review of one of her piano concerts from which her father Friedrich Wieck quotes. The main emphasis, however, is on intertextual references or, more precisely, on intermediality. On the one hand, Clara’s composition, the Fugue Opus 16 in G minor, is referred to and played throughout the play. But apart from indicating those points where Louise’s thoughts shift to Clara, the repetition and variation of the fugal theme also stresses the fact that there are many possibilities of playing this piece of music. Moreover, musical techniques are adapted for drama: the play’s form corresponds to a fugue with a prelude, a coda and no scenic divisions. Yeger tries to instrumentalise the flow of music in her play: as in a fugue different voices (and possibilities), i.e. the different women and their destinies, are placed in counterpoint to each other, thus creating a polyphony of possible selves.

On the other hand, Variations includes references to films. On second sight the whole play turns out to be a sort of bricolage\(^\text{30}\) from the films Brief Encounter, Some Like it Hot and Anna Karenina. In each of these films — as in Variations itself — a train station is the site of important dramatic developments. Intermediality serves to undermine the illusion that real life is being represented on stage and negates the traditional opposition between real and fictive characters, i.e. between fact and fiction. Moreover, it illustrates what Clara herself, at one point in the play, says about creativity, “Genius is a romantic myth” (191). This statement finds a structural equivalent in

\(^\text{30}\) I use the term ‘bricolage’ as used by cultural theorists referring “to some meaningful, if limited, assemblage of given materials,” see Margaret A. Rose, Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 225.
the fact that most of the play is not original but consists of a combination of other works.

This blurring of original and imitation which becomes less comprehensible as the play proceeds is mirrored in the concept of identity the playwright presents. Yeger states in the introduction to her play that “within each one of us there are many different women.” (207) The play’s characters reveal themselves as Louise’s potential selves. Louise is presented as a hysteric who shifts between different roles and, at the beginning, shows a complete lack of identity. According to Christina von Braun, a hysteric is “an image of women created through men’s words.” This is visualised when Louise adopts the language of Anna und Laura, who are characters created by men. The sense that one woman is easily transformable into another is also dramatised by parallel scenes between Clara and Brahms and Louise and the hotel guard, and by the fact that some parts have to be doubled in performance.

Louise comes to accept the different parts of herself; the child, the sensuous woman, the mother and the old woman: “... and here is I ... Louise ... all of me ... all of these ... yes, even you. Louise is I ... I ... I” (204), and in a scream of liberation she releases the hidden, disowned aspects of herself. Finally she follows Clara’s advice, “Look at yourself, instead of me. Ask yourself the questions you want to be answered,” and becomes a subject in her own right. Louise is not shown as having achieved a unified identity. Instead, its attainment is revealed as an ongoing process in her life and on her journey, which she continues at the end of the play. Space takes on symbolic meaning as Louise’s train journey is not only a literal journey but also a spiritual one which leads her towards inner maturity.

Contrary to The Winter Wife, references to historical reality in Variations contain ontologically ambiguous encounters between Louise, Clara and Marilyn as well as between Louise and the film

33 See Cousin, p. 150.
34 Yeger, Variations on a Theme by Clara Schumann, p. 203.
versions of Laura, Anna and the mythical Greek Titan Rhea. Instead of a linear time structure, *Variations* has no apparent time scheme but different time levels — the two main levels being the present and the 1850s — and blends dream and reality. Similar to Louise, who is looking for the truth about Clara’s life, the audience is constantly asking what is real and what is only part of Louise’s dreams. Thus, the spectator has to become active and is expected to put together the fragments as in a puzzle. But this puzzle is a tricky one — even once the play is finished some pieces remain evasive.

As in the plays I have discussed, biographical plays by other women playwrights show female characters as acting subjects who move in and out of private and public spaces. As far as dramaturgical choices are concerned, stage realism has become the exception rather than the rule. Another example of the former would be Pinnock’s dramatisation of the life of the black activist Claudia Jones in *A Rock in Water* (1989). Women dramatists tend to dissolve fixed identities by calling gender-related behaviour into question as in *The Winter Wife* (1991) or by using cross-dressing, compare, for example, Christina in *Queen Christina* (1977) by Pam Gems, Isabelle Eberhardt in *New Anatomies* (1981) by Timberlake Wertenbaker or the woman warrior Hannah Snell in *Warrior* (1989) by Shirley Gee. Others go so far as to ascribe multiple roles to historical characters, as, for example, Liz Lochhead does in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987), where Mary and Queen Elizabeth are not only shown as queens but also as maids and prostitutes to stress their common fate as women in a patriarchal society.

I hope here to have broken down the common prejudice that most biographical plays make one wish one had stayed at home and read the biography instead. Biographical plays by women dramatists offer more to the audience than satisfying their inquisitiveness. Instead, they image and imagine women’s lives in the past and point to an engagement between past and present that will hopefully effect change in the future.

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35 Higdon calls this phenomenon “polytemporal time,” see Nünning, p. 309.
Hovering Between the Post-Colonial and the Pastoral: Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*

In a recent article Robert F. Garrat offers a comprehensive debate on Friel’s exploration of verbal and non-verbal or literary and non-literary forms of cultural expression, claiming that in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, “Friel manages to present dance linguistically as a concept, but also as a spectacle which pleases the audience aesthetically as it functions symbolically to convey deeper intellectual meaning.”

However, in the play the lost ritual significance of dance is dramatically presented as an almost subversive challenge to such well entrenched rational notions as ‘deeper intellectual meaning’. Dance in all its non-verbal complexity within a given oral cultural tradition is reduced to authorial representation by Michael, an isolated nostalgic narrator, who himself embodies the limits of authorship at the end of the play. If the representation of dance as both primeval cultural ritual as well as a sanitised and commercialised late twentieth-century form of mass entertainment was intended to ‘please the audience aesthetically,’ could *Lughnasa* have more effectively been ended with a scene from *Riverdance*? Perhaps another way of approaching the discussion is to explore the idea that Brian Friel is teasing rather than pleasing the audience aesthetically. As with most of Friel’s work, the author’s exploration of the nature of both narration and language itself within the complex web of Anglo-Irish cross-cultural tensions is challenging in its very depth and subtlety. *Dancing at Lughnasa* sets up a series of tensions in the form of oppositions between what is

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orally/literally mediated and that which cannot be represented. The main thematic oppositions are tightly woven into both the dramatic structure and the image strategy of the play. Patterns of tension can be located between the fixed, doctrinaire codes of literate colonialising powers, (i.e. Church and Empire) and the pre-colonial oral cultures they interrupt and displace.

Inherent in these underlying layers of tension is the opposition between what established doctrines decree morally acceptable and the ever present threat of popular rebellion against such restrictions. Informing this whole area of interactive tension is the Artaudian notion of dance as a form of potential rebellion against restrictions of social convention as well as a release from introspection. These areas of tension are given a further thematic twist, which prevents the play being read purely as a consistent set of oppositions. In terms of music and dance, the refreshing moral challenge of 1920s and 30s American popular culture, referentially linked to pagan influences via the ‘Voodoo of the Marconi,’ is nevertheless also the dominant cultural product of a powerful socio-economic force. Thus, in an ironic reversal the fallout from American colonialism delivers the final blow to traditional community rituals after the onslaughs of the Church, British Colonialism, and industrialisation.

Historically, the loss of traditional dancing went hand in hand with the destruction or displacement of interactive forms of oral culture as a whole. Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’o has gone as far as to suggest that for Africans, English Studies as an author-centred and essentially western intellectual tradition, should be abolished. Ngugi, having intially risen to prominence as an English-language novelist, saw this form of literary expression itself as a form of colonial cultural reduction. The main thrust of his argument being that performance art is interactive and non-verbal, whereas Western traditions have generated both individualism and passivity in author-reader/audience relations. As folk tales and dance ceremonies throughout Sub-Saharan Africa fell victim to the European missionaries, it is perhaps no surprise that today much research is being done to reverse the colonial influences.
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The colonising missionaries wrote off dance rituals as savage and replaced the interactive folkstory-telling performances with the fixed authority of parables within the gospels of the Bible. Ngugi makes this Bible-and-bullet-process a central cause of what he sees as the empire striking rather than writing back: dance, for example has been studied “as symbolic expression of social reality reflecting and influencing the social, cultural and personality systems of which it is part.” The oral tradition also comments on society because of its intimate relationship and involvement.²

With no access to their own lost oral traditions, the Christian missionaries have never been able to understand the complex codes of the cultures they were destroying. For example, unlike Western religion, African dance and folktale ceremonies did not fix moral codes into fixed binary elements of good and evil, which often incorporate the resulting effect of guilt-inducement as an instrument of social control. Various spirits were woven into dance patterns, and in many forms of folktale session the reaction of the audience would affect the telling of the tale. What Ngugi refers to as ‘intimate audience involvement’ is not exactly the tenor of theatre venues such as The Abbey or The Royal Court.

Dancing at Lughnasa does, however, subtly link the erosion of ancient oral African and Irish traditions by the twin forces of cultural interruption; colonialism and literacy. In doing so, the play also explores a basic anthropological tenet. This refers to the ways in which centralised socio-economic systems and standardised religious institutions not only displace paganism, shamanism and community-based systems of religion, but whole areas of community culture as well.

Mediating these thematic dimensions is Michael the individual narrator, who structurally links Dancing at Lughnasa with Brian Friel’s other meta-dramatic projects which directly foreground the links between the author and narrator as well as between fiction and reality. I am thinking specifically of Philadelphia, Here I Come!, Living Quarters, The Freedom of the City and Making History. It can be be argued that

most of Friel’s work questions the act of dramatic representation within a post-colonial thematic field. The African dimension, the broader field of reference which informs *Dancing at Lughnasa*, centres on Michael’s recollections of Uncle Jack. As a Christian missionary who in true bullet-and-Bible fashion had been attached to the British army in Kenya, Jack eventually went native and became a threat to the church establishment. Both Irish missionaries and the British army are presented as part of the same colonialising process. The basic conflicts between displaced oral traditions and the legitimising power of doctrine is dramatically underscored by satirical juxtapositions: for example, when Kate, who eventually quashes the Mundy sisters’ Cinderella-like quest to attend the pagan harvest festival, unpacks the shopping in Act One:

AGNES: All the same, I remember going to some great harvest dances.
CHRIS: Don’t we all.
KATE: *(Unpacking)* Another of those riveting Annie M.P. Smithson novels for you, Agnes.
AGNES: Ah thanks.
KATE: ‘The Marriage of Nurse Harding’ — oh dear! For you, Christina. One teaspoonful every morning before breakfast. (11)

The sanitised marital fiction of Annie M.P. Smithson and cod liver oil are cleverly overlapped and figuratively conflated. Simple dramatic irony operates here at Kate’s expense. Kate has no access to the author/narrator’s use of irony, being both an innocent adherent to church doctrine and a victim of the playwright’s rhetoric. Only the initiated audience is allowed to share the irony of Kate’s reference to Ballybeg being Uncle Jack’s home as a justification for forbidding the sisters to attend the harvest festival.

KATE: Do you want the whole countryside to be laughing at us? Women of our years? — mature women dancing? What’s come over you all? And this is father Jack’s home — we must never forget that — ever. No, no, we’re going to no harvest dance. (13)

One of the most emblematically obvious motifs are the redundant military uniforms with which Jack was presented on leaving Uganda. The uniform element is linked into a complex sequence of colonial and pre-colonial referential interplay. More subtle is the paradox
Brian Friel's Dancing at Lughnasa

underlying the fact that Western domination of the world is based on the apparent duality of church and state. Both agencies have worked together to legitimise and enforce the economic and military process of colonisation. This mechanical division of roles both obscures its single purpose and destroys the more subtle web of traditional community-generated mores. Jack's description of Ryangan village ritual contextualises this whole argument within an Afro-British-Irish framework:

We light fires round the periphery of the circle; and we paint our faces with coloured powders; and we sing local songs; and we drink palm wine. And then we dance — and dance — and dance — children, men, women, most of them lepers, many of them with misshapen limbs, with missing limbs — dancing, believe it or not, for days on end! It is the most wonderful sight you have ever seen! That palm wine! They dole it out in horns! You lose all sense of time...! Oh yes the Ryangans are a remarkable people: there is no distinction between religious and secular in their culture. And of course their capacity for fun, for laughing, for practical jokes — they've such open hearts! In some respects they're not unlike us. You'd love them Maggie. You should come back with me! [...] How did I get into all that? You must stop telling me those long stories. (48)

The last line establishes the link between what remains of pre-Christian Irish folk culture and that of Sub-Saharan Africa. Pre-Christian Ireland was colonised by both Britain and the Roman Catholic Church continuously over a millennium. This process reached its peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when industrialisation speeded up the culturally destructive forces of imperialism. In Ireland, orthodox Catholicism had gained a stronghold on rural communities. The clash between the deeper traditions of rural pre-famine Ireland and the colonising role of the Roman Catholic establishment forms the thematic centre of John B. Keane's The Field (1965).

The remnants of pre-Christian culture with its ritual attachment to the land clash violently with the biblical moral codes imposed by the church. Bull McCabe, like J.M. Synge's Aran Islanders, embodies cultures whose ancient community-based mores and rituals accept certain forms of murder as legitimate, for example in the defense of honour or in warding off the advance of property-owning materialism. When the church in Ireland adopted English as the medium of
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instruction, it was sanctioning the Anglo-American materialist cultures which displaced ancient pre-Christian mores and traditions worldwide. In J.B. Keane’s fictional location of Carraigthomond, the church in the form of a Bishop and Father Murphy team up with a garda sergeant in an attempt to prove that the village knows Bull McCabe murdered a land purchaser to protect his ancient land rites. The audience knows that the villagers are lying, but the moral centre of the play lies with them. In frustration the sergeant exclaims, “McCabe and his son killed this man. You know, I know and the whole village knows. Nobody cares and the terrible thing is that nobody will care.”

Keane quite clearly sees the established church in Ireland as being part of a colonial and post-colonial legitimising force, as he allows Bull McCabe the murderer to make all the challenging speeches:

Father. You have your collar and the Sergeant, his uniform. I have my fields and Tadgh, (To TADGH) There’s two laws. There’s a law for them that’s priests and doctors and lawmen. But there’s no law for us. The man with the law behind him is the law...and it don’t change and it never will.

The tone of these speeches is echoed by Kate’s moralising tirade against the sister’s plan to attend the festival of Lughnasa:

KATE: (Very angry, almost shouting) And they’re savages! I know those people from the back hills! I’ve taught them! Savages — that’s what they are! And what pagan practices they have are no concern of ours — non whatever! (17)

The nineteenth-century churches in both Britain and Ireland displaced the last remnants of pagan traditions partially by systematically placing taboos on traditional pre-Christian dance ceremonies. Ostensibly aimed at so-called moral improvement, the destruction or purification of dance effectively formed the last phase in England and, somewhat later, Ireland in the elimination of ancient pagan oral traditions. It is worth reminding ourselves here that in Ireland, from the refusal of rural communities to persecute witches through to the persistent belief in fairy spirits, the church never entirely succeeded in wiping out pagan traditions.

4 Keane, p. 166.
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In England, however, the displacement was more complete. The opening sequence of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* traces cultural interruption through what Hardy saw as the process of rural destruction wrought by industrial capitalism and the Church. The parallels here with the religious taboos inflicted on the Mundy sisters are more than coincidental:

The forests have departed, but some old customs of their shades remain. Many, however, linger only in a metamorphosed or disguised form. The May-Day dance for instance, was to be discerned on the afternoon under notice, in the guise of the club revel, or 'club-walking,' as it was there called […] . Its singularity lay less in the retention of a custom of walking in procession and dancing on each anniversary, than in the members being solely women […] . Either the natural shyness of the softer sex, or a sarcastic attitude on the part of male relatives, had denuded such women's clubs as remained of this their glory and consummation […] . The banded ones were all dressed in white gowns — a gay survival from Old Style days, when cheerfulness and May-time were synonyms — days before the habit of taking long views had reduced emotions to a monotonous average […] . There were a few middle aged and even elderly women in the train, their silver-wiry hair and wrinkled faces, scourged by time and trouble, having almost a grotesque, certainly a pathetic appearance.⁵

Country dancing with its ancient fertility rites had been deliberately tainted with unmanliness and had its dangerously transgressive symbolism defused. The May-Day festival is reduced to an almost embarrassingly feeble parade at the beginning of Hardy's novel.

Essentially, Hardy is documenting the fate of a rural population adrift from its own pagan roots, about to be dispersed in the same way that the Irish rural poor were dispersed. Flight from the countryside into huge urban centres has plagued both Europe and Africa from the time of the medieval enclosures through to industry, empire and the post-colonial era. In Friel's description of the sisters' attempt to dance to Irish music in the middle of Act One, the stage directions echo the tone of Hardy's observations. The sisters become an awkward wellington-booted parody of their own dance traditions, which is anything other than 'aesthetically pleasing'.


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They form a circle and wheel round and round. But the movements seem caricatured; and the sound is too loud; and the beat is too fast; and the almost recognisable dance is made grotesque because — for example — instead of holding hand, they have their arms tightly around one another’s neck, one another’s waist. (21)

Oral cultures only survive, as long as the complex process of transmission from generation to generation is not interrupted and discontinued by the twin processes of colonial conquest and the imposition of industrial technologies. The role of Irish Catholic missionaries in Africa strongly resembles that of the British cultural colonisation of Ireland. Thus, Uncle Jack’s return from Africa to Ballybeg embodies a deep questioning of the colonisation and displacement of oral cultures, in which both Ballybeg and Jack’s African village became historically embroiled. The thematic link is given an added twist by the notion that Michael’s own parentage and upbringing are closer to the norms of a traditional Sub-Saharan African village. Michael has been raised by five women in a community, his father Gerry like the African warrior/farmer in the fields, or the dislocated rural worker, is an itinerant whose relationship with his mother Christina is characterised by affection rather than conventional extra-marital resentment.

Such tolerances were all community-based responses to the demands of traditional farming, trading, and cottage-industry manufacture, as well as the insecurities and hardships of rural life. The deeply rural pagan community traditions in the west of Ireland had still been dominant, before the disastrous Great Famine of 1845 to 1847. Michael’s recollections of his own childhood linked to his representations of Uncle Jack form a potentially subversive, tacit approval of more openly polygamous sexual coventions. Uncle Jack, by conflating ancient Irish harvest ceremonies with African ritual, is rendering his role as missionary dangerously subversive. In a process of ostensible cultural resistance, he brings back elements of oral African culture to Ballybeg, which at the time the play is set is in the process of losing the last remnants of its own community cohesion and traditional culture.

The subversive associations are given an added twist by Friel’s incorporation of fragments of Cole Porter’s 1934 hit “Anything Goes.” These fragments of popular culture re-open the tension between
dance and moral censure. The moral challenge, represented playfully in the words of the song, reflects Conradian images of civilisation as a surface veneer of fixed moral codes stretched over a potentially explosive core of rebellion both in a liberating and a destructive sense. The tension between the power relationships embodied in those institutionalised codes and the process of civilisation they claim to represent is of course embodied by the plight of Uncle Jack, who — like Conrad’s Kurtz — has gone native allowing the thin veneer of missionary values to be ruptured.

Good authors, too, who once knew better words
Now only use four letter words
Writing prose
Anything goes... (64)

The thematic echoes here were probably too much for Brian Friel to resist. If it was the dominance of prose literacy which displaced complex poetry and dance in the disruption of pre-Christian societies, then popular culture and prose has done much to displace the kind of higher literacy and the position of poetry of Western society between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. The song goes on,

If driving fast cars you like,
If low bars you like,
If bare limbs you like,
If Mae West you like,
Or me undressed you like,
Why, nobody will oppose,
When ev'ry night,
The set that's smart is
Intruding in nudist parties in studios
Anything goes... (64)

Precisely the kind of nightmare the church is afraid of is now being imported through the colonialism of American popular culture. The propensity to dance and openly celebrated sexuality had been ritually embodied in ancient codes. That same potential is however exploited in twentieth-century Western society, without being underpinned by cohesive community-oriented values.

By the end of Michael’s narration, Ballybeg community tradition has been all but culturally and economically eliminated by emigration
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and the advance of other Western economies. The five women, rather like Hardy figures, are also victims of the orthodox rural conservatism of the De Valera era. The Mundy sisters, after a burst of spontaneous dancing at the beginning of the play, fall victim to the power of guilt and orthodoxy and abandon their ideas of going to the harvest dance.

In a number of ways Dancing at Lughnasa picks up on the exploration of cultural and linguistic displacement of colonised societies in Translations. Uncle Jack as a missionary has been very much in the position of Yolland; that of a cultural colonist, who becomes romantically infatuated with the language and customs of the ancient culture he is in the process of eliminating. As with Yolland, there has also been some kind of romantic, sexual transgression. In Translations, Yolland is counterbalanced by the returning Anglo-Americanised Irish emigrant Owen, whose wholesale adoption of the colonising culture enables him to appear as an embodiment of the dynamic Irish emigrant success story pitched against a static and doomed rural parochialism. In Lughnasa, the dramatic function of Owen is echoed by Gerry, both itinerant playboy father and idealistic soldier, whose energetic embodiment of the shifting world of interruptive colonial change contrasts with the static nature of Ballybeg. However, both Owen and Gerry represent precursors of the forces that were to eliminate so many rural communities.

The problem of representation for Friel is that any kind of narrative representation involves the subjective literary mechanisms of authorship. As in The Freedom of the City, Friel’s attempt to represent fictionally the marginalised and forgotten involves what he sees as the limitations of individual narration. Franz Fanon, in contrasting the interactive dynamism of oral culture in performance with Western drama, throws an interesting light on the position of late twentieth-century narrators like Michael.

As for dramatisation, it is no longer placed on the plane of the troubled intellectual and his tormented conscience. By losing its characteristics of despair and revolt, the drama becomes the common lot of the people and forms part of an action in preparation or already in progress.6

6 Franz Fanon, "On National Culture," The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, p. 156.
Brian Friel's Dancing at Lughnasa

Friel's Michael in Dancing at Lughnasa problematises the nature of memory fluctuating between verbal recall and non-verbal triggers: "Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary" (71). The position of the narrator himself, however, is highly ambiguous as the complex cross-flow of author/narrator functions foregrounds the role of dramatic fiction as a means of verbally recording that which would otherwise have ceased to exist at all.

Generically, Dancing at Lughnasa fits into two well-established and narrowly related fictional conventions: Northrop Frye's concept of ironic fictional romance and William Empson's functional concepts of the pastoral. In both cases, the narrator's mediation is crucial to both of these conceptual parameters. Michael the narrator has access to the knowledge of the fate of the play's characters including his own. This narrative structure functions clearly within the ironic mode as a framing device, which is clearly laid down in the stage directions at the beginning of the play:

Around the stage and at a distance from MICHAEL the characters stand motionless in formal tableau. MAGGIE is at the kitchen window (right). CHRIS is at the front door. KATE at extreme stage right. ROSE and GERRY sit on the garden seat. JACK stands beside ROSE. AGNES is upstage left. They hold these positions while MICHAEL talks to the audience. (1)

Michael's narrative position as an interface between plot and audience is thus reinforcing Friel's fictionally self-conscious approach to the role of the narrator. There are also echoes of the Romantic tradition, in which the individual narrator is the mediator between the realism of the conventionally represented material world (in this case Ballybeg and the socio-economic rural malaise of the De Valera era) and a mythical culture beyond which signifies atavistic, primeval struggles of the psyche and the supernatural. But Friel — like Hardy — is also alluding to the collapse of the pre-industrial, pre-materialist remnants of oral cultures into parodies of their former selves.

This form of interaction between a central narrator, lost narratives, and lost pre-materialist worlds is at the structural core of Dickens's Great Expectations, Conrad's Heart of Darkness, and L.P. Hartley’s The Go Between. Precisely within this generic context, William Empson's comprehensive thesis on the nature of the pastoral provides us with a
fitting analytical template from which we may debate the nature of Brian Friel’s fictional achievement in *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

In *Some Versions of Pastoral*, Empson discusses the pastoral as a form of fiction through which an author may explore his or her own intellectual sophistication with direct reference to a narrative mode or plot dealing with common people in a more simple environment. Thus the narrator’s nostalgia for a lost cultural world is framed by someone, an assumed author who has never experienced being an integral part of that culture. One is reminded of the familiar 1960s criticism of the so-called revival of old English folk music, which chided middle-class students for trying to identify with lost rural working-class traditions. At that time, according to the cynics, the only form of Western folk culture to survive are dirty jokes, springing as they do from a living form of popular cultural exchange. On a more serious note, writers like Franz Fanon and Ngugi, representing voices of the colonised, may see the Western authorial narrator as a self-doubting ineffectual liberal. However, for those of us who no longer have access to our lost oral traditions, narrators like Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa* are vital links, perhaps the only ones we have.
Staging Ritual in Contemporary Nigerian Drama: Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Tess Akaeke Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*

In modern Nigeria, traditional ritual and contemporary drama exist side by side. Although the form of traditional ritual has naturally somewhat changed in the course of time — partly, but not solely in the wake of colonialism — it is vital to numerous aspects of everyday Nigerian life. Likewise, although some manifestations of contemporary drama are considered elitist and may not be accessible to the mass of the population, it occupies an important position in Nigerian culture today. While traditional African ritual has attracted the interest of many cultural anthropologists, contemporary African drama has attracted the interest of many literary critics. The coexistence and interrelatedness in one cultural setting of two forms whose precise relationship has, on a more general level, been discussed both in historical and theatrical terms for quite some time seems to

exert a particular fascination on more recent scholarship. Drawing a
connection between the significance of drama and ritual in an Igbo
context, M.J.O. Echuero suggests that "drama is to the society what
ritual is to religion: a public affirmation of an idea; a translation into
action of a *mythos* or plot just as ritual is the translation of a faith into
external action." In her study *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*
(1992), Margaret Thompson Drewal examines the re-presentational
character of Yoruba ritual performances. Departing from Drewal's
understanding of ritual as play, I shall discuss an aspect of the rela-
tionship between ritual and drama that arises from their coexistence
not only in one cultural setting but also within a single text and/or
performance.

The question of what happens when traditional ritual becomes a
part of contemporary post-colonial drama has been raised before by
Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins. As they show, indicating the
creative potential of ritual within drama, when "traditional perform­
ance elements are incorporated into a contemporary play, they af­
fect the play's content, structure, style, and consequently, its overall
meaning/effect." This paper concentrates on the analysis of two spe­
cific plays, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Tess
Akaeke Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash.* Soyinka and Onwueme are
two outstanding West African dramatists of today. Soyinka, the 1986
Nobel laureate from Western Nigeria, is generally regarded as the
pioneer of modern African drama in English. He has published nu-
erous plays and developed his own theory of Yoruba 'ritual tra-
gedy.' Having grown up in a cultural environment that was charac-

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terised by elements of both western and Yoruba traditions, Soyinka draws extensively on Yoruba myth and ritual. The theatrical strategies he chooses to present his interpretation of Yoruba mythology on stage reflect his twofold cultural heritage. Onwueme, a dramatist from Eastern Nigeria, who also holds a Ph.D. in African theatre studies, represents a younger generation of Nigerian playwrights. In her plays, she is predominantly concerned with feminist issues in the context of Igbo culture. Her texts reflect an acute awareness of the complexity of cultural change. In contrast to *Death and the King’s Horseman*, which is set in pre-independence Nigeria, *The Broken Calabash*, one of her major plays, is, as Chidi Amuta notes, additionally characterised by “a certain sense of contemporaneity which pitches the conflicts in the context of present-day Africa with its universities and other modern institutions.”

Ritual as Play

In her study of Yoruba ritual, Margaret Thompson Drewal distinguishes her own approach to ritual from previous studies that “tend to attribute agency to the ritual structure,” which implies the dependence of the success of a ritual performance on the completeness of all the stages of the ritual structure. She herself examines, in her own words, “the power of human agents to transform ritual through performance.” One of her most significant key words is ‘repetition with a difference’: change in ritual is vital to its continued meaningfulness. Furthermore, Drewal points out that, for Yoruba speakers, no discrete term for ritual exists that would allow clear definition of its generic boundaries. Rather, the Yoruba concept of ritual is “a broad category of performance” and, as such, “subsumes annual festivals, weekly rites, funerals, divinations, and initiations

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As Drewal explains, for Yoruba speakers, the terms ‘ritual,’ ‘spectacle,’ ‘play’ and ‘festival’ overlap and interpenetrate. In many contexts, Yoruba use these terms interchangeably. Ritual, Drewal argues, is play:

Yoruba rituals [...] are propitiatory performances for the deities, ancestors, spirits, and human beings. [...] When Yoruba ‘perform ritual’ [...] they often say in English that they are going to ‘play.’ [...] In relation to ritual, what I understand Yoruba to mean by ‘play’ is, more specifically, that they improvise. I do not use the term ‘improvisation’ strictly in relation to music and dance, although in certain rituals Yoruba name and frame such activities as ‘play’ In reference to ritual practice broadly, I use the term ‘improvisation’ — as Yoruba use the English word ‘play’ — to refer to a whole gamut of spontaneous individual moves: ruses, parodies, transpositions, recontextualizations, elaborations, condensations, interruptions, interventions, and more. (19)

Ritual is play, not in the sense that it lacks seriousness, that it is frivolous, or impotent, but in its structural openness to creative transformation. This characteristic brings it close to the genre of dramatic performance. I do not mean to imply that ritual and drama are the same, no matter how many elements they share. However, if one keeps in mind that “not all drama is ritual, [...] and not all ritual is drama even though ritual usually employs elements of dramatic performance,” an understanding of ritual as play provides an interesting angle from which to examine the incorporation of traditional ritual structures into contemporary plays.

Ritual as Play within a Play

If ritual may be regarded as play, the re-presentation of ritual within contemporary Nigerian drama may be regarded as a variation of the play-within-a-play motif that is so important to sundry traditions of theatre. A playwright who deploys one or more forms of ritual in his/her play so to speak ‘plays’ with those rituals. By incorporating a ritual into a play, s/he gives it new meaning/s: s/he creatively trans-

11 Drewal, p. 19.
12 Drewal, p. 12.
13 Gilbert/Tompkins, p. 56.
forms it. While repetition with a difference is principally characteristic of every ritual performance, a ritual deployed as play within a play engenders a number of specific ‘differences.’ Ritual as play within a play begins, in Helen Gilbert’s and Joanne Tompkins’s words, to “interact with the secular.” It is no longer a ritual per se, but a re-presentation of ritual in a dramatic context, or, to quote Rawle Gibbons, as theatre, ritual “is given a different form, another god.” Its various elements (such as actors, space and time, music and dance, monologue and dialogue, costumes, requisites) as well as its meaning/s are subjected to the political, ethical, philosophical and/or aesthetic agenda of the drama that frames it. The following analysis of the rituals re-presented in *Death and the King’s Horseman* and *The Broken Calabash* highlights some of their functions and meanings within these plays.

*Death and the King’s Horseman*

At the heart of Soyinka’s play is a Yoruba tradition which demands that the king’s horseman, i.e. the male head of a family distinguished by that particular office, commit ritual suicide when the king dies. This ritual suicide is conceptualised as a journey from this world to the realm of the beyond. When the king dies, the horseman, who has until then spent his life in honour and affluence, must follow him after a period of nearly thirty days during which pre-burial ceremonies are performed. It is said that the moon will be the horseman’s guide on the hidden path of a trance dance to a certain gateway in the sky, through which he has to pass on his way to the abode of the ancestors. The king’s horseman is born to this one destiny; his ritual self-sacrifice is essential to both the welfare of the community and to the peace of the world. If he fails to die, the king will curse his people for the humiliation they have caused him. In

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14 Gilbert/Tompkins, p. 61.
16 As Drewal points out in *Yoruba Ritual*, the conceptualisation of ritual as journey is quite characteristic in Yoruba thought.
case the horseman dies before the king is buried, his eldest son is to take his place.

Soyinka's play consists of five scenes, the first and third of which are predominantly devoted to the representation of the preparations for the death of the king's horseman. Not quite in accordance with tradition, these preparations are interrupted by the preparations for Elesin's marriage to a beautiful young woman whom he has seen on the market. To legitimise this inopportune marriage, Elesin argues that he intends to leave his precious horseman's seed behind so as to travel lighter. The ritual complexes of marriage and death are thus joined, an ill-fitting union, as it turns out. The second and fourth scene each contain references to the major ritual from the outside, but first and foremost the audience is confronted with British forms of ritualised behavior. At the end of the fourth scene the action takes a dramatically very effective, turn as it becomes obvious that the normal structure of the ritual has irredeemably been disrupted. Elesin, who was last seen in a deep trance and on the verge of death, unexpectedly enters the stage in handcuffs. Depending on the line of interpretation one follows, the British district officer has finally succeeded in preventing him from committing ritual suicide, or Elesin's high spirits and love of life that wind, in the manner of a leitmotif, as continuous premonition through the play have proved his tragic flaw; in any case, Elesin has failed to live up to his communal duty as horseman to the king. The final scene represents a kind of remedy in terms of the conditions of the ritual, as it turns out that Olunde, Elesin's eldest son, a medical student who specifically returned from England to bury his father, has died in Elesin's place. Yet, the natural order of the world has been turned upside down, since the son does not normally die before the father. Overwhelmed by his tragic fate, as he is confronted with the body of his dead son, the imprisoned Elesin suddenly breaks his own neck. His suicide comes too late, however, and retains nothing of its former dignity and purpose.

Interestingly, the crucial stage of the ritual structure is not represented on stage. Elesin's ritual suicide is prevented. At the end of the third scene, Soyinka's stage directions merely demand that
“lights fade slowly on to the scene” (45), before the horseman, who continues to dance himself deeper and deeper into his trance, supposedly succeeds to will himself to death. Olunde, Elesin’s son, who finally dies in his father’s place after the latter has been arrested, is carried on stage only when his ritual suicide is completed. So the only death that is actually represented on stage is the tragic ending of Elesin’s life when he, who is now not even able to assume the role of eldest son to the deceased horseman and bury Olunde, which would formerly have been his son’s duty towards himself, strangles himself with the chain binding him. This kind of death, however, is certainly not part of the original ritual scheme. It seems that Soyinka deliberately avoids the representation of ritual death on stage.

One reason for this may be that the motif of ritual death in the history of anglophone literature is strongly marked by orientalist tendencies. Most characteristically, ‘human sacrifice’ has served as a function of exoticism, a horrible yet fascinating symbol of otherness. In Soyinka’s play, the representation of what the British District Officer’s wife calls “barbaric customs” (53) deliberately offers a different perspective. Younger Nigerian critics like Femi Osofisan have accused Soyinka of cultural nostalgia, of idealising the old times by heroising the horseman’s role in the ritual. However, while Soyinka’s attitude regarding the practice of ritual suicide remains opaque, he insists that the representation of ritual suicide in *Death and the King’s Horseman* is part of a larger metaphysical scheme. Its function must neither be reduced to merely expressing an attitude towards ritual practice nor to making a statement about the colonial encounter. Soyinka wants Elesin’s death to stand independent of colonial discourses. In the “Author’s Note” to *Death and the King’s Horseman* he emphasises that the “Colonial Factor is [...] a catalytic incident merely” and instructs the “would-be producer of this play” rather to “direct his vision [...] to [...] eliciting the play’s threnodic essence.” By not having the horseman’s ritual suicide represented on stage, Soyinka prevents the spectacular nature of the

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18 Soyinka, “Author’s Note”, *Death and the King’s Horseman*. 

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event, and with it a pro/contra polarity resonating with colonial binarisms, from dominating the audience’s response. The horseman’s suicide in the final scene may still be a spectacular kind of death. Having been ritually decontextualised, however, it serves to refer to the metaphysical dimension of the play: Elesin may have lost his role in the ritual; yet he continues to play a part in Soyinka’s tragedy. If his suicide has become perfectly meaningless in ritual terms, it still significantly functions as the fulfillment of his tragic destiny.

A further reason for not showing the horseman’s ritual death on stage is connected with what Soyinka considers the ‘threnodic essence’ of the play. While the actual moment of ritual death is marginalised, the central stage of the horseman’s ritual suicide is the long period of transition, beginning in the first scene with the dialogue between Elesin and the praise-singer and being continued in the third with the trance dance. In the first scene Elesin’s dance movements, which rather spontaneously accompany the dialogue, are characterised by an “infectious enjoyment of life” (9). This dialogue already contains some of the features that are so vital to the central third scene: the dialogue is, for instance, partly realised as antiphonal singing. In terms of the ritual, the communication between praise-singer and horseman serves as a prelude to the ritual proper; in terms of the play, the fact that it contains several allusions to the late king’s death and the horseman’s approaching departure from the world of the living introduces the audience to the central theme. The elements of dance, chant, oral story-telling and speaking in riddles establish a distinctly Yoruba setting.

The stages of the horseman’s ritual suicide represented in the first and third scene both may be interpreted as Soyinka’s literary ‘improvisation’ (to apply Drewal’s term) on the ritual prototype. The ‘differences’ he creates, giving the ritual its shape as play within a play, establish the intended metaphysical dimension of Death and the King’s Horseman. In the first scene, the dialogue between Elesin and the praise-singer serves to forebode the unexpected direction the ritual is going to take. On the very first page of the play the horseman refers to “[t]hat Esu-harrassed day” (9), thus reminding the audience of the Yoruba trickster deity who epitomises the principle
of unpredictability. The story of the Not-I bird, whom Elesin self-contentedly claims to have bidden "seek his nest again, / Safe, without care or fear" (14) as well as the horseman's proud assertion, "I am master of my Fate" (14), inevitably stir the trickster's urge to create chaos by perturbing people's plans. Those who know Esu know that there will be trouble in store for Elesin. It is at this point that the horseman's tragic fate begins to take its course, long before the 'Colonial Factor' enters the play.

The third scene, in which Elesin's trance dance is represented, allows the audience to glance at the interspace between the different realms of the Yoruba universe. Elesin remains physically present on stage throughout the trance, yet it is obvious that his distance from the space and time of this world increases steadily as he proceeds on his ritual journey toward the beyond. This illusion arises by means of the antiphonal chanting of the horseman and the praise-singer that introduces and accompanies the trance dance. First, the praise-singer assumes the voice of the deceased king, who is already waiting for Elesin to arrive. His repeated question whether Elesin can hear his voice is answered by the horseman with the words "Faintly, my king, faintly" (41). However, as Elesin's distance from the world of the living increases, the praise-singer's voice more and more becomes that of the audience's representative or his own voice as praise-singer to the king's horseman. In this way, Elesin's departure is suggested convincingly. The horseman's allusions to what he perceives on the way to the other world as well as his diminishing awareness of his surroundings and the increasing heaviness of his dance movements further enhance the desired effect. The space of the stage begins to reach into the realm of the beyond, as Elesin is on his way to the king. By having the lights fade on the scene before the dance terminates with the horseman's death, Soyinka retains an awareness of the presence of the metaphysical world throughout the rest of the play. His re-presentation of the trance dance reflects his emphasis on aspects of the horseman's ritual suicide that transcend a superficial spectacle. Far from encouraging exoticist voyeurism, he asks the audience to participate in the internal dynamics of the ritual. As play within a play, the re-presented ritual is transformed into
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a function of cultural meaning to represent, in turn, a comment on the happenings of the play on a larger scale. Obviously, Soyinka’s satirical, at times even cynical, portrayal of western ritualised behaviour carries the same potential as play within a play (e.g. the exchange of formal British greetings in contrast to the verbal exchanges between Elesin and the praise-singer; the Pilkings’s practising a tango to music from a cranked gramophone in contrast to the horseman’s dance movements). By seeming comparatively shallow, these elements represent an equally effective comment on the play.¹⁹

The Broken Calabash

Onwueme’s play The Broken Calabash was first published in 1984. It comprises seven movements which are framed by a short prologue and epilogue. Ona, the heroine, is an only child. She is an Idegbe, which, in the context of Igbo culture, implies that she must not marry into another man’s family. If she ever bears children, it will be for her father to propagate the family line. The other option she has is to marry a ‘wife,’ who will then bear children for her father. While this tradition of Idegbe, which like the ritual suicide in Death and the King’s Horseman involves a kind of individual self-sacrifice for the sake of a larger group of people, represents the thematic starting-point of The Broken Calabash, there are two major Igbo rituals involved that are relevant to the meaning of the play. The first serves as a backdrop to the action and is established in the prologue: a town crier announces the Ine satirical festival that marks the beginning of harvest and is meant to purge the land of the evil of the old year so as to prepare it for the new yam season. The welfare of the people depends on this yearly ritual purification. Indicating the meaning of Ine, the town crier, on the ritual plane, serves to remind the people of the annual obligation to purify the land. On the theatrical plane, he indirectly functions as a cultural interpreter to audiences who are not familiar with Igbo culture. His brief appearances during the play often herald a group of satirical dancers who, during

¹⁹ For a more detailed analysis, see Gilbert/Tompkins, pp. 67-69.
Staging Ritual in Contemporary Nigerian Drama

the festival, are expected to chant songs against people who have transgressed the customs of the land.

The second major ritual in *The Broken Calabash* represents a more domestic kind of ritual. It belongs to the ceremonial complex of marriage and is intertwined with the problems of Idegbe. Ona, the young protagonist, is in love with Diaku, a young man who, according to Igbo tradition, belongs to a socially isolated caste. While Ona is quite generally not supposed to marry outside her father’s family, it would still be worse to marry a young man of that particular Osu caste. When Diaku’s kinsmen in accordance with, and yet clearly in opposition to, custom present a calabash of palmwine to Ona’s father to propose, the latter causes it to fall to the ground and shatter to pieces. The manner in which he rejects the proposal is a scandalous affront.

The major theme of *The Broken Calabash* is formulated by the town-crier with a gong:

We are in a period of transition. Kom!
New yam must be eaten. Kom!
The moon is full, the old season dies. (42)

Onwueme’s play is concerned with cultural change, which she does not necessarily connect with colonial or neo-colonial pressure. By choosing the conceptual framework of an annually celebrated festival to supply the various metaphors of change, she characterises change as a natural phenomenon. When the old season ends, the time is ripe, so to speak, for change. The full moon represents a turning point one cannot reasonably ignore. The fact that it is still yam that will be eaten in the future ensures a certain continuity; yet, there must be change — repetition with a difference. While the town-crier does not directly interfere with the narrative, his words serve to highlight and comment on certain aspects of the plot.

The characters’ attitudes towards the rituals represented in *The Broken Calabash* reflect their attitude towards change. Like Soyinka, Onwueme re-presents a number of western counter-rituals. Having been called a symbolist artist,²⁰ she introduces several cultural icons

²⁰ Amuta, p. 56.
that evoke broader ritualistic backgrounds. The left and right walls of Ona’s family’s living-room are, for instance, decorated with the picture of a crucifix and red and white cloth with feathers respectively. In the very first movement, these objects signify the dichotomy between Christian and Igbo ritual/religious traditions, anticipating a conflict between the two. Ona’s father, who is decidedly against all change, satirises “all these so-called priests who wear long gowns like women to bog you down with weights of rules and irrelevant doctrines” (36). The exchange of rings that represents an important aspect of engagement ceremonies to Ona and her boyfriend is, like a number of Christian ceremonies, trivialised and/or ridiculed by Ona’s father. As he puts it, “confession, catechism, confirmation. ‘Con’ this, ‘con’ that. The white man and his priests have nothing else to offer us but ‘cons’” (40-41). This remark shows that to him — and this is perhaps characteristic of his generation — cultural change is strongly associated with a colonial imbalance of power.

The reluctance of Ona’s father to change reaches a climax when he causes the calabash of palmwine presented to him in the course of the marriage proposal to shatter to pieces. Ironically, this disruption of a traditional ritual structure proves much more problematic than any other instances of change depicted. At the end of the play, it does not only result in a desperate suicide but also in communal chaos. The town crier’s lamenting the turn of events suggests the question of what pollution of the land really means. In the second movement of the play, there is a particularly interesting scene which Onwueme describes in her stage directions as follows:

*As TOWN CRIER [who has just once more explicated the meaning of Ine] is leaving, he is followed by a comic/satirical scene of mock dancers. First, a group of young men and boys dressed in brassieres, wigs, lipstick, rags, skirts, ladies’ clothes, and high-heeled shoes, dances across the square. Soon after, girls dressed in men’s clothes, beards, one-eyed goggles, etc., chant songs and dance. They all chant songs against people who have transgressed the customs of the land. When they meet the boys, both groups coo and boo each other, with the boys chasing the girls from the square (37).*
On the surface, the mock dancers' satirical costumes as well as their songs seem to criticise an over-zealous adaption of western values, which are regarded as 'pollution.' However, situated at a point in the play where Ona's father has proved himself a stubborn defender of outmoded marriage traditions, the town-crier's preceding reference to polluters of the land strongly anticipates the future role of Ona's father as chief polluter of the land who will have to "pay the final debt to the gods" (37). The young people's grotesque transvestite costumes highlight the fact that it is Ona's father, who, by insisting on finding a 'wife' for her, forces her into a role she perceives as unnatural for herself. The traditional understanding of offending the customs of the land is dramatically being inverted.

By means of ritually motivated dance, Onwueme skilfully intertwines the narrative and the ritualistic strands of her play by constructing thematic parallels between the two. Very effectively, she inserts brief dance scenes at particularly significant points in the play. When, for instance, the gift of the calabash shatters to pieces, a group of ritual mock dancers suddenly appear who dance around the broken calabash. At this point, which represents a dramatic climax, the different ritual signifiers of Igbo tradition informing the play for a moment converge. Onwueme, while having her protagonist Ona, unlike her father, sympathise with 'western' rituals (which to her generation have ceased to be specifically western rituals), nevertheless uses Igbo traditions of ritual as a means of cultural self-assertion. However, she skilfully invests the old traditions with new meanings. Ritual here becomes a function of cultural change — in this case represented by an issue of feminist concern — which is understood not as a total abandonment of the old values but as a natural development. As the town crier enunciates, a new season begins. While the purificational aspects of the Ine festival are maintained, Onwueme adds additional layers of meaning to the event. Like Soyinka in Death and the King's Horseman, she deploys the manifold creative potential of ritual as play within a play.
Anguished Human Relations and the Search for Love: Plays by Canadian Writers Brad Fraser, Judith Thompson and Dianne Warren

JOY: I didn’t try to fix anybody’s life. I don’t know how. (86)
ISOBEL: I came back. I take my life. I want you all to take your life. I want you all to have your life. (63)

These are quotations from the three plays on which this article focuses: Serpent in the Night Sky,¹ Lion in the Streets² and Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love.³

Brief Introductions to the Plays

Jenny Topper, the Artistic Director of Hampstead Theatre in London, in connection with an English production of Lion in the Streets, made this comment: “We have ideas about the terrific niceness of Canada […]. These plays show that the serpent got in there as well.”⁴

The “Serpent” in the title of Dianne Warren’s first play Serpent in the Night Sky (1991) is a cosmic serpent that will devour the moon, but — hopefully — not the world. Warren’s play is a powerful play of domination and escape and an assembly of on-the-edge characters.

² Judith Thompson, Lion in the Streets (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1992).
³ Brad Fraser, Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1996).
⁴ “There goes neighbourhood” (Sarah Hemming talks to Judith Thompson), Independent April 1993.
Duff, a Saskatchewan cab driver, picks up Joy, a seventeen-year-old girl from Montana; they plan to marry after only one day of courtship. He brings her home to his family, who live on a northern lake. Soon Joy realises that Duff and his sister’s family are pathological, as far as the future is concerned. Duff is about 20 years old, his sister Stella is in her late twenties. She denies her advanced pregnancy. Stella’s husband Gator is “thirty or so”; he poaches fish and beats his wife. He is a vicious idler — and a bully. Duff’s mother (55) has deserted the family. Every now and then she comes back from the bush to leave a dead rabbit on the doorstep for her children. And there is Preacher (he is forty-ish), an American, who came to Canada to escape the draft during the Vietnam war. On his journey across the border he sees the moon being eaten by a serpent. He stays in Canada, becomes a kind of visionary and longs for another ultimate — the eradication of evil.

Dianne comments on the characters as follows:

Joy senses that if something doesn’t happen in Duff’s family, Duff will end up a criminal and an abuser, like his mentor Cator, and Stella will become hardened and incapable of love, even for her baby. Marlene will be in purgatory forever. But in the play it is not too late. The characters want a future. Stella wants to nurture. She’s raised Duff to adulthood. But she is about to become a real mother and the baby is different — more vulnerable and susceptible to Gator’s abuse. That’s why she denies her pregnancy. Marlene leaves presents for Duff (the dead rabbits) because she has never forgotten that she is his mother. There is anguish everywhere in this family, but until Joy comes along no one knows what to do about it.\(^5\)

The serpent in Warren’s play is the embodiment of the evil in people’s lives. But who can eradicate the evil? Poetic visionaries perhaps, or potential heroes? The “lion” in the title of Judith Thompson’s play \textit{Lion in the Streets} is the “lion in our blood vessels,” as the author herself says.\(^6\) When the “lion” is in the street, there is chaos. In this play (written in 1990) the ghost of a murdered girl flits through the neighbourhood seeking her killer, the “lion in the streets.” The Isobel of the play goes back to a little local girl of Portuguese parents in Thompson’s immediate neighbourhood. She was emotionally

\(^5\) Letter from Dianne Warren to the present author, dated 2 July 1997.

disturbed, "used to eat dirt and kick people, and the boys would encourage her to do this so that they could chuck stuff at her." To Thompson, the "sadistic nature of these kids [...] seemed to reflect a sadism at large in society." Isobel, when wandering through the neighbourhood "smells the breath of the lion," but she envisages so much other pain in this urban jungle that when she finally meets her killer she is able to forgive him. She decides to stop the cycle of death. The characters in Lion in the Streets relate to almost everything in the world. The gentrified upper-middle-class people are linked to the paraplegic person (with only occasional help) in the basement. The lawyer is friendly across the fence, but this does not cross much further. A middle-class professional couple have a dinner party; the wife comes in, and the husband is there with his mistress, a telephone-sex girl. These and other characters are all part of the multi-ethnic neighbourhoods in Toronto. And the ghost of Isobel (who was killed seventeen years before) tries to find succour, to find sanctuary, in each of these scenes.

Brad Fraser's play Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love (1989) is about friendship, loneliness, love, confused sexuality, death and contemporary youth culture — but primarily about how people in this day and age try to make contact with one another, cannot find love, cannot even recognise it any more. David is the central character. He is a gay waiter, a former actor — hedonistic, cynical and witty. He sets the tone with a series of anonymous encounters that make up his sex-life. Bernie, David's best friend (for a long time), a married man, is a notorious womaniser, and reveals himself as a serial killer of young women. Altogether there are seven characters, who try to find a substitute for "romantic love" which, to them, is a relic, a bourgeois construct. Casual liaisons and polymorphous perversity have replaced love. There is no communication between them any more. Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love is a portrait of the urban jungle, a compassionate study of young adults groping for meaning in a senseless world.

7 Interview with Judith Thompson.
Albert-Reiner Glaap

Comments on the Issues of the Three Plays

What these three plays have in common is that they are all about ‘anguished human relations’ in the Canada of our times.

In *Serpent in the Night Sky* Dianne Warren explores the idea that love is linked with the ability to choose.

If one person is dominated by another, then freedom of choice is not possible. Power is embodied in the character of Gator, his is a raw, physical kind of power. When Joy comes along, clearly in search of love, Gator is threatened. [...] Marlene and Joy determine the ending. Rather than happily ever after, there is the potential for love, if people do things right. And doing things right is dependent on the characters’ abilities to be autonomous. This applies in particular to Duff and Stella. Stella can be a good mother and Duff can be a good partner for Joy, only if they free themselves of Gator, so that they can make wise choices, rather than choices based on an unequal relationship. The play examines the connections between love and power. From my perspective, you can’t have both.8

Marlene and Preacher encapsulate the idea that all human beings should have a choice. Marlene helps Stella rid herself and the baby of Gator. Preacher encapsulates the idea that no one “protector” can save the world from evil. It takes individuals who are free to make choices, and a community to help out. Preacher goes back to looking for the Serpent. People do not change after just one incident. He has agreed to marry Joy and Duff, but he is not yet ready to give up his own quest. “That’s just me,” comments Dianne Warren, “not wanting to suggest that there are easy solutions, or that people learn quickly, or that happiness comes easily.” Preacher is ineffective in his attempt to erase evil, because no one person can do this. And what Warren is pointedly saying is that neither poetic visionaries nor potential heroes can ‘fix’ broken lives.9 Joy cannot do it all by herself either. She is not a social worker, not a therapist who knows better than the other characters. She is just a young woman who starts on her own journey and is going to make sure she gets somewhere even if it means leaving a person she loves.

8 Letter from Dianne Warren.
9 Letter from Dianne Warren.
It is important that Joy is American. She crosses a border, literally, and finds herself in a new country, with no passport and no identification. In other words, she can now be a person of her own making. Needless to say, the awareness of the power of the huge country on the other side of the border is looming behind it all. Joy and Preacher are Americans. There are parallels: Power destroyed Preacher in a way. On his journey across the border he sees the moon being eaten by a serpent. On her trip across the border, Joy encounters Cator.

The two Americans end up in the same place. Preacher stays and tries to catch the serpent. Joy knows she will be beaten and prepares to leave, until Marlene steps in on her own journey out of purgatory. Preacher came to Canada as a man beaten by his own country. Joy came to Canada as a young woman beaten by some kind of male dominance, although that is not specifically explained in the play. The Americans don't save the day in the play. The individuals do, and mother-Marlene makes the first move.¹⁰

Fraser's play is set in Edmonton, which represents the transition from rural to urban. Up until twenty years ago, everyone there had a rural background or spent some time on uncle's farm. Fraser himself points to the fact that seeing the big city-dwellers replacing the nice country folks is still "uncomfortable for many people in Edmonton."¹¹ Edmonton today is a metaphor for a suburban place, a shopping centre, the most northerly city in North America, a city in a bleak landscape and a dope-taking underworld in which people experience many ways of life, fear and love.

Fraser's Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love leaves the past behind; the play is, in Sarah Hemming's words, "a dark sexy piece about the seedy underworld of Edmonton where life is conducted in the shadow of a serial killer."¹² The characters are young adults between twenty and thirty years of age, Fraser's age group, whose questions he tries to thematise. "The play is not about how we wish to live, but how we actually live," Fraser said in an interview.¹³

¹⁰ Letter from Dianne Warren.
¹¹ Albert-Reiner Glaap, Interview with Brad Fraser, Toronto, 29 May 1997 (type-script).
¹² "There goes neighbourhood."
¹³ Interview with Brad Fraser.
which I conducted with him, and he adds, “The questions of these people are difficult questions, especially in the gay area. My work has changed as I have come out and have been aware of what is going on. My characters within the play talk about what AIDS is doing to people, and they cannot escape.” There have been a number of Canadian plays dealing with confused sexuality, search for love, AIDS and groping for meaning, but most of these do it without a plot, instead they contextualize the problems of the people concerned into larger, global concerns. Fraser wanted a plot, a dramatic action that creates a level of anxiety in the audience and makes them ask questions about why we are the way we are. What is indeed a cumbersome title (Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love) is meant to tell them, “This is not the kind of play you are used to going to.” The first part of the title (Unidentified Human Remains) was gleaned from an experience Fraser had in his early twenties, when he pulled a small police poster from a gay bar bulletin board with two strange photographs “of the forensically reconstructed face” of a man who had been sexually assaulted and mutilated before he was killed. Nobody knew who the man was. He had been found in a septic tank at a farmhouse near Edmonton. Beneath the photo on the poster was written “Unidentified Human Remains,” and here was the perfect title for Fraser’s play, Unidentified Human Remains, that was so much like what David, the central character in his play, was, and the other characters as well, human beings, mutilated, tortured, missed by no one. This image, however, is only part of the title, one level of the play. The other level is expressed by the second half of the title, The True Nature of Love. Death and love live side by side in Fraser’s play; its dual nature combines the melodramatic and the contemporary, elements of a thriller and of a love story. It is not only about the horrors of this world, but also about the search for love, the search for what love really is and means. Fraser knows the people of his peer group, who are the characters of his play; he has been in their situation himself. Although he would not call his plays “autobiographical” in the literal sense of this word (“You can’t put life on stage,” he says), he considers what he has written as “a kind of autobiographical fiction” in the sense that he started from what life gave
him and went on to write something that would make the audience ask questions rather than give answers.

Judith Thompson’s *Lion in the Streets* is likewise based on an intimate knowledge of her immediate surroundings which in this case is neither a specific family (as in Dianne Warren’s play) nor a particular peer group (as in Fraser’s play), but her own multicultural neighbourhood in Toronto. There is no “serpent in the sky,” but a “lion in the streets,” which represents our self-limiting fears. The ghost of Isobel encounters various characters who encapsulate those fears: marital desertion, rape, bullying in the office, cancer, sex real or imaginary, suffering from cerebral palsy, the evils of cholesterol, to name but a few. Similar to the characters in *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*, Thompson’s characters are “tainted by the deepest insecurities and fruitless quests for a return to innocence,” as Helen Adkins writes in the *Tribune*.14 The culmination is Isobel’s meeting with her murderer, who killed her seventeen years ago. She has observed the souls of people in the neighbourhood and finally recognises that the lion is not just the deranged young man who murdered her, but the cruelty in all of us, or, as Judith Thompson herself explained in an interview with Cynthia Zimmerman, “something buried, a force that can be great or terrible. We’ve buried it for so long that when it comes out it comes out roaring, like a caged animal.”15

Canada has the reputation of being a peaceful, civilised country, and people in so-called civilised urban areas think they are safe, but — and this is what Judith Thompson is trying to drive home — no one in Canada, or elsewhere in this modern world, lives in a conservation area. We are not safe, underneath there is so much violence and painful infection, the wilderness of the North has found its counterpart in the urban wilderness with its often very mixed neighbourhoods. The ending of *Lion in the Streets* was not planned to be the way it is, it evolved while the author was writing; Isobel becomes a Christ-like figure and eventually addresses the audience, as she did at the

beginning of the play. What she is saying now is, “I came back. I take my life. I want you all to take your life. I want you all to have your life” (63). Thompson admits that her own desire for reconciliation must have triggered off Isobel’s “desire to stop the cycle of death.” In her talk with Sarah Hemming on the occasion of the London production of Lion in the Streets at Hampstead Theatre, Thompson pointed out, “I think you have to want to provoke change through your plays. I don’t believe I’ve done my job if I’ve just shown horror.”

Isobel stands for the duality of horror and love that Judith Thompson has in mind and that is also encapsulated in the title of Fraser’s Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love, a duality endemic to a society anxious to determine where the values of our time are.

Insights into the Making of the Three Plays

In what way have the three portraits of the urban jungle, the places of menace, the danger and fear been dramatised? Would one expect a narrative path from beginning to end, a clear-cut structure, a well-wrought plot, an elaborated language? Hardly so.

Thompson’s Lion in the Streets breaks away from traditional theatre-writing, from conventionally naturalistic plays. Richard Paul Knowles in his Introduction to the Coach House Press edition of the play writes, “The characters in Lion in the Streets tend to be fragmented and discontinuous, and they are rarely contained within a single, unified action or linear plot. They tend, too, to be represented self-consciously as constructs undergoing crises of subjectivity, struggling to bridge a persistent gulf between the self that speaks and the self unrepresented in that discourse as the subject, the ‘I’.”

The action is multiple, coming as it does in a series of vignettes. Six actors play thirty different parts. Only the role of Isobel is constant. Although invisible to the others most of the time, she is always on stage. The multiple actions in the various vignettes remain open; one character from each episode is carried over to the next, where he or she triggers off a new action. The portrait of an urban neighbourhood

16 “There goes neighbourhood.”
that is being painted in the course of the play and Isobel’s presence replace the linear narrative of traditional theatre-writing. “Isobel provides the structural link for the vignettes,” writes Cynthia Zimmerman, “and her story supplies a narrative line, albeit a muted one.”

Thompson creates her play by having the characters deliver monologues. As they try to articulate what their situations and fears are, they talk in broken English, the language the author hears in her neighbourhood, by which means the characters express their deepest insecurities. Standard English does nothing for Thompson. With reference to her latest play Sled (1997) she was asked, “Why are most of your plays not middle-class?” Her answer was, “My characters have to be middle-class but very quirky or of a class that uses a dialect of English which is usually much more powerful.” In Lion in the Streets the rhythms of the spoken language are emphasised to the point of being like music.

Whereas in Thompson’s play a child murderer, “the lion,” who is not merely a deranged young man but the cruelty that is in all of us, triggers off the action, Fraser’s Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love was influenced by a serial killer (of women, this time). But here the author had already been working on the script for eight months, before Brenda McLenaghan’s body was found by the roadside tied to a tree by a long extension chord and before the newspaper story about it was published. The thought of that crime was the catalyst or was to become the catalyst for Fraser’s play. “What would I do if I found out that it was my best friend who had done it? All of a sudden I had a plot,” he said to me in the interview — more than just the collection of characters and a lot of scenes that he had worked on in the months prior to the murder of the woman. A plot, however, not in the traditional sense, with an exposition and a clear-cut structure, leading to a closed ending; but one “with scenes that resemble a roller coaster: You are scared to go on, you never know what's going to happen.”

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20 Interview with Brad Fraser.
21 Interview with Brad Fraser.
Albert-Reiner Glaap

Fraser wants to write for people who do not normally go to the theatre. When he wrote *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* he was in his mid-twenties. He knows the people who live in places like Edmonton. As a playwright he wants more than just characters who represent this, that or the other: “I want to start from concerns which represent people,” he said in the interview. His plays have not been written for people who want to be given a certain amount of satisfaction. “I don’t think of any of my plays as being over. I don’t want things neatly tied. When they walk out of the theatre, a debate must be going on.”

Fraser does not want the audience ever to be able to disengage from a particular character on stage. This is why the actors and actresses in *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* are always on stage, all of them, although they hardly act. They are portraits of different kinds of love or anxiety. As he was trained as an actor and worked as a director, Fraser is fully aware of the powerful aspects of what he calls “simultaneous peripheral action.” “Contrary to a film screen,” he says, “you’ve got a whole space in front of you (i.e. in the theatre). As the audience watch a particular scene going on, they see that other things are going on as well. The actors are not to be disengaged from the stage.”

Fraser’s main objective is that the theatre-goers are affected by everything that is going on in each of the scenes. Therefore: no exits and no entrances! “If this or that character left the stage the audience would get the impression that they become someone else,” he says. *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* is an uncompromising study of young adults groping for meaning in a senseless world of AIDS, bulimia, cordless phones and sex-killings. Its author speaks their language, which is direct, sharp, edgy and comic-based TV. I asked Brad Fraser how he would define his own background and his concept of writing plays. He describes himself as “white trash Canadian, a rural person with no scholastic life, who

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22 Interview with Brad Fraser.
23 Interview with Brad Fraser.
24 Interview with Brad Fraser.
has not gone through any kind of academic training." He wants a more visceral form of drama that deviates from conventional patterns and deals with the concerns of the people in this decade of fear and uncertainty.

Finally, back to Dianne Warren’s Serpent in the Night Sky and what went into the making of this play. Although it has a traditional structure (some critics call it a ‘well-made play’!), the roles played by the characters are not traditional. Here, once again, Dianne Warren’s point of view is most revealing:

I keep thinking how different things in this play would be if it were a Hollywood movie. Gator would have physical/sexual power over Joy; Duff would eventually choose Joy over Gator; the men would fight and Duff would win; good over evil would prevail and Joy and Duff would be happy. I think Serpent takes a familiar story and deals with the elements in a way that challenges this story structure.26

Each of the characters contributes to the mirroring of “anguished relations.” Joy is a kind of catalyst, because she believes she can have a future. She is prepared to leave Duff, although she loves him; and her strength spurs Stella and Marlene into what could be termed a ‘collective action.’ When Marlene drives Gator into the lake for love of Duff and Stella, and Stella leaves Gator for love of her child, power has nothing to do with these decisions. In the words of Dianne Warren,

Joy will show Duff how to love, once they are free of Gator, the same way Stella will be able to love her child, once she is free of Gator. Eventually, Joy and Duff are leaving in a taxi — so there is potential for a happy ending. But Preacher is still looking for the serpent — so there is still potential for evil. In the end, we hope that the serpent will not eat the world. But it still might.27

25 Interview with Brad Fraser.
26 Letter from Dianne Warren.
27 Letter from Dianne Warren.
Richard Foreman’s Theatrical Deconstruction of the Neo-Ritualistic Theatre of the Sixties

Anthropology, or at least a certain popular image of anthropology, has had a strong impact on the development of experimental theatre in this century. In this essay I would like to examine two different generations of the American theatre avant-garde of the past three decades with regard to their approaches towards anthropology. For the sake of simplification I would like to refer to them as the theatre of the sixties and the theatre of the seventies, even if these terms are constructs and the binarism they imply shaky.

Antonin Artaud’s experiences with Balinese theatre and his sojourn with the Tarahumaras in Mexico in the mid-thirties — nowadays we would call it research in theatre anthropology — impregnated his concept of a Theatre of Cruelty, which became the most dominant point of reference for the alternative theatre of the sixties. The Polish director Jerzy Grotowski published an essay on Artaud in his famous book Towards a Poor Theatre, and Julian Beck and Judith Malina of The Living Theatre repeatedly referred to Artaud. The anthropological writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Victor Turner, on the other hand, but also the later texts by Clifford Geertz were very important for Richard Schechner, who founded the Performance Group in 1967 and invited Grotowski to his first workshop in the United States in 1969.

The next generation of theatre artists who dominated New York Off-Off stages in the seventies was also interested in anthropological
issues, but for very different ends. Robert Wilson, for example, made use of the time-structure of the passion play in his seven-day performance *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE* in Iran in 1972. He also adopted the dance of the Whirling Dervishes for his rehearsals and productions. However, regarding the theatre of the seventies I want to focus here mainly on Richard Foreman, whose theatre work, as I would like to demonstrate, deconstructs the anthropological assumptions of the experimental theatre of the sixties on several levels.

Foreman founded the New York-based Ontological-Hysteric Theatre in 1968, yet produced his main body of work in the mid-seventies. Besides being the playwright, set designer and director of his ontological-hysterical productions, he is also a highly regarded theoretician of theatre and one of the most self-reflecting and intellectual theatre artists working in America today. In addition to his ontological-hysterical work, Foreman has not only collaborated with the composer Stanley Silverman on music-theatre productions, but he has also directed films, written a novel (which will soon be published) and successfully staged the dramas of other playwrights. His staging of Brecht and Weill’s *Threepenny Opera* at the Lincoln Center in 1976 was the last outstanding American production of this play. Since the early nineties Foreman has been working at the Ontological, his small theatre in the attic of St. Marks Church in the East Village, and he has just toured in London with a recent show called *Permanent Braindamage*.

The theatre avant-garde of the sixties and seventies were different in terms of their aesthetics, their training and their intentions, partly due to the fact that most theatre artists of the sixties had theatre backgrounds and were still influenced by post-war drama and psychological realism, whereas most of the theatre artists of the seventies disliked any form or notion of traditional and even modern theatre — many of them came from outside the theatre, from the Judson Dance Group, minimalism in painting and music, happening and experimental film. The differences between these generations can also be seen in their contrasting ways of applying anthro-
Richard Foreman’s Theatrical Deconstruction

polological concepts of ritual to their stage practices and theatre aesthetics.

The most decisive feature of the theatre of the sixties could be termed, with Herbert Blau, the “participation mystique,” the idea that theatre should be an experience of *communitas*, where any kind of breach could be healed, any dualism be turned into oneness, any distance be dissolved. Actors and audience should become one; isolated and estranged individuals should become part of a Dionysian party; the tactile quality of the body should overcome the dominance of abstractifying language; allegory should be replaced by the symbolic mode; the permanent deferment of representation should turn into the presence of a Bakhtinian carnival. The notion of ritual, to which most of the sixties’ groups referred, was a highly romantic one, being understood as an experience of flow, healing and unity. This notion was partly influenced by Norman O. Brown’s book *Love’s Body*, which propagated the concept of a “Dionysian body mysticism.” In one scene of the Performance Group’s most well-known production *Dionysos in ’69*, the performers celebrated a birth ritual, which was Schechner’s version of Asmat, a tribal practice in Indonesian New Guinea.¹ In his book *The Life of the Theatre* Julian Beck defined the aim of the Living Theatre as achieving a “Dionysian Theatre that leads the people into dance, wild hunting [...] and fucking [...] other facets of body theatre, holy touch and use.”² In the same book he defined “revolution as ritual acts: purification: unification: the creation of the body of the people: enlightenment, end of divisive murder.”³

In opposition to the theatre avant-garde of the sixties, Foreman has always insisted on the importance of writing in his own productions, even if his plays refuse any traditional notion of exposition, plot-line and character, and have been dubiously labelled “Theater of Images” by Bonnie Marranca. Foreman has always maintained

³ Beck, p. 107.
the traditional framework of the theatre, with its proscenium stage and its distance between the actors and the audience. He aimed at a tactile and physically mimetic perception of the stage event, yet not by erasing the distanced gaze of the viewer, but by trying to add an almost material density to the feel of the stage space. A production of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre can still be identified by several peculiar features: overlapping sound-loops, black-and-white dotted strings stretched horizontally across the stage, Foreman’s own amplified voice commenting on the events on stage, blinding spotlights directed towards the audience, ear-shattering sounds stopping the flow of action on stage, etc. As a result of Foreman’s own references to Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Lacan, and Derrida in interviews and essays, many critics regard his work as a theatre machine that permanently reveals and reflects its own modus operandi of representation. He himself has written in his second “Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto” that the spectator should be made aware of his own gaze at each single moment of the performance, thereby alluding to Brecht’s “alienation effect”: “To be a proper SPECTATOR is to be in two places at once. 1) Seeing where it is (the art) 2) Seeing where you are (watching).”

Foreman also wrote in his first manifesto: “TAKE TWO RULES CONTRADICTORY IN NATURE. FOLLOWING BOTH MEANS SUCCESS.” Foreman’s insistence on notions of the double-bind, difference, gap, and ambiguity quite naturally led him to prefer montage and to reject the concept of flow, which he associated with Grotowski’s theatre: “I wanted a theatre that did the opposite of ‘flow’ — a theatre that was true to my own mental experiences, that is, the world as being pieces of things [...].”

In his book Unbalancing Acts, which was published in 1992, Foreman attributed the schizoid elements of his plays and stage productions to his religious concerns. Both Foreman and Julian Beck have

6 Quoted in Kate Davy’s introduction to Foreman, Plays and Manifestos, p. ix.
used religious concepts of Jewish, Christian and Asian mysticism as tools of inspiration to create their theatre pieces. While in *Paradise Now* (1968) the Living Theatre aimed at a theatrical experience close to a collective physical and spiritual union, the actor in the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre is supposed to function like a priest who only speaks to a few initiated members of the audience. In opposition to the Living Theatre's utopia of fulfillment, Foreman's theatre bears great similarity to traditions of negative theology and the notion of *deus absconditus*, the absent God.

Foreman considers his writings a gift from an unknown 'Other' — either conceived as the Gnostic 'alien man from beyond' or as Jacques Lacan's abstract location where signification happens. The writings in turn are staged as a sacrifice to this alien force, to keep the creative process going.

One must find ways to sacrifice 'what comes' to one in the writing. Offer it up ... to what Gods?
Destroy it as useful to use in daily life as-it-is. Rather serve it up to the elsewhere in us.
The play is then a ceremonial ground. Certain operations are performed. Not to tell (you) something. Not to take (you) elsewhere. But an important and significant activity goes on which you watch or not watch. But it isn't there for you or for me, it's for the benefit of someone else, hidden within us both, who needs to be fed so that everyday you and me can still be alive in a way that has plasticity and aliveness of thought and perception. Understand, it's not a question of refining the GOALS of thought and action, but of keeping the process itself grounded in a kind of energy that makes the process itself want to continue.9

From my point of view, the difference between the theatre concepts of Schechner and Beck on the one hand and Foreman on the other is analogous to the difference between certain anthropological concepts of ritual and *communitas*. The neo-ritualistic theatre of the sixties can be related roughly to the anthropology of Victor Turner, whereas Foreman's understanding of the ritual character of the theatrical experience comes closer to the theories of Michael

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Markus Wessendorf

Taussig, who currently teaches anthropology at Columbia University and has done fieldwork in Latin America over many years. One of his main research topics is the *yagé*-ritual performed by Indians living along the Putumayo River in Colombia. During these rituals (mostly male) Indians drink *yagé* with a shaman to rid themselves of evil and to receive healing visions. *Yagé* is a hallucinogenic drug brewed from local vines. Taussig’s participation in such rituals has made him question Victor Turner’s approach. In *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (1978) Turner (with his wife Edith) describes rituals in terms of flow and *communitas*:

In flow and communities what is sought is unity, not the unity which represents a sum of fractions and is susceptible of division and subtraction, but an indivisible unity, ‘white,’ ‘pure,’ ‘primary,’ ‘seamless.’ This unity is expressed in such symbols as the basic generative and nurturant fluids semen and milk; and as running water, dawn, light, and whiteness. Homogeneity is sought, instead of heterogeneity, [and the participants] are impregnated by unity, as it were, and purified from divisiveness and plurality. The impure and sinful is the sundered, the divided. The pure is the integer, the indivisible.¹⁰

As opposed to Turner’s understanding of ritual, Taussig describes his experiences with the *yagé*-rituals on the Putumayo River by referring to Brecht’s dramaturgy of the ‘alienation effect.’ Taussig argues that the *yagé*-nights are closer to an experience of disjunction and a montage of perceptions than to the experience of continuity and flow. He regards Turner’s harmonious notion of *communitas* as a typical Western romanticisation of other cultures and writes in his book *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* (1987):

Certainly the *communitas* features of the *yagé* nights are the antithesis of the whiteness, this homogeneity, this soppy primitivism of semen and milk and the unified as the pure. Against that the *yagé* nights pose awkwardness of fit, breaking up and scrambling, the allegorical rather than the symbolist mode […]¹¹


Montage: oscillating in and out of itself, feeling sensations so intensely that you become the stuff sensed. But then you are standing outside the experience and coldly analyzing it as Bertolt Brecht so wanted from his "alienation effects" in his epic theater. Only here, in the theater of yagé nights in the Putumayo foothills, the A-effect, standing outside of one's now defamiliarized experience and analyzing that experience, is inconstant and constantly so, flickering, alternating with absorption in the events and their magic.12

The interesting aspect of Taussig's position as a contemporary anthropologist is his permanent recourse to performative and theatrical models to explain both sacred and secular rituals, workings and circulations of power, and systems of make-believe. In his latest book, *The Magic of the State*, which came out in spring 1997, he not only analyses the political utilizations and implications of the theatre of spirit possession in Latin American countries, but he also creates his own theatre of different text genres, ranging from thorough ethnographic analyses to highly literary passages, thereby achieving an all-inclusive "thick description" in Clifford Geertz's sense. Herbert Blau's verdict on the experimental theatre of the sixties, "there is nothing more illusory in performance than the illusion of the unmediated,"13 corresponds strongly to Taussig's revision of Turner. Taussig's description of the yagé-nights seems to prove and support Blau's assertion that "what is universal in performance is the consciousness of performance" for the experience of ritual. Blau writes,

> When I speak [...] of the consciousness of performance, I am stressing the consciousness in the grain of performance — no outside no inside — which in certain kinds of performance may appear not to be there but, as in a topological warp, is there in its appearance, appearing not-to-be. [...] It's the falling away from trance, or its doubling in split consciousness, that makes us aware of trance as performance, as well as the possibility — engrained in the most skeptical thought of performance, in performance as a thinking body — that the world may be entramed.14

If we can concede a higher accuracy to Taussig's notion of ritual than to Turner’s conceptualisation, the question arises whether

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12 Taussig, p.443.
14 Blau, pp. 171-72.
Foreman's theatre does not come much closer to a ritualistic experience than the neo-ritualistic performances of the sixties' theatre avant-garde. I want to argue here that Foreman's theatre work deconstructs the anthropological assumptions of the alternative theatre of the sixties on at least three levels:

1. On a formal level, Foreman tries to achieve an experience where the spectator oscillates between totally opposed and ever-shifting modes of perception, comparable to Taussig's description of the yage-ritual.

2. On a semantic level, Foreman indicates the underlying causes for the feeling of lack and the desire for completion in the Western psyche, often leading to the fabrication of an ideal and exotic otherness, which is then projected onto non-Western cultures (as, for example, Turner's notion of the pure); at the very beginning of Foreman's libretto Africanus Instructus (1986) the character Otto sings, "THERE / WHERE THE WORLD IS DIFFERENT FROM HERE, / WHERE THE MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS / ARE DIFFERENT / FROM THE MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS HERE ...," and not much further into the play Rhoda states, "I think the dark continent — is — this place. Home safe"; in another play, Egyptology (1983), Foreman hints at the exotic allure of ancient Egyptian culture for the Westerner.

3. On a third level, it could be argued that in his productions of the seventies Foreman staged the presumed unconscious subtext of theatrical and political representation as outlined by Norman O. Brown in Love's Body. Interpreting representation in psychoanalytical terms, Brown wanted to ban from the stage the castrating and hypnotising gaze of the phallic actor towards the audience. What sounded like a figurative explanation of the subliminal effect of theatrical representation on the spectator was taken at face value by Foreman, who literally transferred the suggested scene onto the stage — with the result that the pretensions of Brown's theory became evident and turned into burlesque through its very theatricali-

sation. Kate Manheim, who played the hysterical heroine Rhoda in all of Foreman's productions in the seventies, became famous for her rigid and threatening stare at the audience. In Place and Target (1978) and in Book of Splendors: Part Two (1977) this stare was even accompanied by her wearing a gigantic phallus.

But perhaps it is also possible to discuss Foreman's work as a theatrical deconstruction of the sixties' discourse on another level. Basically, his starting point is not so different from Schechner's, Beck's, or Grotowski's. Foreman himself has admitted that his work as an artist is mainly motivated by a desire for presence and transcendence, states of being which in his plays are poetically termed "poetry city," "paradise," "city of gold," etc. In his play Lava (1988) two students and their spiritual teacher are trying to achieve an ecstatic state which they call "category three," and until the very end of the play it remains uncertain whether they have really reached that level of experience. Foreman's theatre work is driven by a desire for completion, but his ontological-hysteric plays only document the failure of this desire by performing a dramaturgy "of repeated false starts."17 Only difference, deferment and delay are valid options: presence and oneness can never be achieved. In all of his productions Foreman stages the permanent failure of desire, a failure which is not only the ordinary course of things, but which is necessary to keep desire itself and the creative impulse alive.

17 Foreman, "How Truth ... Leaps (Stumbles) across Stage," Reverberation Machines, p. 198.
The Role of Rituals in August Wilson’s Drama

A discussion of the phenomenon of drama and theatre from an anthropological perspective must take into account the role of rituals. For a play or — even more so — its presentation is a ritual altogether, and it consists of a number of ritual elements, which often overlap and influence each other. Compared with Euro-American drama, African American drama places significantly more emphasis upon spectacle, dialogue, and rhythm, than upon plot, character, and theme. Therefore an analysis of plays written by an African American playwright promises to present vivid examples of how rituals work in theatre.

The author who has become most successful in putting on plays about the African American experience is August Wilson, who was born in Pittsburgh in 1945. He received the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 as well as in 1990. Research on Wilson¹ and general acceptance of his achievements² are only just beginning. Wilson’s father was a white


² Even German-language newspapers reported on Wilson after he had had an intense public discussion with Robert Brustein, a white critic, in the spring of 1997: Thomas
Thomas Leuchtenmüller

German baker, who left the family when August was still a boy. Wilson dropped out of school at ninth grade. He wrote poems and worked as a cook until Lloyd Richards, then Dean of the Yale School of Drama and Director of the Yale Repertory Theatre, praised Wilson’s play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* in a contest. A unique story of success began: between 1984 and 1992, Richards, who directed, and Wilson, who advised on the productions, presented five plays on Broadway. Apart from *Ma Rainey*, these were *Fences*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Two Trains Running*. *Fences* became the commercially most profitable play in the history of the American theatre, and it won all of the five “best play prizes” awarded by New York theatre critics — a novelty.

The influence of the experienced Richards on Wilson’s success — the African American director had already made theatre history when he staged Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* on the Great White Way in 1959 — cannot be overestimated. And also other circumstances of the productions, which I will mention later on, are of importance. But nevertheless, these are not the true reasons why Wilson is so well accepted by blacks and whites. Rather, we must look at specifics of contents and form. What happens in a Wilson drama? It is the author’s explicit intention to reflect in his work examples of the African American experience in the 20th century decade by decade: history in stories. Wilson’s drama takes


4 August Wilson, *Fences* (New York: New American Library, 1986); hereafter abbreviated as *FE*.


place in the industrial cities of the North, and he is interested in what happens to the common man.

Therefore, we find blues musicians who want to be successful (Ma Rainey); a garbage collector and his family striving for social progress (Fences); a group of black workers who have just left the South and are looking for orientation in the North (Joe Turner); a farmer and his sister, a housewife, who both intend to decide what will happen with an old piano (Piano Lesson), and a restaurant owner, who wants to get a reasonable price for his property (Two Trains). In the centre of the playwright’s aesthetics is the conviction that African Americans should become more aware of their specific cultural features and of their difference from white people; furthermore, Wilson implies that blacks are not allowed to show what makes them and their lives different.

One specific formal feature in Wilson’s drama is the use of rituals. Through them, the dramatist wants to remind especially blacks of a valuable — African — heritage that is, according to him, deeply rooted in African Americans and that just needs an occasion or a strong will to become manifest. He intends to show harmless adaptations, too. The positive contexts of the rituals — with which the characters deal more in an unconscious, but acceptable way — prove the author’s favourable attitude regarding rituals. Some of them are mainly meant to strengthen the community spirit, others are intended to purify, respectively to heal in the first place. A definition given by Barbara J. and Carlton W. Molette may be used to describe what can be regarded as a ritual in a narrow sense in Wilson’s work. According to the authors, rituals

[... ] will have all three of the following characteristics: (1) Behavior becomes formalized through an evolutionary process; (2) Group consensus regards the behavior as having some specific and important functional effect; and (3) The ritual validates the group’s system of values.8

The most noticeable ritual by which African Americans underline their community spirit is the juba in Joe Turner. The term ‘juba’ has been used to describe an African step dance recorded particularly in

South Carolina and the West Indies. The juba recalled a time when enslaved Africans working in plantation houses gathered left-over food to share with those working in the fields. The leftovers were called juba, jibba, or jiba, and were thrown together on Saturday or Sunday. To prepare psychologically for eating what was usually labelled ‘slop,’ they made up an exuberant song.

There are great similarities to the elements Wilson uses in *Joe Turner*. First, there are the following stage directions:

*The Juba is reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African Slaves. It is a call and response dance. BNUM sits at the table and drums. He calls the dance as others clap hands, shuffle and stomp around the table. It should be as African as possible, with the performers working themselves up into a near frenzy. The words can be improvised [...]*. (52)

Other elements are: characters sit together, there is eating, and it is Sunday. All are in high spirits: it is Seth who owns the pension and is normally reason itself (this becomes visible in the way he deals with the white Selig), it is Seth who always stresses that he is born of free northern parents, it is he who animates the others to join in. Bynum has just been called “half asleep” by Seth — and Bynum does not deny it (51). Jeremy brought his guitar all the way from the South to Pittsburgh (6) (where the action takes place). The guitar is his treasure: with the instrument he impresses the lonely Mattie (26); he also wins a prize (44). But nevertheless, Jeremy regards the guitar as unnecessary for the juba; the simple drumming on the table is, as he says, adequate, and Bynum confirms that (51). Most important is that Loomis, the outsider, can be seen in a state of great ecstasy. We read: “LOOMIS begins to speak in tongues and dance around the kitchen” (52), and “LOOMIS starts to walk out the front door and is thrown back and collapses, terror-stricken by his vision” (53).

In *Ma Rainey*, *Fences*, and *Piano Lesson*, too, totally different characters come together — for a song. And again there is a gradual joining-in, again everybody knows what to do or sing. This, of course, does not surprise us in a play like *Ma Rainey*, which has a recording session at its centre — although the musicians appear more like an interest group including members who find some positive remarks for each other from time to time. In the characters’
words and reactions it can be detected that they gradually gather as a rule, that they always check their instruments and rehearse before they do the recording and hope to get cash instead of cheques. The ritual nature of the artists' coming together is underlined by the repeated words of the bandleader Cutler, "One...two...you know what to do."

In *Fences*, Raynell is only willing to put on her new shoes that allegedly hurt and Cory accepts to go to their father's funeral only after they have sung a song together(100) which Troy used to sing (44, 84). The siblings have not seen each other for five years (93) (and Raynell is just seven now, but the way in which Wilson lets them sing demonstrates their reunion: first it is Cory who starts, then it is he who joins in. In *Piano Lesson*, there are Boy Willie, Lymon, Winning Boy and Doaker who come together for a prison song that reminds them of their communal past in the south. "[...]* the men stamp together and clap to keep time. They sing in harmony with great fervor and style" (39). It does not matter that Doaker obviously cannot sing (40). Men like Boy Willie and Doaker come together, who have totally different opinions regarding what should be done with the piano, and men like Boy Willie and Lymon share a common experience: one wants to go back to Mississippi, the other intends to stay in the North. No shared song can be found in *Two Trains*. But there is communal action, too. The people are collecting money for a black man who was put into prison: Wolf, Holloway as well as Sterling — and through him Risa, who gives him the money, and Hambone, for whom Sterling includes a dollar, as Sterling says (77).

Another ritual in *Fences* that strengthens the feeling of solidarity is the regular Friday night meeting of Troy and Bono that opens up the play. The stage directions call it a "ritual of talk and drink" (1), of which the presence of Rose is an integral part, although she does not drink (5). The ritual character of the meeting becomes even more visible when the behavior of the three characters involved is repeated (43). And again, Lyons, who has already joined the group (13), appears on the scene because of money (46). The end of the relationship between Troy and Bono is reflected in the fact that the
protagonist's best friend does not want to take part in the ritual anymore (83).

In Two Trains you also find a ritual, it concerns sugar. Wolf always asks the waitress Risa for sugar (43, 57), which she does not bring, and Wolf seems to forget about it for a while. Asked by Sterling, Risa explains that half the time West, for instance, does not use the sugar (56). And, in fact, West mentions it just by the way, for example: “I was gambling before [Sterling] was born. Give me some sugar, Risa. I ran two or three crap games” (67). The characters repeatedly play the sugar game, they understand each other. Furthermore, Ham­bone’s question to Lutz concerning the ham, which he has been asking every day for almost ten years, is important. The characters obviously do not feel bothered by repeated actions; rather, the happenings outside the restaurant mean for them a diversion and a reason to discuss relationships between black and white (50).

A second group of rituals has purifying functions. It was part of the voodoo in New Orleans that the priest or priestess

[... ] would spill a little water on the table (libation) at the base of the altar as an inducement for the loa to reside. Libation, always conducted by a priest or priestess, is a voodoo purifying ritual in which wine, oil, water or a special liquid concoction is poured out in various places — in all four corners of a worship room, by all doors and windows, and by the altar.9

A song and a general invocation of the god of the cult followed. In addition, songs were sung that described his qualities, character, behavioral patterns, and needs. After the god’s arrival, the devotees sang a song noting his coming:10

This description sketches, as it were, the end of Piano Lesson, although the priest’s role is split at that point of the play, which is also a sign of the communal character of the ritual. The priest Avery wants to bless the piano with water and says, “May each drop of it be a weapon and a shield against the presence of all evil and may it be a cleansing and blessing of this humble abode” (104). In his flamboy-

10 See Mulira, p. 46.
The Role of Rituals in August Wilson’s Drama

ant manner, Boy Willie wants to assist Avery (“BOY WILLIE grabs a pot of water from the stove and begins to fling it around the room,” 105). But only Berniece’s courageous calling for the ancestors, whose possible help is regarded as effective, leads to the conclusion. The sound of a train shows the intervention of the ancestors. Berniece’s threefold “Thank you” (106) signals that she has noticed the presence of the three people she wishes to intervene. A “thank you” from Berniece, spoken again shortly after this, is also the very end of the play and underlines the woman’s change of heart.

Voodoo practices in New Orleans before 1900 could include the sacrifice of a young goat and the drinking of its blood, followed by a dance. This corresponds to Bynum’s activity described by Seth in Joe Turner: Bynum, of course, kills pigeons, but he drinks their blood, as it seems, and dances. It becomes clear that Bynum does this frequently: for Bertha, Seth’s wife, outlines Bynum’s action (“He’s gonna dig a little hole”) even before Seth is seeing it (“That’s what he doing...”) (3). Bertha, whose connection to her African roots is reflected in her laughter, appears sympathetic, because she tolerates her husband’s opinion; she tells Seth, “Come on and get your breakfast and leave that man alone” (1). Seth, however, changed by the North and appearing unsympathetic at this point in time, despises Bynum’s “heebee-gheebee stuff” (35). It is also Bynum who claims to have seen a “shiny man” whom he calls “John” — a name that recalls John the Baptist. Bynum describes the purifying ritual of his vision as follows:

We get near this bend in the road and [the shiny man] told me to hold out my hands. Then he rubbed them together with his and I looked down and see they got blood on them. Told me to take and rub it all over me...say that was a way of cleaning myself. (9)

This resembles John’s way of baptising, which is regarded as preceding Christian baptism. Matthew writes about John, “Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judæa, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3, 5-6). Besides, in his defending speech facing the Jews of

11 See Mulira, p. 51.
Jerusalem, Paul speaks of a man living according to the law who asked him, “And now why tarriest thou? arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (The Acts, 22, 16). In Bynum’s vision the so-called John called himself the “the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way” (10) — and the Biblical John said, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear [...]” (Matthew 3, 11).

In this context, there are other similarities. John’s sermon is characterised by the eschatological arrival of Christ (the connection of ‘turning back,’ penance, guarantees the salvation in the coming Last Judgement), and Bynum’s “John” says about the “shiny men,” “[...] if I ever saw one again before I died then I would know that my song had been accepted” (JT 10). It is also an act of purifying that Loomis injures himself at the end, he nearly looses his mind when he shouts to Martha, “You want blood? Blood make you clean? You clean with blood?” — before he rubs his blood all over his face (93). Significantl y, Wilson does not let the Christian elements appear as strange or ridiculous.

It is typical of voodoo that the songs, which repeated verses, were transmitted orally from one generation to the next. In almost every voodoo service of the Dahomean nation in Haiti and New Orleans, the first supplication song is addressed to the keeper of the gates, Legba, who intercedes with other deities in the affairs of humans. First, he is asked to open the gates. It is striking that Bynum got his song from his father (JT 10) and that Gabriel asks St. Peter to open heaven’s gates for Troy (FE 101). The motif of repetition can be found in the fact that Berniece sings her sentence “I want you to

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12 In his other plays, Wilson also depicts a connection between African Americans, suffering, and blood: in Levee’s report that he nearly bled to death helping his mother (MR 70); in Berniece’s description that Mama Ola polished the piano until her hands bled (PL 52); when Sterling symbolically gets a ham for Hambone by stealing it from Lutz’s meat market, whose shop window he smashes (IT 72); and, in a wider sense, when Troy says that he cares for Cory, because he is his “flesh and blood” (FE 38), an expression Troy repeats concerning Raynell (FE 79).

13 Mulira, p. 45.
help me” eighteen times (PL 107), that Gabriel talks about the Last Judgement several times in a monotonous way (FE 27, 47) and that Hambone speaks repeatedly and unvariedly about the ham (TT, e.g. 47, 53).

The third group of rituals are the healing ones. Bertha’s behavior towards the end of Joe Turner belongs to this group. It expresses the effectivity of the power of the past in a very impressive way. “BERTHA moves about the kitchen as though blessing it and chasing away the huge sadness that seems to envelop it.” This has a healing result, the stage directions read: “It is a dance and demonstration of her own magic, her own remedy [!] that is centuries old and to which she is connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood’s memory.” The near-hysterical laughter that follows Wilson describes as “a celebration of life, both its pain and its blessing” (87). The deep meaning of black expression, the author suggests, has already become clear in the final stage directions of Ma Rainey. There, Wilson mentions that Levee’s trumpet expresses the struggle “for the highest of possibilities and blowing pain and warning” (111). As it was the case in the activities stated before, Bertha’s laughing brings the people together: Mattie and Bynum join in, then again the stubborn Seth (JT 87). Bertha, incidentally, is a typical example of a black woman that practises traditional as well as Christian elements of religion. She is criticised, because she sprinkles salt in the room (2) — and attends the church (43).

At the end of Fences, all characters gradually come together for a funeral (Wilson even writes about a “reunion” between Rose and Cory, 91). This ritual is characterised by the fact that everybody, one after another, tries to establish a relationship with the late Troy that is influenced by the wish to forgive. Bono says to Cory, “Your daddy knew you had it in you” (92). Lyons talks about Troy’s extraordinary baseball achievements and repeats Troy’s words, “You got to take the crookeds with the straights,” which now fits his own behaviour, as Lyons believes (94). Rose stresses that she had a choice and had to live the way she did (98). Cory’s and Raynell’s change has already been mentioned. Gabriel’s contribution here is that he believes he can open heaven’s gates for his brother. His attempt constitutes the play’s climax and is the great task of the handicapped person, who
performs "like a man who has been waiting some twenty-odd years for this single moment." The traditional dance, not the modern trumpet helps Gabriel in this. In *Two Trains*, visiting Aunt Ester has a healing effect. The ritual consists of walking around the house, finding the red door and knocking on it (47).

In this context, it should finally be specified what it is that characterises Bynum as a typical healer. If a priest found out that the reason for the illness of a man is a "loss of the soul," he tried to find it. Similarly, Bynum is sure that Loomis forgot his "song," and he gives him a piece of advice, "See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song he goes off in search of it [...]" (*JT* 71). Typically, the priest prays and contemplates in the early morning — as Bynum does (2). Other characteristics are the acknowledged position Bynum is granted by almost everybody in the play (in the traditional African culture the "root doctors" played an important role) and the cures through herbs (Bynum says, for instance, "The roots is a powerful thing", 22) as well as by using other objects of allegedly magic qualities (Bynum gives Mattie, for example, a cloth packet that should help her forget her husband, who ran away, 24). Besides, as it was in the old tradition, Bynum's practice is inherited and accessible to people of limited income like Mattie.

The ritual elements in Wilson's work appear to be a central prerequisite for his success especially among blacks. For the rituals can fulfill in a very effective way the three functions that they — according to Molette and Molette — should have as parts of black plays: they lead to a feeling of community in the audience, have a useful purpose, and affect people spiritually. Wilson depicts rituals as part of a spiritual past that African Americans should not forget but confront. And similarly he presents mysterious things, Death, God, the devil, and the church.

16 This feature and the few others that follow are described by Beverly J. Robinson, "Africanisms and the Study of Folklore," *Africanisms in American Culture*, pp. 211-24.
17 Molette/Molette, p. 84.
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Wilson’s treatment of certain areas that are attached to religion is part of a wider concept that can be described as moderate black nationalism. For more moderate forms of black nationalism merely say that African American subculture is one of many subcultures that form a pluralistic American society — and militant cultural nationalists assert the superiority of African American culture to Western civilisation, usually on moral and aesthetic grounds. In Wilson’s drama, we find also moderate positions acceptable that concern other important spheres of life: the playwright focuses on family life, music, dance, and sports.

Apart from contents, Wilson’s tremendous success has to do with the form of his plays. There is realism containing unrealistic elements; authentic and artistic elements mix. This applies to the plays’ action, setting, time, characters, language, stage directions, and other aspects of production (as critics have suggested). And finally, Wilson enjoys extraordinary favourable conditions regarding the production of his plays: in addition to the influential Richards, there are other qualified artists, and their often continuous participation is of significance; there is Wilson’s independence of the black stage; there are multicultural tendencies in the theatre; and there are important media — like the New York Times — which are supportive.

For the Africans transported into the New World the open deck of the slave ships was their first stage. And for a long time the amusement of white people remained the sole reason why African Americans were allowed at least some kind of cultural activity. Black people had to come a long way from the African Grove, their first theatrical institution, founded in Manhattan in 1821, to a place that is geographically very close and where they could celebrate America’s most successful man of the theatre: it was at New York’s Forty-Sixth Street Theatre, where, in 1987, August Wilson’s Fences broke all the records of the business — and where the dramatist showed that strengthening the community spirit, purifying, and healing is more than just a ritual.
FinISHED Story: Elizabeth LeCompte's Intercultural Take on Time and Work

Ever since its development out of Richard Schechner's Performance Group (in 1975) and the assumption of its current name (in 1980), the Wooster Group, under the direction of Elizabeth LeCompte, have appropriated and incorporated a number of canonical writings in their productions. These are combined with other "texts," considered of a lower or non-artistic status, which they happen to have come across and linked up associatively. LeCompte's scavengings of cultural detritus thus include interviews, historical documents, letters, autobiographical material, film, video, recordings, original dialogue, improvisations, dances, paintings, photographs, even the performance space and props from previous productions.¹

While the pretexts or source-texts of Frank Dell's The Temptation of Saint Antony (1989) comprise Gustave Flaubert's La tentation de Saint Antoine (1848-9, 1874), most productions play off drama texts, which do not for that matter constitute a fixed centre or linear, narrative support. Nyatt School (1978) and Point Judith (1979), both from the Rhode Island Trilogy consisting further of Sakonnet Point (1975) and Rumstick Road (1977), make use of T.S. Eliot's The Cocktail Party (1950) and Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night (1941, 1956). Among the pieces belonging to the second trilogy, The Road to Immortality, which concludes with Frank Dell, Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act) (1981) and L.S.D. (…Just the High Points…) (1985) come to terms with Thornton Wilder's Our Town (1938) and Arthur Miller's The

¹ The materials for Elisabeth LeCompte's first collaboration with Schechner on Commune (1970) included such classics as Melville's Moby-Dick and Thoreau's Walden.
Crucible (1953), respectively. Brace Up! and what has been called in its different versions Fish Story, Fish Story II. A Work-in-Progress (Today I Must Sincerely Congratulate You), UnFinISHed Story, and FinISHed Story (1996) tackle the first three and the last act of Chekhov’s Three Sisters (1901). More recently, O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones (1920) and The Hairy Ape (1922) have been given less iconoclastic stage renderings.

Even the last two shows in the above series never become what Peter Sellars once called “a predictable act of lip-synching to the hoariest old commonplaces.” LeCompte keeps deconstructing in each of her productions the established dramatic text, i.e. exposing from within its hidden mode of operation, contradictions, and power dynamics. In the process the text may be used integrally (give or take a few lines) (as with the two early O’Neill plays) or condensed, performed at break-neck speed and reduced to gibberish (as with O’Neill’s last play and Miller’s classic). It may be reproduced and disseminated (through recordings, readings, and lecture videos complementing the acting, which can involve assigning the same part to children and adult performers, as with Eliot and Wilder) or it may be excerpted and “sampled,” fragmented (through song and dance) and rearranged (as with Chekhov). In the words of David Savran, LeCompte does not attempt a systematic critique, knowing that it would make her the mirror image of that which she is seeking to dismantle. Instead, she works by discontinuous attack, a kind of aesthetic guerilla warfare, subverting the received meaning of texts and other cultural artifacts.

All the same it is possible to extract from these theatrical forays into canonical drama the gist of LeCompte’s inherently political critiques. In the following paper I take a closer look at FinISHed Story. While this production, like its successors The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape, revolves extensively around time and memory (and, as a corollary, around the work ethic), the Wooster Group’s entire output so far is based on recurring concerns and principles. Apart

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3 Savran, p. 157; on LeCompte’s deconstructive method, see also pp. 92-94, 221-22.
from the overall deconstructive and associative method, these include multiple focus, polysemy and open-endedness, individualisation of signifiers, active audience involvement, humour and playfulness, an anti-mimetic and anti-realistic stance, a highly theatrical multimedia approach, a suturing of theatre and autobiography, and a vivid, critical self-consciousness regarding the process and impact of practising theatre within the current world, divided along racial, gender, and class lines. *FinISHed Story* illustrates several of these principles, though time only allows me to comment upon a few of them.

Simply stated the Wooster Group's productions of Chekhov are driven by the dynamics of memory, which here equal the dynamics of theatre. Indeed, the difficult mediations across the gap between reality and fiction, present and past parallel the tensions between the absent people or characters and the performers standing in for them. For Olga, Masha, and Irina Moscow is more a fiction than a reality, the dream of a past which distorts the future and robs them of a bearable present. The play's operating tension is already announced in the opening line's commemoration of general Prozorov's death on Irina's birthday (strictly speaking her name day), the mournful thought of the winter-like cold on a joyful spring day. Just so, it is contained in Masha's renewed expectations after the extensive remembering upon Vershinin's arrival. However, as the lives of the sisters unfold over the four acts, time turns their eager and hopeful anticipations into new sad memories, forever bypassing the actualisation of their wishes, preventing the possession or prolongation of precious moments, notwithstanding Fedotik's emblematic picture-taking, which the Wooster Group retained and accompanied with a joyous ditty and blinding flashlight.

Given its textual prominence, the temporal dynamic conditions the paradoxical make-up of single lines in Paul Schmidt's translation, just as it determines the mirrorings in the Wooster Group's scenography and props, or the substitution of the elderly Beatrice Roth for the youngest sister Irina (which literalises the notion of psychological age). In lines like Tuzenbach's "What a happy life I dreamed of then — and where is it?" (65), Fedotik's "in ten or fif-
Johan Callens

teen years [...] we won’t hardly recognize each other” (74), Andrei’s “whatever happened to the past [...] when my life and my future were shining with hope?” (85), Olga’s “Tomorrow [...] it will all be a memory” (88), and Irina’s “I’m going away tomorrow, remember” (90) prospects and recollections clash, as if each makes possible the awareness of the other. It is this self-awareness or self-reflexiveness — apart from the chasm between performer and character — that is reflected in the mirrored scenography and props, with twice three strips of flypaper, two square white little tables, two double opaque screens, two video monitors up front (albeit divided by a third one in the middle), two lamp stands (without the shade but with plastic leaves so as to symbolise trees), and two double light boxes.

Beyond that Willem Dafoe’s commitment to movies during the preparation of Brace Up! meant temporary absences, the infection with AIDS of Ron Vawter, to whom Finished Story is dedicated, a definite removal.4 Through the video tapes both were nevertheless present on stage to contribute to the magic of the performances as well as to dispel it humorously (e.g. by the camera’s zooming in and out of focus when Vawter/Vershinin is taking leave of Masha, the repeated takes, and the use of glycerine). Time and space were equally transcended for Josephine Buscemi, the charming old woman who spoke Anfisa’s lines and who died in January 1996. So the Brussels audience learnt from Kate Valk in the brief prologue, meant to refresh everyone’s memory with the plot of Chekhov’s play and ending with Andrei’s pathetic effusion from Act III (71).5

4 Already during the making of Frank Dell’s The Temptations of Saint Antony in 1986 it became known that Vawter was HIV-positive but he kept working in film and theatre until his very death in 1994, featuring next to Tom Hanks in Philadelphia and practically staging his own death in Philoktetes Variations, which opened in Brussels but had to be cancelled after four performances because of Vawter’s worsening condition. His curtailed life (1948-1994) recalls Chekhov’s (1860-1904). In his day, TB was as much a scourge as AIDS is now, both leading obnoxious (not to say cancerous) metaphorical lives, which Susan Sontag has challenged in Illness as Metaphor (1979) and AIDS and Its Metaphors (1988).

5 Because the company felt the prologue, which was modelled on television serials beginnings with a recapitulation of earlier events, did not work satisfactorily, it was dropped after the first two nights.
Elizabeth LeCompte’s Intercultural Take on Time and Work

The prologue, the omnipresent master of ceremonies/technician, and the difference in medium — live or pre-recorded video as opposed to live action — all ‘theatricalise’ Chekhov, widen the gap between performers and characters. This theatricalisation through modern technology may sound contradictory but is illustrated in the conspicuous use of spotlights and micros, and in the video of Tuzenbach’s collapse not outdoors but on the stage floor with its square-tiled pattern. That Jeff Webster doubles as narrator and Tuzenbach further prevents identification. The duel, the third one of Solyony, who thinks he looks like Lermontov (46), is also the outcome of a scene “near the theatre” (76). Similarly, Masha and Vershinin’s theatrical kiss is shown on video and the play is terminated with some film’s stereotypical announcement of “The End.”

As Borges’ father knew, memory is always the memory of a memory, layered like piled coins, filtered through earlier recollections. While Valk spoke the prologue to Fish Story, which was revived at the Lunatheater, Brussels in April 1996, I realised my own sense of Chekhov’s play was coloured by the lingering images of Fish Story, as seen at the Théâtre Varia, Brussels, in May 1993, and of Brace Up!, seen two years earlier at the Ancienne Belgique, Brussels, in November 1991. When Willem Dafoe’s image then appeared on the monitor, cut off above and below by the black cinemascopic bands, it awoke echoes of his screen appearances. The meaning of any Wooster Group performance never stands apart, is never completed but open-ended, reaching out towards past and future, continuously accruing significance. Just as performers end up being the sum total of their previous roles (existential and theatrical), so the carryovers from one production of the Wooster Group to another (in terms of stage, props, costumes, etc.) make for, not just concatenations into separate trilogies, but for one big, sprawling work-in-progress, constantly intersected by the changing lives of the company members and the changing realities of the theatre and the world they explore. Carryovers have of course been common enough in Elizabethan and

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6 Spalding Gray was reminded of this image in his interviews with Savran (Savran, p. 70).
amateur/provincial theater and the resulting semantic depth or layeredness is clearly anti-illusionistic. As a case in point, the gig of Donna Sierra and the Del Fuegos in a Miami tourist hotel, from L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...) and Frank Dell's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, may then have triggered the idea of the Geinin and their presentation in tourist resorts of a short adaptation of *Three Sisters*, just the highlights, the favourite arias.

The Japanese travelling company puts Chekhov's play further into perspective. Their story is partly narrated, partly enacted — with Eastern-like costumes, haircuts, and music, a boomer-gaffer clad in black like the Bunraku puppet masters, Kabuki heroic poses and Samurai sword fights, stagehands proffering props with a ritual bow as in Noh theatre, etc. The resulting distance materialises the cultural gap, the American company's unease towards a Russian classic, one that furthermore helped to establish Stanislavskian acting. It is a method with which the Wooster Group will have nothing to do, despite their technical mastery, LeCompte's fascination with "a real naturalism," and Schmidt's contribution to that century-old tradition. In the sixties he indeed teamed up with Randall Jarrell for a translation of the play, commissioned by The Actors' Studio and later done on Broadway by Lee Strasberg. The star-studded but underrehearsed and disastrous London production of *Three Sisters*, which opened at the Aldwych on May 13th, 1965, undid the reputation of the Method in Great Britain and ended Strasberg's directoing career, though the emergence of a new generation of American actors reconfirmed his reputation as a teacher. Here, the Wooster Group members' personal history again fuses with theatre history, autobiography conditions the theatrical choices, form and content show a perfect fit.

On the surface, the Wooster Group's productions of Chekhov are as disordered as his plotless plays, an absolute mockery of Ibsen's

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7 Savran, p. 196.
well-made ones and the conviction that “the main thing in life is form. When things lose their form, they lose their identity” (21). Chekhov’s famous juxtapositions of seemingly unrelated items, resulting from spliced conversations (4), and his apparently irrelevant interjections (a quote from a contemporary opera, Ferapont’s tall tales) feel very much improvised, which is to the Wooster Group’s taste. The company puts Chekhov’s splicing — the eerie link-up between discrete spheres — to hilarious use when the rhythm of Dave Shelley’s fishing rod synchronised with that of Dafoe’s dangling foot, as he is sleeping, or when onstage Peyton Smith blows her nose at the same time as Roy Faudree off stage. The tomfoolery with a fly, a fish, and tea pouring from a samovar, which simultaneously exist in reality, on film, and on stage, may draw from the same source, even if it adds to the slapstick atmosphere derived from comedy in general.

The playwright and company further share a love of details, which as in chaos theory, can acquire tremendous importance and whose effect, as Tuzenbach realises before the duel (84), one cannot undo. For all their unpredictability, Chekhov’s play and the Wooster Group’s ostensible riffs on it are rigorously composed. In the words of Alex Szogyi, “[t]ime in the most literal sense is the key to [their] architecture.” Chekhov meticulously clocks every act and underscores the time lapses in between. The year, season, and day are constantly referred to, a clock is broken, people look at their watches, wind them, talk about their age, come late. Chekhov even

10 Of course, the discrepancy between Ibsen and Chekhov is not that great, considering the former’s predilection for the retrospective method.
11 Schmidt has “It’s funny how the stupidest little things in life can seem so important, all of a sudden and for no reason” (84); but Szogyi’s translation is more revealing: “Sometimes idiotic, minimal details take on importance in life, one wonders why. One continues to laugh about them, they are only trivial, and despite all that, one is launched, and one feels one hasn’t the strength to stop” (Four Plays by Chekhov, trans., pref., afterwords and notes by Alex Szogyi [New York: Washington Square Press, 1968], p. 195).
12 Szogyi in Four Plays, p. 204.
13 Also “late” is Masha’s meeting with Vershinin, since both are already married, Balzac’s marriage to Eveline Hanska a few months before his death (41), and Chekhov’s marriage to Olga Knipper, when he was already suffering from TB.
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intuits the coming revolution, that metaphorical storm gathering (8), which makes the play an elegy for a class on the verge of disappearance.

Similarly, LeCompte’s choreographic and musical conception of the play depends a lot on timing, again literally so, when we hear the crew count during the dances or mark the beat with wooden percussion sticks or the metal clicking of the fork Natasha finds. Musical instruments, of course, already feature prominently in Chekhov’s text, which also resumes certain themes like leitmotifs (the indifference, the references to time, to Pushkin’s *Ruslan and Liudmilla*, the belt, etc.). Of the instruments, the Wooster Group foregrounds the street musician’s accordion and Fedotik and Rohde’s guitars, which become the Geinin’s electric ones, mimicked with shooting-sticks. In addition, there is the beautiful, multilayered soundtrack, which acoustically translates the theatrical polysemy and dramatic ironies. Sometimes the production exudes a strong sense of harmony, sometimes dissonance dominates, so that the dephasing between Jeff Webster’s amplified voice (as he tells the story of the Geinin with his back to the public) and his lips on the monitor (another set-up preventing identification, like the switches between b/w and colour) becomes an analogue of the characters’ maladjustment (embodied by the Wooster Group’s slapstick beatings). Szogyi speaks in this regard of a “rubato” rhythm (210), a speed fluctuation within a musical phrase at odds with the steady accompaniment, and he points out how “off key” the buoyant military music sounds as background to the sisters’ final depressed mood.

Next to being a structural and metaphysical factor, time, its availability and one’s experience of it are also determined by class, culture, and gender. Irina’s romantic idealisation of work early on is that of the female aristocrat with fantasies and time to burn, unlike Chekhov, who from an early age had to support his family and later juggled his writer’s career with that of a practising physician. Unlike Olga, who teaches and takes on the duties of headmistress, so that she can appreciate the few days off she gets. Unlike Anfisa and

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14 Sound was taken care of by James “J.J.” Johnson and John Collins and it incorporated original music by Evan Lurie, John Lurie, and the Roches.
Ferapont, who in their old age are still ordered about and left waiting, regardless of the time of night. The intercultural scale of the triangle America/Japan/Russia — a stark contrast to the bland universalism of Wilder’s *Our Town* criticised in *L.S.D.* (…*Just the High Points*…) and an expansion of the generic hybridity of Chekhov’s tragicomic text and his references to different nationalities — creates shifting perspectives on the work ethic, which the Wooster Group refuses to freeze. The listlessness and indifference of Russia’s gentry — which has determined the Chekhov tradition for so long — jars with the Calvinist moral duty to work hard, with which Americans are indoctrinated. Vershinin’s idea that work spells suffering from which only future generations will benefit (38-9) oddly enough mixes Marxist theory with Judaeo-Christian eschatology. The Geinin’s near religious devotion to the theatre evokes Japanese workaholism, as well as the Wooster Group’s time-and-energy-consuming commitment to their art, even if the Geinin’s demise through the advent of television has given them more spare time to enjoy life by fishing, practising the guitar, and watching television, too.

In the wake of the already mentioned distancings, LeCompte humorously de-romanticises work — one of the Geinin has lost both kidneys, but still performs whenever he can. Yet, she retains its moral imperative, thereby adhering to Chekhov, who contrasts persevering women like Olga and Irina with Natasha and the pitiful men. Natasha’s idea of work is that of checking up and ordering about servants (29) or practising patronising philanthropy (56). An-

15 Note in this regard Natasha’s arrogant and awkward appropriation of French (44, 86), Tuzenbach’s embarrassment at his German name (35), Vershinin’s reference to the healthy Russian climate (14), and the row between Solyony and Chebutykin over two Russian dishes (46). The Wooster Group’s excerpt from Kenneth Branagh’s film version of *Henry V* (1989), showing the king on his white steed leading the rallied English troops into the battle of Azincourt, ties in with the nationalist theme, but also forms an icon of Chekhov’s references to Shakespeare (59), in particular to *Richard III* (37-38) and *Macbeth* (Natasha’s crossing the room with a candle, Chebutykin’s washing his hands during the fire, Solyony’s inability to get rid of the cadaverous smell on his hand). Macbeth’s famous dirge upon his wife’s suicide forms an echo of Irina’s, Chebutykin’s and Tuzenbach’s suicidal thoughts and harps on Chekhov’s theme of human transience.
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drei ends as a member of the county council, working out of boredom (31). With a broken heart Tuzenbach gladly embraces death by Solyony’s hand on the eve of his initiation into factory work. And Chebutykin, the indispensable newspaper in his pocket, watches it all, after suffering the pretense of his culture and education and the loss of his professional pride when failing to save a woman’s life (59-60). Vershinin believes, “We must find a way to join love of work to love of higher things” (88). But with his repeated desperate outcry, “I can’t remember” (49, 59), which the Wooster Group excerpted and foregrounded on video, Chebutykin shirks his responsibility, as when he refuses to remember whether Prozorov’s wife loved him (79).

What Dobrolyubov may have written Chebutykin really has forgotten (8).17 It confirms Vershinin’s point that time makes people and ideas relative (14-15). But the lapse of memory is also a dig at socialist literary criticism with its double underlying target: the bad habit of politicians to make art subservient to some ideology and utilitarianism in general. The Wooster Group distances itself from both by their painstaking, organic working method and their rejection of any explicit political programme, even if it is easy enough to offer a feminist interpretation of Three Sisters.18 At the same time, the company shares Chekhov’s complaint with the arrogance or delusion of those considering culture a luxury (18, 61), which corresponds to the Republican line of Newt Gingrich and other conservatives threatening the National Endowment of the Arts and its funding of subversive and offensive art. That the Wooster Group must have been aware of such parallels can be deduced from the forty

16 To demonstrate their culturedness, the characters in Three Sisters again depend on their money: it is not the comfort of having studied writers, philosophers or languages that matters but the ability to reproduce them by money.

17 Whether the Wooster Group actually mentioned Dobrolyubov in performance or not (they probably did not) is irrelevant, since he is subsumed by all the things Chebutykin forgot, causing a frustration which the company did emphasise by excerpting his pathetic “I don’t remember.”

18 Elements of such interpretations would surely be Kulygin’s patronising and repressive behaviour towards Masha, his sense of decorum offering no outlet for her passions, Vershinin’s denigrating talk about his wife, Solyony’s mocking of women’s intellectual capacities, etc.
percent cutback in funding by the New York State Council for the Arts because of the company's allegedly racist use of blackface in Route 1 & 9.

For Elizabeth LeCompte culture is a way of life, purchased dearly or not, but necessary all the same. So it was for Gertrude Stein, surrounded in her Paris home at 27 Rue de Fleurus by Picassos, Cézannes, and Matisses, and paid court by Hemingway, Fitzgerald and other trailblazing artists. Stein is the Ur-mother of the twentieth-century American avant-garde, including contemporary performance artists. Among theatre practitioners the Living Theatre, the Judson Poets' Theatre, and Richard Foreman tried their hand at Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights (1938). Robert Wilson staged it, too, as her most celebrated play, Four Saints in Three Acts (1927). LeCompte has never tackled a Stein play so far, but her poetics of performance, as exemplified in the Wooster Group productions of Three Sisters and other plays, are easily derived from Stein's central conceptions.

Best known is Stein's aspiration towards plays as landscapes, giving priority to relationships rather than stories. According to Bonnie Marranca, it is this "spatial conception of dramaturgy [which] elaborates the new, modern sense of a dramatic field as performance space, with its multiple and simultaneous centers of focus and activity, replacing the conventional nineteenth-century time-bound, fixed setting of the drama." Stein was dissatisfied with linear or sequential story-telling and causal action, preferring instead immediate experience, a continuous present. All too often the "rubato" rhythm at work between the characters in Three Sisters was spotted between traditional performances and their spectators. As she formulates it in her lecture "Plays,"

the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience. [...] Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening.²¹

Stein's continuous present is an attempt to synchronise real and fictional time, an undertaking shared by Pirandello and later by many 60s artists. In prose she proceeds by repetition, discontinuous syntax, collage-like juxtaposition, omission of punctuation, linguistic playfulness, and sheer duration or length of composition. Thus, The Making of Americans is over a thousand pages long with sentences ever circling back, breaking up, stalling the forward thrust of conventional story-telling. In her drama the frame and side text or authorial voice constantly threaten to overwhelm the performance text in which scenes, people, and objects have been rendered autonomous, making for a non-hierarchic performance space, obstructing traditional action or progress. Like the cubists, she decentralises the subject and fragments the surface, shifting the emphasis from the anecdotal and psychological to the abstract, pictorial, and musical.²² Another means of realising a continuous present, both in prose and drama, is by “using everything”: personal experiences as well as the everyday. By integrating reality, it becomes a compositional element: the time of the composition and the time in the composition fuse, as Stein puts it in her lecture “Composition as

²² See Randa Dubnick, The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1984). A shift of emphasis does not mean radical abandonment. As Marc Robinson points out in The Other American Drama (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), Stein’s “plays can surprise with a psychological force greater for being unannounced” (p. 16), and insofar as she “expresses an abiding desire to understand identity [...] Stein probed more deeply” (p. 17). But the drama of “the need to know” ultimately supersedes that of the person or object investigated, giving Stein’s plays a strong cognitive quality, stressed by Marranca, too, and equally present in Wooster Group productions.
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Explanation” delivered before the Oxbridge literary societies. Stein’s worldly concern makes her formal experiments political in the broadest sense.

The Wooster Group wittingly and unwittingly pursue Stein’s continuous present between and within individual productions, even if their extensive use of videos permits them to combine landscapes with portraits and still lives, too, since movement is a function of stillness. On the one hand, theatre, by grace of the performers’ actual physical proximity, is probably the most continuously present of the arts. It is a feeling the Wooster Group abet by their expertise, conviction, and commitment, granting the drama enacted, for all its improvisational origins, a strong sense of necessity, a naturalness, and self-sufficiency. As with any of Stein’s compositions, “it confuses” but “it is,” and “it likes it as it is.” On the other hand, any performance is by definition short-lived, hence the Wooster Group’s counter-move through the notion of a work-in-progress with constant carryovers and revisions. Spectators are “witnesses” who “corroborate” or constitute performances, “the real origin of exhibiting acting is this,” Stein tells us in Saints and Singing. Since spectators cannot always be present, the Wooster Group become their own audience, by systematically recording rehearsals on video and incorporating, again by video, within their shows external perspectives on them. In Finished Story Dafoe with consternation suddenly exclaims, “Oh my gosh, they’re filming. They’re everywhere.” Soundmen, too, are visible, and stage-hands, people normally relegated to the offstage area or frame. Within the Wooster Group’s cramped performance space actors, technicians, and “spectators” jostle with each other and the creator, that privileged spectator, disguised as master of ceremonies. Private rehearsal and public showing, creation and representation merge, upsetting ordinary theatre practice and chronology. Despite the show’s lyricism and finish, making for

24 Stein, Look at Me Now and Here I Am, p. 24.
fluency and continuity, the fragmentation of the text and theatrical signifiers, the mirroring of props, and the polysemic simultaneity of actions slow down the performance, by fracturing every single entity (temporal or other) and demanding that the audience reserve another seat at a future showing. The Wooster Group’s extensive recyclings of ‘found objects’ and the performers’ lives again force performed and performing time to adhere more closely. As such the company’s anti-mimetic bias requires qualification, for a deeper mimeticism is operating here, as in Stein’s drama: no fictional reality is re-presented but the creative processes of life, of the drama-turg, of the performers are continuously presented.

Given such an aesthetic Chekhov’s Three Sisters provides as convenient a site of experimentation as Stein’s Four Saints in Three Acts would. Actually, the two plays are not that dissimilar: both short-circuit time, whether it is through Chekhov’s clashes of anticipation and recollection, heightened in Schmidt’s translation, or in Stein’s exemplary but illogical remembrance of winter in winter time. For the rest, the two plays reject plot (albeit to different degrees) in favour of musical motifs and rhythm, and they are marked by a desultory, aimless mood of dissatisfaction. Mood and tone are very

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26 Apart from the already mentioned desynchronisation between Jeff Webster’s voice and lips, there is the more radical disconnection of sight from sound, when Kate Valk’s pursuit of a fly with a red swatter is accompanied by actors pretending to shave with their microphones. Such formal fragmentation and recombination fascinate Stein, triggering questions like: “Does the thing heard replace the thing seen. Does it help or does it interfere with it [...] Does the thing seen or does the thing heard effect you and effect you at the same time or in the same degree or does it not.” Stein constantly thought “about the theatre from the standpoint of sight and sound and its relation to emotion and time” (Lectures in America, pp. 101, 104).

27 Stein, Operas & Plays, p. 13. To convey still motion in the dramatic landscape Stein uses the images of nuns moving about placidly or of birds in full flight immobilised in the sky by a head wind (Lectures in America, pp. 129, 131), or as Faulkner puts it in one of the many oxymorons studding Light in August (New York: Random House, 1985): “birds in stillwinged and tremulous suspension” (p. 115). Eugenio Barba would call such tension a case of “luxurious” equilibrium as opposed to the “everyday” equilibrium of true repose. The concern with time and with slowing it down through psychological incursions is, of course, thoroughly modernist.

28 According to Marranca, Chekhov himself characterised, not Three Sisters, but The Seagull as “four acts and a landscape” (Ecologies of Theater, pp. xvi, 7, 52). For the
much to the point here. It was composer Virgil Thomson's theory concerning *Four Saints*, which he scored for voice, that "if a text is set correctly for the sound of it, the meaning will take care of itself." I doubt whether those unfamiliar with *Three Sisters* would be able to reconstruct Chekhov's fourth act from the apparent jumble of *FinISHed Story*, never mind the whole play. Yet, its meaning undoubtedly transpires with great lucidity: the dynamics of memory, the tragicomic maladjustment, the unfulfilled longing, all of them thwarting true forward movement. The pervasive indifference and self-reflection in the Prozorov household, as well as its living in the past, deprive speech and action of their pragmatic power to cause effects in time. Similarly, when LeCompte decides to draw out Vershinin's farewell through repeated takes, she gives in to Masha's desire, inscribed within the text, and prolongs the memory of Ron Vawter, whose lingering image seems to say, "When this you see remember me." 

Determined to capture time and bypass memory, Stein and LeCompte ended up creating highly memorable art. Ever so suspicious of authority and the prescribed way of doing things, these maverick and outlaw women acquired canonical status among feminists and performance artists. In "Composition as Explanation" dominant moods of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, see Brooks Atkinson’s review in *The New York Times* 17 April 1952: n.p.


31 In *Ecologies of Theater* Marranca somewhat disingenuously claims that Gertrude Stein and John Cage “are marginal figures in the fields they represent in the sense that they are outside the canons of official culture” (p. 20). But that did not prevent Stein from becoming enconced in other canons, granted that the feminist and performance art canons are “selective” ones, as distinguished (but not always distinct) from the potential, accessible, official, personal, and critical canons which Alastair Fowler identifies in *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 214-16, or the closed, pedagogical, diachronic, and popular canons Wendell V. Harris adds in “Canonicy,” *PMLA* 106.1 (Jan. 1991): 110-21. The same ambivalence with regard to status exists in Marc Robinson’s
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Stein denies that avant-garde artists are ahead of their time. It is just that they create their time in too particular a way for it to be acceptable by the artistic power brokers, who do the accepting and refusing. These marginalise the particular by denying its beauty and emphasising its irritating, threatening, annoying, and confusing qualities. Canonisation, by contrast, consists of denying the latter stimulating features in favour of beauty and promoting the work as a classic. Stein chafes at this volte-face, impoverishing art by applying exclusive standards to it, “beauty is beauty even when it is irritating and stimulating not only when it is accepted and classic.” There are those who believe that in recent productions the Wooster Group have lost their edge. I would like to think of the flies buzzing through *FinISHED Story* and its successor *The Emperor Jones* as emblematic noise, enervating and disturbing but capable, too, of generating rhythm and sense with “distribution and equilibration,” compositional qualities Stein took great stock in.

*The Other American Drama,* which equates Gertrude Stein, Tennessee Williams, and Sam Shepard with Maria Irene Fornes, Adrienne Kennedy, and Richard Foreman. June Schlueter is more to the point by including Dinah Pladott's article “Gertrude Stein: Exile, Feminism, Avant-Garde in the American Theater” in her collection *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP; London: Associated UP, 1990), pp. 111-29.

32 Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am,* p. 22.
33 Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am,* p. 23.
34 Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am,* p. 29.
Dramatherapy in Great Britain has evolved in recent years from a motley array of disparate activities reaching back into the nineteenth century towards the status of a fully regulated profession. The foundation of The British Association for Dramatherapists in 1976 can perhaps serve as the starting date for the process of its official institutionalisation. The Association started its own journal, *Dramatherapy*, in 1977. Training courses, both part and full time, were established and, in 1988, the Institute of Dramatherapy was founded, specifying its own code of practice and code of ethics. The following year, dramatherapists achieved a position on the Whitley Council as a recognised professional body and, in 1993, the Council for Professions Supplementary to Medicine submitted the Dramatherapists’ application for State Registration to the Privy Council.²

Outside the UK, dramatherapy programmes exist in New York and San Francisco, as well as in Israel, Greece, and Italy. Their numbers of practitioners and clients are constantly rising and the business of publishers in the field, in England especially Routledge and Jessica Kingsley, is brisk.

With this booming trade happening in the immediate neighbourhood, scholarly attention in the adjoining field of theatre and drama so far has not shown any signs of heightened activity in reaction. By contrast, the intake on the therapists’ side from performance

² Further information on the Insitute and training courses in Britain can be obtained from the BADth Office at 41 Broomhouse Lane, Hurlington Park, London SW6 3DP.
theory and experimental theatre has been considerable. Their intake has also been rather eclectic, and it is perhaps this lack of critical dialogue which severely affects the stringency of argumentation as well as the style and structure of many books on dramatherapy. The impression I am describing is not, however, unknown to dramatherapists themselves. Bland criticism would also be no reason for repeating it here, were it not to show how little dramatherapists lay claim to erudite scholarship or approach their subject from an academic distance. In most cases, they are highly involved practitioners who struggle to come to grips with and communicate their immediate experiences. Their typical background is either the acting profession or psychiatry, not theatre or literary studies.

This fundamental divergence in interests and orientation of dramatherapy on the one hand and theatre studies on the other makes the two discourses an uneasy match and may explain the faltering communication. Their very disparity, however, makes the attempt to compare and mediate all the more alluring. In the following, three short steps will lead from a look at some of the theatrical roots of dramatherapy, on to a description of its basic practices and finally to suggestions of areas for potential cross-fertilisation.

The idea that theatre can have healing powers goes back to Greek antiquity. The cathartic effect Aristotle ascribed to tragedy springs to mind. Travellers to Greece may also recall the Aesculapian sanctuary at Epidaurus as a symbol for the Greeks' unified vision of religion, therapy, and theatre. There, the famous amphitheatre forms an integral part of the holy precinct dedicated to the god of healing. This, in Schiller's sense, naive unity was, however, lost in Western culture. The feeling of alienation of theatre from life paradoxically reached its apex and turning point as theatre made its greatest efforts to imitate life in the realism and naturalism of the nineteenth century. When stage illusion was at its most convincing, the sharpness of the dividing line between stage and auditorium cut

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2 Mooli Lahad in an interview with Sue Jennings in Jennings, Handbook of Dramatherapy (London and New York: Routledge, 1994, repr. 1995), p. 184: "[...] we have concepts, artists, enactments, but basically it is still an approach, it is not a theory, it's a model."
off the dialogic interchange between them. It could only be crossed like Alice stepping through the Looking-Glass or like Oscar Wilde entering a self-sufficient art world more real than the life commonly referred to as ‘reality.’ Thus, when A.W. Godwin produced *As You Like It* in the clearing of a forest in 1884, the whole world (or at least Coombe Woods) had truly become a stage. Yet Godwin’s merging of stage and auditorium in his perfect illusion” which still relegated the audience to the role of “eaves-droppers”\(^3\) was only a short step from actually drawing them into a more active dialogue.\(^4\)

That was the line pursued by other theatre practitioners, who, frustrated by their art’s seeming irrelevance to people’s lives, set out on a — again in Schiller’s sense — sentimental quest to rediscover this unity in the unexplored and hence primitive recesses of the mind or of other continents, and frequently in both. Stanislavski’s ‘Method’ still concentrated on the actor who was to fuse his natural personality with his role, just as Godwin had fused nature and stage. Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty,’ Grotowski’s ‘Poor Theatre’ and the theatre laboratories that sprang up in his wake, Peter Brook’s rejection of the ‘deadly’ for an ‘immediate theatre’ and the many promising experiments which mushroomed in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s all started by probing the depths of the actor’s psyche towards its pre-rational springs shared by, and immediately recognizable to, the archetypal human soul. Drawing heavily on ritual and myth, a close communion with the spectators was to be achieved, of which the gradual abolition of the stage/auditorium divide was only an outward sign. In the face of such extreme developments as actors embracing and copulating with spectators in the “Rite of Universal

\(^3\) *The Era* 27 July 1884.

\(^4\) It is impossible not to remark in a footnote on the telling but entirely coincidental irony that the part of the forest which Godwin had originally chosen for his venue had to be abandoned when its owner, the Duke of Cambridge, refused permission (on moral grounds?) and the performance had to be moved to a clearing in the adjoining property which belonged to a Dr MacGeagh’s hydropathic establishment; see John Stokes, *Resistible Theatres: Enterprise and Experiment in the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Paul Elek Books, 1972), p. 47.
Intercourse” of The Living Theatre’s Paradise Now (1968), the actor/audience relationship surely had come a long way from the performances on the picture-frame stage of the nineteenth century.

Although Artaudian or Grotowskian theatre was by no means apolitical, its approach was fundamentally different from the communists’ social realism or the social commitment of Brecht. Where Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt led to a self-conscious use of theatrical effects to convey an activist message, Artaud or Grotowski wanted to bring about change in the individual spectator, which in turn could alter the social order. The aim was directly man’s “soul,” as Paul Kornfeld, contrasting expressionist drama with conventional drama dealing with character, had already envisaged it in 1918. Clearly, this type of avant-garde theatre already contained a distinctly therapeutic element, as it liberated actors and spectators to get in touch with their roots and express their primordial emotions. Indeed, the dividing line between theatre and therapy has remained fluent, as shown by the instances of Grotowski and his leading disciple, Eugenio Barba. Whereas the master decided to leave the stage in the mid-1970s and commit himself exclusively to “paratheatrical workshops” devoted to the inner self-discovery of their participants, his disciple has emphatically stayed within the world of theatre. Barba refrained from turning his ‘Theatre Anthropology,’ for all its therapeutic potentialities, into a therapeutic method, but has developed it, as originally conceived, as an actor’s training technique.

The cross-over between theatre and therapy is, however, the interesting aspect in our context. At the risk of complete over-simplification, this cross-over can perhaps be separated into two strands of tenuous historical continuity eventually forming the most prominent concepts of today’s dramatherapy. They are briefly adumbrated in the following by focusing on their early pioneers and a representative practitioner in our time.

7 Innes, p. 169.
If modern dramatherapy has a godfather, Nikolai Evreinov (1879-1953) has a strong claim to it. Together with Vsevolod Meyerhold, with whom he was involved in constant squabbles, he spearheaded the opposition against Stanislavski’s naturalism in Russian theatre. With Meyerhold he shared, as Tony Pearson aptly puts it, “a crusading belief in the re-integration of stage and audience through an appeal to the styles and conventions of earlier theatrical epochs.” His watchword was teatral’nost’, theatricality, for which he had published his Apologia as early as 1908. His work with his Starinnyi Teatr, The Ancient Theatre, in the seasons 1907/8 and 1911/12 was an attempt to realise this concept. By staging medieval moralities and plays from the Spanish siglo d’oro, he hoped to recapture the type of celebratory audience participation he considered typical of those periods. In the 1920s, however, he reduced his involvement in theatrical activities, and his interests became more theoretical and speculative. A selection of his numerous lectures and writings on theatre appeared in English translation in 1927 as Theatre in Life. In the theory he developed, a common theatrical instinct is “the mainsprings of our existence,” a feature in which “a cultured man differs little from a savage, a savage from an animal.” Calling for the “stage management of life,” he admonishes his readers to cultivate their theatrical instincts just as the stage manager has to bring order to the conflicting interests making up a performance. Together they are to function as “collective stage managers” of their specific national culture. Playing one’s role well, can moreover affect a cure in the individual, by enabling one to live up to it, just as the actor is cured through

9 Apologia teatral’nosti (1908). This was actually his speech given at the beginning of his term (1908/9) at the invitation of Vera Komissarzhevskaya, who had just dismissed Meyerhold from the post as principal director of the St. Petersburg theatre.
11 Evreinov, p. 23.
12 Evreinov, pp. 98-112.
“self-transformation” and the audience through catharsis.\textsuperscript{13} “Theatrotherapy” was the term Evreinov coined for it.

In his call to abolish the actor/audience divide and to re-activate the primitive roots of theatre as humanity’s common core so as to provide a potential to transform and heal the individual as well as society, Evreinov anticipated later developments of twentieth-century experimental theatre as described above. His theatrotherapy also prefigured some of the major strategies employed in modern dramatherapy, as a short introduction to Sue Jennings’s work can exemplify. One of the most distinguished dramatherapists in England and beyond, Jennings combines the professions of actress and therapist. In her view, the theatre director and therapist share the same aim: “Each one tries to create a safe environment where experiments with the self can take place, where skills can be both learnt and let go.”\textsuperscript{14} Her approach of “working from the ‘outside in’” recalls Stanislavski’s Method:

The skills of movement and voice are established externally and then make an impact on the internal world. The movement and sounds create metaphors and images which are able to reach our internal world […]. They bypass our defence systems which are necessary for fragile identities.\textsuperscript{15}

On this basis, her therapy sessions for psychiatric out-patients are closely modelled on the process of theatrical production, beginning with theatre workshops for the acquisition of basic acting skills to rehearsals and performance, ending with post-production meetings.\textsuperscript{16} Referring to Artaud, but also van Gennep, Victor Turner, and Richard Schechner, she calls for a ritual drama of healing, as she sees the cause of many psychiatric syndroms in today’s general poverty in ritual leading to incomplete or misguided liminal experiences.\textsuperscript{17} Many of her remedial strategies take their cue directly from Artaud, such as the “search for new language through sound and movement,” the use of “larger-than-life images and effigies” and the

\textsuperscript{13} Evreinov, p. 125.
\textsuperscript{14} Jennings, \textit{Handbook}, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{15} Jennings, \textit{Handbook}, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{16} Jennings, \textit{Handbook}, pp. 52-54.
\textsuperscript{17} Jennings, \textit{Handbook}, pp. 93-113.

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aim of a resolution of conflicting opposites through "the integration of the phsyical with the metaphysical — feeling and thought."\textsuperscript{18} Recalling my introductory remarks on Epidauros, \textit{The Greek Theatre of Healing}\textsuperscript{19} as the title of Jennings's latest book project further underlines her integrative approach.

In their value-free, semi-ritual use of metaphor and myth, Jennings's therapeutic interventions are open, oblique and facilitative rather than directive. These are also the points where dramatherapists see their main differences with the practitioners of psychodrama. Nevertheless, the borderline is by no means firmly drawn. However indirectly, there has always been such a vivid exchange of ideas between the two sides to warrant a closer look.

Theatre had been introduced into psychiatric institutions as early as the 1800s — the theatrical productions partly written and directed by the Marquis de Sade between 1797 and 1811 at the asylum of Charenton, of which he was an inmate, are a particularly apt example, as they make one wonder how close he would have got to Artaud's way of treating cruelty, had he lived 150 years later. Picking up on this tradition, Jacob L. Moreno (1890-1974) pioneered modern psychodrama.\textsuperscript{20} What Freud had his patients report to him as they lay on his couch, Moreno made them stage with themselves as protagonists, providing them with the techniques for doing so. These techniques have been further developed by therapists, Cox and Theilgaard for example recently using \textit{Shakespeare As Prompter}.\textsuperscript{21} The psychiatrist's therapeutic interventions are then based on his analysis of the performance. Dramatherapy, by contrast, is less specific. Instead of re-enacting a group member's past traumatic experiences, the creation of sculpts is a communal process negotiated at

\textsuperscript{18} Jennings, \textit{Handbook}, pp. 105-08, 111.
\textsuperscript{19} Sue Jennings, \textit{The Greek Theatre of Healing} (London: Jessica Kingsley, forthcoming).
\textsuperscript{20} At about the same time, from 1908 onwards, Vladimir Iljine used a form of therapeutic theatre in Russia. His merits cannot be further explored in this context; see Ina Schmidt-Ranson, "Brecht's Lehrstücke in ihrer Beziehung zum Therapeutischen Theater V.N. Iljinens und zum Psychodrama J.L. Morenos," \textit{Dramatische Therapie}, ed. Hilarion G. Petzold (Stuttgart: Hippokrates, 1982), pp. 47-59.
\textsuperscript{21} Murray Cox and Alice Theilgaard, \textit{Shakespeare as Prompter: The Amending Imagination and the Therapeutic Process} (London and Bristol, PA: Jessica Kingsley, 1994).
the beginning of the performance and spontaneously developed in its course. The correlation between the communal performance and the individual client's experience or problems remains oblique and is not necessarily dissected. As Anna Chesner points out, "it may even be considered psychically damaging and counter-therapeutic to shine too bright a light directly onto the significance of the dramatic work to each individual." Thus, the cure is in the acting process itself, not in the diagnostic insights to be drawn from it.

Obviously, playing and experimenting with different roles is an important constituent of the dramatherapeutic process. Again, Moreno is one of the pioneers in the field. Together with the research of George Herbert Mead and Ralph Linton in the 1930s, his own conceptions of sociometry and sociodrama led to a wide acceptance of the role metaphor as a model in sociology and social psychology. Both, through influence from Moreno's psychodrama and through absorbing ideas from later sociologists, notably the work of Erving Goffman, modern dramatherapy draws heavily on role theory. In recent years, Robert Landy, director of the American Institute of Dramatherapy in New York, has attempted to establish a systematic basis for it. In Landy's postmodernist view, personality does not have a core or centre, but consists of a nexus of interrelated roles. Things start to go wrong, so Landy's rationale, when one of the individual roles is inadequately conceived and enacted. As all the roles are interdependent, a single deficiency affects the entire system forming the 'personality.' It is therefore the dramatherapist's aim to help the clients identify miscast roles by enabling them to isolate them in performance so that they can be re-enacted or replaced by others which are better suited. In order to

23 Rather testily, Moreno however declared in the introduction to the third edition of *Psychodrama* 1 (1964): ii: "It is a 'myth' that the American sociologist, G.H. Mead, has had a major influence upon the psychiatric 'role concept' and its psychopathology. The formulation and development of the psychiatric role concept and of role playing techniques is the exclusive domain of the psychodramatists."
do so successfully, it is vital to have a compendious repertoire of alternative roles at one’s disposal. Consequently, Landy developed a taxonomy of 84 archetypal roles. To stock his arsenal of role types, however, Landy did not examine life, but theatre, scouring the entire history of Western theatre for examples. Thus, the role type ‘Daughter,’ with the conventional form exemplified by Miranda in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* or Katrin in Brecht’s *Mutter Courage*, has the three subtypes of ‘Renegade/Rebel Daughter’ (Cassandra in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*), the ‘Bastard/Vengeful Daughter’ (Regan and Goneril in *King Lear*) and ‘Daughter in Distress’ or ‘as Victim’ (Varya in Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard*).

In order to find the right attitude towards any single role, it has to be viewed from the right perspective. For this purpose, Landy strikes a balance between Stanislavski and Brecht, adapting ideas from T.J. Scheff. “Aesthetic distance” is his term for the best enrolment technique, which is contrasted with the “overdistanced” on the one hand and “underdistanced” on the other. Seen from an aesthetic distance, a role is isolated and circumscribed as a distinctive behavioral pattern while still allowing for emotional involvement and identification. Training patients to acquire the right distance to the roles making up their personalities and possibly substituting misapplied role types by more suitable ones is, in short, Landy’s therapeutic approach.

Put in theatrical terms then, what Landy has done is to transfer the creative fissures and the high self-reflexiveness within the actor/role relation typical of modern theatre into a therapeutic setting. The same can be said for Sue Jennings’ use of ritual elements, so that, in this respect, dramatherapy is, quite openly, an extension of common theatrical practices, sometimes, one has to add, in an out-of-context, watered-down fashion. It must be noted, however, that

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dramatherapy's syncretism does not stop there. Recent books in the field confess to a whole gamut of influences from and contiguity with, other therapeutic practices, such as play therapy, Gestalt therapy, expressive therapy, metaphor therapy, dance therapy, psychosonics or geriadrarna. The list sounds very much like the ridiculous number of therapies undergone by the anti-hero of David Lodge's novel Therapy. Whatever else dramatherapy may be credited with, it is clearly not a discovery of outstanding singularity. It must be seen as jostling in the ranks of an unprecedented spectrum of therapeutic practices. However, the fact that theatre has inspired one of these variants also reflects back on theatre itself. Dramatherapy, I would argue, can be seen as the latest indicator that theatre, once again, has jumped on the bandwagon, and triumphantly so.

At a closer look, the therapeutic fads parodied by Lodge are, as Lodge himself appears to imply, only the supercilious excrescences of a much more deeply rooted concern of modern culture. In a recent issue, Die Neue Rundschau dubbed our Western culture the "therapy society." Indeed, the 'psychological turn' early in our century appears to have drawn a 'therapeutic turn' in its wake. The paradigm of looking at human behaviour in moral terms where the ultimate remedy is salvation has been replaced by a psychological conception which calls for therapy when things go wrong. Theatre has, of course, invented neither of the concepts, but it has done remarkably well in assimilating them. In a profusely moralising society, theatre had not only reflected the trend by becoming didactic. Lillo's London Merchant is an instance where it also advocated itself,

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33 Schattner/Courtney, II, pp. 175-95.
35 Die Neue Rundschau 108.2 (1997), Special Issue: "Unsere Therapiegesellschaft: Die süße Sorge um das Selbst."
as I have attempted to show elsewhere, as the best way, if not to salvation, at least to avoid the pitfalls detracting from it. In this respect, there is a clear line running from Lillo to the self-conscious therapeutic dimensions in the theatre of Artaud or Grotowski and spilling over into dramatherapy.

Thus, far from merely reflecting a trend, theatre has adapted the therapeutic Zeitgeist to its own ends. Apart from providing inspiration to explore new areas thematically, its application is patently apologetic or even propagandist: therapy has been a powerful weapon in the battle for audiences. Staking a claim to healing powers when everyone is clamouring for therapists of every shade and colour clearly is good publicity. Once again, Grotowski can serve as an example: trying to define theatre in terms of “What is unique about it? What can it do that film and television cannot?”, he first suggests to strip it of all accessories to its essentials and then appraises theatre as a particularly apt means of achieving the aims of our involvement with art which are, in his view, “to cross our frontiers, exceed our limitations, fill our emptiness — fulfil ourselves.” Quite a therapeutic programme, one might say, the result of which he describes, like a successful cure, as being “reborn.” Again, dramatherapy sets the seal on this strategy. Here, the therapeutic value of theatre has been accepted to the extent that some people started to see it exclusively from this perspective, in the case of Evreinov or Moreno stripping it in turn of all they considered non-essential to its therapeutic effects. The outcome is, of course, self-defeating, as theatre, being more (or less?) than therapy, is lost on the way.

Still, the relationship between twentieth-century theatre and dramatherapy is much more complex than Eric Bentley’s accidental “overlap,” when he merely suggested that “if chunks of a psychodramatic session are art, pure theatre could in some ways be thera-

36 Forthcoming in *RECTR* (1997).
Klaus Stierstorfer

peutic." With the concept of therapy, theatre has, once again, taken up a central issue of a particular period in time, used it according to its own rules and lost it again through its very success. It happened before with stage historicism and naturalism, and it is, I think, happening again with therapy. When The Pastoral Players performed *As You Like It* in Coombe Woods in 1884 to have as realistic a setting as possible, the death toll of stage realism as an innovative theatrical approach had already sounded. By analogy, the recent institutionalisation of dramatherapy can very well be interpreted as an indicator of the demise of therapy as a viable theatrical concept.

For much of twentieth-century theatre history, however, our understanding would be incomplete without paying special attention to its therapeutic orientation. Even as it begins to lose its importance, it is worth investigating traces of its creative assimilation. When theatre had shed its openly moralising qualities, for instance, structural patterns survived the demise of their content. Thus, the notion of a chain reaction of sin, where a minor moral lapsus would inexorably draw ever severer sins in its wake was re-used, devoid of its moral contents, as the groundwork of the well-made play, where a minor cause would inexorably lead towards the intricate entanglements of its plot. Similarly, an examination of dramatherapists' models might help to identify patterns of therapy which have been adopted and recycled in theatre, even in those performances which no longer have any therapeutic implications. A full investigation of therapy as a paradigmatic background and source of inspiration for twentieth-century theatre is, as far as I can see, still pending.

Clearly, dramatherapy's position is a sort of fulcrum, as it combines theatre with another key modern paradigm, therapy. Perhaps, this is one explanation for its phenomenal growth despite its fuzzy approach. The fact that it apparently has built up a record to work as therapy with numerous patients could cautiously be interpreted as a confirmation of the therapeutic effect, if only as a by-product, of theatre itself. Perhaps, we could, after all, infer something about

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how theatre affects us from the way dramatherapy is found to work best. And indeed, parallels can be discovered. What I have described above as the non-analytical and non-prescriptive nature of dramatherapy and what one might also call its rupture with both anamnesis and prognosis, is an observation that holds true for much of modern theatre. Dramatherapists deny the use and even possibility to infer from a patient’s performance either the roots of his or her problems or any direct strategies to solve them; the healing effect is in the communal performance, which cannot simply be expressed in a diagnostic formula. In the same way, the theatrical performance cannot be translated back into its dramatic text or its effect on the audience’s lives. One reason for the impossibility of simply switching from life into theatre and back and interpreting the one by the other along the way is what one might even call the ‘theatrical turn.’ As Herbert Blau has pointed out, “the performance principle has come to possess, along with the play of language, not only the other arts, but philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, anthropology and [...] the most advanced literary theory.” His (and ours), he suggests, “is a state of mind occluded by theatre.”99

With theatre deeply engrafted onto modern life, we can no longer talk about it, as it were, ‘from the outside,’ since the outside is also theatrical in its own way. With theatricality having become such an important concept way beyond the domains of theatre, we ought to look for it and apply to it our critical instruments in all walks of life — and we have to take account of its ineluctability in discussing theatre itself. Nina Auerbach’s little book Private Theatricals40 is an

99 Herbert Blau, Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), pp. xii, xiv. The adoption of the aesthetic role concept by sociology has received an acute examination by Hans Robert Jauß in the subsection “Soziologischer und ästhetischer Rollenbegriff” in his compendious Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 221-31. For a general survey of the most important developments in theatre sociology so far, see for example Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1989), pp. 478-86.

exemplary move in this direction, as she pinpoints theatricality, or
the fear of it, as a central concern in all aspects of Victorian culture.

Finally, the way in which dramatherapy is effective could also un­
derline the importance of theatre’s pre-rational dimension. If
theatre is found to affect so strongly our moods and emotions, we
need to take account of it. Here, the critical tools will still be found
lacking. In her recent book *Von den Gefühlen beim Lesen*, Evelyne
Keitel has attempted to establish a critical systematics aimed at our
emotional involvement when reading novels. This could, perhaps,
be a stimulus for an investigation of modern drama and theatre in
the same direction.

All considered, dramatherapy clearly is an interesting develop­
ment. Whether taken as a source of new perspectives in theatre and
performance studies by some, whether accepted by others as a viable
therapeutic opportunity, whether used to convince administrators in
times of severe cuts in arts funds of the relevance of theatre to
people’s lives, or whether simply as a means to top up the income of
chronically underemployed actors, it is well worth watching its
future progress.

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41 Evelyne Keitel, *Von den Gefühlen beim Lesen: Zur Lektüre amerikanischer Gegen­
wartsliteratur* (Munich: Fink, 1996). Using a different approach and a new methodol­
ogy, Keitel not only pursues lines opened up by the New Critics to whom she refers,
but also investigations of the kind collected in *Sympathielenkung in den Dramen
Cyberspace: The Impact of Information Technology on the Stage

Information technology is one of the main issues of our present age. The control revolution which has, at the same time, made progress possible since the mid-nineteenth century,¹ has caused modern society to become increasingly ‘abstract.’² Global media extend the boundaries of identity. This is the process of rapid innovation most of us have become familiar with. But in the past few years, due to incredibly fast processors and immense storage capacities, a new dimension of machine-dependent existence has arisen, the consequences of which are more frightening than the conjectures of science fiction: simulation and virtual reality meaning cyberspace.³

It could well be that we still have to wait for a number of years until a playwright succeeds in putting the computer and virtual reality onto the stage with its subject-matter either expressing grave concern about the state of society and the impending Bill-Gatesian universe or using virtual reality as a prop or as a complete stage set. The absence of contemporary information technology in the theatre could simply be due to the fact that an experienced playwright who is also well versed in computing has not yet emerged. As we do not

need to discuss the relevance of the progress of the information society and the corresponding decline of industrialism, which is affecting everyday-life more and more deeply, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the emergence of information technology in a survey of Internet sites devoted to the theatre. In Great Britain and the U.S., a well-established net of theatre servers available to the general public has come into existence. I should like to suggest that we surf them and have a look at the files accessible on the assumption that the impact of information technology is so powerful that it will sooner or later successfully appear on the stage, as most of the current trends in (modern) society have been dramatised so far.

Before examining virtual-reality devices on the stage, four playscripts submitted to the Dramatic Exchange — a server founded by former members of Caltech — will be discussed briefly. The Internet offers new ways of communicating and of publishing the results from creative-writing classes all over the U.S. Admittedly, it is arguable that surfing will enable us to find out what will happen on the stage during the first decade of the new century, but an author who is sensitive to modern technology may perhaps become an established playwright in a few years' time, so that the electronic version of a successful play may be of historic interest, even if it is withdrawn from the server as soon as it starts its run on a professional stage. This sort of star-gazing might be useful considering the fact that the writing classes alone produce an abundance of pastiche and plagiarisms, although a small number of invaluable pieces of dramatic art have also come into being. When in ten years' time, David Sears or Andrew Agostino (but certainly not both of them), will be celebrated as the meteors of the American stage, this paper will prove an historic landmark in Internet-mediated drama research. I find theatre surfing quite fascinating because of the ease with which people can start experiments and launch new projects, especially in U.S. humanities departments, and, apart from Patrick Marber's new play Closer (premiered May 1997), I was rather disappointed not to see any information-technology plays on any of the London servers,
including even fringe productions, which are regularly entered.⁵

There are more than one hundred plays currently held by the Dramatic Exchange, and, surprisingly, I found that there were only a few plays concerned with computing as such.⁶

Even if post-industrialism has not yet brought tangible results, the public is aware of the general effects of change. Contrary to the assumptions accepted above, only four writers are really committed to dealing with the menace inherent in post-industrial technology, and this is a revealingly low number. Fortunately, however, the plays I was able to spot correspond exactly to the current developments of information technology, the disquieting impact of which has recently been pictured by Hollywood in impressive movies such as Tron (1982), Circuitry Man (1990), The Lawnmower Man (1991), Johnny Mnemonic (1995), The Net (1995), Total Recall (1991) or the U.S. serial Tek War (1994).⁷

Apart from Hollywood, the cyberpunk movement has also produced quite a number of significant negative utopian narratives focussing on an information society in which man is enslaved by, and addicted to, technology. In William Gibson’s Neuromancer (1984) man has become a puppet executing the commands of hostile artificial intelligences. In a sombre 21st century, which is now looming over us, man is reduced to a marginal existence in an underworld of

⁵ First consult the URLs (uniform resources locator or ‘Internet address’) collected in the ‘Anglistik im Internet’ section in Erfurt Electronic Studies in English (http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/ees/urls.html); see “Theatre Resources.” Another access point to the Net well worth clicking on is Alexa Williamson’s Cyberstage: Online London Theatre Guide with a particular emphasis on fringe events: http://web.ukonline.co.uk/Members/alexa.w/. A reliable guide to fringe productions is the homepage of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (http://www.edfringe.com/). See also Ewald Mengel’s survey of theatre web sites in “Drama- und Theaterressourcen im Internet,” Anglistik im Internet: Proceedings of the 1996 Erfurt Conference on Computing in the Humanities, ed. Doris Feldmann, Fritz-Wilhelm Neumann, and Thomas Rommel (Heidelberg: Winter, 1997), pp. 157-82. An excellent addition to web resources is the CDE homepage created by the English Department at Mainz University; see their collection of links under http://fb14.uni-mainz.de/projects/cde/links.html.

⁶ See http://www.dramex.org/.

violence, crime and addiction in impoverished urban centres throughout the world. There is a divide in society between high-tech winners and low-tech losers. Multinational trusts run by a network of intelligent computers rule the planet. Nature has been replaced by a computer-generated environment; virtual reality anticipates the post-biological age where cyborgs will replace man once and for all. 8

Information Technology

Man-machine interaction – Anne Welsbacher, Terra Incognita (1995)

Anne Welsbacher’s notion of fuzzy logic, which is developed into rapidly evolving machine-generated artificial-intelligence programmes, 9 is quite misleading from the point of view of computer science, although it makes use of popular visions of machine intelligence acting as a substitute for emotional problems. The story is based on a love triangle. Terra is a post-graduate in psychology, suffering from being neglected by a fellow-researcher who is keen on finding out what happens to affection among humans when they are subjected to extreme cold over extended periods of time. As Frank vanishes for long periods in the laboratory fridge, Terra creates a substitute by feeding fuzzy-logic algorithms into the computer which turns out to be an expert on music, even if it displays bad taste in some of its choices, and to be a sensitive partner to the emotionally starved Terra: “MAX: I can forget fewer than nothing when you speak it to me. I hold every word from your lips inside the space where even my bedazzled electricity does not reach.” 10

If the dialogue had consistently maintained this distinctive style, including a number of very funny jokes about music, and if the plot had been worked out properly, this play could have made it onstage,

although the myth of the miraculous computer whose intelligence surpasses all our expectations is not a new one.


Information poverty is one of the growing concerns in a post-industrial age. As far as we can discern the shape society will take in the next century, access to the information network would seem to determine the divide between the haves and the have-nots. Class-distinctions will not only be perpetuated, but in the future, the managerial class controlling the information market will be more powerful and more elevated from the common people than in any period of middle-class democracy. In a way, Andrew Agostino’s remake or pastiche of the *West Side Story* comes to an even more disquieting conclusion. Middle-class Onliners, to whom information used to be available, and working-class Offliners, who are kept in the ghetto of information poverty, merge in the age of post-industrialism to suffer the same fate of redundancy and unemployment. Classes are revealed as a myth created by the ‘system’ to cement hierarchy in society and to deflect discontent from the so-called United Government. The electronic revolution has uprooted society for good: “CRONUS. The fact is all tech jobs are disappearing. When they introduced Generation 3-Neuro-nets almost everyone lost their job, Onliners and Offliners.”

If this is a very plausible assumption, the principal conflict between the warring youth groups is solved by re-establishing “human interaction in an age of machines” and the evil gangleader is expelled from the place called “Everytown, a suburban area somewhere in North America.”


In Howard Rheingold’s vision of virtual communities, the global village created by computer-mediated communication will be the

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A group of average American citizens keys in internet-relay-chat messages in Nobody Knows I’m a Dog by David Perkins. The principal technical device is spotlighting the individual actors as they are engaged in e-mail or all of them when engaged in full discussion. The spotlights are meant to convey the idea of individuality and neurotic isolation in the human-machine interaction. In the end, after a lengthy discussion of fabricated identities which are surprisingly close to the original person, the performers quarrel until the whole virtual community definitively breaks up. Internet-users cannot avoid being the people they really are, however intensely they secretly wish to be somebody else. The game of identity guessing fails: “NADINE: Boys! The intellectual level of this conversation has fallen through the floor. We owe it to ourselves to behave like adults...”

The message of David Perkins’ play on Usernet Newsgroups is that IRC will never replace genuine human intercourse, however difficult it may be to accept one’s own self: “Still, I feel that no matter how elaborately we manufacture an alter ego or online persona it will never veer too far from who we really are.” Perkins plainly contradicts Benedikt’s claim that “egos and multiple egos, roles and functions, have a new existence in cyberspace.” Perkins’s view coincides with Patrick Marber’s current representation of the Net.

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14 Benedikt, Cyberspace, p. 123: “New, liquid, and multiple associations between people are possible, for both economic and noneconomic reasons, and new modes and levels of truly interpersonal communication come into being.”
15 In Closer, which is a tragic play on failing human relations and the destructiveness of modern promiscuity, man is reduced to a “fucking caveman.” Obviously, it is not the information technology of the nineties that causes the failure of love. Due to sexual explicitness, the play, a National Theatre production, is having a very successful run in the West End (Patrick Marber, Closer [London: Methuen, 1997], p. 55).

The most pretentious play or the most substantial one of the four under discussion is *Computer-Mania: The Fear of the Future On Stage* by David Sears, which is a blend of the Thornton Wilder-type of epic narration mixed with Brechtian songs and interludes based on a post-apocalyptic vision of post-industrial capitalism. The motto of the play derives from a message by Alvin Toffler when the futurologist was still a left-winger. Toffler later became an apologist for Reaganomics and an advisor to the President for what may be called the information capitalism of the future. One of Toffler's latest publications is dedicated to Newt Gingrich.\(^\text{16}\)

Bar-code technology has subjected mankind to the surveillance machine implemented by the world state and run by the three industrial super-powers: Japan, Europe, and the USA. The moves performed on stage are quite ingeniously conceived, and the action reaches an impressive level of speed and intensity. The whole evolution of contemporary society is unveiled as the result of a conspiracy instigated by a small group of the richest men in the world. In addition, David Sears has sufficient command of the language to create a performance which is well worth being staged:

*The stage opens to reveal the information superhighway with fibre optic lines connecting cities, people, and places... a worldwide electronic network with people from all nations using their computers...*

**NARRATOR** (Singing)

Form a line, super highway.
Internet will show us the way.
See your friends on the telephone.
Watch your kids or shop from home.
Yes, form a room Japs.
Form a room, Jews.
Form a room, those with Aids.
Form a room, ugly women!
It's so much fun, the computer age.

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\(^{16}\) Sears is quoting from Alvin Toffler's *Eco-Spasm Report*. A more recent publication revealing Toffler's new turns of ideology would be *Creating a New Civilization: The Politics of the Third Wave* (Atlanta: Turner, 1995).
Your [sic] on the run, with the cyber stage!
You've got no cares, were in control.
You've got no mind it's thought control!
Form a room, blacks.
Form a room gays.
Form a room, bi-women.
Form a room, call it heaven!
Are you ready for 2024.
Computer rooms are what's in store.
What bucket are you! (Points at the Audience)
Would you like to know!?
What bucket are you! (Points at Audience)
It's Thought control!
How much are you, willing to to pay!
Welcome fools, to the superhighway.

**Everyone freezes: The Richest Man in the world walks to center stage…**

Bar code has been introduced, which is implanted on the forehead and on the palm, although it is invisible to the naked eye it can be traced by a laser system. Once all the citizens are marked, no cash or credit cards are needed to make purchases. The 'control revolution' has reached its apogee, for electronic banking has proved, indeed, the 'killer application' in achieving the breakthrough of the new technology. Through a global fibre-optic network — which is rapidly growing right now in 1997 — electronic banking will be controlled by one large world computer commonly referred to as 'The Beast' which is located in Luxemburg. David Sears argues that the binary 101 is equivalent to the number six predicted in the Bible as the sign of the final economic system. In this play, performers, music and imagery all contribute to the notion of a world coming to its end.

*Virtual Reality Experiments*

Man's tools are evolving beyond the mere mastery of the environment towards a complete reconstruction of his universe along the lines of both fear and wishful thinking. Strangely enough, the prog-

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ress of technology tends to reverse the process of enlightenment by the emotional regression of those who make use of it. One might object that virtual reality is only a small part of the technological achievements we so readily ignore, such as virtual architecture, flight simulation and long-distance surgery, but simulation devices are central to the world of modern media and of the reality they construct.

In the evolution of virtual reality, Buhl distinguishes between (1) previrtual worlds (computer-mediated communication such as e-mail on the Internet, online databases, open-access library catalogues), (2) virtual reality without immersion (stage sets on screens; computer-games equipment used in the rear of the stage), (3) peripheral phantomatics, which is Stanislaw Lem's coinage (the performer is immersed into cyberspace or interacts in realtime programming with artificial intelligences, i.e. computer-generated beings), and (4) central phantomatics including neuronal interfaces and direct brain stimulation. Recent progress in ear and eye surgery seems to herald the beginning of a new age, while on stage peripheral three-phantomatics are still being practiced.

As a starting point, it may be helpful to take into account the different experimental approaches to virtual reality as applied to the stage. The Worcester College Drama Group set up a 32 feet-by-32 feet screen in the rear of the stage on which the fantasy environment of a computer-game could be projected. This might be suitable for One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Taking the monsters off the game and having actors move in front of the screen instead is not only ingeniously simple, but also effective, considering the level of sophistication and perfection three-dimensional computer graphics such as Duke Nukem have attained.

At Carnegie Mellon and Stanford, experiments in interacting with animated computer-generated objects — a cat aptly called Lyotard, for instance — have been as encouraging from the point of

18 See the Kansas University experiment in virtual reality.
view of computer science\(^{21}\) as the generation of the virtual Member of Parliament by the Cologne College of Art. The idea of real MPs haranguing a mixed audience of real and virtual MPs is quite disturbing, as it anticipates the entirely artificial character of our media-generated world.

In this paper, however, I would like to draw the reader’s attention to Mark Reaney’s experiments in virtual-reality stage-sets. The Kansas University Theatre introduced head-mounted displays to the audience when they staged Rice’s *Adding Machine* and Kopit’s *Wings*. The materials documenting the performances such as stills, extensive descriptions and demo versions of software are available from the Kansas University server. At KU, each audience member wore a head-mounted display called “i-glasses!”. Audiences were still able to see live actors on-stage and computer graphics projected onto rear screens. Simultaneously, they were presented with computer graphics (normally generated by CAD software) and live video images projected within the head-mounted display. Thus, there are three levels of the stage merging into cyberspace, but according to Mark Reaney the audience “maintained a strong connection with the live actors” and “the communal nature of the theatre experience was not lessened.”\(^ {22}\) The vr performance of *Wings* was aimed at communicating the main character’s chaotic state of mind. A stroke and the ensuing fight for recovery is a theme which requires a great amount of non-verbal elements. In this experiment the vr stage-set appeared to lend itself perfectly to the live performance on stage.

**Conclusion**

But what if the nature of reality itself becomes the subject-matter of the play?\(^ {23}\) One of the most persistent myths of cyberspace is a new

\(^{21}\) Cf. the description of the Oz project at Carnegie Mellon; http://www.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs.cmu.edu/project/oz/web/oz.html.

\(^{22}\) Cf. Mark Reaney’s “Production Notes” for *The Adding Machine* as part of the *i.e.VR* homepage (The Institute for the Exploration of Virtual Realities); http://ukanaix.cc.ukans.edu:80/~mreaney/.

\(^{23}\) For the traditional positions of science fiction, see *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick: Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Lawrence Sutin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995).
understanding of reality and illusion, which would be an extension of the traditional metaphor ("All the world's a stage, And all the men and women players"), either expressing the consciousness of creating oneself or, if we take Macbeth, a loss of confidence and faith. But more recently, the fear of manipulation by machine-generated patterns of consciousness ('mindscape'; 'bioapparatus') is conveyed by critical surveys of the modern media. "Networked intelligence" will increase, but in this way, virtual reality will increasingly be marketed as a tool contrived for the escaping into infantile worlds of wishful thinking. The more technology advances, the more man regresses. The word will lose its weight, and the spectres of desire will take over.

Even if information technology has developed beyond all expectations, let us be on the safe side and conclude that virtual-reality equipment will be an important new prop in sumptuously staged musicals and similar shows, but it should be remembered that drama means the spoken word acted by human beings in contact with the members of the audience. During the first decade of the new century, the stage will perhaps come under pressure from technology. The expectations of an audience in a high-tech consumer society may require the spectator to be immersed in virtual reality as in Huxley's feelies. This may be the trend the taste directors will have to cater for; but the newly reconstructed Shakespeare stage at the Globe will survive as well, even in virtual reality displays on the Internet. That is what we should be grateful for.

Another question has not been answered yet: the stage needs a myth in the Aristotelian sense to represent information society ade-

27 See http://www.reading.ac.uk:80/globe/.
Fritz-Wilhelm Neumann

quately. The present vagueness of this notion — in spite of all the
guesswork of science-fiction writers coming true — has to be crystal-
lised into an action focusing on the quintessential experience of
living under pressure from an advanced technology in the same way
that Harold Pinter vividly rendered the sense of menace under the
Welfare State. But what is it, if not another tool designed by *homo
faber* or — for purposes of comedy — the miraculous computer
which turns even the laziest student, when wired to it by chance, into
a most promising research fellow?
Post-industrial society has produced in England a generation of young people who fit with frightening ease into Emile Durkheim's definition of 'anomie,'\(^1\) lacking full social integration and displaying "imperfect organic solidarity."\(^2\) They find themselves in a culture where identity is increasingly commodified and is articulated through tacitly agreed and fiercely policed norms of conspicuous consumption and display. An example of the kind of essential commodification which impinges directly on their experience is that of the Spice Girls. Even the Beatles were once a small amateur group, struggling to identify and develop their musical personality, but the Spice Girls are merely a marketing concept, with no context or history, a symbol of the eternal consumerist 'now.' To accept that they have a valid musical persona, even as a 'babe band,' is to accept the subservience of recreation to production and consumption. Such an acquiescence also underlies the acceptance of the boom in England of venues for mass drinking, which has been accompanied by an intensive saturation production and marketing campaign to increase alcohol consumption among the young.

The pressure to acquiesce in the social consensus which underpins such examples of the commodification of identity and behav-

\(^1\) Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1933), p. 106.

hour is enormous and embodies the threat of violence towards any deviants. This is a very real threat, as I am speaking not only of divergence from ‘official’ culture, but also from mainstream ‘youth culture’ — a point to which I will return.

Divergences from social norms are easily perceived and clearly labelled. If these divergences are sufficiently extreme, they are labelled as deviant, or even ‘liminal’ — to use a concept developed by the late Victor Turner⁵ — that is to say, they are seen as lying on the borders of acceptable human behaviour, or even transgressing them. They thus raise questions about the humanity of the individual who embodies them and hence whether this individual may not inhabit a different world, not only socially, but spiritually and even physically. Such a notion of difference may be as useful to the deviant as to the normative group. Some deviants manipulate the social and physical world, some withdraw from it. They disassociate themselves — even bodily. They fall into trances. Sometimes they even put themselves into trance.⁶

Those young people who for reasons of unemployment, poverty, or ethical resistance spurn consumerism, find no place in the culture of commodification. They are increasingly drawn to alternative cultural programmes which place great influence on resistance to the cultural norm, both through affirmative action — such as eco-protest — and also through highly expressive and theatrical celebrations of the norms of these counter-cultures. Rave culture is one such programme. Rave culture is a way of life which involves the stimulant use of an (illegal) drug, music and most importantly, dance. Dancing into a trance-like state of disassociation is the goal of many ‘ravers.’ This trance is consciously sought and is felt to represent a more benevolent level of existence than that of daily life. The participants share a strong sense of having been already marginalised by capitalist culture — which they despise — and the rave is an opportunity to formalise and theatrically express a counter-culture, in dress, behaviour, norms and values.

The effects of the combination of heightened emotion, a loss of inhibition and (some would insist) transcendental states of consciousness, appeals to people who feel trapped and constrained by a society which is increasingly dumb and numb. As Artaud said in his ‘Open Letter to the Schools of Buddha,’ “we must exorcise repressive behaviour patterns in society.”⁵ Rave offers the possibility of escaping a distasteful reality and re-creating oneself in a shared experience of alternative existence. It is likened, by its participants, to a religious event producing a spiritual experience.⁶

The rave experience focuses on a dance-form which is supported by the use of the drug ‘Ecstasy.’ The various labels which have been given to Ecstasy — love-drug, disco-biscuit, psychotherapeutic tool, truth drug, scourge of a nation — do little to inform or to explain effects which are vital to understand in order to gain insight into the rave phenomenon. Ecstasy is 3,4, methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). Its chemical structure is strikingly similar to that of mescaline, a classical hallucinogen and trance-drug. Ecstasy operates by anticipating and prolonging moods of happiness and euphoria, as well as possibly stimulating the brain centres controlling repetitive movement. Although producing a hangover and having probable long-term neuro-toxic effects, it also appears to have more permanent effects in maintaining moods of happiness and social positiveness. First synthesised in 1898 and re-synthesised in 1976, it was appropriated in the 1980s by dancers to Acid House (and later, Trance and Techno) music, who utilised the drug’s capacity to prolong and improve their dance experience and enjoyed its ability to heighten their generalised sensual awareness and alter their state of consciousness. It was simultaneously criminalised. It has been estimated that between 500,000 and 2,000,000 young people in England have taken Ecstasy.⁷

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⁵ Antonin Artaud, cited by Clinard, p. 56.
⁶ N. Saunders, “E is for Ecstasy,” Eternity No. 34 (semi.samizdat rave magazine, no publisher or date available).
The performative structure of a rave can be broken down into three stages, which reflect externally the stages of the raver's experience and illustrate a progression in the use of the body. The initial stage is characterised by controlled, measured energy levels. People step rhythmically from foot to foot at the edge of the dance-floor and on staircases and balconies as they "find their rhythm for the night." Despite limited interaction, the focus is external. The controlled movements betray an intense anticipation, as the raver waits for the music to build or the Ecstasy tablet to take effect. As the music builds in pace and intensity, people gather on the dance-floor. The style of dancing alters as people begin to move more freely, moving their arms and hands in conjunction with the lower body, sometimes developing a fixed, yet introspective stare. Others move sinuously through the crowd, smiling and making eye-contact, creating dance-patterns out of their search for a dance-space and dance-companions for the night. Finally the dance alters once more. The freedom of movement increases, more and more variations are developed in response to internal impulses other than the repetitive beat of the music. People fall into step with other's dancing in unconscious mimicry, leap and jump and, towards the end of the evening, dance on elevated areas such as speakers, platforms, bars and stages, physicalising and theatricalising their uplifted state of consciousness.

Individuals in a rave reach a stage of heightened physical capacity which allows them to dance for hours without a break, gradually shifting and developing their choreographic and corporeal patterns and achieving extended passages of high rhythmic speed, physical agility and bodily expressiveness and manipulation, which would normally be unobtainable. Their faces are rapt, their focus appears to bridge the external and the internal. Their emotional and kinaesthetic sensitivity is high. A rave en masse presents an extraordinary field of waving, swaying, gyrating bodies, composed of a multitude of individual and group scenarios of physical expressiveness. The ravers interact with the music and create a physical response to the aural dialogue. Dance is the physical language of the rave, through

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8 L. Clark, personal communication.
which the ravers communicate simultaneously with the music and with each other.

It is impossible not to see in the rave an extraordinarily complete manifestation of Artaud's visions for a new and redemptive theatre. He focused his vision on an appeal to the primitive subconscious of the psyche and the release of our "repressed subconsciousness" which "drives us to a kind of potential rebellion."9 He entertained notions of metamorphosis and re-identification through a new use of the body, as a fundamental tool of "spatial expression."10 In the rave the body creates "gestures out of a state of mind"11 that become the primary form of communication and interaction. Dance, combined with music, scenographic architecture and lighting, creates the landscape and physical language of rave. Rave participants assume alternative personae — as do young eco-protesters, re-naming themselves "Swampy" and "Animal" — effectively re-identifying themselves as full members of the sub-cultural group. By participating in the group act ravers have the opportunity to exorcise daily life — albeit temporarily — and release the "ghost within," by following Artaud's suggestion that "rhythm is the only thing that can take us out of ourselves."12 Artaud looked to a theatre which could take on "the magical freedom of daydreams"13 — a space between dreams and reality. "At heart," he said, "audiences are searching for a poetic state of mind, a transcendent condition, by means of love, crime, drugs, war, or insurrection."14 The anatomy of rave culture would seem to embrace all these conditions. Within the rave itself the transcendent condition is pursued through music, dance and the use of Ecstasy. By altering their state of consciousness and participating in the ceremony which is the rave they seek to "re-discover a religious, mystical meaning and to incorporate it into their lives as a

10 Artaud, p. 54.
11 Artaud, p. 48.
12 Artaud, p. 117.
13 Artaud, p. 65.
14 Artaud, p. 81.
Many ravers find that their lives shift in emphasis. They discover or re-discover the importance of personal and social interaction through the process of sharing a rave with so many people. These attitudes can be carried through into everyday life. (Paradoxically and to the raver, significantly this apparently socially positive circumstance is condemned by authority. A rave is illegal unless previously granted a licence by the police. The state has criminalised the ravers’ celebration of their way of life.) The vocabulary of the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ suggests much of the rave experience, both aesthetically and emotionally — theatre which bombards performer and audience with sensory stimuli, the core of which is “violent, concentrated action” which is “like lyricism, it calls forth supernatural imagery.” In his vision of ‘The Show,’ Artaud details many elements which characterise a rave setting — a performance space which places the audience in the centre of the action, musical instrument as part of the theatre set, “new, surprising objects, snakes, puppets many feet high, abrupt lighting changes” and, in the Second Manifesto of the Theatre of Cruelty “waves of light, like fire-arrows.”

The activities of rave find consonance not only in Artaud’s ecstatic visions, but also in the extremes of physical theatre research and performance. The goal of the work of Grotowski’s Laboratorium was described by one of his collaborators as “a real trance, a public offering of self, a tangible act with recourse to the entire sphere of intimacy.” Even more apposite are the examples which are to be found in para theatrical research, which effectively explores both the physical and the psychological resources of the performative body. There are striking similarities between what tends, systematically, to

15 Artaud, p. 35.
16 Merrill, n.p.
18 Artaud, p. 62.
19 Artaud, pp. 72-80.
20 Artaud, p. 74.
The Shamanic and Ecstatic Features of Trance-Dance in Rave Culture

develop during a paratheatrical ‘organic improvisation’ and a rave. One may specify rhythmic shifting from foot to foot, running and sinuous weaving, leaping, the access of enormous strength and agility, singing and chanting, mimetic dancing (which has been termed “morphic resonance”\(^{22}\)), a prolongation of physical activity, sometimes for hours, with accompanying feelings of euphoria and physical capacity, and, it has to be said, a tendency to “see things.”\(^{23}\) Paratheatre also comes to feel a ‘way of life.’

However, what we must essentially recognise is that all these perspectives are pre-dated and encompassed by the activities of the shaman.

Mircea Eliade suggests that psychological experiences of rapture are fundamental to the human condition,\(^{24}\) but the structure of urban culture in England does not embrace the pursuit of ecstasy. Hence, rave could be read as a response to a repressive and materialistic society’s need for emotional, psychological and spiritual release. In the same way the peasants of the Mayan Empire, locked into the drudgery of desert agriculture, would respond to the call of their shaman priests to the narcotic *ololoqui* to “come and expel the green pain.”\(^{25}\) The shaman is a link between this world and the spirit world, establishing a channel of communication between the two and transmitting or relaying spirit-messages. This channel of communication is effected within the physical body of the shaman and is realised through a state of trance. To reach the spirit-world the shaman must go on a journey which is simultaneously internal, psychological and spiritual and also external, corporeal and performative.\(^{26}\) The shaman must physically illustrate his or her internal spiritual transformations. The shaman performs for the community by chanting, singing, dancing, and shape-changing. Sometimes


\(^{25}\) Norman Taylor, *Narcotics* (New York: Delta, 1963), Ch. 6, p. 130.

\(^{26}\) Arnold, “The Shamanic Complex.”
dance and sometimes drugs are used to induce trance. "Dance and trance are [...] central [...] to the continuing practice of this art of ecstasy." 27 Often there is prolonged and specific rhythmic stimulation. In some communities the shaman, as well as making the journey, is a guide and master of ceremonies, who leads the whole community through a version of the same experience. The Piaroas of Venezuela, when preparing for one of their community trances, brew vast amount of weak beer, using canoes as the fermentation vessels. Their shaman guides them as they drink vast quantities, until they vomit it up. They immediately drink again. The prolonged cycle of drinking and vomiting creates a physical dislocation and exhaustion which is unable to resist the insistent rhythm of the drink-vomit cycle and which leads to psychic disassociation. 28 In the same way, the DJ leads the raver, in an equally surreal physical environment, through a similar experience.

The loud, repetitive nature of rave music, the prolonged and rhythmic dancing, the hypnotic lights, and the use of Ecstasy bring about a form of trance-state in which the raver may experience an increased spiritual awareness. The mind, in this condition, feels free to leave the body — as does the soul of the shaman in trance. The importance of ascension, of the sky and of flight in shamanic practice is reflected in the use of Ecstasy at raves. As the drug takes effect, the most commonly addressed question is "are you up yet?"

Shamans often manifest a set of symbolic gestures — such as foaming at the mouth — or physical attributes — such as an impossibly enhanced physical capacity and agility — to illustrate their voyage into trance and into the spirit-world. 29 At a rave, as the Ecstasy takes effect and the music builds, ravers dance more and more energetically and indomitably, their eyes staring and their pupils dilated, while they repetitively lick their lips and writhe their mouths (known as "gurning" on the rave circuit). They are in that condition

29 Arnold, "The Shamanic Complex."
of psycho-physiological excitation and suggestibility which can result in temporary or even permanent physical manifestations such as swelling or blistering of the mucus membranes and which some, who believe in the possibility, link to the external phenomena of telekinesis, poltergeist activity, and the presence of the divine or the supernatural.

Is the raver our culture’s shaman? Points of difference exist, which are ultimately points of principle, rather than of practice. A shaman must make sacrifices, both to attain the role and to fulfil it — “something must be lost in order to gain shamanic power.” The raver takes risks when using Ecstasy and makes a physical commitment to the event, but this seems minimal by comparison. The raver’s goals are ultimately personal ones. The sense of *communitas* in a rave, which parallels that achieved at a shamanic event — “it is one, it is unity, it is ourselves” — is not normally systematically translated into social action. Nor does the raver have the shaman’s responsibility to aid and guide the community through the efficacy of the spirit-messages which are received in trance and, frequently, through the conduct of the ceremony itself. We have seen that the DJ may have the same responsibility during a rave, but this role — the manipulation of the rave’s mood and dynamic through the music — is open to abuse and DJs do give in to the temptation to play God in a dangerous environment. The shaman may be corrupt, but the responsibilities of the role cannot be forgotten. At the same time, however, like the raver, the shaman does not necessarily have any special status outside the exercise of the shamanic function and is, not infrequently, a socially marginalised figure. Also, as we have seen, rave culture has, for its participants, an ethical and a spiritual

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31 Arnold, “The Shamanic Complex.”
33 The ‘Exodus’ collective, based outside the town of Luton in England, is, however, an example of the counter-cultural idea in practical action. See e.g. M.A. Wright, “Free Parties,” in *Ecstasy and the Dance Culture*, http://cityscape.co.uk/users/bt22/party.html.
Nicholas Arnold

significance. Both its possibilities and its dangers are perceived.\textsuperscript{34} Since rave is thought of as replacing a sinful world with a benevolent one, albeit usually temporarily, the situation becomes suffused with the aura of creation through re-creation.\textsuperscript{35} A kind of millenarian fervour ensues.

Rave is not Carnival, where all social order has disappeared. On the contrary, it represents an alternative society. It is not the Feast of Misrule, because it does not simultaneously present the antagonistic elements of the social equation, with their status reversed. On the contrary, in a rave the inversion has already taken place and we are in the process of moving towards the “other world.” However, despite a general lack of reference to “official” culture, rave utilises many elements, such as spectacular lighting technology, from the club scene — that is to say, from main-stream youth culture. Rave’s relationship with this culture can be portrayed as a series of binary oppositions. The scenography for clubbing seeks to be opulently architectural; that for rave surreal or non-existent. Dress for clubbing is sexy-fashionable; for raves it is practical or extreme and transforming. The clubber’s drug is alcohol, a depressant which is liable to lead to violence; the raver’s is Ecstasy, a stimulant with benign symptoms. Clubbing is exclusive and operates a variety of arbitrary codes of admission; rave is inclusive. The ethic of clubbing is an individual hedonism, apotheosised in the sexual act; that of the rave a shared euphoria, symbolised by the displacement of genital sexuality to a generalised eroticism, represented by massage.

Ravers carry little boxes of Tiger Balm, a scented ointment, with which they massage each other during the period of ‘come down.’ Normally, such physical contact between strangers would be regarded as unacceptably intimate, transgressive and clearly sexual. But the Tiger Balm massage becomes an ‘agape,’ a concrete symbol of a generalised, non-sexual state of brotherly love, a laying-on of

\textsuperscript{34} There is a rave community in Leicester, England, where the DJs make a point of dancing with the audience, to symbolise their recognition of the dangers of manipulative activity (L. Clark, personal communication).

\textsuperscript{35} N. Saunders, \textit{The Agony and the Ecstasy of God’s Path}, http://cityscape.co.uk/users/bt22/god.html.
hands which blesses and dramatises the raver’s transformed moral state. It also carries a message about sexuality, which is seen not only to have been appropriated as the prime lubricant of the transactions of the consumer economy, but also as having been re-commodified and degraded in commercial ‘youth culture.’

There is an unsettling and unresolvable tension in the attitude to sexuality adopted by the rave, which exalts dance — the art and practice of which most directly eroticises the body — while insisting on a simultaneous denial and transcendence of the sexual personality — “You don’t go to a rave to ‘pull’.” In this context rave is thus seen to be performing three fundamental theatrical operations. Firstly, it makes concrete, live and immanent that which is, at the conceptual level, contradictory or impossible. Secondly, that which is physically manifested is also a concrete symbol of a more far-reaching conceptual discourse — the transcendence of eroticism in the rave becomes a physically attainable sign of a general state of grace. Thirdly, it uses contradictory means to attain its goal — a state of communal, ascetic, spiritual transcendence is achieved through personal, corporeal and highly eroticised means.

Raves are profoundly theatrical events, both in their sophisticated techno-scenographies and in the performative opportunities made available to participants. Nor is watching, the classic theatrical audience stance, taboo — indeed, first-timers at raves are often advised just to watch, since the complexities of that experience alone are initially quite sufficient. Once a participant, however, the raver is simultaneously author, performer and audience, for self and others. This mirrors developments which have been going on in theatre for the past fifty years and in the arts in general for longer and which now clearly represent a major direction for contemporary theatre practice — the collapse of the boundaries of definition between the different ‘classical’ performing arts and also the death, or re-loc-

56 As this paper was being prepared for publication, Chanel and Calvin Klein were reported to be considering removing their advertisements from ‘lads’ magazines such as FHM and Loaded, because of their sexually exploitative content; cf. The Guardian 28 Aug. 1997.
57 L. Clark, personal communication.
tion, of the auteur. This leads, in turn, to a questioning of what constitutes theatre. Mik Flood, until recently the Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, has submitted a discussion document to the Board of the ICA, which is predicated on a new relationship between ‘popular’ art-forms and formal art-production institutions. He points out that if such major organisations as London’s South Bank can successfully endorse the work of an artist such as Laurie Anderson — who might previously have been identified as ‘fringe’ or ‘avant-garde’ — it is time for organisations such as the ICA to reconsider their goals and their means.\(^{38}\) Similarly, Shinkansen, the London-based experimental dance-production agency, has recognised the growing centrality and significance of youth culture. Their series of ‘Club Research’ events, in which Techno and Acid-House music and rave scenography have been fused with the input of major performers such as Wendy Houston of DV8 Physical Theatre.\(^{39}\) The performance group ‘Blast Theory’ constitutes most of its work in terms of the technologies of popular culture.\(^{40}\)

Rave presents a de-stabilising fusion of the age-old pursuit of celebratory transcendence with its realisation via the most advanced technology. It exists in, and speaks of, a world in which technologies are developing which break down previous distinctions between production and consumption — including those in entertainment and the performing arts — and between the live and mediated arts. The raver, simultaneously performer and voyeur, embodies the collapse of the distinctions between subject and object. In the area of the growing incursion of information technology into performance, this loop of self-sufficient provision is already represented by the development of interactive computer narratives and virtual reality programmes. At present, the virtual reality experience is determined by the parameters of a pre-existing programme. But it is perfectly possible to conceive of programmes which are purely interactive systems, in which any and all events are produced and con-

\(^{38}\) Mik Flood, personal communication.

\(^{39}\) See e.g. ‘Club Research,’ 9 Dec. 1995, arts depot, 26 Pancras Road, Kings Cross, London NW1, a Shinkansen/Diva Pictures co-production.

\(^{40}\) See e.g. ‘Chemical Wedding,’ Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1993.
tinuously modified by feed-back between human and machine. The Australian performer Stellarc confesses to being fascinated by what he sees as the obsolescence of the human body in the face of high technology and insists that his work is not only an attempt to find out how far one can take the body in performance, but also to discover a new role for it. His latest work sees his nerve-impulses transmitted, via computer, to gigantic industrial machines, with which he conducts grotesque and perilous dances.\textsuperscript{41} The raver is wired into a gigantic hyper-machine, built from the hard and soft narratives of drugs, decibels, beats-per-minute, lights, lasers and human bodies and their own chemical landscape — the hormonal pulses of the lymbic system, by-passing the more linear and rational commands of the upper brain.

Rave re-energises the debate about activity and passivity in our experience of the theatrical arts. It makes us ask once again whether theatre is watching or doing, whether it is a group or an individual experience and what do these distinctions signify? There is self-sufficiency within the electronic hallucinations of a virtual reality headset, but there is little doubt that there is also considerable emotional benefit to be derived from sharing in the subtle wash of pheromones around a mass theatre audience.\textsuperscript{42} Rave depends on \textit{communitas}, but in such a way as to simultaneously raise and debase the individuality of the participants. The drug-tripped mass professions of mutual love at a rave can be as depressing as any other totalitarian manifestation. The redemptive feature of rave is that, despite its unsettling images of mindless mass cohesion, its practice reflects its ideology — it is ultimately dependent, for each participant, on the benevolent moment. In the theatrical lexicon it is a ‘happening’. This does not lessen its need for structures of organisation and control. Dada cabarets and 1950s happenings themselves required such systems — and without them the shaman cannot dance into trance.\textsuperscript{43} As Brecht

\textsuperscript{41} "Illuminations," BBC-TV2, December, 1995.
\textsuperscript{42} See papers of LIPS, Saintes, 1989 and 1991.
\textsuperscript{43} J. Miller, "The Body in Question," No. 4, BBC-TV, 1978.
famously said, “we are not magicians, but workers, my friends!” But rave insists on a shift in emphasis between control and freedom. It asks how much control will be exercised and for what reason. This is a salutary question. Text-based theatre, as we experience it, is one of the most highly controlled artistic forms currently functioning. It balances the inherent riskiness of live action with a hierarchy of fail-safe systems — text, director, role, characterisation, specific scenography, etc. — to ensure the continuing survival and success of the event. It prioritises repeatability and similarity. It is thus an extraordinarily complete metaphor of the systems and philosophies of mass-production which underpin Modernist Capitalist culture. Rave, both as a theatrical and as a political event, reminds us that such structures are neither inevitable, immutable, nor eternal. By doing so, it both de-centres and re-centres our thinking and hints at a re-orientation of the very anthropology of our culture. The raver is following the vision of Rousseau:

Plant a stake, crowned with flowers, in the middle of a square, gather the people together — and you will have a festival. Better still, make the spectators themselves the objects of the spectacle; make them into actors, so that each sees and loves his own image in the others and thus all will be better united.


Notes on Contributors

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