

## Introduction

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In April 1998, London's Almeida Theatre Company staged a production of Eugene O'Neill's classic American play, *The Iceman Cometh*, using a primarily English cast, but featuring the Hollywood actor Kevin Spacey – star of *LA Confidential*, *The Usual Suspects*, *American Beauty*, *KPax*, *The Shipping News* and other films – in the lead role. The Almeida is a small company, far from any theatre district, with a distinctive reputation for innovative, respectful, and high quality productions of scripts from the international repertoire, a company that attracts star actors working at equity scale for the opportunity to engage in intelligent work on major scripts. After a successful run at the Almeida's Islington location, the production transferred, first to the venerable Old Vic, the cradle of England's National Theatre, and then to Broadway, where with minor casting changes in response to actor's equity regulations it opened in April 1999 for a limited run at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre in the heart of New York's theatre district.

In London, and particularly at the Old Vic, the production garnered rave reviews. Critics invoking European modernist playwrights such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Beckett were moved by the play's unrelenting focus on "O'Neill's fundamental argument: that humankind cannot bear very much reality."<sup>1</sup> "Can we tolerate truth?" asked Benedict Nightingale. "No. Evasion is our lot."<sup>2</sup> Kevin Spacey, as Theodore Hickman ("Hickey"), came in for particularly high praise in London, though one wonders whether it was for his fine acting, as such, or for his being so convincingly American. As Peter Charles wrote in *Plays and Players* of the Almeida première, with a telling slippage from "accent" to "performance," "my only reservation [about the production] is that the accents of some artists lacked the genuine flavour but

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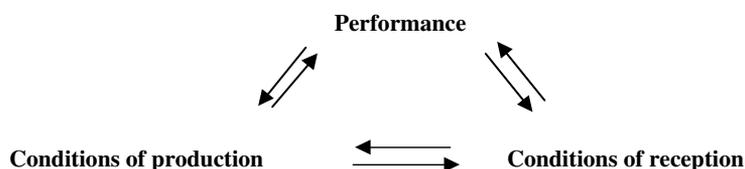
this was more than compensated for by Kevin Spacey's wonderful performance."<sup>3</sup> In any case, Spacey "pretty much cleaned the award racks in England" for his performance, winning, among others, the prestigious Olivier Award.<sup>4</sup>

The Almeida production was also warmly welcomed in New York, where, however, it was reviewed less as a play about avoiding the truth than one about the classic American theme of personal freedom. "O'Neill exalts Hickey's attempt at freedom," wrote J. Cooper Robb, "and uses his search to identify the enemies of liberty."<sup>5</sup> Spacey's performance on Broadway, although it was nominated for a Tony Award, failed to win one; and although Spacey was widely praised, his performance also came in for significant criticism for the first time, most notably by Michael Feingold in *The Village Voice*, who devoted a lengthy paragraph to its shortcomings in depth and complexity.<sup>6</sup>

Why should the receptions of this production be so different, when it remained essentially unchanged in conception, direction, design, and central casting? What accounts for such significantly different understandings of the same play's meaning in the same theatrical interpretation and staging? There are, clearly, many things, both cultural and theatrical, that shape what audiences see on stage and how they understand them, and these things are what this book is about.

Among the many factors that may have shaped critics' and audiences' reading of the Almeida production of *The Iceman Cometh* at the Almeida, the Old Vic, and on Broadway is the cultural politics of location. As an American movie star in an American classic staged in England, Kevin Spacey was in possession of a particular kind of "authenticity," and a particular kind of cultural cachet that made his performance available for a level of praise that was less readily granted in America itself, where, on the other hand (as Spacey himself noted), British actors have been given Tony awards, if for different reasons, "for a long time."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the somewhat jaded context of European modernism may, in London, have created a range of expectations about a mid-century international realist classic that enabled virtually existentialist readings of O'Neill's play. In New York such readings were less than congenial. There, as an *American* classic, the play was more likely to be read as exploring "classic American" themes.

This book attempts to develop a mode of performance analysis that takes into account the immediate conditions, both cultural and theatrical, in and through which theatrical performances are produced, on the one hand, and received, on the other. It understands *meaning* to be produced in the theatre as a negotiation at the intersection of three shifting and mutually constitutive poles:



Each corner of the triangle consists of complex and coded systems – of production, theatrical communication, and reception, all working in concert or in tension with one another to produce whatever meanings the performance has for particular audiences. One corner, “performance,” refers to the raw theatrical event shared by practitioners and audiences, what is traditionally thought of as the performance “itself.” The other two corners refer to the “material conditions” that shape both what appears on stage and how it is read, or understood – what has traditionally been understood to be the “context” within which the performance happens. This book attempts to flesh out this triangle and come to an understanding of precisely what constitutes each of these corners, and how they work together in the contemporary English-language theatre to shape the social and cultural impact of theatrical productions, that is, to produce meaning. The book’s title, *Reading the Material Theatre*, establishes a tension between its insistence on the materiality (as opposed to textuality) of theatre, and the act of reading, which is usually understood to constitute what is read *as text* (and is often associated with the interpretation of published play scripts). It signals at once the non-textual, physical materiality, the ephemerality of the raw theatrical event, and the necessary instability of the relationships among each of the corners of my triangle. Raw event – the performance – and the material conditions that produce it and shape its reception can only endure and become available for analysis once they are together translated into the realms of discourse and understanding, where they come into

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being for critics and audiences alike as “performance texts,” and where ultimately their meaning is produced.

The book is divided into two parts. The first attempts to develop and apply a theoretical approach that I am calling “materialist semiotics,” one that takes into account the roles of all aspects of theatrical production and reception in the production of meaning in contemporary English-language theatre. Its first chapter sets out to theorize an approach that brings together cultural materialist critique, theories of the semiotics of drama and theatre, and approaches to reception that have been developed in theatre and cultural studies scholarship. Among the principles that emerge from such an approach are the dicta that theory and practice are mutually constitutive, that attention must be paid in writing about theatre (as about all cultural production) to the precise politics of location, and that such writing, too, like theatrical practice itself, is never unlocated, but is always a function of the cultural positioning of the writer.

The second chapter develops and exemplifies the approach schematized in the first through its application to the specific aspects of theatrical production and reception that constitute the corners of the diagram above, while providing specific examples of their operation and ideological coding as produced and read in particular cultural and theatrical locations. The book’s method, then, is developed in these chapters in large part through its application in specific circumstances of production and reception, and the book structure that I am sketching here will therefore be more fully articulated as its rationale and theoretical grounding evolve.

While for the sake of clarity Part One deliberately isolates the component elements of both the approach itself (cultural materialism, semiotics, and reception theory) and the production and reception of theatre (training and tradition, working conditions, space, place, and public discourses), it does so with the understanding that these elements do not – cannot – function in isolation from one another. On the contrary, it is the ways in which, and the degrees to which they are in mutually constitutive consort or tension that make both theatrical practice and its analysis so productively complex. For this reason, while the applications and examples provided in Part One are used in isolation to illustrate specific items under discussion, Part Two attempts in

several chapters to bring these factors to bear in more fleshed-out ways upon specific productions as case studies. It aims to practice, develop, and test the method that has been articulated in Chapters One and Two with a degree of contextualized thickness across a variety of different cultural contexts and distinct systems of production and reception. These chapters include analyses of the production and signifying systems of a large repertory company in Canada – Ontario’s Stratford Festival – and a small not-for-profit company, also Canadian, dedicated to the staging of new work, Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre. Also included are New York’s Wooster Group, an avant-garde creation company that works out of Manhattan and mounts international tours of techno-postmodern revisionings of American classic dramas, and the English Shakespeare Company, a socialist troupe dedicated to classical theatre and provincial touring that performed in differently coded theatrical spaces in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and entered into negotiations with unlikely partners in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. The final case study is of the global marketplace of international festivals, their fringes, and the companies – including one small southern Irish troupe, Corcadorca – represented at them.

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*Part 1*

Theory and practice

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## 1 Theory: towards a materialist semiotics

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A wide range of material factors frame, contain, and contribute to the ways in which audiences understand theatrical productions. This book will outline a practical approach to the analysis of contemporary English-language theatrical productions, one that attempts to take into account what Marvin Carlson calls “the entire theatre experience.”<sup>1</sup> The objective is to develop, articulate, and apply to contemporary theatrical practices and productions in the English-speaking world a “materialist semiotics” which combines a cultural materialist approach as it has developed in Britain with theatre semiotics as it has evolved in Europe and North America. The goal is to articulate and apply a method for achieving a more precise and more fully contextualized and politicized understanding of how meaning is produced in the theatre.

Traditional ways of analyzing drama and theatre have tended to focus on what happens on stage or in the script, assuming that theatrical scripts and productions “have” universal meaning that is available for interpretation by audiences anywhere. They treat theatrical performances as the autonomous works of individual creators, products of the determinable intentions of playwrights, directors, and other theatre artists, in which specific meanings are contained and communicated with greater or lesser clarity across the footlights to anyone, anywhere, who cares to receive them. This is the principle on which international tours, co-productions, and festivals function. Most of this work operates on the assumption that artistic inspiration transcends what are considered to be the accidentals of historical and cultural context, that it speaks across various kinds of difference to our common humanity. In doing so, however, such work tends in the interests of what is understood to be universal truth to police

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the norms and commonsense understandings of dominant cultures, and to efface significant cultural and material differences based on such things as national, political, cultural, and geographical location, together with class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

I am interested here, however, in developing modes of analysis that consider performance texts to be the products of a more complex mode of production that is rooted, as is all cultural production, in specific and determinate social and cultural contexts. I would like to consider theatrical performances as cultural productions which serve specific cultural and theatrical communities at particular historical moments as sites for the negotiation, transmission, and transformation of cultural values, the products of their own place and time that are nevertheless productive of social and historical reification or change. I want, that is, to look at the ways in which versions of society, history, nationality, ethnicity, class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, or other social identities can be both instantiated and contested, to different degrees, in a given performance text. And I want to look at the degrees to which the transgressive or transformative potential of a particular script or production functions on a continuum from radical intervention and social transformation to radical containment (that is, the control of transgressive elements in society in the interests of the reproduction of the dominant order). Which end of this continuum each production tends towards will depend, in part, on the material conditions, both theatrical and cultural, within and through which it is produced and received, conditions which function as its political unconscious, speaking through the performance text whatever its manifest content or intent.

My focus, then, is on the ways in which the cultural and ideological work done by a particular production may be seen to have been mediated by the cultural and, particularly, theatrical conditions through which it has been produced by theatre workers, and through which its meaning is produced (as opposed to being merely received, or interpreted) by theatre audiences. Included in this project are considerations of such things as, on the one hand, the conditions of theatrical production, which include the training, traditions, and practices of directing, acting, design,