

Singular impressions: Meta-theatre on Renaissance celebrities and corpses

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Abstract

Theatrical corpses and celebrities never fail to evoke a peculiar awareness of the performative nature of the play as a real-world event for the audience, and so both corpses and celebrities are always meta-theatrical. By applying a phenomenological model in order to separate staged objects into their dual components of actual and fictional noemata (virtual sense impressions), it becomes clear that these particular objects – celebrities and corpses – create a unique kind of meta-theatre, replacing the typical perceptual ambiguous duality of the fictional and the actual with an obstinately singular impression of the actual. Renaissance plays provide a rich and sophisticated field of examples wherein the plays pick up this essential meta-theatricality and construct second-level self-reflexive comments, playing variations on this basic perceptual problem. Ultimately, this analysis proposes a model that might profitably be applied to other instances of meta-theatre that present only a single actual noema, such as self-reflexive references to space and time.

In the summer of 2002, I saw *Richard III* at the Stratford Festival (Stratford, Ontario, Canada) with Tom McCamus in the title role. As so often happens with well-known actors, especially those who appear regularly with a single company, and even more especially with a repertory company like the one at Stratford, my experience of McCamus as Richard was haunted by the ghosts of characters past; characters from years ago and characters from yesterday's matinée – the residuum of my own theatregoing history at this particular theatre: McCamus as Horner in *The Country Wife*, as Edmund in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, as Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*. (I didn't see *The Threepenny Opera* and so missed McCamus as Macheath). To each audience member, the actor's body becomes a variable palimpsest where new characters overwrite old characters, but never completely efface them. Caught up in the drama of *Richard III*, my primary impression was that of Richard Duke of Gloucester, but a familiar gesture or intonation could unexpectedly bring forth any of these others. This is the effect of celebrity. In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson treats this resonant colliding experience of the dramatic past and present and identifies the actor in general and celebrity in particular as being a potent site for ghosting.¹ But this kind of ghosting need not be limited to a specific previous playgoing experience. It can also extend to the conventions of playgoing in general, highlighting what or who the actor is as well as what or who he is not.

Keywords

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1. 'The most familiar example of this phenomenon is the appearance of an actor, remembered from previous roles, in a new characterization. The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles . . . a phenomenon that often colours and indeed may dominate the reception process' (8). Regarding celebrity Carlson writes 'But even when an actor strives to vary his roles, he is, especially as his reputation grows, entrapped by the memories of his public, so that each

new appearance requires a renegotiation with those memories' (9).

2. All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edn. (ed. by G. Blakemore Evans), Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. Spelling has been regularised where necessary and editorial marks have been removed.
3. The theatrical effect 'refers to stage action that immediately reveals its playful, artificial and theatrical origins . . . It reminds the audience of its spectator status by bringing out the theatricality or theatricalisation of the stage'. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, trans. by Christine Shantz, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998, p. 394.

Also in the same production, a very demanding athletic combat was staged between Richard and Richmond (Graham Abbey). Richmond killed Richard. Then Abbey stood over the body and proclaimed 'God and your arms be prais'd, victorious friends, The day is ours, the bloody dog is dead' (5.5.1–2) while McCamus lay on the stage still quite obviously breathing heavily from the exertion of the fight. This is one of the most extreme examples I have witnessed of the irreconcilably breathing corpse. The primary impression again may be Richard dead, but faced with conflicting evidence, the audience must process competing impressions of the dead character and the living actor both occupying the same moment in time and space. This is the effect of staged corpses.

Theatrical corpses and celebrities never fail to evoke a peculiar awareness of the performative in the audience. I will argue that this performative awareness stems from strong outside knowledge of the actual, which compels recognition of the irreconcilable ontological divide between the fictional and actual. In this way, the staging of corpses and celebrities is always meta-theatrical. Awareness of the actual in competition with the fictional reminds the audience once again that this is a play and so operates to offer a 'meta' comment on its theatricality. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it will describe how, in phenomenological terms, the staging of celebrities and corpses functions as meta-theatre in precisely the same way, both presenting aggressively singular impressions that unbalance the typical duality of aesthetic experience. And second, by unpacking this atypical meta-theatrical strategy, to demonstrate the general effects of second-order meta-theatre, which comments on theatrical perception by showing breakdowns of that perception.

A confluence of historical performance conditions on the early modern English stage, including daylight performance, the bare minimally adorned stage and boy-players in female parts, demanded significant interpretive work on the part of the audience to manage the relationship between the actual – day, stage, boy – and the fictional – night, world, woman. Subject to such conditions, the perceptual gap between the fictional and the actual is wide and inescapable. Witness the opening exchange between Barnardo and Francisco: 'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.' 'For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold, And I am sick at heart' (*Hamlet* 1.1.7–8).² For an audience present to a mild weather, day-lit performance, the theatrical effect is palpable.³ The audience must work to transpose their actual surroundings to that of the fictional world into which they are being invited. The chorus in *Henry V* reflects on this perceptual effort: 'Think when we talk of horses, that you see them/Printing their proud hoofs i' th' receiving earth;/For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings' (Prologue 26–28). Many Renaissance plays adopt this strategy. They identify perceptual gaps of this kind between the real world and the represented world and then build on this basic situation to comment on the process whereby audiences work to reconcile these opposing poles, attempting to close or at least minimize the stress of the perceptual gap.

The manifested tension between the two poles of the actual and the fictional generates a primary strongly self-aware theatrical effect and also produces opportunities for secondary self-reflexive commentary on that effect.

Among phenomenological critics considering the engagement of the perceiving audience-subject with art, both Bert O. States and Mikel Dufrenne examine this observed tension between the actual and the fictional at play in aesthetic representation. In his *Phenomenology of the Aesthetic Experience*, Mikel Dufrenne separates the art object into two components; the work of art and the aesthetic object (Dufrenne: 3). As a work of art, the art object is described in its physical being. To this view, a painting consists of canvas, frame and paint. The sculpture is stone or wood or metal. In the theatre, this aspect of the performance encompasses the actor as actor, the stage as stage and the sets and costumes as constructed from wood, paper and fabric. As an aesthetic object, the art object is transformed. A painting becomes a bowl of fruit or a nude reclining; the sculpture a bird in flight; and the actor becomes Hamlet, the stage the court at Elsinore. Both these aspects of the art object exist simultaneously, housed in the same physical entity, and constituting an innate duality in every art object between the actual (the work of art) and the fictional (the aesthetic object). In phenomenological terms, following Edmund Husserl, each of these perceived aspects of the same object presents a different virtual sense impression or *noema* – the actual noema of the actor, for example, and the fictional noema of the character. The key to distinguishing the actor noema from the character noema lies in the perceiving attitude or *noesis* that is brought to bear on the impressions given. Dufrenne's work of art manifests through the natural or positing attitude, which privileges the actual noema. Whereas the noesis of audiencing privileges the fictional noema, and the art object manifests to consciousness in Dufrenne's terms as an aesthetic object.⁴ Oscillating between these two perspectives, both noemata always remain, however one is temporarily displaced by the other. The displaced noema is, in phenomenological terms, deemed to be absent but co-present or co-intended.

Having placed the responsibility for the identification of an aesthetic object with the perceiving audience, and having laid out the innate duality of works of art, which always manifest both actual and fictional faces, Dufrenne does not go on to discuss meta-theatre or the potential for self-referentiality as a result of the duality of theatrical objects. However, he does consider the appropriate balance of belief concerning the relative reality of the two noemata required for an audience and identifies the inter-dependent relation between the fictional noema positioned out front and the actual noema standing behind. Describing his own audiencing experience, he writes,

I indeed relate to Tristan and Isolde through the singers, but not as a dupe. I do not call a doctor when I see Tristan stretched out on his couch, and I am fully aware that he is a legendary being who is as mythical as a centaur. Besides, marginal perceptions keep reminding me that I am at the theatre as

4. English lacks an appropriate word to describe the particular cognitive experience of attending a play. (French uses the verb *s'assister*, which points to active generative work being done by the audience to make the play). Spectators merely see. Playgoers go to a play but this term doesn't indicate what they do once there. Audiences do more than their etymological root of simply hearing (*audire*) indicates. And so audiencing is a word of my own coinage to fill this terminological gap.

5. In contrast to Dufrenne's coolly balanced state, we see a fictional example of inappropriate audience stance in the person of the Grocer's Wife in Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. This lady, witness to a play, is concerned for the safety of the characters. In Act 3, when Jasper draws his sword and threatens to kill Luce, the Wife urges her husband to 'raise the watch at Ludgate and bring a *mittimus* from the justice for this desperate villain' (3.92–93). Inside the provisional reality of the London of 'The London Merchant' (the 'real' play within the play), the power of the watch and the justice's warrant is of course void. Likewise, actual-world money is introduced to pay a fictional-world debt. After Rafe spends the night at an inn, the Host threatens to seize him for non-payment of his bill. From the audience, the Wife urges her husband to pay the Host the twelve shillings owed (3.174–178). Our amusement at the antics of this character originates in our awareness of her behaviour as foolhardy and inappropriate.

a spectator . . . I accept without difficulty such unlikely things as, for example, that the dying Tristan has so much voice left for singing. (Dufrenne: 9)

Here, Dufrenne as an operagoer deliberately limits his belief in the fictional noema as real. As he says, he is not a dupe and does not call a doctor for the dying Tristan. Belief in the character's reality status is limited by what Dufrenne terms marginal impressions. These impressions are founded on incursions into the foreground of perception by actual noemata. In this case, impressions are dependent on the awareness of Tristan as a trained singer. Under this audiencing strategy, Dufrenne manages to keep the fictional noema in check by permitting some small awareness too of the actual noema. As Dufrenne's translator Edward S. Casey notes, this act of balancing competing noemata echoes Coleridge's call for a 'willing suspension of disbelief' (Casey: xviii). Contrary to the ordinary employment of this quotation, Coleridge does not, in fact, advocate a complete surrender to the proposed reality of a fictional world. Rather he posits a somewhat cooler attitude that accounts for the fictional by reference to the actual: 'The true stage-illusion in this and in all other things consists – not in the mind's judging it to be a forest, but, in its remission of the judgement that it is not a forest' (Coleridge: 4.37). In this remission of judgement, in the studied refusal to decide, the audience deliberately chooses not to expose the reality behind the fictional forest. And in this negative belief there is an implied awareness of the actual noema that is not a forest. This ambivalent, balanced stance is the typical 'correct' audiencing stance. The fictional noema is provisionally privileged as 'real' but the actual noema remains to remind us that the events on the stage are not in fact real and do not require a real world audience response as Dufrenne rightly notes.⁵

Dufrenne identifies the source of his somewhat detached stance from the dying Tristan as 'marginal impressions'. He writes, 'Attention turns away from what is marginal so as not to take it [the fictional reality] too seriously. I accord it only a potential rather than an actual existence, a neutral one in any case, unless an incident such as a loud-talking neighbour or a power failure leads me back into what Husserl calls a positing attitude' (Dufrenne: 7). For Dufrenne, marginal impressions are key to the maintenance of the ambivalent belief stance. However, impressions like the loud-talking neighbour exceed the marginal and disrupt the careful balance. These intrusive impressions insist on the replacement of the fictional noema with the actual; the actual comes to the fore and the fictional is set aside as co-intended. Disruptions of the kind that Dufrenne lists relate to the actual experience of playgoing. Coughing, rumbling traffic outside the theatre and an unexpected power-cut all exist beyond the scope of the fictional. It is true that these disruptions do create a perceptual shift to the natural or positing attitude, the same kind of shift instigated by meta-theatre. But since these disruptions are not themselves theatrical they don't count as meta-theatre proper, but Dufrenne is certainly moving in that direction. This now brings our attention around to those actualising impressions that emanate

from the qualities of the stage instead of from the house. When stage elements themselves move to disrupt the fictional and promote the actual, we get meta-theatre. By drawing excessive attention to the actual underpinnings of theatrical structures and conventions, meta-theatre reverses Dufrenne's normative audiencing process of neutralization. Impressions that are more than marginal are no longer just helpfully neutral to the fictional reality but are actually destructive.

'If you know not me': Meta-theatre and celebrity

One such actual impression that jeopardises the security of the fictional reality is that of the celebrity actor. Normally, the actor's body is subject to what I term the embodiment–effacement convention. Under this theatrical perceptual practice, the actual noema of the actor is phenomenologically transposed by the audience into the fictional noema of the character. We accept that Richard Burbage becomes Hamlet. We then place Hamlet at the forefront of our perception and relegate Burbage to the status of absent but co-intended. The fictional character is successfully embodied and the actual actor is effectively effaced. In the case of celebrity, the transposition process is placed under stress as the audience attempts to properly transpose this actual person into his proper fictional existence. But, the problem of the actual celebrity noema lies with having encountered something too real. The result of this encounter is often a failed embodiment because of the failed effacement of self. For a famous actor, the audience's awareness of his or her actual-world self is too strong and is not easily supplanted by the character persona.⁶ Carlson categorises this actual-world reference to the actor's life outside the theatre as another source of ghosting: 'This is the haunting of a new interpretation by the audience's knowledge of or assumptions about the actor's life outside the theatre' (Carlson: 85). I would suggest that this perceptual ghosting stemming from an acute awareness of the actual is not limited to knowledge or even speculation about the details of a celebrity actor's life *per se*, but extends from the simple identification of that person as a celebrity, that is, as a strongly defined real-world figure. It is this inefaceable quality of the self that makes dramatic celebrities necessarily meta-theatrical at the primary level simply by their appearance on the stage.⁷ And this virtually inescapable disruption of the fictional in favour of the actual makes celebrity an attractive target for self-aware second-order commentary.

This attraction to the phenomenon of the stubbornly actual actor noema ascendant over its fictional counterpart can be seen in a handful of plays from the early modern period, where the casting of celebrities becomes fodder for playful commentary. In *Greene's Tu Quoque*, a piece of comic business depends on this meta-theatrical power of celebrity to displace or at least resonate with the character. Here, the player Thomas Greene in the character of Bubble debates going to a play:

Geraldine: Why then we'll go to the Red Bull; they say Greene's a good clown.
Bubble: Greene? Greene's an Ass.

6. This is especially true in Hollywood films when big-name stars play roles where the character's name is of little importance. Apart from eponymous roles, ask yourself if you can remember the names of any characters played by Julia Roberts or Tom Hanks.
7. In 'Celebrity and the semiotics of acting' (*New Theatre Quarterly*, 6:22 (1990), 154–161), Michael L. Quinn observes that 'this relatively direct exchange of expressive signs and outside knowledge splits the acting sign much like the sign is split by Brecht in his *verfremdungseffekt*' (156). Although he takes a semiotic approach rather than the phenomenological approach that I am following here, Quinn identifies the same difficulty between the personal expressive function of acting, which comes to the foreground and so overpowers the referential function of the stage figure.

Scattergood: Wherefore do you say so?
Bubble: Indeed I have no reason: for they say, he is as like me as ever he
can look. (1571–1576)

Another variation on this meta-theatrical play features in the induction to Marston's *The Malcontent*. Under circumstances that are not entirely clear, ownership of the playscript for *The Malcontent* was transferred from the Children of the Queen's Revels at Blackfriars to the King's Men. When it was performed at the Globe, an induction by John Webster was added. In this new opening scene, the actor William Sly enters playing a member of the audience who seats himself on the stage. He then demands to speak to some of the actors of the company, naming particularly Henry Condell, Richard Burbage and himself, William Sly. Three actors come out to speak with him; and they are Burbage, Condell and a third man John Lowin. Sly interrogates them concerning the play's transfer to the King's Men. Finally, Sly offers a silly prologue and then, presumably, they all exit – there is no indication in the text that Sly remains onstage through the main action of the play. After the appearance of the three actors, none of the performers takes any notice that Lowin is not Sly, and the self-requesting paradox dissipates. In both examples above, the meta-theatrical turn depends on the audience's correct identification of Bubble as Greene and of the intrusive audience member as the actor William Sly. Both examples position a fictional character to comment on the actual characteristics of the effaced actor and so speak against himself. Through this device, attention is drawn to the overcharged dual noematic status of the actor and character both housed in one body. In the induction to *The Malcontent*, the awareness of this duality is augmented as there is an additional moment of curiosity as the audience wonders how the problem of Sly paradoxically demanding to see himself will be solved. (For Greene to encounter himself in the parallel example, the characters would in fact need to go to the Red Bull and see Greene there. While the characters do not then go to the Red Bull, paradoxically, they are in fact already there, since the Red Bull was the home of Queen Anne's Men at the time of the play and was almost certainly the actual world performance venue.) Here, Sly is ontologically divided against himself and the two noematic selves cannot meet. By making this impossible request, the actor Sly calls into question the relationship of the competing noemata. The ontological status of Burbage and the other actors who enter the scene supposedly 'as themselves' is contrasted with that of Sly 'as audience' who is one fictional level removed from the actual self that he demands to see.

In a slightly more involved scenario, akin to my initial example of the actor as palimpsest concerning Tom McCamus as *Richard III* and others, Andrew Gurr suggests another potential instance of meta-theatre of the celebrity convention in the casting of *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. When Polonius claims to have previously played Caesar at university and been 'kill'd i' th' Capitol' (*Hamlet* 3.2.103–104), Gurr imagines a knowing wink

when the actor playing Caesar (possibly John Heminges), having been killed by Brutus (possibly Richard Burbage), is again killed as Polonius by the same actor now playing Hamlet (Gurr, *Playgoing*: 106). This meta-theatrical moment, like those described in *Greene's Tu Quoque* and *The Malcontent*, is not a pure example, however, because the perceptual oscillation required to make this self-referral work, which depends on the shift to the audience's recognition of the actors as actors, is only half the equation since the allusory external knowledge of the casting in the earlier play is also needed. To complete the circuit, the audience needs to reach out of the fictional world and draw on a specific actual world experience. Whereas in the first two plays mentioned there is a single connection between one actor and one character, Gurr's *Hamlet/Julius Caesar* reference forms a double connection linking two characters from two different fictional worlds via the bridge of the actual actor and the audience's actual-world experience of attending plays; here specifically two productions – first the Chamberlain's Men's *Julius Caesar* and then their *Hamlet*. But it is also possible to generate this triangular bridged relationship between an actual noema and two fictional noemata within a single play, thus eliminating the need for outside knowledge. The way to do this is through transparent doubling.

Richard Tarlton, in a performance of *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, made good use of the meta-theatrical bridging afforded to celebrities to draw a laugh. As re-counted in *Tarlton's Jests*, the actor playing the judge was for some reason absent and Tarlton stepped into the role in addition to his normal role as the clown. As the judge Tarlton received a box on the ear from Prince Henry. After the judge exited, Tarlton returned immediately as the clown and inquired of the other actors what had transpired:

O, saith one, hadst thou been here thou shouldest have seen Prince Henry hit the Judge a terrible box on the ear. What man, said Tarlton, strike a Judge. It is true, saith the other. No other like, saith Tarlton, and it could not but be terrible to the Judge when it so terrifies me, that methinks the blow remains still on my cheek, that it burns again. The people laughed at this mightily.⁸

Again, two fictional characters are perceptually linked through the actual status of the celebrity actor. However, meta-theatrical resonance in this case relies less on the fame of the particular actor than on the marked reaction to the blow that has affected two different characters in one actor body. The single body takes the blow and it is felt by both occupant characters. The traditional separation between doubled characters is breached by Tarlton as the clown in his verbal acceptance of the shared physical experience (and perhaps visually by a red cheek). The simple recognition of one actor in two roles functions in a simple meta-theatrical mode to remind the audience of the absent but co-present actor noema. But, Shakespeare as interpreted by Gurr and Tarlton shows that this simple awareness at the heart of the embodiment-effacement convention can itself be fodder for self-referential commentary and so create secondary

8. Richard Tarlton, *Tarlton's Jests* (London, 1638) sig. C3. This anecdote first came to my attention in Sally-Beth MacLean and Scott McMillin, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998, p. 89.

9. This metatheatre of celebrity casting is pointed up in the movie *Working Girl* (1988) when Sigourney Weaver's character returns from a skiing holiday carrying an oversize stuffed toy gorilla, certainly a sly reference to her previous film *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988).

meta-theatre on that basic awareness. It is clear from the Tarlton jest that, although celebrity is helpful in bridging two fictional characters to engender a meta-theatrical awareness of theatre as theatre, the central requirement is merely audience identification of a specific actor-character correlation. Of course, fame facilitates this identification, but that awareness can be generated in a more overt fashion by what the characters say about their previous intradramatic incarnations.

It is accepted that doubling played a role in the plays of the Tudor and Stuart public stages. However, there is no consensus among scholars of the era about how this practice operated, whether or not playwrights deliberately plotted doubled pairs, and whether or not audiences drew the pleasure of recognition from identifying them. Nevertheless, there are moments where at least the potential for meta-theatrical commentary and awareness do break through, whether or not they are intentional and without the historical supporting evidence for an audience reaction, unlike Tarlton's note: 'The people laughed mightily.' One of these moments arises in *Richard II* Act 4 Scene 1 regarding the quarrel between Aumerle and Fitzwater. The resolution of their disagreement depends on the testimony of the banished Norfolk. Bolingbroke declares that 'These differences shall rest under gage/Till Norfolk be repeal'd. Repeal'd he shall be' (4.1.86–87). The Bishop of Carlisle, a bystander to this scene, seizes this opportunity to deliver the news that Norfolk cannot be repealed because he has since died in Venice. Alan Armstrong argues that this piece of dialogue is moving toward a pointed meta-theatrical joke, if the Bishop of Carlisle is Norfolk. That is, if the same actor who played Norfolk banished in 1.3 returns to play Carlisle in 4.1. The character cannot be repealed not only because he died a fictional death in Venice, but also because the actor whose body he occupied has moved on to play another character. When the audience 'sees' Norfolk standing before them, the character is simultaneously dead in spirit but paradoxically resurrected to some extent in body. The seemingly redundant lines that follow the revelation of Norfolk's death seem to point explicitly to this exchange:

Bolingbroke: Why, Bishop is Norfolk dead?

Carlisle: As surely as I live, my lord. (*Richard II* 4.1.101–102)

Both Bolingbroke's question and Carlisle's response yoke together Norfolk and the Bishop. Carlisle in particular associates the dead Norfolk with his own living corporeal presence as Carlisle. Success for this kind of meta-theatrical turn is dependent on the audience recognising the same actor in both roles. And so the direct articulation of the doubling at work creates a kind of 'local' celebrity, making the actor playing Norfolk/Carlisle known to the audience even if we don't know his name.

Celebrities, who remain resolutely actual, manifest the clearest appearances of the actor as palimpsest haunted by faint traces of previous roles and also occasionally by details of the actor's real life.⁹ This is true of all

actors, but typically it is suppressed by the persuasive impression of the character noema. The disruptive awareness of this actorly characteristic of embodiment residue surfaces to perception in the case of famous actors or when the performer is known personally to the audience, or when he is made known to the audience through an explicit reference to prior roles. In every case of celebrity-based meta-theatre, the fictional-world noema is persistently overwhelmed by the insistent phenomenal impression of the actor as a person. Whereas the ambivalent belief stance described by Dufrenne and Coleridge permits oscillation or ambiguity between the competing noemata, disruption of this balance by a strongly actual impression eliminates the normal ambiguous duality of staged objects, renders the manifestation of the fictional noema particularly difficult and leaves only the single noema of the actual. The aggressively singular impression created by celebrities and commented on by meta-theatre is a factor of the distance between the paired noemata. The identification of the actor as actor compels the audience to consider how unlike the character he is. It is that distance that instigates the meta-theatrical double vision, emphasising the irreconcilability of the two halves.

Turning to Bert O. States' *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*,¹⁰ States, like Dufrenne, discusses the innate phenomenological duplexity of staged objects without delving into the self-referential fallout that I argue necessarily follows from the awareness of this duplexity. States targets theatrical events of the destructive kind that I am imagining where the actual breaks through the façade of the fictional. To illustrate these 'upsurges of the real', he selects, as his basic example of theatrically challenging elements, objects that possess a high degree of iconicity – objects that obdurately remain themselves within the fictional context (States: 34). In contrast to the example of celebrities where the distance between the actual actor and the fictional character that she aims to embody is so great that it is difficult to perceptually overcome, these self-identical objects are so close to their fictional counterparts that the same meta-theatrical effect of aggressive noematic singularity is triggered. Standing firm against their integration into the fictional world, objects with this ability resist the transposition to stage objects. States include in the list of these stubbornly actual objects ticking clocks, animals on the stage, running water, live flame and child actors (States: 30–34). Any object or occurrence that is blatantly real fails to be sufficiently integrated into the fictional world and operates in such a way as to distract the audience from the reality effect, pointing up the fact that the spectacle witnessed is artificial. Working backward through the attempted transposition, the audience retraces the path whereby these real objects have been brought to the stage. Instead of allowing the objects to be passively absorbed by them into the fictional world, the audience is more interested in their real-world status. Located at the extreme end of the perceptual spectrum, these objects are so attached to the real world that the transposition process required to absorb them into the fictional world is unusually difficult. The effect of this resistance is that when

10. The subtitle of States's book is 'On the Phenomenology of Theater', but he himself acknowledges in his introduction that what he offers 'is not even a phenomenology of the theater, properly speaking' (1). The descriptions that he provides are only phenomenological in the vague sense that they awaken 'the reader's memory of his own perceptual encounters with theater' (1). For a more detailed critique of States's use of phenomenology, see Craig Stewart Walker, 'Reckoning with States on the phenomenology of theatre', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 11:2 (1997), pp. 65–83.

11. A theatre company in the UK called 1157 performancegroup made news in the spring of 2004 with a casting call for a corpse. The group is preparing a play called *Dead . . . you will be*, which proposes to examine the social taboos surrounding death. The performance was initially scheduled for May 2004 but has since been indefinitely postponed. It is not clear to what extent the staged corpse will be fictionalised.

placed on the stage objects of this type retain their real-world status and disturb the reality effect built up by the remainder of the stage image. As unsuccessfully transposed objects, they trigger a reminder for the audience that the entire play is an artificial product of the transposition process. And as such these objects perform as meta-theatre, displacing the fictional world and foregrounding the actual theatrical situation. But this situation is not restricted to the particular objects with which States are occupied.

‘Now am I dead’: Meta-theatre and corpses

A corpse on the stage is exactly a States-type object. The problem of the proximate relationship between the fictional correlative of unreflected audiencing and the real-world correlative brought to the surface by the meta-theatrical noesis finds its terminal example in dramatic deaths. However, the case for corpses is a little different from that of celebrity. Whereas it is awareness of the actual celebrity actor that causes the disruption of the fictional world, an actual corpse is impossible. The actual taking of a life and subsequently the staging of a corpse remains a theatrical taboo.¹¹ Some of States’s obstinate objects are also subject to theatrical taboo in a small way. Live animals and live flames, as well as objects that States do not include but which function in a similar way, like real alcohol and real money, generate perceptual discomfort because they create risk on the stage. The actual-world capacities of these objects for unpredictable behaviour – fire, drunkenness and theft – get in the way of their fictional assimilation. Later on, I will talk more about meta-theatre and fear of the too-real. But for the moment, the corpse stands in this company as an object that is not desirable on the stage. Like these other objects, it would be, one imagines, too real and as such quite worrisome. The actual and the fictional in this case are not too distant and therefore irreconcilable as celebrities are, but in fact too close, being identical and so irreconcilable. An audience may accept an actual chair in the role of fictional chair, but an actual corpse makes us uncomfortable. But, surprisingly perhaps, the performance of a fictional corpse triggers the same perceptual discomfort because it is so strong, strong in a similar manner to the celebrity. And like celebrity, the perceptual distance between the fictional noema of the dead body and the actual noema of the living actor playing dead is immense.

A corollary to the basic embodiment–effacement convention is the rule that there are limits to the extent of the embodiment of which the actor is capable. As a perceptual phenomenon, the character is often granted abilities that are beyond the representational power of the actor. This limitation of the actor occurs because in addition to the noema of the actor as actor, the actor is also a real-world object, which has been bracketed from consideration as part of the process of theatrical reception. So although the actor as object has been perceptually set aside, the confining body of the actor cannot be fully shed. On the other hand, the character is noema only, the result of a noetic act of imagination without a real-world counterpart. And so there are objects and actions that, when portrayed on the

stage, are not possible (or extraordinarily unlikely) or not desirable that they be identical to the equivalent real-world actions or objects. Death is the ultimate example of failed embodiment. When a character dies, the audience can be within a hair's breadth of absolute certainty that the actor portraying that character is not truly dead, that in fact she is only feigning.¹²

Ordinary death or serious injury is a staple of the drama. Hamlet and Laertes are both killed in their exhibition duel before the court; Othello smothers Desdemona; Romeo drinks poison. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo memorably bites out his own tongue. All in full view of the audience. Regarding dramatic representation, there are levels of fidelity and the audience is preternaturally flexible concerning what it accepts as convincing – or at least not disrupting. A stage kiss is a real kiss. A stage slap is often a real slap but sometimes not. A stage death is certainly (hopefully) not a real death. Audiences are not positioned so as to distinguish between the perception of another's real pain and feigned pain, but audiences can be (mostly) certain to distinguish between feigned death or serious injury and the real thing. According to the dictates of convention, when a character dies, the actor is not also dead. With this certainty in place, even the basic case of a simple unreflected death becomes meta-theatrical at the primary level because the audience knows that the actor is not really dead. As when presented with the unaffected child actor or the oblivious dog on the stage wagging its tail, the audience is impressed with how well death is acted. When presented with a corpse, we check for breathing.¹³ Death is always meta-theatrical.¹⁴ The discrepancy of the dual view presented by the breathing corpse arises because in death the actor attempts the embodiment of an inanimate object and the strain of the transposition work to be done acutely reminds the audience that a noetical restructuring is required. In the case of dramatic deaths, the two noemata attempt to engage in the regular competitive ambivalent relation basic to theatre but the noematic pairing of the live actor and the corpse is undeniably unambiguous and singular and so the embodiment fails, triggering meta-theatre. From the ambivalent phenomenological stance of the audience-subject, it is not necessary for a staged embodiment to be convincing; it need only be ambiguous in its duality.

In the play-within-a-play situation, ambiguity is re-introduced, where really real deaths meta-theatrically highlight the rule. The characteristic of ambiguity itself becomes the target of meta-theatrically figured play-within deaths. Here, it is possible for the actors also to die alongside their characters because with the insertion of another world-within reality shifts from our world (reality^a) to the fictional world, which frames the play-within (reality^b). It is inside the medial frame of reality^b that the actors die. Freed from the restricting body that protects actor^a, actor^b is able to counter the controlling rule, concerning the limits of embodiment, by actually dying. The real world (reality^b) invades the play world (reality^c). So, ambiguity is again possible in the perception of play-within deaths

12. The Roman gladiatorial contest (which I would not consider to be theatre) is the only exception to the ironclad safety of this conviction. An example of an actual death in a work of art that is frequently mentioned to me in this context is the death of one of the stuntman-charioteers in the famous race scene in *Ben Hur* (1959) that occurred during filming and was left in the final print of the film. Significantly, the intended slant of this story is that hearers are to be shocked not at the accident in filming but at the inclusion of it in the film. This anecdote, however, is not in fact true, and lives in repetition as an urban legend. Urban legends take as their inspiration items of collective societal anxieties. It is interesting to note that this aspect of death in art is worthy of perpetuation as a legend. Likewise, snuff films, although widely believed to exist, have also been proven to be an urban legend. A new and disturbing phenomenon is the stream of videos broadcast of hostages in Iraq being beheaded. These killings remain in the realm of the shockingly actual but the framing medium of recording and transmission creeps uncomfortably towards fictionalizing the representations.

13. Peter Ustinov on playing King Lear (Stratford Festival, Ontario, Canada,

1979) re-counts this anecdote: 'Well eventually you die and you think, "This is the most wonderful moment. I hope the audience doesn't see how relieved I am". And you fall to the floor. From then on, until the end of the play, everybody starts talking terribly slowly in deference to your recent death . . . [and while you're lying there], a terrible itch manifests itself on your left ankle. And you think all sorts of things. It's the worst time of the evening. It's got nothing to do with nerves about lines, it's lying there dead knowing you daren't move because you will destroy the illusion for thousands of people' (Richard Ouzounian, *Stratford Gold: Fifty Years, Fifty Stars, Fifty Conversations*, Toronto: McArthur, 2002, pp. 288–289).

14. Susan Zimmerman reaffirms this assessment in her discussion of the corpse as idol: 'Thus the representation of the corpse on the early modern stage entailed the metatheatrical recognition not only of an illusion, but in effect of a double illusion – an illusion of an illusion. That is, a material, sentient body was supposed to signify an insentient one, severed from 'its real materiality' – a disembodied body . . . As a disembodied body only *in potentia*, the body of the actor was thereby enjoined to represent the unrepresentable on several levels, in what

since they occur at one remove from the absolutely real body of the real-world actor. In the main action of the play-within of Soliman and Perseda contained in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo kills Lorenzo, Bel-Imperia kills Balthazar and then herself, leaving three corpses on the stage. When the play-within seems to be at an end, Hieronimo considers the convention, addressing the audience-within:

Haply you think, but bootless are your thoughts,
 That this is fabulously counterfeit,
 And that we do as all tragedians do:
 To die today, for fashioning our scene,
 The death of Ajax or some Roman peer
 And in a minute starting up again,
 Revive to please tomorrow's audience.
 No, princes: . . . (4.4.76–83)

Boasting of his successful revenge, he holds up the uncertainty of dramatic death, contrasting the actual tragic situation with the audience's expectation of the conventional playing of death – that the actors counterfeit death, rising up to play again tomorrow, leaving only their characters dead. Another case of murder-within occurs in Massinger's *The Roman Actor*. As with Hieronimo's play-within, the inner fiction becomes a vehicle for revenge as the emperor Domitian participates in the play-within and as part of the plot kills the player, Paris. At the moment of his stabbing, Paris exclaims, 'Oh, I am slain in earnest!' (4.2.283). In both plays, the 'earnestness' of the murders is made explicit. The extra-dramatic indicator of certain death at the level of world^b serves to collapse the inner world, eliminating the tension of denial between reality^b and reality^c, causing the two corpses to become one.

Ambiguity between phenomena activates doubt on two previously held certainties. The first certainty is that the actor still lives when the character dies. Really real death in the play-within casts this certainty into doubt. The other certainty is that death is absolute. Resurrection in the theatre is the province of the actor who gets up after the death of her character. But the iterated theatrical frame encompassing the play-within puts this power into the hands of any actor-within. As a result, the perceptual tension surrounding play-within deaths extends to the tradition of feigned deaths where the characters are subsequently restored to life (Jasper in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* and of course Juliet). Meta-theatricality in these cases turns on the exposure of the rule by characters dying and then popping up again to display that the rule works. When the characters revive, the fictional world within dissolves to restore the actual world.¹⁵

In each of the above cases where death is feigned in life, the audience-within is purposely deceived by the performed deaths, but the audience-without is aware of the pretence from the outset. This is not the case with

the 'death' of Falstaff at the Battle of Shrewsbury in *1Henry IV*. To avoid an extended battlefield encounter with Douglas, Falstaff falls to the ground, counterfeiting his death. This ruse is successful and Douglas exits, while Falstaff remains an onstage corpse throughout Prince Hal's fight with Percy. It is only after Percy is killed and Hal exits that Falstaff sits up, exposing the fakery of his death:

(*Falstaff riseth up.*) . . . Counterfeit? I lie, I am no counterfeit. To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man; but to counterfeit dying, when a man thereby liveth, is to be no counterfeit, but true and perfect image of life indeed. (5.4.114–119)

Playing on the word 'counterfeit' as both a pretence and as a false image, Falstaff sophistically claims here that a corpse is the false image of a live person and that the act of pretending to die, the counterfeiting of a counterfeit, is the true mark of a living man. Significantly, in performance, Falstaff delivers this speech with the corpse of Hotspur (and the body of the living actor playing Hotspur) on the ground beside him. Having played his own play-within, Falstaff worries that Hotspur also is a counterfeit player and may too rise up. And so to be certain of the Percy's death, he stabs him again. The meta-theatrical tension between the corpse that rises up and the one that does not comments tidily on the convention at work. Other characters who are unexpectedly restored to life also address this need for the ambiguous relation of phenomena of fiction and reality. Both *The White Devil* and *The Malcontent* feature characters whom the audience thinks are dead and who rise up in later scenes. These restorative events assure the audience, saying in effect, 'Don't worry. I'm not really dead.' But this message nested inside the fictional play-within performs perceptually in two directions. On the one hand, one aspect of the rule is supported, as an actor who performs his own fictional death does not in fact die. But, on the other hand, the other half of the rule is cast into question as the certainty of the death of the character is undermined, promoting suspicion as to the permanency of fictional death.¹⁶

Twentieth-century plays engage in more elaborate play with the rules of limitation on embodiment in death. Instead of layering world upon world to establish a repetition of the rule or directly countering the rule, meta-theatrical plays on death adjust the boundaries between the several worlds, creating perceptual ambiguity about the application of the rule. One way this is accomplished is by the merging of two worlds into one. In Genet's *The Balcony*, the character of Arthur performs death in both worlds. He is scheduled to play a corpse in the funeral studio (Scene 7), but before this play-within occurs, he actually gets killed (Scene 5). Irma puts him in the scene regardless: 'He didn't think he'd be acting his role this evening in earnest' (61). Another variation on the relation of the multiple dramatic worlds is the situation where the two worlds run in parallel, with figures from both realms interacting with one another. *Six Characters*

might be called the consummate instance of metatheatricality.' 'Animating matter: the corpse as idol in *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*', *Renaissance Drama*, 31 (2003), pp. 222–223.

15. A famous example occurs at the end of John Dryden's *Tyrannick Love* (1669). When the 'corpse' of Nell Gwyn was to be removed, the actress sat up and chastised the stagehand: 'Hold! Are you mad, you damned, confounded dog?/I am to rise, and speak the epilogue.'
16. The culture of comic books has ingrained this doubt concerning the absolute nature of death in its readers. In a fantastical medium, where superheroes and their nemeses die and are regularly resurrected, often by supernatural means, readers of these series view death with great suspicion. It is an axiom of comic-book culture that a character is not dead until you see the body, and even then death is far from certain. For example, in the comic-book-inspired cult television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996–2003), the title character dies and is brought back to life not once but twice.

in Search of an Author presents a very complex case. When the little girl (The Child) is found drowned and the younger brother (The Boy) shoots himself, the actors are shocked. Some of the actors proclaim that it is real. Others defensively insist that it is a pretence. The Father says 'Pretence? Reality, sir, reality!'. Unconcerned with the pretence or the reality, the manager is merely annoyed that he has wasted so much time on these people (276). The two worlds intersect. The two children, like Arthur, die in both realities. They die as characters in their own play – the play-within. They also die 'for real' since their real-world existence is the same as the play-within. Significantly, they are not actors. They are only characters, real in one world; and so, like actual people who are also real in only one world, they are limited to a single existence and an inflexible death. Likewise in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the two eponymous characters are also only characters. And as such, their deaths are prescribed and unavoidable. Guildenstern lashes out at the Player's casual acceptance of his impending death:

I'm talking about death – and you've never experienced *that*. And you cannot *act* it. You die a thousand casual deaths – with none of that intensity which squeezes out life . . . and no blood runs cold anywhere. Because even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after *death* – there is no applause – there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that's –

death –

(And he pushes the blade in up to the hilt. The Player stands with huge, terrible eyes, clutches at the wound as the blade withdraws: he makes small weeping sounds and falls to his knees, and then right down: . . .) (90)

To the applause of his fellow tragedians, the Player dies a 'theatrical death' inflicted by a knife with a retractable blade. Contrary to the theatrical death of the player, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern disappear when they die, avoiding the perceptual oscillation of the ostended corpse. 'Death is not anything . . . death is not . . . It's the absence of presence, nothing more . . . Now you see me, now you – (*And disappears.*)' (91, 92). One cannot 'be' dead, since, as Falstaff argues, being implies an active portrayal of death. In both *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* and *Six Characters*, two groups with different existential status confront each other. Death is the ultimate test of who is who.

As a distancing device, meta-theatre reminds the audience of the constructed nature of the theatrical illusion, and so protects the audience from excessive emotional involvement. In this sheltered state, confident that the play is only a play, the audience takes comfort that the staged events are not real. Andrew Gurr, in a recent article 'Metatheatre and the Fear of Playing', identifies among Elizabethan playgoers a 'real fear of illusion, and a revulsion against the deliberate dishonesty it was based on'

(Gurr, 'Fear': 91). To allay this fear, he suggests that steps were taken by the players to acknowledge the danger of the dramatic illusion by making it explicit to the audience. Meta-theatre is one tool that mitigates the fear of illusion by exposing its existence. Regarding basic embodiment conventions like role-playing and the boy-player of women's roles, commentary on the conventions eliminated fear and disposed of any covert deceit by acknowledging the disguise: 'Tricks with meta-theatricality were an essential outcome of the discomfort writers and their audiences shared, as staging techniques grew more sophisticated, over the dangers that lay in the deceptions of realism' (100, 101). But in the case of really real deaths in the play-within, the effect is just the opposite, because fear is not a factor of the too-real illusion but of the too-real reality. The protection of the illusion of the play as play has been breached by the reality of the play as event. Actors whom the audience assumed to be safe are now dead. Instead of reducing audience concern, the ultimate effect of this invasion is to increase fear, a fear that is the product of doubt. When the death of an actor is raised as no longer an impossibility, the perceptual relation between the fictional- and real-world noemata is destabilized by doubt. Although the death of an actor is an extreme case, fear and doubt experienced by the audience that the play as event will displace the play as play is a constant state. For the audience, the actual death of an actor (by accident or murder) brings the world of the play as event abruptly to our notice. On the list of things that could possibly 'go wrong' during a theatrical event – props that are dropped or broken, actors who miss an entrance or trip on the furniture – the death of an actor is certainly the worst. But as a member of this group of mishaps, it is of a type of events that dispels the safety of the illusion and brings to the fore the hazards of dramatic performance. Stage fright is exactly this same kind of fear but from the actor's point of view. Shakespeare uses this image in Sonnet 23 to describe his speaker overcome by love 'As an unperfect actor on the stage,/ Who with his fear is put besides his part' (1, 2). For the actor, the fear is that his safety inside the fictional world will be abrogated by the flubbing of a line or by an embarrassing costume mishap. It is notable in this context, then, that when an actor loses his character succumbing to uncontrollable giggles, it is sometimes referred to as 'corpsing.' The term is apt since the intrusion of the actual actor aspect is death to the character, and also a kind of death for the afflicted actor.¹⁷ Any 'death' onstage that imperils the relation of the illusion to the framing reality is serious in a medium that depends on the maintenance of a careful ambivalence.

Meta-theatrical events interrupt the careful ambiguity of stage objects to display their innate actual objectivity. Typically, this is achieved through reiteration or a kind of layering process, where the theatre repeats or nests certain devices or conventions and by so doing draws attention to the original. Plays-within-a-play work this way as the complete theatrical enterprise is nested inside itself and so through repetition reminds the audience of the theatrical process with which we are engaged. In fact, the vast

17. My thanks to Peter Thomson and my colleague Judith Fisher for clarifying this colloquial British expression for me and for making the connection between laughter and professional 'death'.

majority of meta-theatrical events operate in this layering mode. However, by examining the causes of the perceived meta-theatrical effect triggered by celebrities, corpses and other similarly peculiar objects, it becomes apparent that there are other, albeit rare, modes by which the theatre generates autopoiesis. Through this alternate mode, the apprehending audience-subject is confronted with the (near-) certainty of a single reality. The perceptual fluidity of the dual and ambiguous theatrical perception is replaced by the inflexible single view. It becomes apparent that an absolute reality effect is not the relevant issue in successful audiencing. The audience need not be convinced that the actor is Hamlet or indeed is Hamlet's corpse. The audience need only maintain the oscillating double perspective that the actor is provisionally both himself and Hamlet together. The proximity of the two noemata, either as too close or as too distant, only becomes a factor in unbalancing perception when one noema is replaced by the other, leaving only one. The dynamic interplay of two noemata is essential to theatrical perception. By momentarily arresting the oscillation, meta-theatre points to this ordinary need for duality, presenting in the atypical mode a single impoverished vision. Stopping the perceptual 'play', meta-theatre unplayfully insists on the perception of the real celebrity that is a real celebrity and the real actor who is not dead. The relationship of the paired noemata, which shapes ambivalent theatrical perception by alternating between presence and absence is briefly severed. Significantly, however, the perceptual imbalance caused by a meta-theatrical disruption is temporary, audiences are perceptually quite resilient, and so the normal alternation of the competing noemata of actor and character is soon restored.

Beyond the examples shown here of the disruption of the embodiment-effacement convention by celebrities and corpses, this model of the stubbornly single noema, which activates meta-theatrical reflection may be applied to other aspects of theatrical transposition, notably transpositions of dramatic space and time. In the same way that the actor self 'me' becomes another self 'not me' through the theatrical noesis, the space of 'here' becomes 'not here' and the time of 'now' becomes 'not now.' These are subjective apprehensions and conversions performed by the audience engaged in the act of creating theatre. Clearly, theatrical space and time express the same noematic duality as actor bodies. With this similar perceptual pattern evident, it becomes possible to expand the catalogue of meta-theatrical events into hitherto uncharted territory and to compare meta-theatrical strategies of disruption across usually disparate theatrical elements.

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