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**A PSYCHOANALYTIC DISCUSSION OF  
*THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY*  
(The Faction, New Diorama Theatre  
London, February 2015)**

**Based on a panel discussion organized by  
The Faction and Media and the Inner World**

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**THE PANEL IN CONTEXT:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO *THE TALENTED MR RIPLEY***

**Candida Yates**

This introduction provides a context for the transcript of the panel discussion on The Faction's production of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* that took place at London's New Diorama Theatre in February 2015.<sup>1</sup> The event was organized jointly by The Faction and Caroline Bainbridge and Candida Yates, Directors of the Media and Inner World research network. The network was first set up and funded by the AHRC in 2009 with the aim to create a dialogue between academics, media practitioners and creative and psychoanalysts and psychotherapists to explore the role of emotion and unconscious processes in the spheres of both practice and representation within media and culture. Caroline Bainbridge and I have worked with The Faction on a number of occasions, and, in the case of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, we also worked with the cast in rehearsals as consultants. This involved focusing on the psychoanalytic themes of the text whilst also using a process consultancy method to explore the relational and affective themes that emerged within rehearsals themselves.

The staging of the play in 2015 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of Patricia Highsmith's 1955 novel, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, which was the first book in the 'Ripliad', a series of five books about Ripley published between 1955-91.<sup>2</sup> (See MacRury, forthcoming). On the night of this performance and discussion panel, we were fortunate enough to have in the audience Highsmith's literary agent and friend, Tanja

Howarth, who knew Highsmith well and who contributed to the panel discussion from her seat in the audience. In the past, the books have been adapted for cinema – most famously by Anthony Minghella in his highly successful 1999 Oscar-winning film, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*,<sup>3</sup> starring Matt Damon as Tom Ripley and Jude Law as Dickie Greenleaf, where the psychological themes of jealousy, envy and desire are brought to the fore. The insecurities of Ripley were beautifully evoked by Matt Damon whose portrayal of him as a vulnerable young man who turns into a murderer also tapped into wider cultural anxieties at that time about the fragility of masculinity and the loss of narrative certainty about it as a cultural construction (Yates 2007).

The novel, film, and play tell the story of Tom Ripley, a young con artist with a troubled and unhappy back history (he was an orphan, raised by a cruel aunt) who later escapes to live in New York. There, he meets the rich shipping magnate, Herbert Greenleaf, who pays him to go and bring home his son Dickie who is living in Italy with his girlfriend, Marge. Ripley finds Dickie, befriends him and wants to emulate and possess his easy and glamorous playboy lifestyle, and this soon tips over into wanting to *be* him and take over his identity. When he is rejected by Dickie, Ripley murders him and then goes on to steal his life – forging his signature and keeping his death a secret whilst also stealing and spending his inheritance. After killing Dickie’s friend Freddie (who discovers the truth), Tom Ripley escapes to Greece and is free to re-invent himself once more.

As the transcript of the panel discussion makes clear, the story of Ripley contains a number of psychological themes that relate to emotional states such as jealousy, envy and narcissistic rage – all of which converge around questions of identity and identity theft – a theme that is also highly relevant for contemporary audiences. The timeliness of that theme not only relates to the widespread crimes of identity theft in a digital age, but also, ontologically, it refers to the way that boundaries of identity and the self in the late modern era are more ambiguous and less fixed than previously.

The cultural processes that contribute to the fluidity of modern identities and which challenge the boundaries of the older social order can be traced back to the 1950s and 60s when consumer culture – often referred to as ‘Americanization’ – emerged as a dominant force in the US and in Europe (Hebdige 2002). *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is set

in this era when mass consumption began to take hold – particularly in the form of American mass consumption where the real and symbolic inheritance of the father (as symbolized by Ripley’s relationship to his father) was being challenged. As Iain MacRury says in the panel discussion, one can see that process at work in Highsmith’s novel not only through the display of consumer objects in the story (and the large red fridge stands partly as a feminized symbol of Americanization in this respect) but also through though the faux bohemian rebellion of the son (Dickie) against his father (Herbert), the respectable bourgeois businessman.

The legacy of that process of cultural change was evident both in the counter cultures of the 1960s and 70s but also in the developments of late modern consumer capitalism. Today, where the culture of mediatization shapes all aspects of life, the notion of the fluid self can sometimes be viewed positively as connoting the potential for new modes of subjectivity to emerge that tap into and extend the contemporary mobile world of digital communication (MacRury and Yates 2017). And yet the fragilities of contemporary subjectivity are also often emphasized, where the uncertainties and risks of late ‘liquid’ modernity have given rise to new anxieties about the meanings of selfhood and its fragility in precarious world (Bauman 2000). It is against this backdrop of risk and emotional vulnerability that notions of ‘identity theft’ take on meaning and resonate for contemporary audiences who engage with *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and its themes. Ripley’s slippery personality provides a perverse example of making up the rules as he goes along, where desire for the other also becomes linked to a deadly game of flirting with the identity of another. Here, the porous boundaries between self and other are not only related to notions of potential space, a rebellion against the establishment or even an experience of empathy with another; but rather they also signify a lack of ego strength linked to the forensic pathologies of a narcissistic personality disorder.

The performative aspects of Ripley’s identity resonate with contemporary cultural and psychoanalytic themes of narcissism that Christopher Lasch brought to our attention in his 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism*. Here, Lasch applies a Kleinian inflected reading of narcissism to argue that the cultural conditions of consumer culture, the emergence of identity politics and the preoccupation with the performance of self that have created a new superficial personality type that on the surface seems confident and

self-assured, and yet that, underneath, is vulnerable, and driven by self-hatred and a desperate need for approval. In the current celebrity-driven era, where it is said that a superficial culture of performance dominates, clinical concerns about personality disorders are also widespread, and Lasch's 1979 thesis has become popular once more. Therefore, the notion of identity theft, which is a theme of the Ripliad, not only rings true for contemporary audiences in terms of the ubiquity of it as an actual crime in a digital age where identity can be easily stolen for purposes of fraud and so on. It also has psychological and emotional connotations that evoke the psychosocial processes discussed by Lasch and others, thereby reminding us that Ripley is a villain for the contemporary age.

The novel and its adaptations are profoundly psychological and as panellist, Brett Kahr discusses, Ripley's unhappy childhood at the hands of his sadistic aunt provides important hints of his dysfunctional personality and also his subsequent murderous behaviour. Ripley's personal insecurity is evident at social and psychological levels and shows itself in his envy of Dickie's indulgent lifestyle, but also in his jealousy and envy of Dickie's partner, Marge. Psychologically, jealousy and envy are closely interlinked and yet are important distinctions. Whereas 'Envy concerns what you would like to have but don't possess... jealousy concerns what you have and do not want to lose' Van Sommers, 1988: 1). One becomes sexually jealous when one fears that a third party is going to take away someone whom one loves and desires. Jealous feelings are bound up with feelings of rejection and the threat of public humiliation and can strike at the heart of social and psychological identities, which explains why depictions of jealousy are a recurring trope of films, novels and theatre (Yates 2007; 2015a; 2015b).

Jealousy occupies a central place in the psychoanalytic narrative of Oedipal love and rivalry. For Freud (1922), feelings of jealousy are 'normal' and inevitable and yet jealousy can also take on pathological forms linked to unresolved Oedipal and homoerotic desire, which is projected onto the partner. Klein (1957) links jealousy to the depressive position and a capacity to cope with ambivalence. Yet as Joan Riviere (1932) and later Klein (1957) argue, the experience of jealousy and the threat that it represents may cause the subject to regress back into paranoid schizoid modes of relating where destructive, primitive feelings of envy emerge once more. Here, the greedy, narcissistic

lover may create in their partner a feeling of being consumed and ‘sucked dry’ by their possessive attentions (Baumgart 1990: 203). We see this scenario in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* narrative when Dickie Greenleaf begins to find Tom Ripley’s jealous attention increasingly ‘needy’ and claustrophobic. Ripley’s behaviour in this context seems to evoke the primitive wish for oral gratification discussed by Riviere (1932) and Klein (1957) with reference to the phantasies that are stirred up in relation to the first infantile relationship at the breast. As they discuss, although this relationship does not involve three live people, it does involve a subject and two imaginary objects and the psychic meanings that are attached to those objects may become displaced onto later jealousy triangles (Yates, 2007) as in Ripley’s jealousy of Marge or Freddie.

The representation of Tom Ripley’s narcissism is present in the depiction of his slippery identity and in the lack of boundaries between himself and the object of envious desire for the handsome Dickie Greenleaf. From a Kleinian perspective, this behaviour is paranoid schizoid in character, evoking an early, ‘primitive’ stage of development when the boundaries between self and other are not yet established and when psychological defences are mobilised in order to defend against the threat and envy of the other who seems to possess everything that is needed for the good life – which in phantasy is grounded in a fight for survival. Dickie’s rejection of Tom and the shaming of him in connection to his neediness and also his lack of social status and desirability results in Tom killing Dickie by lashing out at him in a rowing boat with an oar in a fit of narcissistic rage – something, which as Kahr points out, is extraordinarily phallic in its representation.

The depiction in *The Talented Mr Ripley* of jealousy, envy and desire with its links to the forensic themes of identity theft and murderous aggression need to be interpreted and read in conjunction with an understanding of the cultural contexts in which the story is represented and experienced. The latter has links both to wider concerns about masculinity, but also more recently to anxieties about identity and the ubiquity of performance as a way of life. Mark Leipacher’s adaptation of Highsmith’s story on behalf of The Faction and the wonderful performance of Tom Ripley by The Faction actor, Christopher Hughes, skilfully brought to life for the current age the complex, affective dynamics of Highsmith’s 1950s narrative. The psychodynamic and

cultural elements of the story that I have identified continue to resonate with audiences at a time when the dilemmas about identity and its boundaries reverberate powerfully at conscious and unconscious levels of experience.

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## Notes

1. The panel discussion first took place on 14 February 2015. It was reconvened as part of an ESRC Social Sciences study day on 'The Talented Mr. Ripley and identity theft' at Bournemouth University in November 2015.
2. See Patricia Highsmith 1955; 1970; 1974; 1980 and 1991.
3. Details of the film, its cast and production crew can be found at Internet Movie Database: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0134119>. Accessed 4 June 2017.

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**IDENTITY THEFT IN THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY  
PANEL DISCUSSION**

**Mark Leipacher, Christopher Hughes, Brett Kahr,  
Iain MacRury, and Candida Yates (Chair)**

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ML: My name is Mark Leipacher and I'm the Artistic Director of The Faction and also the Director of this evening's performance of "The Talented Mr. Ripley". I want to introduce you to our post show Q and A, hosted by the Media and the Inner World research network. Media and the Inner World is an organization that explores arts events from a psycho-cultural perspective. The Faction and Media and the Inner World have worked together over the last three years on discussions following our productions of *Mary Stuart* and *Thebes* and for me they're always fascinating and enlightening and enriching parts of the process and so I'm thoroughly looking forward to this event as well. Professor Candida Yates will be chairing this evening's panel of guest speakers and I hope that people will join in the dialogue and continue a debate following on from the production. We hope that the relationship is going to continue between Media in the Inner World and The Faction, and we're actually looking at how psychoanalysts and academics such as Professor Yates and her MIW Co-Director, Professor Caroline Bainbridge, can support the production process in rehearsals as they have done for *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. With that in mind, we hope that we might generate further material in the future, so that's a very exciting development of our relationship. Without any further ado I'm going to hand over to Professor Candida Yates.

[Applause].

CY: Thank you Mark and what a fantastic production.

Audience: Hear, hear.

[Applause].

CY: I'm really pleased that our Media in the Inner World network has contributed to the shaping of this production. As Mark says, Media and the Inner World is a research network which brings together media

professionals and creative, psychoanalysts, psychotherapists and academics to explore the place of psychotherapy and emotion in different aspects of media, creative performance and popular culture. Today, on this panel we have Professor Iain MacRury who is from Bournemouth University and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, author, and broadcaster, Brett Kahr, who has worked extensively with the Media in the Inner World network and who is also a Visiting Professor at Bournemouth University. We will also ask questions of Chris Hughes and his performance as Ripley, too.

IM: Thank you Chris, thank you cast and thank you everybody that put it together because I've just had a really brilliant few hours. I enjoyed watching and thinking about what was presented. I came across this story in its form as a novel, and it's a novel from the 1950s written in the [United] States and it's about a kind of 1950s moment. In a way, I also think of it as a novel which is a gateway to the 1960s, and to some of the dramas and some of the kind of feelings and ways of being that the 60s came to be about.

One of the little mottos around the 1960s was the idea of the refusal of inheritance. It does seem to be a really important theme that was captured brilliantly by the Director in this production in the way that the story was composed. Throughout, there was an insistence on the importance of that story of Dickie Greenleaf, who's refused his inheritance and also who's refused to be inherited by his inheritance – we might think of Bourdieu's sociology here. It seems to be that that's the large narrative space in which an awful lot of this story takes place. The question of him not going home becomes a question about identity and refusal. The peculiar trope of Tom being sent as a Jamesean emissary across the Atlantic<sup>1</sup> is a subtle way of exploring that space of refusal. It seems remarkable that he won't return because as I see it, Dickie has an enormously obvious reason to go home. His mother was dying. There seems to be a problem in the Greenleaf family about thinking about that difficult fact, and about what that means. Tom Ripley's job, Tom's 'secret' role seems to be partly about filling up the space that's been left about the family's inability to think about the death of their mother. I think the role the mother - off stage and behind the scenes -



is hugely powerful though largely unspoken. Tom wonderfully conveys both an earnestness and a commitment to his task but also a thoughtlessness about everything that's going on 'underneath'. Everybody misses what happening, the production of this story, is captured in the staging - wonderfully designed in the stage-space, with a huge hole in the middle. I'm sure that was a deliberate thing - the mystery in the middle - hidden in plain sight. And of course that gulf adds to the physical drama of the stage because you do want to know what's in it! Is somebody going to fall in - on purpose or by accident? It adds to the drama of it all, and that's a notable aspect of the play - a physical reminder and neat way to stage the suspense that Highsmith is known for.

The question of physical instability is important because that's wonderfully captured by Chris as Ripley. The physical differences between the characters are pronounced. Yet they seem to be able to merge. The axis around which that difference is enacted and performed for us is one of stability and integration versus disintegration - playing a part and falling apart. I noticed a line that comes up a couple of times and emphasizes *keeping it together and not falling apart*. Chris as Ripley does a wonderful performance of both falling apart and not falling apart.

CH: Thanks.

IM: Another observation. I was sitting here in the first section of the play thinking, isn't there a lot of *skin* on display here [audience laughs]. That was important in a play about costumes and disguises. Skin here is a kind of disguise laid bare. One way of looking at this is to say Ripley's is a story about skin; it's a story about somebody whose skin isn't thick enough. It's a story which begins with somebody who looks pale and pasty ... And that also comes across in the cinematic adaptation by the way. And it's part of the novel too - in a different way. I don't think this semi-naked-ness is just a kind of comedic display - to isolate Tom's 'real' appearance as pale or strange or inadequate - not just that. It's also about something different. It's about the fact that his relationships with the world are not properly delineated, he doesn't have the things that on the one hand would keep his

affections, his feelings *out*, (he seemingly falls in love quickly, and he falls in love very easily). But also in a sense he can't hold any of that love *in*. He can't quite hold any of his relationships in. He's always lonely because he doesn't have enough body or enough skin to keep everything where it should be – neither here nor there. I think that porosity actually is something that goes right into the depths of the story that Patricia Highsmith was also personally interested in – from the point of view of her own sense of a troubled life.

Ripley is also a story about people passing through borders too easily – boundaries failing or encasing and trapping. It relates to not knowing whether or not you've got a passport, and then trying to move from one place to the other. Even the borders between something like murder and suicide become strangely mixed. So this is a place without firm-enough categories, it's a drama about people without good enough categories to sustain identity. It's a place where stable, idealized identity becomes a fantasy, and where, it is also a little unreal. That's because there's not enough space for each other somehow, no still spots, from within which identities might be reciprocally created and contained.

I've got one final point because the bit that finishes off the story about skin is the final scene which was done really triumphantly – when Ripley stands there on the prow of the stage – and on the prow of the boat – and he talks about *armour*. Ripley says that he going to walk into Greece – across the border - wearing armour, and of course that transition from the naked boy on the beach and then the hero in the armour refers to way that armour is another type of skin, but that's gone wrong somehow – skin that's too thin becomes a skin that is too thick – a costume.

CY: A theme of this panel is the notion of identity theft and its representation in the play. When Caroline Bainbridge and I worked with the company we focused on the themes of jealousy, envy and flirtation and their relationship to the psychic boundaries of intersubjectivity and object relations, and how different aspects of the self are managed in that context. I am now going to turn to Brett Kahr who will perhaps return to some of those themes.

BK: Thank you. Good evening, ladies and gentleman. I fully endorse all of the kudos extended to the magnificently accomplished and hard-working cast of actors and to Mark Leipacher and the whole creative team. We have just witnessed a truly riveting theatrical production, so I thank you all. And I thank Iain MacRury for his remarks. I will pick up what Iain said about ‘skin’, which, I consider really quite vital to this whole process.

Candida Yates has asked us to think tonight about the problem of ‘identity theft’. Now, I imagine that most of us watching *The Talented Mr. Ripley* this evening will never have committed a murder. In all likelihood, none of us will ever have bashed someone on the head with an oar, crushing a person’s skull, as ‘Tom Ripley’ has done. But, in one way or another we may all be perpetrators of identity theft. One cannot be a human being without having committed multiple acts of identity theft from earliest infancy onwards. In order to embark upon life as an infant, and then to become a grown-up, each of us must identify constantly with our parents or primary caregivers. Somehow, we learn how to step into the shoes – into the *skin* – of these important adult figures, learning how to wear their clothes or how to speak with the same accent, or how to endorse the same religious beliefs and cultural beliefs, and so forth.

So, it is absolutely normative in human behaviour to begin life by stealing, or by attempting to steal, the identity of someone else through this process of wholesale infantile identification. Most of us manage to take pieces – crucial pieces – and often very good pieces of other people’s identities and “enskin” them – taking them into our minds – and then we put these pieces of identity inside ourselves, as Iain has suggested, in a comfortable, harmonious way.

But sadly, not everybody can manage ‘identity theft’ in a calm and mentally healthy way, and often, we find that many struggle with such a theft, so much so, that they become quite psychologically unwell in the process. Back in 1964, an American psychologist – Dr. Milton Rokeach – published a very, very popular book at the time called *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. For those of you who do not recognize the location, Ypsilanti is a small town in Michigan. Rokeach worked in a psychiatric hospital there, where he met not

one, not two, but, rather, *three* in-patients, all of whom claimed to be Jesus Christ. The book tells the very poignant story of what happened when Dr. Rokeach put these three ‘Christ’s’ together in one room. [Laughter from audience]. It proved to be very interesting, because each ‘Christ’ claimed to be the *real* Jesus Christ, dismissing the other two as psychiatric patients. [Laughter from audience]. So, we have here an inkling of what happens when identity theft becomes ossified into what we would describe in the world of psychology as a psychotic state of mind: a very *mad* state of mind.

This play is fundamentally about murder and, also, about identity. But, additionally, we might describe it as a play about madness. And we should regard ourselves as very honoured to have Tanja Howarth with us tonight. She worked for many years as Patricia Highsmith’s literary agent. I hope that Tanja will be pleased that many of us have begun to rediscover Patricia Highsmith anew, and to recognize her increasingly as a great classical, tragic writer, who understood madness extremely well. Indeed, I regard this play about ‘Tom Ripley’ as good as any ancient Greek drama. I think it certainly holds its own with those of Euripides in many, many respects.

You know, on the surface, the play seems to be merely the story of a crazy person who has ‘gone off the deep end’, bashing his friend’s skull with an oar, but actually, from a psychological standpoint, this story contains a great deal of truth. My colleagues and I in the field of forensic mental health have often encountered such people in our work – people who share such qualities with ‘Tom Ripley’. Many years ago, Sigmund Freud wrote that creative artists – such as poets, novelists, playwrights – possess an intuitive understanding of the depths of human psychology more than psychologists do; and I think that we can include Patricia Highsmith in this group of quite psychologically sophisticated writers. I find her to be a most brilliant psychologist, in fact. Candida Yates mentioned envy and jealousy in her introduction to this evening’s discussion; and I agree that these aspects of psychological functioning might well be quite crucial to an understanding of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Indeed, ‘Tom Ripley’ suffers much envy, in part, due to his profound experience of childhood deprivation.

But in addition to the role of envy, I think that we must also explore the notion of castration anxiety in this story. As a classical Freudian, I regard castration anxiety very seriously – a man’s terror of the loss of his potency, either real or imagined. All men will fear, at some point, a lack of potency and an insufficiency of masculinity – whatever that might mean – and so forth. Indeed, in this adaptation of the novel, we have a reference, in Act I, to the aunt calling ‘Tom’ a ‘sissy’ or, in other words, a castrated boy. I find this reference quite chilling. And when I work psychotherapeutically with male patients, I often hear about experiences of these men suffering similar attacks to their sense of potency or masculinity. And these attacks really do exert a profoundly traumatic impact, threatening one’s very sense of bodily identity and psychological identity. In more extreme cases, such attacks on potency can contribute to the development of madness. So castration anxiety does play quite an important role.

If a man has an opportunity to exert his sense of potency, he can stave off the madness. In desperation, ‘Tom’ takes the oar – a very evident phallic symbol – and he attempts to restore his potency by thrashing a man called ‘Dickie’ to death. Of course, this represents a false potency, rather than a true potency; and consequently, ‘Tom’ begins to regress further and further into states of madness. But in clutching at the phallic oar, ‘Tom’ affords himself the momentary opportunity to counteract the castrating assault from the aunt who lambasted him during his childhood as a ‘sissy’.

Of course, we do not know whether Patricia Highsmith, the author, conceptualised any of this in a conscious way; but she certainly brought a great psychological understanding to the portrayal of ‘Tom Ripley’. In other words, ‘Tom’, having felt attacked by his aunt, clutches the oar in a desperate attempt to restore the lost potency – the castrated potency – of his boyhood, believing himself now to have the phallus of which he had once felt deprived. I regard this detail as not merely Highsmith’s dramatic licence but, rather, as a very astute piece of depth psychology.

Indeed, ‘Tom Ripley’ demonstrates not only murderousness but, also, a phenomenon that we observe from time to time in psychotherapeutic work, namely, a variant of transvestism known as ‘homeovestism’ – a type of sexual perversion. We all know that the trans person dresses in the clothes of the opposite sex: for instance, a man wearing a woman’s clothing. But the ‘homeovestite’ dresses in the clothes of another person of the *same* sex, who shares the same sort of genitalia: in this case, a man stealing the clothing of another man and then donning it for purposes of sexual arousal. We find that men who become homeovestites do so, quite unconsciously, in order to enhance their own sense of castrated potency, and they derive a boost in masculinity from wearing the clothing of another man.

So, when ‘Tom’ dresses in the clothing of ‘Dickie’ and then, when he takes hold of the oar ... well, he believes that he has really restored his lost potency. These seemingly odd moments which we have witnessed tonight make brilliant dramatic sense. So, I congratulate Patricia Highsmith.

CY: Thank you.

[Applause].

CY: I wonder if you [Chris] have any thoughts about what’s been said.

CH: Oh I’ve got so many thoughts about what’s been said there, it’s so interesting how often you concur with the conversations that we had in the rehearsal rooms when we were chiselling this down, and that’s fascinating. I really need to ponder the idea of being in another person’s skin in order to develop it. I know nothing about psychotherapy but in terms of playing someone, I try not to judge them or their thoughts and it’s difficult to respond to what you said as ‘myself’ – if you see what I mean. I think Tom would probably be quite embarrassed about it.

CY: The play touches on identity theft, which is significant in the sense that it was once a book, then a film and now a play. A recurring theme of the play is narcissism, which can also be linked to the idea of identity theft. It is often said that narcissistic people have a thin boundary between self and

other and such people also get a sense of themselves from the outside because they lack an authentic or core sense of self. The emergence of narcissism as a character type is often traced back to the 1960s and so it is interesting that the play is still relevant today and seems to speak to us so freshly. It taps into contemporary notions of performativity, which Christopher Lasch linked to what he called 'a culture of narcissism'.

I wonder if anyone in the audience wants to respond to some of the themes that have been made?

Audience: Iain referred to the fact that Tom goes through these cycles of almost crashing and then reviving. By the same token, Tom is clinically an accidental murderer – I mean he doesn't set out to kill the first guy and not the second guy either. Why is it that he isn't crushed by guilt? And why is it that he actually doesn't fall apart? In the end he is quite a strong person, his armour – his skin protects him. I would imagine that if you're an accidental murderer that at some point you would find the pressure intolerable in terms of trying to maintain your composure, but he doesn't fall apart!

IM: I suppose he doesn't fall apart *yet*. Who knows? The suspense comes from partly from this falling and not falling apart I thought.

BK: Well, I regard these as hugely complex questions. Our colleague in the audience has just described 'Tom Ripley' as an 'accidental murderer', and I suppose we might question that. From a clinical perspective, I doubt whether anyone can become a murderer 'accidentally'. We know from forensic studies and from psychoanalytical studies that the rage required to perpetrate such an act will start to simmer at a very early age. Returning once again to the theme of castration, I find it extraordinary that Miss Highsmith chose to call the protagonist's first boyfriend 'Dick' and his second boyfriend 'Peter' – both nicknames for the penis. 'Tom Ripley' struggles with a great deal of castration in his mind, and a great deal of rage, and in his wish to incorporate the 'dick' and the 'peter' into his fragile sense of masculine identity, he murders both of these men in order to take control. Perhaps Tanja Howarth, or someone else, can enlighten us about

whether Patricia Highsmith ever wrote about, or talked about, how she came to choose the names of her characters

T. Howarth: No, no, the only reference she ever made about inventing Ripley was that she saw a young, a beautiful young man walking into the sea and the sun was going down and he almost disappeared in the fading light and that gave her the idea so... if your interpretation of the names have any kind of foundation – well, I don't think she would have talked about it! [laughs]

Audience: So actually, it's not about the man, it's about the woman who saw a boy walking into the sea; it's actually about her perception.

IM: One of the things that perhaps makes Tom less than accidental, and I see what you mean by that, is he seems to be incredibly good at *relaying* guilt, so there's lots of little instances where perhaps you know it's one of the advantages of the thin-porosity of his skin and nothing sticks to him, or nothing sticks inside him. It came across very well in the performance and more so in the novel, how with his little asides, he makes Marge feel guilty. For instance, Marge feels guilty because perhaps her letter that she wrote to Dickie was a prompt to his imagined suicide. Similarly, I don't think that Herbert really escapes the scenario without a shred of guilt. I think he finds it difficult to feel it, to put his finger on it. It was acted very well because Herbert really is somebody who doesn't seem to be that close to his own feelings, and is very good at closing them off – good at not knowing, not seeing and not detecting. So I think that as well as the complexity of whether he's guilty or not, I think everybody around him shares in guilt. This adds to confusion. Tom's the kind of person that, when around him people feel guilty, perhaps because in a sense he's not doing that emotional work of owning his crimes. He's incapable of fully feeling that guilt for himself.

ML: One of our questions when rehearsing this play was whether or not we needed to decide on what was Tom's 'talent'. The idea of his manipulation of the people that surround him was what we came down to: the way he manoeuvres them. The act of impersonation is the talent that he claims he's very good at, but nobody really tests that. The idea of him being an



accidental murderer is profoundly fascinating to me. In the rehearsal room you say: 'he is a real person, and we've all been in circumstances and at a certain point you might find yourself doing something terrible and that's not indefensible'. I don't know whether the idea of him being an 'accidental murderer' is necessarily true because he killed someone and made a choice to do it, but there's also a question about whether he starts off the play as a 'murderer' and I think that's fascinating.

Audience: I think it's quite interesting that none of you are talking about class because he's brought up like 'trash' and he's only able to get into the party where he meets the Greenleafs because he's borrowed a Princeton jacket from a roommate who is 'slumming it'. So his ability to manipulate everybody comes from his very pensive study of the people who are at the level to which he wants to aspire. The reason that he kills Dickie is because that is his only way of entering into the class that he feels that he entitled to belong and I think it's important to explore that.

CY: It's true, it's in the book, you know Freddie knows something's up because when he meets Ripley in what is meant to be Dickie's apartment, he looks around him and it doesn't look right. In other words, Ripley's lack of cultural capital – which for him is a source of shame, also gives him away.

IM: Well, he's played as an English character and English people are supposed to be much more in tune to class and conscious of the nuances of it – and to the people who are faking it, than apparently less class-conscious Americans.

CY: But what of Marge? I so enjoyed the performance of Marge (played by Natasha Rickman) and seeing events from her perspective. It was a fantastic performance, really strong!

[Applause] ...

CY: Psychoanalytic understandings of jealousy and its projection onto women are relevant here. Psychoanalyst, Ernest Jones spoke about this in his paper on jealousy when he said that jealous men often project their feelings of lack and vulnerability onto women so that they – the women – are left

feeling like they are the jealous ones. But in the play, I liked the way that Marge refused to take up that position of lack and instead kept bouncing back, and as a woman I enjoyed seeing that, it was brilliant.

IM: I think this question about talent and what is Mr. Ripley's talent is very fundamental and it's right there in the title. I think he's talented, I don't think he's as talented in the way the company on the stage is. In the case of Ripley, his talent is also a deficit: It is a psychopathic talent. If asked to identify what Ripley's talent is, I'd say that it lies in the fact that he has not yet died, quite literally, because there is a suicidal core to him given the early deprivation and the lack of sufficient will to live as himself. And whether it's his yearning to be part of the other social classes as our colleague at the back of theatre has suggested, or whether it wants to be taken in by a powerful protective father figure like Mr. Greenleaf senior, it may be a combination of all of that.

But I think his talent is that he hasn't died, and I actually think that that was also Patricia Highsmith's greatest talent. She did not die even in the face of a very difficult psychological environment. Just even from the some cursory reading of biography we know she was supposed to have been aborted as a baby. Her mother had attempted to swallow poison and the abortion did not work, Later in life she told her daughter Patricia you were supposed to be dead and yet she survived and she channelled that in a really sublimatory fashion into creativity and lived a long and productive and creative life, so I think, I think Tom Ripley's greatest talent is that he had not yet died.

Can I just add that what might be meant by 'talented' was that he wasn't found out, rather than die, because all through the books what Patricia Highsmith was so brilliant about was that she produced a murderer we didn't want to be found out. I couldn't go on reading the last book, *Ripley Under Water* because I thought 'now he's going to be found out', and no other writer to my mind has managed to do this, to actually produce this wonderful elegant strangely loveable murderer.

ML: He was a profound challenge; I think we are all quite fond of Tom now as well, but it's an interesting thing being an actor on stage for 3 hours with an audience knowing that the task is to accomplish what Highsmith so eloquently does is to have people by the end of the play not want him to get caught.

BK: Absolutely.

IM: I just want to say something about the fridge [laughter] ... it was a very significant presence. It's big. It's prominent in the staging. I think it does talk to some of the questions about class and culture. This is not just a psychological play. What Dickie and Marge are doing in *Mongibello* is trying to live outside the kind of structures that their class gives them, the constraints and so on – as well as entitlements and privileges. Their life constitutes a kind of bohemianism. One view is that this story is partly a depiction of some of the risks in that bohemian American-in-Europe idea of adventure. So it shows a generation that is trying and somewhat failing to live without class, to live a narrative of refusing class and privilege (Dickie the artist and free spirit) but with rather a weak commitment to that ideal. So it reminds us of kind of half-hearted in-between refusal of the wealth and comfort that the young couple take for granted. So to the fridge: the fridge seems important because it points to something about the uncreativity of that world Dickie and Marge are making – a faux bohemian fantasy rather than a life lived in authentic refusal.

It also partly connects to the idea of talent. The fridge also caught my eye because there was an awful lot spoken about it in the production, but also in the era of 1950s Americanization and Europe. Consumer items like fridges became a hugely powerful part of the narrative. Along with cars they formed a vision for a streamlined and all new type of consumption – the birth of lifestyle. This was is hugely important in terms of changing mores, but it was also threatening to a different type of kind of revolt against the old traditional-familial-domestic order, a different kind of modernist refusal – which aspired to be more bohemian. On stage, the fridge helps us to see Marge and Dickie's lifestyle as a kind of padded bohemia but which is

actually slowly being invaded by the consumerist-modernity of a red fridge [laughter].

IM: The fridge is, largely, identified with Marge, who is often draped over it. It's also a prop for reminding us of the inheritance trope and, perhaps, hinting at ideas about maternal-familial care. It is a feminized object. The fridge is a gift that no one seems to want. Had the novel been called *The Gifted Mr Ripley* it would have been an entirely different story – because gifts are things that people know how to receive and that place us in relationships.

Dickie doesn't really know how to receive the gifts he's been given. Tom is desperate to be given such gifts but nobody's giving them to him – and he must appropriate them by other means. Perhaps, instead of gifts you sometimes get talents? The talents that Tom's got are about calculation and astonishing quick thinking. Perhaps he's developed that talent for calculation as a compensation for the fact that he lives in a world without a kind of relational consummation and the real transfer of good between the generations and in relationships – often wrapped up as gifts, intimacies and inheritances. Calculation is a wonderful talent to have, but Tom can't quite live with it alone. It's not enough. Maybe this is really a story about the pain of (only) having the capacity to calculate. Tom's talent lies in a story where for whatever reason he couldn't receive the 'normal' gifts of intergenerational sharing – things that the parental generations might have given or that present generations for some reason exclude you from ... so I think that's why the fridge is very important because really it's the gift that nobody seems to know how to receive – even while being the gift that speaks of something everybody needs in the heat of Mongibello – but relegated to that horrible dark corner of the room. [Laughter]

CY: Thank you [Applause] ... So Brett, let's finish with your thoughts...

BK: Thank you. Well, I have just one final thought. It pleases me very much that Iain has brought up the fridge. We might consider this to be the ultimate symbol of coldness and lack of warmth. Tanja, you told us that you enjoyed the fact that 'Ripley' escapes in the end and does not get

caught. I must tell you that I, on the other hand, felt deeply disappointed when the four policemen failed to arrest him. If they *had* arrested him, then ‘Tom’ would, at least, have experienced some looking-after and some warmth. [Laughter from the audience]. I think that we should remember that in the world created by Patricia Highsmith, it becomes very hard for anybody to achieve a consolidated sense of identity. And I find it quite ‘chilling’ – *literally* – that in this theatrical version of the novel, we have fridges strewn across the set. Everyone seems to be rather cold: fathers who do not travel to Italy to find their own missing sons; children who lose their parents; dying and dead mothers. The attacks on early attachment relationships in this story can only be described as profound – attacks on attachments between children and parents – and this sets the seeds of murderousness and of a desperate attempt to conquer a faltering sense of identity, resulting in ‘identity theft’. I find this work very, very profound. But let us remember that, in spite of all of these terrible issues, people struggling in this way can still be helped with the right form of psychotherapeutic treatment.

[Applause]

CY: Well, thank you very much and if you’re interested in the events that Media and the Inner World Research network have put on, we’re at [www.miwnet.org](http://www.miwnet.org). Finally, I want to thank the cast again for their fantastic performance,

[Applause]...

ML: I just want to echo this chorus of gratitude and to say on behalf of my co-Artistic Director, Rachel Valentine Smith, and me and the whole of The Faction, thank you very much to Candida and to the panel, to Iain and to Brett. Thank you to the audience for your contributions and also for watching the show. I hope you enjoyed your evening. Thank you all very much.

[Applause]

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**Notes**

1. The plot device shared with Henry James's *The Ambassadors* is widely noted.

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