Baz Kershaw

Dramas of the Performative Society: Theatre at the End of its Tether

The emergence of new performance paradigms in the second half of the twentieth century is only now being recognized as a fresh phase in human history. The creation of the new discipline, or, as some would call it, the anti-discipline of performance studies in universities is just a small chapter in a ubiquitous story. Everywhere performance is becoming a key quality of endeavour, whether in science and technology, commerce and industry, government and civics, or humanities and the arts. We are experiencing the creation of what Baz Kershaw here calls the 'performative society' – a society in which the human is crucially *constituted* through performance. But in such a society, what happens to the traditional notions and practices of drama and theatre? In this inaugural lecture, Kershaw looks for signs and portents of the future of drama and theatre in the performative society, finds mostly dissolution and deep panic, and tentatively suggests the need for a radical turn that will embrace the promiscuity of performance. Baz Kershaw, currently Professor of Drama at the University of Bristol, trained and worked as a design engineer before reading English and Philosophy at Manchester University. He has had extensive experience as a director and writer in radical theatre, including productions at the Drury Lane Arts Lab and with the Devon-based group Medium Fair, where he founded the first reminiscence theatre company Fair Old Times. His latest book is *The Radical in Performance* (Routledge, 1999). More recently he wrote about the ecologies of performance in NTQ 62.

I begin, perhaps a little unconventionally, with my sub-title and a few straightforward examples of theatre at the end of its tether. In an encyclopaedia of theatrical mishaps they would probably go under the headings of falling scenery, broken machinery, and intemperate audiences. Through them I hope to show how at the limits of theatre another kind of performance begins.

Unexpected spectacle – such as collapsing scenery – is part of every actor's worst nightmare, so it may constitute a kind of theatrical lapsus that can open unusual widows on the vista that connects theatre to the world. Consider the mishap that befell Donald Wolfit in his London production of *King Lear* in 1953 – the date is significant. Here is Peter Hay's version:

> Wolfit . . . played the storm scene standing against an eighteen-foot obelisk, which required holding in position by a man standing behind it, and thus hidden from the audience. Just before the coronation [of Elizabeth II] . . . the task was carried out by a patriotic stage-hand who had begun to celebrate the forthcoming event somewhat in advance of others. On the line 'Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!' the stage-hand hiccoughed and lurched forward, causing the obelisk to strike hard the back of Wolfit's head. The actor, being enormously strong, finished the scene supporting both the obelisk and the patriot, by then paralytic. When Wolfit came into the wings, he was limping (the bump on his head was concealed by his wig and he did like his injuries to be *seen*).[1]

Here is the unexpected spectacle of an actor excelling himself by calling up terrific reserves of physical prowess, presence of mind, and imaginative power in entirely unplanned ways. As Wolfit limps along the thin line between tragedy and farce the event becomes a performance that stretches but does not break the tethers of theatre, to reap the benefits of a real if minor disaster.

We might say that Wolfit's misfortune drew unrehearsed performance into the imaginative frame of theatre. In contrast, my second example is one in which accidental deconstruction produces another type of imagi-

native poise, as the victim steps neatly over the invisible line dividing theatrical action from other kinds of performance. Here, Giles Brandreth provides a crisp description:

> One night when Judi Dench was playing the title role in Brecht's *Mother Courage* with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the wheel fell off the wagon she was supposed to drag round the stage throughout the play. The mishap brought the performance to a standstill. Miss Dench turned to the audience and craved their indulgence, 'You see, unfortunately we're the RSC not the RAC.'[2]

Here the theatrical tethers are stretched beyond breaking by the wayward wheel, but Judi Dench manages to preserve something of the frame of theatre by performing a marvellous transformation from epic tragedian to stand-up comedian. The bounds of the classic text become embarrassing tatters through technical failure in one of the great theatres of the western world, but the situation is rescued by a class act which performs a spectacularly transparent switch between contrasting theatrical genres.

Some kinds of extra-theatrical performance can transform the nature of the theatre experience itself. Consider the riot that erupted on the fourth night of Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 1926. This was in response to O'Casey's anti-heroic version of the 1916 uprising. Peter Hay gives the following, mildly sexist account:

> While part of the audience stormed the stage to attack the cast, another section waged war on the rioters themselves. Lennox Robinson recalled a friend of his hurling her shoe at one of the rioters 'and with unerring feminine aim, hitting one of the players on the stage'.[3]

W. B. Yeats, senior director of the theatre, came out on stage and, referring back to the riot that had greeted Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* nineteen years earlier, bellowed: 'You have disgraced yourselves again, you are rocking the cradle of a new masterpiece.' The arrival of the police restored order and the play resumed, but subsequent performances could only proceed because of the continued presence of the police in the aisles – the pun is intended. The riot and its effects resonated through Irish political history for many years, in a clear case of the audience in performance exposing the tethers of theatre and producing a direct consequence for the practice of power.

So when the theatre finds itself at the end of its tether, when the protocols that create the theatrical frame begin to unravel under the pressure of mishaps or disasters, then performance that in some crucial sense is *not part of the theatrical frame* has to be called on to preserve it, restore it, or connect it to some other domain. In other, more melodramatic words, theatre *in extremis* has to draw on performance beyond theatre to have any hope of making any kind of difference in the world.

And if recent reports from authoritative sources are to be believed, theatre and drama in the West are indeed currently *in extremis*, in a state of crisis that some believe may possibly prove to be terminal. What is the cause of this sorry state of affairs, in which the whole of western theatre often seems to be at the end of its tether? Is it because performance beyond theatre, performance in culture generally, has somehow usurped or displaced the theatre's historical or traditional purposes? And is this happening because we are living in an historically transformed situation, one that is marked by new types of cultural, social, political, and economic process which are *constituted* through performance?

2 Sources of the Performative Society

The problems of performance, in any of its many aspects, are now so pervasive that it is difficult to know how best to approach them. The student of drama and theatre attempting to gain some kind of purchase on these problems is in much the same predicament as the adventurer recalled by Edward Bond's Lear: 'I once knew a man who was drowned on a bridge in a flood.' For, in the twenty-first century, performance has become to culture what water is to nature, an element indispensable to life. We are all students of performance now, because in the century just gone performance gradually became the *sine qua non* of human endeavour: think of Neil Armstrong's carefully crafted aphorism as he set foot on the moon – 'One small step for man,

one giant leap for mankind' – and you have it in a nutshell: the small step that is a cosmic leap performs a transformation for us all.

So it is hardly surprising that performance is now a subject of studied concern. It arrives in a very personal guise through anxieties about our own performance – in career, life-style, love, or inaugural lecture. Or we become fascinated by the performance of people we will never meet – in the media, sport, politics. Or we are drawn to more abstract domains of performance – FTSE, GNP, RAE – league tables everywhere.

The pervasiveness of performance, then, generates various pathologies of perception of social process. A jaundiced eye sees us living in an age of inhuman performance indicators. A healthier view focuses on the pleasures of creativity in performance. This ubiquity of performance, around us and within us, suggests, if not a break from the past, at least a radically transformed situation: 'one that I have tried to indicate in my title'.[4]

In saying that I slipped, probably invisibly, into another mode of performance, to bring a different kind of drama into this room. Twenty-seven years ago Raymond Williams used those words in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Drama at Cambridge University. So my title pays essential homage to his argument about what he called the 'dramatized society'. In his lecture he drew a cool contrast between *drama* in the history of western theatre and drama in the age of film and television.

Drama in theatre he saw as chiefly characterized by the nature of occasion: annual festivals of Dionysus in Ancient Athens, Corpus Christi in medieval Chester, afternoons (plague permitting) in Elizabethan London, evenings in Restoration patent houses or the Victorian music halls. The act of gathering conferred a unique quality on the event. But film and television, he argued, infiltrated drama into everyday life. The new media made drama an 'habitual experience', so that it had come to constitute a 'basic need'. But how do we describe the continuing results of this long historical process now, in the age of Walkmans, PCs, DVDs? Is drama now an unconscious addiction, a programme so deeply ingrained that we do not even recognize it as a need? Has drama now become a matrix of consciousness in ways that it never was before?

Consider the question of 'life style'. Think of the difference between a life lived through a single career – as miner, teacher, housewife, banker – and one that forges a kind of shape-shifting between several mini-careers. The first collapses distinctions between ageing and ambition to create a kind of genetic dramaturgy, while the second uncouples the passage of time from personal trajectory to make a dramaturgy more likely to be driven by the fickleness of desire. The life-long career implies a singular agent, whereas a sequence of careers makes for multiple selves. One might even argue that the first is to natural childbirth what the second is to human cloning, so that a shift from one to the other produces a different kind of world.

Or, in another register, consider the consumption of speciality magazines and of television channels increasingly devoted to 'narrow-casting'. These media are predicated on the self-dramatizing interest of the consumer, who tries out the roles represented for size: expert mountain-biker, capable do-it-your-selfer, sex god or goddess. Through such identifications people become ever more uncertain whether they are spectators or participants in the spectacle of reproduction.

Andy Warhol, the twentieth-century artist who raised the question of reproduction to its ironic apogee, pictured the looming anxiety of identity in this self-referential cycle. When the promise of three minutes of fame is held out to everyone, it comes with tough ontological strings attached, for we have to decide not only whom or what we might represent, but also which version of that whom or what: not just Marilyn Monroe or Norma Jean, but one of the many alternatives that media reproduction has fashioned forth. Thanks, Madonna.

If drama has become a matrix of consciousness through such mediatization, then theatre has become a datum of everyday social exchange. This has been achieved through an endemic theatricalization of public and private spaces. The powerful have always known the importance of theatricalizing pub-

lic places. Whether in Whitehall or Nuremberg or Tienanmen Square, the theatre of state elevates particular men (*sic*) through ceremonies which confirm them as world powers. Historically, the public was cast as witness to such proceedings.

But in the second half of the twentieth century a shift that had begun much earlier moved towards a transformation. The movement was uneven, but it can be discerned in the small detail of events. The royal walkabout – shaking hands, accepting flowers – aims to humanize majesty, but it also admits, in however tokenist a fashion, the people onto the stage of history. Likewise, the politician knocking on your door turns every threshold into a platform for the citizen.

Of course, these are the peripheral trappings of a theatre in which the possession of power remains mostly unchanged. But once allowed into the wings, the people will always want a place on the stage. The public show of grief at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, was an entirely logical, if surprising, outcome of this invitation to participate. So too was the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the occupation of Tienanmen Square, the civic actions of Reclaim the Streets, and the more recent protests against international capital in global cities: Seattle, Berlin, Washington, London.

This theatricalization of the public world has been amplified by the media, of course, but a related transformation was occurring at the capillary level of the social. Brecht's friend, Walter Benjamin, inspired by Baudelaire, saw in the shopping arcades and department stores of Paris temples for the worship of the commodity as fetish. He adopted Baudelaire's interest in the *flâneur*, the stroller who eyes the new spectacle of consumption with a detached gaze. This potential in the new urban spaces to produce absorption and detachment at street level reproduces the most crucial characteristic of theatre.

The frames that theatre constructs create a doubled attitude to experience that places the audience as simultaneously a part of and apart from the spectacle of performance. The arcades, museums, urban parks, great exhibitions of the century before last implanted a theatrical paradigm in the daily lives of millions. In the twentieth century this process became synonymous with progress. In the public sphere, shopping precincts and malls, shop windows and interiors, theatricalized consumption; museums, art galleries, heritage sites, theatricalized knowledge; theme parks, science parks, urban regenerations, and the myriad 'projects' of the millennium 'experience' reinforced the theatricality of our view on the world.

In the private sphere likewise: so interior design turns homes into sets, fashion turns clothes into costumes, gourmandism turns food into edible props, tourism turns travel into scene changes, and, in a neat trick in the feedback loop of mediatization, communications turn social exchange into a self-dramatizing set of scenes and scenarios: 'Hello, it's me, I'm on a train.'

A dramatized and theatricalized society encourages an awareness of the sensorium of culture as constructed. But the political and economic forces that have fostered this are at the volatile heart of the performative society. For performative societies are found particularly where democracy and capitalism meet. In such societies performance gains a new kind of potency because multi-party democracy continually weaves staged contest into the fabric of society. Especially in highly mediatized societies, performance becomes the key element of negotiations of authority and power. Moreover, late-capitalist liberal democracies reinforce performance by making the market central to socio-economic organization. Although the 'performance' of companies, corporations, shares, directors, employees is measured in mundane material and/or statistical ways, the notion that they are the players on a commercial or industrial stage is always implied, and often rhetorically explicit, in the language of markets.

Equally, from this perspective, how individuals fare in the competition between life styles or the struggle to accumulate depends crucially on their own performance. So late-capitalist multi-party democracies produce societies in which performance pervades all cultural processes, making it a main medium

of human exchange in virtually all social spheres. In performative societies performance becomes a defining feature of the human.

But in a dramatized, theatricalized, and performative society, what happens to 'drama' in its conventional sense of playscripts as the blueprints for production, to 'theatre' as a set of buildings with stages, and to 'performance' as what happens on those stages? Might the burgeoning of performance in the performative society drive the drama and theatre to the end of a much more critical tether than those experienced by Wolfit, Dench, and the Abbey Theatre actors in my opening examples? To grapple with this question I turn now to two particular dramas in the performative society.

3 First Drama: the Crisis of the Drama

At the start of the twentieth century, serious drama in the West was mostly a matter of rooms. Audiences sat in a large darkened room looking through a hole in the wall into another room. What happened to this onstage room during the course of the last century has been used to chart the wider movements of society.

One critical line, for example, traces out a process of positive fragmentation, as the drama moved from the oppressive drawing rooms of naturalism, through the shadowy distortions of expressionism and the dream-spaces of surrealism, to the sharply etched panoramas of constructivism and epic theatre, and so on to the wide-open, almost empty space in which two tramps agree to go but do not move. In this approach, drama is seen as expanding to take on the world, even the cosmos – seeking new shapes that would better represent the very form and distorting pressures of the times. The world might be going to pieces, but at least the drama knows how to cope with it. Loud applause.

A more focused line can be traced through the dramas that featured a reproduced room onstage. Such rooms were never entirely comfortable, otherwise dramas would not be happening in them, and so they mutated through many manifestations – from well furnished drawing-rooms to seedy attics with their kitchen sinks, to the glamour of five-star hotel suites and millionaires' penthouses. Sometimes the room itself comes under pressure and becomes a hell rather than a haven, even, at the most interesting extreme, to the point of physical collapse. There are only a small number of instances of the latter – the room exploding or imploding – in western drama, but that rarity makes them all the more significant: they can be seen as an acid test of the drama's limitations in framing events to a familiar human scale. For in all these cases the drama fragments under the impact of growing uncertainty about the value of the human.

The sound of a door slamming as Nora makes her decisive break from the doll's house reverberates down through the century following Ibsen's play, shaking the walls of every domestic and eventually of every human certainty, gaining intensity especially following the Second World War. In *Huis Clos* (1946) Sartre makes the Second Empire drawing-room an antechamber to hell. In *Endgame* (1957) Beckett calls for a bare interior devoid of hope. In Harold Pinter's first play, *The Room* (premiered by Bristol students in 1957), the room frames a menace that comes with every knock at the door. In Ionesco's *Amédée* (1953) the room is stretched to breaking point by a dead body grown huge and flying out of the window.

In Sam Shepard's *Fourteen Hundred Thousand*, from the late 'sixties, the characters finally dismantle the walls of the room they have been decorating, leaving the audience gazing at the theatre's bare walls, while a pair of downstage figures read out a description of a world that has become a series of cities with no space between them. But it is in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) that this line reaches its high point, as the expensive hotel room of the opening – so expensive it could be anywhere, say the stage directions – is reduced by a mortar bomb to a rubble that becomes a playground for extreme atrocity. Dramatic form and then, it seems, society itself fall apart as the room implodes.

But there is more than just an onstage crisis in this collapse, because the dramatist has to find a perspective on the drama of a

reduced, or even lost, humanity that it produces. The great master of dramatic reduction, Samuel Beckett, secured a serenely cool angle on his creatures through pathos: we are pitifully suspended by the fact that the two tramps stay still even though they have said they are going to go. Harold Pinter took a similar tack with Stanley in *The Birthday Party*. Both playwrights are great humanists in their work, precisely because they will not let go of humanity even when there seems little or no reason to hang on to it.

Not so Sarah Kane, who is pitiless in her portrayal of humans reduced to utter degradation, as if surveying them with an especially detached gaze. It is not so much the events of the drama – rape, murder, baby-eating, and all – but rather this *attitude* that is truly shocking. In the final moments of *Blasted* a simple technique to show the passing of days gives us a clue as to why this should be so. The stage flicks back and forth, back and forth, from darkness to light in a way reminiscent of a slide show, or of projected film. This is the playwright as camera; this is theatre for the post-human digital age.

The tabloid critics found such ethical honesty unbearable and demonized the playwright, conceivably contributing to her suicide in 1999. But equally they could have attacked some of her contemporaries – say, Mark Ravenhill or Jez Butterworth – who, with Kane, have been celebrated for creating something of a renaissance in late twentieth-century British drama. But if this was a renaissance it was cold-eyed, gazing at the end of humanity with an absence at its heart.

These are major 'hot spots' in the history of the room in the twentieth-century drama. They encourage us to review a central convention – the room as sign for civilization, however troubled – forcefully reminding us, as Raymond Williams argued, that when you can see a convention it is already starting to break down. They suggest that the great traditions of western drama are generally failing, falling apart, as the world gets intolerably risky and its future more gloomy. For there can be no dominant dramaturgy in an era when belief itself is relativized, when whole systems of belief can be translated into mere representations of difference, and when some even argue that there is nothing left for us but representations of representations in a hyper-reality that makes even history itself inaccessible.

So the drama becomes prone to acute and continual crisis as the distinctions between image and belief, illusion and reality, stage and society begin to collapse. The traditional drama – play-scripts staged in a theatre – hangs on by the skin of its cobbled-together illusion, but only a decreasing minority of the population are under the illusion that it has the kinds of relevance it once had. There is more than enough drama on radio, video, and television, in the computer games, at the multiplex cinemas, in the shopping malls, heritage centres, and theme parks, and on the streets – so that drama as the staging of a play-script in a theatre may now be coming to seem, despite its sometimes still evident power, hopelessly quaint and inadequate.

This is my first drama in the performative society.

4 Second Drama: Crises in the Theatre

The British theatres that staged many of these dramas were themselves also in crisis during the final two decades of the twentieth century. And if recent reports by artists, producers, and academics are accurate, the crisis is now nicely maturing into a full-scale calamity. Even the Arts Council of England, normally very cautious in making such claims for fear of losing face, on publishing the 1999 Boyden Report on the condition of English theatre, solemnly warned that:

> At the start of a new century, a number of theatres are slipping towards financial, managerial, and artistic crisis. The process continues to turn too many working lives into a day-to-day recurring crisis. . . . The 1986 Cork Report concluded that 'theatre in England has reached a critical point which must not be allowed to become a crisis'. Ten years later, ACE's 1996 'Policy for Drama of the English Arts Funding System' raised broadly similar issues. In many cases the crisis is either here or just over the horizon.[5]

The culprit usually accused of causing this impending disaster is the state and its

economic policies, particularly those of the Conservative Government between 1979 and 1997. A measure of the seriousness of the current situation, and not just for theatre, can be gauged from the announcement in August 2000 of an extra £100 million of state funding for the arts spread over the following three years. This produces a cumulative increase of 78 per cent in total grant for the arts in England between 1998 and 2004, from £189.6 million to £337.3 million.[6] Surely as this is filtered through the Arts Council's new National Policy for Theatre in England, published in July 2000, the crises in our theatres will start to abate?

I genuinely hope that this will prove to be the case, but also I suspect that the problems of theatre today run deeper than the strata in which investment is secured and budgets are balanced. For there have been qualities in the complaints of the jeremiahs that point to much more than a temporary panic about making ends meet. Since Goldsmiths' College called a conference on the 'Theatre in Crisis' in 1988 (of which the proceedings were reported in NTQ18, 1989), there has been a steady series of publications suggesting that much more is at risk than the infrastructure of the theatre industry.

Peter Ansorge, with many years experience producing television scripts by the likes of Alan Bleasdale and Dennis Potter, is acutely concerned about British playwriting. He ends a long list of reasons to be cheerful about the theatre of the 1990s with: 'Much of this bravura is based on false perception. Our drama is in fact less confident and adventurous than twenty years ago.' And this is just one reason why there is a 'struggle for survival in our theatres'.[7] Peter Hall, in a chapter titled 'Theatre Under Threat' in a book called *Theatre in a Cool Climate*, writes 'The theatre of the 'nineties reveals a failure to respond to society's actual needs.' He believes that 'the creative madness of the British will ensure that theatre will continue in some shape or form. But this will only be after huge convulsions.'[8] His antidote to such spectacular disease is hardly convincing: a little more subsidy, please, especially for regional theatre.

Michael Kustow, ex-director of the ICA and first arts commissioning editor for Channel Four television, as well as producer for Peter Hall and other leading writers and directors in the theatre, claims that theatre 'may be undergoing life-threatening mutations. . . . I am therefore warning against endangered theatre, theatre subsumed by webs and networks.'[9] And this in a book he titles *Theatre@Risk*.

Sir Richard Eyre, in his recent history of British theatre in the twentieth century, echoes Kustow's anxieties with: 'What is at stake today is the survival of theatre itself.' But he seems caught on the horns of an acute dilemma when after nearly 400 pages of arguing for the value of theatre he writes: 'The case for the survival of theatre can only be made by the art itself.'[10] False perception, creative madness, convulsions, webs and networks, a dying theatre having to save itself: these heated phrases suggest a threat that is beyond the purview of quangos or the state.

These are the considered views of the powerful in British theatre, and throughout these recent writings you can sense extreme despair hovering over their hearts. Where are the defences? What will save the theatre? The consensus that emerges from these high-profile prophets is that the essential quality of theatre is its *liveness*, the lived exchange between co-present actors and audiences. This is the theatre's strength and its glory, the source of its unique persistence and its guarantee of survival in the future. But always at the moment of celebrating the power of the live event to capture hearts and to change nations, there looms a shadow, or more precisely a chimera.

It is just barely submerged in the title of Peter Ansorge's book, *From Liverpool to Los Angeles*, which transparently translates into 'from gritty reality to tinsel town'. It is in Peter Hall's: 'The theatre in America is virtually dead. . . . Most of their dramatists – Mamet, Sam Shepard – are off in film. Film is the art of this century.'[11] It is in Michael Kustow's marginally less depressing view that 'In a prefigured response to impending digital culture, arresting visual pieces . . . have begun to appear in the theatre. . . . Theatre

cannot ignore the perceptual changes of the new technology.'[12] The choice of words is telling: the theatre is ahead – prefigures the impending digital culture, and might even manage to arrest its effects. For believers in the live event, such digital developments seem to generate deep anxieties. Perhaps this is because the chimera of reproduction – in film, in television, and now on CDs and DVDs – is much more threatening to theatre than they really care to admit.

It may be that these eminent addicts of the live event, finely tuned to movements that transform the pulse of a culture's life, sense that an impending generic revolution is well under way in today's culture – one that may indeed deliver the end of theatre as we have known it since the Greeks. The new mutation of representation promised by the end of the analogue age is already changing the nature of the 'live' itself. If so, it will not be just that theatre as an institution is threatened with extinction, but also that theatrical performance as an aesthetic form may be transformed beyond recognition. Such, perhaps, will be one outcome of the increasing pressures of de-centred performance in the theatricalized society.

This is my second drama in the performative society.

5 Further Dramas of Performative Society

Were there time I would speak of further dramas in the performative society. I would outline the exciting challenges to the disciplines of drama, theatre, film, and television studies offered by the onset of performance studies. I would explore the interface between live performance and the new digital media for signs of a productive symbiosis. I would discuss the precarious status of the body in performance in an age of post-human uncertainties. And I would discourse anxiously about the uncanny qualities of performance between avatars in the reaches of cyberspace. But whichever theme I chose, I would surely end up having to deal with the new interactions between digital technology and live performance. For there has been, I think, a paradigm shift under way in the exchange between technology and performance during the past quarter century.

Of course, technology has always played a part in the history of performance – the rope tricks of the shaman, the mask that was a megaphone in ancient Athens, the flame and fireworks of hell's mouth in medieval mystery cycles, and on through gas and electric lighting effects in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. But, in this history, technology was always geared to the human actor. Even when the effects were spectacular they were scaled to the human form.

At the advent of the reproductive visual media – of photography, film, television – this still largely held true. But then a difference emerged in the last century, identified most sharply by Walter Benjamin, in which reproduction by mechanical media signalled the beginning of the end of the special qualities of art. Its 'aura' was lost in the inhuman gaze of technical devices. The liveness of the actor was replaced by flickering shadows; but also the image of the moving figure in an instant could be massively magnified by close-ups or shrunk to less than a speck in cosmic infinity. The scale of the human, and by implication any values we might attach to it, was no longer a determining factor in representation and its technologies.

The panic of theatre artists that informed my second drama in the performative society signals, I think, a new phase in this long history. The phase is characterized by a single factor – the shift from analogue to digital systems – but its ramifications for culture are innumerable. One key distinction between analogue and digital methods of reproduction is that analogue recording suffers from an inevitable progressive degradation of the original – each time a copy is made some quality is lost – whereas digital reproduction is not significantly subject to such corruption.

But digital media have a further immense advantage over analogue forms, because their contents seem to be infinitely manipulable. As Anthony Smith says in *Software for the Self*, they can be 'reorganized, remade, enhanced, distorted, and presented again on demand'.[13] Moreover, as those contents are at root just strings of numbers they 'require

no inspiring or originating reality' – consider the dinosaurs in *Jurrassic Park*, which ultimately are based on archaeological surmise.

Further, digital media can create forms of reproduction which are highly immersive and interactive – computer games, training simulators, virtual reality systems. So the potential for creativity in the digital age is enormous. But that age also threatens to up the ante in the society of the spectacle, reinforcing the threat of the hyper-real, moving us closer to the era of the post-human. In this scenario, live performance in theatres may seem like the last bastion of the truly human, which must be protected from representation and reproduction at all costs.

But what if we were to imagine this the other way around: the digital age not as a threat to the live but as a possible source of its rebirth and enhancement in a new kind of sensorium? What kind of digital theatre might place the live centre stage in every sense? In the twentieth century the Bauhaus artist Walter Gropius envisioned a 'total theatre' which had auditoria and stages that could be radically reconfigured, and which were surrounded by a wall of screens onto which scenery could be projected. Unfortunately his design was never realized, though its influence can be detected even in recently built theatres such as the West Yorkshire Playhouse or the Lowry in Salford. These places are still scaled to the human figure, but even more fundamentally their design participates in the cultural binary that separates houses for projection – cinemas, IMAX – from houses for live performance.

Here I am not talking about a practical binary – films are shown in theatres, though cinemas are rarely used for live performance – but about an imaginative one. So how might we imagine a collapse of that binary, to figure forth a space that equally honours the new digital media and the living presence of the performer, while carrying through principles of immersion and interactivity with an infinite flexibility in its treatment of scale?

Such a space, if it could be imagined and made to work, would most likely make our existing theatre buildings – even the newest ones – seem, like much of the drama that takes place in them, rather quaint and inadequate, if not entirely obsolete. And it might even have this effect for cinema, too. And how might we best react to this potential disaster for the cinema and theatre as we know them, and to the possibility that the spectacle of the hyper-real in the performative society will not be a threat to the human, but be crucially productive of it?

One of the best-known disaster stories about the theatre may be especially instructive for the new situation I am suggesting we try to imagine. Forgive me for repeating it, but perhaps we may find in it a new resonance for the future. The story concerns Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who for thirty years had made London's Drury Lane Theatre a showcase for his extraordinary talents. Then, on 24 February 1809, it fuelled a blaze that could be seen for miles. Sheridan was sitting in the Piazza Coffee House in Covent Garden, watching the fire over a bottle of wine. When he was complimented for his amazing composure in the face of calamity he replied, 'May not a man be allowed to drink a glass of wine by his own fireside?'

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe the University has kindly supplied some wine. I should be delighted if you joined me for a glass.

Notes and References

1. Peter Hay, *Theatrical Anecdotes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 342–3.
2. Brandreth, Giles, *Great Theatrical Disasters* (London: Grafton Books, 1986), p. 20.
3. Hay, op. cit., p. 263–4.
4. Raymond Williams, *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 11.
5. Arts Council of England, *Boyden Report* (London: Arts Council, 1999), p. 10.
6. Arts Council of England, '£100 Million More for Arts', *Arts Council News*, August 2000, p. 1.
7. Peter Ansorge, *From Liverpool to Los Angeles: on Writing for Theatre, Film, and Television* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. x, 134.
8. Vera Gottlieb and Colin Chambers, ed., *Theatre in a Cool Climate* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1999), p. 109.
9. Michael Kustow, *Theatre@Risk* (London: Methuen, 2000), p. xiii.
10. Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, *Changing Stages: a View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 378.
11. Gottlieb and Chambers, op. cit., p. 109–10.
12. Kustow, op. cit., p. 206.
13. Anthony Smith, *Software for the Self: Culture and Technology* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 96.

Helen Freshwater

The Ethics of Indeterminacy: Theatre de Complicite's 'Mnemonic'

Theatre de Complicite was founded in 1983 by Simon McBurney, Annabel Arden, and Marcello Magni, and has since established its reputation as one of Britain's leading experimental physical theatre companies. Here, Helen Freshwater discusses the construction, performance, and implications of one of their recent works, *Mnemonic*, which premiered at the Salzburg Festival in 1999, and has since toured to London's National Theatre and the John Jay College Theatre in New York. The work questions our metaphorical conceptualization of memory, displacing the conventional model of retrieval with an understanding of memory based upon a performative paradigm. This is memory as an act of imagination: transient; grounded upon narrative; open to interpretation; intrinsically corporeal. Freshwater interrogates the impact of the performance's incompletion, addressing the ethical issues raised by recognzing the indeterminacy of the past. Under Simon McBurney's direction, the original cast comprised Catherine Schaub Abkarian, Katrin Cartlidge, Richard Katz, Simon McBurney, Tim McMullan, Kostas Philippoglou, and Daniel Wahl. Helen Freshwater is currently completing her PhD on performance and censorship in twentieth-century Britain at the University of Edinburgh and will shortly be taking up a post as Lecturer in Drama and Performance at the University of Nottingham. She is a contributor to the *Edinburgh Review*, and the forthcoming anthology *Crossing Boundaries* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

MONTRÉAL, Canada, 1976: I wake in the night, alone in bed. I'm aware of noises, the sound of conversation, laughter. I get up out of bed. But it's dark, and I'm scared. My bedroom is at the end of a long, unlit corridor, and if I want to reach my parents to see what's going on, I'll have to walk down it alone. The house is all on one level, and at the end of the corridor I can see Mum and Dad, sitting in the light, talking and laughing with an unfamiliar young woman. So, despite my fear, I walk down the corridor, out of the dark, towards the light.

My first memory: frozen, both reified and remade through much repetition. I've often wondered if this set of images is simply the product of my desire to remember, or if it contains traces of an actual occurrence. My parents assure me that I am recalling a real event: I have remembered the layout of the house correctly, and the young woman I saw sitting with them was my aunt, who had travelled across the Atlantic to visit her older sister. But I remain sceptical. Surely the memory, which replays in my mind with the blurred, shaky quality of a home-made ciné film, has long lost its vital connection to the originary moment. A careful remake, dutifully labelled and filed away under the title 'my first memory', has long replaced the original.

Theatre de Complicite's *Mnemonic*, first performed in Salzburg and then in London at the end of 1999, addresses the problematic question of how we depict the action of memory. The work represents an attempt to find a way of presenting memory that is equal to its complexity and instability, and asks us how we can move beyond individual reminiscence to explore the conflicted region of our collective past.

Mnemonic starts with an unusual form of audience participation. We are invited to recollect particular moments in our personal histories. The director, Simon McBurney, guides the audience through a séance-like experience: we are instructed to cover our eyes with a sleeping mask and dive into our