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Modern Theatre's Expansion into Reality

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Although the tension between the real and the illusion based upon it are at the heart of the theatrical experience, the main attention of theatre until modern times has been on the use of what might be called illusion-supporting devices (such as the use of artificial language, especially verse, of artificial gestures, and of elaborate conventionalized costumes), and instances of illusion-challenging situations, were relatively rare, even marginal. In the final years of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first, however, many theatres in Europe and the United States became particularly interested in calling attention to the real in their work—presenting performers who did not create characters and who may not even have been actors, but who appeared on stage as themselves, texts not created by dramatic authors but drawn from real life, such as interviews or court transcripts, and real environments sometimes shared by actors and performers and containing real elements accessible to both. Although Hans-Thies Lehmann in his *Postmodern Theatre* devotes a few pages to this phenomenon, as one type of postmodern experimentation, what he designates as "the irruption of the real" (2006, p. 100), he considers only one among many types of postmodern experimentation. I will argue, on the contrary, that it constitutes a major shift in the practical and phenomenological world of theatre, and a turning away from mimesis, which has been at the heart of the theatre ever since Aristotle.

It is true that one of the basic features of theatre as an art form has been from its earliest manifestation the use of materials from real life to construct its fictions, the most important of which has been the living body of the actor. Over the cen-

turies almost every part of the real world has been utilized in some way or another by the theatre—real patterns of intonation and gesture, real objects, real items of clothing, real light, real sound, real animals. Obviously, both theatre makers and audiences have always been to some extent aware of this phenomenon, and reception theory, from Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" (1854, v. 3, p. 6) to Schechner's (1985, p. 112) "not" and "not not" paradox, has attempted to find ways to talk about the necessary double consciousness theatre demands, imposing the imaginary character and her surroundings upon the real actor and his. This tension has been foregrounded, however, and the real emphasized in a new way in recent years, when the theatrical use of the real has become increasingly prominent. This new attention has affected almost every aspect of theatrical production, but I will here briefly suggest how it has been manifested in four key parts of such production—the words spoken on stage, the bodies of the performers, the scenic environment and the objects on stage.

Thus bringing of human speech, with its grammar and syntax, into the theatre, while a central feature of the art, rarely if ever calls attention to itself as a borrowing from the "real" world. If, however, all or part of the theatrical text is recognized as coming from that world, then the situation is very different, and the steady development of this use of language in theatre has become more and more important in modern times, particularly during the past century. The most striking and widespread example of this has been the various forms of what has been most common called the documentary theatre. The first clear example of this type of drama was the 1925 In *Spite of Everything! [Trotz aledem]* by Erwin Piscator, who created a new sort of theatrical experience based on contemporary news reporting and designed to reflect current social reality for its audiences. Although many of his contemporaries were devoted to work that would reflect the evolving political scene, only Piscator focused on the presentation of actual historical documents. A statement of 1928 expresses his motivation clearly: "It is not theatre we want, but reality. Reality is still the biggest theatre" (1968, p. 329). Similar concerns profoundly influenced the American *Living Newspaper*, created as part of the 1930s Federal Theatre Project (FTP). It generally based its work on news items, often specifically quoted, and its first creation, *Ethiopia*, was composed almost entirely of verbatim excerpts from speeches of world leaders on Mussolini's 1935 invasion of

that country. Unfortunately, the politically-engaged productions of the FTA proved too radical for an increasingly conservative government to support and its funding disappeared after only four years. It was not until the 1960s, with a resurgence of interest in theatre dealing with current social problems, that significant documentary drama, and verbatim material, appeared again on the American stage.

In part this was inspired by a new interest in documentary theatre in Germany, led by Rolh Hochhuth, Heinar Kipphardt, and Peter Weiss, in works often directed, most appropriately, by Piscator, returned to Germany after a twenty-three-year exile in the United States. Weiss, the chief theoretician of the movement, made the most extensive use of verbatim materials, particularly in *The Investigation [Die Ermittlung]* (1965), with a script taken from the Frankfurt war-crime trials, and *Vietnam Discourse [Viet Nam Diskurs]* (1968) with a second act composed entirely of political speeches, in the manner of *Ethiopia*. In his manifesto "Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre," Weiss insists that "The documentary theatre shuns all invention. It makes use of authentic documentary material which it diffuses from the stage, without altering the contents, but in structuring the form" (1995, p. 139).

Perhaps the best-known contemporary American author of documentary drama is Moisés Kaufman, who first came to wide attention with his 1997 off-Broadway success, *Gross Indecency:* The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde. Like *Unquestioned Integrity*, this is drama based on records of hearings that involved a highly visible social concern—this time homosexuality, a topic that since the Stonewall riots of 1969 had become a more and more open interest of the American theatre, especially with the rise of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. No historical figure was more widely seen as a martyr to anti-gay prejudice than Oscar Wilde, and his trial and subsequent imprisonment became emblematic of such prejudice. Although the play's stage resembled a courtroom, with prosecution on one side and defense on the other, who in fact presented excerpts from the three trials, at the front of the stage was a long table with four narrators, who continuously sorted through and read from piles of books and papers in front of them. Their material included newspaper reports, non-courtroom material from and about male prostitutes, and quotations from such figures as Bernard Shaw and Queen Victoria and a modern (unnamed) academic pedantically discussing Wilde's sexuality in its historical context.

A new wave of verbatim theatre appeared during the 1990s, especially in the United States and England. The most important precursor of this new wave, was Emily Mann, whose work in the late 1970s and early 1980s clearly anticipated it and caused her to be sometimes called "the mother of documentary theatre" (apud Potier, 2002, s. p.). Her playwriting debut, in 1977, was *Annulla*, the first of a particular subgenre of the documentary to which Barney Simon, director of the South African Market Theatre, gave the name "theatre of testimony" (apud Fugard, 1997, p. xiii). In such works, the verbatim words of the survivor of some devastating experience are used as the basic text in order to emphasize a particular political concern. A prominent contributor to contemporary documentary drama in general and interview-based drama in particular is Anna Deveare Smith. The piece that brought Smith national and international attention was *Fires in the Mirror* in 1992. This work dealt with a series of bloody riots in Brooklyn in the summer of 1991, touched off when a car driven by a Hasidic Jewish man struck and killed a young Caribbean-American boy, sparking protests in which a black gang killed in retaliation a visiting Jewish student from Australia. Like the Tectonic theatre company, Smith went into the deeply troubled community and interviewed a wide variety of citizens of that community as well as civic and religious leaders. She then worked them into 29 monologues from 26 different people, which she performed herself She presented not only the actual words of her subjects, but attempted also to reproduce the voice, gestures, and exact verbal quality of each speaker, and thanks to her extensive notes and powers of mimicry, she dazzled audiences with her transformation into a wide range of individuals, some prominent figures already familiar to those audiences. Elin Brockman, writing on "Ideas and Trends" for the *New York Times* in May of 1999, characterized the interview-based theatre of Anna Deveare Smith as part of a "headlong rush toward reality" in the arts in general. The arts "are no longer imitating life," she argued, but "are appropriating it" (Brockman, 16 May 1999).

Further evidence of this trend soon appeared in the next, and most famous work of Moises Kaufman and his Tectonic Theatre, the 2000 *The Laramie Project*. A notorious real-life crime was at the heart of this work, the homophobic murder of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming, 1998. Instead of assembling material from local records and police reports in the manner of

most documentary of the previous century, the Tectonic Theatre created their own original text. Five weeks after Shepard's death, they went to Laramie and during the next year conducted over 200 interviews with people of the town. Out of this material they created their 2000 play, one of the most widely performed plays in America over the next decade, and also produced in other theatres around the world.

In its continuing colonization of reality, however, the theatre has in more recent years begun to base performances on more everyday texts—interviews, conversations, and e-mails from persons not involved with major public events, crimes, or social movements. Probably the best known example of such work is that of the Nature Theater of Oklahoma, which in the first decade of the new century challenged the position of the Wooster Group as the best-known American experimental theatre company on the international scene. The Nature Theater was founded in 1905 by Pavol Liska and Kelly Cooper. Their mission statement places them at the heart of modern interest in theatrical utilization of elements of the "real" world: "we use the readymade material around us, found space, overheard speech and observed gesture."[1] The culmination of the Nature Theater's work to date is the four-part *Life and Times*, presented at New York's Public Theatre in 2014. These first four episodes lasted eleven hours, and another fourteen episodes were promised for the future. The text is a transcript of a series of telephone conversations with a company member, Kristin Worrall, detailing her memories of growing up on the Eastern Seaboard. Worrall's words are an exactly reproduced slice of current American speech, filled with pauses, fillers, ahems, ahas, and what-was-I-talking about digressions. The closest previous approach to this kind of speech was the monologues of Anna Deavere Smith, but even they were far more edited, and, moreover, devoted to material of public interest. *Life and Times* for the first time brings onstage verbatim material from everyday life in all of its complexity and banality. It is difficult to imagine that verbatim theatre could come closer to the speech of real life than this.

Turning from language to physical objects, it is clear that any such object in the theatre can be "borrowed" from the "real" world outside the theatre. Clearly among these objects the actor traditionally holds not only the most prominent

[1] Available at: https://oktheater.wordpress.com/were-ok2/. Date accessed: 16 Feb. 2016.

place but also the one in which the negotiation between the real external world and the theatre's fictive world is the clearest. This is because of the audience's awareness, even when repressed, that alone among these objects the actor has a consciousness, a knowledge that he or she simultaneously exists in both of these worlds. This is why animals onstage provide such a source of tension, sometimes pleasant, sometimes not, since they bring to the stage an uncompromised reality that can never been completely under the control (as can a real chair) of either the actors' or the audience's imaginary world.

In most periods of theatre history, various conventions, such as costume, make-up and mask, have encouraged audiences not to be strongly aware of the "real" person behind the stage character, but this covering has almost never been complete. In an important essay of 1990, for example, Michael Quinn argued that "The personal, individual qualities of the performer always resist, to some degree, the transformation of the actor into the stage figure required for the communication of a particular fiction," and suggested that the performance of a well-known celebrity actor "represents one case in which the personal, expressive function of acting comes into the foreground of perception" (Quinn, 1990, p. 154-161). Every age in Western theatre from the Renaissance onward has produced such celebrity actors, from Burbage and Betterton to Olivier and Gielgud. However, brilliant any of these may have been in the creation of particular roles, once their celebrity had been established, audiences were, in large part, attracted to their performances to see the actor, not the dramatic fable.

The late nineteenth century, which began with the triumphs of Ristori and Rachel and ended with those of Bernhardt and Duse, was clearly one of the high points of celebrity acting, where Quinn's celebrity figure often, for better or worse, clearly overshadowed the stage figure. Although Quinn sees these figures as essentially in opposition, this same period also saw some remarkably successful blending of them—a further complication the use of the "real" onstage. By far the best known example of this was the international success of William F. Cody, "Buffalo Bill." In 1873 Cody began playing himself in an enormously successful series of works presenting his adventures on the American frontier. Never have theatre and real life been more closely intertwined. During the summer months Cody travel West to pursue his scouting and to fight the Indians, especially the Sioux, and during the

winter he would tour in the East with plays starring himself and presumably documenting his summer adventures. Thus, in the winter of 1876, Cody presented J. V. Arlington's *The Red Right Hand*, depicting Cody's killing of the Indian leader Yellow Hand the previous summer, offering the public what was widely accepted as a kind of documentary drama. Indeed, this achievement of Cody was so popular that he regularly enacted the "duel with Yellow Hand" as one of the acts in his Wild West Show. Cody's show inspired countless imitators, many of whom tried, as far as their resources would allow, to follow Cody's interest in infusing his shows with real elements—from stagecoaches to elk. The Chicago World's Fair of 1893 featured a show called *Sitting Bull's Log Cabin*, which indeed utilized the actual cabin in which Sitting Bull was killed, and featured nine Indians, among them Sitting Bull's second in command, the almost equally renowned Rain-in-the-Face.

The last great flowering of the Wild West show coincided with another form mixing historical events with performance, the first major historical reenactments, which became a highly popular instrument of propaganda in Revolutionary Russia. The most famous of these events, *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, was directed by one of the leading theatre directors and theorists of the Soviet era, Nicolai Evreinoff. This production re-created a major event of the Revolution, only a month after that original event and on the same site. It involved both personnel and equipment that took part in the original event, and many of the participants, like Cody, returned to the ongoing conflict in the real world when the reenactment was finished. In his evocation of this event, Slavoj Žižek comments: "Although this was acting and not reality, the soldiers and sailors were playing themselves. Many of them not only actually participated in the event of 1917 but were also simultaneously involved in the real battles of the civil war that were raging in the near vicinity of Petrograd, a city under siege and suffering from severe shortages of food".[2]

The rise of the film, with its far greater visual resources, was surely instrumental in the fading away of the sort of realistic historical spectacles that were so important to nineteenth-century theatre. In the new century, realism's challenge to mimesis took new forms. In the early part of the century one of the most important arose within the theatre itself, and the various challenges new experimental

[2] Mentioned in MARKER, Lise-Lone. *David Belasco*: Naturalism in the American Theatre. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 66.

drama made to conventional drama, with its closed world of realistic illusion. From futurism onward, each new movement, in one way or another, sought to bring a new "reality" to the stage, and a number of these sought to do this by emphasizing the physical body of the actor. In 1959 Allan Kaprow began to present events he called "happenings," which were composed only of real-life actions, without a narrative thread or the use of mimesis. Closely related to the happenings, and appearing soon after, came experimental works based on the real-life movements of the human body, often called "body art." During the 1960s Bruce Nauman was making videotapes of his body performing natural actions, and many body artists of the 1970s presented similar material. Bonnie Sherk, for example, performed a piece named *Sitting Still* in 1970 which consisted only of that action. Clearly the most extreme examples of body art were those that attempted most strongly to remove any traces of the mimetic or the fictional from their presentations, creating pieces that emphasized the physical reality of the body by subjecting it to extreme conditions, even damage. The most famous such work was surely the 1971 *Shoot* of Chris Burden, for which a friend actually shot him in the arm with a rifle. The extremity of such actions, Burden explained, was to remove his work completely from theatre, which he dismissed as "bad art." "Getting shot is for real," he explained. "There's no element of pretense or make-believe in it" (Sharp and Bear, 1973, p. 61).

Far less extreme examples of the calculated or accidental display of the actor's "real" body go all the way back to classic times, with reports of actors actually dying on stage, actually physically wounded, actually losing control of their emotions or even their sanity. The most extreme examples come from the Roman shows of the late classic period, which varied the straightforward and brutal killing of criminals by wild beats by staging these killings from time to time as re-enactments of mythic stories, so a victim costumed as Icarus might be pushed to his death from a high tower, or a mimic "Orpheus" with only a lyre, was exposed to the ravages of real wild bears (Fagan, 2011, p. 6). Many stories of actors really dying or being wounded come from the middle ages. Undoubtedly many of these reports are what Jody Ender's calls "urban legends" in his fascinating study of this phenomenon, *Death by Drama* (Enders, 2005). None the less, any theatre-goer can recall instances when the "real" body of the actor breaks through the fictive world—it

may be so simple a matter as an inadvertent sneeze, or a temporary loss of memory, or it may be as serious as an actual physical injury, but it is an inevitable and even essential part of the total theatre experience.

Much more clearly conscious are on-stage actions that calculatedly call attention to the body, as when the body performs real actions that are not considered "proper" for the current theatrical culture. The rise of "realistic" acting was in large measure a gradual bringing into the theatre bodily actions from the world outside. The great French actor Talma, a major precursor of realism, astonished audiences in the 1821 neoclassic drama *Sylla* by showing them his body lying on a bed. "Never in the whole annals of French tragedy," notes his biographer Collins, "had any hero or heroine gone to bed on stage" (Collins, 1964, p. 321).[3] The contemporary critic Legouvé actually described step by step how each of the actor's limbs moved to accomplish this action (p. 322). More recently, other bodily functions have moved from real life onto the stage. In a current (2014) production of Molière's *Imaginary Invalid* at the Berlin Volksbühne, the leading Berman actor Martin Wuttke continually hawks and spits, to the delight of the audience (at one point also he receives a huge enema as water spurts from his mouth and ears).

On-stage urination and defecation have been seen on European stages, especially in Germany, for some time, although they remain rare and mostly underground in Anglo-Saxon theatre. The Norwegian experimental artist Vegard Vinge and his company have gained a major European reputation with their radical reinterpretations of Ibsen which always include violent physical action, urination and defecation, which are clearly not simulated. Such activities, says their leading chronicler in English, Andrew Friedman, "powerfully highlight the live performer laboring beneath the theatrical fantasy" (Friedman, 2012, p. 20).

Although such extremely personal and private demonstrations of the stage figure's bodily reality are a fairly recent theatrical phenomenon, the milder, but originally almost equally shocking stage display of the nude body has been a significant part of the theatre's fascination with the real for the past half-century. Of course display of the nude or nearly nude female body has long been a feature of burlesque

[3] This is not strictly true, as early as 1792 in Ducis' neoclassic adaptation of *Othello*, with Talma in the title role, the heroine, Heldemone was killed in her bed (by stabbing, not strangling) in the original version, but when the play was first staged at the Comédie Française, the audience was so outraged that Ducis created a new happy ending, requiring neither Heldemone's death nor her bed.

theatres and other venues of marginal reputation, but it was not until the late 1960s that nudity, both male and female, entered the more legitimate theatre, first not surprisingly in more experimental houses, and before the decade ended even in the mainstream theatres of Broadway. Obviously a degree of sexual titillation was normally involved, but more generally such displays reflected both the desire so strong in that turbulent decade to challenge traditional social and cultural mores, and also the continuing project of the modern experimental theatre to break down the barriers between what appeared on stage and offstage life, both public and private. John Houchin, writing on theatre nudity and censorship during this decade observes, rather hyperbolically: "The presence of unclad bodies on stage transforms the conventions of theatre into stark reality. There is no longer any illusion or mystery, only a person whose actual physical being is conspicuously present" (Houchin, 2003, p. 205).[4]

Around 2000 a number of groups, especially in Germany, became interested in calling upon audiences not only to be aware of real bodies on stage but also of real individuals from the off-stage world. The leading contemporary company involved in this new wave of bringing real material, especially human material, onto the stage has been the German Rimini Protokoll, formed in 1999. None of the performers in Rimini Protokoll productions are professional actors, but the group avoids the use of the word "amateur." The participants in these productions are rather "experts," but "experts of the everyday," and on stage they present material from their area of expertise, which is their own life experience. Of their work the journal *Frankfurter Rundshau* reported: "Rimini Protokoll brings real life to the stage in a way that no other theatre form has been able to. The unmistakable strength of these performances lies above all in the fact that in spite of the proximity to the persons whom they portray a rift appears between the role and the personality, and with it an awareness of the risk that life could gain the upper hand, and theatre could lose control over itself."[5] For each of their productions, Rimini Protokoll searches for participants from throughout Germany and indeed from around the

[4] Schechner:"Stage performance is always on the verge of tumbling back into the real world", apud John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, 2013, p. 205

[5] This quote is widely reproduced but never, so far as I have been able to discover, with full attribution. It appears to be a regular part of international publicity for the company. See, for example, the media release of the 2014 Perth International Festival in Australia, "Situation Rooms". (http://media2.perthfestival_Situation-Rooms_MRO7112013.pdf).

world, whose own personal stories can be woven into a coherent performance text. Rarely have they worked with traditional dramatic text, but their 2007 *Wallenstein* was one of their most innovative and praised creations. Using Schiller's play as a framework, they selected persons who in various ways suggested Schiller's major characters—a Weimar politician whose party had turned against him, an astrologer, a woman who ran a dating service to arrange extra-marital affairs, Vietnam veterans, and so on, weaving them and their stories into a structure governed by the events of Schiller's plot.

The success of Rimini Protokoll launched a new wave of German use of personae brought in from the real world and many of the leading new experimental groups of the new century experimented with such material. *Testament* (2011), the best known offering of She She Pop, a feminist performance collective organized the s as Rimini Protokoll, brought the actual fathers of company members on stage to help present a meditation on *King Lear* and to discuss generation tensions and the processes of theatre. Gob Squad, a British-German collection formed in 1994, recently turned toward non-actors in *Before Your Very Eyes*, where the audience, seated behind a one-way mirror, watched a group of 8 to 14 years old children first playing extemporaneously in a colorful play room, then encouraged by instructions from a loudspeaker to create sketches and improvisations about adult life.

Neither Rimini Protokoll nor its most important sister groups have used real bodies to make specific political points, but given the modern German tradition of political commentary in the theatre, a number of directors such as Volker Lösch, used the bodies in this way. Thus his production of Wedekind's *Lulu* (2010) utilized a chorus of actual Berlin sex workers, his production of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* had a chorus that emerged from the audiences and identified themselves as convicted criminals and felons, while homeless people from the streets of Hamburg provided the chorus for his 2011 *Marat/Sade*. Such direct representations of contemporary social reality have aroused continual controversy, and sometimes legal challenges, as when the chorus in *Marat/Sade*, in a further blurring of theatre and reality, ended the production by citing the names, incomes and addresses of Hamburg's wealthiest citizens, among the wealthiest in Germany and the world.

Lösch and others have been accused not only of sensationalism but of exploitation in their use of real human material, however consensual that use has been.

A particularly striking recent case indicates the complexities, aesthetic, social, and moral of this growing practice in contemporary theatre. This is the *Disabled Theatre* of French choreographer Jerôme Bel, which has stirred heated discussion internationally since its premiere in 2013. Bel has been from the beginning of his career very much involved with the use of non-dance material in his work, indeed in France he is generally regarded as the leader of what is called the "non-dance" movement. In 2013 Bel was approached by the theatre HORA of Zurich, a producing organization founded in 1993 for people with learning disabilities, primarily Down's Syndrome. In the resulting work, each actor introduced him or herself in the audience, in the second part, each performed a dance sequence choreographed by themselves, and in the final section each spoke of their experience in creating this work. The production was both tremendously moving and profoundly disturbing, as it was clearly meant to be, constantly testing the boundaries not only between life and dance, but between how audiences are to react to a display that hovers somewhere between exploitation and expressive fulfillment, between shock and empathy, between aversion and fascination.

Although the body of the actor and the words he or she uses are in almost every theatre culture appropriated fairly directly from experience outside the theatre and thus are always susceptible to some "bleeding through" of their non-theatrical reality, the same cannot really be said for the general physical surroundings of the actor. The normal image of a theatrical performance is one that takes place inside a space particularly created for such activity. Thus, although though the actor and his language come in from outside, the space within which he performs is most often constructed as part of the theatre apparatus, even when it imitates extra-theatrical spaces. The Western Theatre, from the Greeks until the change toward more realism at the end of the eighteenth century, usually used fairly neutral backgrounds, predominantly composed of architectural elements, in front of which the actors performed. A similar neutrality is found in other major theatrical traditions, most famously in the Japanese Noh, with its invariable stylized background and its single pine tree.

This scenic approach did not significantly change until the rise of romanticism and realism encouraged designers to bring more and more of the real into their compositions. Historical dramas sought ever greater accuracy of visual detail and

contemporary ones exact reflections of the world outside the theatre. The Duke of Newcastle reported on the famous English director Charles Kean's Shakespearian production of the 1840s that "there is nothing which he introduces upon the stage for which he has not authority, and you may see the living representations of Shakespeare's characters, with the exact costume, the exact scenery" (Cole, 2011, p. 366). The culmination of this approach to visual realism in Shakespeare came at the end of the century in the productions of English directors Henry Irving and Herbert Beerbohm-Tree, although its limits were also suggested by perhaps the most famous production of this type, Beerbohm-Tree's 1911 revival of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with live rabbits and a mossy stage floor sprouting live flowers that could be plucked by the actors. Nor was Shakespeare unique in this late nineteenth century passion for "real" stage environments. The lavish historical spectacles that Sardou created for Sarah Bernhardt in France featured similar visual extravagance, carefully researched down to the last detail, such as the colors of glass available in the Byzantine court of the epic *Theodora*, which incidentally also included live lions and tigers (Hart, 1913, p. 266).

The same tendency could also be seen in the much more modest depictions of everyday life that also grew in popularity from midcentury on. Early in the nineteenth century, the traditional system of representing domestic rooms by painted side wings and a flat backdrop, often with two-dimensional furniture painted on them, began to be replaced by the modern box-set, much closer in appearance to a real room, with real doors and doorknobs, real molding, and dimensional furniture. Like monumental realistic Shakespeare, such domestic illusions of everyday life reached their apotheosis at the turn of the next century, in this case in the work of David Belasco, perhaps the most famous champion of realism in scenic environments. For one production, *The Easiest Way* (1909), Belasco purchased the furnishings, lighting devices, even the wall coverings from a tenement in New York' Tenderloin district and created an onstage replica from them (Larsen, 1989, p. 21-22) His production of *The Governor's Lady* (1912) received thunderous applause for its detailed recreation of one of a then-popular chain of New York restaurants, Child's, in which the audience could even smell the coffee and pancakes being prepared. Again, Belasco obtained actual elements from the Restaurant Company, and created so complete an image that, according to *Theatre Magazine* "It is as

if he had taken the audience between the intermission, walked them around the corner of Seventh Avenue and seated them to one side of the Child's restaurant at that location and let the last act be played there" (Philips, 1912, p. 104). Belasco himself boasted that he purposely blurred the boundaries of the real and the fictional, seeking to make his audience "forget that it is not looking into a real place."[6]

In fact, certain experimental productions were already literally taking audiences out of theatres and leading them to real locations, just as the *Theatre Magazine* review suggests. As early as the mid-1880s an amateur society in England, the Pastoral Players, caused a stir in artistic circles with their outdoor productions of pastoral plays by Shakespeare and Fletcher in the Coombe Wood in South London. Typical was the glowing report in *Era* magazine: "Not only did the mounting leave nothing to the imagination, more even than imitating reality with photographic accuracy, it was reality itself" (Anon, 1885, p. 12). Another journal suggested that such surroundings were far better than conventional stages not only for the audiences but also for the actors:

> Instead of facing thin edges of canvas and carpentry at the wings, they are looking at realities, real rounded tress, living grass, glades and prospect. Their scene is as good as that present to the audience. There is no sham. The sun is really shining for them, the birds are singing, the leaves and blades of grass and flowers really waving in the breeze (*Eastward Ho!*, 1885, p. 429).

Surely the most influential director internationally in the early twentieth century was Germany's Max Reinhardt, who became strongly associated with productions moving out into the real world. When Reinhardt began his career at the opening of the twentieth century, the fashionable style was detailed realism of the Belasco and Beerbohm-Tree variety, represented in Berlin by the work of Otto Brahm, of whom J. L. Styan reports: "Every prop or piece of furniture on stage had to be as authentic as possible, and every detail of speech or movement, however small, had to be perfected to the point where an audience was convinced it was seeing the real thing" (Styan; Reinhardt, 1982, p. 18). Reinhardt moved far beyond this,

[6] Quoted in Lise-Lone Marker, *David Belasco*: Naturalism in the American Theatre, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 66.

performing Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Everyman*, which inaugurated the Salzburg Festival in 1920, on a large platform set before the doors of the Salzburg Cathedral, and incorporating the entire area into the performance, with characters entering from side streets and bells rung or cries shouted at appropriate moments from towers elsewhere in the city. The next year he presented *The Merchant of Venice* in an actual small square in Venice with a bridge at the rear over a small canal, along which gondolas passed to and fro and upon which the elegant Spanish barque of the Prince of Aragon arrived with its noble suitor (Fischer-Lichte, 1999, p. 175-79). Various outdoor pageant and festival productions continued throughout the century, but the use of real scenery gained even greater importance after 1960 with the rise of what came to be often known as site-specific theatre, created in and for a specific location, in which the real elements of the surroundings were central to the artistic effect. After the 1970s, with the rise of interest in the environment, an important part of such work moved out of urban locations into the natural world, as in the monumental *Patria* cycle of Canadian artist R. Murry Schafer, in which the real elements include lakes, forests, sunrises, storms, even seasonal changes.

The actor has possessed a double quality from the very beginning, bringing a real body into theatre's fictive universe, but only when theatrical production left its enclosed and artificial world did the scenic environment of the actor begin to appear both real and a part of the fiction. An important part of theatrical production, however, is located between these positions, the stage object or property.[7] Unlike the scenery, to which it is closely related, the property has from the beginnings of theatre often not been created in the theatre, but has been a product of the real world outside, brought into the theatre. Like the actor, therefore, it had an existence in the real world before appearing on stage, but being inanimate, it is far less likely than the actor to betray that other existence to the audience. An actor may be accidentally hurt, or simply forget a line on stage, thus disrupting the fictive world, while a property, once introduced, seems safely at home there.

This does not mean that the "real" quality of a property cannot be emphasized. In

[7] In the first major theoretical study of stage properties, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: university of Michigan Press, 2003), Andrew Sofer distinguishes between props, which are actually used or manipulated by the actors, and stage objects, which are not. For his purposes this is an important distinction, but I am considered another with a different aspect of this question, which concerns both equally, so I will draw examples from both.

the late nineteenth century, as the scenic environment itself used more real elements, properties shared in this reorientation. A report in the London journal *Belgravia* in 1878 notes that "reality" has now taken over the stage — "Real horses, real dogs, real water, real pumps and washing tubs" (Cook, 1878, p. 287-8). The first items cited, real animals, have a particularly rich and interesting stage history, since their unconsciousness of the stage but their consciousness in general gives them an even greater hold on the external world than the body of the actor. One of the first and most famous stage dogs, Crab in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, owes much of his humor to the fact that he continues to operate in his own real universe, not that of the play, and the many theatre dogs, horses, and other animals that have followed him have provided a continuing site of theatrical negotiation of the real and the mimetic.

Throughout most of the history of the theatre, the presentation of the real has continued to take place within an over-arching physical arrangement. The audience has gathered in one location, and the performance, whatever its use of real elements, has taken place in another location observed by the spectators. In more recent times, however, audiences have been encouraged in a variety of ways to share the same space as the performers. This may be achieved either by the audience entering a mimetic constructed world, the actors being brought into the real world of the audience, or, most commonly some blending of the two, as in the popular immersive theatre of the British company Punchdrunk in the twenty-first century. In Punchdrunk productions, such as the 2003 adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Sleep No More*, a non-theatrical real space, such as an abandoned warehouse, is refitted with real properties to be made into an environment for the encounter of actors and audience.

Such "immersive" or "environmental" experiences, although they are physically composed almost entirely of real spaces and materials, still are significantly controlled and arranged by the producing organization. A much more complete integration of reality into a theatricalized consciousness is offered by the many experiments of the past two or three decades which encourage spectators to see the external world from a theatrical perspective. An early and relatively simple example of such work was Robert Whitman's 1976 *Light Touch*, which seated audiences inside a darkened warehouse and opened a loading door so that they could see the

street outside as if it were a stage setting, converting the real into a kind a theatre by altering the audience perspective. This strategy was merged with immersive theatre in the 1990 production of *Father was a Peculiar Man*, created by Reza Abdoh for the site-specific performance company En Garde Arts. Audience members, actors, and regular citizens circulated through a several block area of New York City, with audience members invited to consider whatever they saw as part of the performance. Other leading companies in Europe and the United States, such as Rimini Protokoll in Germany, have created similar immersive experiments in the world outside the theatre. Theorist Patrick Duggan memorably characterized this new theatrical experience inextricably mixing the real and the fictive as "mimetic shimmering" (Duggan, 2012, p. 100). One might expect such indeterminacy to be troubling, but contemporary audiences have demonstrated a keen interest in this latest incorporation of the real into the always changing operations of theatre. It is already clear that one of the significant areas of experimentation in twenty-first century theatre will be the continuing negotiations between that theatre and the reality which it both reflects and incorporates.

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