Introduction
The Reality of Theatre

I saw myself and forgot my lines. I was sitting in the 500-seat auditorium of the KVS BOL theatre in Brussels, performing in *Lear Enters* (2008) by the Singapore artists Ho Tzu Nyen and Fran Borgia. On stage, an 'audition' for the title role in a hypothetical version of Shakespeare's *King Lear* that my character was hypothetically producing was underway. At a certain point, Kaylene Tan, playing the Director, said 'let's ask what Paul thinks. Paul?' A spotlight came up on me as planned. To my surprise and horror, it was accompanied by a live relay projection of my face on a massive screen upstage. I saw myself and forgot my lines.

So there I sit, like a rabbit in the headlights – although in this case, the rabbit is also at the wheel. And while I scramble to recall what I am supposed to say, let's have a think about the cause of my predicament. It's not going to spare my blushes, but it will help clarify the focus of this book. It is tempting to ascribe this scenario the qualities of a primal postmodern scene. Confronted by his mediated image at the moment of performance, the actor enters a mise-en-abyme of memory-obliterating self-consciousness. Hoist by his own regard, he feels the rush of the Real. Certainly, this would be in line with a reading of *Lear Enters* as a particularly self-referential kind of 'reality theatre'. Conceived as the theatricalization of an eponymous section from Marvin Rosenberg's classic study *The Masks of King Lear* (1972), in which different iconic portrayals of Lear are analyzed, *Lear Enters* made a multimedia spectacle of the conventionally pre-theatrical set-up of an audition. Assisted by a supporting cast playing daughters and courtiers, three actors took it in turns to perform as Lear in the opening scene of Shakespeare's play, and explain their interpretations of the character. The piece was tightly structured, but the actors had been separately and loosely rehearsed, so the audience got to watch them discovering the performance in the process of creating it. Against this backdrop, we find in my face-off with myself the emblem of a long-standing and widespread interest in the relationship between theatre and

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reality – a relationship that may be amongst the most distinctive theatre has to offer many of the societies where it is practised.

If only. It would indeed be comforting to pass off my momentary meltdown in Brussels as an effect of the *King Lear* set-up – a glitch in the matrix. While being confronted with a video projection of myself may have exacerbated the problem, however, it was not the cause. The reason I forgot my lines is because I did not know them well enough. It is as simple, and embarrassing, and real, as that.

This is the kind of reality from which *Real Theatre* takes its cue: not 'theatre *and* reality', but the reality *of* theatre, and its implications for performance analysis. Not the thematic and aesthetic world of *Lear Enters*, but the one where lines are generally learnt, but occasionally forgotten, alongside countless other activities, many quite mundane, that make up the theatre. This is a theatre embedded in and continuous with everything else that passes for reality in the places where it is practised: one thickly understood to be composed of many integrated elements, while also reflecting the constraints and chance occurrences that influence what content is presented, and what forms it takes. It is concerned with what contributes to and comprises the everyday reality of those who participate in the practice and perpetuation of the form, in a variety of administrative, technical, creative, spectatorial – or, more broadly, agential – capacities. It recognizes that each interpretation of 'the theatre' is deeply rooted in a unique repertoire of individual experiences, while at the same time a broad, vague, consensual (if not majoritarian) image circulates through society, informing patterns of thought and figures of speech. These features of theatre are at once obvious and elusive, and in this introduction, I will consider some reasons why.

From Reality Theatre to the New Realisms

Real theatre is theatre as is: as the art form, institution and assemblage we find – and that finds us – *in medias res* in the places where it happens. This is the theatre that unfolds over time and in different parts of society, taking myriad forms as it goes, and reflecting the inherent multiplicity of any given 'we' in this formulation. It gathers up the available resources, from technology to people, and extends its meanings and expressive modes into other media and circumstances. This seems straightforward enough. And yet, as a steady stream of publications on variations of what I have called 'reality theatre' suggests, the persistent appeal of thinking about theatre in relation to reality remains something of an impediment to recognizing

the theatre as real in itself. The reasons become clearer if we briefly survey some indicative titles that foreground this relationship. José A. Sánchez's *Practising the Real on the Contemporary Stage* (2014) exemplifies an ongoing preoccupation with 'works in which the real bursts onto the stage, challenging not only representation, but also the construction of reality', or that intervene directly into spaces 'not delimited by artistic institutions' (3). Here, Sánchez follows a broad critical consensus in poststructuralist thought by taking 'reality' to be 'a consensual or imposed construction', and 'the real', to resist construction 'while simultaneously being the material and object of representation itself' (3). The practices he examines vary widely in time, place and medium, and in so doing, he makes an expansive claim for the theatrical treatment of reality as underpinning some of the most vital and challenging innovations of the modern and contemporary periods, from those of Stanislavski, Brecht and Artaud, through the Living Theatre and the Wooster Group, to Thomas Ostermeier, Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio and Lola Arias.

The title of Carol Martin's *Theatre of the Real* (2013) would appear to suggest a similar project, but Martin instead focuses in detail on a genre that Sánchez touches on more briefly: performances rooted in documentary and verbatim forms. Martin's conception of 'the real' and 'reality' are less subject to theoretical pre-determination than Sánchez's. In part this is because she proceeds descriptively, using 'theatre of the real' as an umbrella term for a variety of creative methods and performance styles that each inflect differently what Martin calls 'the real's ambiguity' (177, n. 1). And in part it is because she also makes free and frequent use of the everyday meanings of 'real', often relating it to conventionally contrasting terms like 'virtual', 'fictional', 'imaginary', 'acting' and 'theatre', in order to show how 'theatre of the real enacts social and personal actualities by recycling reality for the stage' (4). Marvin Carlson takes up a related project in *Shattering Hamlet's Mirror: Theatre and Reality* (2016), which historicizes the kinds of practices Sánchez and Martin discuss. Drawing on Bert O. States' phenomenological account of the extent to which theatre comprises the elements it represents, Carlson notes that 'the utilization of real material … has been a defining characteristic of theatre from its very beginnings'. Nevertheless recent experimentation can be distinguished by 'the much more widespread and self-conscious utilization of [the real materials] combined with an undermining of the traditional distinctions between the real and the representation' (17). In their analyses, both Martin and Carlson come closer to recognizing the reality of theatre than Sánchez. However, Martin's focus on works that 'claim specific relationships with events in the real

world' (4), and Carlson's on theatrical developments that demonstrate 'a constantly shifting awareness of the construction and deconstruction of the "real" world around us' (18) both rely on an initial rhetorical separation of theatre *from* a reality whose centre of gravity resides elsewhere.

Wide-ranging in their critical approaches and chosen case studies, all three books affirm theatre's capacity to absorb or throw into relief what is taken to be real, and thereby to call the terms on which such determinations are made, or indeed on the nature of reality, into question. However, in so far as these studies are representative of a growing literature on the topic, we might interpret their publication symptomatically – and somewhat against the grain of their arguments – as indicative of an enduring anxiety about the reality status of theatre.[1] Why is it so difficult to allow that theatre might first of all be real in the same way that everything else is? One answer is that this is obvious, and not, therefore, an interesting basis for analysis. For anyone invested in the distinctiveness of theatre, such an idea seems mainly to emphasize the ways in which theatre is *un*remarkable. This quickly becomes apparent if we look at accounts of theatre that do not take the claims theatre makes most self-advertisingly for itself – on stage – as their primary point of focus. Policy documents and annual reports fold individual events into a broader statistical reckoning and larger narratives about economic or social goods; guides for architects or technicians disaggregate the component parts of the venue, and recompose them in ways that can come as a rude shock to those more used to the definition of theatre as the meeting of audience, place and performer in time; and when social scientists turn their attention to theatre, they give prominence to explanatory frameworks that can seem indifferent to – if not at odds with – the claims made by theatre participants about the meanings and effects of theatrical events. For anyone seeking theatrical uniqueness, these and other renderings can seem as likely to explain theatre away, as to make the case for its continuing significance. Treating theatre first and foremost as real in itself would appear to risk producing generic cultural history or social analysis, only sporadically quickened by flashes of spectacle.

But the point here is not simply to abandon the perspectives afforded by theatre studies in favour of another disciplinary approach. Rather, it is to ask what more can be said for an understanding of theatrical events

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[1] Three further books whose titles are indicative of their related contributions to the same domain are Liz Tomlin's *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory, 1990–2010* (2013), Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford's *Theatre of Real People: Diverse Encounters at Berlin's Hebbel am Ufer and Beyond* (2016), and Natasha Lushetich's *Interdisciplinary Performance: Reformatting Reality* (2016).

today if we continue to attend to the broadly human-scaled conditions of production, performance and reception, while recognizing the presence, influence and possibilities of these many other factors; to entertain the sometimes mundane realities of theatre as social institution, cultural practice and technical activity, predominantly but not exclusively in the Anglophone West, while nevertheless remaining attuned to the particularities and provocations of live performance. Humankind may not be able, as T. S. Eliot rather peevishly put it in *Four Quartets* (1969 [1935]), to bear very much reality, but current conceptions of theatre certainly can.

Perhaps, however, there is more to the appeal of 'reality theatre' than disciplinary investments or prejudices. In the middle of the last century, the British philosopher J. L. Austin analyzed the uses in so-called ordinary language of the English word 'real'. In *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962a), Austin argued that, by contrast with most terms, where the affirmative use is basic to its meaning, 'a definite sense attaches to the assertion that something is real, a real such-and-such, only in the light of a specific way in which it might be, or might have been, *not* real' (70). Since it is commonly assumed that one of theatre's defining characteristics, relative to other phenomena in the social world, is that it is 'not real', a phrase like 'real theatre' is either contradictory (real and not real at the same time) or tautological (because both 'real' and 'theatre' pertain to the 'not real'), depending on your point of view. Either way, the implication is that if we want to know what theatre is, really, we cannot begin with the claims it is said to make *for* reality. Taking the latter approach establishes a distinction at the outset between reality or 'the' real on the one hand, and a theatre that discloses or obscures something about it, on the other. By comparison, the question of what theatre is – its reality – is separate from and perhaps positively obscured by the question of its treatment *of* reality.

Indeed, in the cultural contexts at issue here, theatre's questionable relationship with what is understood to be real may be *so* exemplary, that the harder thing to do when presented with a phrase like 'real theatre' is to take it literally. Set against claims about the inaccessibility of 'the' real articulated by Sánchez and the freewheeling relationship between reality and theatrical representation in the work of Martin, Carlson and others, simply taking theatre as it comes could be cast as naïve: after all, if there's one thing that shouldn't be taken at face value, it's theatre, isn't it? In response, I propose to complement this 'weak' version of real theatre with a conceptually 'stronger' realism that can help account for its participation in the composition of reality. Aptly enough, we find the seeds of this realism in Austin, though on the face of it this might seem surprising.

In theatre and performance studies, Austin is almost exclusively known for the theory of performative speech acts advanced in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962b), which explored the conditions under which 'the issuing of [an] utterance is the performing of an action' (6). In performance studies accounts, the introduction of these ideas is normally followed by a discussion of how Jacques Derrida, in his essay 'Signature Event Context', argued that Austin's 'felicitous' speech acts were constitutively reliant on those theatrical and poetic performatives Austin had notoriously dismissed as 'parasitic' (Austin: 1962b: 22), and that both participated in a 'general iterability which constitutes a violation of the allegedly rigorous purity of every event of discourse or every *speech act*' (Derrida 1988 [1972]: 18, emphasis in original). This normally leads to an explanation of how Judith Butler expanded the insight to describe gender as 'an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (1988: 519, emphasis in original). As a result, Austin's ideas are widely associated with the view that identities are performatively produced and culturally determined, and that cultural performances occupy a privileged position in their examination, contestation and alteration.

But this is arguably to get the emphasis in Austin's own thought, if not its direction of travel, the wrong way round. Austin's so-called 'ordinary language philosophy' sought largely to highlight the contingencies of the ways in which we seek to assimilate ourselves to the flux of the world, rather than to reinvent it. This is a world to which our relation as humans is highly variable: taking issue in *Sense and Sensibilia* with reductive philosophical accounts of how we perceive 'material things', for instance, Austin reels off a heterodox list of phenomena ('people, people's voices, rivers, mountains, flames, rainbows, shadows, pictures on the screen at the cinema, pictures in books or hung on walls, vapours, gases' (1962a: 7)) that do not readily conform to any such category. When it comes to using language to draw distinctions, wrote Austin in 'A Plea for Excuses' – the most explicit statement of his method – 'even ordinary life is full of hard cases' (1956–7: 11). His approach involved not only parsing generic assumptions about a class of activities into a sometimes dizzying range of linguistic and circumstantial particulars, but doing so in precisely those domains where language, behaviour and events enter into unstable or unpredictable relationships, as revealed when excuses are called for, for example, or in the subtle gradations – and complicating preconditions – of pretence. For Austin, who, in an incidental underscoring of his commitment to the ordinary conceded that his approach might be called 'linguistic phenomenology', were it not 'rather a mouthful' (8), words do not discursively

produce the world so much as they are an integral part of it. They are like other objects, although they have evolved into particularly precise tools for meeting, shaping, and in turn being shaped by, the kinds of worldly encounters with which humans have historically been most often confronted. Superstition, fantasy and error still survive, and ordinary language can be limited in the face of more ambitious intellectual endeavours or perception-changing technologies and scientific instruments. However, an attentive and exacting ordinary language approach involves 'looking again not *merely* at words … but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena' (8). As such, writes Sandra Laugier of Austin: 'language makes it possible to talk about the real (to speak truly) because it is *immanent to this real* (and not the other way round)' (2013: 70, emphasis in original). Or, as Austin put it, in a perhaps too glib aphorism, 'fact is richer than diction' (1956–7: 21).

I will return to the implications of Austin's account of the ordinary for thinking about theatre in due course. Here, let us note that while a focus on the performative has led to a contemporary emphasis on the role of speech, action and gesture in the construction of social reality, the underlying impetus of his thought in fact directs us towards a kind of realism. Traditionally, realists have argued for the existence of a mind-independent reality, and sought objective statements that describe it. By contrast, Austin's realism might be said to anticipate recent arguments that find shortcomings both in classical realism, and in constructivist anti-realism, which holds that reality is inaccessible and unknowable outside of language and social discourse. The positions adopted in this wide-ranging body of thought, which might be gathered under the umbrella term 'new realisms', are varied, but one thing they generally share is a conviction that there are no hard and fast distinctions between material processes and human meaning-making, though there are limits to how far such human activities extend in scope, significance and validity.

The implications of this are both conceptual and methodological. For example, in *Retrieving Realism* (2015) the philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor argue that 'the world is a co-production, that the objects we directly encounter are shaped by our bodily embedding in the everyday world' (131). This fits us for interrogating reality, they claim, and yet, in so far as we must continuously 'revise and adjust our thinking' to do so, the truths we discover are independent of us, and will remain irreducible to 'a single mode of questioning that yields a unified picture or theory' (154). Thinkers of a less humanistic bent, particularly those associated with actor

network theory and assemblage theory, have paid particularly close attention to the multiplicity of entities involved in that 'bodily embedding'. They argue that what counts as real is always the historically specific outcome of the complex, contingent and ramified interactions of human and nonhuman entities, some aspects of which we recognize as such, and others that we come to believe, in a classically realist mode, exist in the world without the active participation of people or indeed anything else. This is exemplified by the composition of scientific facts, which, as Bruno Latour has argued, are neither free-floating independent truths, nor invented social constructs: 'When we say that a fact is constructed, we simply mean that we account for the solid objective reality by mobilizing various entities whose assemblage could fail' (2005: 91). 'Construction' here does not mean 'socially determined', but akin to what happens at a building site: 'all the [human and nonhuman] participants working hard at the time of their most radical metamorphosis' (88) towards an outcome that remains uncertain.

The implications for an understanding of the human in such scenarios, and more particularly the status of nonhuman entities, has exercised a further set of thinkers associated with affect theory, new materialism, and, though not without disagreement, speculative realism.[2] As Levi Bryant explains it in *The Democracy of Objects* (2011), if we can recognize that the conventional epistemological focus on how we *know* objects is secondary to an ontological realism that focuses on the *being* of objects, previously dominant or all-encompassing human phenomena such as mind, language, and cultural and social entities can be seen as simply some of the objects of which the world is composed, alongside 'objects independent of humans such as galaxies, stones, quarks, tardigrades and so on' (18). Summarizing the implications of this, Bryant identifies 'a profound decentering of the human and the subject that nonetheless makes room for the human, representation, and content, and an accompanying attentiveness to all sorts of nonhuman objects or actors coupled with a refusal to reduce these agencies to vehicles of content and signs' (27). Such are the ideas animating a range of thinkers who may not focus directly on the question of philosophical realism, but whose theories all, in one way or another, attest to the emergence of a striking set of qualified realisms, relative to more conventional accounts.[3]

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[2] For a lucid discussion of 'some of the internal philosophical differences within the nonhuman turn', see Bennett 2015 (here, 225).

[3] For a sampling that indicates the scope of this project, see, in addition to Bryant's 'ontological realism' (2015: 18), Dreyfus and Taylor's 'pluralist robust realism' (2015: 154); Karen Barad's 'agential realism',

Now, you might well be forgiven for thinking that in the space of a few paragraphs we have moved quite far from the 'weak' account of real theatre – theatre in general, we might say – that I sketched above. Not only are the conventional boundaries of theatre practice rather more modest than the galactic scales that seem to be at issue here, but it is in any case a resolutely human-oriented activity that in many traditions makes a virtue of the suggestive power of artifice. But there need be no contradiction. If anything, the emphasis that most theatre continues to place on the human scale, and by extension the question of what makes us human, renders it a particularly rich site to explore the role of nonhuman elements that are required for such enquiries to take place. Meanwhile, new realist approaches help us interpret those contemporary performance genres that are themselves increasingly seeking to displace or relativize the human component, as well as to rethink the meanings and effects of certain historical practices.[4] Similarly, 'the suggestive power of artifice' is by no means an irrelevant consideration. As Latour's observations highlight, such power may well rely on the precision with which the artifice is fabricated; or perhaps it can be explained with reference to the expanded quantity of active agents that Bryant sketches, which underscores how far the deliberative gathering of components for, in and as performance is outstripped by the infinite variety of their qualities.

The goal here is not to make a claim for the *unique* significance of the new realisms to understanding the theatre, or vice versa. Theatre features in multifarious ways in new realist writings, and in the next chapter, I shall take issue with some such representations, which are at once sustained and instructively limited.[5] Equally, while the new realisms may have much to offer an understanding of theatre, as of other cultural practices, it is

in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007: 132–85); 'immanent realism' in William E. Connolly's *A World of Becoming* (2011: 74–6); the discussion of 'social realism' in Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society* (2006: 1–3); 'realistic realism' in Bruno Latour's *Pandora's Hope* (1999: 15); and 'effective realism' in Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event* (2011: 7–8). Arguably, we find an important precursor in William James's 'natural realism' (Jay 2005: 278).

[4] On contemporary practices, see the essays collected in Schneider (2015a). For a historical account, see Cabranes-Grant (2016). Early adopters of this approach include Read (2008) and Salter (2010). An edited collection surveying and extending the field is Schweitzer and Zerdy (2014).

[5] In addition to Annemarie Mol on enactment (2002) and Karen Barad on performativity (2007), both of whom I consider in Chapter 1, see also Bruno Latour's references to drama (1999: 113–4), play-acting and puppets (2005: 46–7, 59–60), John Law's to the theatre of cruelty (2004: 97), Diana Coole's to choreography (2015: 43), and Timothy Morton's to an appealingly odd variety of theatrical paraphernalia (2013: 87–103). Rebecca Schneider has burlesqued the performative investments of some accounts of vibrant matter – 'Every single thing is participant in a grand live opera performed by the tiniest singing participants!' (2015b: 12) – on the grounds that the 'expansive optimism' (13) of Jane Bennett and others is inattentive to difference.

important to resist throwing the baby onto the bandwagon. These ideas, too, will pass – at least in their present form, and sooner than theatre will. When it comes to exploring emergent interdisciplinary theoretical ideas from the perspective of a particular (and implicated) discipline, some circumspection is required, lest one's primary area of interest be distorted to conform it to the theory's putative object. In the first instance, then, let us take a methodological cue from those ideas as a means of supporting and extending an understanding of the theatrical realities that are the main concern of this book. Put briefly, they provide a framework for appreciating the heterogeneous and open-ended composition of complex entities, and a vocabulary for tracing the connections within them and the effects they produce. If we treat theatre as one such entity, then this approach implies a methodological attitude, underpinned by a materialist commitment to the blurring of boundaries between human and nonhuman, the distribution of agency across complex assemblages, and attentiveness to the non-signifying features of theatrical performance. That said, if we are to balance all this with the 'weak' sense of theatre as is, then we must allow that theatre can play fast and loose with such approaches, which will pull some aspects of a given event or practice into focus, but always somewhat unevenly. By way of a partial illustration of these points, which still leaves room for real theatre to go about its singular and unruly business, let us return to those unfortunate avatars of mine, still sweating it out in the *Lear Enters* hotseat.

Re-enter *Lear Enters*

As I sit dumbstruck in the auditorium of the KVS BOL, I am desperately fighting the urge to look at my hand, upon which – brace yourself – I have written the first line of each of my speeches. It's shameful, isn't it? But why? The simple reason is that I was not 'off-book': I had not absorbed the lines well enough, instead transcribing the book onto the parchment of my own skin. In so doing, I breached theatrical protocol by carrying into performance a feature of the production process that is not only conventionally left behind, but supressed. As I shall explore in Chapter 4, taking my cue from Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's study of 'the construction of scientific facts' in laboratories, such features are typically obscured to the extent that the final outcome appears to exist independently of them. One might identify a similar logic in discussions of reality theatre: in order to make a claim about the relationship between theatre *and* reality, many mediating objects and intervening processes that in fact render theatre