

Theatricality

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1 Theatricality: an introduction

Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis

One thing, but perhaps only one, is obvious: the idea of theatricality has achieved an extraordinary range of meanings, making it everything from an act to an attitude, a style to a semiotic system, a medium to a message. It is a sign empty of meaning; it is the meaning of all signs. Depending upon one's perspective, it can be dismissed as little more than a self-referential gesture or it can be embraced as a definitive feature of human communication. Although it obviously derives its meanings from the world of theatre, *theatricality* can be abstracted from the theatre itself and then applied to any and all aspects of human life. Even if limited to theatre, its potential meanings are daunting. Thus, it can be defined exclusively as a specific type of performance style or inclusively as all the semiotic codes of theatrical representation. Some people claim that it is the definitive condition or attitude for postmodern art and thought; others insist that it already achieved its distinguishing features in the birth of modernism. Within modernism, it is often identified as the opposite of realism, yet realism is also seen as but one type of theatricality. So, it is a mode of representation or a style of behavior characterized by histrionic actions, manners, and devices, and hence a practice; yet it is also an interpretative model for describing psychological identity, social ceremonies, communal festivities, and public spectacles, and hence a theoretical concept. It has even attained the status of both an aesthetic and a philosophical system. Thus, to some people, it is that which is quintessentially the theatre, while to others it is the theatre subsumed into the whole world. Apparently the concept is comprehensive of all meanings yet empty of all specific sense.

In recent times, scholars across the arts, humanities, and social sciences (and journalists of every stripe) have invoked the

positive and negative valences of the idea of theatricality in so many cases and contexts that its connotations now seem almost limitless. Deciphering its possible meanings has become a major challenge, and occasionally an impossibility, because this expansive idea engages some of the most pressing issues of our age: the aspects and nature of performance, the history of aesthetic styles, the means and modes of representation, the communicative power of art and artistry, the formation of subjectivity, and the very operations of public life (from politics to social theory). Given these contending meanings, it is crucial that we be able to discern what is meant when a writer uses the term “theatricality,” but far too often we are confronted with vague definitions, unspecified parameters, contradictory applications, and tautological reasoning. Hence, the meaning of theatricality cannot be taken for granted.

In order to understand why there are so many meanings and applications, it greatly helps to investigate the history of the idea of theatricality. Although the word itself has a short history (in English, for example, it was coined in 1837), its possible denotations and connotations connect it with terms, concepts, and practices that have a long history in many cultures. So, what is often called theatricality today has gone by various names in the past. Or we might say that various concepts and practices have often struggled toward a name which has remained elusive. Our task, then, is to understand how and why these other things, in their successive applications, have been conceived and reconceived as theatricality. Sometimes, for example, theatricality has been identified with both the Greek idea of *mimesis* and the Latin idea of *theatrum mundi*. Neither concept carries exactly the same meaning as the idea of theatricality (as we will attempt to illustrate), yet both *mimesis* and *theatrum mundi*, as terms and concepts, contribute to the ways we understand (and misunderstand) theatricality. Appearing and reappearing throughout the ages, these terms and concepts continue to color the meanings of theatricality in our times.

So, rather than confining theatricality within its etymological history in English or any language, we find it more useful to examine the concepts and practices which it invokes. Each of these concepts and practices has a history; it comes from somewhere, each in its own time, and then it develops and modifies

over time. As attributions change and are succeeded by new or modified ones, concepts and practices complicate each other, resulting in the tangled complementarity and contradictions that are accorded to theatricality today. Though we are greatly concerned with the emergence and use of the term theatricality in the last two centuries – when the word itself has been asked to do so much work – we are also interested in how the term and idea get applied *post hoc* to earlier times, including pre-modern theatres and societies. And we are especially interested in how the contemporary idea of theatricality partakes of earlier concepts.

Our topic, then, is the idea of theatricality in its various manifestations throughout many periods, even when the term itself did not exist. In particular, as theatre scholars, we are concerned with the relationship between the expansive meanings of theatricality and the particular cases of theatrical activity. Theatricality and theatrical activity may seem, to some observers, to be the same thing, but such is not necessarily the case. By taking historical perspectives on the various uses and meanings of the term, we want to show how the history of theatre and the history of the idea of theatricality are related yet sometimes distinct developments. Indeed, they are sometimes at odds with one another.

In this endeavor we resist the apparent need to stipulate one meaning for theatricality. Such a definition, we acknowledge, would offer some much-needed clarity to a very confused situation, but the domain of theatricality cannot be located within any single definition, period, or practice. Nor can it be limited to any one application. Moreover, to fix the meaning of theatricality would defeat the purpose of our project, which is to investigate the wide range of possible applications (and misapplications). We recognize, though, that this approach will not eliminate some of the ambiguities and contradictions in the meanings of theatricality. But our introduction and the collected essays should identify, with historical and theoretical rigor, what some of the interpretive possibilities and critical problems are that pertain to the idea of theatricality. We may fail to deliver a single definition or a systematic understanding of theatricality, but we hope to challenge the ahistorical and *laissez-faire* uses of the concept in critical usage today. We also challenge some of the expansive applications of the concept. What emerges from our assessments is a

diverse set of interconnected explanations of theatricality but not a composite interpretation.

For better or worse, the idea of theatricality is quite evocative in its descriptive power yet often open-ended and even contradictory in its associative implications. It is not, however, meaningless, and it offers, at least potentially, a protean flexibility that lends richness to both historical study and theoretical analysis. Of course, as we noted initially, it can mean too many things, and thus nothing. If it serves too many agendas, it is in danger of losing its hold on both the world of theatre and the world as theatre.

I

The first thing to make clear is that theatricality is not necessarily the antonym of what Jonas Barish calls “antitheatricalism,” even though they have an obvious etymological relation and, more importantly, a definite historical bearing on each other.¹ Since antiquity, the critique of theatre has focused on both its tendency to excess and its emptiness, its surplus as well as its lack. In this critique, performance is characterized as illusory, deceptive, exaggerated, artificial, or affected. The theatre, often associated with the acts and practices of role-playing, illusion, false appearance, masquerade, facade, and impersonation, has been condemned by various commentators, from Plato to Allan Bloom. This negative attitude, whether engaged or merely dismissive, has often placed theatre and performers at the margin of Western society. As Barish documents, it has been a recurring, if inconsistent, feature of Christian thought. And in the contemporary USA, for instance, this antitheatrical prejudice continues to energize political debate about the National Endowment for the Arts. In these formulations, theatricality – always suspect – calls forth its critical other, antitheatricality.

According to Plato, mimesis attempts to evoke the “factual” or real world but cannot capture it because the Real is not located in the visual and tangible conditions of the material world. As a counterfeit practice, twice-removed from the true or pure realm of the Real, theatre illusively (perhaps fraudulently) produces a mimesis. For the perceiver, the mimetic product posits (and apparently presumes) an empirical link with what is being

represented, but this relation is always simply a rhetorical feat of similarity, never sameness (King 1995). The theatre may imitate life (or some ideal), but like a metaphor the representation is always removed from its model, falling short of it. Crucially, then, for advocates of antitheatricalism, including some religious writers, the theatre's "take it or leave it" attitude means that theatrical mimesis is not subject to verification (Gebauer and Wulf 1995). As such, it can come a little too close to the operations of religious faith for the comfort of the devout.

So, while the theatre reveals an excessive quality that is showy, deceptive, exaggerated, artificial, or affected, it simultaneously conceals or masks an inner emptiness, a deficiency or absence of that to which it refers. Plato, Saint Augustine, Tertullian, Puritan pamphleteers, Rousseau, Nietzsche, and many others have presented a series of indictments against the theatre and theatrical behavior on this basis. Tracing the lineage of this accusatory attitude in a range of pejorative terms for the theatre, Barish notes that "with infrequent exceptions, terms borrowed from the theater – *theatrical*, *operatic*, *melodramatic*, *stagey*, etc. – tend to be hostile or belittling." Likewise, a wide range of expressions drawn from theatrical activity express or convey disapproval: "*acting*, *play acting*, *playing up to*, *putting on an act*, *putting on a performance*, *making a scene*, *making a spectacle of oneself*, *playing to the gallery*, and so forth" (1981: 1). As Paul Friedland explains, "at issue was the fundamental impossibility of structuring a force of order around individuals who inherently would not be taken seriously" (2002: 202).

Actors in many societies and eras have often been criticized, marginalized, ostracized, and punished because of their suspect craft and skills, and anyone who resembles them is tarnished by the mimetic brush. In addition, actors' social behavior and identity have often been seen as threats to the order and standards of the community on the basis of their ability to make mimesis credible (Wikander 2002). Thus, a man impersonating a woman may persuasively signify femaleness, and though he will never become a female, in theatricalizing one he deceives as to the very nature of the absence. Or, the credibility of a person or situation is called into question by its resemblance to the mimetic excess of artifice, which lacks believability. One of the most disturbing cases is the long history of minstrelsy in the USA and beyond.

The inevitable “failure” of mimesis to produce a true likeness is not a condition limited to the theatre. Nor is mimesis the only explanation for what happens when we attempt to represent our human narratives to one another. John MacAloon credits Dell Hymes with the concept “‘breakthrough into performance’ to describe the passage of human agents into a distinctive ‘mode of existence and realization’” when they narrate certain kinds of experiences about self, family, and community (MacAloon 1984: 2, Hymes 1975). Just as theatricality has been used to describe the gap between reality and its representation – a concept for which there is a perfectly good and very specific term, mimesis – it has also been used to describe the “heightened” states when everyday reality is exceeded by its representation. The breakthrough into performance helps to distinguish theatre from other kinds of artistic types or media as well as from the more pervasive utility of role playing. A breakthrough into performance may involve impersonation, but it may just as easily be the continuous presentation of one’s customary persona. When the spectator’s role is not to recognize reality but to create an alternative through complicity in the “heightening” of the breakthrough into performance, then both performer and spectator are complicit in the mimesis. This complicity can be exhilarating, but it can also be deeply disconcerting. It means that mimesis may not mislead, because when caught up by it the actors and spectators agree to forgo truth. This “mimetic conundrum” implies that performers and spectators are still true to themselves, though paradoxically the representation may lack truth.

Across the centuries, antitheatricalism has had a central place in the attitudes, values, and commentary of many people in the West. During the Reformation, it contributed to the suppression of vigorous traditions of religious drama and radically changed the secular theatre. But we should keep in mind that a very wide range of positive and negative attitudes towards theatre and performance has existed throughout the cultures and societies of the world. Islamic cultures, for example, have been generally opposed to certain mimetic practices including the theatre, but nonetheless a rich tradition of shadow puppetry, monologues, and dances exists in Islamic societies. And of note, the twelfth-century Arab scholar Averroës helped to keep alive and carry forward the Aristotelian poetics. In India, including the Hindi

societies, theatrical activities have been encouraged, from the rich heritage of Sanskrit drama and folk drama to the elaborate customs and ceremonies of both village and urban life. In African cultures an equally wide spectrum of theatrical activities can be found. While some communities in Africa have placed constraints on certain theatrical modes of representation and behavior, many other African cultures have highlighted theatrical activities in all aspects of communal life and belief. Likewise, in China, at least from the Han Dynasty (approximately 200 BCE to 200 CE), theatrical entertainments were plentiful in both court and folk activities. A similar richness of theatrical activities in court and folk cultures can be traced through much of the recorded history of Japan. And in other Asian and Indonesian cultures, these activities seem to be central to folk traditions and social life, as in the thriving traditions of dance-drama, puppetry, and festival. An equally rich tradition of dance, oral performance, and festival existed among many of the indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America. So, throughout much of the world, there seems to be less evidence of the kind of suspicion and disapproval of theatricalism that became established in Christian and Islamic cultures. Consequently, in any endeavor to understand the history and meaning of attitudes towards theatrical behavior and activities, we need to recognize that the topic, from a global perspective, makes generalization impossible.

The idea of theatricality is also complicated globally because it has repeatedly been used to explain how theatre and religion are related. Here the issue often gets located in the search for the origins of theatre within religion or ritual (for an analysis of theories of the origin of theatre, see Rozik 2002). Ever since the emergence of the academic disciplines of anthropology, ethnography, and archeology, various scholars have posited that theatre somehow developed out of religious practices, including performed rituals. So, despite limited evidence, the origin of Greek tragedy has often been located in religious practices and rituals because of the apparent ties between the Greek theatre festivals and the worship (or honoring) of Dionysus. Likewise, the re-emergence of theatre in early medieval society has often been credited to religious practices and rituals within the Christian service and the monastic orders. In similar manner, various observers of African cultures have charted how a spectrum of performance

modes, including masquerade dances and spirit possession rites, are located in religion and ritual (Kennedy 2003: I, 18–35). But scholars of classical, medieval, and African theatre often disagree on the matter of the ritual origins of theatre. Usually these arguments depend upon certain assumptions about the inherent theatrical features of both religious practices and theatrical performances. For example, a shaman and an actor seem to be similar figures; they share the signs and codes of theatricality, from mask and costume to gesture and voice. Both create a spectacle for spectators; both often present a story. So, it is easy to assume that they must share a common heritage. Thanks to an all-inclusive idea of theatricality, the sacred and the profane not only intersect but merge. But this apparent similarity is complicated by, on the one hand, the nature of belief and rite within religious practices and ritual action and, on the other hand, the nature of play and imagination in theatrical representations. Even apparently the same performative practices in religious ceremonies and theatrical entertainments mean differently for spectators. So, an all-inclusive and singular idea of theatricality may easily mislead us when we are considering these two different practices.

In the twentieth century, various people in the modern theatre (e.g., Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, Ariane Mnouchkine) have sought to revitalize theatrical performance by evoking the supposed ritualistic elements of theatre or by returning theatre to its ritual base. And in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when a great effort was made to recover – and sometimes to romanticize in sentimental or nostalgic ways – the performance heritages of the disappearing folk cultures (e.g., folk dramas, songs, and festivals), a number of people celebrated folk culture as the lost, true voice of uncontaminated performance. In all of these developments, from the search for theatre’s origins to the fascination with folk festivals, the idea of theatricality haunts the historical investigations and inhabits the theoretical models.

So, just as theatricality has been tied to the ideas of mimesis, antitheatricalism, religion, and ritual, it has also been yoked to the popular topos of *theatrum mundi*. This extended metaphor (and expansive symbol), which connotes the commensurability of life and the stage, appears repeatedly in the philosophical, religious, social, and artistic commentary of the classical age (e.g.,

Plato, the Stoics, Cicero, Seneca, Juvenal, Lucian, Tertullian, and Plotinus), and it carries forward through the medieval and renaissance periods (Christian 1987). Thus, when Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* announces that "all the world's a stage" in his speech about the seven ages of man, he is expressing a popular concept. Life and death follow the arc of a basic drama, and we all are players. God, fate, destiny, or fortune provides the script.

In his Corpus Christi play, *El Gran Teatro del Mundo*, Pedro Calderón makes explicit this basic topos when El Autor (God) creates El Mondo (the world):

I am El Autor, and in a moment
 You will be the theatre. The actor is man.
 . . .
 Since I have devised this play,
 That my greatness may be shown,
 I here seated on my throne,
 Where it is eternal day,
 Will my company survey.
 Mortals, who your entrance due
 By a tomb your exit make,
 Pains in all your acting take,
 Your great Author watches you. (Christian 1987: 122)

Likewise, Cervantes' Don Quixote observes that what occurs on stage also takes place in our lives. Emperors on stage and emperors in life traffic in the same drama. "But when they come to the end, which is when life is over, Death strips them of all the robes that distinguished them and they are all equals in the grave" (Cervantes 1950: 539).

The *theatrum mundi* topos thus articulates God's judgment: death unmask everyone. The vanity of earthly shows is balanced by the hope that life here is but a mere shadow of true existence. This conceit seems to provide a unifying concept, but the metaphor is a tease, for if the actor/man and emperor/mortal come to recognize their existential circumstance, we in the audience are similarly stripped of our masks and pretenses. Yet when this happens, the mystery grows still deeper. Knowing one's role on the great stage of life may create false certainty that the wise are discernible from the foolish. The *theatrum mundi* asserts a particular reality which, unlike the story of the Emperor's

New Clothes, is a pretense to be disclosed to all. And in disclosing it, we find ourselves still on stage, still pretending (see Weisinger 1964).

Besides providing this basic allegory, the idea of the *theatrum mundi* also suggests that human beings are required to act out their social identities in daily life. All individuals, as Ben Jonson expressed the *theatrum mundi* conceit, are controlled by a mimetic impulse: “I *have* considered our whole life is like a Play: wherein every man, forgetful of himself, is in travail with expression of another. Nay, we so insist in imitating others, as we cannot (when it is necessary) return to our selves: like Children, that imitates the vices of *Stammerers* so long, till at last they become such” (Jonson 1970: 14). Selfhood disappears or is remade as the mimetic impulse transforms identity. It is in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque – the world of topsy-turvy where boys are bishops, women rule, or commoners are kings – that the *theatrum mundi* finds its limits, for at the end of the day the prevailing hierarchy is restored. Yet in the carnivalesque we also see the ultimate point of the *theatrum mundi* conceit in Shakespeare, Calderón, Cervantes, and Jonson, for vanity and grandeur vanish at the grave and we are all the same, crumbling like the clown Yorick into dust.

Understandably, we want to believe that there is something in human life that surpasses the show. This is Hamlet’s position when he declares to his mother: “Seems, madam? nay, it is, I know not ‘seems’” (I. ii. 76). But this defense of an inner sanctum of identity and sincerity is a dubious proposition, for Hamlet spends the whole play struggling against not only the deceptions of others but also his own self-deceptions. Besides being impelled to act out his feigned madness and his mousetrap stratagems, he also must perform his life and values until the moment of death. One of the major reasons that this play is so appealing to us is that it is a compendium of the *theatrum mundi* heritage, as if Shakespeare had pulled together in one complex dramatic action all of the various ideas in Western culture on the symbiotic relation between theatre and human existence (Righter 1962, Van Laan 1978, Whitaker 1977, Wikander 2002).

If theatre and life are inseparable, our behavior is a series of roles. And if we are merely playing roles, there is no “original” to the mimesis; we are caught in an inescapable condition of

imitating a false ideal. In modern times, August Strindberg, Edward Gordon Craig, Nikolai Evreinov, Luigi Pirandello, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, and Jerzy Grotowski all struggled to find ways to overcome a deep, unsettling suspicion that theatre (or life) is condemned – in Jean-Paul Sartre’s terms – to this condition of bad faith. For example, Strindberg’s struggle with theatre, though partially resulting from a pathological doubt about the integrity of his actress-wives, was also based in a metaphysical search for selfhood (if not salvation) beyond all the social and moral hypocrisies of modern life. His late plays, so brilliant in their heightened sensibility, cannot escape the paradox that he must use the stage to assault the abiding condition of role-playing, hypocrisy, and false representation in human existence. Likewise, Craig, fascinated by the condition of pretense (and masquerading himself behind dozens of pseudonyms in his writings for his journal called *The Mask*), saw the theatre as both a monster to be tamed and the refined expression of performance. Ultimately, the way to achieve this refinement was to rid the stage of actors and to turn it over to the soulless “über-marionette,” performing in a condition beyond sincerity or hypocrisy. A puppet-object does what it is manipulated to do, and there can be nothing between its persona and its effect: as such, it escapes the role-playing of a false mimesis. Or consider Artaud’s apocalyptic struggle to unmask theatre and society. His torments, equally metaphysical as those of Strindberg, committed him to an impossible mission to purify the theatre of its falseness, of its theatricality. Gesturing through the flames, his actor/seer sought martyrdom in acts of defilement and atonement that somehow were supposed to wipe out the insufficiency and banality of the theatre. But as Susan Sontag acknowledges in her insightful essay on Artaud, “Both in his work and in his life, Artaud failed” (Artaud 1976: xix). Perhaps failure, like theatricality, is inescapable.

Besides struggling with the heritage of the *theatrum mundi* topos, modernist theatre reconfigured another aspect of theatricality according to the realist–theatricalist polarity, whereby realist conventions sought to erase the apparent operations of theatricalism and a series of theatricalist ventures such as Nikolai Evreinov’s celebrated theatre of self-referentiality (Carlson 2002, Evreinov 1927, Fuchs 2001, Golub 1984, Jestrovic 2002). Thus,

the concepts of realism and theatricality set up a binary configuration in modernism, with realism aligning itself with the idea of “artless” art and the many alternatives to realism embracing and celebrating the explicit theatrical conditions of the stage, its genres, and its traditions. Unlike the opposition between melodrama and realism in nineteenth-century theatre, this new antinomy allowed the concept of theatricality to achieve a positive definition. Thus, a major reversal in the idea of theatricality occurred in modernism.

Theatre practitioners and theorists fought for this rehabilitated theatricality, presenting defenses and celebrations in campaigns for a great variety of aesthetic styles. Playwrights, moving beyond the requirements of realism, reconceived the visual and verbal codes of theatre. Many modern playwrights, of course, continued to work within realism. And many other playwrights revealed realistic and nonrealistic qualities in their writings, often in the same play. But the development of modern drama is also distinguished by the nonrealistic or alternative works, from *A Dream Play* to *Endgame*. In turn, the leaders of Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, rejecting the codes and logic of realism, located the defining traits of their artistic programs in the overt exploitation of theatre’s “stagedness.” Likewise, a number of influential directors (including Max Reinhardt, Harley Granville Barker, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Jacques Copeau, Erwin Piscator, and Orson Welles) and leading designers (Edward Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia, Joseph Urban, Josef Svoboda, and Ming Cho Lee) created a new theatricalism in the architectural components of the *mise-en-scène*. Not only the styles but also the ideas that defined modernism came to be identified as theatricality. Thus, when Brooks Atkinson reviewed Orson Welles’ production of *Danton’s Death* in 1938, he wrote: “Welles’ real genius is in the theatricality of his imagination” (Rokem 2000: 145). The term had become, in great measure, positive in denotation and connotation. And it had attained an aesthetic aura and justification apart from its long (im)moral heritage. Moreover, the idea of theatricality could now be used to describe key attributes of both imagination and genius.

At the heart of the distinction between realism and theatricality (or theatricalism) is the debate over the traits and purposes

of representation in theatrical mimesis. Does dramatic performance refer beyond itself to the world or does it serve to make explicit the theatrical aspects of presentation? On one side of this debate is the naturalistic idea of theatre (in writing style, acting, scenic codes); on the other side is the series of antirealist alternatives (such as symbolism, surrealism, and expressionism). Thus, in 1940 Mordecai Gorelik, the stage designer and scholar, provided the following definition: "Theatricalism [is] a modern neo-conventional stage form based on the principle that 'theatre is theatre, not life'" (1940: 494). By mid-century, with the triumph of modernism in the arts, this distinction between realist and nonrealist theatre was also described as an alternative between "representational" and "presentational" styles (Beckerman 1990, Brockett and Findlay 1973, Gassner 1956). Eric Bentley identified these alternatives as the two traditions of modern drama (Bentley 1946).

In a similar distinction between realistic and theatrical modernism, John Gassner, in *Form and Idea in Modern Theatre*, named Meyerhold, Alexandr Tairov, Vakhtangov, Copeau, and other directors as "the leaders of theatricalist stylization." But he also praised Konstantin Stanislavsky as an "imaginative realist" who achieved a "theatricalist-realist synthesis" in his theatre (1956: 149–54, 183, 189). So much for simple naturalism. Despite Gassner's attempt to place Stanislavsky in both camps, many commentators, preferring an oppositional narrative, have counterposed him to Meyerhold. This is a gross simplification of the totality of their careers, yet still they often serve as the emblematic progenitors of realism and theatricalism in the West.

In our modern theatre this distinction between realistic and theatricalist aesthetics organizes our understanding of the history of stage design since the nineteenth century. Typically, we chart how realism (*à la* Ibsen or Anton Chekhov) and historical antiquarianism (particularly the Shakespearean productions of Charles Kean, the Meiningen Company, and Henry Irving) joined forces to achieve historical accuracy with their pictorialist set designs. Then, just as a modernist revolt against realism occurred, so too was there a "Shakespeare Revolution" that displaced antiquarianism (Styan 1977). This narrative is demonstrable in English Shakespearean productions, as the antiquarianism of Henry Irving and the grandeur of Beerbohm Tree's

productions gave way to Granville Barker's symbolist revolution (Kennedy 2001). Modernist stage design, shaped by Appia and Craig, displaced realism and antiquarianism by abstracting mass, volume, and light to create a new vision of the stage space (or, according to Craig, to recapture the old, abiding vision of theatre). With abstraction came the attempt to visually disavow the one-to-one correspondence of verisimilitude, making a virtue of the mimetic gap. As Dennis Kennedy describes the Shakespearean revolution in scenography, an iconic or metonymic design was displaced by a metaphoric or symbolic design (2001: 12–14). Of course, theatrical realism and pictorialism were no less conventional than the new stage design, but they achieved the aura of the real in their recognizable settings, whereas the new stage design was apparently rejecting or subverting the correspondence codes of representation.

Brecht went one step further. He called for a theatre that indexed its own features in order to subvert role-playing and mimesis so that actors could signal the falsity or duality of their own acting, selectively helping spectators to reject empathy and identification. Brecht's idea of theatre, quite opposed to the theatre of presence of Artaud (and later Grotowski), sought to achieve the condition of a political debate and demonstration through the technique of *Gestus*, which called attention to the contrast between theatre's ruling norms of pretense and the concerns that pressed upon spectators in everyday life. Then the spectators, like workers in a labor hall meeting, would supposedly evaluate and dissect their political situations. To be politically efficacious, Brecht needed spectators to reject the commensurability of stage and world, to step out of the Möbius loop of the *theatrum mundi*, and use the dystopic example of the dramatized story to better their social condition.

In sum, for all of these modernists in the theatricalist mode, theatre is only acceptable if it acknowledges and strives to overcome its own confinement within the mimetic traditions of performance, be they antiquarianism, pictorialism, naturalism, or realism. Yet, paradoxically, this is the impossible dream and the unresolved dilemma of modernist theatricality. Strictly speaking, however, this theatricalist idea predates the modern period. The concepts of *metadrama* (a play which comments upon the

conventions of its genre) and *metatheatre* (a performance calling attention to the presentational aspects of theatre and its conventions in the moment of its transpiring) are hundreds of years old. Scholars of Shakespearean drama have especially been drawn to the concept (Abel 1963, Calderwood 1969; 1979, Righter 1962, Van den Berg 1985).

According to Jean-Christophe Agnew, late-sixteenth-century English dramatists sought credibility, not faith, as if credulity could be exchanged between actor and audience like a commodity transaction between debtor and creditor. Plotting devices – mistaken identities, exchanged genders, misdirected suspicion, and all the stuff of dramatic irony – so exceeded what was believable in the known world that a pact regarding fabrication rather than truth bound the actor and audience. Having established this, it was logical for plays to call attention to their own fictive or metatheatrical devices:

Hamlet, for example, required the performer to divulge the very process of his own enactment and to do so in a setting, real and fictive, where ritual itself had been explicitly desacralized. The effect, however fleeting, of this pointedly deconstructive exercise was to subject all claims to authority to a deeper and in many ways unattainable standard of authenticity . . . In this fashion the player-playwright managed to return, with equal measures of malice and geniality, the challenges hurled at *his* illusion by gallants and groundlings alike. (1986: 112)

This metatheatrical condition also served as a counter-challenge to theatre's detractors who condemned the stage for its dissembling inauthenticity, for if it acknowledged its own terms of engagement, denying an expectation of belief, it cut detractors off at the knees.

Lionel Abel defined the term *metadrama* to distinguish a new metaphysical drama from the tradition of tragedy. Beginning with *Hamlet*, he argues, a new "intellectual" theatricality shaped drama and consciousness. The character of Hamlet reveals a new kind of dramatic self-consciousness, and the plot of the play presents a set of characters who are playing roles and attempting to script the actions of the other characters. So, instead of seeing Shakespeare's play as the culmination of a rich heritage of the *theatrum mundi* concept, Abel perceives it as the beginning

of a new modern consciousness about the dramatized nature of identity and society (1963: 105, 112).

This shift in perspective is comparable to the redefinition of the renaissance as the early modern period (Cohn 1997, Erickson 1995, Fischer-Lichte 1997, Fuchs 1996). From this perspective, a new, self-conscious metatheatre flourished at this time. The argument makes sense, but we would also note that Timothy J. Moore uses the concept of “metatheatricality” to describe the ways that Plautus self-consciously refers to the play in progress, as part of the address to audiences (1999, see also Slater 2000). So, despite Abel’s claim, Shakespeare is not necessarily the originator of metatheatre. The origin might even be set earlier than Plautus, for in Aristophanes’ use of parabasis and references to people in his audience an obvious metatheatrical technique is used (Halliwell 2002). Thus, a history of metatheatre can be traced from Aristophanes and Plautus to Shakespeare and Calderón, and thence to Genet and Beckett. And almost every book on postmodernism in the theatre makes a case for some kind of metatheatricality. This postmodern theatre defines the historical moment by means of an aesthetics of self-irony that depends upon the simultaneity of what has come before and what is transpiring in the very moment of presentation (Gran 2002). So, metatheatricality is a particularly slippery criterion for the historicized definition of theatricality (Schleuter 1979, Whitaker 1977).

II

This search for the meaning of theatricality has already carried us through a series of surrogate yet distinct concepts: mimesis, antitheatricalism, religion, ritual, *theatrum mundi*, modernist theatricalism, metadrama, metatheatre, and metatheatricality. All of them are clearly related to the concept of theatricality, but none of them yet defines it. Indeed, they may muddle our understanding of the idea of theatricality. As Kenneth Burke warns, “if we use the wrong words, words that divide up the field inadequately, we obey false cues” (1959: 4). So, perhaps we need to return to the word *theatre* itself, especially its metaphoric connotations. For example, some of the earliest uses in English of the words *theatrical*, *theatricalism*, and *theatricality* set up an

opposition with the concepts of the natural, true, or sincere. In his *Characteristicks* (1711), the Earl of Shaftesbury wrote: “The good painter must . . . take care that his Action be not theatrical, or at second hand; but original and drawn from Nature her-self” (*OED*, 1971 edition). This familiar distinction between nature and artifice has a long history in aesthetics, and it continues to guide various people who write about both the history of theatre and the theory of theatricality (Gran 2002, Mori 2002, Taylor 2002). Almost invariably, the polarity between the natural (or the real) and the theatrical (or the artificial) carries a moral as well as an aesthetic judgment, with the idea of the natural serving, of course, as the positive pole in the equation. The natural is also the realm of the sincere and the true, especially with the emergence of romanticism. In philosophical terms, this opposition illustrates the dichotomy between appearance and reality. Thus, a series of related antinomies are in operation here: real versus false, genuine versus fake, intrinsic versus extrinsic, original versus imitative, true versus counterfeit, honest versus dishonest, sincere versus devious, accurate versus distorted, revealed versus disguised, face versus mask, serious versus playful, and essential versus artificial. All things theatrical are on the negative end of the polarity.

In telling ways, this opposition has also been used to distinguish between masculine and feminine traits, with women portrayed (from the perspective of patriarchy) as duplicitous, deceptive, costumed, showy, and thus as a sex inherently theatrical. The norms of natural behavior and sincere judgment reside within masculinity. Women, especially but not exclusively those who go on the stage, are simultaneously devious and shallow in their masquerades. In a world of artificiality, they lack moral rectitude, yet they reveal, in their excessive manner, a talent for sexual display and deception. Thus, this antitheatrical attitude, when applied to femininity, usually carries an additional prejudice against the sexual identities and activities of women. In these sets of antinomies, the second term – the realm of the theatrical – is, by definition, the inauthentic. Much about the history of antitheatricality, when extended to society, depends upon these oppositions. For example, the negative attitude can be traced in the commentary of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on such topics as affectation, vanity, imposture, decorum, fops, and

women in public spaces. Long before the word theatricality appeared, aspects of the concept were well established in society and its rules of judgment (Günsberg 1997, Straub 1992).

In the nineteenth century, especially in bourgeois society, there was also a strong social disapproval and censure of the theatrical world. Sometimes this disapprobation was religion-based, especially in northern European and North American regions where nonconforming Protestantism predominated. But the religious opposition was grounded, for the most part, in a social morality of class prejudice and bourgeois paternalism. Respectable families, attuned to the community codes of propriety and social acceptance, disapproved of anyone, especially daughters and wives, who participated in the professional theatre. Thus, nineteenth-century actresses still confronted an antitheatrical prejudice that framed economic and social constraints in terms of sexual and moral attitudes (Davis 1991; 2000, Schuler 1996).

Even someone who is basically supportive of theatre may express antitheatrical attitudes and judgments, with perhaps a special register of condemnation still meted out to women performers. This is the case with Roland Barthes' complaints about the "tirade" in the performance of Racine's *Phèdre*, by which actresses of each generation are judged:

It is for this actress, these lines, these *tirades* that we go to the theatre; the rest we put up with, in the name of culture, in the name of the past, in the name of a poetic thrill patiently waited for because it has been localized by centuries of the Racinian myth. The public (though I dare not say "the popular") Racine is this mixture of boredom and diversion, that is essentially a discontinuous spectacle. (1983: 141)

In this indictment, Barthes blames the critic, the public, and the performer for the excesses and indulgences.

Opera performers, movie stars, and leading ladies of the stage have all been given a special tag: the prima donna. In a study of this figure, Rupert Christensen traces a pervasive antitheatricality:

In 1862 . . . Henry Mayhew, in his survey of London Labour, identifies the prima donna as a sort of courtesan, idling her way through wealth and fame; and by the twentieth century, particularly in English, the term had stuck as a label of abuse on a level with virago, shrew, or bitch. To be a prima donna was not so much to be a great interpreter of operatic

music as to be an outrageous *grande dame*, “exciting, torrential, and exasperating,” and often lazy, greedy, stupid, conceited, and “impossible” as well. It has proved a powerful stereotype. A woman who wants her own way is a prima donna. A woman who makes a complaint is a prima donna. A woman who changes her mind is a prima donna. (1984: 9)

Christensen quite rightly criticizes the sexism that operates in the appellation of prima donna, but it is also noteworthy that similar charges were made against the castrati singers of the eighteenth-century opera stage and the tenors of the nineteenth.

But this was also based on a misperception of performance’s theatrical qualities. Fanny Kemble, an actress early in her life – and a daughter, niece, and sister in a family of distinguished performers – explained:

There is a specific comprehension of effect and the means of producing it, which, in some persons, is a distinct capacity, and this forms what actors call the study of their profession; and in this, which is the alloy necessary to make theatrical that which is only dramatic, lies the heart of their mystery and the snare of their craft in more ways than one; and this, the actor’s *business*, goes sometimes absolutely against the dramatic temperament, which is nevertheless essential to it. (1926: 11)

In other words, theatricality was an effect produced through mastery of skill. While an audience might be duped by the actor’s dissembling, dissembling itself was a product of finely honed ability. As such, performers did not dupe themselves and did not confuse their roles with their psyches. Through the course of the nineteenth century, the ability to make character and self appear seamless became a hallmark of a particular kind of acting. Perhaps, though, the next time someone suggests that natural acting lacks affectation, we should keep in mind Oscar Wilde’s quip in *An Ideal Husband*: “To be natural . . . is such a difficult pose to keep up” (1919: 15).

Acting vogues ply a route between what appears to contemporaries as mannered and what appears natural; this is what Kemble means by “a specific comprehension of effect and the means of producing it.” Even though many successful actors in Western theatre have cultivated an expansive or mannered acting style (Edward Alleyn, Antoine de Montdory, Thomas Betterton, Sarah Siddons, Ludwig Devrient, Edmund Kean, Edwin Forrest, Frédéric Lemaître, Henry Irving, Sarah Bernhardt,

Tommaso Salvini, Charlie Chaplin, Jean-Louis Barrault, James Earl Jones), there is nonetheless an abiding chorus of praise for actors who by comparison achieved a natural, less theatrical – but not subdued – presence (Richard Burbage, Charles Macklin, David Garrick, August Wilhelm Iffland, Fanny Kemble, Joseph Jefferson, Edwin Booth, Ellen Terry, Eleanora Duse, Minnie Madern Fiske, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Michael Redgrave, Jessica Tandy, Meryl Streep).² Each age has its own idea of what is natural and lifelike. It is, in part, a question of taste regarding how apparent the effect is meant to be, and how prominent the contrast between the artificial circumstances of enacting a stage play and the degree of the audience's absorption. Is a playgoer to wonder at the actor's skill, or forget that skill is involved?

Denis Diderot argued that the condition of acting necessitated artificiality: "Every personage who departs from what is appropriate to his state or his character – an elegant magistrate, a woman who grieves and artfully arranges her arms, a man who walks and shows off his legs – is false and *mannered*" ("De la Manière" quoted in Fried 1980: 100). The artificiality exists not merely in the act but in the perception of it. The observer is crucial. Extrapolating from this, the art critic Michael Fried has argued that whenever a consciousness of viewing exists – in life or in painting – absorption was sacrificed and theatricality resulted. To Fried, theatricality is the sacrifice of "dramatic illusion vitiated in the attempt to impress the beholder and solicit his applause" (1980: 100). On this criterion, Fried assesses paintings of the eighteenth century. This distinction between absorption and theatricality also serves him in his analysis of post-1945 American painting and sculpture, which he values to the extent they are liberated from theatricality. "The success, even the survival of the arts [i.e., the visual arts] has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater" (Fried 1967: 18). Apparently, great art does not theatricalize its subject matter in the manner of sentimental and melodramatic playwrights; great art does not play to the audience in the way that showy actors do; great art resists the codes of display and seduction. For Fried, the best paintings since the age of Diderot eschew mannerism and establish an authentic mode of perception for the observer who is absorbed into the aesthetic moment, not seduced by theatricalized