The Theatrical in the Sexual, the Sexual in the Theatrical: Some Parallels and Provocations
Rabey, David Ian

Wagner, Richard. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*. Eds. and trans. Stewart Spencer and Barry
    Millington. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1987.
Wheeler, Michael. *Heaven, Hell and the Victorians*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994.
Zimmern, Helen. *Arthur Schopenhauer: His Life and his Philosophy*. London: Longmans Green,
    1876.

The Theatrical in the Sexual, the Sexual in the Theatrical: Some Parallels and Provocations

David Ian Rabey
Aberystwyth University

In this essay, I wish to open up some questions and speculations about recent theoretical paradigms of sexuality, and their points of contact with various elements of theatricality. In so doing, I hope to confirm and extend recent observations about the characteristic theatricality of the specifically sexual aspect of the human imagination and consciousness, and also to suggest how the theatre, in its differing forms, is a particularly informative analytic manifestation (and manifestation for analysis) of the (often contradictory) human imaginative impulses associated with the dynamics of eroticism: the extrapolations of the imagination, the reflexive self-consciousness, the interrogation and suspension of notional "reality," the dialectic of presence and absence (and proximity and distance), and the stretching and challenging of time.[1] Thus I might offer a first step towards identifying an *erotic* dynamic at work in theatrical performance and spectating.

THE VERY THOUGHT OF YOU

> Desire does not create the self; rather it is part of the continuing
> process of creating the self.
> — Simon 43

I want to consider terms for articulation of the sexual, and its performative transformations, from two theoretical angles. The first is William Simon's *Postmodern Sexualities* (1996); its back cover poses the question: "What are we really talking about when we talk about sex?", and suggests that the volume be classified under "Sociology/Cultural studies/Gender studies." However, I suggest that the book also has intriguing ramifications and resonances for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies; and that these disciplines can in turn

offer some aesthetic illustrations in support of Simon's model of the human sexual consciousness as crucially *dramatic and theatrical*. In this respect, Simon is extending some proposals of Erving Goffman, whose book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) indicated the pertinence of dramatic paradigms to the performances involved in social life, but Simon is refocusing the vocabulary of dramatic and theatrical terms to present an analysis of the sexual consciousness, individual imagination, and interpersonal (re)negotiation. Second, I consider *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire* (2002) by Katharine Liepe-Levinson, who has worked as a dancer, actor, choreographer, director, playwright, and educational consultant. As her title suggests, Liepe-Levinson offers a study of contemporary North American male and female strip shows, but as a basis for considering wider issues of (often contradictory) sex roles, cultural positions, and performance practices, where the conventionally separated binary opposition of "fantasy" and "reality" is subjected to the promise of interrogatory entwinements. She examines how the theatrical can make itself specifically and pre-eminently sexual in its arousal of the imagination; however, her observations have resonances for theatrical and "real-life" interpersonal performances beyond those of the strip show.

Ken Plummer's foreword to Simon's book concisely proposes an initial connection through its claim that Simon presents a model of human consciousness and sexuality in which "[t]he construction of the self is highlighted [...] through contexts of complexity, pluralism and choice" (Simon xiii). In this process, in Plummer's words, "human sexualities are best seen as drama" in which "[a]n elaborate set of stagecraft rules and performance guides engulf our sexualities and bring them into passion" (xii). Plummer goes so far as to assert that "sexuality for human beings must have life breathed into it through drama," acknowledging that "[f]ixed formulae for drama make life and sexuality drama," acknowledging that "[f]ixed formulae for drama make life and sexuality easier," but suggesting "there is always room too for improvised performance" (xii). Robert Nozick is more specific in proposing that "[s]ex is not simply a matter of frictional force"; rather, "[t]he excitement comes largely in how we interpret the situation and how we perceive the connection to the other." He suggests sexual excitement is crucially "interpersonal: how the other views you, what attitude the actions evidence" (qtd. in Simon 72). These proposals would seem to support the choice of paradigms from drama and theatre, the most directly interpersonal genre and medium. Following on from this, Simon suggests that "sexual desire is rarely, if ever, just for sex" (121), and moreover that "[i]ntensity of feeling derives not from revealing ourselves to the other, but in revealing ourselves to ourselves. The other is often merely the occasion" (153). One might add, this may also be specifically applicable to the extraordinary theatrical (as well as sexual) performance.

GLORIOUS DISTRESS

It is important to establish the way(s) and contexts in which Simon characterises and uses that notoriously elastic term "postmodern." He suggests that "[a]mong the more critical aspects of postmodernity is *the normalization of change*, the unprecedented degree to which change permeates virtually every aspect of our lives and the unprecedented degree to which we have come to live with it, expect it, and even come to desire it as the normal condition of our lives" (4). In consequence, the individual may find that "moments of achievement, which once promised consummatory gratification, often become a shallow, if not mocking, experience because either the achiever or the meaning of the achievement has changed during the interval" (5). The recurrence of this experience drives the self to become restlessly renegotiative and internally dialogic, as illustrated by a basic example:

> Enormous numbers of us almost daily ask ourselves a question, a question that most of humanity asked, if ever, only on the rarest of occasions, "What shall I wear today?" This question joins conceptions of the self with the individual's perceptions of the expectations of others; the individual self-consciously anticipating her or his subsequent role as a text that will be read by others. (Simon 7)

Thus, Simon proposes the "recognition of the inevitability of the divided self, as a normal condition" (97), and characterises the postmodern experience as something which requires a constant response in managing the increasing diversity and density of dialogues, both interpersonal and internal, "where many individuals learn not only to stage their own lives, but to 'stage direct' numerous changes of scenes and acts" (13), with reference to pre-established cultural scenarios, in such a way as to "provide the understandings that make role entry, performance and/or exit plausible for both self and others" (Simon 40).

At this point I suggest we compare Simon's characterisation of the postmodern with that of Lyotard, who suggests that the postmodern "produces the feeling that there is something unrepresentable" (Lyotard 15), establishes a division between what is literally experienced and what can be imagined, and may thereby exacerbate the imaginative activity. Lyotard proposes, "it should be made clear that it is not up to us to *provide reality*, but to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable" (15). This concept of "conceivable but not presentable" is also profoundly theatrical, in that it describes two separate images and a complex relationship between them, as of that which is literally depicted on stage, and that which the audience can only (be directed collectively to) pursue imaginatively (in highly personal and individualised terms).[2]

I would seek to draw (even further) attention (than he does himself) to how Simon's characterisations of sexuality reflect those of theatrical performance: "The sexual, often too real to be taken too seriously, can become an occasion for

a visceral confirmation of a *version* of the self that is not obtainable in other configurations of the self' (132). Improvisation in this context "may be seen as little more than institutionalized variations of existing scenarios"; but at other times, a process of *"interpersonal scripting* [...] represents efforts at creating an interpersonal consensus, be it ever so temporary or uncertain of acceptance"; it *"represents the mechanism through which appropriate identities are made congruent with desired expectations"* and informs "internal rehearsal" (41, emphases in original). This context requires individuals to provide dramatic expositions for their selves, in self-narrating terms: "the individual increasingly must question who she or he is by remembering where and with whom she or he is. And in contexts where vacations replace community festivals, the community of memory relies more on standardized idioms of a personal narration than upon collective myth" (29). This contextual need for terms of self-exposition is dramatised repeatedly by Beckett (*Endgame, Happy Days, Krapp's Last Tape, Play, Not I, That Time, Footfalls* all depict characters seeking to locate themselves definitely in space and time by subverting imaginatively their own dependence on others) and Pinter (particularly the mid-period plays *The Homecoming, Landscape, Old Times, No Man's Land*, which all dramatise the use of variant forms of exposition and memory as weapons of sexual combat), and through to the recent plays of Ed Thomas (*Flowers of the Dead Red Sea, East from the Gantry, Stone City Blue* are all duels fought over the formative terms and structures of memory, emphasising self-conscious performances of concealment and disclosure, and the seductive possibilities of mutual reinvention). In contrast to (for example, some pre-1950s Western) social orders that might be characterised by stability, where re-enactment and reconfirmation generate a "community of memory,"

> in large, heterogeneous, complex, and change-prone settings (postparadigmatic social orders), the self, its integration and cohesiveness, becomes as problematic as the meaning of a past that is constantly subject to being viewed from different contexts of experience and, thus, constantly subject to revision. At the same time, the future is called into question, if only by the discontinuity between the present and the past; history ceases to be the legend of origins and becomes instead a chronicle of transformations. In such settings, the self must achieve its continuity by recourse to the reflexive, as even shared experiences often can only be preserved as personal history. (Simon 29)

So, the modern experience of the individual might more appropriately be characterised in terms of transformation than of continuity, but the persistent and compulsive impulse to reflexivity in the self might be identified as *self-dramatizing* in transformatively *theatrical* terms. This might provoke a reappraisal of the most appropriate *theatrical genre* for the (re)presentations of experience, and provide definite grounds for an imaginative challenge to the

dominant theatrical form, social realism: "The sexual, like the photographic image, is often viewed as being just what it appears to be: a fact derived from life, the purest instance of naturalism. However, this is a deception: it is really a complex text [...] selectively assembled to affirm, deny and persuade." (29) The dominant "recognizably familiar" forms of drama—not just in theatre, but perhaps more insistently established in and by film and television—might more precisely be identified as "social realism" than Simon's term "naturalism." Social realism seeks not only to identify, but to also re-present pseudo-scientifically, what might (or ought to) be social, realistic, recognizable and familiar. It deals in what I have called (developing terms coined by Brendan Kennelly) the "dayenglish" of rational explanation, analysis and justification (Rabey, *English* 3), as opposed to the surprising and speculative presences of "nightenglish," which (following Kennelly) I associate with an energised, (sometimes calmly) ecstatic interrogation and distinction, which has little or nothing to do with the order and legislation of conventional good behaviour. Human consciousness, which is influenced by the social context of postmodernism as both Simon and Lyotard describe it, sounds distinctly and regularly closer to the dynamics of theatrical expressionism which I identify and approach through the term of "nightenglish." Moreover, the energetically self-dramatising and performative process of sexuality, as a "complex text" "selectively assembled to affirm, deny and persuade" sounds akin to Howard Barker's drama, identified by Charles Lamb as *seductive* in reference to the theories of Jean Baudrillard (Lamb 49ff). Barker proposes that the performers and audience of his Theatre of Catastrophe gather, in imaginative fascination, around a *perceived lack* ("impossible to describe, by definition indefinable" [Barker, press release]); compare also his *aperçu* "the photograph has the status of a wound, which smarts with its *irresolution* [...]" (Barker, *Death* 13). In this context, Simon's characterisation of desire is particularly pertinent:

> Desire, as experienced by the self, is not merely the experiencing of a lack or absence. It is the labeling of a lack that is the initiation of desire, the initiation of a process of layered interrogations hidden in the deceptively singular question: What is it I desire? [...] Desire is the scripting of potential futures [...] the continuing production of the self. (Simon 139)

In this "labeling of a lack," we approach again Lyotard's division between what is literally experienced and what can nevertheless be imagined through the paradox of indefinition. Indeed, a less predictable and heterogeneous social context would seem to excite further individual imaginative activity in internal dialogue: "It is the confusions of that world that create our capacity to desire alternatives and the uncertainty of the world that encourages us to try to get away with it," making most people "potential tricksters—particularly to themselves" (Simon 32). Moreover, the sexual "not uncommonly

opportunistically enlarges [its] claims during moments of crisis, disjuncture or transition" (Simon 58). The imminence or threat of catastrophe or death may interrogate the promises and certainties associated with predictability and restraint and intensify *carpe diem* impulses (as in J. G. Ballard's investigation of persistently surprising links between the forces of *eros* and *thanatos* in his 1975 novel *Crash*, 102ff). In times and places of relative social consistency, however, while interpersonal congruence of expectations and desires is possible, "[t]he sexual becomes problematic [...] to the degree that different aspects or senses of the self make different and possibly conflicting demands upon the sexual" (Simon 33). As a clear example of this, Simon cites Auden's observation: "The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind in order that I might love myself is very different from the image which I try to create in the minds of others in order that they may love me" (qtd. in Simon 33).

Both Freud and Kristeva have written on the psychological novel in terms more directly applicable to drama. Freud has noted how "[t]he psychological peculiarities to the tendency of modern novel in general probably owes its self-observation into many component egos, and writers to split up their ego by self-observation into many component egos, and in this way personify the conflicting trends in their own mental life in many heroes" (qtd. in Simon 50). Kristeva, in *Desire in Language*, has moreover identified an element of erotic tension as crucial to the appeal of the novel: "The fantasizer's gratification or pay-off in making such a voyage, or stepping into such a scene, is based on the delicious suspense and sought after pleasure of dramatic uncertainty—a pleasure not unlike the suspense and tease of sexual desire' (qtd. in Liepe-Levinson 92). These comments are relevant to the novel, but the theatre manifests these premises of personification, entry into scenes, and (what Kristeva significantly terms) *dramatic* uncertainty in more extreme terms. Simon furthermore suggests that the human sexual consciousness may be usefully seen in terms derived not just from the attendance of theatre (as a spectator) but also from the production of theatre (as performer, dramatist, director, and producer) in the creation and maintaining of sexual excitement:

> A highly reflexive, executive self appears, but not necessarily always on demand, to manage the commitments to the world and commitments to oneself. The self in becoming a scripted actor becomes its own producer (managing resources, balancing investments in long-term and short-term pleasures) while becoming its own director in the continuous staging of the self. (Simon 49)

In the context of fantasy and internal rehearsal of imaginative scenarios in the 'theatre of the mind,' this can involve alternative and provisional senses of the self, animated as 'supporting players' to the "executive" (or protagonist?) self:

> the concept of sexual scripting takes on a more literal meaning: not the creation and performance of a role but the creation and staging of dramas [...]

> What the actor/ego is (including what the actor/ego feels she or he should be feeling) is dependent upon the creation of a cast of others (including what they should be feeling), the others who complete the meaning of the actor. In some cases this requires others who are obliged to experience what the actor cannot or is forbidden to directly experience in her or his own name. (Simon 51)

There are some connections here between Simon's ideas and the theories of Augusto Boal, specifically those in Boal's *The Rainbow of Desire* (1995), in which he identifies "the essence of theatre" as "the human being observing itself": "*The Human being not only 'makes' theatre: it 'is' theatre*' (Boal 13, emphasis in original).

SWEET INSOMNIA

The lure of fantasy is conventionally viewed, even disparagingly or dismissively, as a simplification of life's complexities, a melodrama of gratification, as when Simon notes, "Among the pleasures sought [in the 'dramaturgically enriched' arena of the imagination] may be that of experiencing oneself within a context of scripted social action where a version of the self is experienced as more free from conflict or ambivalence than may ever be achieved in real life" (Simon 87). But it is also notable that imaginary fantasy, real and staged, may incorporate or be based upon elements which complicate rather than simplify quotidian surfaces. The appeal of the impulse towards dramatic tragedy, for example, might appropriately be glimpsed in these terms: "*However unpleasant or self-punishing such a fantasied realm sometimes appears to be, it has a wholeness that often compensates for its lack of reality, while reality rarely affords compensation for its frequent lack of wholeness*" (Simon 87, emphasis in original). It is true that both imaginary fantasy and theatre may *entertain* such disruptive (even catastrophic) possibilities in order to justify the pleasures of relief or the power of reversal: consider the words of the god Jupiter in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* as exemplification of comic and romantic providential resolution: "Whom best I love, I cross; to make my gift, / The more delay'd, delighted" (5.5.195–96.) Both personally and theatrically, what is unleashed by the imagination might not offer or seek lasting change, but rather justify a reinscription of the conventional and familiar *status quo*, seeking to re-establish a "Natural Perspective" in Northrop Frye's sense of myth, or (re)assert a social mythology in the sense of Roland Barthes. In both instances, "[m]yth is more often a consoling apology than the blueprint for some social imperative" (Simon 112).

Indeed, the theatre can be characterised as a mechanism to manifest "that uniquely human ability to dream our discontents with civilization in ways which simultaneously enact our enduring commitment to it" (Simon 110): a

vision/version of theatricality which closely accords with Jean Duvignaud's sense of its intrinsic *arrested dynamism*, an imaginative activity which actually forecloses and prevents physical action. This is, of course, usually true of theatre; with the important exceptions of participatory Theatre-in-Education or Boal's programmes, theatre spectating involves a physical restraint, the better to privilege an imaginative activity. As Simon remarks elsewhere, in terms again applicable to theatre, "[t]o embrace desire fully is to run grave risks, not least of which is the risk of disappointment. For most of us, most of the time, merely to invoke its presence is sufficient" (Simon 150).

However, as Katharine Liepe-Levison has noted: "If sexual desire is always at least partly about losing control, then sexual representation, play and fantasy allow us to have control over a time in which we can experience the sensation of being 'out of control'" (136). Often when we make plays or performances, we transform sexual energy and desire into specific types of persons, in terms of what Baudrillard calls a "*hyperreality*, the attempt to re-create in social life what was never there" (Simon 124), an activity which may characterise postmodern culture. Simon's characterisation of eroticism is crucially limited and self-limiting:

> Eroticism can be defined as the images of desire that, independent of their immediate possibility of realisation (enactment), are capable of initiating and sustaining sexual arousal [...] But once constituted as eroticism or as an aspect of a subjective erotic culture, such images of desire approach hyperreality. [...] The erotic comes to function like the mock rabbit at dog-racetracks: while tempting with the smell of flesh, it is constituted never to be consumed. (Simon 124)

From this perspective, eroticism is merely a rigged game, promising but deferring or reducing the terms of the exclusively-sought "climax"; it (and Simon's sense of it) has become alienated and estranged from what Liepe-Levinson terms "the delicious suspense and sought after pleasure of dramatic uncertainty" (92). By way of further contrast, consider Bataille (to whom Simon never refers, surprisingly): "The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives" (Bataille 17). In some respects, Bataille's model of eroticism maps onto Simon's model of the negotiations of interpersonal scripting, but has more catastrophic consequences:

> Eroticism is one aspect of the inner life of man. We fail to realise this because man is everlastingly in search of an object *outside* himself but this object answers the *innerness* of the desire. [...] In human consciousness eroticism is that within man which calls his being into question. (Bataille 29)

I would offer a further definition of eroticism: the promise that one may enjoy a surprising amount of freedom through and with the body of another (whereas Simon's vision of a commodified eroticism replaces the promise of surprise with the promise of a functional familiarity and objectified economy).

While they may involve a (merely flirtatious and ultimately belittling) taming and mitigation of the terms of loss of control, sexual representation, play, and fantasy—and drama and theatre—may also lead to the transgression of boundaries, through which an imaginative impulse "carries over," through metaphor, to make a lasting personal difference to the terms and possibilities of what might be considered and designated as 'real' experience. This may be particularly true in the case of the performance of a tragedy (such as *King Lear* or *Antony and Cleopatra*) which involves a confrontation with death (its irrevocable and literally unbearable chaos to human values, or its promise of an eroticized, repudiating escape from them):

> Like Butler, Bataille and Sontag each propose that images of death, or the *risk* of death, may conjure up an erotic infinity for the viewer or reader because death signifies an indefinable state. This death-like erotic infinity, which defies the limitations and precepts of the social world, can be represented and apprehended only in terms of its tension with the everyday—that is, through a dynamics of transgression in which social, personal and even "natural" laws are foregrounded and shattered at the same time. (Liepe-Levinson 147-8)

This is a different sort of "pleasure." Simon himself proposes that "PLEASURE IS FOUND IN METAPHOR, SATISFACTION IN NARRATION" (143), but I would propose that tragic drama offers us the pleasures of discontinuity through metaphor, which suggests that the satisfactions of mere (literalist) narration are comparatively limited. Karoline Gritzner has questioned some limitations in Bataille's characterisation of eroticism "as a force which breaks down the socially perceived discontinuity of being" (Gritzner 102); Gritzner notes how this (fundamentally Hegelian) notion of a deliberate loss of self in eroticism is questioned in Barker's drama and theatre where "the characters engage in erotic games of seduction in which the reaching of sexual climax is no longer the exclusive aim" (103); rather, she suggests "[t]he experience of erotic pleasure is presented as deriving from a perception of reality as an *aesthetic* construct which is characterised as process, deferral and transformation" (103-4; see also Rabey, "Two," for an account of Barker's dramatization, in his play *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*, of an eroticism depending on the intricacy of elaborated description and proximity, the extrapolation of longing rather than the summary of its satisfaction).

ENIGMATIC VARIATIONS

In the context of my considerations, of how well Simon's paradigms of the theatricality of the human sexual consciousness may illuminate the pertinence and specificity of imaginative appeal as manifested in the theatre, it is odd that and specificity of imaginative appeal as manifested in the theatre, it is odd that Simon himself tends to draw back from theatrical imagery (evident elsewhere in his references to scripting, actors, directing and producing) in terms of imaginative ambition and reach, which he tends to associate with poetry. Perhaps his (unfortunately conventional) associations and experiences of theatre are predominantly prosaic (the "dayenglish" of social realism) rather than poetic (the "nightenglish" of expressionism). He is drawn to the poetic as a frame for the erotic—as when he suggests "[s]exual intercourse is more often poetry than prose as it represents a sequence of metaphoric gestures whose interdependencies or claims for coherence are rarely articulated" (Simon, 144)— whereas I would suggest "theatre" might be substituted for "poetry" to identify both the distinctness and similarities of both processes. The persistence of Simon's association may stem from his affection for Frye's profoundly and literally conservative sense of continuity:

> Sexuality is far more rooted in the poetic than the physical or biological. Sexual behavior, like many other forms of human behavior, is dependent upon myth ("a story that is not history"—where the truth of telling is more important than the telling of truth) and metaphor ("a relationship between symbols [representations] [*sic*] that is not logical"). (Definitions of myth and metaphor are those of Northrop Frye).   (Simon 148)

Whilst welcoming the persuasive provocations of the above, one might reply that sexuality is far more rooted in the dramatic and theatrical than the poetic; its pleasures are based in action more often than narration, and its dynamic—at its most distinctive and explosive—encompasses and depends upon discontinuity as well as satisfaction (or as a continual rewriting and reperformance of the terms of satisfaction, and thereby of the self). As Liepe-Levinson observes, in development from Judith Butler:

> Sexual agency or "new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms" are not found in some kind of mystical notion of a new, pure, or authentic behavior or gesture. They are discovered in the *variations* that take place within the established, repetitive signifying practices of our culture. (Liepe-Levinson 109)

She argues for the importance of the imaginative space—both personal, and (to some extent shared when) theatrical—as places of sexual fantasy, play, and representation "in which both females and males can swerve, switch character, and disobey the expected gender behaviors and decorums of the everyday world" (138). In this sense, it is possible for the "nightenglish" of the theatrically fantastic to interrogate or repoeticize/redramatize the terms, consequences, and moral priorities of the explicatory and justifying "dayenglish" of social realism. Liepe-Levinson suggests that whilst fantasy is *different* to the literal terms of reality, it is not always *separate* from it; indeed the difference may provide a constructive liberation: "The more fantastical the scene, the more it underscores a shattering of social and personal boundaries, the closer it comes to representing the almost impossible to represent—the extreme physical and emotional sensations produced by sexual desire" and "the more room it allows for expansions on conventional sex roles" (Liepe-Levinson 148). While Liepe-Levinson's comments are inspired by various forms of erotic performance, the observations might significantly be applied to (seriously?) fantastic theatrical scripts and performances, such as of Caryl Churchill and David Lan's play *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *The Skriker* (1994), Barker's *The Castle* (1985), Howard Brenton's *Sore Throats* (1979), David Rudkin's *The Triumph of Death* (1981) and *The Saxon Shore* (1986), and Anthony Neilson's *The Censor* (1997). And the power of Heathcote Williams's polymorphously perverse play *AC/DC* (1970) can be resonantly identified through reference to Simon's account of the "sadomasochistic charade," which "eroticizes the extended performance beyond the immediately genital" in terms of poetic/physical defiance of "a context of communication systems where virtually all are given immediate access to intimacies of social power, but access projected through cool media where bureaucratic rationalization depersonalizes the causes of frustration and outrage" (134).

MIMETIC JEOPARDY (THE NEARNESS OF YOU)

Liepe-Levinson cites Freedman's assertion that the strip show is "quintessential theatre, its stage the battle place of one's look" (qtd. in Liepe-Levinson 165). However, drama often provides cues for the (avowedly fictional but compellingly convincing) performance of the 'battle place of the look,' and theatre provides opportunities for spectators to observe and relish these battles, relatively unobserved. A particularly powerful juncture of performances may even lead the spectator to marvel at the performer's suggestion that *more is at stake here than conventional investments necessitate*. In this respect, I would suggest that there is less of a disjunction between the strip show and the "more legitimate" theatre than Liepe-Levinson suggests. In strip shows, she notes how "[s]eemingly raw or involuntary responses of the body that occur within the frames of theatre create a particular dilemma and added thrill" for "such acts lure spectators into the game of actively guessing whether the performers' pleasures or pains are real or pretend" (116).

In the traditional world of theatre, however, one can assume that it is rare for the general spectator to contemplate what an actor playing Hamlet may be thinking about when he kills the character of Polonius, or what a ballerina does for fun when she is not performing *Swan Lake*. It is the stripper's very *performance* of upholding and transgressing the social norms that most likely lead patrons to ask such questions in the first place. (Liepe-Levinson 186-7, emphasis in original)

Whilst I acknowledge that these are not the conventional norm, I would counter that some of the most memorable theatre and dance performances I have witnessed, which involved the (fictional?) transgressions of social norms, have indeed involved me in a surprised speculation as to the performer's terms and extent of (imaginative if not literal) investment in an action and/or role by interrogating conventional senses of emotional and physical limits (I won't reduce this phenomenon to the specifics of examples from my own idiosyncratic experiences, but rather prefer to ask the reader to recall your own—perhaps more personally informative—analogous moments). In the theatre, this may be even more startling than on film or television, because (a) the proxemics of the performance space may permit or insist upon closer personal scrutiny and experience of the performers, not only of the 'battle place of the look,' but of their physicality (their sweat, even their odour); (b) the actions and events performed are usually required to be repeated, usually both before and after a specific performance, even though that performance manifests a sense of involuntary discovery. Liepe-Levinson appropriately identifies the strip show as involving the spectator's action of "straining-to-see" which is nevertheless "pleasurable because it adds to the experience of instability and suspense that drives erotic arousal" (80), and also the pleasure of "mimetic jeopardy": "the position of being up close and not being able to touch at all once more reinforces the excitement/pain of sexual yearning that is, for some, in and of itself, a profound source of sexual pleasure" (154). This identification of the charge of proximity provides a specific and telling reversal of Simon's disparagement of eroticism not predicated on contact in his image of the ever-evasive "mock rabbit" (Simon 138). Liepe-Levinson's notion of a pleasurable "mimetic jeopardy" approaches Gritzner's invitation to reconstruct reality through aesthetic process, deferral and transformation.

Indeed, "mimetic jeopardy" is, I would suggest, present to some degree in all theatre, but is particularly pertinent in transgressive plays and performances conducted in intimate theatre spaces. The performer is someone we cannot—we dare not—touch (except in some participatory programmes). It would 'break the spell.' But our imagination reaches out to them. Their (and our) unnecessary but willed proximity constitutes their (and our) power.

FLIRTING WITH DISASTER

One night, I stood in the wings of a theatre, waiting to go onstage, with my fellow performers, and thought: 'One day all of these people will be dead'. Now at least one of them is.

Having worked for weeks to evolve a thrust and pattern, now the performers dressed and queued to walk out and present images of tragic melancholy: insisting on the inevitability of irrevocable loss. In time, no one would remember what they had done. Their reasons for doing it were not obviously sufficient for their exertions and pains; that is to say, this activity was not a necessary or wise investment of time, money or emotion.

They were literally flirting with disaster.

Their images of make-believe attempted to make the members of the audience "enamoured" (Barba 172) whilst confronting the inevitability of irrevocable loss, through death, which they would all one day know: the same experience, but each in different terms.

The performers gave no reason. They were unreasonable. They might prove intolerable. They would only be pardoned if they made the audience enamoured of their own tragic melancholy. If they discovered a thrill in the nearness of loss.

This sense of loss is approached in readily immediate terms by a Clive James lyric:

> When in a later day
> Little of the vision lingers
> Memory slips away
> Every way but through fingers
> Textures come back to you real as can be
> Making you feel
> Time doesn't heal
> And touch has a memory. (James 333)

Here, the image, the incidence, the sensation of the erotic touch becomes an imagined talisman, worn by recurrent fingering, compulsively alluring in its demonstration that 'Time doesn't heal.' Here, the painful sacrament of the erotic contact becomes more precious than the promise of Time, whose so-called healing is exposed as merely a crawling, unstoppable desensitization. Even the regretted action—in oneself, in another—can exert the character and fascination of a scar.

I propose that the performer is briefly but significantly outside of the conventional claims of Time, which the audience normally experiences and represents. We queue and pay to be surprised again by our own pleasurable and painful nearness even as—and because—we know we thereafter rejoin the current of conventional time, and its associated loss. But this sense of loss is at

least partly qualified by a process of re-membering the absent—something all the more remarkable if the absent never existed, truly or literally.

ENTWINED DIFFERENCE

Simon Shepherd notes how "Body/script" represents "both an opposition and a mutual dependence" (Shepherd 14); this has increasingly been characterised as a binary with the emergence of Performance (previously known as Performance Art):

> Within the polemic which was generated in order to define the emergent form, theatre was seen to belong with the business of representing, and fictionalising, the body. Performance stripped away theatricality, exposing spectators—or participants—to the actuality of the performer's body. (Shepherd 160)

As Shepherd notes, this leads to a disciplinary split in the very work which has an unusual potential to demolish binaries (such as those of "fiction and reality," [26]). However, this notion of the 'real body' versus the scripted body (as conceived as an imposition on the actor/performer) may reflect an "ancient distrust of fiction and theatre" and the "impropriety of the scripted body" (Shepherd 30). There seems a link here with the prescriptive binarism identified by Liepe-Levinson: "By resting our critiques of pornography and the sex roles it depicts on either/or evaluations (whether coming from the Right or the Left), we also promote varying concepts of a 'good' or 'authentic' sexuality—an idea that threatens to become ever more a part of legislation" (13).

Shepherd goes so far as to suggest:

> With its suspicion of fiction, theatricality, illusion, all gathered up into distaste for the scripted body—a body imposed upon—this trend of modern performance analysis may be said to fall into a place within a long tradition of bourgeois asceticism. For those less ascetic, the job perhaps is to re-engage with slobbering theatricality at its most—um—imposing. (31)

William Simon's propositions on sexuality suggest that, on some imaginative level, we are all characteristically engaged in the scripting and theatricalisation of bodies and selves, of selves and others. As I have suggested before, theatre can be (both a manifestation and a reflection of) a living triumph of the artificial, which is what human beings do best (Rabey, "Liberations"). Theatre (like sexuality) has and can certainly be used to do more than one thing, and opposing things: the *conciliatory* and the *interrogative*, for example, or the valorizing of either the collective or the individual. One might draw a further parallel here between theatre and Simon's identification of how "[l]ove, which

minimizes the difference, which would abolish the difference, also permits the revelation and revelry of the difference"; but how, in particular, "[f]or those who celebrate the difference risk is vital, transgression the occasion for its inevitable confirmation: a sharing of wickednesses that cannot be experienced alone" (Simon, 155).

NOTES

1. With many thanks to my colleague, Karoline Gritzner, for assisting me towards these formulations. Parts of this article were presented, in earlier form, at the Day Symposium on Theatrical Aesthetics of Eroticism and Death, Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1 May 2004. I would like to thank Karoline again, Helen Iball, Charmian Savill, and Isabel Morgana Rabey for their constructive observations on intermediary drafts.

2. With thanks to Catherine Rees for directing my attention towards these observations.

WORKS CITED

Ballard, J. G. *Crash*. St. Albans: Panther, 1975.

Barba, Eugenio. *The Paper Canoe*. Trans. Richard Fowler. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

Barker, Howard. *The Castle*. *Plays Two*. London: Oberon, 2006. 7-77.

—. *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*. London and New York : Routledge, 2005.

—. Press Release. Wrestling School (Theatre Company.) 1990.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. A. Lavers. London: Paladin, 1973.

Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism*. Trans. Mary Dalwood. London: Marion Boyars, 1962.

Beckett, Samuel. *Endgame. The Complete Dramatic Works*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986. 89-134.

—. *Footfalls. The Complete Dramatic Works*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986. 397-403.

—. *Happy Days. The Complete Dramatic Works*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986. 135-68.

—. *Krapp's Last Tape. The Complete Dramatic Works*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986. 213-33.

—. *Not I. The Complete Dramatic Works*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986. 373-83.

—. *That Time. The Complete Dramatic Works*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986. 385-95.

—. *Play. The Complete Dramatic Works*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986. 305-20.

Boal, Augusto. *The Rainbow of Desire*. Trans. Adrian Jackson. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

Brenton, Howard. *Sore Throats. Plays: One*. London: Methuen, 1986. 337-390.

Churchill, Caryl. *Cloud Nine. Plays: One*. London: Methuen, 1986. 243-320.

——. *The Skriker. Plays: Three.* London: Nick Hern Books, 1998. 239-92.

Churchill, Caryl, and Lan, David. *A Mouthful of Birds. Plays: Three.* London: Nick Hern Books, 1998. 1-54.

Duvignaud, Jean. "The Theatre in Society: Society in the Theatre." *Sociologie du Théâtre.* Trans. Tom Burns. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965. 7-25.

Frye, Northrup. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1957.

Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* New York: Doubleday, 1959.

Gritzner, Karoline. "Catastrophic Sexualities in Howard Barker's Theatre of Transgression." *Genealogies of Identity: Interdisciplinary Readings on Sex and Sexuality.* Eds. M. Sönser Breen and F. Peters. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005. 95-106.

James, Clive. *The Book of my Enemy: Collected Verse 1953-2003.* London: Picador, 2003.

Lamb, Charles. *The Theatre of Howard Barker.* London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Liepe-Levinson, Katharine. *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire.* London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Lyotard, Jean François. *The Postmodern Explained.* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

Neilson, Anthony. *The Censor. Plays: One.* London: Methuen, 1998. 243-85.

Pinter, Harold. *The Homecoming. Plays: Three.* London and Boston: Faber, 1997. 13-90.

——. *Landscape. Plays: Three.* London and Boston: Faber, 1997. 165-88.

——. *No Man's Land. Plays: Three.* London and Boston: Faber, 1997. 315-99.

——. *Old Times. Plays: Three.* London and Boston: Faber, 1997. 243-313.

Rabey, David Ian. "Liberations from the Literal, or Why I Write for Theatre." *New Welsh Review* 43 (Winter 1998-9): 77-81.

——. *English Drama Since 1940.* London: Longman, 2003.

——. "Two Against Nature: Rehearsing and Performing Howard Barker's Production of his play *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo.*" *Theatre Research International* 30.2 (July 2005): 175-189.

Rudkin, David. *The Saxon Shore.* London: Methuen, 1986.

——. *The Triumph of Death.* London: Methuen, 1981.

Shakespeare, William. *Cymbeline.* London and New York: Methuen, 1969.

Shepherd, Simon. *Theatre, Body and Pleasure.* London and New York: Routledge 2006.

Simon, William. *Postmodern Sexualities.* London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Thomas, Ed. *East from the Gantry. Three Plays.* Bridgend: Seren, 1994. 167-213.

——. *Flowers of the Dead Red Sea. Three Plays.* Bridgend: Seren, 1994. 101-66.

——. *Stone City Blue.* London: Methuen, 2004.

Williams, Heathcote. *AC/DC.* London: Calder and Boyars, 1972.

Encore/*en corps*: Staging Mother in Michel Tremblay's *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* and the Maternal Rhetoric of Twentieth-Century Drama

Sheila Rabillard
University of Victoria

When I first saw *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* (in the original *Encore une fois, si vous permettez*, 1998) during its 1999 performance at the Belfry Theatre, Victoria,[1] just a few months remained before my son's birth. In the euphoria of prospective motherhood, I took Tremblay's theatrical portrait of "Nana" to be a wonderful gift from son to mother. I still think it is; but Derrida reminds us that gifts are not free, nor freely given, and reflection has shown me the weight of debt implicit in Tremblay's play and the finely-calibrated exchanges of power he dramatizes. Despite the brevity of this two-character play and its clarity of form, it is not simple. One of its peculiarities is that it represents a continuation of a series of collections of autobiographical short narratives: *Les vues animées* (1990; translated as *Bambi and Me*), *Douze coups de théâtre* (1992; translated as *Twelve Opening Acts*), *Un ange cornu avec des ailes de tôle* (1994; translated as *Birth of a Bookworm*), and *Bonbons assortis*, published after the composition of the play, in 2002. In these collections Tremblay takes as point of departure, respectively, memories of the cinema, the theatre, books, and family anecdotes. In brief humorous tales he revisits (the sequence is roughly the same in each book as in the play) his childhood, his adolescence, and the beginnings of his adult life, chiefly his life as a writer. Furthermore, before these autobiographical *récits*, Tremblay had already drawn on his own experiences (though in more fictionalized form) in creating his novels about Plateau-Mont-Royal.[2] The outlines of Tremblay's mother, née Rhéauna (affectionately, Nana) Rathier, can be discerned in the "Fat Woman" of these novels; she also shares some traits with Germaine Lauzon of his first theatrical success, *Les Belles Soeurs*.[3] She appears under her own name in the novel *Un Objet de beauté* (1997; translated as *A Thing of Beauty*), but here