Chapter 1

ROMAN THEATRICALITY AND THEATRICALISM

By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art . . . In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art. ¹

When we study and attempt to understand the culture of ancient Rome, we are soon struck, as indeed contemporary observers and commentators were, by the prevalence of behaviour and types of activity resembling, or even strongly drawing upon, the art of the theatre. Everywhere we look we find that the theatre, both actual theatrical practice – mimetic performance fashioned for the attention of spectators – and as referred to or echoed in other art forms, ceremonies and behaviour was one of the primary modes of cultural expression in Rome, and consequently, one which we need to consider when we attempt to understand ancient Romans and their society. In recent years a number of studies have documented and assessed the nature, range and significance of Roman theatrical practice, and beyond that, the prevalence of theatrically informed behaviour in wider aspects of its culture. Theatre, drama, theatrical architecture, the range of spectacular entertainments in the arena and circus, the theatrical aspects of triumphs, funerals, Roman ceremonial ritual and public rhetoric: all have received attention.²

Cumulatively, such studies construct a striking impression of the ubiquity of theatrical influence and the manner in which elements of the theatre were constantly being recycled into other media, such as rhetoric, to become in time ‘naturalised’ within it. As latter-day observers of the scene, we are struck
everywhere by the residual *pentimenti*, the lingering shades of theatrical form silently underlying so many layers of Roman culture, but still visible to us retrospectively.\(^1\)

The term ‘theatricality’, however, has acquired such a vast range of cultural, psychological, semiotic and stylistic meanings that, as Davis and Postlewait point out, it is in danger of losing its hold on both the world of theatre and the world as theatre.\(^4\)

For the purposes of this book, therefore, we propose definitions of two ways in which theatre and the theatrical manifest themselves culturally. First, there is ‘theatralism’, defined as the whole range of borrowings, in any medium or form, from the domain of the theatre as place, institution and activity, and which serve as a culturally ubiquitous, collective reservoir of examples, similes and metaphors.

Second, we propose to discuss ‘theatricality’, defined as a subset of ‘theatralism’ denoting all that serves to draw attention directly to the domain of the theatre itself; one might describe ‘theatricality’ as the self-conscious face of ‘theatralism’.

Gladiators fighting in the arena, for instance, but costumed as if enacting a scene derived from history or mythology,\(^5\) when it was a direct import of impersonation from the domain of the theatre into the arena, may have consciously been viewed as an instance of what we would call ‘theatricality’: spectators recognised that this spectacle was inventively appropriating conventions of theatrical representation to add an additional dimension to the presentation and meaning of the display.

In time, however, mimetically tinged gladiatorial contests may have become so commonplace that they came to be thought of as simply belonging to the domain of the amphitheatre (‘amphitheatral’) – their theatrical origins to all intents and purposes forgotten. At this point, we would deem it to have been absorbed into the ‘cultural vernacular’ of ‘theatralism’, rather than retaining any meaningful claim to ‘theatricality’.

Differences, therefore, between what is properly an example of self-conscious ‘theatricality’ and what of ubiquitous ‘theatralism’ do not lie in objects or practices themselves, but rather in how they were perceived, which changed over time.

If these definitions attempt to denote different aspects of the transaction between the theatre and the culture of which it was a part, we need also to consider when and why theatricalism, and its scion theatricality, were such widespread phenomena; why the theatre was such a rich source of metaphor, on the one hand, and such a pleasurable object of reference, on the other. This forms the subject of much of our enquiry in this book, but for the time being, we may note in passing that amongst the reasons why the theatre appeared so frequently as both influence and reference was that it acted as an enjoyable and

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\(^1\) Living Theatre in the Ancient Roman House, Richard C. Beacham, Hugh Denard.

\(^2\) **Figure 1** Bronze Gladiator Helmet, Naples Museum, Inv. No. 5671. Photo: Archive Foglia.
important exemplar of all that was mimetic or spectacular, extravagant, playful or fantastical.

However, we need here forthrightly to acknowledge a problem and challenge. Our approach will loosen our discussion from the firmly positivist mooring provided by the subjects (and the facts we know about them) in which theatrical practice was directly acknowledged by ancient sources and participants as an immediate constituent element (theatricality). If we then embark into identifying wider reflections or influences upon activities or modes of perception within areas of life that we judge to have been informed by or evocative of the theatre in style or method (theatricalism), we must run the rapids of interpretation.

Here the nature of our subject makes us particularly mindful of Sontag’s admonition: ‘to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of “meanings”’.6 Theatricalism, as we will deploy it here, is not primarily about attempting interpretatively to ‘treasure hunt’ paintings, decor and space to identify and reduce them to direct evidence of theatre practice, plays, scenery or architecture. We aspire instead to restore in our estimation and imagination an awareness of their pristine sensuality – and how for ancient viewers this drew upon the cognate sensuality of ancient theatrical experience and its constituent elements of sight, movement, imagery, bodily awareness, emotional empathy, make-believe and cognitive response: in effect the *erotics* of theatricalism. We want to avoid as far as possible a confusion of realms between on the one hand that of forensic knowledge and the interpretative ‘meaning’ consequent upon it, and on the other, a more nebulous dominion of the theatricalised sensibility, which, we argue, was evoked ubiquitously by the paintings, decor and disposition of space within the Roman domestic sphere.

Scholars inclined to a more forensic methodology will perceive in this ‘un-taming’ of artefacts and their release into the speculative wild the danger of trying to achieve firm understanding and genuine historical insight based upon free-ranging metaphors that, if allowed to ‘run riot’, may extend and compound one another out of any truly meaningful residual relationship with material and factual evidence.

Nevertheless, the risk should be taken because we believe that an opening up and piecing out the imperfections of evidence through ‘imaginary puissance’ (including perceptions derived from metaphor and analogy) potentially can significantly advance our understanding of crucial aspects of Roman belief and practice. The nature of some of these is such that hard facts alone, if held in isolation from the thought and imagination we may, judiciously, bring to bear upon them, can never give us full access to them as evidence. We believe that our approach can lead us to genuine insights.

In any historical study, scholars readily draw upon a variety of materials to assist their work. In writing history focused upon antiquity, these might include archaeology, an examination of the facts and opinions recorded by relevant ancient historians, secondary commentators, an historiographic methodology and finally a range of contemporary terminology and theory (even though these were unknown to and unobserved by the ancients themselves) in order to highlight and seek to explain ancient events and conduct. Thus, for example, modern economic theory, or concepts developed within discourses focused on colonialism or gender studies, can be extremely useful in providing access to past events on terms we readily understand because we regularly encounter and use them in contexts and subjects that seem analogous to areas we wish to consider in the realm of ancient culture and society. We propose to use theatricality and theatricalism and several other terms discussed below, not because the ancients employed them or did so consistently, or were conditioned in their behaviour by...
them as terms of reference, but rather because they will help us to isolate and discern shifting relationships between the fictional and the real in Roman culture. In particular, we will explore the evidence of these phenomena, as defined, in their extensive evocation and expression within the art, decor, spatial organisation and activities of the domestic realm.

Concentrating for the moment on our modern term, ‘theatricalism’, which we have defined as any medium or form having what we believe to be affinities with the theatre, we can consider the extent to which it may provide a ‘handle’ to assist us in identifying, grouping, naming and perceiving relationships amongst a variety of acts and attitudes, not otherwise readily bound together by any comprehensive term or descriptive model. Certainly, ancient Greeks and Romans conceived of, practised and experienced a range of cognitive and sensual acts (viewing, perceiving, contemplating, remembering) in ways often substantially different than most of us do today, and we believe the notion of theatricalism is useful in helping us to ‘name’ and understand these differences, and apprehend the nature of such acts.

Presenting briefly a few examples of theatricality and theatricalism – while bearing in mind that the nature of these and the tendency for elision between them is such that rigid distinctions are not always tenable – may help to demonstrate the efficacy (indeed the necessity) of resorting to analogy and metaphor in our study.

At the games given to inaugurate his theatre in 55 BC, amongst a great variety of different types of theatrical entertainments, Pompey the Great included presentations of both Greek and Roman drama upon its vast stage. Cicero records (possibly exaggerates) how the Clytemnestra of Accius included a parade of 600 mules to carry the plunder of Agamemnon from Troy, and how amidst hundreds of performers, some 3,000 bowls were displayed in the Equus Troianus (of Naevius?) upon the stage. He evidently found such spectacle tedious, but undoubtedly it reminded the audience (and was thus intended) of Pompey’s memorable triumph exactly six years earlier; the greatest Rome had ever seen. It lasted two days and included hundreds of captives representing the nations and cities Pompey had conquered, together with innumerable wagon-loads of plunder – carried in a glittering stream. Plutarch (Pomp. 45.1) remarked that even then Pompey had left out enough booty ‘to have dignified and adorned yet another triumph’. Here, in effect, but now in the theatre, elements of it were restaged for an audience that evidently had developed a compelling taste for such things.

The Roman triumph (and Pompey’s in particular) can itself readily be seen as a major example of theatricalism. As a performance it might be considered a ‘total’ work of art, supporting the emotional content of the occasion with such expressive elements as music, song, mimicry, elaborate costumes, dazzling booty, banners, incense, and not the least of these, the participating presence of the crowd itself. Moreover, scenic displays in the form of carts carrying tableaux vivants featured prominently. These were several storeys high, showing variously scenes from the campaign (such as the surrender of an enemy general), captured cities painted or modelled, representations of geographical features such as mountains or rivers and important ‘performative emblems’ such as – in Pompey’s triumph – the statue of the vanquished Mithridates. There were actors, dancers (including men dressed as satyrs) and a vast array of scenic embellishments and props.

The entire ensemble was a sort of processional theatre; the movement of massed ranks of people seen by the spectators from a variety of vantage points: on the street, from public buildings along the way or at sites of ceremonial performance. In general, the spectators were static while the performance as a whole was mobile and so stage-managed – to which a great deal of attention was...
devoted – to allow it to be temporally coordinated and unfold in a ‘dramatic’ manner; for example, the juxtaposing of emotively suggestive elements to create a sort of montage effect. The relationship here between theatricality (in the theatre) and theatricalism (in the triumph) is obvious, and indeed became more explicit when, in the Imperial period, the traditional route of the triumphal procession was altered to take it through the orchestras of Rome’s theatres where the crowd could enjoy it from the comfort of their seats.8

Similar affinities (and a high degree of aesthetic cross-fertilisation) can be seen in the close – if troubled – relationship between the role and skills of the actor and those of the orator, which we detail in Chapter 10. Each studied the art of the other, and each imported into their own craft elements originating in the other’s.10 Cicero pointed out that ‘the speaker should manipulate the description of reality so that the audience imagines more than it sees’ (De Orat. 2.244). Here again theatricality in one medium elided into theatricalism in the other, and then in turn imported back elements of the second medium.

A third example of this pervasive phenomenon is the relationship between theatrical performance and the Roman funeral. Roman tragedy contained numerous scenes of mourning, choral lamentations and passages eulogising heroes and their achievements. Moreover, an entire genre of Roman drama, the fabulae praetextae, took as its subject the dramatisation of the lives of famous Romans. Such plays were sometimes commissioned for performance at the funerals of such men, or their descendants. But the connection did not end there; the funerals themselves were highly theatricalised events.

In Roman towns and cities, the forum was the traditional venue to conclude funeral ceremonies with the delivery of the laudatio praising the life and accomplishments of both the deceased and other illustrious members of the family who had departed before him. It was also one of the sites where theatrical entertainments were staged. Prior to the funeral oration, a series of intensely theatricalised sequences took place in what amounted to a veritable pageant – suffused with moments of ‘mixed reality’ – honouring and commemorating the deceased while constantly underscoring the theatrical elements of performance and make-believe that construed such a pageant. After first assembling in theatrium of the family home, itself a space that customarily mediated between the private and public spheres – where the pater familias received clients, conducted business and ordered the affairs of the household – as well as the past and present, through its display of ancestral masks and insignia, the procession progressed through the urban landscape to the forum.

In addition to the living members of the family, their friends and clients, as well as an often vast assembly of the general public, hired actors wearing the masks and robes of office of deceased ancestors accompanied the cortège, impersonating the dead and performing dramatic and comic scenes along the way. Musicians provided a loud accompaniment, costumed dancers performed the satyr dance sikinis (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 7.72.12), while professional mourners sang funeral dirges. Once in the forum, the body of the deceased was displayed upon the rostra or speakers’ podium, usually presented standing upright, while ‘the dead’ sat in formal array, to hear the speeches praising their deeds and his, while themselves functioning as extraordinarily provocative ‘props’ for the other participants. Remarkably, the deceased person could be addressed in the second person by the speaker of the funeral oration and even perhaps made to ‘respond’ as if engaging in a dramatic dialogue between the living and the dead.12 Borrowing imaginative intensity from the suggestive setting provided by the monuments and evocative
associations of the place itself, the ceremony was intensely theatrical. As Polybius pointed out (6.53), ‘there could not be a more inspiring sight . . . . For who would not be moved by the sight of the images of men renowned for their excellence, all together as if alive and breathing? What spectacle could be more glorious than this?’

The event was virtually defined by the mixing of realities that constituted its formal elements. Here the ultimate boundaries – those between life and death, the present and the past – were emphatically dissolved. All present, spectators and performers, the living and the dead were assimilated into a single congregation participating collectively in both actual and historic time within an extraordinary temporal and imaginative space fashioned for the purpose. The ruptures and transgressions between fiction and reality are so pervasive, and made so central to the social transaction taking place, that they constituted a different mode of reality – a ‘mixed reality’ – the performance, visualisation and experience of which our term ‘theatricalism’ helps us to understand and assess. This mixing of reality and fiction, a pervasive element in Roman society (and a major aspect of theatricalism), figures prominently in our discussions.

The impromptu funeral of Caesar clearly demonstrates how central these theatrical elements were even within a relatively ‘improvised’ and concentrated version of the normal ritual. The ancient accounts repeatedly emphasise its overt theatricality. In addition to the actors masked and dressed to depict, according to custom, the deceased together with a congregation of his ancestors, there were also masked actors dressed in the robes they used when taking part in a triumph. Thus, theatre, triumph, ancestry and funeral were all simultaneously evoked through the medium of masks. The rostra itself stood stage-like, embellished with a gilded replica of Caesar’s temple of Venus Genetrix and equipped with a scenic device to lift and display a wax replica of Caesar’s corpse.

Marc Antony’s highly histrionic performance culminated when ‘having spoken thus he . . . took his position in front of the bier as in a play, and bending down to it and rising again, hymned him as a celestial deity’. Both Caesar’s covered body itself and an image of it were displayed; real object and artistic representation juxtaposed. Following the climax of this performance with the revelation of Caesar’s body, ‘the people, like a chorus in a play, mourned with him in the most sorrowful manner and from sorrow became filled again with anger’. They then formed a double chorus to recite the funeral dirge, while an actor impersonating Caesar named his murderers and recited appropriate lines from plays by Pacuvius and Attilius, after which ‘the musicians and actors tore off their robes which they had taken from the material of his triumphs and donned for the occasion, rent them to pieces, and threw them into the flames of the pyre’. The entire event derived its force in part from the immensely powerful cognitive blending experienced by the participants/spectators caught up in – transported by – an intensely powerful ‘double-vision’ suffused with and informed by theatricalism.

**MIXED REALITIES**

The creation and manipulation of such ‘mixed reality’ theatricalised performances as that of Caesar’s funeral had long been practised at Rome, not least by Caesar himself. In 68 BC he used the occasion of the funeral of his aunt Julia, the widow of Marius, to display the masks and regalia of her husband who, once revered as the saviour of the country, had been a veritable non-person following his death. Indeed, his remains had been exhumed and thrown into the river on Sulla’s orders; and the trophies commemorating his famous victories
banished from public display, many of them destroyed. Now, almost two decades after Marius’ death, Caesar exploited Julia’s funeral both to ‘rehabilitate’ his uncle, but more immediately to enhance his own prestige and dignity through the ‘scenic’ use of the emblems as props, and through a funeral oration that took as its theme the origins of the two sides of his family, one descended from kings, the other from gods.

Three years later Caesar was elected aedile, and again employed the power of theatricalism to attract and retain popularity. Before giving his games, to build anticipation, he staged a prelude, displaying the splendid decorations and props to be employed in them ‘not only in the Comitium and the Forum with its adjacent temples, but in the Capitol as well’, where he built a temporary setting of colonnades as a setting for them (Suet. Div. Jul. 10.1). The games themselves were the most sumptuous yet given at Rome and secured him enormous popularity and consequent political power. According to Plutarch (Caes. 5.9), because of them ‘people were so pleased that everyone sought to heap new offices and honours upon him’. Then, to secure yet further support, he reverted on a grander scale to the strategy used earlier at Julia’s funeral. As a theatrical ‘coup’ he reconstructed or restored images of Marius, together with the trophies of his victories, and secretly installed them by night on the Capitol, where, as news of the brilliant display spread, a huge crowd, moved by tears at the sight, gathered to applaud Caesar’s act.15

We can discern in this briefest overview of Caesar’s showmanship the epitome of a process through which the employment of different media in funerals, triumphs, orations, scenic displays, games and spectacles, and their associations, are intermingled and blended so that elements of one reinforce or in turn gain significance from another, as theatricality melds intermedially into what we may generically characterise as ‘the spectacular’.

Scholars are increasingly exploring how intermedial relationships between different systems of representation operated in Roman art, architecture and a wide range of other cultural expressions.14 Intermedial references in Roman domestic frescoes served to introduce some extrinsic quality or connotation found in one or more other media. Reflection on the characteristics of intermedial influence tends not radically to alter major conclusions about the design origins or contents of specific wall paintings, but it does encourage us to gauge the significance of polyvalence as a property of Roman frescoes and its impact upon questions of perception, experience and meaning.

Such intermedial research as that undertaken here in the realm of theatricalism is not a matter of identifying simple, monodirectional lines of influence. Rather, we seek to observe traces of an immensely complex set of changing intermedial relations in the belief that the creation, development and understandings of each medium informed the creation, development and understandings of others, and that each cultural product was encountered and received in the light of analogous products in other media.

From such examples as those described above we can observe how elements of theatricality (often drawing variously upon and bringing together different media) penetrate and colour ostensibly non-theatrical activities within what we characterise as a ‘vernacular of theatricalism’. But before attempting to isolate this as a subject useful to our understanding, we need first to consider an even broader and more striking phenomenon which we might characterise as the ‘ubiquity of make-believe’. In surveying (and interpreting) Roman society and culture, students soon encounter a pervasive unifying (if apparently contradictory) phenomenon: that what we would designate as the real and the fictional – the observable ‘here and now’ and the imagined ‘make-believe’ – are deeply
intertwined in Roman thought and practice. As a sort of shorthand for such aspects (which in a number of political, artistic and philosophical expressions seem almost to define the agency and content of these activities), we employ the contemporary concept of ‘mixed reality’. By this, we mean circumstances in which real and fictional materials refuse to ‘stay put’; they constantly intrude one upon the other, transgressing the boundaries that notionally separate them to create in their place permeable and often all but invisible membranes through which the stuff of mental, emotional, and even active life ceaselessly flows, back and forth. Roman artists, writers, and politicians, as well as their Roman audiences, appear to have taken a particular delight in the formulation and experience of such transgressions. And in fact, the notion of an audience – often a participating and collaborative one, since spectators were themselves deeply implicated in such transgressive transactions – is particularly useful in revealing and describing Roman instances of ‘mixed reality’.

Instances are readily visible accounts of performance in the Roman theatre, and indeed have left an indelible mark as well upon surviving examples of Roman drama. The comedies of Plautus have ‘fixed’ within their texts the ‘watermarks’ evoking those vivid conjunctions of opposites that characterised moments in their first performances when the boundaries between the ‘real’ and the ‘fictional’ were systematically violated. What we see now are the oxymoronic ‘scripted’ improvisations in which an imaginative actor, aided by an audience of co-conspirators, abandoned the text to break character, chat with the audience, comment upon the local landscape and events and generally subvert the concept of plays as fixed works of art, pretending that they were being shaped then and there in the holiday spirit of ‘anything goes’. The ‘fictive’ world of the dramatic plot is thus ruptured and conjoined with the immediate ‘real’ world of the spectator. Serious scenes are spiced with indecorous indecencies as an actor steps out of character to perform a comic routine, or engage in obscene banter and abuse with another. Words are coined, played with, tossed about and phrases turned; sometimes to release a flash of bizarre imagery, but often purely for the funny sounds they make. It seems likely that a long tradition of unscripted popular drama had conditioned audiences to associate such rough and ready presentations with the very concept of theatre, in which boundaries between the real and fictive (and any concept of fourth wall dramatic illusion) were so remote that they were not so much ruptured as constantly and playfully skipped across.

In the unscripted Atellan farces that maintained a tenacious hold upon Roman popular audiences long after the appearance of literary comedy, as well as in the ubiquitous and extraordinarily varied entertainments comprising the mime, the same ‘mixed reality’ mode seems dominant. The popularity of such theatrical fare appears to have arisen and persisted in large part precisely because of their spontaneous and unstructured nature; the opportunity they provided to spectators and performers alike to indulge in ‘licentia theatralis’. One expression of this was promiscuously to mix and match artistic and social acts by moving effortlessly in and out of plots and roles, importing contemporary references, and inviting the spectators to engage in topical banter as part of the show. By their nature, such events have left little evidence in the historical record, but enough to enable us, broadly, to perceive something of the nature of the occasions. Extensive evidence, however, suggests this ‘multi-perspectival’ aspect of performance also characterised a wide range of other transactions taking place in the theatre. By the late Republican era, and continuing into the Principate, a tradition of audience participation and verbal intervention was firmly established. Cicero records a
wide range of examples ranging from the boos and hisses encountered by politicians from hostile sections of the audience, to the scandalous and even dangerous subversion of the proceedings by politically manipulated partisan mobs. He notes with satisfaction how actors ‘pointed’ appropriate lines (rapturously received and endorsed by the audience) to deliver a satiric attack upon his political opponents; while at moments of political crisis, such as that following the assassination of Caesar, he asks urgently for news of political expressions exhibited by the spectators. The occasions at which the immediate reality of political events forcibly rent the fabric of notionally aesthetic presentations were taken so seriously that rival politicians sought to outmanoeuvre one another to gain control of the theatrical bill of fare, while ‘packing’ the audience with their followers thereby to manipulate such moments of ‘mixed reality’ transactions, and their reception.\(^{16}\)

In the Imperial period, when the dangerous political rivalries and electoral competition (much of it conducted through the medium of the theatrical games) that had proven so perilous and destructive during the late Republic were forbidden, the Roman audience nevertheless adamantly retained, asserted and upon occasion demanded its right not just to be entertained, but to use the occasions of such ‘gifts’ from its rulers to exchange potent messages \textit{en masse}. The games devolved into veritable political assemblies replacing the abandoned elected bodies and to a degree encompassing their functions as organs of popular expression and social cohesion.

Theatricalism is a fictionalisation of reality that is capable of bringing about a real redistribution of social power. This fictionalisation is always visible; both spectators and performers are aware of it. For example, in actual theatrical performance the mask and costume of the actor fictionalise his ‘real’ face and body into a character. Spectators, however, are simultaneously aware of the person of the actor (within a discourse of connoisseurship) and the role they are playing. In the context of the pervasively metatheatrical elements of Roman theatre, the self-consciousness of both player and public are particularly intense. Whether ‘breaking’ character to refer to the dynamics of the performance, or ‘pointing’ particular lines of a play (and sometimes even incorporating appropriate lines from a different work) to exploit the audience’s awareness of current events, the ‘mixed reality’ of the medium is persistently reiterated. In fact, indirectly, the actor might distribute social power by using lines to refer to contemporary figures, enhancing or deflating their \textit{dignitas} with the collusion of the receptive audience.

Even when remaining in character, the very language of the actors functioned as a form of ‘linguistic mask’. By convention it was notionally the spontaneous utterances of the \textit{dramatis personae}, but in fact it consisted of a heightened, formal and poetical language, delivered according to rigidly defined metrical and vocal standards, and often accompanied by the \textit{tibia} or lyre. It was delivered in an embodied context by a costumed performer, using the props, scenery and actions determined by the staging. Thus, not only through its verbal content, but also the technique of its delivery, the individual actor’s language was received and evaluated on several simultaneous levels by the audience. This included its meaning within the fictional context of the drama, and its representation of the qualities and circumstances of the mythic characters portrayed; the skills and technique with which it was delivered; and often the professional ‘profile’, and even personal history, of the individual performers, many of whom were public ‘personalities’. In assessing such language and its delivery, an audience used to hearing and engaging with political and legal rhetoric could apply the critical judgement acquired from such occasions to the ‘artistic’ event in the theatre: a potent mixing of perceptual realities.
Indeed, as noted above, public speakers themselves drew upon theatrical gesture and vocal technique for the perfection and delivery of their craft, while acknowledging that such reciprocity was potentially destabilising. Certain politicians were even popularly given what were deemed to be appropriate nicknames derived from performers in the theatre. At the same time, the actor’s craft in delivering the fictionalised rhetoric of the dramatic character had the potentially volatile capacity subversively to call attention (in a manner similar to what later dramatic theory would term ‘alienation technique’) to the analogous employment (and therefore to the possible deceitful fictionality) of such rhetoric in a variety of familiar, and highly important ‘real-life’ situations. To be made fully aware of how orators ‘acted’ represented a potentially disturbing raising of consciousness, which is one of the reasons why rhetoricians such as Cicero and Quintilian devoted great effort to define and confine the relationship.

As a self-conscious fictionalisation of ‘real’ language, the words of the actor could redistribute social power both directly and indirectly. Directly, the status of the performer was affected by the quality of his vocal technique, and the playwright’s status by the spectators’ response to his words. In recognising the problem of the actor’s status, Seneca epitomised how Roman theatrical practice in his day demanded manipulation of the perceived boundaries between the real and the fictional. He wrote (Epist. Mor. 80.7–8) of the tragic actor ‘who sweeps grandly across the stage and says with head thrown back, ‘Lo, I rule Argos: my kingdom I have from Pelops . . . ’ He is a slave. He gets his five measures of grain and five denarii. And yet the actors pursuing this low-status and ‘trivial’ profession, while officially incurring the social disgrace of infamia, not only exercised an important degree of power inside the theatre, but could clearly acquire great social prestige, wealth and dignitas outside of it, as the example of the Republican actor Roscius, who attained equestrian status, attests. Cicero (Pro Roscio Com. 18) pointed out the paradox of such a ‘mixed reality’ by observing that Roscius was ‘an artist of such excellence that he alone seems fit to appear on the stage, and a man of such character that he alone seems fit not to go there’.

Indirectly, the actor’s status could become an object in its own right. Beginning in the early Principate, performers of the recently introduced and extraordinarily popular pantomime became ‘megastars’ and attracted such a degree of partisan fervour, periodically resulting in violent clashes between the fans of rival artists, that a variety of decrees were passed to curb and control both performers and audience.

The actors, and theatre in general, never required the audience to renounce their consciousness of the actuality of the theatrical performance when they attended it ‘to satisfy the pleasures of the ear, whether by a speech, or by a song, or by a play’ (Seneca Epist. Mor. 108.6). Thus, a performance might in one moment move the spectators to tears, and at the next moment provoke them to jeer an actor’s dropped line, a metrical fumble or cracked voice. Roman theatricalism in its mixing of realities involved a seamless shifting between perspectives of real and fictional, neither excluding the other.

**CONJUNCTIO OPPOSITORUM**

It was not just in the incompatible roles and status of the actor that theatricalism provided a potentially volatile (and yet, extending the paradox, potentially unifying) cultural force. The theatre itself was both important and trivial; a conjunction of opposites. We see this repeatedly in the contradictory attitudes so often expressed towards it. Theatre is always characterised both as a mimetic art form, and also – through the medium of its presentation – as a dual reality,