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PRESENCE IN PLAY:

A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre

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Submitted for the qualification of PhD in Theatre Studies

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Abstract

Theatre as an art form has often been associated with notions of presence. The ‘live’ immediacy of the actor, the unmediated unfolding of dramatic action and the ‘energy’ generated through an actor-audience relationship are among the ideas frequently used to explain theatrical experience - and all are underpinned by some understanding of ‘presence.’ Precisely what is meant by presence in the theatre is part of what this thesis sets out to explain. Presence, I argue, is not so much a single concept, but is a term which encompasses differing accounts of theatre’s aesthetic or experiential specificity. While I have attempted to show how concepts of presence have developed over time, most of the forthcoming discussion is rooted in twentieth century thought, when theatre’s aesthetic autonomy became an increasingly important concern in the context of artistic modernism and the rise of rival media such as film and television.

However, an equally important part of this thesis has been to question the relevance of concepts of presence within the context of contemporary theory. Since the nineteen-eighties in particular, theatre theorists have been inclined to critique the notion of presence from a poststructuralist perspective. Additionally, the increasing use of technology in performance and a recognition of the pervasive influence of the media in contemporary western society has made traditional appeals to theatrical presence seem increasingly retrograde. In the light of these concerns, questions are raised about how the distinctiveness of theatre might best be articulated without reinstating the current opposition between those who advocate theatrical presence, and those who treat the concepts of presence with suspicion.

By drawing together discussions which posit presence as ‘the essence of theatre’ alongside poststructuralist misgivings about the validity of such claims, I have attempted to re-position the concept of presence within a contemporary theoretical context. Without wishing to idealise the stage as a privileged site which is experienced in terms of presence, I argue that we should instead examine the potential of theatre to put presence into play. Rather than look at theatre ‘as’ present, I propose instead to explore how theatre manipulates our experience of the present, challenging rather than reinforcing an audience’s experience of the ‘live’ or the immediate. Drawing on ideas in semiotics, phenomenology and performativity, I argue that a framework for thinking about presence, enriched by poststructuralist theory, can inform the analysis of theatrical performance. While by no means a complete survey of presence in the theatre, it is my hope that this thesis will help to suggest new ways of thinking about the tangled set of ideas which surround this concept, and how they might contribute to our understanding of theatre’s representational possibilities.

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Introduction

While collecting ideas for this thesis, I took the opportunity to watch a performance by French-Canadian theatre artist Robert Lepage at the Newcastle Playhouse in April 2001. Inspired by images from the space race, *The Far Side of the Moon* explored the relationship and ultimate reconciliation between two brothers, Philippe and André, following the death of their mother. The sense of dislocation from everyday reality induced by the loss of a parent was imaginatively compared to what it might be like to visit the far side of the moon, and rather than look down upon earth from afar, experience the feeling of having become totally dislocated from our reference points as we look into the empty blackness of outer space.

While these themes were particularly evocative to a student at the early stages of doctoral research, the theatrical presentation itself helped me to generate some important questions and to clarify the trajectory that my thesis would take. Both brothers were played by Lepage in a 'one-man' show, with the aid of puppeteers and some considerably sophisticated technology. Locations, characters and scenes changed very rapidly, with the help of a sliding wall at the back of the set, together with quick costume changes and lighting effects. Scenes moved from locations such as an apartment, to the surface of the moon, to the interior of an aeroplane, to a conference room, to a hospital - at bewildering speeds. Fitted into the sliding wall at the rear of the stage was a laundry machine with its round window which, when lit in a certain way, depicted the moon, or at other times a goldfish bowl. With appropriate lighting and sound, along with a bank of adjacent seating, the glass was transformed into the window of an aeroplane, or it simply stood for the principal character's laundry machine, which Lepage then climbed into as it suddenly took on the characteristics of a space shuttle! Lepage himself

made quick changes from one character to the next, while the ironing board in the kitchen - turned upside down - became a piece of gymnasium equipment, and the sliding wall evolved into a giant mirror instantly transforming the setting.

Lepage thus very ostentatiously created the fictional world in front of the audience, manipulating the space as though it were a blank canvas on which to create different images and theatrical landscapes. The stage space was highly fluid, in an almost constant state of being changed and transformed before the audience, with the potential to channel the spectator's attention in different perceptual directions. An intimacy was generated from the experience of seeing the stage transformed before one's eyes which seemed to highlight - or be derived from - theatrical conjuration. Bert States has suggested that the intimacy of theatre is unlike that of film or the novel:

The real intimacy of theatre is not the intimacy of being within its world but of being present at its world's origination under all the constraints, visible and invisible, of immediate actuality (States 1985: 154).

The important term here, 'world's origination', captures that sense of interplay that seemed to be generated by the performance. In *The Far Side of the Moon*, the theatrical world seemed to *emerge* from the stage, and from the materiality in which it was grounded. In this way the audience's quotidian reality was implicated in a process of world-making, as the imaginary world of the fiction seemed to overlap with the 'reality' of the stage and its objects. *The Far Side of the Moon* presented a fictional world in a constant state of becoming, a state which seemed to invite the imaginative engagement of the audience to flesh out the often fleeting images. The audience was not witnessing merely an 'illusion', nor even the generation of an illusion, but an overlap of illusion and reality. As the glass window of the laundry machine

became the image of the moon, the outside of a goldfish bowl, or opened into the interior of a rocket, the object was seen in a constant state of 'becoming' something else; the 'presence' of the stage was multi-layered. Even as the window became the moon, it still retained traces of the rocket or the brain scanner - while remaining a humble laundry machine window nonetheless.

On one (albeit rather superficial) level, the performance might well be taken as a celebration of the 'magic of theatre'. It produced the sort of experience which could elicit such gushy or sentimental reactions, a certain magic associated with 'being there' in the theatre. The performance generated no illusions which a film might not have created just as well, if not better, but the audience was not merely watching an elaborately constructed fiction but the *making* of that fiction before them. The actor, the stage and its materials were being manipulated before the audience who were themselves party to the transformation of a basic 'reality', encompassing stage and auditorium, into a series of fictional propositions. *The Far Side of the Moon*, as an extraordinary exercise in theatrical illusion-making and conjuration before an audience, seemed to raise questions about the notion of presence in theatre. On one level 'presence' calls to mind the physical fact of spectators watching the performer who is in the same room, while, with this performance, there was also the sense that fictional spaces were being created 'spontaneously'; the immediacy of the fiction as well as the proximity of the performer.

Notions of presence (under terms such as immediacy, spontaneity, liveness) are, perhaps for most theatre-goers, part of the vocabulary for describing theatrical experience, particularly as distinct from the experience of film or television spectatorship. However, it is much easier to evoke notions of presence in a way which mystifies the process of theatre spectatorship, than

it is to reflect critically on the meaning(s) and potential usefulness of the concept of presence for understanding theatrical experience. When trying to quantify the notion of presence, difficult questions arise. For one thing, what does 'presence' mean in relation to theatre; is there such a thing as 'theatrical presence' or are there many different kinds of presence? Does the notion of presence apply equally to theatre in general or is presence more explicit in some kinds of theatre? Does the notion of theatrical presence suggest a basic distinction from, or superiority over, other media such as film? What, then, of the technology involved in (for instance) *The Far Side of the Moon*, without which its remarkable time/place transitions would not have been possible; to what extent does technology, when used, mediate an 'immediate' experience?

These are among the many questions which emerge when the concept of presence in theatre is subjected to scrutiny. Furthermore, the question of presence in theatre is a historically shifting one. For example, in 1941, American playwright Thornton Wilder's asserted that 'On the stage it is always now' (Wilder 1964: 240), while in 2002 Andy Lavender claimed that: 'Theatre has always traded in nowness, and at various points in its history has developed new ways in which to heighten the spectator's awareness of the present moment' (Lavender 2002: 189). While superficially these claims look remarkably similar, Wilder conceived theatre as a medium whose apogees were the classical and neo-classical stages, where audience and actors colluded in acts of pretence and imagination. Lavender, on the other hand, is writing about presence in the context of media and technology, which both expands that which can be put before us 'now' (like twenty-four hour 'live' news broadcasts), and problematises the continued intimacy of the actor-audience relationship. In other words, when looking at the notion of presence, there are wider questions concerning how a theatrical world is shaped and

presented to us, and how theatre is shaped by or responds to the conditions in which it is perceived.

Indeed, since French philosopher Jacques Derrida has tackled the notion of presence in philosophy at large (as well as theatrical presence in his essays on Artaud), the idea of theatre as a 'live' and present phenomenon has come under some intense scrutiny. In his essay 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation', Derrida points to the Artaudian paradox, that to *achieve* a theatre of pure presence, one would first have to find a way of *representing* this presence. 'Presence', as Derrida suggests, 'in order to be presence and self-presence, has always already begun to represent itself' (Derrida 1978: 249). Theatre theorist Elinor Fuchs draws specifically on Derrida in her critique of theatrical presence. 'Derrida', Fuchs claims, has 'challenged the assumption that it is within the power of human nature to enter a Now, to become entirely present to itself' (Fuchs 1996: 72). If we agree with Derrida that 'the present in general is not primal, but rather, reconstituted, that...there is no purity of the living present' (Derrida 1978: 212), then that would certainly seem to cause difficulty for claims, like Lavender's, that the stage serves to 'heighten the spectator's awareness of the present moment'. Derrida's writings disrupt the claims to meaning, truth, closure and presence in philosophy, in favour of absence, deferral, play and openness. In like terms, poststructuralist approaches to theatre tend to emphasise a shift from envisaging a stage which stresses the importance of the *present*, to a postmodern aesthetic of absence and textuality. Roger Copeland has claimed that an opposition is now in place between Artaud as 'the apostle of pure unmediated presence vs. those "poststructuralist" thinkers who complicate the distinction between presence and absence' (Copeland 1990: 29).

The notion of presence has carried great seductive power in the theatre, as Herbert Blau has put it: 'There is nothing more illusory in performance than the illusion of the unmediated. It is a very powerful illusion in the theatre, but it *is* theatre, the truth of illusion, which haunts all performance, whether or not it occurs in the theatre' (Blau 1987: 164-5). The power of drama and performance, Blau suggests, resides in its illusion-making potential, but it can never capture 'presence' fully, and is always trapped within its own limited sphere of illusion and representation. Elinor Fuchs, Philip Auslander, Michael Vanden Heuvel have also pointed to the idealisation of presence in theatre, seen as theatre's 'locus of power'. Fuchs in particular has claimed that presence 'after Derrida' has 'fallen into disfavour as a theatrical value' with an increasing concern for 'an aesthetics of Absence rather than of Presence' (Fuchs 1985: 165).

Jean Baudrillard's theories of simulation and mediatization have further undermined the notion of presence by questioning the whole notion of 'reality' in a culture so heavily invested in technological reproductions. In the contemporary western world, our knowledge of the environment is increasingly shaped, not by personal experience and interaction, but by media images and representations. Philip Auslander has taken Baudrillard's assessment of modern society as a place where 'truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to exist' (Baudrillard 1988: 171), as a challenge to the notion of 'liveness'. Auslander argues that the increasing use of technology in theatre in the form of video screens and microphones, amongst other mediating devices, along with the advancing tendency of theatrical performances to appropriate filmic or televisual discourse, has eroded theatre's distinctiveness as a 'live' art form. Indeed, Roger Copeland, also referencing Baudrillard, puts the issue bluntly:

The ongoing critique of presence is also valuable insofar as it reminds us that no experience (no matter how “live”) is entirely unmediated...Furthermore, the idea that theatre’s “liveness” is - in and of itself - a virtue, a source of automatic, unearned moral superiority to film and television, is sheer bourgeois sentimentality (Copeland 1990: 42).

Indeed, one of the most powerful arguments *against* defining the ‘essence’ of theatre around a conception of presence derives from a recognition of the increasing use of technology for theatrical effect. To return to my example, *The Far Side of the Moon* does not simply produce a world ‘in-the-making’ as though it were magically conjured in the very *moment* that it was experienced in the theatre. The apparent spontaneity of the ‘illusion making’ was itself perhaps a further ‘illusion’ underpinned by some sophisticated mechanics; the programme credited not only Lepage, but also listed technicians whose number were of filmic proportions. Indeed, *The Far Side of the Moon* was not simply ‘more present’ than a film, for the rapid transformations lent the performance a ‘filmic’ quality. The horizontality of the set was more reminiscent of a cinema screen than that of a traditional English or European style theatre incorporating the values of verticality deriving from the relationship between man and gods. The horizontal space tends to place man *in* his social environment; it creates, as it were, a highly semiotised space, conducive to producing a world of illusion sealed from the audience, which they can peer into. Watching the performance, with its cinematic codes of representation, was like watching a film, except without the ‘film’. The ‘immediate’ presence of the performance was thus put into question through the very incorporation of theatrical discourse within the matrices of cinematic mediation. The performance, while seeming to generate images and worlds as though spontaneously, clearly reminded the audience that such effects were only achieved *in relation to* cinematic experience. Before Lepage’s ‘big screen’, I imagined myself *being in* a cinema, and perhaps actually *watching* a film - only to see the presentation ‘come to life’! In imaginatively seeing a film come to life *as* theatre, the

audience may be afforded a glimpse of that which is denied us when we watch a film: to see the world 'being-made' before them. But it is perhaps only when we imagine 'taking our seats in the cinema' that *The Far Side Of the Moon* comes to life in this way. By entering into this game-world, the audience are invited to experience the respective 'magic' of both film and theatre's world-disclosing capacities, within one overlapping experience.

While the 'critique of presence' remains important to our understanding of contemporary theatre, there is also a danger that this critique tends towards a reductive analysis of theatrical experience. Roger Copeland's view of the theatre's supposed superiority over film and television on the basis of 'liveness' as being 'sheer bourgeois sentimentality', surely has some justification. However, Copeland's position, by equating presence in theatre with the concept of 'liveness', tends to view the notion of presence reductively. The more specifically linguistic critiques of presence, while undoubtedly making an important contribution to our understanding of the issue, suffer from similarly reductive tendencies. Stanton B. Garner alludes to this danger, pointing to a 'scriptocentrism' implicit within poststructuralism's linguistic and textual interests which tend to give a reductive account of theatre's means of *embodying* representations (Garner 1994: 25). This 'scriptocentrism' is especially evident in Fuchs' account of postmodern theatre as the 'Revenge of Writing' which privileges 'absence' over 'presence' and textuality over theatre's entrenchment in the 'actual'. Theorist Jon Erickson seems to have a point therefore when he asks: 'what happens to the specific *pleasure* that theatre affords if presence is to be evaded, eliminated, or deconstructed...[?]' (Erickson 1995: 216). If the deconstruction of presence appears to miss the point somewhat, then perhaps we need an explanation of theatrical presence that both accounts for legitimate poststructuralist concerns, while also providing for the experiential specificity of the medium.

In this thesis, I set out to investigate a conflict within theatre studies between those who advocate and affirm theatrical experience as being founded on presence, and those ‘poststructuralist thinkers’, as Copeland put it, who view the notion of presence with suspicion. It is not so much a question of affirming or rejecting presence; theatre, I will argue, has the potential to interrogate our experience of the present. The Chorus’ speech in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, for instance, might be read as an account of how theatre stages the problematic of presence. The Chorus implores the audience to aid in transforming the ‘unworthy... wooden O’, into ‘so great an object’ as those ‘vasty fields of France’ on which Agincourt was fought (Prologue: 10-13). It neither affirms the drama as an unfolding present, nor the wooden stage as an immediate ‘here and now’, but invites its audience into a process of theatre-making. Presence in this case is both self-authenticating and self-negating, an overlap of the ‘now’ of the fiction and the ‘now’ of the stage. The point this speech seems to make is precisely that we do *not* enter into a ‘now’ but experience theatre as a form of representation where the very impossibility of fully inhabiting a given ‘present’ is itself playfully presented. Theatre can be seen not so much as ‘having’ or containing presence, but as an art that plays with its possibilities. Such an approach would allow room for the poststructuralist ‘critiques of presence’ to operate, without needing to discard or reject the intuitive idea that some notion of ‘presence’ is an important aspect of theatrical experience.

This thesis is not polemical in the sense either of prioritising one form of theatre above another or of privileging theatre above, say, film or television, but it is polemical in the sense that it tries to re-situate presence as a key concept for theatre studies. Much of my discussion therefore consists of attempts to quantify the notion of presence, and to address the different ways in which presence in theatre has been conceived of and interrogated. Traditionally, presence in theatre has been seen as that which lies outside representation; the presence of the

actor, the ‘liveness’ of an event or the ‘energy’ that is sometimes said to connect actors and audience all lie beyond the province of signification. While all these conceptions of presence have been questioned on the basis that, to paraphrase Derrida, there is nothing outside of representation, I argue that presence can be seen *as a function* of theatrical signification. To understand how presence is staged we must look at how theatre (re)presents its illusions to an audience. In so doing, I hope to show that a conception of presence looked at from a fresh perspective should continue to be seen, not as a redundant or rhetorical phrase, but as a critical concept that can illuminate the analysis of theatrical performances.

An approach to understanding presence in theatre should also take into account the patent artificiality of many shows, which often point not only to the ‘present’ act of making the show, but also to the *absence* of the fictional world produced. The highlighting of artificiality as a means of accessing a world partially real and partially imaginary was essential to Jean-Paul Sartre’s theatrical ideal: ‘This is the meaning of theatre: its essential value is the representation of something which does not exist’ (Sartre 1976: 143). Theatre’s very basis *in* the world allows us to perceive the ordinary - the wooden boards of the stage - in a different light; the existent (the wooden scaffold) and the non-existent (fictional Agincourt) are apprehended in one complex perceptual moment. It is as though theatre’s initial grounding in a basic ‘here and now’ before an audience can be used as a basis from which the audience’s experience of the present can be explored and subjected to question. What began as a ‘wooden O’ is itself displaced by a fictional proposition (the ‘vast fields of France’), yet the fictional landscape is never as ‘real’ and ‘present’ as the stage on which they appear. One might say that a feature of much theatrical experience involves the *simultaneity* of imaginatively ‘seeing’ a fictional world that has been conjured up, while *seeing* the theatrical means of creating the fictional. If the stage is always concerned with ‘now’ as Thornton

Wilder asserted, then this ‘nowness’ is one of considerable complexity in being both actual and fictional. In the most general sense, we could define presence as being the simultaneity between consciousness and an object of attention. Objects of attention can be constituted in many different ways. They may be real, like the computer screen and surrounding bits and pieces, or an object of attention might be imaginary, remembered or fictional. However, if the concept of presence implies a correspondence between consciousness and object, or viewer and stage, then theatre at once affirms presence by taking place *before* an audience, while simultaneously putting this correspondence into question by positing a fictional ‘now’ which is out of kilter with the stage ‘now’. We see the stage and imagine the fiction, and so the whole question as to what *is* present is opened up.

I argue that it is the very potential of theatre to put presence *into play* that enables us to consider the importance of theatre as an art form that can allow us to reflect upon and question the construction of ‘reality’ in the contemporary world. To fully appreciate *how* theatre can stage the unravelling of the present, we need to understand theatre not only as an object of discourse, but also as a way of *seeing* the world anew. In *The Far Side of the Moon*, the limitations of theatre were used to ‘make strange’ the ordinary. As Bert States observes, ‘theatre - unlike fiction, painting, sculpture and film - is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that *are* what they seem to be’ (States 1985: 20). That the round window *was* what it ‘seemed to be’ enabled it - and other objects - to be seen in a range of guises as an expansion of perceptual possibilities. While Herbert Blau has pointed out that theatre’s inherent limitations as an art form will never allow it to fully embody ‘the unmediated’, it is thanks to these very limitations that the notion of presence has been so central to theatrical discourse. It is because theatrical enactment takes place *within* the world that theatre has had a particular association with ‘presence’. Discussions of theatrical presence

need not be tied to idealism or celebrations of the unmediated, but can help us understand how theatre utilises its limitations as a medium tied to a world of 'things' and to the representational possibilities afforded by these limitations.

In this context the writings of Baudrillard and Derrida seem less an imperative to regard theatrical presence with suspicion, than as an invitation to explore the issue further and to shed light on theatre's capabilities as a mode of representation. Theatre's ability to complicate presence takes on particular resonance in relation to Baudrillard's notion of 'hyperreality' in which 'simulations' take precedence over the 'real': 'simulation threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary"' (Baudrillard 1988: 171). If simulation 'threatens' the distinctions between the 'real' and the 'imaginary', then the stage is a place where this 'threat' can be actualised and playfully explored. One might further expand the employment of a conception of theatrical presence within a set of poststructuralist concerns by acknowledging just how interested Derrida is *in* the concept of presence. Far from wishing to replace the notion of presence with 'absence' or 'textuality', Derrida, in his key work *Of Grammatology*, declares a quite different 'intention': 'To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words "proximity", "immediacy" and "presence"...is my final intention in this book' (Derrida 1974: 70). There is perhaps no art form better suited to making presence 'enigmatic' than the theatre, where the 'immediate' is represented, and where the character or stage world is in 'proximity', while being, in a very real sense, absent.

This study does not set out to be a comprehensive historical survey of theories relating to theatrical presence. The structure I have adopted for this thesis is roughly chronological however, an approach which, while making no pretence at being a 'history', acknowledges that discourses surrounding theatrical presence have evolved and changed over time. Neither

does this thesis claim to be an exhaustive survey or explanation of presence in theatre - potentially every play or performance throws up fresh questions with regard to presence - but it does aim to outline and develop perspectives on some key texts relating to the topic. The first three chapters outline what I describe as the three main 'modes of presence' in theatre; in these chapters I examine the broad range within which presence has been theorised on the stage. Those three modes are the making-present, the having-present and the being-present, and each of the first three chapters is devoted to exploring how each of these three modes has been theorised.

The first chapter is devoted to ideas surrounding theatre's ability to make fictional entities present on the stage, and looks particularly at the notion that staged drama unfolds before the audience as though it were occurring 'now'. Philosopher John Searle makes the distinction between a theatrical *enactment* of a story and the mere *telling* of a story:

A fictional story is a pretended representation of a state of affairs; but a play, that is, a play as performed, is not a pretended *representation* of a state of affairs but the pretended state of affairs itself (Searle 1979: 69).

A story performed is one which is seen as though it were 'here and now', unlike a written story which is a recounting of events through the mediation of a narrator. Among the key questions which I address in this first chapter is the extent to which the presence of a dramatic world negates or tries to supersede the presence of the stage and its properties, and how theatre as a medium for 'presenting' fiction has been compared to that of film.

In the following chapter I turn from looking at discourses surrounding theatre's way of making fictions present to an audience, and towards ideas that theatre *has* presence. The

notion of 'aura' becomes a key term in this chapter which examines how twentieth century practitioners such as Appia, Craig, Artaud and Grotowski envisaged a presence in theatre that would transcend the fictional and the representational. When Jerzy Grotowski defined the essence of theatre as: 'the actor spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion' (Grotowski 1968: 19), he was referring, in almost mystical terms, to the ceremonial quality implicit within the theatrical situation itself, which went beyond the pretence of (merely) representing fictional worlds. I examine the notion of aura in theatre in terms of strands of thought associated with artistic modernism. In particular, aura is prioritised when the autonomy and essence of the medium become prime criteria for aesthetic achievement. One of the central questions that emerges is whether theatre, as an art form that embraces contingency and consists of many inter-related art practices, is inherently unsuited to realising the modernist ideal of a pure transcendent presence. While figures such as Artaud and Grotowski have become synonymous with the concept of presence in theatre, I argue that attempts to prioritise the metaphysical quality of the auratic inevitably avoid the basic contingency of the actor-audience situation, a key component of much theatrical experience.

While Chapter Two looks at attempts to overcome the contingency of theatrical experience, contingency is central to the ideas examined in the third chapter. In particular, contingency is expressed in terms of a basic perceiver-object relationship which has characterised numerous discussions of 'performance' and early performance art. The literal fact of 'being-there' in-the-same-room-at-the-same-time as the performance/artist at once implied a rejection of a transcendent stage 'aura', and an eschewal of attempts to create theatrical 'illusion'. A key part of this discussion will be to critique attempts to differentiate performance art from theatre on the basis of presence. I will argue that a conception of 'theatre' can be usefully employed

as a way of questioning notions of 'literal presence' that were used to document and theorise emerging forms of postmodern practice and discourse.

These first three chapters are designed to mark out parameters and to draw broad distinctions between different perspectives on presence. Presence in theatre means different things at different times to different people, and these opening chapters in part aim to bring a sense of order to an otherwise divergent and sometimes contradictory set of discussions. However, these chapters are not intended to draw fixed boundaries between theorists, practitioners or theatrical styles; a practitioner discussed in terms of one 'mode' of presence could also be discussed in terms of another. Furthermore, the point of distinguishing between different modes of presence is to demonstrate that presence in theatre is not a singular, monolithic entity, but a complex and multiple set of discussion and perspectives. Thus, in a given performance such as *The Far Side of the Moon* we can envisage all three modes of presence operating simultaneously; as fiction is made-present, Lepage's onstage presence as 'the maker' potentially lends the performance a certain aura, while the playful manipulation of props emphasises their literally 'being-there' before the audience. Apart from developing terminology and setting out parameters, these chapters are designed to flesh out the scope and complexity of the topic, and prepare the ground for my own suggestions as to how presence might be theorised.

Before offering these suggestions however, chapters Four and Five are devoted to examining a significant body of work which has emerged that questions the whole notion of presence in the theatre. Chapter Four explores the critiques by and inspired by Jacques Derrida, and examines claims made by some contemporary theatre theorists that presence as a concept has become a problematic issue. While critiques of presence have raised a number of important

questions, I suggest that poststructuralist discussions often develop a fairly reductive conception of presence, and have not always engaged with theatre's potential to explore the complexities of presence in ways which complement - rather than militate against - Derrida's analysis of presence in western philosophy. In chapter five, I examine discussions surrounding the notion of 'liveness', and especially how some of Jean Baudrillard's key ideas have influenced critical reflections on this notion. Of central importance to this chapter are issues surrounding the relationship between theatre and technology, and theatre within a wider 'mediatized' landscape. By drawing upon the notions of presence explored in previous chapters, I suggest that -while the notion of liveness is often conflated with the broader concept of presence in theatre - these should be seen as separate issues. While a variously configured relationship with technology raises questions about theatre's supposed liveness, I argue that the use of technologies on the stage can highlight theatre's potential to play on the audience's experience of the present.

In the final chapter I offer a perspective on presence in theatre which avoids merely restating that presence is the 'essence of theatre' and instead seeks to find a framework for understanding how theatre *stages* presence. To do so, I draw on post-Husserlian phenomenology, with its emphasis on how the body 'presents' the world to consciousness, and its potential applications to performance analysis. Central to this chapter is an investigation of the relationship between phenomenological analysis, with its emphasis on the 'actual', and semiotic analysis, with its emphasis on the 'textual'. When applied to theatre, both modes of analysis, I suggest, converge around the notion of presence, and their inter-relation can suggest a framework for thinking about how theatre 'presents' objects of attention. I argue that presence should not be seen as something fixed which theatre has or

doesn't have, but as the subject of a constantly shifting interplay between theatrical signification and the context in which a performance takes place.

I hope this study will demonstrate that, in order to better understand the continuing relevance of theatre's representational potentials, we need to reconcile a set of concerns surrounding notions such as 'absence', 'deferral', 'textuality' and 'mediatization', with a conception of theatre as a mode of expression whose cornerstone is 'presence'. Theatre affirms *its* presence by making 'presence' enigmatic. Conversely, the specificity and pleasures of theatrical experience can themselves be seen anew in the light of poststructuralism. Far from being threatened by current tendencies to pick apart notions of presence and essence, theatre's distinctiveness as an art form may be affirmed in terms of its ability to play out the possibilities and problematics of presence before an audience.

Chapter 1

Making-Present:

The Fictional Mode of Presence

In his 1941 work *The Dramatic Imagination*, Robert Edmond Jones wrote: ‘This is drama; this is theatre – to be aware of the Now’ (Edmond Jones 1941: 34), but which ‘Now’ is it; the Now of the ‘drama’, or the Now of the ‘theatre’? Are we in the imaginary presence of Hamlet at Elsinore, or in the real ‘live’ presence of actors on the stage? In addressing the performance of dramatic fiction I will consider the part played by *both* of Edmond Jones’ Nows in the construction of presence. It has often been suggested that staged drama is unlike any other form of fictional discourse because it gives rise to an experience of presence. Theatre appears to have a unique potential to place objects of representation *there* on the stage before us, with events and actions actually *taking place* without having been pre-recorded or narrated. What I propose to investigate here is not the presence of the actor or the ‘immediate’ relationship between the theatrical medium and its watching audience, but ideas which explore theatre’s capacity for making fictional propositions present. This topic may be sufficiently broad to encompass the whole field of drama; however, although I employ a number of salient historical examples, my main concerns are to draw out questions in relation to more recent theories of theatre’s distinctiveness as a representational form. While I examine ideas from semiotics which distinguish theatrical communication from that of literature, and attempts to distinguish theatre from film by constructing theories of imagination, a central part of this chapter will be to interrogate an underlying belief that theatre fulfils its potential by *making* present the fictional.

As Robert Edmond Jones' proposition tends to imply however, the notion of presence in theatre is an inherently contested one. The 'Now' of the dramatic fiction has often stood in a problematic relation to the 'Now' of the dramatic medium - the stage and its physical properties. For Aristotle, the theatrical medium itself seems not to have been of paramount importance to the dramatic genre known as tragedy. As he writes in *Poetics*, 'the effect of tragedy is not dependent on performance and actors' (Aristotle 1996: 13), later adding that: 'The plot should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudders and feels pity at what happens' (1996: 22). 'Drama' is decidedly more important to Aristotle than 'theatre'. Somewhat more recently, Theodore Shank in his work *The Art of Dramatic Art* (1969) has stated that 'the aim of dramatic artists is to create from any and all materials which serve their purpose virtual action ... which is presented as an immediate audible or visual presence' (Shank 1969: 55).¹ However, theorists and dramatists from Coleridge to Brecht have also stressed the dangers of presenting 'virtual action' as an 'immediate presence', pointing to the need for more active participation from spectators in making the drama present. This desire to construct stage fictions which invite the collusion of spectators calls for a more sophisticated notion of theatrical presence than many accounts would suggest.

Indeed, so broad are the discussions surrounding this topic, even in relation to drama alone, that it begs the question as to whether there can ever be a general understanding of what presence in theatre means. What does seem clear however, is the centrality of the notion of presence to numerous discussions of theatre's distinctiveness and its particular qualities as an

¹ At its most extreme, the theory of illusion, commonplace in the discourse of the representational arts, would envisage the medium as a transparent pane of glass, through which the spectator 'sees' the representation. Art theorist Arthur Danto summarises the theory of illusion as follows: 'If illusion is to occur, the viewer cannot be conscious of any properties that really belong to the medium, for to the degree that we perceive the medium, illusion is effectively aborted' (Danto 1982: 151).

art form. Theatre's distinctiveness, I will suggest, is less about making *fictions* present than it is about making our experience of the present a subject of contemplation.

Theatre as a negation of the real

I begin the investigation by examining theories of dramatic discourse which are founded on the invocation of a sure separation between the 'real' and the 'unreal'.² The initial question I wish to pose is as follows: to what extent does the presence of a fictional 'elsewhere' negate the presence of the 'here and now'? In theatre semiotician Keir Elam's account of the 'logic' of dramatic worlds, a clear distinction is implied between the physical constituents of the stage (scenery, actors, properties) and the fictional world proceeding from these constituents.

The spectator, as Elam describes:

derives from the conventionalised onstage happenings a range of dramatic information which enables him to translate what he sees and hears into something quite different: a fictional dramatic world characterised by a set of properties, a set of agents and a course of time-bound events (Elam 1980: 98).

As I will discuss, this basic proposition that 'onstage happenings' are 'quite different' from a 'fictional dramatic world' raises some important questions about the notion of presence in theatre. One such question concerns the status of those physical constituents of the stage, which are apparently superseded by the presence of the dramatic world. As Elam continues:

Clearly, with respect to the "real" world of performers and spectators, and in particular the immediate theatrical context, it [the dramatic world] is a spatio-temporal *elsewhere* represented as though actually present for the audience (1980: 99).

² Although I employ the distinction between the 'real' and 'unreal' here for convenience, it is a distinction which later chapters will seek to interrogate more deeply.

Like Elam, James Urmson is keen to qualify this account of dramatic presence by clearly establishing the drama's status as 'counter-factual', by which the dramatic fiction can be clearly distinguished from 'actuality':

The auditors who are acquainted with the conventions of drama will expect the playwright to provide them with a hypothetical counter-factual background... The story of the play is this counter-factual interpretation. Any member of the audience who does not realise that the interpretation is counter-factual will be mistaking drama for actuality (Urmson 1972: 338).

The dramatic world is seen as a hypothetical construct by an audience 'acquainted with the conventions of the drama'; the drama is created through active hypothesising by the audience who can clearly distinguish what is real from what is not. Here again, this notion of the 'counter-factual' which Urmson places between audience and drama introduces a sharp distinction between 'drama' and 'actuality':

The spectator who can distinguish drama from reality is constantly aware that his interpretation is counterfactual (1972: 339).

The presence of the drama, even when placed in 'counterfactual' quotation marks, exists in an apparent opposition to the physical 'actuality' of the stage; this separation, according to these arguments, forms the logical basis on which dramatic worlds are founded.

French semiotician Anne Ubersfeld in her work *Reading Theatre* echoes this fundamental distinction, although she appears to extend this observation beyond the construction of drama *per se*, to a much broader conception of 'theatrical communication':

The essential characteristic of theatrical communication is that the receiver considers the message to be unreal, or more precisely, untrue... What appears on the stage is a concrete reality – objects and people whose concrete existence is never questioned. Although they indisputably exist (they are the very stuff of reality), they are at the same time denied, marked with a minus sign. A chair on the stage is not a chair in the real world. Spectators cannot go and sit on it, or move it somewhere else; for them it is forbidden, it does not exist. Everything that happens on stage [...] is marked with unreality (Ubersfeld 1999: 24).

We are never fooled into thinking that the chairs and tables onstage *are* actually those in a fiction, but we agree to pretend that they are by mentally marking those objects ‘with a minus sign’ - their reality has been subtracted from. According to Ubersfeld, theatrical communication works by ‘denying’ its basis in reality.

If staged drama can be defined as a hypothetical ‘elsewhere’ represented ‘as though actually present’ (Elam) then this may provide one way of distinguishing between the presentation of dramatic fiction from that of narrative fiction. As philosopher John Searle notes, there is a difference between a world *shown* to an audience and a world *described*:

A fictional story is a pretended representation of a state of affairs; but a play, that is, a play as performed, is not a pretended *representation* of a state of affairs but the pretended state of affairs itself, the actors pretend *to be* the characters (Searle 1979: 69).

A performed drama *presents* a fiction, whereas a written narrative recounts fictional events. Keir Elam further elaborates on this point by distinguishing between ‘state descriptions’ in literature, in which a fictional world is described, from the ‘hypothetically actual’ construction of the drama:

The states of affairs stipulated by state descriptions or, equally in novels are at an evident remove from the stipulator's or reader's immediate context, so much so that classical narrative is always orientated towards an explicit *there and then*, towards an imaginary "elsewhere" set in the past and which has to be evoked for the reader through predication and description. Dramatic worlds, on the other hand, are presented to the spectator as "hypothetically actual" constructs, since they are "seen" in progress "here and now" without narratorial mediation (1980: 110-111).

Two broad questions in relation to the concept of presence emerge from these accounts of how dramatic worlds are constructed. The first relates to the extent to which drama can coherently be conceived of as a negation of reality, the extent to which everything onstage is 'marked with unreality'. I explore this issue in more detail further on; here I only wish to note the potential difficulties in reconciling a theory which emphasises the negation of the real with an art form that - more than any other - contains 'real' things such as people, chairs and tables. The other question which needs to be addressed is the notion of drama as presenting the unfolding of fictional events before the spectator, without 'narratorial mediation'. Given the numerous forms of drama which *do* include some form of 'narratorial mediation', such as the Greek chorus or the Elizabethan soliloquy - devices used to *tell* rather than show the story - we need to ask just how much drama actually conforms to this model.

The notion of stage drama as the negation of the real fails to notice the extent to which the very reality of the stage can participate in the construction of the drama. In other words, the notion of drama as an unfolding of fictional events before an audience does not really deal with theatre *as* theatre, a medium that manipulates physical phenomena before a specific group of people. If we go back to Edmond Jones' assertion: 'This is drama; this is theatre – to be aware of the Now', we can see that the Now of the 'drama' (unreality) and the Now of the 'theatre' (reality) do not go together easily. Surely however, if we are to appreciate the complexity of theatrical experience we need to understand how *both* drama and theatre combine to produce a specific mode of presentation, rather than how drama subtracts theatre.

Perhaps the deepest problem with the notion that real objects onstage are, as Ubersfeld put it, 'marked with a minus sign', is that it appears to negate the theatrical medium itself. We may wonder whether it is really coherent to posit such a distinction between dramatic 'illusion' and concrete 'actuality' when theatrical performances are, after all, *events* in which the audience is presented with actions, utterances and objects. If these physical constituents of the stage are merely there to illustrate a dramatic 'unreality', then might it not be preferable to read the plays with a view to imagining their realisation in performance? This may exaggerate the issue, for we are dealing with theorists whose particular interest lies in demonstrating how performances are read by an audience. However, in principle one wonders just how far away this position on illusion versus actuality might be from that of the nineteenth century English critic Charles Lamb, who held that it would be preferable to read the plays of Shakespeare than to see them in performance. For Lamb, the physical reality of the stage militates against the spectators attempts to lose themselves in the creations of Shakespeare, the supreme dramatist. Lamb puts the problem neatly: 'What we see upon the stage is a body and bodily action; what we are conscious of in reading is almost exclusively the mind and its movements' (Lamb 1865: 524). In reading, the world of Shakespeare becomes *more* present for us in our imaginations, while in the theatre there are numerous rogue elements from the 'real' world to distract our attention from the (unreal) essence of the drama. Theorists such as Elam, Urmson and Ubersfeld, while highlighting the importance and value of theatrical performance as more than merely the illustration of a literary idea, clearly have in mind a notion of drama as separate from the immediate context of the stage, whose physical presence is at odds with dramatic 'unreality'.

A comparison between theatre and film may help to clarify this issue. Film can also give us a strong sense of action happening in the present, and there is less 'reality' to subtract in film, since it does not use real objects to represent fictional objects as theatre does.³ To examine more closely the notion of presence in staged drama, I will deal with comparisons between theatre and film which directly relate to distinctions between reality and fiction. The distinctions between theatre and film give rise to questions to which a number of film theorists have addressed themselves, particularly Christian Metz and Andre Bazin, who sought to distinguish film from theatre on the basis that film is better at circumventing the potentially distracting presence of the real. As I hope to show, if we are gain a more rounded understanding of theatre as a mode of communication, we need to develop a more complex conception of how presence is constructed on the stage.

Film as negation of reality

Both Christian Metz and Andre Bazin emphasise the particular reliance of theatre on real objects, in contrast to the supposed transparency of film as a medium.⁴ For Metz, the very fact that theatre's medium is made up of material objects, rather than a transparent stimulus, inhibits theatre's capacity to construct an imaginary world. Theatre, he suggests, is 'too real':

³ There may be examples which counter this general distinction; Noel Carroll calls to attention the a piece called *Monster Film* in which its creator Malcolm LeGrice 'walked - stripped to the waist - into the projector beam (his shadow becoming progressively like a monster), while a crashing din sounded loudly' (Carroll 1995: 80). Despite this and other counter-examples, however Carroll maintains that a general distinction between film and theatre on the basis that: 'the performance [of a play] warrants artistic appreciation, whereas the performance of the film [merely the function of physical mechanisms] warrants no artistic appreciation' (1995: 79).

⁴ I do not propose making simple ontological distinctions between theatre and film on the basis of Metz and Bazin's arguments, I use them merely to illustrate the limitations of conceiving drama as the negation of reality; it does not really allow us to distinguish between theatre and film as representational forms.

The actor's bodily presence contradicts the temptation one always experiences during the show to perceive him as a protagonist in a fictional universe...Because the theatre is too real, theatrical fictions yield only a weak impression of reality (Metz 1974: 9).

The stubborn reality of the theatrical space, props and actors gets in the way of the unreality of a fiction. While theatre is 'too real' to give us a strong impression of fictional presence, film's illusory appeal derives from the fact that the medium doesn't consist of 'bodily presence':

The impression of reality we get from a film does not depend at all on the strong presence of an actor but rather on the low degree of existence possessed by those ghostly creatures moving on the screen, and they are, therefore, unable to resist our constant impulse to invest them with the reality of fiction...The film spectacle produces a strong impression of reality because it corresponds to a 'vacuum, which dreams are ready to fill' (1974: 9-10).

Metz's account suggests that, in order to engage imaginatively with a fictional world, it is necessary for the spectator to exclude all consideration of reality. To the extent that 'reality' is perceived, a fictional unreality loses its imaginary force. Filmic fictions on the other hand, yield a 'strong impression of reality' because film has, like a 'vacuum', removed - or subtracted - elements of reality. The cinema audience enter a de-realised zone in which the real world 'does not intrude upon the fiction and constantly deny its claim to reality' (1974: 11). The theatrical medium, however, has a tendency to negate (or 'deny') its fictitious dimension by existing in a way which is undeniably non-fictional.

Andre Bazin distinguishes between film and theatre along similar lines in his essay 'Theatre and Cinema':

The characters on the screen are quite naturally objects of identification, while those of the stage are, rather, objects of mental opposition because their real presence gives them an objective reality and to transpose them into beings in an imaginary world the will of the spectator has to intervene actively, that is to say, the will to transform their physical reality into an abstraction. This abstraction being the result of a process of the intelligence that we can only ask of a person who is fully conscious (Bazin 1967: 99).

Again, the suggestion is that a theatre spectator has a certain amount of work to do in order to engage imaginatively with a fiction through a presentation so obtrusively located in reality.

Bazin's implication is that cinema spectatorship requires no conscious act of 'will' to 'transform [...] physical reality into an abstraction'. Bazin's suggestion that only a person 'who is fully conscious' can transform elements of 'an objective reality' into 'beings in an imaginary world' will remind us of Metz's proposal that film offers us a 'vacuum which dreams readily fill'. Film offers us the opportunity to dream, to enter into an imaginary world and block out any unnecessary consciousness of reality. For Bazin, film is a substitute for reality:

The world of the screen and our world cannot be juxtaposed. The screen of necessity substitutes for it since the very concept of universe is spatially exclusive. For a time, a film is the Universe, the world, of if you like, Nature (1967: 108-09).

Theatre on the other hand, is seen in relation to reality: 'Theatre of its very essence must not be confused with nature under penalty of being absorbed by her and ceasing to be' (1967: 104). Theatre is forever competing against the very materials from which it is constructed, (actors and chairs are *there* onstage, but may be intended as parts of a fictitious world), while film is able to generate representations by *absorbing* the real rather than competing against it.⁵

⁵ Bazin and Metz's distinctions between theatre and film are supported by more recent theorising; film theorist Richard Allen writes: 'In order to experience a drama as a projective illusion, as a fully realised world, we must imagine that the actors and props are neither physically present nor a part of this world' (Allen 1995: 89).

When theatre semiotician Anne Ubersfeld talks of theatre placing reality under a 'minus sign', or when Urmson opposes 'drama' with 'actuality', they construct a model of dramatic presence which might apply more to film than to theatre. At least, film would seem to be far better equipped to demonstrate the principle of drama-as-negation-of-the-real than theatre. Unlike that of film, the theatrical medium consists largely of real objects, and this suggests that presence in theatrical performance is potentially more complex and unstable than that of film.

The fact that the approaches to thinking about presence in theatre adopted by Elam and Ubersfeld have also been addressed in relation to film, raises some difficult questions. It can be argued of both media that they (sometimes) attempt to create a strong sense of presence in their construction of fictional propositions. The debate as to whether filmic or theatrical fictions are made more present for the spectator is perhaps not as important a question to consider as the extent to which emphasising presence in one medium implies a comparison with something (supposedly) less present. Elam's or John Searle's accounts of presence in staged drama are made via comparisons with other kinds of fictional discourse in which 'presence' is less explicit. The need for comparison is also strikingly the case in the writing of Metz and Bazin who, either directly or by implication, account for the 'impression of reality we get from a film' (Metz 1974: 9) with a stage performance. Indeed, the emphasis on presence for each respective medium appears to undermine the whole project of establishing the essential distinctiveness of either theatre or film: the experience of presence in one medium depends entirely on its specific comparison with another. In other words, when the experience of presence in one medium is conceived of in direct opposition to the experience of another, the very ideal of presence is called into question. The experience of one medium becomes *contingent* on another; the spectator in the theatre is aware of 'presence' to the extent that the experience differs from that of cinema - or vice versa.

However, within the terms of this film-theatre comparison, lies a more subtle approach to thinking about the distinctiveness of theatrical representation. It all hinges on what Robert Edmond Jones identified as the 'Now' of both 'drama' *and* 'theatre'. To understand presence in staged drama, we must look more closely at how the fiction onstage is underpinned by the 'Now' of the 'theatre'. Theatre may not be any better at *presenting* fictional entities than film, but it has been variously suggested that theatre, by virtue of being *theatre* - grounded before an audience - requires a wilful act of imagination on the part of spectators which fundamentally separates the respective experiences of theatre and film.

The Need to Imagine

Daphna Ben Chaim (1984: 64) notes of Christian Metz that his theories of film aesthetics can help us to conceptualise certain aspects of theatrical experience:

Metz's greatest contribution to our understanding of the concept of distance is that involvement of the art object is made easier when "fictionality" (nonreality) is inherent in the medium itself...Both the novel and the film have a built-in fictionality (neither use realities to represent nonrealities). But this comparison also suggests the limited usefulness of Metz's observation: "decoding" the film to experience its fictional world need not stimulate the imagination to any noticeable degree (though, of course, films can be created to stimulate the imagination by inducing high-level interpretations).

Arguably, film is far better at subtracting 'the real' than theatre, and an account of how theatre posits fictional objects will need to demonstrate the ways in which theatrical fiction embraces the reality of the stage. By the same token however, the film/theatre distinction is not as clear cut as this discussion would seem to imply. It is very difficult to argue - notwithstanding the

views of certain key film theorists - that theatre *per se* calls on a greater degree of imaginative involvement than film *per se*, nor is it true that film always conceals the mechanisms of its construction. Recent films such as *Dogville* (2003) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) for example, revel in revealing the mechanisms underpinning filmic illusion, and invite an imaginative engagement from a spectator complicit in acts of fictional conjuration. Moreover, the need to emphasise the importance of the collusive act of imagination in theatrical experience can be seen as a reaction against a more pervasive naturalism in the arts - an artistic idiom that seemed to have been placed under the spell of technological reproduction, and especially film. Before looking more specifically at the shift away from naturalism in theatre, I will investigate more closely links between imagination and notions of presence.

An interest in imagination did not start as a response to naturalism or the development of photography and film. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a great literary figure of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, had much to say on the nature of the imagination, and its specific application in decoding a theatrical presentation. Frederick Burwick, who surveys Coleridgean thought in *Illusion and the Drama: Critical Theory of the Enlightenment and Romantic Era* (1991), suggests that Coleridge's idea of a 'willing suspension of disbelief' arises through a concern to establish the voluntary nature of the imagination. Unlike his contemporary, A. W. Schlegel, who defined illusion as 'a waking dream, to which we voluntarily surrender ourselves' (Burwick 1991: 194) - not unlike Metz's definition of film - Coleridge wished to emphasise the audience's consciousness of representation, and its subservience to the will of the spectator. Burwick writes of the development of Coleridge's theory of illusion:

In contrast to the landscape painting, the stage scenery involves an “*analogon* of deception, a sort of temporary Faith which we encourage by our own Will”...Coleridge now affirms complete volitional control over stage illusion: “We know that it is at any time in the power of the will to see it as it is” (1991: 209-10).

We have the freedom to see the stage scenery as pieces of painted cardboard or as the Forest of Arden, to alternate between looking at the medium or at the representation. For Coleridge however, there is an important balance to be struck with the relationship between medium and representation. This balance is explained through recourse to a distinction between a ‘copy’ and an ‘imitation’. As Burwick explains ‘A copy merely mirrors and reproduces, an imitation reveals the conscious artistry involved’ (1991: 212). An imitation, in Coleridge’s account ‘means always a combination of a certain degree of dissimilitude with a certain degree of similitude’, as Burwick succinctly summarises ‘It is our recognition of the difference that delights us’ (1991: 212). This ‘difference’, for Coleridge, accounts for the particular pleasure we take in theatrical images: ‘If mere pain for the moment were wanted, could we not go to our hospitals: if we required mere pleasure could we not be present at our public fetes’. Theatre provides us with illusions, the pleasure of which are determined by our ability to control them in our imaginations: ‘The real pleasure derived from knowing the scene represented was unreal and merely an imitation’ (1991: 212).

It is in Shakespeare that Coleridge finds the finest sense of balance between reality and unreality. To demonstrate Shakespeare’s appreciation for the importance of the imagination, Coleridge cites the Prologue to *Henry V*, in which the Chorus implores the audience to ‘piece out [theatre’s] imperfections’ with our ‘thoughts’:

But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that hath dar’d
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object: can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram

Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million;
And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work...
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts:
Into a thousand parts divide one man,
And make imaginary puissance...(Prologue: 1-25).

Coleridge reads this speech as a celebration of difference; the contrast between the 'unworthy scaffold' and 'so great an object' as Agincourt compels the audience to imagine that which is clearly absent. Imitation implies, as Coleridge put it 'a certain quantum of difference' (cited in Burwick 1991: 229), and the pleasure gained from a theatrical experience is explained on the basis of this difference. We are not duped or seduced by the perfect illusion, but remain free to see difference between the objects placed before us, and those 'great objects' which are only there if our imaginations permit them to be so.

It is significant that much of what Coleridge says concerning the role of imagination in theatrical experience is indirectly reinforced in Metz and Bazin's accounts of the filmic medium. In theatre, we are aware of the difference between medium and representation, in film - according to Metz and Bazin - this difference plays a much less significant role: medium and representation tend to merge. The suggestion that theatre involves 'piecing out' imperfections imaginatively is one which has informed subsequent discussions of theatrical experience, as well as attempts to distinguish theatre from film.

A conception of theatre's artificiality was also fundamental to Jean-Paul Sartre's twentieth-century understanding of the art form, a conception which was informed by a complex account of imagination. For Sartre, theatre is essentially concerned with unreality and

imagination: 'This is the meaning of theatre: its essential value is the representation of something which does not exist' (Sartre 1976: 143). Compared with the perceptual richness of seeing the detail in things which exist before us, in theatre we are concerned with non-existent entities and events. In his essay 'On Dramatic Style', Sartre illustrates this point by differentiating theatre from film, the novel, and perceptual experience. This particular passage will be worth quoting at length because it contains Sartre's basic position on the nature of theatrical representation:

What individualises an object in life is that I, with my memories, in my situation, face it, touch it, and act on it. Similarly in the film, if I am made to look at the branches of a linden tree at the precise moment when I ought to look at them and in the precise way I am supposed to look at them, here again I am driven into individuation. But in the theatre I do not see the object, because to see it would be to connect it with my universe, in which it would be a cardboard tree, since actually seeing it would be seeing it as something painted on a flat or a designated object. My only connection with the set is the character's gestures; the only way I can be connected with the tree is to see a character sit down in its shade... Thus, a character's gesture of swimming will bring the river into being, and there will be no need for a cardboard river for him to seem to dive into. You can also make stylised, schematised objects – this is the real meaning of "poor man's theatre" – because it is quite enough simply to indicate them, provided the indication is a general one, and what we see of an object is always general (1976: 11).

Once again, we have this basic tension between an unreal fictional world, and that which is materially real before us. Seeing a character at any given time, involves seeing past a 'real' actor, just as 'piecing out' the Forest of Arden involves an effort to see past painted pieces of cardboard. In theatre, we do not necessarily get caught up in perceptual details as we do when we confront day-to-day objects, or when we view the particulars of a filmic image. Although Sartre suggests that we do not 'actually see' the objects onstage, but rather the general 'indication' of objects which are absent, it is important to understand that it is only *through* the real that this effect can be achieved. For Sartre, films or novels interest us primarily by showing us a world as particular individuals (heroes) view it, we readily engage in

psychological and perceptual detail. In theatre, we are not interested in these details: 'This, therefore, is what we primarily see in theatre: people embarking on a venture and performing acts in order to do so' (1976: 13).

Bertolt Brecht, like Sartre, also sought to emphasise the importance of spectatorial consciousness and control over theatre's potential to construct illusions; while Sartre posited the 'schematised object', Brecht refers to the 'partial illusion':

Too much heightening of the illusion in the setting, together with a "magnetic" way of acting that gives the spectator the illusion of being present at a fleeting, accidental, "real" event, create such an impression of naturalness that one can no longer impose one's judgement, imagination or reactions, and must simply conform by sharing in the experience and becoming one of "nature's" objects. The illusion created by theatre must be a partial one, in order that it may always be recognised as an illusion. Reality, however complete, has to be altered by being turned into art, so that it can be seen to be alterable and be treated as such (Brecht 1964: 219).

It is not that the stage can itself embody a representation of 'reality', but that it can stimulate a collective consciousness, enabling the audience to 'interpose one's judgement, imagination or reactions'; facilitating an act of what Brecht described as 'complex seeing'. Brecht shares the concerns we find in Coleridge and Sartre for whom the more detailed and naturalistic the illusion, the more the spectator will be controlled by the experience. The fact that, as film theorist Andre Bazin points out, theatre requires an act of conscious 'will' to transform physical objects into 'an abstraction' is seen as a source of both theatre's aesthetic specificity *and* its potential to transform our perspective of the world around us.⁶

⁶ Brecht, in suggesting that the audience's imagination is activated when a balance between the real and the unreal is maintained, strongly echoes Schiller's defence of the Greek Chorus in 1803: 'For the mind of the spectator ought to maintain its freedom through the most impassioned scenes; it should not be the mere prey of impressions, but calmly and severely detach itself from the emotions which it suffers...It is by holding asunder the different parts, and stepping between the passions with its composing views, that the Chorus restores us to our freedom, which else would be lost in the tempest'. (cited in States 1985: 95).

For Sartre, the difference between the real and the unreal is a crucial facet of theatrical representation. Ideally, theatre should strike an appropriate balance between the real and the unreal to activate the 'free imagination'; too much emphasis on either naturalistic detail in fiction or the stripping away of fiction in place of 'reality' kills the need for imaginative collusion. As Sartre explains in his essay 'Myth and Reality in Theatre':

[...] the spectator never loses sight of the fact that what he is being presented with – not even accepting historical plays – is something nonreal. The woman there does not exist, the man, her husband, is only in appearance her husband; he certainly does not really kill her. This means that the spectator does not believe – in the full sense of the word "believe" – in Polonius' murder (Sartre 1976: 141).⁷

Like Sartre, contemporary British philosopher Roger Scruton distinguishes a conception of imagination from that of 'belief', and has stressed the connection between imagination and freedom of will. Normally, our perceptions are not subject to our own will; we see, hear, smell and touch that which is in front of us and surrounds us, and have no volitional control over these perceptions. Aesthetic response however, rests on the imagination and is divorced from belief. Imagination, in Scruton's terms, is seeing without believing. To perceive an aesthetic object is to perceive something in the knowledge that it is unreal. Unlike the perception of an object that *is* there, aesthetic experience is volitional; standing before a Picasso the spectator must *choose* to see the face by piecing together the distorted shapes in the painting. An animal such as a dog, may stand - or sit - before the painting and never see the face, since only a being with a capacity to imagine can see beyond the materially given. During an aesthetic experience, we have a measure of control over what we perceive, and are free to choose how we perceive it.

⁷ Although Sartre was a radical thinker in his day, his views on theatrical aesthetics tended to be a little more conservative. He saw the rise of 'happenings' or the 'documentary play' as leading to a 'crisis of the imaginary in theatre today', leaving the audience feeling bewildered, 'powerless' and 'impotent' (Sartre: 1976: 147).

In considering the staged murder of Desdemona, Scruton points out that 'This is an imaginary scene; which is to say that what is represented is not really there on the stage, nor anywhere else in the objective world' (Scruton 1983: 131). As a result, the observer 'has no disposition to believe that what he sees is actually happening'. Of course, we might say the same of a filmic representation of the same scene, but Scruton's proposal relates to our level of consciousness before a theatrical performance compared with a filmic one. If our interest in a theatrical representation is divorced from belief and is directed towards an object of representation which is clearly imaginary, then our interest in film is often connected to its ability to reproduce the real:

For consider how the magic of the screen arises... You see an actor, portraying a famous detective; and he is walking through the streets of London. But the streets of London are not represented: they are *there*, realised before you, with all their bustle and noise and arbitrary design (1983: 134).

Scruton's distinction is largely compatible with those of film theorists such as Bazin and Metz: film has the potential to produce a more detailed sense of an illusion already fully assembled, whilst theatre - like 'flat-pack' furniture - requires a conscious effort to construct.⁸ Thus, the distinction between drama in film (as realisation) and theatre (as reality) turns around differing accounts of presence. Dramatic representation on film, by freeing itself from the excess baggage of physical presence, becomes all the more real, all the more 'present' to consciousness by being virtually *nothing* in physical terms. Dramatic representation in theatre, by being presented through actors and props which are physically present, clearly demarcates the absence and unreality of its representations. In film, the absence of the physical heightens the sense of reality and presence with regards to the fictive. In theatre, an

⁸ That said, Scruton's account appears to place greater emphasis on the relationship between the camera and an external reality than Metz, who focuses more on the phantasmatic nature of film.

abundance of physical objects in terms of props and actors highlights the sense in which the fictive is unreal and absent.

The Act of Making-Present

An emphasis on imagination as a central element in theatrical performance - or in determining what theatre *should* be like - has been a key feature of attempts to formulate a theatrical aesthetic that would counter the tendency to construct detailed illusion. From a perspective which foregrounds the collusive act of imagination, the reality of the stage and its properties is that which should be highlighted and played upon; the 'Now' of the 'drama' and that of the 'theatre' should be coincident. An interest in classical theatre, Renaissance stagecraft and in the techniques of *Commedia dell'Arte* has underpinned much exploration into finding ways of making theatre which are, as Peter Brook put it, 'freed from any decorative statement that confines the imagination' (Brook 1993: 116).

Like Sartre and Scruton, Brook has recognised that theatre should appeal to the imagination by striking a balance between the reality of the stage, and the unreality of fictional propositions:

There is a difficult balance to be found all the time between what is realistic and what needn't be realistic. An extraordinary thing about theatre is that the imagination of the audience is so ready to respond to any suggestion. But if what you put on the stage is purely in the world of the imagination, rapidly you find it something that isn't rooted in reality; you find that one way or the other there have been certain natural elements that give a basis to what you're doing. For instance, in our theatre, we've put earth on the floor, because one needed to feel that this was taking place not on an abstract floor, but that what the people were standing on was real in every sense of the word. Yet, if because of that you then go farther and build on operatic realism, the realism has turned against itself and is no longer appealing to the imagination (Brook 1999: 90-1).

One of the most recognisable 'Brookian' techniques involves, as Colin Counsell points out, employing objects 'synechdochally', (whereby a part represents a greater whole) and 'metaphorically' (Counsell 1996: 149). Thus a single wheel represents a chariot in *The Mahabharata* (1985), an industrial cable spool represents a war machine in *Ubu aux Bouffes* (1977), or spinning plates are used to depict flowers in the forest of Arden in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970). Theatre which turns away from illusion and naturalistic scenography and stops being about a specific time and place, instead opting for the transformative potentials of the 'empty space' becomes more about what is happening 'now' between actors and audience. As Brook notes, 'The essence of theatre is within a mystery called "the present moment"' (1993: 81).

The general proposition that theatre's distinctiveness - which rests on its appeal to the imagination in the present moment of performance - can only be secured by finding non-naturalistic ways of representing fictional objects, continues to exert a powerful influence on the way theatre is thought about today. Dymphna Callery, in her book on the wide range of practices that has become known as 'physical theatre', explicitly distinguishes between theatre which appeals to the imagination with that of naturalism which is concerned more with the 'copying of nature':

From the spectator's point of view, physical theatre accentuates the audience's imaginative involvement and engagement with what is taking place on the stage. There is a greater emphasis on exploiting the power of suggestion; environments and worlds are created onstage by actors and design elements provoke the imaginations of spectators, rather than furnishing the stage with literal replications of life (Callery 2001: 5).

Callery's distinction is also a clear appeal to exploring and enhancing a sense of presence in theatre:

Understanding and preferencing the living quality of a theatre event lies at the heart of physical theatre... Watching becomes a sensory experience, the magical and illusory qualities of the experience are paramount (2001: 5).

We have thus moved some way from the initial proposition, via Elam and Ubersfeld, that presence in theatre can be explained in terms of a “‘here and now’ without narratorial mediation’ in which the objects onstage are ‘marked with a minus sign’. Recognising the ‘living quality’ of theatrical performance is dependant on striking a certain balance between the real and the unreal, of recognising the synecdochal and metaphorical potentials of theatrical signs, rather than allowing the real to be subtracted by the unreal.

The emphasis on the ‘present moment’ in performance in which the *making* of the illusion is prioritised above the realisation of a stable ‘here and now’ would seem to affirm the centrality of the actor’s craft to the process of making-present. Rather than walking out onto a completed stage-world and interacting with a pre-existing environment, it is the actor and the activities of the actor which form the central point of focus. An appreciation of the ‘living quality’ of the theatrical event would recognise that the actor’s playing and engagement with space and audience is at least as important as the semiotic effectiveness of the stage setting in conveying a fictional world. Julian Hilton points to the importance of what he terms ‘implicit or explicit acts of *designation*’. Acts of designation shape that which is made present on the performance space, keying in the time and place of the action, the characters involved and the scenario being enacted. Significantly, Hilton stresses the importance of the actor in making these acts of designation:

In practice it [the act of designation] means, for example, that an actor may walk across what are patently wooden planks, point to them, saying, “Look at the grass. Isn’t it green?”, and we see green grass under his feet. The performer depends on the willingness of all those watching and listening to collude with him in thinking wooden

boards to be grass. They in turn depend upon on the performer's willingness to convey his belief in what he is saying, within the designated boundaries of the performance (Hilton 1987: 14).

Hilton's description here bears some similarity with Brook's characterisation of the 'empty space' which is transformed by the simple act of the performer entering the space. The theatrical event, by this account, may not be understood merely in terms of how a fictional world is made present to spectators, but moreover in terms of the *making-present* of the fiction: the *acts* of designation as well as their counterfactual end products.

Exploring the relationship between the creativity of the actor and the audience's imaginative collusion in the event tends to lead one away from naturalism and more towards self-conscious 'theatricality'. When the actor walks across wooden planks designating them as green meadow, the actor's freedom seems to derive from the non-imposition of a self-complete naturalistic environment. It is perhaps easy to single out notional examples of naturalism as that which anaesthetises the 'living quality' of the stage event, when in reality narrow definitions of naturalism are no less conceptual than Peter Brook's idea of the 'empty stage'. In what follows I will look more closely at how conflicts between an aesthetic which leans more towards naturalism and one which leans towards overt 'theatricality' have been articulated in relation to presence.

Multiplying Pretence

Naturalism set out to reflect a changing consciousness in the nineteenth century, in which ideas about society and religion were giving way to a more scientific outlook. The adherents

of naturalism framed their ideas as a challenge to established theatrical conventions with their roots in the romanticism of the early nineteenth century. As J.L. Styan notes, much theatre in the nineteenth century had become formulaic and commercially driven, a form of entertainment which was ‘essentially romantic, joyfully unreal, a concoction of trite situations and petty tricks which worked wonderfully well within the formula’ (Styan 1981: 3). That said, naturalism in theatre could be seen as an extension of romantic drama as much as a reaction against its more tired manifestations. Victor Hugo’s Preface to *Cromwell*, penned in 1827, makes it clear that the nineteenth century reaction against classicism aimed to give a greater sense of place - and indeed presence - to the unfolding action:

We see on the stage only the elbows of the plot, so to speak; its hands are somewhere else. Instead of scenes we have narrative; instead of tableaux, descriptions. Solemn-faced characters, placed, as in the old chorus, between the drama and ourselves, tell us what is going on in the temple, in the palace, on the public square, until we are tempted many a time to call out to them: “Indeed! then take us there”! (Hugo 2005).

The emergence of naturalism placed a greater emphasis on the interaction of character and environment, with Emile Zola at the forefront of calls create a more objective form of theatre for a scientific age, rooted in psychological and social reality. The incorporation of ‘real’ objects was clearly important to achieving this sense of authenticity. André Antoine and his Théâtre-Libre took up Zola’s suggestion of abandoning the house lights, and created detailed stage settings. Rehearsals were arranged on a completed set, allowing the actors to develop their characters within a fully furnished stage environment. The Moscow Art Theatre took this aesthetic to an extreme, with painstaking reconstructions of the Kremlin or the streets of ancient Rome, including the expedient of importing genuine Norwegian furniture for a production of *Hedda Gabler* (Styan: 1981: 73).

In such detailed arrangements of stage props, however effective at conveying the impression of a complete and 'present' fictional world, lay the potential for naturalism's subversion. As stage naturalism was becoming synonymous with verisimilitude, simultaneous technological developments in such media as photography and film were making it possible to accurately represent the world in great visual detail in more sophisticated ways than the stage could offer. As Lee Baxandall wrote in 1968:

The period of modern drama was indeed opened by Naturalism. Its outlook was at one time a bold revelation; it stood at the pinnacle of social-scientific awareness. No longer. Each year's collection of naturalistic truths becomes a little less compelling or interesting... Why should audiences not, as they do, turn towards the cinema, where far more *reality* gets caught willy-nilly in the camera within a comparable lapse of real time, irrespective of whether the movie story is really naturalistic...? (Baxandall 2002: 91).

The 'magic of the screen' as Scruton observed, is that it can depict a world in such detail, conveying the impression that the character is really 'in' the world represented, and not within the artificial parameters of a stage.

Moreover, the pursuit of the naturalistic aesthetic, when taken to a fervent extreme, could be self-defeating. If taken too far, attempts at generating verisimilitude onstage can backfire. The more 'realistic' a stage set appears, the more one might be fascinated by the construction of this 'realness'. One aspect of the set may look more convincing than another; a window may clearly be painted at the back of the set, while an oak cabinet looks like the real thing. A stage direction in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* mentions that a fire is lit at the opening of the play. Before a fully furnished stage, the audience may wonder; 'Is this a "real" fire? Does it emit smoke? Will fuel have to be added to keep it alight'? If one decides that it *is* 'real' then how curiously obtrusive it seems on this 'realistic' set to have upon it an element so rooted in the

natural world, so obviously non-fictitious, so 'real'. But if we decide that the flames do not look quite real (or even worse, are painted), how utterly fake and disappointing is this artefact on an otherwise beautifully designed stage! In other words, stage naturalism carries within itself the potential for its own subversion. In a well known story, Chekhov, frustrated by Stanislavski's wish to convey a stronger impression of place by having frog, dragonfly and dog sounds onstage during his production of *The Seagull*, scornfully commented:

The stage is art. There is a genre painting by Kramskoi in which the faces are portrayed superbly. What would happen if you cut the nose out of one of the paintings and substituted a real one? The nose will be "realistic" but the picture will be ruined (Chekhov cited in Meyerhold 1998: 30).

There is a certain point beyond which naturalistic adornments become an unnecessary distraction from the (after all) fictitious doings of the stage characters. The conspicuousness of 'real' objects can disrupt the self-present integrity of a fictional stage world.

It is of no little significance however, that Chekhov, one of the most celebrated exponents of stage naturalism, remained cautious about valuing extreme verisimilitude at the expense of theatricality. In the fourth Act of *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), there is a moment where Chekhov appears to puncture the stage illusion by highlighting the mechanics of naturalism. The character Charlotte picks up a bundle which looks like a baby in swaddling which she rocks to-and-fro; a baby's cry is heard offstage and she 'throws the bundle down' (Chekhov 1977: 189). Chekhov effectively tricks the audience into believing Charlotte was holding a baby, and when she throws it down, it is clear that the bundle is *not* a baby - but merely a bundle! There is a simultaneous acknowledgement of both the 'Now' of the drama in which a character (Charlotte) interacts with her fictional surroundings, *and* the 'Now' of the theatre in which objects are manipulated and actions are taking place in front of an audience. In this

case, the throwing down of the bundle is an action which takes place in the fictional elsewhere of *The Cherry Orchard*, and one that has an impact 'here and now' in the theatre. A similar case could be made for Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), which is far from lacking in awareness of its status as theatre. It is a play whose mindfulness that the box set *is* a confining 'doll's house' communicates the protagonist's predicament to the audience in a way which utilises - rather than merely conceals - theatricality.

While the experience of watching naturalism onstage cannot *all* be explained in terms of attempting photographic similitude or the copying of the world outside, there is a danger that stage naturalism (as Chekhov had pointed out to Stanislavski), can conceal rather than revel in its theatricality. This danger was of particular concern to American playwright Thornton Wilder, who in the 1920s, found the theatre of the day distinctly uninspiring and - most importantly - unimaginative. Wilder's notion of pretence comes close to Sartre and Scruton who also identify an awareness of theatrical convention as key to seeing the real *as* unreal. As Wilder observes 'in its greatest ages the stage employed the greatest number of conventions' (Wilder 1964: 239), or to put it differently, stage signs were seen as provisional 'pretences' rather than fixed representations of reality.

However unlike those who have decried naturalism as a set of stage conventions which inherently militate against theatricality, Wilder recognised that the concerns of naturalism could be married to a non-naturalistic stage aesthetic. The form of staging which most appealed to Wilder's sense of theatricality was, like that of Brook and Sartre, one which looked back towards Renaissance stagecraft and the direct appeal to the imagination:

The modern world is inclined to laugh condescendingly at the fact that in the plays of Racine and Corneille the gods and heroes of antiquity were dressed like the courtiers under Louis XIV; that in the Elizabethan age scenery was replaced by placards notifying the audience of the location; and that whip in the hand and a jogging motion

indicated that a man was on horseback in the Chinese theatre; these devices did not spring from naivete, however, but from the vitality of the public imagination in those days and from an instinctive feeling as to where the essential and the inessential lay in drama (1964: 239).

What particularly appealed to Wilder about staging in the times of Racine, Corneille and Shakespeare was not just its appeal to the imagination *per se*, but the attempt to make the story present on the stage. In this respect, Wilder's interest in French neoclassical and Elizabethan drama is echoed by the German theorist Peter Szondi, who has also suggested that neoclassical drama was one which sought to prioritise the immediacy of stage action. Szondi examines the formal development of modern theatre by initially proposing a rigorous definition of 'the Drama' as an absolute form, established during the Renaissance and reaching fruition in French neoclassical theatre. During the seventeenth century, prologue and the chorus were abandoned in favour of present tense human interaction in dialogic form. The classical unities of time, space and action were bound within this fixed dialogic form of human interrelations, which set up an apparently sealed, self-contained world. Perhaps the most important aspect of this dialogic form was, according to Szondi, its presence:

Because the Drama is always primary, its internal time is always present... In the Drama, time unfolds as an absolute, linear sequence in the present. Because the Drama is absolute, it is itself responsible for this temporal sequence in the present. It generates its own time. Therefore, every moment must contain the seeds of the future (Szondi 1987: 9).

The action of the drama proceeds through dialogue alone, the interpersonal exchanges which take place on the stage are in tandem with the action. The drama does not require reflections on the past or ruminations on the possible future, nor the accidental intervention of external agency, rather the action evolves organically from the dialogue presented onstage. In this way

the form of the drama (interpersonal exchange) and its content (a certain “action”) are inextricably bound to each other.

The internal structure of a Racinian tragedy may well provide one of the better illustrations of Szondi’s conception of ‘absolute Drama’. A dynamic of confession and revelation is contained within the present-tense dialogues between characters, whose situations change (usually for the worse) onstage as the audience watches and listens. In this form of drama, there is little need for props or detailed set changes, nor the delineation of time and place that is found in naturalism. Actors and actions happening onstage in the present are the central objects of focus, while the when and where of the action is of lesser significance. The stage-setting in Racine, as with the comedies of his contemporary Molière, remains relatively neutral. As Donald Roy writes of Molière:

Either because of the unsophisticated stages to which he grew accustomed during his apprentice years in the provinces or because of the reductive affect of a preoccupation with unity of place in the accepted dramatic theory of the day, the settings of Molière’s plays are almost immaterial to the action that takes place on them: apart from providing a necessary location for events and a number of entrances, exits and strategic acting positions, they make no real theatrical statement (Molière 1997: 14).

While naturalism might be seen as developing from the neoclassical model by further paring away extraneous theatrical conventions so that now codes of speech and behaviour adopted by characters most closely resemble those in the outside world, the whole notion of present action in ‘absolute drama’ is arguably undermined. For Wilder, far from generating a greater sense of the ‘here and now’ in the theatre, much stage naturalism tended to posit the action on the stage as an *elsewhere*, necessarily *other* than the audience’s space/time. In his preface to *Our Town and Other Plays*, he talks of the theatre he saw in 1920s America as having become a ‘museum showcase’ (Wilder 1962: 10), in which a kind of ‘box-set’ realism predominated

whereby the stage seemed unnecessarily concerned with denoting a particular place and time. The specification of the place and context of represented events was problematic for Wilder. Far from making a fictional world seem more 'present' in its apparent completeness and detail, Wilder argued the naturalist aesthetic imposed an unnecessary *distance* between the audience and the dramatic world. He found that the theatre he was encountering in the twenties, rather than being a dynamic and vital artistic form, was something of a residue from the nineteenth century, in which:

They loaded the stage with specific objects, because every concrete object on the stage fixes and narrows the action to one moment in time and place (1962: 11).

This 'jugglery with time [...] devitalised the theatre' (1962: 11) by ensuring that audience time was out of synch with that of the drama. The naturalistic approach to staging seemed to pinpoint a particular location 'in time and place' which was detached from the immediate 'here and now' of production and spectatorship. Wilder suggested that the very act of particularising a dramatic world leads to a sense of absence rather than presence, time and space is necessarily *other* than that occupied by the audience. This is an interesting subversion of Keir Elam's differentiation, following Searle, that whereas narrative fiction describes a mediated 'elsewhere', performed drama is the unmediated presentation of a fictitious 'here and now'. For Wilder, fleshing out the details of the fictitious world was potentially weakening to theatrical presence, which is much more to do with play-making than fiction-realising:

When you emphasise place in the theatre, you drag down and limit and harness time to it. You thrust the action back into the past time, whereas it is precisely the glory of the stage that it is always "now" there (1962: 11).

Once the stage becomes divorced from representing the specific and the particular, performance and audience can become united in a contemplation of the general and the universal. This strategic move was crucial to renewing the distinctive 'glory' of the theatre as being, in Wilder's terms, "'now" there'. If theatre rests on a 'fundamental pretence' then presenting that pretence implies a certain action - or thing done - and a thing represented, or not quite done. Wilder's notion of pretence is closely allied to Sartre and Scruton's ideas who identify an awareness of theatrical convention as key to seeing the real as unreal. As Wilder observes 'in its greatest ages the stage employed the greatest number of conventions' (1964: 239), or to put it differently, stage signs were seen as provisional 'pretences' rather than fixed representations of reality. For Wilder, it is theatre's ability to separate the thing done from the thing represented that constitutes the 'glory of the stage'; it points to the paradox on which theatrical presence rests as that which complicates the very notion of 'the present'.

In place of a theatre which specifies time and place - driving a wedge between stage and auditorium rather than emphasising co-presence - Wilder envisaged an aesthetic that would highlight pretence and artifice as a means of healing this schism. An exploration and 'multiplication' of theatrical 'pretence' is proposed as a means of freeing the stage from an immersion in the *particular*, to embrace the general and the *universal*. In his essay 'Some Thoughts on Playwriting', Wilder writes:

The stage is fundamental pretence and it thrives on the acceptance and in the multiplication of additional pretences. When it tries to assert that the personages in the action "really are", really inhabit such and such rooms, really suffer such and such emotions, it loses rather than gains credibility (1964: 239).

Theatre's presence and 'vitality' depends on theatre being seen as a pretence in which the audience colludes, and not as a self-contained world with 'fourth wall' removed. Wilder

concluded that by complicating the idea of 'time' within the drama, he could heal the artificial rift that had arisen between the temporal spheres of stage and auditorium since the nineteenth century, injecting a renewed sense of vitality into theatrical presentation. In doing so Wilder points to the need to avoid the spatial/temporal disjunctures in theatre that naturally occur in film - given that the actors are not actually *there* in front of the audience - and to recuperate a sense of theatre's 'magic'.

However, in his most famous play *Our Town* (1938), Wilder does not merely depart from naturalism altogether, but attempts to depict recognisable characters (rather than 'the gods and heroes of antiquity') and their interactions with their environment, within more traditional theatrical conventions which highlight theatre's pretence. While the play largely consists of domestic scenes from life within a small town in New Hampshire in the early twentieth century, the staging eschews naturalistic scenery and constructs Grover's Corner's with a minimum of props, supported by mimed action and a narrator. Thus a plank of wood becomes a drugstore counter, the top of a ladder the seat at a child's bedroom window, and we hear the sound of clinking bottles as Howie Newsome enters with an 'imaginary' horse carrying a rack of milk bottles. Specific items are brought onto the stage, such as chairs, tables and trellises covered with vine leaves only to show that they are in themselves unimportant: vehicles of a pretence rather than a detailed representation of reality. The play opens with the Stage Manager who narrates the action, arranging the chairs onstage and delivering an ironic remark in the direction of the audience:

There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery (1962: 22).

To recall Julian Hilton's phrase, this is a play in which an emphasis on actorly 'acts of designation' forms an integral part of its realisation in performance. Through speech, gesture and mime, the actors create the scenes in performance, and are largely unburdened pre-existent stage objects. Ultimately, particular facts, things, objects, locations, are not the point for Wilder; truth is not found in the specific but in the general and the universal and the lack of stage detail aims to capture the sense of individual characters existing within a panoramic view of human life. This core idea is developed in the final act where Emily who has died, is allowed to re-live a day in her life, on which Wilder comments:

...in the first two acts there are at least a few chairs and tables; but when she revisits the earth and the kitchen to which she descended on her twelfth birthday, the very chairs and tables are gone. Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind – not in things, not in “scenery”...The climax of this play needs only five square feet of boarding and the passion to know what life means to us (1962: 12).⁹

At the outset of the play, there are 'at least a few chairs and tables', borrowing something from the conventions of naturalism, which promote a more or less contiguous relationship between stage signifiers and the represented domestic setting. By the end of the play however the iconic ties which bind signifier to signified become reduced to the point of arbitrary convention adopted within the performance. The 'very chairs and tables' have, literally, lost their significance. Wilder thus attempts to reconcile the bare and neutral stage space that Szondi describes with respect to neoclassical theatre, with a more naturalistic tendency to portray the day to day lives of people in their living space.

By accentuating 'convention' and 'pretence' however, Wilder is no longer promoting the existence of characters on the stage who speak and act within a sealed dramatic universe, but

⁹ Wilder's suggestion that the chairs and tables be removed in the final scene may have been an afterthought; there is no direct stipulation for this change in the play's stage directions.

within the shared experiential sphere of the actor-audience situation. The play does not simply create a 'fictional time' other than the audience's own, but also a 'performance time' which acknowledges its present existence before the audience. Just as time has its inevitable effect on the lives in Grover's Corners, with the Stage Manager's final words to close the play - a musing on the nature of time - Wilder fuses the space-time of the drama with that of the audience. The Stage Manager directly addresses the audience at the end of the play, whose performance would originally have finished at around eleven o'clock:

[*He winds his watch.*]
Hm...Eleven o'clock in Grover's Corners – You get a good rest, too. Good night
(1962: 91).

For Wilder, presence in theatre means more than just telling a story onstage rather than on a page, it is about reconciling - to use Robert Edmond Jones' phrase - the 'Now of the drama' and the 'Now of the theatre'. In conventional naturalism, it is argued, dramatic-time and theatre-time are separate and out of sync; by colluding with the audience in a game of pretence, both 'Nows' are brought together. The audience take, to use art theorist Ernst Gombrich's phrase, the 'beholder's share' (Gombrich 1960: 155), making active imaginative choices in the 'present moment' of performance. Dramatic 'Now' and theatre 'Now' are experienced simultaneously, there is an overlap between the space/time of the fiction and the space/time of the audience which theatre is never fully able to suppress. The singular idea of a 'Now' onstage is suspect; rather we should think of presence in theatre more along the lines of what Wilder terms 'now there'. Onstage a 'now' in a drama is always '*there*' in some fictional space and time, while at the same time that fictional '*there*' is enacted '*now*' before the audience. Far from attempting to deny or overcome that doubleness, or to 'subtract' theatricality, *Our Town* represents an exemplary attempt to celebrate this doubleness,

emphasising a degree of pretence even in the telling. This doubleness in relation to *Our Town* is surely reinforced by the fact that the co-presence between actors and audience, sustained especially through the Stage Manager character, is itself scripted in. When the Stage Manager announces an intermission, sets up a scene or closes the evening, s/he does so as Wilder's fictional character, creating the illusion that the action is happening 'now'. Wilder's approach at once seems to highlight theatricality even while it undermines the possibility that theatrical experience is characterised by some singular, unambiguous notion of presence.

Conclusion

While this chapter has focussed specifically on exploring the fictional mode of presence, much of the discussion anticipates ideas which recur over the course of the thesis. In theatre, it is difficult to separate that which is present from the present that is pretended. This idea of pretence that Thornton Wilder identified as being central to the theatre seems to be worth further reflection, for this notion carries within it many of the complexities and ambiguities within accounts of presence on the stage. John Arden's explanation of theatre is intriguing in this respect: 'The actor onstage pretends: and presents the pretence to the public' (Arden 1977: 11). This phrase which forms the book's title, *To Present the Pretence*, captures the difficulty inherent in quantifying the *presentation* of theatrical fiction: what is present is (only) pretended, while the thing pretended is not (really) present, but is (only) pretending to be present. Lawrence Kornfeld, in describing the difficulties of directing the plays of Gertrude Stein, puts the matter rather better:

That is the hardest thing about plays: pretending and reality. We pretend what is real and we really pretend, but what we pretend is not real and what is real is not pretence. What happens onstage is not an illusion, it is real, but it is pretending to be another kind of real thing (Kornfeld 1990: 138).

While Kornfeld is talking about pretence, he is illuminating the difficulties we have in pinning down the notion of presence in theatre. Kornfeld's notion that onstage 'what we pretend is not real and what is real is not pretence' suggests that theatre is a place where the real and the unreal blend together. Presence in theatre does not equate to a stable 'here and now' but is far more ambiguous than this simple formulation would suggest. Presence, as Kornfeld's description of pretence indicates, becomes a very slippery concept in theatre. One of the things that makes theatrical experience - at its best - exciting is that it both gives us a strong sense of presence while at the same time it is difficult - perhaps impossible - to pin down precisely what *is* present.

While this chapter has examined a number of accounts in which different notions of presence in theatre are *affirmed*, what seems common throughout these examples, regardless of specific style, is the manipulation rather than affirmation, of presence on the stage. While some versions of stage naturalism militates against this manipulation of presence, naturalism also has the potential - by grounding a pretended world upon a real stage with real objects - to gain much in terms of tension, while exemplifying the central ambiguity to which Kornfeld alludes: 'what we pretend is not real and what is real is not pretence'.

If we consider what makes staged fiction 'present' in a way that differs from other forms of representation, we need look no further than the ambiguities of pretence. To differentiate theatrical performance from film or literature for instance, we might suggest that theatrical objects - actors and props - are pretending to *be* something other than themselves. Novels or

screens on the other hand, do not themselves *as objects* pretend to be anything - unless we see them in staged drama where they might be used as props in a fictional world. Theatre is a form of representation that works by infusing a present context (a stage, or actor-audience relationship) with pretence. However, it would be a mistake to think that a theatrical performance is therefore simply more 'present' than the action of a film or novel. The key to articulating some of these differences is not to suggest that theatre is simply present 'here and now' whilst dramatic action in literature or onscreen is absent; it is the very notion of presence that theatre can disrupt in a particular way.

Before we can pursue these questions further, we also need to look at other theorisations of presence which do not revolve around the staging of dramatic fiction. While one mode of theatrical presence can be understood in terms of the *making-present* there is a further sense in which theatre is seen as *having-presence*. That is, a theatrical performance, whether by virtue of its actors or by the energy by which the performance is conveyed, can seem to convey an authority or even an 'aura' to an audience. For some practitioners and theorists, particularly in the twentieth century, the need to explore this energy and aura that theatre seems to possess has been even more important than how theatre posits objects of representation. While in this chapter I have been primarily concerned with how fictional discourse has been theorised in terms of presence, the next chapter investigates notions of presence which transcend - or make claims to transcend - the fictional and the representational.

Chapter 2

Having Presence:

The Auratic Mode of Presence

In this chapter, I look at the mode of presence that is perhaps most difficult to define, but which an audience member may easily recognise and experience. An actor can convey a powerful sense of charisma, or a famous play or theatre company can project a sense of prestige and authority to a knowing audience. The term I am using for this mode of presence is 'auratic presence', derived from the term aura. What makes 'auratic presence' so difficult a term to pin down is that it doesn't immediately refer to the presence *of* anything in particular. To say of someone who enters a room that they have 'an aura about them' is to notice more than simply their presence in the room. Aura is a term with mysterious connotations, referring to a presence which is above the ordinary, an abstract quality that can be attached to people, names, objects or places which have more significance than appearance might suggest. The auratic mode of presence is thus very different from the fictional mode; while the latter is concerned with the *making-present* of fictional phenomena, auratic presence refers to the *having* of presence.

The first thing I would like to suggest about the auratic mode of presence is that it is possible to identify two broad ways in which aura can be manifest. One manifestation of aura is that which is constructed through the fame or reputation of the actor, playwright or artwork, along with the knowledge and expectations that spectators may carry with them into the experience. Art critic John Berger's characterisation of aura is oriented towards accounting for the experience of the 'celebrity' artwork:

Before the *Virgin of the Rocks* the visitor to the National Gallery would be encouraged by nearly everything he might have heard and read about the painting to feel something like this: "I am in front of it. I can see it. This painting by Leonardo is unlike any other in the world. The National Gallery has the real one. If I look at this painting hard enough, I should somehow be able to feel its authenticity. The *Virgin of the Rocks* by Leonardo da Vinci: it is authentic and therefore it is beautiful"(Berger 1972: 21).

Berger's analysis of aura may well apply to the experience of many a famous work of art, or indeed to the sense in which a famous actor can be endowed with an auratic presence when seen onstage. Berger's analysis could also extend to the way in which an RSC 'Shakespeare' production can exude a sense of gravitas which might encourage the spectator to view a performance with a more deferential attitude than they might when viewing a television programme. To give a more specific example, Stanislavski's insistence that the patrons of the Moscow Art Theatre should arrive on time, dress well, and refrain from bringing food into the auditorium can be seen as an attempt to engender a sense of reverence in the theatre; to establish an *aura* of artistic and cultural significance.

This understanding of aura however, especially in relation to theatrical performance, is limited. Berger's account of aura derives from that of cultural critic Walter Benjamin, who equated 'aura' with the unique presence of the artwork, 'its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be' (Benjamin 1999: 214). Benjamin's discussion of the aura of the original, by definition, applies to the aura of something that has been reproduced. In the case of *Virgin on the Rocks*, the 'original' is likely to be viewed in terms of an infinitude of reproductions which reinforce the cultural value in which the venerated object is held. However, an understanding of aura in these terms does not really take into account the dynamics of the *unanticipated* encounter with the unknown painting that produces an uninvited sensation of wonder, let alone, by extension, the aura produced by the

charisma of the hitherto unknown stage actor. In Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*, the character Roquentin pays his first visit to the Bouville museum, and describes the eerie impression created by the portrait gallery:

I thought for a moment and I went in. An attendant was sleeping near a window. A pale light falling from the window was making patches on the pictures. Nothing alive in this huge rectangular hall, except for a cat which took fright at my arrival and fled. But I felt the gaze of a hundred and fifty pairs of eyes upon me...As I was walking towards the portrait of Olivier Blévine, something brought me to a stop: from his place in the line, Pacôme the merchant was looking down at me with his bright eyes (Sartre 1965: 122-123).

The paintings in this description certainly exude an air of authority, and the arresting looks emanating from the canvases are enough to fix Roquentin's attention. These paintings certainly 'have' presence for Sartre's hero, but it is not derived from their having been reproduced or much celebrated, as in Berger's example. The auratic quality of the pictures is so not much a product of the objects themselves, but of the situation in which they are encountered; the unexpected revelation of eyes (a)peering from a shadowy wall.

Auratic presence in theatre can also be constructed *in the act* of performance, not just through the prior reputations of dramatists, actors, directors or theatre companies. In the case of the charismatic actor, Thomas Richards' description of his first encounter with the legendary actor Ryszard Cieslak captures this sense of charismatic appeal:

Our acting class was in full swing when Cieslak walked in. I practically fell out of my chair, I had never before felt such presence from anyone. "My God, this is a dinosaur, people like this don't exist anymore. He walks like a tiger". Cieslak sat down and with his presence alone he began to take over and dominate our class (Richards: 1995: 10).

In terms of the actor, aura in theatre is much more complex and potentially dynamic than that of a painting or a statue. The actor's (auratic) presence can be constructed through his manipulation of space and materials, including his own body and posture, as well as the way in which the actor confronts his audience and engages their attention. Clearly, the fame and reputation of an actor can also contribute to this sense of aura, as Richards' 'star-struck' description might suggest. Yet the description also contains an element of the mysterious, as though Cieslak were a higher form of being with great spiritual vitality.

The notion of spirituality as a recurring theme in this chapter should be made explicit, for it binds together many of the ideas explored. The notion of aura itself has certain spiritual connotations; in holistic healing parlance, aura is sometimes understood as an energy field of colour surrounding the body, an indicator of one's state of spiritual health. In certain strands of modernist art, spirituality became synonymous with a turning away from external, material reality, and an emphasis on the exploration of the inner essence of a given medium. The artist Kandinsky, writing in 1911, argued that the purpose of art was to progress towards aesthetic autonomy by exploring 'spiritually', the essence of each medium:

And so; gradually the different arts have set forth on the path of saying what they are best able to say, through means that are peculiar to each...Consciously or unconsciously, artists turn gradually toward an emphasis on their materials, examining them spiritually, weighing in the balance the inner worth of those elements out of which their art is best suited to create (Kandinsky 1992: 91).¹

Kandinsky's appeal to the spiritual in art was predicated on a longing to see beyond the materiality of the painting, and to explore instead the atmospheric or emotional qualities of

¹ Kandinsky, who also wrote plays, was among a number of prominent modernist visual artists who worked in the theatre. For a detailed discussion, see Rischbieter, Henning, ed., (1968) *Art and the Stage in the Twentieth Century: Painters and Sculptors Work for the Theatre*. Documented by Wolfgang Storch. Greenwich Conn.: New York Graphic Society.

colour. Barbara Hepworth spoke of sculpture in similar terms, emphasising the importance of 'inner' qualities over 'physical attributes':

When we say that a great sculpture has vision, power, vitality, scale, poise, form of beauty, we are not speaking of physical attributes. Vitality is not a physical, organic attribute of sculpture - it is a spiritual inner life. (Hepworth 1992: 374)

Constantin Stanislavski describes the art of acting in remarkably similar terms, contrasting his ideal to that of the 'mechanical actor', who would express 'merely the external life of his character'. The aim of art, and the actor, should go beyond physical, surface reality, and should strive to a higher, spiritual realisation: 'The fundamental aim of our art is the creation of this inner life of a human spirit, and its expression in artistic form' (Stanislavski 1988: 14). In both cases, the 'spiritual' quality of art is associated with the exploration of 'inner life', a vitality that can be experienced but cannot be directly represented. Theodore Adorno provides a pithy summation of the principle at work here: 'The more spiritual works of art are, the more they erode their substance' (cited in Larson 2004: 68). The spiritual quality of art transcends the medium through which it is embodied.

In drama notions of spirituality and the concomitant rejection of external appearance and materiality became a key feature of the symbolist movement. J.L. Styan makes a useful distinction between the 'materialist' and the 'symbolist' perspective:

The materialist believes there is no between the natural and the spiritual order; his knowledge comes from observing the external world through the senses. The symbolist does believe there is a difference, an absolute difference, between nature and the spirit; for him, the world is the external expression of what lies hidden in the mind (Styan 1981: 61)

For symbolist playwrights such as W. B. Yeats and Maurice Maeterlinck, achieving a formal aesthetic unity was also more important than trying to represent the external world; the stage should become a realm in its own right rather than a vehicle for imitating the world beyond. W. B. Yeats, in his essay 'The Tragic Theatre' (1910), suggested that theatre should be imbued with spiritual and poetic values, that the stage should look beyond tangible, physical reality, and instead embody an 'ideal form, a symbolism handed by the generations, a mask from whose eyes the disembodied looks' (cited in Carlson 1993: 305).

Spirituality can thus be seen as a recurring metaphor for the way in which various forms of modernist theatre practice sought to investigate the 'essence' of theatre, encompassing a tendency to privilege the 'inner life' of the artistic medium over the external trappings of theatrical display. The idea of the spiritual in performance was given even greater priority in Jerzy Grotowski's conception of the 'holy actor', trained to become a universal embodiment of humanity, shorn of an artificial individuality and socially imposed behaviours. In America in the 1960s, groups such as The Living Theatre and The Performance Group also explored Grotowski's notion of theatre as 'secular ritual' by staging events in which the actors and audience were envisaged more as 'celebrants' than as artists-spectator/consumers. Antonin Artaud has largely been acknowledged as a key influence on this generation of theatre practitioners. A conception of theatre as a sacred space was central to his concept of 'cruelty', yet this spiritual conception of theatre should be differentiated from the idea of a 'theological stage', to use Derrida's term. The term 'theology' refers to systems of belief or thought which have at their centre the presumed existence of a deity. In theatrical terms, most theatre dedicated to staging the work of an author/playwright may be characterised as 'theological' in that the action onstage is to a large extent determined by an absent creator. One of Artaud's most consistent criticisms of European theatre was its longstanding deference to the

playwright as author/god; originator and prime-mover of the theatre event. In this sense, Artaud's spirituality was deeply anti-theological. For Artaud, the stage as a place where 'truth' is discovered through sensory experience rather than through the words of an all seeing author. The theatre is envisaged as a 'confrontation with the absolute', a means of finding 'those elements of truth hidden under forms in their encounters with Becoming' (Artaud 1970: 51). The investigation of what I am terming auratic presence could otherwise be seen as a study of attempts to find the spiritual centre of theatre as an art form.

While aura in theatre is not confined to any particular historical period, my major focus here will be on modernist attempts at creating a unified aura for the *whole* show. For the theatre practitioners I examine in this chapter, Craig, Appia, Artaud, Grotowski and Chaikin, the notion of autonomy was central to their aesthetic visions. While all worked independently and thought about theatre differently, they shared with Kandinsky a commitment to discovering the 'spiritual...inner worth' of their art form. My choice of practitioners therefore, does not reflect a belief that their work and ideas are in any way interchangeable; the comparisons I make are intended to illustrate common themes within attempts to establish 'auratic' conceptions of presence in theatre. Aura in theatre can be looked at in many different ways, but what I principally propose to critique here are idealistic attempts to create auratic performances which transcend representation, whilst leaving room for an assessment of the actor's contribution to creation of aura in the theatre. In doing so, I wish to address an underlying tension between these two variations of aura. A modernist quest for an autonomous theatrical aura beyond representation, based on notions of transcendence and self-presence; and an idea of aura as created *through* the act of representation, based on an understanding of the actor's craft and the cultivation of 'stage presence'. As I shall discuss in relation to the Open Theatre's production of *The Serpent*, aura in performance can be created

through an interaction between actors, text and audience; that is, in the ‘moment to moment’ unfolding of the performance rather than the realisation of a metaphysical ideal.

Creating Auratic Performance

As Chapter One investigated, theatre, to a lesser or greater degree, involves pretence. In most theatre, the medium is made up of actors and stage props *pretending* to be the people and objects of a fictional world. In other art forms, such as literature, painting and sculpture, no such obvious gap between medium and artistic expression exists: the picture of a woman isn’t *pretending* to be the woman in the picture, just as the words of a novel are not pretending to be the characters they describe. Likewise, with Michelangelo’s statue of David, the artwork is immanent and ‘present’ in the object standing in the Galleria dell’ Academia. The problem with proposing theatre’s ‘autonomy’ and ‘self-presence’ is in some measure derived from this distance between medium and artistic expression: the fine arts may *appear* to embody a specific artistic intentionality, whereas, to some, theatre has appeared as a rather clumsy rendering of a dramatic text. Attempting to eliminate the distance between medium and artistic expression has been a key to constructing ‘aura’ in theatrical performance.

It is my understanding that a theatrical performance can ‘have presence’ for an audience according to a whole range of factors. The auratic presence, for instance, of a famous theatrical ensemble might be compared to that of a renowned symphony orchestra in performance. However, for the theorists and practitioners I examine here, the cultivation of what I am terming auratic presence would require new conceptions of theatre as an art form. Theatre’s complexity as a medium makes the question of aesthetic integrity and autonomy

seem somewhat problematic. Theatre is contingent on many different creative individuals working together rather than on one supreme artist, and, above all, theatre is contingent on its audience. Perhaps this is why we are more likely to talk about the aura of an actor or an author than of a theatrical performance. For some modernist practitioners, theatrical performance contained elements of an aesthetic whole that were unsatisfactorily disconnected from each other.² As the American playwright Sam Shepard has put it:

The subject of painting is seeing. The subject of music is hearing. The subject of sculpture is space. But what is the subject of theatre which includes these and many more? (Shepard: 1981: 212)

As Shepard's comment implies, it is much easier to envisage how the 'subject' of painting or sculpture can be deduced by exploring that which is specific to the medium. If theatre was to claim a sense of aura and of self-presence, it would have to ditch its association with pretence and fakery and transcend conventional representation. Indeed, unlike Wilder, who sought to bring actors and audience together in an act of collective make-believe, Antonin Artaud more radically envisaged a theatre that would 'eradicate any idea of pretence' in the theatre (Artaud 1970: 42). As we shall see, different ways have been sought to create a harmony between medium and artistic expression in theatre, and these can be seen as attempts to produce a theatre with a greater sense of 'aura' and even mystery.

If aura in theatre can be looked at in terms of the inter-relationships between actor, director, text, audience and context, then the problem for the practitioners I discuss here is one of imbalance in these relationships. Very often, one of these terms becomes dominant at the expense of the whole performance. Of particular importance to Artaud in achieving some

² Of course, aura can always emanate from 'star' directors or legendary playwrights, but that is not the same as the notion of the stage having a self-contained aura of its own.

form of autonomy for theatre, was to challenge the traditional centrality of the playwright. Artaud's suggestion, in its projection towards the 'independence' and 'autonomy' of theatre, is representative of the impetus behind the exploration of auratic presence:

This notion, the predominance of the lines in theatre, is deeply rooted in us and we view theatre so much as just a physical reflection of the script, that everything in theatre outside the script, not contained within its limits or strictly determined by it, appears to us to be part of staging, and inferior to the script. Given the subservience of theatre to the lines, we might ask ourselves whether theatre by any chance possesses a language of its own, or whether it would really be illusory to consider it an independent, autonomous art for the same reasons as music, painting, dance, etc (Artaud 1970: 50).

As long as theatre was seen as a vehicle for the telling of a story, or a place where actorly virtuosity could be demonstrated, then theatrical performance would always be for the exhibition of something other than 'itself'. Just as the move towards painterly abstraction entailed an attempt to organise materials on the canvas so that they could be seen *as* paint rather than as a picture *of* something, some theatre practitioners were seeking to find ways of making theatrical performance as a whole more present and self-contained. The stage can have no 'aura' if it is *contingent* on the written word (script); that is, if words are shaping the stage's meaning and purpose and the audience's experience of what is going on upon it. So long as the stage is shaped by language, it will always be contingent and 'inferior', relying on the aura of, say, the dramatist or the actor, and never realising its own potential to be an 'independent, autonomous art'. Artaud's censures were not limited to a particular set of theatrical conventions (such as naturalism), but to the very idea of reference to an 'outside', or to the use of language or signification to allude to some point 'outside' the staging.

While Artaud's ideas tended to challenge the construction of a formal aesthetic, Adolphe Appia, who worked and wrote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, wanted to

reform the theatre so that it could attain the aesthetic integrity of other arts. While differing considerably on their respective visions of theatre, both Appia and Artaud were united in their belief that theatre needed to redress the imbalances in theatrical production which detracted from a performance being experienced as an *end in itself*, rather than a *means* to telling a story or exhibiting the virtuosity of a performer. As the visual arts were turning away from realistic forms of expression towards abstraction and symbolism, the theatre seemed, in the words of Richard C. Beacham in his study *Adolphe Appia : artist and visionary of the modern theatre*, 'retrograde and irrelevant' (Beacham 1994: 1). Appia found that the theatre of the late nineteenth century, with its painted backdrops and artificial verisimilitude was, as an art form, in disarray. The challenge which Appia set himself was to bring about reform in the theatre, allowing this most multifarious and fragmented medium to better express itself as an *art form*, with its own internal coherence, authority and self-presence.

'Drama', as Appia observed, 'is the most complex of all the arts on account of the large number of media the artist has to use to communicate his ideas' (Appia 1993: 44). Theatre's medium complexity problematises its aesthetic status: how can theatre attain the dignity of an art form when it is merely the sum of various other media? As Appia explains:

Every work of art must contain a harmonious relationship between feeling and form, an ideal balance between the ideas which the artist desires to express, and the means he has for expressing them (1993: 29).

Implicit in Appia's argument is an assumption that theatrical performance should aspire to become a 'work of art' - an object of sorts, containing internal harmony ('an ideal balance'), and directly transcribing the artist's 'desires' and 'feeling'. Appia is looking to mystify the relationship between performance and spectator, to transform theatrical enactment into a

‘work of art’, whose self-presence and integrity would allow the enactment to be appraised on its own terms, rather than in terms of, say, the performance of the lead actor, or the playwright’s text. While Appia is dealing with a separation of stage and auditorium, it is not the spatio-temporal disjunction between audience from the fictional world of the drama that was examined in the previous chapter, but a qualitative separation from the mundane world of the auditorium and the artistic space of the stage.

Like Artaud, Appia recognised that theatre’s aesthetic autonomy would be impossible to achieve in a theatre dominated by the dramatist. If theatre is to be considered worthy of high art status, it is vital that a performance should embody - directly and without mediation - the intentions of the artist. In most dramatic theatre however, Appia noted that the playwright had little or no input into the staging of his work. What the dramatist writes does not totally determine and control how the play is produced, thus the creation of theatre occurs in ‘two phases’:

In the first [phase], the dramatist must translate his ideas into a dramatic form; then the written text that results has to be translated to accord with the requirements of staging before an audience. Unfortunately, this second part of the process, the realisation of the staging or *mise en scene*, is not under the control of the dramatist...As a result, staging is subject to a variety of whims and tastes (1993: 44).

If an artwork’s value depends on the unity of medium and artistic expression, and the unimpeded revelation of artistic vision, then the theatre, from Appia’s perspective, seemed to be some way behind other forms of expression such as painting or sculpture. As Appia explains of conventional staged drama, representation (script) and medium (actors and scenery) are out of synch:

It therefore follows that not only is drama (as staged) the most complex of all forms of art, but also the only one in which one of the most fundamental elements must be deemed as a *medium of expression* to be outside the dramatist's control; a situation which seriously curtails the integrity of drama as a form of art, and reduces it to an inferior status (1993: 45).³

The dual process that Appia describes undermines the integrity of the artist/dramatist's 'vision', since the spectators' experience may be obscured by the idiosyncrasies of those in charge of the staging. Theatre cannot achieve an auratic presence as long as the processes of creation and realisation are out of kilter, for the 'integrity of drama' is dependent on the unity of representation (of artistic intent) and its expression through the theatrical medium.

Ensuring the integrity of this guiding vision was Appia's overriding concern; without the smooth channelling of artistic intention into the medium itself, no centralising 'interpretation' would be possible. A theatrical performance would be akin to an orchestra playing haphazardly without a conductor.⁴ Appia, greatly influenced by Richard Wagner's notion of *Gesamkunstwerk*, realised that for theatre to gain artistic integrity, all of its expressive elements must be brought under the control of a single artist 'creator':

The person whom we call the director...will assume with the word-tone drama, the role of a despotic schoolmaster as he presides over the elementary preparation of the staging (1993: 52-3).

The creator would no longer be absent from the event, with the actors and stage hands left to their own idiosyncratic devices, for now the creator/director would be able to mould the stage according to his will, much as the painter constructs the picture on his canvas.

³ Samuel Beckett, who placed an unprecedented level of control over actorly, directorial and scenic interpretation in some of his later plays, such as *Not I* (1976), may provide a possible exception to Appia's case that theatre as a '*medium of expression*' lies beyond the province of the dramatist.

⁴ Appia himself compares the theatre director's role to that of 'a genial conductor', Milling and Ley (2001) *Modern Theories of Performance*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, page 33.

While the director/artist may have been akin to a painter in terms of the direct application of creativity to a medium of expression, it was still important for theatre to differentiate itself aesthetically from painting. Appia's solution was to eliminate the ubiquitous reliance on painted flats to illustrate the background to dramatic action. In place of an emphasis on verisimilitude, Appia advocated the employment of abstract, three-dimensional shapes, with the dynamic use of light mediating between inanimate setting and living actor. Instead of getting side-tracked into trying to produce ever more faithful depictions of 'reality' (ultimately for Appia, a fruitless exercise), Appia felt that theatre should concern itself with the integration of its own internal constituents. It was far more important to Appia that, for instance, actors, light and scenery functioned harmoniously together so as convey the 'inner essence' of a forest scene, rather than physically resemble, in great botanical detail, a mere play of surface appearances: 'we shall no longer attempt to give the illusion of a *forest* but instead the illusion of a *man* in the atmosphere of a *forest*' (Beacham 1994: 118). Theatrical performance would thus be 'present' as an artistic creation like never before. The stage would neither represent the incomplete prescriptions of an absent author nor stand in for a naturalistic reality beyond; instead the stage would be autonomous and self-sufficient, exuding the aura of art.⁵

However, as Grotowski would later realise, it was not enough to simply reform the elements within the staging to secure the self-contained presence of the stage. Not only would the distance between artistic creation (script) and its medium of expression (performance) have to

⁵ The aesthetic intention to fuse the elements of the theatrical together to create a sense of stage's autonomy were shared by a number of symbolist playwrights, including Yeats and Maeterlink. Such ideas were echoed by the Polish dramatist Stanislaw Witkiewicz, whose 'Theatre of Pure Form' was one which turned away from the external reality and internal psychology of naturalism, and attempted to synthesise sound, décor, movement and dialogue. Every element would be part of the whole, and the audience would not need to look beyond the stage to find its meaning, for the 'meaning would be defined only by its purely scenic internal construction' (Witkiewicz 1995: 345).

be challenged, so to would the independent responses of an audience who may not want to experience what the director/artist had intended them to. The theatre would no longer be *contingent* on external artists or even on an audience; Appia's hope was that the stage could just be *itself*, present in its own right. Indeed, Appia claimed that:

living art is the only one that exists completely, without spectators (or listeners). It needs no audience, for it implicitly contains the audience within itself...from the moment it exists, we are with it, in it (cited in Milling and Ley 2001: 38).

What Appia means by being 'with it' is not the kind of collaborative co-presence that Wilder advocated; the audience are not present with the physical constituents of the stage, actors and scenery, but with the work of (living) art itself. The physical act of making theatre *for* an audience would be all but transcended.

Appia's theories of the theatre, with their emphasis on establishing formal aesthetic harmony on the stage, can be seen against a background of a particular strain of modernist discourse that distinguished artworks from physical objects. The Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce - deeply sympathetic towards impressionism and symbolism - developed ontological theories of art that gave philosophical exposition to the notion that the art work is the self-sufficient container of artistic vision. For Croce, whose theories would influence later critics of modernist aesthetics such as Clement Greenberg, art should be distinguished from physical objects. A painting as a mere assemblage of materials such as oil and canvas is not itself an artwork, the artwork is the ethereal 'vision' which the object embodies. To measure and weigh a statue (thereby treating it as a physical object) might be useful if you need to move it, but hardly if you want to contemplate it aesthetically. Following this line of reasoning, Croce,

in his *Guide to Aesthetics* (1913), provides the following answer to the question of defining art:

The answer denies, above all, that art is a *physical* fact, as, for example, certain particular colours or combinations of colours, forms of the body, sounds or combinations of sounds, phenomena of heat or electricity - in brief, anything which goes under the name of 'physical' (Croce 1965: 9).

It may appear remarkably far-fetched to exclude all things physical from the definition of art when the world's most famous paintings and sculptures appear to be physical *things*.

However, Croce's writing should be seen in relation to the modernist interest in accounting for the essence of respective art forms. Painting was becoming less concerned with faithful representations of the outside world, than with exploring abstractions such as formal compositions of line, colour and shape. This tendency towards abstraction was also paralleled by a move towards expressionism, which, although initially a separate impulse, was more concerned with the internal and subconscious states of the artists' mind than with the direct perception of external reality. Against this background, and pushed to a logical extreme, art seemed predicated on transcending and distinguishing itself from the physical world, much as a theologian might distinguish the soul from the physical body.

Croce's list of what art is not, it may be noted, contains many of the overlapping layers of physical reality with which theatrical representation is constructed; 'combinations of colours', 'sounds', 'forms of the body', and even 'heat or electricity'. However, whereas scenery could be altered and made to look more abstract and mysterious, 'forms of the body' posed a specific problem; every body looks unique, individual and *real*. Appia's attitude towards the actor was paradoxical: whilst envisaging the actor's body as the centre of the theatrical spectacle, he also wanted the human body to come closer to the symbolist vision of the ideal

actor. The actor cannot be seen as an element drawn from the *outside* and planted onto the stage, s/he must be seen as an organic *internal* constituent of the *mise-en-scene*. To the extent that the actor is seen as an individual with a certain level of spontaneous creative independence, the self-contained 'presence' of the stage would be undermined. The creation of ideal stage presence would seem therefore to depend on the actor 'sacrific[ing] himself to rhythmic and emotional depersonalisation by renouncing forever - and fully conscious of the reasons - his pre-eminent importance' (cited in Beacham 1994: 53).

Appia's invocation of actorly sacrifice carries resonance in relation to subsequent writings of Artaud and Grotowski, for whom the performer, divested of socially inscribed personality, should become a channel through which spiritual energies could be transmitted to an audience. Indeed, the body is a particular point of concern for those wishing to invest the stage with auratic presence. These concerns were prefigured by nineteenth century critic Charles Lamb, who, as noted in the previous chapter, was less concerned with the aura of staged performance than with the aura of the playwright - particularly that of Shakespeare. In his essay 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage-Representation' (Lamb 1865: 525), Lamb recognised both the aesthetic incompatibility of the living actor and the painted flat (there is the discordancy, never to be got over, between painted scenes and real people'), and the problems associated with theatre's physicality. The danger with theatre as Lamb saw it - particularly when it came to performances of Shakespeare - is its tendency to cheapen great works of (dramatic) art by bringing them into the lowly sphere of physical occurrence. For Lamb, the art of Shakespeare is discovered in reading his plays as poetry rather than in actually seeing the plays enacted. This distinction is crucial, for 'What we see upon a stage is body and bodily action; what we are conscious of in reading is almost exclusively the mind' (1865: 524). Physical enactment can only impinge

upon the essence of Shakespeare's poetic and a-temporal art: 'The sublime images, the poetry alone, is that which is present to our minds in the reading' (1865: 523). It is for this reason that Lamb contends that 'Lear is essentially impossible to represent on a stage' (1865: 524). Lamb - not one for mincing words - found the very idea of an actor physically portraying so universal a figure as King Lear 'painful and disgusting' (1865: 523). King Lear is a vision of humanity, and not, as Lamb puts it, some 'old man tottering about with a stick, turned out of doors by his daughters on a rainy night'. For Lamb, the work of a great dramatist such as Shakespeare can only become truly 'present' through the solitary act of reading, the physical presence of actors and mechanicals onstage are an *affront* to vision of the artist.

The English designer and theorist Edward Gordon Craig, who was largely in agreement with Lamb about the incompatibility of the actor's body and the aesthetic, thought it better (in theory) to remove the body from the stage rather than forego stage performances altogether. Craig, like Appia, was not resigned to accepting the aesthetic inferiority of the stage to literature, and envisaged a symbolist-orientated theatrical aesthetic under the control of a single artistic creator. However, this reorganisation of the stage could only work if *all* the elements on it were subject to the same kind of control that the painter had over his paints and canvas; radical surgery would be required. Unlike raw materials which can be fashioned to express the will of the artist/creator, the actor, with a body and mind of its own, always retains one foot in the mundane world of the physical, from which Croce was so anxious to escape. In his famous essay 'The Actor and the Über-Marionette', Craig makes plain his concerns about the body as an artistic medium:

Acting is not an art. It is therefore incorrect to speak of the actor as an artist. For accident is the enemy of the artist. Art is the exact antithesis of pandemonium, and pandemonium is created by the tumbling together of many accidents. Art arrives only by design. Therefore in order to make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of those materials (Craig 1968: 55-6).

Art, in being concerned with symbol and ideality, cannot tolerate the presence of the body since the body—or more generally ‘the physical’ (Croce), being part of nature, is an accumulation of ‘many accidents’. The human body in particular, bearing in Hamlet’s words ‘the stamp of nature’, contains an inherent impurity which can serve to distract from the contemplation of the essential and the universal.

While a stage set could be made to evoke rather than literally depict, the body of the actor, as Appia had found, could not so easily transcend its moorings in the physical present. Craig’s proposal however, was - and remains - particularly radical:

Do away with the real tree, do away with the reality of delivery, do away with the reality of action, and you tend towards doing away with the reality of the actor...Do away with the actor, and you do away with the means by which a debased stage-realism is produced and flourishes. No longer would there be a living figure to confuse us into connecting actuality and art (1968: 81).

The actor would be replaced by the ‘Uber-marionette’, an archetypal figure who would not suffer or display the foibles and idiosyncrasies of the individual body, but would be capable of embodying idealised features of humanity. Finally, the theatre could rid itself of that ‘mortal coil’ which had rooted it so firmly in the physical world of accident, contingency and the haphazard, and elevate itself to the level of abstraction, essence and art.

While Grotowski’s work with the Polish Laboratory Theatre (between 1959 and 1970) involved an attempt to reconnect the audience to what Grotowski termed ‘the closeness of the living organism’, the actor’s body and psyche also remained problematic within his conception of Poor Theatre. Grotowski’s proposed ‘elimination of plastic elements which have a life of their own’ raises specific questions regarding the status of the actor in the Poor

Theatre. The very fact that the human body has ‘a life of its own’ presented a difficulty which Grotowski chose to deal with, not by removing the body with all its individual foibles, but by overcoming ‘the life mask’ of feigned individuality. The body of Grotowski’s ‘archetypal actor’ was moulded into an expressiveness that facilitated an anti-naturalistic acting style transcending individuality and social convention, pointing instead to an ideal. Grotowski proposed that through discipline with intense physical and mental training, the actor could relinquish his hold on individual selfhood and become a spiritual embodiment of humanity. Grotowski calls the annihilation of the actor’s body a ‘sacrifice’, a notion which was central to his thinking in the later years of his work with the Polish Lab Theatre:

If he does not exhibit his body, annihilates it, burns it, frees it from every resistance to any psychic impulse, then he does not sell his body but sacrifices it. He repeats the atonement; he is close to holiness (Grotowski 1968: 34).

The actor functions as a kind of secular ‘priest’ who breaks down the barriers of socially constructed individuality to reach the ‘innermost core’ of ‘being’ before the audience/congregation.

The idea of actors engaging in a ritual ‘self-sacrifice’ characterised Grotowski’s work during the sixties. The Theatre Laboratory’s production of Calderon’s *The Constant Prince*, specifically focused on the virtuosity of Ryszard Cieslak, was generally acknowledged as the best example of the self-transcendence for which Grotowski called. In the lead ‘role’ Ryszard Cieslak’s remarkable performance has been described by Christopher Innes:

Cieslak’s body expressed his psychological state in physical reactions that are usually considered involuntary – sweating profusely while remaining still, a red flush spreading over his skin, tears flooding from closed eyes – giving an effect of absolute authenticity to the experience presented (Innes 1993: 161).

As Innes hints, while Cieslak's apparent ability to induce upon himself extreme states of physical stress give rise to the 'effect' of authenticity, there remains a question as to whether this was a powerful 'acting' performance, containing the kind of charismatic exhibitionism that Grotowski was trying to avoid. It is however, important to stress that Grotowski's training methods were concerned with eradicating 'blocks' (including the performer's ego and any tendency to project personal charisma), thereby freeing up the kind of creative state which Innes describes.

Both Grotowski and Craig advocate the eradication of extrovert, 'showy' or egocentric examples of actorly display, and affirm the need to control and integrate the actor into a broader aesthetic framework. Even Artaud seems to have retained something in common with Craig and Grotowski in his insistence on retaining a tight control over the production elements, including the actor. In his *first manifesto* for the 'Theatre of Cruelty', Artaud explains:

The actor is both a prime factor, since the show's success depends on the effectiveness of his acting, as well as a kind of neutral, pliant factor since he is rigorously denied any individual initiative (Artaud 1970: 76).

Artaud further elaborates on this need for tight control in his *second manifesto*, insisting that the sensory impact he sought from theatre could only be achieved under certain conditions:

The Theatre of Cruelty was created in order to restore an impassioned convulsive concept of life to theatre, and we ought to accept the cruelty on which this is based in the sense of drastic strictness, the extreme concentration of stage elements (1970: 81).

While Artaud's writings inspired the work of American groups in the 1960s, such as The Living Theatre and The Performance Group, some of whose performances emphasised spontaneity, improvisation and actor-audience integration, arbitrary or 'accidental' elements - an inevitable constituent of improvisational performance - would appear to contradict this conception of cruelty. An observation Artaud makes of the Balinese model would apply more to formalism than to visceral spontaneity with which he is more traditionally associated: 'In fact everything in this theatre is assessed with loving, unerring attention to detail. Nothing is left to chance or individual initiative' (1970: 40).

These attempts to create performances which prioritise the auratic presence of the stage involved the attempt to control not only the elements within a production - the actors, the materials and the text - but also the audience's experience. In particular, external contextual factors must be eliminated so that the performance - ideally - is not contingent upon anything outside the production. Neither actors nor text nor elaborate scenery can be allowed to become dominant at the expense of the whole performance. As Grotowski says, there can be nothing with 'a life of its own' on the stage to disrupt the integrity of the performance. Taken to an extreme, even a primary theatrical element outside the stage itself comes under question; as Appia had suggested, a show could exist without its audience - theatre should not be contingent even on the presence of spectators.

So far, the examples I have pursued in terms of 'auratic presence' have represented extreme attempts to create an aesthetic wherein the stage *has* presence. Furthermore, these examples seem share ambivalence towards the status of the actor, whose 'presence' on the stage is, for many, of defining importance in the theatre. I would like to explore the status of the actor a little further in the following section. Clearly, the actor is central to theories of presence in

theatre, but to what extent does the actor's presence mitigate against these notions of auratic presence? It may be that, rather than reducing the idea of aura to discourses surrounding modernist attempts transcend representation, that aura should be seen in less mystical terms of the actor's skill engagement of the audience.

Demystifying Aura

There is a certain irony in that the attempts of some modernist practitioners to find the 'essence' of theatre were themselves predicated on denying certain facets of theatrical art. As Jonas Barish, in his work *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1981) points out, particularly in relation to Edward Gordon Craig:

Partly, no doubt, the vogue for marionettes and masks at the turn of the century reflects an attempt to retheatricalise the theatre, to rescue it from a paralysing realism. But it also constitutes an effort to *detheatricalise* it, to divest it of the kind of theatricality implied in the eternal posturing and grimacing of the actors (Barish 1981: 344).

While of the four practitioners I have looked at, Barish's observation relates most obviously to Craig's difficulties in reconciling art with acting, there is a wider principle here which underpins attempts to prioritise aura in performance. Problems with the idiosyncrasies actors reflect a longing to bypass the capricious elements of theatre, to smoothen out the often unstable relationships between actor, text, director, audience. In his essay on the Uber-marionette, Craig creates a fictional dialogue between an 'artist' and an 'actor' in which they discuss the differences between an artistic presence and a theatrical presence. As the 'artist' explains to the 'actor': '...as I have said, my own will is entirely under my control. The line

can be straight or it can weave; it can be round if I choose...And when it is ready – finished - it undergoes no change but that which Time, who finally destroys it, wills’, to which the actor replies ‘I wish it were possible in my work’ (Craig 1968: 68-9). Undoubtedly, it was Craig’s wish to bridge the gap between theatre as a ‘haphazard’ and inferior mode of expression into a form of high art in which the artist’s intention is fully embodied and present in the finished product.

Perhaps the most important term in Craig’s dialogue is ‘Time’. The painting, as Craig’s ‘artist’ suggests, is ‘ready’ and ‘finished’ once it has been made, it exists as a self-present entity which ‘undergoes no change’ when repeatedly viewed by a spectator. Theatrical performance however, is an inherently ‘haphazard’ business subject to contingency and ‘change’; even an Uber-marionette (were such a thing to exist), could presumably be subject to mechanical failure in mid-performance, or itself be subject to the ‘whims’ and errors of the human puppeteer. Unlike a painting, a theatrical performance’s temporal duration ensures that it is never fully ‘finished’ and *present* as a ‘work of art’: once the performance is ‘finished’ it ceases to exist *as* a performance.⁶ Moreover, a performance is liable to be a *repetition* of the previous night, or at least a repetition of some kind of rehearsal, rather than a self-contained product existing independently in time and space. Arguably, no-one was more concerned with the problem of repetition than Antonin Artaud.

Jacques Derrida in his essay ‘The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation’, argues that Artaud’s writings contain a sense of tension between a deep passion for the possibilities of theatre’s immediate impact on an audience, and an acceptance that theatre’s ‘immediacy’ is always being repeated. While Derrida’s critique of Artaud would seem to be

⁶ This also happens to be Peggy Phelan’s view, for whom ‘Performance’s only life is in the present’ (Phelan 1993: 146). However, this position (which has also been questioned), is explored more fully in chapter 5.

derived almost entirely from a scholarly appraisal of Artaud's writings rather than from the perspective of an audience member envisaging the practical implications of Artaud's ideas for the theatre, this critique is an important contribution to theorisations of presence in the theatre. Artaud was driven by a vision of theatre that would be experienced purely on its own terms, and not in reference to an external reality. Although his career as a theatre director was limited, in his collected writings, *The Theatre and its Double*, Artaud does make some specific suggestions as to how his theatre should be organised, and even makes comparisons to existing non-western forms. In his essay 'The Theatre of Cruelty', Artaud calls for an abandonment of the stage-auditorium divide, recommending instead 'a kind of single, undivided locale without any partitions of any kind' with the audience 'seated in the centre of the action' (1970: 74). The audience, seated on swivel chairs, would watch the action unfolding all around them 'with sudden outbursts flaring up like conflagrations' (1970: 75). The stage-auditorium divide would be overcome, and the distance - both physical but particularly psychic - between performance and audience would disappear within the immediate intensity of the theatrical experience.

For Derrida, Artaud's theatrical vision is premised - knowingly - on a conceptual paradox; he wants a theatre of 'pure presence' while on a deeper level Artaud understands that every present, especially in theatre, is always already a repetition. Derrida cites Artaud, drawing from a poem written in 1946. Artaud declared: 'And now I am going to say something which, perhaps is going to stupify many people. I am the enemy of theatre. I always have been. As much as I love the theatre, I am, for this reason, equally its enemy' (Artaud cited in Derrida 1978: 249). As Derrida suggests, Artaud 'cannot resign himself to theatre as repetition, and cannot renounce theatre as nonrepetition'. (1978: 249). Realising the impossibility of his

dream, Artaud, as Derrida puts it, 'kept himself as close as possible to the limit: the possibility and impossibility of pure theatre' (1978: 249). A *kind of* theatre without repetition and representation - a first time, one time experience - would be impossible to create without falling into the trap of creating new conventions or styles. An 'Artaudian' theatre would be a contradiction in terms, every piece of theatre described as 'Artaudian' would not be *itself*, but would be experienced in relation to some pre-established notion of what Artaudian theatre is like, and what it tries to achieve. The spirit of Artaud's writings would seem opposed to the institution of any kind of theatrical style or method. As Artaud puts it in 'No More Masterpieces': 'Once a form is used, it has no more use' (1970: 56), echoing his insistence that written poetry 'is valid once and then ought to be torn up' (1970: 57). The Theatre of Cruelty is ultimately an abstraction, one to which a given performance may aspire yet never actually achieve.⁷

Grotowski's turn towards 'paratheatrical' activities after 1970, when he ceased making works of theatre, can perhaps partly be attributed to a recognition that the actor-audience relationship which he claimed to be the essence of the artform, always implies a degree of contingency and slippage between artistic intention and audience reception. Claiming that the 'phenomenon called theatre [has become] devoid of meaning' (Grotowski cited in Ben Chaim 1984: 47), he was no longer content with the actor-audience division, and sought instead to create a new kind of communal experience. Grotowski reflected on the differences between his paratheatrical undertakings and his work with the Polish Laboratory Theatre:

The words "spectator", "performance", "actor" like the rest of the so-called theatre terminology, we consider anachronistic with regard to what we are looking for (Grotowski 1973: 129).

⁷ I return to Derrida's essay, and further the significance of Derrida in terms of thinking about theatrical presence, in chapter 4.

In place of 'theatre' Grotowski envisaged 'meetings' held between 'participants' which opens up a new 'perspective':

What perspective is opening here? A perspective which transcends acting, with all pretence, with all playing. It is the fullness of man that is thrown onto the scale. A human being in its totality – that is to say what is sensory and at the same time shining through, as it were; soul is body, body is soul, sex and luminosity. And it would even be difficult to say whether this is physical or psychic, because it is one and the same thing. Acting is simply abandoned (1973: 120).

Grotowski exhibits an Artaudian craving to access universal levels of experience and a full, shared presence that would overcome theatrical distance and the differential nature of the stage. This tendency is reflected in his attitude to the mental preparation of actors, who should 'come to test themselves in something very definite that reaches beyond the meaning of "theatre"' (1968: 216). Theatrical activity is merely a means to direct human contact for Grotowski: 'the theatre and acting are for us a kind of vehicle allowing us to emerge from ourselves, to fulfil ourselves'. One might say that the form of presence sought by Grotowski was fundamentally and self-consciously an *anti*-theatrical presence in that it depended on transcending theatrical representation.

The problematic notion of aura, and the complex factors underpinning its construction - in particular temporality and audience reception - are well illustrated when considering the staging, reception and subsequent revival of one of the Polish Laboratory Theatre's most famous productions. *Akropolis* (1966) was based on a symbolist play by Stanislaw Wyspianski in which in which the tapestries and statues in Cracow cathedral come to life and re-enact scenes from biblical tradition on Resurrection's eve. In Grotowski's Polish Laboratory reworking of the text, the action takes place not in Cracow cathedral, but at

Auschwitz, while the biblical and Homeric characters of Wyspianski's play bring to life scenes from the extermination camp. Grotowski's actors, dressed in simple brown sack-cloth, occupy a space strewn with miscellaneous material including metal stovepipes, a metal bathtub, wheelbarrows, hammers with nails, and a violin. Underneath these objects, heaped litter and junk, is a large wooden box at the centre of the stage space which conceals a trapdoor. There is no clear dividing line between the stage and the auditorium, with the audience seated around the edge of the performance space. Mixing biblical parable with Homeric myth and holocaust imagery, the performance reached its climax when the actors engaged in an apparent self-sacrifice by ritually dancing into a 'crematorium' represented by wooden trapdoors in the centre of the playing area. What the Theatre Laboratory hoped to achieve with this production will be worth considering, for it was a particularly striking attempt to explore the idea of presence in performance, and it is a production whose mythology has developed an 'aura' of its own.

In performance, *Akropolis* was, in the words of Theatre Laboratory's literary adviser Ludwick Flaszen, concerned with a process of initiation:

the actors represent those who have been initiated in the ultimate experience, they are the dead; the spectators represent those who are outside of the circle of initiates, they remain in the stream of everyday life, they are the living (in Grotowski 1968: 63).

The actors do not represent individuals but a kind of spiritual collective ('initiated into the ultimate experience'), who have, in the immediate act of performance, sacrificed personality and transcended social affectation: 'the actors become stereotypes of the species' (1968: 69). Flaszen's claims describe a theatrical performance which has become truly auratic, that is, a performance which does more than represent a spiritual vision, but actually *becomes* that

vision. In Grotowski's words 'The actor must not *illustrate* but *accomplish* an "act of the soul" by means of his own organism' (1968: 213): the actor as the creative centre of the performance, is entirely present in the moment of performance, not illustrating, but *accomplishing*.

Of course, whatever the actor manages to accomplish would be meaningless unless the audience not only understands what the actor is trying to do, but also *believes* that he accomplishes a transcendental act. Of the actor's sacrificial act, Grotowski adds that 'The spectator understands, consciously or unconsciously, that such an act is an invitation to do the same thing' (1968: 37). Thus, in *Akropolis*, the division which Flaszen alludes to between the actors as spiritual community, and the audience 'outside of the circle of initiates', is implicitly an 'invitation' to the audience to overcome their own (supposedly) artificial layers of selfhood.

The more metaphysical claims about the potential of a performance like *Akropolis* to enact a kind of spiritual awakening are contestable or best unproved.⁸ The 'act of the soul' that Grotowski described is akin to John Berger's characterisation of aura: the metaphysical glow of the artwork. What is clear however, is that Grotowski's reputation as a director and actor theorist was advanced through the skills and craft for which his performers were renowned. This latter idea of aura as constructed during the performance by skilful performers, comes closer to Roqueuntin's encounter with the paintings at Bouville museum: the unfolding experience and acknowledgement of artistic invention.

⁸ For a critical account of Grotowski's transcendental claims concerning the actor's presence, see Auslander, Philip (1997) *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*, London Routledge, p.p. 21-26, and 34-36.

I would like to explore the differences between these ideas of the auratic by examining a more recent interpretation of *Akropolis*. The piece was staged by the Wooster Group, a New York ensemble whose re-workings of existent texts have been read from a 'poststructuralist' rather than modernist perspective. In this piece it the Wooster Group seems to question the idea of a metaphysical aura while reinforcing the auratic potential of actorly skill. *Poor Theatre, a Series of Simulacra* (2004), began with the audience watching a video monitor placed centre stage, on which is screened a film of the Wooster Group watching a film of an 'original' performance of Grotowski's *Akropolis*, in preparation for *their* performance which the audience 'now' see. When the Wooster Group's actors actually appear onstage, it is to re-enact their visit to Wroclaw where Grotowski's company was based, and the piece includes a painstakingly detailed re-enactment of the last section from *Akropolis*. Actors from the Wooster Group simultaneously re-enacted - in Polish - the same scene in front of the audience while in the periphery of the stage area, video monitors played a recording of an 'original' performance by the Theatre Laboratory of this closing section. As reviewer Jessica Slote explains:

The Wooster actors, facing the audience, appear to have an uncanny way of matching word for word and motion for motion what we can also see on screen...The audience can, in effect, switch back and forth between the Polish archival performance on film and the astonishingly accomplished Wooster actors simulating live in their work space (Slote 2005).

At the same moment as the Theatre Laboratory performers began their exit into the ovens on film, the Wooster's actors exited the stage through a trapdoor, disappearing as the filmed performance comes to an end with the voiceover line 'and nothing was left but smoke'.

As Kermit Dunkelberg acknowledges in his article 'Confrontation, Simulation, Admiration: The Wooster Group's Poor Theatre', the Wooster Group 'do not – cannot - capture the full-blooded, raw presence of the Laboratory actors, but rather simulate the flat and partial image of their performance as captured on video' (Dunkelberg 2005: 47). However, despite their (inevitable) inability to capture the 'raw presence' of the original, Dunkelberg points out that what is achieved in performance is more than a cunning simulation; that 'from this rigorously limited simulation, something powerful emerges ... "mere pretence" is transcended' (2005: 48).

The Wooster Group's simulation raises questions concerning the more transcendentalist claims of the Polish Laboratory's performance through the very act of *re-presenting* the documentary footage. The actions of the original were repeated, but without those actions being shrouded in the aura of metaphysical revelation. However, as Dunkelberg stresses, the Wooster Group's performance worked beyond the level of irony, or a simply homage to an iconic moment in twentieth century theatre: the Group's 'simulation' was a powerful performance *in itself*. Between the video images of Grotowski's *Akropolis* and the stage performer's responses to those images, a dialogue of artistry was formed between the Polish actors and their American contemporaries. In the performer's meticulous efforts to animate 'only those parts of their bodies that mirror their counterparts as seen within the frame of the monitor' (Dunkelberg 2005: 47), this was a piece which clearly had the potential to resonate as a demonstration of actorly skill. *Poor Theatre, A Series of Simulacra* does not demonstrate that aura in theatre is contrived or necessarily underpinned by ideas of the actor's self-revelation; if anything this performance serves to highlight that it is the actor's training, preparation and commitment which underpins the impact of the performer on the stage.

Attempts to make aura paramount in theatre, whether by emphasising the stage's aesthetic autonomy in the manner of Appia or Craig, or by attempting to transcend representation through actor-audience 'communion', neglect the contingency inherent in an actor-audience relationship. Even Grotowski's *Akropolis* was merely the 'double', or an imperfect copy (or a representation) of an idealised vision of a theatre whose aura would transcend representation, and the contingencies implicit in the actor audience transaction. This was perhaps a central reason for Grotowski's eventual rejection of theatre; theatre can never quite achieve 'A perspective which transcends acting, with all pretence, with all playing'. As Daphna Ben Chaim writes of this paratheatrical turn:

No longer concerned with creating "performances" or events *for* an audience, which would imply a distinction between the roles of performer and perceiver, Grotowski wants everyone assembled to meet on the same plane, thereby making meaningless the distinctions between audience, actors, and performance (Ben Chaim 1984: 48).

While Grotowski eventually sought to merge performers and audience within the fabric of a theatrical event, thereby moving in the opposite direction from Craig and Appia's tendency to distance the audience from the aestheticised world on the stage, scenographic formalism had also envisaged a transcending of 'everyday' reality. As Irene Eynat-Corfino remarks, Craig's theatrical innovations were designed to 'cause the spectator to sever all links with his immediate physical reality' (Eynat Corfino 1987: 39). To return to Barish's observation about the use of marionettes at the expense of 'grimacing' and 'posturing' actors leading to an *anti*-theatrical bias, there is a point at which attempts to overcome theatrical representation altogether (as in paratheatrical events), or to create a self-contained stage spectacle, seem to represent a move *away* from theatre rather than towards its essence. Which begs the question: can a theatrical performance (and not merely an actor or playwright) be invested with a holistic auratic presence without eradicating the pretence of theatre?

The Presence of the Actor

Much avant-garde theatre in the sixties has been accused - in the words of Michael Vanden Heuvel - of pursuing a 'transcendentalist agenda' in which 'the potency of presence lay in the performer's ability to capture and enact spontaneously the totality of reality and make it available to the spectator' (Vanden Heuvel 1991: 44). The assumption behind much experimental theatre of this period entailed a belief, as American critic Philip Auslander argues, that 'the presence of the actor as one living human being before others is spiritually and psychologically liberating' (Auslander 1997: 62). The 'poor' actor, stripped of the affectations of theatrical pretence, took on an aura of spiritual authenticity before an audience. The auratic presence pursued by the experimental theatre and performance groups that Vanden Heuvel and Auslander describe could only be pursued if, in Artaud's terms, pretence was 'eradicated', or in Grotowski's terms, the actor accomplished 'acts of the soul' rather than merely illustrated them. While one way of creating an auratic theatre may have been to follow the 'transcendentalist agenda' that Vanden Heuvel alludes to, the Open Theatre (1963-1973), which was co-founded by Joseph Chaikin, demonstrated that aura in theatre could be pursued *through* the presentation of pretence.

Joseph Chaikin, although his name has been associated with the likes of Artaud and Grotowski, actually developed a very different conception of presence. Elinor Fuchs has written:

The Living Theatre and its *Paradise Now!*, Schechner's *Dionysus in '69*, Grotowski and his "actor-saint", and Chaikin's Open Theatre in different ways sought Artaud's "culture without space or time", the zero-degree revelation of an Artaudian presence. Chaikin's 1972 book, *The Presence of the Actor*, uses the very term in its title (Fuchs 1996: 69).

Fuchs' view is exemplary of some theatre critics, such as Auslander and Vanden Heuvel above, who tend to shy away from the idea of the actor's presence, or to conflate it with metaphysical notions of the auratic. A more sensitive approach to understanding the actor's presence would look more closely at the acting craft than at the more ambitious claims of guru directors. For theatre anthropologist Eugenio Barba, the actor's presence is not merely to be explained in terms of the 'transcendentalist agenda' to which Vanden Heuvel refers, but must be accounted for, first and foremost, by understanding the techniques of the performer. After all, the effect of the charismatic actor on an audience cannot all be explained in terms of a dubious metaphysics, or indeed simply the fame and prior reputation of an actor. Barba's understanding of actorly presence is based on certain principles of 'pre-expressive scenic behaviour' which are common to performers in different cultures. As Barba explains:

These principles, when applied to certain physiological factors - weight, balance, the use of the spinal column and the eyes - produce physical, pre-expressive tensions. These new tensions generate an extra-daily quality which renders the body theatrically "decided", "alive", "believable", thereby enabling the performer's "presence" or scenic *bios* to attract the spectator's attention *before* any message is transmitted (Barba 1995: 9).

The actor's presence derives from her mastery and embodiment of craft, and while the nature of this craft differs from culture to culture, the performer's *having* presence depends on how successfully the 'natural' body is transformed into the 'scenic *bios*'. The Open Theatre, for whose aesthetic the presence of the actor was central, may be easily elided with the 'transcendentalist agenda' of the nineteen sixties as Vanden Heuvel puts it, or loosely with 'Artaudian presence' as Fuchs suggests. Yet a closer look at the Open Theatre's work, and especially at Chaikin's understanding of presence, promises a way of understanding the link between the performer's presence and the actor's craft.

Of central importance to the group was an exploration of the actor's presence. Chaikin defined presence in the following terms:

It's that quality that makes you feel as though you're standing right next to the actor, no matter where you're sitting in the theatre...It's a kind of deep libidinal surrender which the performer reserves for his anonymous audience (Chaikin 1991: 20).

Although Chaikin is talking here of the charismatic actor, who possesses 'a quality given to some and absent from others', the overriding concern of the Open Theatre was to highlight the presence of performers as a group rather than as individuals. Initially committed to workshoping ideas in acting rather than giving public performances, the Open Theatre became one of the best-known alternative theatre groups in America within the decade between their formation in 1963 and their disbandment in 1973. The Open Theatre developed exercises and acting techniques which not only attuned the actors to the 'immediate landscape' of the stage, but also to opening up questions and imagining possibilities. Among these exercises, much influenced by improvisational guru Viola Spolin, the group explored the interpenetration and fluidity of identity and interaction between people and their environments.

Chaikin claimed that the group's 'aesthetic intention' was to 'bring about a kind of theatre of immediacy - a presence, being present, in the theatre. To explore those powers which the live theatre possesses' (cited in Blumenthal 1984: 15). Chaikin's conception of presence is one that links with the notion of aura; theatre is not merely about *making* (fiction) present, rather that theatre inherently *has* or 'possesses' an inherent presence which needs to be further explored. However, if Grotowski and Artaud, in different ways, sought a transcendental presence beyond representation, then Chaikin is content to explore a contingent presence in ordinary, individuated space-time. As Chaikin explains:

The basic starting point for the actor is that his body is sensitive to the immediate landscape where he is performing. The full attention of the mind and body should be awake in that very space and in that very time (*not an idea of time*) and with the very people who are also in that time and space (Italics added, cited in Blumenthal 1984: 51).

Chaikin's statement contrasts with the 'transcendentalist agenda' which Vanden Heuvel ascribes to experimental theatre in the sixties, which fundamentally aspired towards 'an idea' of 'time and space' *beyond* the 'immediate landscape' of the theatre. As Blumenthal writes of the Open Theatre:

Only when the actor is attuned to the entire play and the audience-actor situation of the particular performance is the theatre work truly alive... Spectators must not be tricked into looking *through* the actors, the physical setting, and the actual time, without seeing them, to enter the realm of the drama. Rather the performers, the playing space, and the actual time must be acknowledged along with the theatrical world they conjure up. This sort of double-reality, precisely, underlies Chaikin's presence (1984: 51).

As well as attuning his audience to the 'double-reality' of the theatre and the fiction (much as Thornton Wilder sought to do), presence for Chaikin is about being aware of a whole spectrum of simultaneous phenomena, an existential moment-to-moment awareness of a shared situation between actors and audience. As Chaikin puts it:

You're in that particular space in that room, breathing in that room... That's what theatre is. It's this demonstration of presence on some human theme or other and in some form or other (cited in Blumenthal 1984: 40).

The Serpent (developed between 1967 and 1969), represented a fruition of the Open Theatre's development in terms of acting technique and their political and social concerns, mixing together scenes from contemporary culture with the timelessness of biblical narrative. The piece was developed in collaboration with playwright Jean Claude van Itallie, who subtitled

The Serpent 'a ceremony'. However, while the piece may have maintained a ceremonial quality through the foregrounding of actors and the non-naturalistic acting idiom employed, it was quite unlike the 'holiness' of Grotowski's *Akropolis*, or the staged ritual of the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now*. Indeed, *The Serpent* can be read as a critique of the 'transcendentalist agenda' associated with many experimental ensembles of the period, while it posits a somewhat different approach to aura in performance.

The performance began with the stylised autopsy of a gunshot victim, before moving into a non-naturalistic reconstruction of the Kennedy assassination, based on photographic stills taken from the famous 'Zapruder film' as published in *Life* magazine (the film itself was not shown on American television until the 1970s). Just as the first two sequences connected the themes of violence in modern society, the later sequences explore the Fall of man in the Garden of Eden and the subsequent murder of Abel by his brother Cain, which provide an overall commentary on the preceding sections. The whole piece was performed with eighteen actors and virtually no props or scenery. Far from being didactic in its presentation of themes, the performance invited the audience to explore and imaginatively connect ideas such as knowledge, innocence, violence and power in relation to both contemporary events and to human nature.

One of the most prominent features of *The Serpent* was the construction of imagery within the piece and its interaction with the actor's vocalisation. Scenes representing the Tree of Knowledge's interaction with Eve, to the strange creatures which inhabit Eden or the assassination of Kennedy, were created in a way which drew attention to the process of theatre-making rather than to the 'presence' of those fictional propositions. As Dorinda Hulton explains of the Open Theatre's imagery, presence is revealed in the motion between

actor and the 'emerging' image rather than in 'the actor's self':

the actor allows a particular kind of shifting balance, or dialogue, between body and mind, in listening to and watching for the emerging form, the emerging image, and is able, moment to moment, to come into alignment with it. In such a case, there is a perceptible quality of "presence", moment to moment within the process of change or transformation, this quality of "presence" having more to do with the actor in operation with imagery rather than uniquely with the actor's self (Hulton 2000: 161).

The way in which the actor's 'operation with imagery' can foreground a moment of presence is well illustrated in the sequence of *The Serpent* where Cain kills his brother Abel. Before the scene is enacted, a female chorus explains to the audience through song that Cain will kill Abel, but that Cain does not know how to kill or what death means. The singing stops and the stage is quiet save for the 'bleating' of Abel's sheep, as played by other members of the company on all-fours, which continues throughout. Having dispersed the sheep and disabled his brother after an initial blow, Cain seems unsure of how to proceed. He almost playfully 'smashes' different parts of Abel's body until it is finally rendered lifeless. The scene is not presented 'realistically' however, and the actions of twisting a limb and vocalising the sound of the resulting 'snap' are never graphically detailed representations of violence. If anything, the actions performed are more akin to a playground game in which thumps and arm twists are crudely simulated. We are aware of what Blumenthal describes as a 'double-reality' in which we never fully enter the world of a realistic fiction, nor are we confronted with a revelation of the actor's self; rather we are aware of the actor's play-making. It is the actor's 'operation with imagery' as Hulton puts it, that defines the 'quality of presence' here; the actors neither stand outside of representation, nor allow themselves to be absorbed into the actions they represent. What is highlighted is not only the actors' activity of creating images, but also the *audience's* active involvement in supplementing a schematised representation with the imagination. The aura which this moment produces is not that of the actor

transcending self and culture, but of a heightened state of awareness established between actors and audience, whose co-operation opens up questions and expands the possibilities of thought and contemplation. The sense of aura generated by the Open Theatre was not that of transcending representation, but of opening up the process of its construction.

What is also striking about this sequence, even when viewing a video recording of the performance, is its power as a representation of violence. This is partly due to the way the sequence is framed; the action is introduced by a chorus, and is then played out by two actors on a bare stage; nothing can distract the audience's attention from the intensity of the scene. A weight of significance is added by the fact that this is no ordinary murder, but (according to *Genesis*) the *first* murder, and human kind's first experience of death and mortality. What is being represented before us therefore is an *original* action, a point from which all acts of cruelty and violence can be measured. Thus the scene has a kind of mythic or 'ceremonial' quality in being a re-enactment of a pivotal moment in mankind's spiritual history which lends it an auratic quality: its mythical importance transcends its immediate representation.

Returning to Walter Benjamin's characterisation of aura, we should not forget that the notion of aura is inextricably linked to that of authenticity. He states: 'the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity' (Benjamin 1999: 214). An 'authentic' Leonardo may be said to exude an aura which a poster print would lack. In the case of *The Serpent* however, events such as the Kennedy assassination (as much a reconstruction of a film as of the 'actual' event) or Cain's murder of Abel, are self-consciously presented as *re-enactments*. Abel's murder is not presented as an *original* action happening 'now' in the theatre. On the contrary, the actions performed look pared down and schematic - they are clearly *pretended* actions. An auratic presence is achieved not through the illusion that the

actors themselves are accomplishing spiritual acts of transcendence, but by inviting the *audience* to transcend the representational act imaginatively, to see *past* actorly pretence and contemplate a more personal sense of what human violence means. The Open Theatre, far from attempting to transcend theatre and eradicate pretence, takes us back to the very ambiguities associated with *presenting* pretence. Lawrence Kornfeld's notion that onstage 'what we pretend is not real and what is real is not pretence' applies here; theatre - as a specific or 'autonomous' form of representation - is less about that which is 'immediately' present or manifest in performance, than it is about the ambiguities between the reality of the pretending and the unreality of that which is pretended.⁹ As the Wooster Group's 'simulation' of *Akropolis* seems to suggest, aura in performance is always a ghost (or a 'double' to recall Artaud), of that which is 'authentic' and 'original'.

Conclusion

The Open Theatre's exploration of theatrical representation conceives theatre as an *open* process, foregrounding the creative act of theatre-making and interpretative activity, and rejecting the singular dominating 'presence' of one element or idea. Rather than attempting to eliminate the contingency and exorbitance of theatre, with *The Serpent* the Open Theatre emphasise the inter-dependence of actors, audience and context along with the pretence and doubleness of theatrical display to generate the full impact of the production. Aura arises more from theatre's contingency rather than from its 'autonomy'; the 'haphazard' and 'accidental' qualities implied by the contingency of the live event are crucial to theatre's auratic potential and cultural capital. Aura is a result not of magical transformations or

⁹ Like Chaikin, Lawrence Kornfeld is a former member of the Living Theatre.

mystical communions but of the cultivated craft of the performers, the cultural context surrounding a theatrical performance, and the way in which a performance is itself represented to an audience. If theatre never fully escapes its own pretence, then perhaps the best way to explore aura in theatre is to embrace the pretence and contingency of theatre.

The Open Theatre's interest in the 'moment to moment' unfolding of a performance can be looked at as being on the cusp of the third mode of presence, which I address in the next chapter. While Chaikin affirms that an intensified awareness of this 'moment to moment' process can generate a creative energy, the emphasis on contingency (rather than transcendence) may suggest not only an exploration of the stage's aura, but also its simply *being there* before the audience. This third mode of presence, the literally 'being there' as opposed to experiencing the aura of the stage or the presentation of a fiction, has informed a significant strand of discussion on theatre in relation to a wider artistic context from the second half of the twentieth century. It is to this discussion which I now turn; as I shall suggest, the 'literal mode' of presence has been an important debating point around which emerging postmodern forms of art practice have positioned themselves in relation to theatre.

Chapter 3

Being-Present:

The Literal Mode Of Presence

Apart from theatre's ability to 'make-present' fictional propositions, or the different ways in which an actor or performance can 'have presence', most theatre-goers might recognise the third mode of presence which I examine in this chapter. If fictional and auratic modes relate to debates surrounding facets of theatrical production, then there is also a sense in which *spectators* are present in the theatre with the actors and with other spectators. This mode, which I refer to as 'literal presence', includes the idea of contingency; theatre as both an occurring exchange subject to the conditions of time and place in which the performance takes place, *and* theatre - almost by definition, as fundamentally contingent on the presence of its audience. In contrast to the fictional presence of Hamlet on the stage, or the 'aura' of the charismatic actor, 'being-present' at the theatre event might seem the most factual or perhaps mundane of the three modes.

However, while the idea of simply (literally) *being-present* before an object of contemplation or performance may not sound particularly controversial, attempts to prioritise this sense of being-there signifies an important shift from modernist conceptions of 'aura' I explored in the last chapter. If the notion of 'auratic presence' suggests an emphasis on the authority and integrity of theatrical production, then my investigation of 'being-present' proposes to explore an emerging 'postmodern' concern with demystifying 'aura' and asserting instead the

centrality of the spectator's experience or 'reading' of the event.¹ As this chapter hopes to demonstrate, the 'literal' mode of presence, far from being a simplistic or neutral construction, has marked a point of contest within debates surrounding notions of theatre and theatricality in the second half of the twentieth century.

While the preceding chapters have taken a broader historical perspective in relation to theatre practice, I deal here principally with debates set around affirming or rejecting the contingency of theatricality as an aesthetic value. Chaikin's notion of presence in theatre '(You're in that particular space in that room, breathing in that room... That's what theatre is)', is a good explanation of the 'literal mode', however this mode of presence also relates to wider debates around the notion of 'theatricality' more generally in the visual arts. Theatre and theatricality are often cast as negative values. Just as established forms of theatre were not 'auratic' enough for some of the practitioners examined in the last chapter, some theorists have also found cause to reject theatre for not being contingent enough. Indeed, much of the following discussion could come under the title of Jonas Barish's work *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (1981). While most of the theorists examined here are not directly taken up by Barish, they may be said to fall under a tradition of prejudice, which Barish traces from the time of Plato, in which theatrical activity is viewed with disdain. While Barish explains this prejudice in terms of 'a kind of ontological malaise, a condition inseparable from our beings' (Barish 1981: 2), my own discussions of a more historically limited debate conceives this prejudice in terms of presence. Not only has theatre itself been the object of prejudice, but so too have terms associated with theatre. As Barish notes, terms such as 'acting, play acting, playing up to, putting on an act, putting on a performance, making a scene' etc, tend 'with infrequent

¹ Craig Owens differentiates postmodern from modernist art on the basis that the purpose of the postmodern is 'no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence; rather it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency and lack of transcendence' (Owens 1992: 1052). Modernism proclaims the 'presence' of the artwork, while postmodern art narrates its own failure to achieve full presence.

exceptions' to be 'hostile or belittling' (1981: 1). I would add that all of these terms refer to the undermining of presence; to pretend, to feign, to dissemble or to 'play act' are all ways of *representing* or exhibiting oneself rather than simply 'being' or *presenting* oneself. It is the perceived duplicity or 'doubleness' of theatre in which presence is manipulated or subverted that lies at the root of the prejudice addressed in this chapter.

While most of the ideas I examine here are not derived from theatre practitioners, theatre - as an art form that complicates presence - remains the central focus of this chapter. Indeed, what I hope to show is that 'being-present' is not entirely separate from 'making-present' or 'having-presence'. Theatre, as I argue throughout this thesis, is an art form in which 'presence' is never singular or straightforward. As Barish's allusion to 'anti-theatrical' terms suggest, presence in theatre is slippery and difficult to lay hold of. It is theatre's propensity for complicating presence however, which gives it a particular vantage point from which to critique the idealisations of the 'literal' mode. While being an art form associated with notions of presence, theatre can also stage its complexities and ambiguities; a medium that reflects on - and engages in - the pretence of presence.

Aura versus Contingency

A particular concern with 'literal presence' in theatre amongst other arts - the spectator's contingent presence with the art object - can be seen running parallel with the idealisation of 'aura' investigated in the last chapter. While 'aura' is a term particularly associated with a modernist adherence to ideals of aesthetic integrity and wholeness, the advocacy of 'literal presence' may be seen in terms of a tradition which is often referred to in terms of the 'avant-

garde'. Although the origins of the avant-garde can be traced back to Paris in 1863 with the opening of the Salon des Refusés (a response to the annual Paris Salon exhibition), the term has also been used to describe a counter-trend to experiments in modernism from the early twentieth century. David Graver, from a theatrical perspective, has characterised the avant-garde as a reaction against the modernist preference for aesthetic unity and integrity:

Anti-art theatre practitioners, in contrast [to modernist practitioners], seek a foundation that brings a more ontologically fluid immediacy to the events in the theatre. For this avant-garde, theatre is not so much the realisation of a fixed work constituted through performance as the unfolding of a unique event (Graver 1995: 58).²

Graver's distinction between the 'fluid immediacy' of the avant-garde and the autonomy of the 'fixed work', suggests that a differing conception of presence was key to the formation of a counter-modernist trend. A philosophical backdrop to the idea of art as an 'unfolding' event whose 'fluid immediacy' is quite unlike that of experiencing a unified work may be found in the so-called 'process philosophers' such as Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead. Both Bergson and Whitehead rejected the rationalistic approach to reality by which the human subject is separated from the objective world of 'things', and sought instead to show that human consciousness is submerged into a world whose ontological foundation is 'process' rather than 'substance'. In his considerably complex *Process and Reality* (1929), Whitehead advances the theory that reality in its totality is ungraspable since it consists, not in discrete individual *things*, but in an infinite extension or 'flow' of events. Giving the example of a stone, Whitehead suggests that the stone is not fully 'present' as a 'thing' but is instead a confluence of all that is connected to it. Even something as simple as 'a grey stone' contains a

² I do not propose to employ Graver's distinction as a means of rigidly separating those practitioners I examined in the previous chapter from those I examine here, but merely to illustrate a general distinction between an aesthetic sensibility which prioritised contingency as opposed to 'aura'.

‘history, and probably a future’ (Whitehead 1960: 185). C.H. Waddington, who employs concepts from process philosophy to develop a theory of modern painting in *Behind Appearance* (1969), further explains Whitehead’s position, with reference to that grey stone.

‘Whitehead’, as Waddington explains:

went on to state that this piece of existent stuff he had hold of contains everything you can find in it; and that, try as you will, you will never exhaust what it contains. You may find in it a fossil, and that is an item in which the whole pageant of organic life on earth is focussed; you may find in it calcium carbonate, and in that resides the whole of chemistry; you will find a colour, shape and texture, and you have the whole of painting and sculpture on your hands; it might be a sling-shot and David and Goliath are beside you... (Waddington 1969: 113).

Every event or every object, contains a reference to every other event or object; everything flows into everything else, just as a river isn’t a fixed ‘thing’ but an ever changing flow.

Like Whitehead, Bergson’s thought emphasised the limited scope for a rational, scientific approach to reality as opposed to the immediate intuition of lived experience. In his work *Time and Free Will* (1889), Bergson distinguishes between scientific time as abstract and artificial, something measurable by clocks, from the intuitive experience of ‘real’ time in which the self is continuously present. Our experience of time is not that of piecing together discrete occurrences which are put into sequential order, our experience is part of a continuous flow. Time seems to pass quickly when one is enjoying oneself, while the same amount of clock time will seem to drag if one is waiting for something to happen. Time is experienced internally, through our relationship to it as beings-in-time; while clock time, although useful, is divided from our immediate experience.

Playwright and author Gertrude Stein developed a theory of time and theatrical presence

which bears remarkable affinities to Bergson's concept of flow. Stein was troubled by the fact that, in traditional drama, there exists a disparity between the present time of the dramatic action and the present time of the audience. In her essay 'Plays' (1934), Stein suggests that a scene depicted onstage exists in 'syncopated time' in relation to the 'emotional time' of the audience: 'your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play' (Stein 1967: 58). Stein's notion of 'syncopated time' is not far from Thornton Wilder's problems with what he perceived to be sterile versions of stage naturalism, whereby an audience's attention is directed towards a 'there and then' rather than an immediate theatrical 'now'. However, Stein's objections went even further in that they were directed against the very notion of 'dramatic tension': the attention of the audience is not only directed away from the immediacy of the stage, but inevitably towards a future pregnant with expectation. As aesthetician Suzanne Langer has pointed out, dramatic presence onstage is traditionally predicated on suspense: '[The drama's] basic abstraction is the act, which springs from the past, but is directed towards the future, and is always great with things to come' (cited in Elam 1980: 124). Stein however, proposed that theatre (and art generally) should aspire to hold the audience in a present moment of contemplation. 'The business of art', she explains, 'is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present' (1967: 65). Her conception of theatre implied an abandonment of the 'fictional mode' of presence in favour of the 'literal mode'. Stein called for a theatre that would forego dramatic development, along with its artificially constructed beginning, middle and end, instead theatre should be as present as a 'landscape' - simply 'there' before the observer:

I felt that if a play were exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it, but it does not with you, it is there and so...the relation between you at any time is so exactly that that it is of no importance unless you look at it (1967: 75).

Stein's theories of theatrical presence bear strong affiliations to that of William James, the American philosopher who influenced her intellectual development, and whose ideas on time and presence are similar to Bergson's. For James, we are not aware of temporal instants segmented in time, but of the broad flow of temporality in which we find ourselves:

the practically cognized present is no knife-edge, but a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time. The unit of composition of our perception of time is a *duration*, with a bow and a stern, as it were - a rearward - and a forward-looking end (James 1890: 609).

The present is not an instant snap-shot moment, but an elongation from past to future. Some of composer John Cage's works, who counts Stein among his influences, reflect this elongation of the present in place of the separation of musical movements or dramatic moments. Perhaps the best demonstration of this idea was the groundbreaking *4' 33''*, in which the musician sits (or stands) in 'silence' for the requisite time frame after which the 'performance' is at an end. Rather than be swept away in the development of musical ideas, the audience are grounded in an elongated present moment. While the performance was on one level a meditation on silence, an important aspect of the experience were the many 'incidental' sounds that surrounded the silence: the performer's entrance into the playing space and the noises - coughing, breathing, shuffling - in the auditorium. If the audience find such a seemingly empty performance unsatisfying, for Cage that is only because of a refusal to 'be' in the present and to open oneself to the richness of everyday phenomena. 'When life

is lived', he once remarked, 'there is nothing in it but the present, the "now moment"' (cited in Crohn Schmitt 1990: 22).

The temporal divorce between the fictional drama and the 'real' time of its audience was also an important concern for the 'happenings' of artist/theorist Allan Kaprow. Kaprow emphasised the importance of "'real" or "experienced" time as opposed to conceptual time'. Happenings, he suggests, should reject a 'fixed concept of regular development and conclusion', such as in a drama, and acknowledge the fact that real time is lived. In a statement which strongly echoes Bergson's conception of lived time, Kaprow suggests:

when we are busy, time accelerates...conversely, when we are bored it can drag almost to a standstill. Real time is always connected with doing something, with an event of some kind, and so is bound up with things and spaces (Kaprow 1992: 707).

A happening's time does not pretend to be different from our own 'lived time', so the audience member can be both spatially and temporally integrated into a present situation. Kaprow's aesthetics, particularly his insistence on 'event' rather than 'artwork' and on the integration of the audience and art, mirrors Whitehead's emphasis on the fluid and interlocking nature of reality. If the 'artwork' tends to reinforce a conception of a universe of individual 'things', then Kaprow's attempts to dissolve the integrity of the artwork can be seen as an aesthetic correlate to Whitehead's thought: *'The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible'* (Kaprow 1992: 706).

The term 'happenings' derives from Kaprow's composition *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* in which chosen words, phrases and actions were presented in three specially designed, inter-related compartments at New York's Reuben Gallery in October 1959. In a happening,

according to Kaprow:

the very materials, the environment, the activity of the people in that environment, are the primary images, not the secondary ones. The environment is not a setting for a play...which is more important than the people...there is an absolute flow between event and environment (cited in Kaye 1994: 37).

The observer literally enters the artwork and there is an overlap between the presence of the observer and the environment in which the happening is set. As Kaprow points out, the 'environment' and the 'the activity of the people in that environment' become 'primary images' that are present in place of artistic vision or aesthetic purity. Kaprow saw the audience *as* performers, invited to move freely and interact with the installations. If certain modernist conceptions of art posit the aesthetic object in a wholly different realm than that of the observer, then Kaprow's avant-gardism argues for a presence founded on the integration of artwork and spectator. As Amelia Jones writes of his seminal essay 'Assemblages, Environments and Happenings' (1959), Kaprow breaks down the rigid life/art distinction by introducing the living body of both artist and spectator as part of the artwork:

Kaprow's argument is a crucial early moment in the acknowledgement of an expanded conception of artmaking...the use of the body of the artist in the work as well as the engagement of the spectator as part of the work (in the Happening) can be seen as a way of connecting – via these very bodies – art as process and as narrative within everyday experience (Jones 1998: 276).

Kaprow's Happenings at once fragment the integrity and authority of the modernist artwork, while highlighting the contingent (literal) processes of production and reception that makes art possible. In *Fluids* which Kaprow created in 1967, large rectangular structures of ice were placed throughout Los Angeles, whose citizens found themselves suddenly chancing upon

these melting structures. Far from being a particular object exuding 'aura', *Fluids* was more concerned with the spectator's being-present with the object in ordinary space/time. The giant ice cubes did not stand alone as 'artworks', but literally melted into the environment in which they were situated. These were not artworks which continued to exist indefinitely in a designated exhibition space, instead *Fluids* highlighted the temporal duration of their presence before a spectator. Kaprow described these encounters as 'a mystery of sorts' (cited in Schechner 1988: 36), suggesting new ways of thinking about the fluidity and temporality of the life-world. Art is not enshrined in some aesthetic universe that we may magically enter by suspending our interest in the empirical world, but is a very real and tangible part of our world; art is an 'event' taking place in space and time, between observers and objects/performers.

Happenings can be seen as an attempt to shed the aura and authoritarian privilege of having 'artists' creating 'artworks', opting instead for an experience centred on spectatorial interaction; something more dynamic and contingent than the predetermined relationship between viewer and art 'object'. With the challenge to the modernist concern with aura, 'art' was seen not in terms of a product which had been fashioned by a unique artistic consciousness, but as a *performance* which involved a fluid, open-ended relationship between spectator and object/installation/performer within a particular context. As David Graver points out, the aesthetic impetus behind this work was very different from the concerns of some modernist practitioners:

Modernist theatre that eschews the importance of character, no matter what form this theatre takes, can be distinguished from the anti-art avant-garde by its reliance on or privileging of an aesthetic focus or centre for each stage piece (Graver 1995: 57).

Craig or Grotowski's conceptions of theatre, while rejecting the idea that the stage is merely a vehicle for enacting a play, were nonetheless centred on a specific theatrical 'aesthetic'. The approaches of Stein or Kaprow, on the other hand, shifted the focus from the aura of the stage to the contingency of spectator experience.³ In the 1960s, the challenge to auratic presence extended to other art practices - to which I shall shortly turn - whose emphasis also seemed to lean towards the 'literal presence' between viewer and object in three-dimensional space. The authority of the artist who projected his or her artistic conception through a fixed 'work' was becoming impeached by the centrality of the spectator's own 'performance' with the object in ordinary space/time. This challenge to aura placed 'theatre' at the centre of a struggle between an increasingly conservative modernist aesthetic founded on auratic presence, and a set of art practices which emphasised 'literal presence'; a precursor to the quintessentially postmodern 'performance art'. Indeed, the link between 'literal presence' and 'theatricality' was made most directly by the modernist art critic Michael Fried, for whom the term implied a rejection of the artistic principles he sought to defend.

Fried, following in the tradition of American modernist criticism exemplified by Clement Greenberg, championed the formal constitution of the artwork, together with its autonomy or purity. In his seminal 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood', Fried sought to argue against an increasingly pervasive (and as he saw it, perverse) theatricality in the arts. It will be worth looking at Fried's argument in some detail, for not only does he develop a notion of theatricality and 'stage presence' in contrast to 'presentness' in modernist art, he also posits 'theatre' as a vacuous art form without authority and presence. While the art world has moved on since 1967, the conceptual model Fried provides - based around an anti-theatrical prejudice - has continued to inform more recent discussions of art practice.

³ Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author' which was published in 1968 and emphasised the freedom of the reader's interpretation against the prescriptions of authorial intention, can be seen as a theoretical correlate to art practices which privileged spectatorial experience.

'Art and Objecthood' appeared in 1967 as a defence of modernist painting against the emergence of minimalist sculpture - or as Fried labelled it - 'literalist art'. At the time, artists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris were reacting against the notion that art is concerned with the exalted status of the aesthetic object, and instead sought to highlight the physical and temporal context in which an artwork is experienced. Their aim, as Fried saw it, was directly opposed to his own criteria of aesthetic value; these artists, rather than create an autonomous 'artwork' drew particular attention towards a '*situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*' (Fried 1992: 825). The work of such artists as Judd, Morris and Frank Stella aimed at rejecting representation or reference, and consisted of geometrical shapes such as cubes or rectangles which, when placed on the floor or wall of an art gallery, appeared to offer an imposing sense of their sheer physical presence. Robert Morris's *untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* from 1965, for example, consisted of four cubes - each about three feet per side - all with mirrored sides, placed close together in square formation on the gallery floor. Far from being the complete 'art objects', the mirrored cubes reflected back on the viewers who observed themselves as much as the objects; the 'artwork' was this observer/object interaction rather than the objects themselves.

Fried's difficulty with these strange objects was that far from asserting their autonomy (as Appia had sought with *his* theatrical aesthetic) from the viewer and the 'everyday' world, the blank austerity of the minimalist (or 'literalist') piece draws attention to the very circumstances in which the work is experienced. Art becomes about its own *staging*; the metal slabs of Donald Judd in Amelia Jones' words, 'compelled the spectator to circumambulate the unliving forms and refused to stage the representational or narrative effects common to modernist and premodernist sculpture' (1998: 113). This *relationship* between viewer and object is what Fried found so specifically theatrical about literalist art: 'Literalist art is

theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters the literalist work' (1992: 825). Moreover, Fried noted that these very objects are unsettlingly 'anthropomorphic' - silent hollow 'bodies' - which seem to confront the viewer, much as the stage actor confronts a theatre audience. Minimalist sculpture encompasses the 'entire situation' of its reception; to experience one of these objects the observer is obliged to move around it, see it from different angles, and experience the object from the particular perspective of her own physical position in space:

I think it is worth remarking that "the entire situation" means exactly that: all of it – including, it seems, the beholder's *body*. There is nothing within his field of vision which declares its irrelevance to the situation, and therefore to the experience, in question (1992: 826).

The essence of theatre, according to Grotowski, is the actor-audience relationship, and it is this very *relationship* which differentiates theatre from other arts, as Fried maintains:

For theatre *has* an audience – it *exists for* one – in a way the other arts do not; in fact, this more than anything else is what modernist sensibility finds intolerable in theatre generally. Here it should be remarked that literalist art, too, possesses an audience... (1992: 830).

Fried (like the later Grotowski) recognised the difficulties implied by this subject-object relationship. Existing *for* an audience, the art-object will not be viewed and valued on its *own* terms, but *in* terms of the viewer's (physical) relationship to it. 'Literalist art' typifies that principle of theatricality to which Fried gives the name 'objecthood'. Theatre confronts its audience with real things like people, props and scenery: 'objects' whose matter-of-fact existence is essentially material rather than aesthetic.

If, following a tradition of Modernist criticism from Croce, Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg, art is conceived as fundamentally ideal rather than material, then theatre and ‘theatrical’ tendencies in modern art, by grounding aesthetic experience in ordinary material reality, must be the enemy. The ‘stage presence’ of minimalism contrasts sharply with what Fried calls the ‘presentness’ of modernist art; auratic presence is differentiated and prioritised over ‘literal presence’. Fried envisages a battle between the Greenbergian concern with asserting the integrity of the aesthetic object, and a theatrical sensibility which would seek to disrupt the aesthetic autonomy of the art work:

What is at stake in this conflict is whether the paintings or objects are experienced as paintings or objects...[painting] must be pictorial, not, or not merely, literal (1992: 824).

Aesthetic value is dependent on the integrity of the medium allowing art to elevate itself above the status of the mere object (or ‘objecthood’ as Fried calls it). An artwork should *transcend* its lowly status as a material worldly object. To the degree that we experience an artwork as a mere object its aesthetic value diminishes; the goal of art must be to defeat ‘objecthood’. Unlike a literalist object or a theatrical performance, which can be experienced only in relation to its context and over a course of time, an ideal aesthetic experience has ‘no duration’ because ‘*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest*’ (1992: 832, original italics). As Fried describes:

It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perceptual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness...I want to claim that it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theatre (1992: 832).

As I suggested in the last chapter, whether the idealisation of aura comes from theatre

practitioners like Appia or Grotowski, or from art theorists like Fried, there is a longing to 'defeat' the contingency of the stage-audience relationship. Indeed, when Fried accuses minimalist sculpture of exuding a '*stage presence*', he is drawing specific attention to the presence of the body and the embrace of an embodied spectatorial viewpoint. Certainly, minimalist objects do not particularly resemble persons, but the experience of *encountering* one of these objects is perhaps not unlike encountering a fellow human being. As Fried explains:

In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another *person*; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly – for example, in somewhat darkened rooms – can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way (1992: 826).

A curious sense of paranoia pervades this observance, minimalist sculpture becomes for the aesthete what a jacket hanging on the bedroom door is to the child after the lights are turned off; a dark ominous shape which looks irresistibly, terrifyingly - human! Modernist art (or at least Fried's conception of it) should demonstrate, as when the frightened child turns on the lights, that there is nothing in the room save the reassuring values of formal harmony between inanimate shapes and colours. For Fried, anthropomorphism and theatricality are deeply connected in that they imply an irrelevant reflection on a viewer's perception, when art should be about the kind of formal aesthetic qualities best understood by art critics.

Just as the existence of the body has been conceived as an obstacle to the creation of a pure theatrical presence, so it is the body and the embodied experience of being-in-the-world which is the real antithesis of 'presentness'. As Donald B. Kuspit observes of Fried's arguments, his plea for 'art' over 'objecthood' privileges an aesthetic experience impervious

to context or subjective perspective, a ‘triumph of the esthetic [sic] over the existential’:

It is as though existing for an audience detracts from – altogether precludes – the experience of presentness or absolute esthetic sensation, because it reminds us of a basic condition of being in the world, viz., that we are there for others (Kuspit 1983: 280).

This ‘basic condition’ of embodied co-habitation is just the kind of banal day-to-day reality that is antithetical to Fried’s aesthetic philosophy. As Fried writes in his book *Absorption and Theatricality* (1980): ‘the paintings of Louis, Noland, Olitski, and the sculptures of David Smith and Caro – were in essence *anti*-theatrical, which is to say that they treated the beholder as if he was not there’ (Fried 1980: 280). The ‘anti-theatrical’ terms in which Fried describes his aesthetic ideal are not dissimilar from those expressed by theatre designer Adolphe Appia (noted in the last chapter) many years earlier. The stage would exude an ‘aura’ which would transcend the contingent relationship between actors and audience. The viewer experiences the work from a disembodied, impersonal viewpoint from which (ideally) no sense of subjective perspective is possible. Fried, through what Kuspit calls the ‘illusion of sovereign impersonality’ theorises the achievement of pure aesthetic presentness through both the rigorous removal of the body from the artwork’s formal constitution, and of the viewer’s embodied *perspective* of the artwork. Furthermore, as the viewer’s perspective becomes aesthetically redundant, the authority of critics, like Michael Fried, as decoders of modernist art becomes greatly enhanced.

Fried’s description of theatre might be rejected by many modernist theatre-makers, for whom the audience’s presence might be of little relevance - or even potentially disruptive - of the aura of the stage. However, some avant-garde practitioners (as opposed to modernist, to follow Graver’s distinction) *were* valorising the ‘theatricality’ of lived experience as a

progressive idea rather than a problem to be avoided. Indeed, despite Fried's robust defence of Greenbergian modernism and 'presentness' in art, the theatrical sensibility Fried had disparaged and Kaprow amongst others had championed, became increasingly prevalent through the fifties and sixties. There are potential confusions about the employment of the term 'theatricality' in these contexts, but both terms relate to essentially the same aesthetic sensibility. While Fried abhorred the increasing tendency of artists to invite a participatory interaction with their work, many artists were discovering ways to 'theatricalise' art, sensing an opportunity to challenge the autonomy of the aesthetic by engaging the spectator in the process of making art.

However, if art since the late fifties had - to use Fried's epithet - become more 'theatrical' - more about the exploration of the contingent and the arbitrary rather than the ideal and the rational - then, paradoxically, this appeared to leave 'traditional' theatre in a retrograde position. Natalie Crohn Schmitt, writing on the development of 'performance theatre' - which she also refers to as 'antitheatre, postmodern theatre, or simply, new theatre' (Crohn Schmitt 1990: 1) - has suggested that the increasing scientific, philosophical and aesthetic concern for concepts such as process and indeterminacy arising in the twentieth century have rendered 'conventional theatre' increasingly archaic:

Conventional theatre, with its frontality and single focus, implies that what is to be understood about reality is its uniqueness - one thing at a time, to which everyone is to attend to the same "right" perspective...but in fact...if reality is perspectival, the value of art cannot derive from its universality (1990: 10).⁴

In the 1970s, Richard Foreman became renowned for developing theatre pieces which highlighted an audience's perception as an open ended activity rather than a pre-disclosed

⁴ Arguably, much 'conventional theatre' does depict reality as 'perspectival'; the drama of Tom Stoppard for instance frequently depicts 'reality' as multiple and unstable.

system of meaning. Strongly influenced by the ideas of Cage and Stein, Foreman's performances attempted to draw the spectator's attention towards their own perceptual processes. With numerous alienating devices, such as the use of loud buzzers, spotlights focussed on the audience, randomly selected words dangling from the flyers, and scripts that eschew causality or developed characters, Foreman's hope has been to constantly keep the audience off balance and alive to the performance's immediacy. Betsy Alayne Ryan has written of the affinities between Richard Foreman's and Gertrude Stein's conception of presence in theatre:

He [Foreman] shares Stein's aversion to the traditional theatre experience dependent upon progressive, crisis-centred action, and posits instead an "ontological-hysteric" theatre, one which shatters the hysteric (conflict) structure of traditional theatre and focuses upon its parts moment by moment. In breaking up time in this way, Foreman achieves the same staticity, the same finality that Stein does in her plays: the perceiver focuses upon a network of relations and connections that have final, physical significance. The reality of the theatre experience per se, as opposed to the alternative reality of the fiction, is Foreman's focal point as much as Stein's (Ryan 1984: 146-7).

Foreman's hope, like that of Stein, Kaprow and Cage, is to allow his audience to 'be' in the present; as Foreman puts it in his 'Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto 1': 'I want to be seized by the elusive, unexpected aliveness of the present moment' (Foreman 1976: 154).⁵

However, while some theatre practitioners were exploring the 'literally present' relationship between stage and auditorium, there was a further sense in which theatre *itself* was being seen pejoratively by those who continued to explore the kind of 'theatricality' that Fried had objected to. If theatre had become the enemy for modernists, it also became the enemy in

⁵ The elongation of the present moment emphasised by Stein is also evident in the spectacular theatrical works of director Robert Wilson, who, in rejecting the sequential time and psychological space of conventional drama, worked within a Bergsonian sense of time as flow and duration. Wilson's *Overture for Ka Mountain* (1972) for instance ran for 168 hours in its Iranian performance, and was spread out over several square miles, both temporally and spatially elongating the presentation to the point where it could not be fully experienced from any single subjective perspective.

theorisations of an emerging field of 'performance art' - another instance of 'anti-theatrical prejudice' - which was underscored by an important shift in discourse. Whilst the 'theatricality' of Stein, Cage and Kaprow was predicated on foregrounding the *spectator* as generator of the experience at the expense of the controlling artist, advocates of performance tended to place the emphasis not on the spectator's being-present, but on being-present with the (performance) *artist*. As I shall suggest, this re-alignment, in common with the modernist distrust of theatricality, had the effect of accentuating the pre-eminence, individuality and 'aura' of the artist.

Performance versus Theatre

In retrospect it would appear that despite Fried's conservative defence of aesthetic formalism, the values of theatricality have taken a firm foothold in the arts. Reflecting in 1983 on developments since the publication of his article, Fried acknowledged that 'In the years since "Art and Objecthood" was written, the theatrical has assumed a host of new guises and has acquired a new name: "postmodernism"' (cited in Auslander 1997: 52). If Fried associates modernism with presentness and aesthetic autonomy, then postmodernism would relate to the instability of theatricality and its dependence on a process of interaction between spectator and performer. Modernism proclaims the 'presence' of the artwork, whilst postmodern art highlights a contingent relationship with its audience and to the context of its reception as opposed to its autonomy or the exalted status of 'presentness'.

Curiously however, the aesthetic practices which became strongly associated with 'literal' presence and postmodern values of 'theatricality' were themselves to be differentiated from

'theatre'. As RoseLee Goldberg discusses in her book *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (1988), 'performance' became the main vehicle through which aesthetic autonomy was challenged. 'Performance', Goldberg explains:

was seen as reducing the element of alienation between performer and viewer - something that fitted well into the often leftist inspiration of the investigation of the function of art - since both audience and performer experienced the work simultaneously (Goldberg 1988: 152).

Two mutually supporting tendencies can be identified with respect to the development of 'performance'. While some artists used performance to propose a breaking down of the autonomy of art forms such as painting and sculpture, they were also trying to generate closer ties between the art work and its spectator. Goldberg's explanation of performance artists' attempts to reduce the 'element of alienation' (distance) between performer and viewer, who now 'experienced the work simultaneously', strongly echoes Gertrude Stein's call for art to enable us to 'live in the actual present'. Whilst the autonomous presence of the artwork that Fried has championed was losing favour, a form of presence more akin to his notion of theatricality was gathering support.

Rather than being seen as an extension of 'theatricality' (as Fried had conceived 'postmodern' art), performance came increasingly to be seen as a separate art category. Whereas performance was seen as a site of energy flows wherein performers and audience could share in the immediacy of art making, theatre was seen (recalling Artaud) as an institutionalised art form with a pretended rather than 'actual' immediacy - or presence. Timothy Wiles noted that within his definition of 'performance theatre' as 'actual activity' rather than 'ideal action' lay an antipathy towards the theatre: 'the potential demise of theatre as such is one of the theoretical assumptions behind much of this new activity' (Wiles 1980: 117). Yet the very

term which Wiles adopts - 'performance theatre' - would suggest that some conception of 'theatre' can never be fully disengaged from a definition of 'performance'. The term theatre is conceived in increasingly narrow terms: 'theatre' is more or less synonymous with 'drama'. The performance/theatre distinction turns around the concept of presence; in 'theatre' performers pretend to do things and be people that they're not, in 'performance' the performers are 'themselves', and actually do things rather than represent their doing. Such a neat differentiation is contentious. However it will be instructive to note how Fried's distinction between 'presentness' and 'theatricality' has been used to promote the cause of *performance* as re-valorisation of the performer/artist's presence - once again at the expense of 'theatre'.

In two articles which appeared in a special theory edition of the journal *Modern Drama* in 1982, explicit attempts were made to distinguish performance from theatre on the basis of presence. In her essay 'Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified', Josette Féral examines the relationship between theatre and an emerging genre of performance. Féral conceives of the relationship between theatre and performance to be one of mutual exclusion but not one of essential opposition. Drawing on conceptual artists Vito Acconci and Elizabeth Chitty, along with practitioners and theorists such as Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski, Féral argues that performance is that which exists 'at the juncture of other signifying practices' (Féral 1982: 170), but which 'escapes formalism' having 'no set form' (1982: 174). In one sense, Féral's characterisation of performance mirrors Fried's claim that 'what lies between the arts is theatre' - a site at which auratic presence starts to disintegrate - yet Féral is quick to distinguish performance from theatre. Féral's characterisation of 'performance' sounds remarkably Grotowskian in its affirmation of the transcendent actor; the performer, instead of standing in for a character, becomes 'the

point of passage for energy flows – gestural, vocal, libidinal, etc – that traverse him without ever standing still in a fixed meaning or representation’ (1982: 174). The performer as neutral conduit rather than an active agent of representation transcends the narrative, scenic and representational *background* of the theatre:

Performance rejects all illusion, in particular theatrical illusion...there is neither past nor future, but only a continuous present – that of the immediacy of things, of an *action taking place* (1982: 171, 173).

For Féral, performance *is* theatre without the background: ‘performance gives us a kind of theatricality in slow motion...giving the audience a glimpse of its inside, its reverse, its hidden face’ (1982: 176). If one can imagine ‘theatre’ as a tapestry depicting a representational scene or narrative, then ‘performance’ would be that tapestry turned back to front; we no longer see the narrative but the very materiality of the interweaving stitching. Just as we see the tapestry for what it ‘really is’ - not a story with characters, but ‘real’ stitching, real fabric - so too does performance expose the ‘under-side’ of theatre so that we can all see it for what it ‘is’:

As long as performance rejects narrativity and representation in this way, it also rejects the symbolic organisation dominating theatre and exposes the conditions of theatricality *as they are* (emphasis added) (1982: 177).

In like fashion, Chantal Pontbriand in her essay ‘The eye finds no fixed point on which to rest...’ (also translated in *Modern Drama* 1982), also sets out a conception of performance in direct opposition to theatre, arguing for a distinction on the basis of ‘presence’. Pontbriand begins by examining Fried’s distinction between art and theatricality, and takes this as the basis for a distinction between performance and theatre. Making the point that Fried, in his

criticism of ‘theatricality’, fails to consider the ‘distinction between theatre and performance’, Pontbriand attempts to demonstrate that theatricality is also the enemy of performance. Using a distinction which reminds us of Schechner and Wiles, Pontbriand suggests that ‘With performance [as opposed to other arts, *especially* theatre], it is actuality which is all-important, therefore situation, presentation’ (Pontbriand 1982: 156).⁶ Like Josette Féral, Pontbriand identifies performance as a phenomenon existing between traditional art categories in which ‘spectator/stage/spectacle’ is ‘seen as process’ (1982: 154). Performance is not dominated by semiosis and representation as the theatre supposedly is; rather than the stage being a mere vehicle for the *representation* of something necessarily *absent*, performance has an ‘obvious presence... a here/now which has no other referent except itself’ (1982: 157).

Pontbriand’s ‘obvious presence’ may not sound much like Fried’s call for autonomous ‘presentness’ in art: indeed ‘obvious presence’ sounds much like the ‘literal’ presence that Fried associated with minimalism. Pontbriand’s further characterisation of performance - ‘Performance is circumstantial, taking into account the performer, the situation... and the public’ (1982: 158) - seems to list the very things to which Fried alluded to as objectionable ‘perverse’ and ‘theatrical’. However, it is curious to note that the terminology which Pontbriand employs in valorising ‘performance’ over ‘theatre’, is strikingly similar to that used by Fried in his discrimination between ‘art’ and ‘theatricality’:

Presence is temporality, and *essentially* what interests us in contemporary art is this criterion of temporality, this coming into being: *the characteristic presence of performance could be called presentness* – that is to say performance unfolds *essentially* in present time (1982: 155, italics added).

⁶ Richard Schechner discusses avant-garde art in terms of the ‘actual’: ‘The avant-garde from the Italian Futurists through the Dadaists, surrealists and on to practitioners of earth art and happenings introduces us to the idea that art is not a way of imitating reality or expressing states of mind. At the heart of what Kaprow calls a mystery is the simple but altogether upsetting idea of art as an event – an “actual”’ (Schechner 1988: 36).

Philip Auslander, in a retrospective article on the influence of Fried's characterisation of theatricality on critical discourse in the visual arts, notes this peculiarity in both Féral and Pontbriand:

Like Greenberg and Fried, Féral and Pontbriand are concerned to locate the essential characteristics of a medium (in their case, performance) and to argue that its assertion of those characteristics in their pure form distinguishes it from, and places it in opposition to, other media (theatre in particular) (Auslander 1997: 55).

Although it should be acknowledged that Féral envisages a close relationship between performance and theatre, it seems nonetheless that both Féral and Pontbriand see a basic distinction between theatre and performance; theatre is action represented, whilst performance is action 'taking place'. There has been a tendency (also implicit in Michael Kirby's article on 'Nonsemiotic Performance') to envisage performance as a separate art category in its own right on the basis of its 'presentness', much as Fried had done in relation to modernist painting. Like Fried, who tries to establish the 'essential' characteristics of modernist art in relation to its supposed 'presentness' in opposition to 'theatricality', Pontbriand establishes what is 'essentially' performance on the basis of how it differs from theatre – through its 'presentness'. This time round the meaning of 'presentness' has shifted from Fried's sense of the artwork existing outside the 'present time' of the spectator, to Pontbriand's sense of performance existing *only* in the spectator's 'present time'.⁷

However, one could also say that the work of many performance artists involves both deliberate pretence, and the will to represent. Even for body artist Vito Acconci, whose work

⁷ More recently, Mike Pearson, in the recent book *Theatre/Archaeology* (Pearson and Shank 2001), appears to follow the schematic differentiation between performance and theatre that theorists such as Féral and Pontbriand had first articulated. Whereas theatre is subjected to conventions and concerns itself with 'the exposition of dramatic literature', performance is 'part of a much larger picture that continues beyond the frame of the proscenium'. Theatre is formally separated from the world of its audience, whilst performance positions itself in that very world, where it can 'substitute rhetoric and soliloquy for dialogue, declamation for discursive reason' (2001: 109).

was cited by Josette Féral as ‘escaping all illusion and representation’, a simple distinction between his overt and immediate physical presence and that of a stage performer playing a role is at best problematic. In his most notorious work *Seedbed* (1972), performed at the Sonnabend Gallery, New York, Acconci (allegedly) masturbated under a ramp built onto the gallery floor over which the visitors walked, while speaking to them via microphone. While Acconci’s physical presence in the gallery space and the manipulation of his body was key to constructing a particular relationship between viewer and performer in the gallery space, Acconci himself remained conspicuous by his very invisibility. The simple fact of Acconci’s ‘presence’ before an audience was therefore brought into question, the purpose built ramp and his voice projecting through a speaker *represented* Acconci’s presence to the viewer, just as the viewer’s footsteps represented individuals for Acconci to conjure within his onanistic fantasy. For Amelia Jones, Acconci was far from ‘escaping all illusion and representation’, but was actively engaged in representing ‘the solipsistic narcissism at the root of masculinity’s privileged relation to power...and particularly to the power of seduction he can wield as an artist, over a gallery audience’ (Jones 1998: 137). If there was more than a hint of theatricality about *Seedbed*, then Acconci’s *Trappings* (1971), in which he was filmed crouching naked inside a closet within a German industrial warehouse, surrounded by toys and fabrics, talking to his penis and dressing it up in doll’s clothes, is perhaps even more blatantly ‘showy’. Far from escaping theatrical illusion and presenting his body directly to the viewer, Acconci displays a body which is always already theatricalised. *Seedbed*, like *Trappings*, raises further questions about the notion of pretence. Ostensibly, Acconci’s performance involved a direct - rather than feigned - manipulation of his body, but whether Acconci was *actually* masturbating (over a very long period of time) as opposed to representing or pretending to, is perhaps a question which only the artist could answer.

Theatre as Performance

In the second edition of *Performance: a critical introduction* (2004), Marvin Carlson has drawn attention to the limitations of the performance/theatre binary.⁸ Carlson argues for an expanded notion of theatrical performance ‘whether it takes the form of “traditional” theatre or of performance art’ (Carlson 2004: 214). Theatrical performance, Carlson suggests, can be seen in the following terms:

It is a specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, almost invariably clearly separated from the rest of life, presented by performers and attended by audiences, both of whom regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in - emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically (2004: 216).

If we relinquish the idea that ‘performance’ as opposed to ‘theatre’ is the privileged repository of presence, it may be possible to conceive of performance as a kind of theatre; both theatre and performance share an overall concern for investigating what it means to be ‘present’. As I have argued in the opening chapter, performed drama, much of which may be seen as the most conventional instances of theatre, can also evince a deep concern for the complexities of theatre as a site where the real and the unreal destabilise the present moment. Indeed, an expanded notion of the ‘theatrical’, in which an audience ‘interpret’ and ‘reflect upon’ that which is ‘presented by performers’, may be useful for critiquing the limits of performance as an art which can never ‘fully’ inhabit the present moment. While terms associated with theatre and theatricality (such as ‘show’, ‘pretence’, ‘acting’ etc) have often been employed to deride

⁸ As Stephen J Bottoms notes (*Theatre Topics* 2003), distinctions between performance and theatre have become a ‘self-fulfilling logic’ whose underlying assumptions are rarely challenged: ‘Such are the citational habits of the theatre/performance dichotomy [...] the definition of theatre has been narrowed down to encompass only its most traditional and conservative manifestations, whereas anything more challenging, taking place beyond the confines of conventional theatre spaces, is now labelled “performance”’ (Bottoms 2003: 182).

or demean, these terms have within them the potential to open up questions in relation to presence.

A performer therefore - even in eschewing 'narrativity' by refusing to dress up as someone else and enact a story - does not succeed in becoming unproblematically 'present' as a result. As the semiotic analysis of theatre shows, stage 'action' is always mediated by a pre-existent network of signs which constitute a given cultural space. Even when a performer is not situated in a traditionally designated 'theatre' space, or making any conscious attempt to represent a character, his or her presence before an audience will not simply be 'literal', direct and unmediated. Italian semiotician Umberto Eco demonstrates this in a seminal article, 'Semiotics of Theatrical Performance'. Taking up a suggestion by C. S. Peirce, Eco proposes to explore what happens when 'a drunk' is selected from the street and exposed in a public place by the Salvation Army in order to advertise the advantages of temperance. The drunken man, when put on display, represents for Eco the basis of theatrical signification:

As soon as he has been put on the platform and shown to the audience, the drunken man has lost his original nature as "real" body among other real bodies. He is no more a world object among world objects – he has become a semiotic device; he is now a *sign*. A sign, according to Peirce, is something that stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity – a physical presence referring back to something absent. What is our drunken man referring back to? To a drunken man. But not to *the* drunk who he is, but to *a* drunk. The present drunk – insofar as he is the member of a class – is referring us back to the class of which he is a member. He *stands for* the category he belongs to. There is no difference in principle, between our intoxicated character, and the word "drunk" (Eco 1976: 110).

The drunken man may not be intentionally 'acting' - indeed his 'performance' could almost count as a 'happening' in Kaprow's sense - the platform 'frames' him in such a way that he becomes a 'sign' above his obvious 'physical presence'. The drunken man may have no script, he may not be telling a story or representing a character or trying to conjure up any

'illusion' in the traditions of conventional 'theatre', yet he is far from being *merely* 'immediately present'. Eco's drunken man is 'a physical presence referring back to something absent', he becomes a representation of a social type. To extend Eco's discussion one might suggest that even without the frame of the Salvation Army platform, a drunk on the street is liable to be 'read' by a passer by in terms of a predefined social type or stereotype, such as 'larger lout'. In other words, the 'literally present' becomes absorbed into the 'fictional mode' of presence: being-present is itself *made*-present.

The converse may also be true. Inevitably, actors onstage, even when playing characters in a fictional world, will actually *do* lots of things which are not (merely) pretended. Indeed, in terms of the actor's *activities* onstage - even within 'conventionally' scripted drama - many of the actions that an actor may represent are actions which are also carried out. As David Saltz notes in his article 'How to Do Things on Stage':

Actors commit real actions, and often those actions can be just the actions they seem to be committing. When the character raises an arm, the actor really raises an arm; and when the character, in raising that arm, is reaching for a glass, the actor really reaches for a glass. Occasionally, an actor may really commit an action only under some of its descriptions. But only in the case of actions inappropriate or impractical on stage, such as murdering, must the actor resort to committing an action that is radically different from the character's (Saltz 1991: 33).

The distinctions between 'acting' (pretending/representing) and 'non-acting' (performing real 'present' actions) are ambiguous, even on a stage which is clearly designated as a fictionalised space. Even when actors represent by making-present fictional propositions, it is likely that they will do so by committing 'real [non-fictional] actions', which will draw attention to their being-present. The claim that performance presents while theatre represents thus becomes untenable. It may be more profitable, as Carlson suggests, to investigate the ways in which

theatrical performance ‘reflects on’ what is ‘presented by performers’ - *and* how the ‘presented’ is signified within the representational frame of the performance.

To briefly reflect on theatre’s potential to complicate this distinction, I will look at scenes from two Sam Shepard plays. In plays like *True West* (1980), and *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), Sam Shepard demonstrates that the ‘literally present’ can be staged within a representational frame. In *True West*, after his masculinity is challenged by his brother Lee (‘You couldn’t steal a toaster without losin’ yer lunch’), Austin decides to prove himself by stealing a ‘bunch of toasters’ which he lines up on the kitchen sink. Whilst Lee smashes a typewriter with a golf-club, Austin drops slices of bread into all the toasters, after which much depends on carefully timed dialogue so that toast starts popping after the line ‘Toast is almost ready’ (Shepard 1981: 47). However, while the smashing of a typewriter and toasting of bread are ‘real’ as opposed to ‘pretended’ occurrences, *True West* above all reveals the impossibility of distinguishing between that which is real (‘true’ or authentic), from that which is feigned or represented. The smell of ‘real’ toast filling the auditorium is particularly striking in a play that explores different constructions of reality, truth and identity; reality and fiction merge magnificently in a scene where an abundance of properly functioning toasters are seen alongside two actors feigning drunkenness. This clash of ‘real’ and the ‘artificial’ is even more explicit in Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977). The play, which depicts the break up of an American farming family whose home is invaded by speculators, contains a setting whose elements are deliberately designed to create a jarring perceptual effect. The set contains no doors or windows, with only a suspended pair of red curtains to indicate the kitchen boundaries on either side of the stage. However, within this schematised and deliberately incomplete setting, Stephen J. Bottoms notes that the stage is ‘crammed with the minutiae of actual domestic activity’:

There is, for example, a working stove on which real food is cooked on sizzling fat, producing real sounds and smells... Still more bluntly real is the extended presence onstage of a live lamb: this is the play's most extreme gesture, since the lamb inevitably behaves so "naturally" that the artifice of the human actors' scripted behaviour becomes inescapably obvious (Bottoms 1988: 168).

Shepard presents us with a dense theatrical patchwork in which objects of attention are real and artificial, sparse and overabundant, immediately there and imaginatively evoked. There is an underlying dynamic at play whereby the live lamb and the smell of actual food highlights the merely pretended status of the characters; yet the animal and the food preparation stands out as being within a fictionalised setting. The live animal and the cooking of food seem to point immediately to the theatrical context of signification, whilst the schematic positioning of the red curtains points towards a fictional universe 'other' than the immediate space-time cohabited by actors and audience. At one point, Shepard even has the character Wesley urinate on the stage, but perhaps even more significantly, it is specified that Wesley must be *facing* the audience at the time. Thus, either the actor must urinate 'for real' - an actorly feat which would perhaps approach the kind of visceral spontaneity for which Ryszard Cieslak was renowned - *or*, the act must appear as the patently 'fake' operation of plastic prosthesis being squeezed by the actor. Shepard plays with fictional and literal modes of presence here; either a 'real' action becomes remarkable within the context of a fiction, or a represented action is 'really' the doing of something else.

From a spectator's perspective, one wants to 'smoothen out' all these obtrusive sights, sounds and smells into a congruent representation of activities within a Californian family home. However, it is difficult to overcome the theatrically incongruous actualities of the (literally present) lamb, of the cooking, or the pretence - or otherwise - of urinating. In the case of the latter, however incongruous or 'shocking' it may appear onstage, the act of urination is

perhaps a recognisable, or even stereotypical, 'performance art' gesture. The employment of this gesture raises questions about the incorporation of the supposedly non-representational basis of performance art within a theatrical context. Indeed, Shepard, who was aware of the development of performance art in the 1970s, commented: 'I think the future promises the migration of playwrights into the territory which performance artists have begun to open up' (cited in Bottoms 1988: 186). In the context of *Curse of the Starving Class*, Shepard appears to take performance art's particular concern (at that historical juncture) with exhibiting the body's visceral reality, using this as a 'text' within his play. By (literally) playing with the 'actual', and representing even the most directly physical gesture as 'staged', Shepard demonstrates that different kinds of presence in theatre cannot easily be separated; one mode is always liable to invade or destabilise another.

Conclusion: The Idea of Presence

There have been broadly two strands of presence in this discussion; one associated with the auratic presence that Fried valued in modernist art, the other a literal presence associated with emerging art practices which have come to be known as 'postmodern'. However, even the postmodern aesthetic that has become associated with 'performance' or 'performance art' retains an affinity with high modernism in certain theoretical contexts through a desire for presence or 'presentness'. As Henry Sayre points out:

There are [...] two separate poetics of the present - a largely modernist one which sees in the "present", in the immediacy of experience, something like an authentic "wholeness", a sense of unity and completion that is the "end" of art, and another, postmodern one which defines the present as perpetually present and invariably in media res, as part of an ongoing process, inevitably fragmentary, incomplete and multiplicitous. This would seem to be a straightforward enough situation, except that

for so many the recognition of the latter in no way mitigates their nostalgia for the former. It is as if, having lost formalism, we necessarily long for its return, as if, having lost the present - or rather, the *fullness of presence* - we are somehow embarrassed to admit it (Sayre 1992: 175).

While presence in the sense of 'authentic wholeness' relates to the 'auratic mode' of presence examined in the previous chapter, Sayre's 'fragmentary', 'multiplicitous' presence comes closer to the 'literal mode'. Both the auratic and the literal modes of presence evince a 'nostalgia' for the 'immediacy' and 'unity' which has led to a derisive attitude towards 'theatre' - an art form apparently too fragmented and complex to embody the 'fullness of presence'. However, as American director and theorist Herbert Blau has pointed out, the notion that 'performance' can somehow escape theatrical signification and stand alone as simply 'present' before the spectator is illusory. As Blau succinctly puts it, theatre is the point at which presence is both constructed and subverted:

There is nothing more illusory in performance than the illusion of the unmediated. It is a very powerful illusion in the theatre, but it *is* theatre, and it is *theatre*, the truth of illusion which haunts *all* performance, whether or not it occurs in a theatre (Blau 1987: 164-5).

Performance can not manage to extricate itself fully from the theatrical frame - that is - from representation, even if a performance does not take place 'in a theatre'. Presence, as Blau affirms, is an 'illusion' or an idea, albeit a very 'powerful' one. Presence 'haunts' theatre, for it is an art form which has oft been associated with notions of presence; at the same time it is *theatre* and notions of theatricality that threaten to expose the 'illusion of the unmediated'.

While notions of 'literal presence' in performance should be distinguished from that theorised by Grotowski, in which the actors sought to capture a kind of transcendental presence that could encapsulate the actor-spectator relation as a moment of essential human communion,

both varieties of presence suffer the same metaphysical blues. Far from 'demystifying' theatre, ideologies of performance art as 'presence' simply reaffirm the illusion of ideal immediacy which haunt the writings of Artaud and Grotowski. Perhaps the idea of presence - of whatever kind - is itself a kind of fiction, an example of theatre's capacity to create the 'powerful illusion' of the 'unmediated'. Thus the auratic and literal modes of presence - envisaged as being beyond signification - actually overlap with the fictional mode of presence; theatre constructs and *re*-presents an idea of the present.

Consideration of the literal mode of presence brings us towards the central question taken up in the following chapter. Do we mean by literal presence that 'what you see is what you see' and so envision a pure simultaneity between perception and object-looked-at, or do we mean that the seen *is* 'literal', that is - literature, text, a sign? In which case 'what we see is not what we see', if everything seen, every 'presence', were, in Eco's words, already 'referring back to something absent'. If so, perhaps we should not talk of presence at all, unless we wish to suggest that presence is an 'illusion' and therefore 'absent'. Of course, French philosopher Jacques Derrida is never far away from contemporary discussions of presence, and in the next chapter I will examine how the whole notion of theatrical presence has come under scrutiny in the light of his poststructuralist strategies. But can there really be a theatre without presence?

Chapter 4

Deconstructing Presence

The opening lines of *Hamlet*, 'Who's there'? 'Nay answer me. Stand and unfold yourself' (I, i, 1-2), pose the question as to what *is* present. Francisco, Barnardo, Horatio and Marcellus debate as to whether 'this thing' that has 'appeared again tonight' is 'but our fantasy' or whether it is 'something more than fantasy' (I, i, 21, 24, 54). To discover the nature of this 'portentous figure', they attempt to arrest the ghost's passage through the night with the entreaty 'Stay, illusion' (I, i, 128). With the ghost apparently slipping through their fingers, Horatio and Marcellus try to pin down its whereabouts, perhaps simultaneously pointing in different directions as each utters in turn: 'Tis here'. 'Tis here' (I, i, 143-144). Just as this ghostly presence appears to have been located, a stage direction reads *Exit the Ghost*; the moment of its apprehension is the moment of its disappearance.

In this chapter I examine whether the different notions of presence in theatre are something to be valued and maintained ('stay illusion'), or if presence is rather a 'portentous figure' to avoid or escape from. Horatio and Marcellus try to prevent Hamlet from communing with the spirit: 'It waves you to a more removed ground. But do not go with it... What if it tempt you toward the flood... And draw you into madness' (I, iv, 61-62, 69, 74). Of course, had Hamlet not been tempted and drawn into madness by his father's ghost we would be left without a play - or at least, without *Hamlet* - but the question here is whether presence in theatre might be similarly seductive and at the same time potentially harmful. So intrinsically important to theatre does presence - whether 'fictional', 'auratic' or 'literal' - seem to be that perhaps if *we* refused to be seduced by theatrical presence, we would be left not only without a play, but

without theatre. However, a considerable amount has been written on the need to re-think presence in theatre, particularly since the ascension to prominence of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who has consistently questioned the meaning and value of 'presence' as a concept. If presence has become a problematic notion in recent years, then what are the consequences for an art form whose traditional cornerstone is the presence of actors, props and actions before an audience?

The poststructuralist accounts of presence in theatre that I examine here attempt to take on the whole notion of presence - often spelt with a capital 'P'. While this critique of presence is dominated by theorists rather than practitioners, its central ideas are based around an understanding of how theatre-makers, especially since the eighties, have sought to expose the stage as a site of representation and citation rather than 'Presence' and 'immediacy'. Part of the aim of this chapter will be to consider this critique (in which the term 'presence' is often employed somewhat reductively or equivocally) in relation to the modes of presence mapped out in the previous chapters.

Superficially, theatre, as an art form which has valued different notions of presence, might seem in want of reform in the light of Derrida's critiques. The title of Elinor Fuchs' article 'Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-thinking Theatre After Derrida' (1985) would appear to suggest as much. However, I will argue that the critiques of presence initiated by a number of contemporary theatre theorists have not fully engaged with important facets of Derrida's thought. While the previous chapters have attempted to portray presence in theatre as a complex and sometimes contradictory set of ideas, some poststructuralist theatre theorists have tended to look at (P)resence as a singular, monolithic entity. In doing so, much is missed in terms of how theatre, made of competing modes of presence ('presences' rather than

Presence) has the capacity to explore and 'play' with notions of presence.

By first tracing the roots of this discussion in the writings of Derrida, I examine the poststructuralist revision of theatrical presence, paying particular attention to how Derridean theory has been applied to a concrete theatrical context. While the critique of presence yields valuable insights into the construction of representation and authorial power - which much contemporary theatre seeks to expose - I suggest that this very disclosure of the mechanisms of 'fantasy', 'illusion' and actorly manifestation reveal theatre as a 'more removed ground' on which presence is explored rather than evaded. In the light of poststructuralism, presence in theatre is not something which can be unquestioningly embraced, but theatre is still a place of *show* where presence remains 'the very coinage' of an aesthetic exchange.

Presence as Phonocentrism

Jacques Derrida critiques a tradition of Western metaphysical thought, which is founded both on the assumption that language exists independently of a wider 'reality', and that stable linguistic structures are in place capable of presenting that 'reality' to us. Derrida identifies a 'myth of presence' within this tradition of intellectual inquiry, which is found not only in philosophical tracts, but also encompasses discourses surrounding the arts and sciences. As Derrida points out: 'It could be shown that all names related to all fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have always designated the constant of a present' (Derrida 1978: 279). To posit a 'principle' involves attempting to arrest the play of signification and make-present a 'meaning'. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida describes this fundamental principle as a 'metaphysics of presence' (Derrida 1974: 49); it is this principle - embedded in Western

culture - which his writings relentlessly seek to expose. Such 'principles' or 'fundamentals' might include notions such as 'truth', 'reality', the 'self', 'Being', 'essence', amongst others that have kept philosophers occupied over millennia. As Jonathan Culler explains in his primer on Derrida:

Among the familiar concepts that depend on the value of presence are: the immediacy of sensation, the presence of ultimate truths to a divine consciousness, the effective presence of an origin in a historical development, a spontaneous or unmediated intuition, the transumption of thesis and antithesis in a dialectical synthesis, the presence in speech of logical and grammatical structures, truth as what subsists behind appearances, and the effective presence of a goal in the steps that lead to it. The authority of presence, its power of valorization, structures all our thinking (Culler 1983: 93-4).

Presence is entrenched in our thought and experience, and this is especially well reflected in a common attitude to language. We may think of our words as a direct expression of our 'own' thoughts, but in fact every utterance is derived from its place within an entire network of signs and references.¹ Most everyday utterances and phrases are 'citational'; for example, a common phrase such as 'nice weather we're having' is not 'owned' by the speaker but drawn from a cultural pool of commonly understood and shared colloquialisms. Language appears to make objective realities present for us, but for Derrida, we mistakenly prioritise the importance of 'speech' over that of 'writing'. In particular, it is the notion of 'writing' which can finally expose the impossibility of self-presence. In much of his output, Derrida examines various instances of what he calls 'phonocentrism' running throughout western thought; the assumption that while speech is the direct articulation of the speaker's thoughts, writing is a derivative form of communication, always liable to misrepresent the 'truth' of the spoken

¹ Derrida argues that the philosophical commitment to truth and presence is contingent on the suppression of writing: 'writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath to speech and to the logos. And the problem of soul and body is no doubt derived from the problem of writing from which it seems – conversely - to borrow its metaphors' (Derrida 1974: 35).

meaning or intention.² Derrida overturns this phonocentric bias of speech over writing by pointing out that all speech is derived from an existent network of signs (writing), which is liable to complicate the presence of the spoken instant. The receiver hears not just the speaker's 'thoughts', but also a citation which is intertextually cross-referential. The 'meaning' of a spoken phrase such as 'nice weather we're having' may not give 'immediate' access to the speaker's mind or intentions. Far from being present in the spoken instant, the speaker's intentions may only be derived by the receiver according to a familiarity with the phrase and/or with the speaker's general disposition (does he 'want to talk' or is he just giving 'time of day'?). Like a written expression, the spoken phrase is repeatable in so many different contexts, with a network of potential nuances of meaning, that it is never really possible to attach a 'transcendental signified', or stable meaning to it. The speaker may not even know his *own* mind in uttering the phrase; such colloquialisms have a way of being spoken as much through reflex as through reflection. It is on the basis that 'writing' infects 'speech' via the latent possibility of citation and repetition, that makes a yearning for presence, truth and certainty forever unfulfilled.

It is particularly Derrida's attack on the priority of speech over writing and the exposure of 'phonocentrism' at the heart of western thinking that has precipitated attempts by theatre theorists to translate the 'myth of presence' into theatrical terms. Elinor Fuchs, in her 1985 article 'Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-thinking Theatre After Derrida', and then with her subsequent book *The Death of Character* (1996), suggests that traditional assumptions about theatre as an art form whose essence is 'presence' must be radically re-thought in the light of Derrida's writings. While Robert Edmond Jones had suggested that the

² As Christopher Norris explains, the notion of phonocentrism equates truth with speech rather than with writing: 'Voice becomes a metaphor for truth and authenticity, a source of self-present "living" speech as opposed to the secondary lifeless emanations of writing' (Norris 2002: 28).

essence of theatre revolves around a heightened awareness of 'the Now', Fuchs points out that such notions have become questionable 'after' Derrida:

Derrida challenged the assumption that it is within the power of human nature to enter a Now, to become entirely present to itself. To Derrida, there is no primordial or self-same present that is not already infiltrated by the trace - the opening of the "inside" of the moment to the "outside" of the interval (Fuchs 1996: 72).

Any experience of the 'Now' is always 'infiltrated' by the past (we read the present in relation to our past experiences and knowledge), and anticipates a future; no present moment is experienced entirely in and of itself. Fuchs' conception of presence in a theatrical context draws on Derrida's analysis of the relationship between speech and writing: 'In a motion that parallels Derrida's deconstruction of speech and writing, theatre practitioners have begun to expose the normally "occulted" textuality behind the phonocentric fabric of performance' (Fuchs 1985: 166). Fuchs' line of thought adopts Derrida to question the hidden textual authority behind the illusion of 'spontaneous' action. The phonocentric tradition of Western thought becomes the 'phonocentric fabric of performance' (1985: 166). There arises the question as to the extent to which presence in theatre - given its complexity and different 'varieties' - can be thought of in terms of one overarching philosophical concept. In other words, how does 'phonocentrism' apply to theatre, and just how much theatre does it apply to?

According to Fuchs, presence has a venerable lineage in western theatre: 'Since the Renaissance, Drama has traditionally been the form of writing that strives to create the illusion that it is composed of spontaneous speech' (1985: 163).³ While the historical

³ Fuchs' claim is a reversal of Artaud suggestion in his essay 'No More Masterpieces', that 'for four hundred years, that is since the Renaissance, we have become accustomed to purely descriptive, narrative theatre, narrating psychology' (Artaud 1970: 57). In Artaud's case however, it is the very *lack* of 'presence' implied by 'narrative theatre' that is being alluded to.

dimensions of this claim are not fully explained, Fuchs' understanding of presence as the 'illusion' of 'spontaneous speech' comes close to Elam's definition of 'Dramatic worlds' as "hypothetically actual" constructs, since they are "seen" in progress "here and now" without narratorial mediation' (Elam 1980: 110-11). Characters are *there* onstage, behaving spontaneously - at least hypothetically. Fuchs claims that this illusion of presence depends on the masking and effacement of the text or written script, thus facilitating the illusion that the actor is behaving and speaking 'spontaneously'. 'Writing', claims Fuchs, 'has traditionally retired behind the apparent presence of performance', creating the illusion of a 'living present'.

However, while Fuchs' initial claim relates specifically to drama, it is clear that she holds a much wider conception of presence in theatre. As Fuchs explains, 'theatrical Presence' contains 'two overlapping but still separable components...one relates to the dramatic narrative as embodied in the total *mise-en-scene*. Here the narrative becomes so present as to be happening *now*. The other has to do specifically with the circle of heightened awareness in the theatre flowing from actor to spectator and back that sustains the dramatic world' (1996: 70). In this useful definition, Fuchs alludes to two kinds of 'now' in the theatre, the now of the drama (the action of which, unlike the novel, is shown in the present rather than through narrative description), and the now of the actor-audience situation. It is a definition which overlaps both the making-present of a dramatic fiction (the fictional mode of presence) and the more mysterious 'circle of heightened awareness' which coincides with the auratic mode. Fuchs' intention thereafter is to show that presence - in both senses - has 'fallen into disfavour as a theatrical value', with an increasing concern for 'an aesthetics of Absence rather than of Presence' (1985: 165).

Jonathan Culler suggests that ‘the metaphysics of presence is pervasive, familiar, and powerful’ (1983: 94). It is the power and pervasiveness of presence, and an often unquestioned assumption of its value and goodness, that theatre critics, have tried to highlight and question.⁴ Perhaps the clearest account of the link between presence and authority in theatre comes from Derrida’s own explorations of Antonin Artaud. Although I intend to explore Derrida’s critique of presence in more detail later on, it will first be useful to outline how Derrida’s notion of the ‘theological stage’ has been taken on by theatre theorists. In ‘The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation’ (1967), Derrida rewrites in his own terms Artaud’s characterisation of traditional text based theatre, whereby the playwright creates and defines reality:

The stage is theological for as long as it is dominated by speech, by a will to speech, by the layout of a primary logos which does not belong to the theatrical site and governs it from a distance. The stage is theological for as long as its structure, following the entirety of tradition, comports the following elements: an author-creator who, absent and from afar, is armed with a text and keeps watch over, assembles, regulates the time or the meaning of representation, letting this latter *represent* him as concerns what is called the content of his thoughts, his intentions, his ideas. He lets representation represent him through representatives, directors or actors, enslaved interpreters who represent characters who, primarily through what they say, more or less directly represent the thought of the “creator” (Derrida 1978: 235).

Keir Elam’s definition of drama as ‘an *I* addressing a *you here and now*’ (Elam 1980: 139), is a good example of an affirmation of presence which asks to be read with a certain Derridean scepticism. Presence is secured through an appeal to direct speech; the ‘*I*’ addressing the ‘*you*’; a direct one-to-one relationship. However this formulation ignores the fact the ‘*I*’ may be an actor portraying a character (‘enslaved’ by an author), whose presence before an audience (‘*here and now*’) is complicated by the fact that the actor - playing Hamlet - is representing a character necessarily *not* ‘here’. This account of traditional text-based theatre

⁴ The mode of presence which is most ‘powerful’ is the auratic, which, as I argued in the last chapter, is always liable to displace the literally *being-there* as a value.

clearly points towards a hierarchical structure of authority. The 'author-creator' - specifically the playwright - 'regulates the time or the meaning of representation' from 'afar', whilst the 'directors or actors' are 'enslaved interpreters' who are merely there to 'represent the thought of the "creator"'. The traditional notion of theatrical presence - that the dramatic action seems to be happening '*there*' onstage - is an artificial construct by which the author-playwright uses the stage as a vehicle for representing his/her thoughts. The 'theological stage', as Derrida explains, rests on phonocentric foundations whereby it is the 'phonetic text, speech, transmitted discourse - eventually transmitted by the prompter whose hole is the hidden but indispensable centre of representative structure - which ensures the movement of representation' (1978: 235-36). While Derrida's critique of Artaud, as I shall show later on, does not limit an analysis of presence to 'phonocentrism', we find Derrida, once again speaking (or writing?) on behalf of Artaud, pointing out that traditional text based theatre doesn't tell the truth about what it is doing. The 'centre' of the 'representative structure' - the prompter holding the written text or script - is hidden from the audience, allowing the actors' *speech* to sound spontaneous and present when it is - in fact - scripted and *written*.

As Michael Vanden Heuvel argues in *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance* (1991), the theological stage is one which is defined in terms of 'Presence' and maintains 'mastery' over its audience:

And in virtually all applications of textuality – literary and cognitive – the seminal desire is mastery, or what I define in theatrical terms as Presence...Such a desire is expressed in theatre through the medium of the theological stage, from which in Western culture the author projects his or her illusion of control, Presence, and potency over meaning and interpretation (Vanden Heuvel 1991: 4).

Notions of presence, from a poststructuralist point of view, are inextricably tied to questions of ideology and power. In an observation which strongly echoes Derrida, Fuchs and Vanden Heuvel, Philip Auslander suggests that ‘The ideological effectiveness of presence [...] requires that the authority of the text be conferred on the actor; the authorizing text itself must disappear behind the performance’ (Auslander 1997: 66). The actor must appear to be speaking spontaneously to produce the illusion that he or she is articulating the thoughts and ‘vision’ of the author/playwright, whose assumptions about the world may be presented as ‘natural’ or truthful rather than ideologically constructed.

It might appear from this collective concern with the authority of the playwright that ‘Presence’ in this context equates mainly to the fictional mode: the *making-present* of characters and worlds to the audience. However, the primary target of this critique does not lie with traditional ‘text-based’ theatre. As we shall see, it is the auratic mode of presence that is of greatest concern to poststructuralist theatre critics.⁵ Most of these critics agree that theatrical work based around an Artaudian/Grotowskian projection, particularly in the 1960s, involved a radical attempt to realise theatre’s potential to explore ‘presence’. Although Fuchs’ analysis of presence in theatre takes a very broad historical focus, her critique of presence concentrates on the ‘late sixties and early seventies’, a period in which ‘both practitioners and theorists became passionate advocates of Presence’ (Fuchs 1985: 163-4). Like Fuchs, Philip Auslander’s understanding of presence relates very much to the actor’s ‘manifestation’ before an audience, either as the spoken source of a dramatic text or as an immediate physical presence. For Auslander:

⁵ While the literal mode of presence could be deconstructed (as Derrida shows in his critique of Husserl’s theory of perception, *Speech and Phenomena*, 1973), for theatre critics being-present as a spectator has not been a major target. Auratic presence, as a more ‘authoritarian’ mode, has attracted greater attention.

The assumption behind much of the experimental theatre and performance of the 1960s... was that because the presence of the actor as one living human being before others is psychologically liberating, pure presentation of performer to audience is the best means available to the theatre to make a radical spiritual/political statement (1997: 62).

The 'Presence' advocated by some practitioners in this period, as I have suggested in Chapter Two, involved an attempt to overcome the fictional mode of presence in favour of the auratic. Both Artaud and Grotowski felt that theatre should be governed by its own immediate energies rather than the prescriptions of an absent playwright. Central to the concerns of a number of experimental theatre practitioners was the revelation of theatre as 'real', 'actual' and 'NOW' rather than pretended and pre-scripted action. By focussing on what he calls the 'persuasive power of presence' (1997: 62), Auslander (like Fuchs), seeks to deconstruct the authority of the stage, whether it is generated by the controlling playwright's invisible 'mastery', or channelled through the auratic immediacy of the actor's self. Indeed, Fuchs specifically proposes to deal with the "aura" of theatrical presence' as a 'theatrical value' (1996: 72), while Auslander defines presence around the closely related notion of 'charisma':

In theatrical parlance, *presence* usually refers to the relationship between actor and audience - the actor as manifestation before the audience - or more specifically to the actor's psychophysical attractiveness to the audience, a concept related to that of *charisma* (1997: 62, original italics).

Auslander's definition of presence, while more limited than Fuchs', is clearly related to the notion of aura. The actor *has* presence and 'charisma' through which he or she 'holds sway' or commands the attention of an audience. It is perhaps not uncommon for a charismatic actor to walk off the stage and triumphantly tell his colleagues 'I had that audience eating from the palm of my hand'. While the charisma of the actor may only be one way in which a theatrical performance can take on an aura (a famous play or theatrical ensemble can generate a sense of

aura even if the actors themselves are not especially charismatic), Auslander specifically locates charisma within a political context. Auslander points to a 'suspicion' of presence which derives, not so much from the writings of Derrida, but from 'the apparent collusion between political structures of authority and the persuasive power of presence' (1997: 62).

For Auslander, experimental theatre's valorisation of presence in the sixties and early seventies displayed a lack of awareness of the relationship between presence and structures of authority. Presence, he argues, 'is the specific problematic theatre theorists and practitioners must confront in re-examining our assumptions about political theatre and its function' (1997: 58). As Auslander suggests, the fact that presence and charisma are associated with politicians such as Nixon and Hitler must lead to a suspicion that to 'invoke the power of presence is to link oneself inextricably with the workings of a repressive status quo' (1997: 63).⁶ Thus in the political arena, presence, understood as charismatic projection, is manipulated in order to influence and construct public opinion. Auslander's analysis of actorly charisma would suggest certain links to Fuchs' critique of 'phonocentrism' in theatre; the values and perceptions of the author may appear persuasive and forceful when projected through the presence of a charismatic actor (or politician). Auslander argues that some American experimental theatre groups like the Living Theatre in the 1960's, while reacting against 'authoritarian social systems' (1997: 62), nonetheless maintained a commitment to actorly presence and charisma and thereby succeeded merely in constructing 'the new ideology on the cornerstone of the old' (1997: 63). As Auslander maintains, theatre-makers have had to recognise that to challenge 'repressive power structures', it has become necessary to recognise presence as 'the matrix of power' in theatre. Instead of reinforcing the traditional authority of

⁶ Despite Auslander's reservations about the 'power of presence' one could argue that charisma can also be an effective tool for those who are *anti* the status quo; the impressive self-projection of Martin Luther King may serve as a case in point.

the actor as bearer of a text or 'message', postmodern political theatre should seek to 'expose the collusion of presence with authority' and undermine charismatic projection.

Both Philip Auslander and Fuchs see presence as a fundamental problem for contemporary theatre, and suggest that the deconstruction of presence is vital for theatre's continuing viability as an art form with the capacity to subvert and challenge prevalent ideologies. The aura of the stage must be undermined if theatrical representation is to be demystified. This demystification of representation in theatre bears certain affinities with Brecht's misgivings over bourgeois drama. For Brecht, traditional theatre's way of implicating the spectator within a *present* dramatic situation did not allow sufficient room for critical contemplation:

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too - Just like me - It's only natural - It'll never change - The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable - That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world - I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh (Brecht 1964: 71).

Brecht recognised that the spectator can be manipulated by the immediate flow of fictional events; the construction of drama as an immediate 'here and now' was deemed problematic. Brecht's solution to distance the actors from their roles however, served to *reinforce* the presence of the actor who became the instrument of Brecht's own views about the 'reality' of social injustices. As Timothy Wiles notes, the Brechtian actor takes on a role of authority in performance:

Brecht's actor - by *playing* the Brechtian actor who is also creating a character - speaks from beyond the understanding of the audience...the performer feigns to inhabit a position of knowledge that is superior to that of the audience (Wiles 1980: 80, 82).

While Brecht challenged the idea of a fictional 'Now', he reinforced the theological aura of the stage as a place where 'truth' and 'reality' can be revealed. As Auslander points out, even though the Brechtian actor would to some extent distance herself from the character, this very distancing would: 'depend on a traditional notion of presence to the extent that the actor's persona as commentator on the character must be invested with the authority of presence' (1997: 63-4). Auslander's suggestion however, is that only by deconstructing presence *as such* can theatre-makers avoid insidiously promoting the (presumably prejudiced) assumptions of an author-creator.

Deconstructing Presence

For both Fuchs and Auslander, who mainly address theatre in a nineteen eighties context, playwrights and theatre practitioners have been increasingly inclined to examine problems posed by presence. To explore the possibility of theatre undermining the traditional authority of actorly presence, Auslander takes a particular interest in the Wooster Group whose work in the mid-eighties reflected a desire to explore the ideological underpinnings of their 'presence' before an audience. Auslander reads the Wooster Group's 1984 performance of *LSD (...Just the High Points...)*, as a deconstruction of presence, and as such it represents a 'preliminary step towards a political postmodern theatre' (1997: 70). In its appropriation of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, *LSD* sets out to expose and undermine the play's 'dominant cultural codes' (1997: 64).⁷

⁷ In fact, following an injunction, Miller's text was soon replaced by exerts from Michael Kirby's play *The Hearing* which transplanted *The Crucible* into 1950's America. 'Accidental' references to characters in *The Crucible* were silenced by a buzzer (Savran 1986: 193).

Auslander contends that the Wooster Group found ways to subvert the authority of Miller's canonical text, and exposed in particular what Auslander describes as 'the perhaps not so subtle sexism in Miller's play' (1997: 65). In Part II ('Salem') of the production, the Wooster Group employed a number of unconventional techniques in order to subvert the presence of the actor. For a start, the 'authorizing text' - or script - far from disappearing 'behind the performance', remained 'stubbornly, physically present, its pages cluttering the set' (1997: 66). Characters were presented in sharply contrasting styles: the men wore contemporary dress while the women wore period costume; the men spoke through microphones, the women did not; Ron Vawter delivered the lines of Proctor at almost unintelligible speed, whilst Kate Valk's caricatured portrayal of Tituba in 'blackface', seemed to be 'in character'. Neither the actors (because they were sometimes 'reading' from script), nor the 'original' text itself (since this very 'reading' constituted an ironic subversion) could claim Presence and authority; the Wooster Group affirmed their 'dependence on the text, [while] radically problematizing their relationship to it' (1997: 66).

These performance techniques facilitated the Wooster Group's 'deconstruction of theatrical presence' as performers chose to 'eschew charismatic projection, [...] thus discourag[ing] the spectator from endowing either representation or representor with authority' (1997: 66). The audience's attention was drawn away from 'presence' and instead towards the process of representation brought about through the tensions between text and acting. Theatrical presence, thus understood as 'charismatic projection', was 'nullified' as the audience confronted the 'process of representation itself and its collusion with authority' (1997: 66). Vanden Heuvel largely agrees with Auslander's analysis of *LSD*. Of the Wooster Group's performance of *LSD* Vanden Heuvel writes:

The Group has no determinate or authoritative text - only an improvised intertext built from the fragments of its performed "readings" - there is no Presence of the actor... This in turn allows the audience instead to focus on the process of representation itself and its collusions and collisions with authority (1991: 150).

However, the claim that in *LSD* there was 'no Presence of the actor' strikes a curious chord in the context of a theatrical performance. It is unclear for instance, how charisma *per se*, which Auslander had defined in terms of an actor's 'psychophysical attractiveness to the audience', was in any way challenged or subverted by the Wooster Group's unconventional staging choices. Baz Kershaw, in response to Auslander's reading of *LSD*, notes that 'the attempt to dispel "presence" from the performance seems curiously eccentric given that it is possibly the most powerful of all the theatre's attributes' (Kershaw 1996: 143). Kershaw points out that in the *context* of a performance by the Wooster Group, attended perhaps by 'a specialist crowd of aficionados', the aura of luminaries such as Willem Dafoe and Ron Vawter (of Hollywood and televisual fame), will be reinforced at every turn. Irrespective of whether Dafoe or Vawter are playing characters in the traditional sense, or are playing themselves not playing characters in the traditional sense, their fame and 'charisma' precedes them. Indeed, Vawter's 'breakneck speed' delivery of text from *The Crucible* can itself be regarded as a wonderful piece of virtuoso charismatic acting. It is worth noting however, that the performance to which Baz Kershaw alludes took place in Glasgow in 1990, some five years after the show was first seen. Not only had the Wooster Group itself yet to achieve its widespread notoriety in the mid-eighties, neither Dafoe nor Vawter had acquired the film/televisual reputations for which they were recognised by 1990. Thus the 'aura' that Kershaw describes in relation to the Wooster Group and the individual performers had been acquired over a period of time during which both the ensemble's techniques, and their individual 'stars', had become widely known.

A potential weakness in Auslander's argument is that it seems to conflate the auratic mode of presence with the fictional mode. In demystifying the process of representation, the Wooster Group clearly problematise the 'illusion of spontaneity'. However, this is perhaps a separate issue from the 'charisma', or otherwise, of the actors involved, let alone the aura which such a famed ensemble can project to its audience. As I have suggested in Chapter Two, aura is created by the context surrounding a performance event as well as the craft and skill of the actors involved, a feature for which the Wooster Group has become renowned. In other words, far from addressing 'the whole notion of presence' in theatre, Auslander's deconstructive reading deals with only one facet of the auratic mode in his analysis of charisma. Aura is generated not only through the charisma of the actor, but also through factors such as the notoriety of the playwright, or director, or - especially relevant in the case - the theatre company. This is not to say that *LSD* did not function in many of the ways that Auslander describes in terms of exposing the processes of representation, but one might plausibly argue that they did so by exploring the notion of presence in theatre rather than by 'nullifying' it. As David Savran observes, the production involved the collision of three periods, showing '*The Crucible's* status in *L.S.D.* as a reading, in the mid-eighties, of a nineteen-fifties drama set in the seventeenth century' (Savran 1988: 175). If anything, the Wooster Group affirm the stage's capacity to *present* simultaneously a set of juxtaposed timeframes which itself required a high degree of skill and virtuosity on the part of the performers. Presence was being put into play rather than into touch.

For Fuchs, the late sixties and seventies may have been the high-watermark in terms of experimental theatre's worship of presence, but, as she suggests, this 'idealisation of Presence in the theatre and theory of the sixties and seventies was almost a rearguard action. Beginning in the early seventies a new generation of theatre artists was challenging the absolute value of

“The Presence of the Actor” (1985: 164). Fuchs draws attention to more recent examples of theatre in which phonocentrism is overturned when textuality is highlighted: writing becomes ‘present’ and the illusion of ‘spontaneous’ speech is subverted.

Fuchs argues that this traditional form of theatrical presence - based on the illusion of ‘spontaneity’ - may be overcome through staging the ‘quote’. Staging the quote would expose the fact that all theatrical speech, characterisation and gesture, has always already been written (or rehearsed), and can never be fully ‘present’ before an audience. The Wooster Group’s appropriation of *The Crucible* in which the actors were reading/reciting rather than ‘spontaneously’ speaking would certainly fit into this conception. Fuchs finds other examples, such as Richard Nelson’s play *The Vienna Notes* (1979), in which the central action consists of the main character dictating his memoirs, before this very act undergoes a reversal: the act of writing itself becomes ‘present’. As Fuchs explains, ‘what sounds best in writing becomes the only criterion for what he does and feels’ (1985: 164), until, by the end of the play, he has invented an entire persona through the act of writing. Fuchs also discusses how the theme of ‘writing’ is presented in Len Jenkin’s *Dark Ride* (1981), a play whose characters struggle to translate an ancient Chinese parchment, itself containing fragments of texts which refer to yet more texts. As the Translator, a young woman, reads the book onstage, the characters she reads about appear before her, so the action of the play takes place *within* the text. As Fuchs explains of the play ‘the conventional distinction between performance and text is unsettled as the performance draws its textuality to our attention’ (1985: 168). The phonocentric underpinnings of theatrical presence (‘an *I* addressing a *you here and now*’) are counteracted as ‘writing’ is introduced ‘onstage as a separated theatrical element’ (1985: 171). Just as the Theatre of Presence was predicated on the suppression of text (writing), the Theatre of Absence - a postmodern, post-Derridean theatre - is *absorbed* in writing. In place of the

‘ontological theatre of the unlimited, stripped-bare, sacred Self’ (1996: 70), we have a ‘post-metaphysical theatre’ which is predicated on ‘interrupting the satisfactions of theatrical presence’ (1996: 71).⁸

While Fuchs’ argument tends to conflate different notions of presence - for example the fictional mode of presence is not clearly distinguished from the auratic mode - her analysis of presence is somewhat broader than Auslander’s focus on charisma. However, perhaps the most striking aspect of Fuchs’ analysis takes us back to the literal mode of presence. Fuchs goes on to argue that dramatists, practitioners and performance artists from Beckett to Richard Foreman, the Wooster Group, Stuart Sherman and Adrienne Kennedy have highlighted ‘the infiltration of what has traditionally been the banished “other” of dramatic performance – the written text itself’ (1996: 71). While on one level the suggestion is that ‘textuality’ is increasingly emphasised in contemporary theatre, yet this emphasis towards ‘the written text itself’, which Fuchs develops in terms of ‘the literalisation of the theatre’ (1996: 80), may well re-inscribe the metaphysical assumptions which she attempts to deconstruct.

In the last chapter, I examined Michael Fried’s problems with ‘literalist art’. Fried’s forthright defence of ‘presentness’ in modernist aesthetics was also an attack on artists’ increasing engagement with the contingent relationship between viewer and object: one is ‘literally’ present before the object or performer. While Fuchs in her advocacy for ‘literalisation’ (implying textuality and a free play of signification) is ostensibly very different from Fried’s

⁸ Although Roger Copeland finds Fuchs’ argument a ‘too abstract to be convincing’ (Copeland 1990: 29) and reminds us that ‘even the most conversational readings of Shakespeare don’t in any way deny the ‘literariness’ of the iambic pentameter’, Fuchs takes ‘spontaneous speech’ as a *metaphor* for the more pervasive phonocentrism implicit in the idea of theatrical experience: even with iambic pentameter we can - with Coleridge - ‘suspend our disbelief’.

critique of the 'literal', I hope to show that there is more in common between these concepts than a coincidence of appellation.

Fuchs refers to the work of director Stuart Sherman, who staged a 'literal' version of *Hamlet*, in which 'five actors carried about copies of Shakespeare's text while performing various gestures (including sitting and reading the play), against a stage décor covered with pages from the play, cut and pasted into dagger-like patterns'. Referring to another of Sherman's pieces, *Stuart Sherman's Chekhov*, Fuchs describes how:

a group of white-clad performers commanded less interest than the grove of cut-out cherry trees that were the piece's central feature. These were constructed from large pages of Chekhov's play texts and clearly readable by the audience. In a wonderfully Derridean *coup de theatre*, these toppled and fell at the end of the piece (1996: 80).

Not only are such strategies of staging aimed at disrupting the traditional aura of theatrical presence, they - in Fuchs terms - 'perform "literally"', because Sherman, (amongst other examples), 'brings the text onstage "literally". The text has become an actor' (1996: 91). That which Fuchs had identified in her 1985 essay as the 'naked emergence of textuality' has now become the 'literal' emergence of the text within the signifying structure of the performance.

Fuchs' claim in reference to the Sherman production, that: 'The very literalness of these images...[is] presenting not characters writing, but *the very texts themselves*' (1996: 80, italics added), may be worth examining. The suggestion that 'the very texts themselves' can be 'present(ed)' is one that seems in danger of conflating the materiality of the text or written script with textuality per se. Furthermore, claims that 'Writing becomes "presentable"' (1996: 80) seems strangely reminiscent of a kind of a 'back to basics' approach for which poststructuralist critics tend to *reproach* those who valorise presence as an 'essential'

condition of theatricality. Surely a 'text' in its broadest sense, is that which - by definition - is absent, and *can never be* present. It is unclear how, for instance, 'the very text' of *Hamlet* 'itself' could be present because the actors on stage are holding and reading from a physical copy of the script. In philosophy, the law (first formulated by C.S. Peirce) that should apply here is the type/token distinction. There are perhaps millions of copies of *Hamlet* of which each one is a 'token' of a general 'type', with the type *Hamlet* existing independently of its innumerable copies. It makes more no sense to enquire in a bookshop as to whether the 'text itself' is in stock - as art theorist Richard Wollheim has shown - than it does to claim, upon losing my *copy* of *Ulysses*, that *Ulysses* has become a lost work (Wollheim 1980: 5). *Hamlet* is not more 'present' on the stage in cases where actors read from the script, than Beethoven's fifth symphony is 'itself' present when musicians carry their musical scripts with them into the concert hall. A 'text', be it a written score or a 'performance text' is *always* that which lies behind any sensible presentation, in music, theatre, film or any situation in which we can speak of 'text'. While a *copy* (or 'token') of a text can become a signifying element on the stage (a script can be used as a prop), this does not mean that the 'text itself' becomes 'part' of a performance. The 'text' is the signifying structure of a performance, not a signifying element *within* a performance.

Indeed, Fuchs' own account seems to point towards an impossible form of presence, not the presence of 'characters' but of 'writing' itself which 'becomes an actor', an integral signifying element in its own right.⁹ Despite the poststructuralist emphasis on notions such as 'writing', 'absence' and 'citation', there is perhaps a hidden desire to uncover the essential substance of theatre: theatre as 'literally' text. Compare the implications of Fuchs' description of the 'naked emergence of textuality' in contemporary performance with Josette Féral's

⁹ This is not to say that writing and textuality cannot be thematically presented onstage, but this is an entirely separate point from the notion that 'writing', in the broader philosophical sense, can itself be made present onstage.

claim (examined in the last chapter), that performance which literally presents, by rejecting 'narrativity and representation', thereby 'exposes the conditions of theatricality as they are' (Féral 1982: 177). It seems that those who wish to uncover the 'literal' dimensions of theatre - whether they search for a full and present reality in the act of perception, or whether they emphasise the emergence of textuality in the act of performance - all make tacit assumptions about what theatre 'literally' is. Whereas Féral had tried to argue that performance art is essentially defined by its freedom from textuality and semiosis (thereby arguing *for* the kind of 'literalism' that Fried had objected to), Fuchs proposes that postmodern performance reveals theatre as literally, or *essentially*, 'textual'. The notion of 'post-metaphysical theatre' would replace a metaphysics of presence with an extraordinary metaphysics of writing.

This is perhaps to leave us in something of a quandary. If we agree with Derrida that 'the present in general is not primal, but rather, reconstituted, that...there is no purity of the living present' (Derrida 1978: 212), how do we reconcile this with the stubborn refusal of theatrical presence to be effaced or deconstructed? Indeed, it is difficult to know what the deconstruction of theatrical presence means apart from the highlighting of scripted *enaction* at the expense of (apparently) 'spontaneous' dramatic *action*. Both the Wooster Groups' *LSD* and Stuart Sherman's *Hamlet*, even when read as problematising presence, seemed to *re-inscribe* presence; just as an 'aura' was maintained around the Wooster Groups 'star' actors, Sherman's *Hamlet* appeared to emphasise the contingent presence between audience and 'text'. If some theatre is engaged with poststructuralist concerns with textuality and absence, it can also be argued that theatre can, in different ways, make these concerns 'present' within the parameters of the medium. Like the Ghost whose presence in Elsinore is 'wonderous strange' (who or what is it? where has it come from?) I will argue that theatre can make presence 'strange'. For Brecht, theatre can represent by 'making-strange' the familiar; it may also be that theatre's ability to defamiliarise the present is its greatest mark of distinction at a

time when, as Fuchs has put it, theatre is ‘de-theologizing itself, doubting speech, voice, character, self, presence’ (1996: 90). It still remains for us to reconcile the Derridean critique of presence with the experience of theatre’s ‘presence’.

Derrida’s Presence

In alluding to the Derridean critique of presence, Roger Copeland makes reference to a joke:

“What’s a Derridean Christmas”? You guessed it: “The absence of presents”
(Copeland 1990: 29).

For Copeland, as this joke serves to show, Derrida’s critique of phonocentrism is a little ‘too abstract to be convincing’ in a theatrical context, when it seems so divorced from the actual experience of a theatre event. The attempted ‘deconstruction’ of theatrical presence by Elinor Fuchs and Philip Auslander might serve to support Copeland’s point in certain respects. However, I believe that Derrida can be far more usefully employed in discussing theatrical presence than Copeland, or even Fuchs and Auslander have been able to suggest. Copeland’s joke may be a little misleading. Derrida has taken such an interest in notions of presence throughout his writings, that he would, I think, be rather disappointed by its absence.

Although Derrida’s writings often concern abstract and high flying ideas in philosophy or science, Nicholas Royle points out, in his engaging introduction *Jacques Derrida* (2003), that Derrida has also written on how everyday phenomena like shopping lists can disrupt the idea of being ‘in’ a present. As Derrida writes in *Limited Inc* (1988):

The sender of the shopping list is not the same as the receiver, even if they bear the same name and are endowed with the identity of a single ego (cited in Royle 2003: 77).

The very effort to compile a shopping list is already a rupture of the present moment; even if the list is merely 'there' to jog my memory in the supermarket, its very existence implies that I am not fully 'there' at any given moment. When I read that list as I pause between aisles, I stop simply 'being' in the supermarket in order to recapture a prior state of consciousness when I knew that fish-fingers were needed. I may consider the future - will there be enough room in the freezer for all this? - was freezer space considered at the time when the list was compiled? There may also arise the sudden urge to procure items not included on the list ('but if I get this item now I won't need to get it next time'); the act of shopping already anticipates the writing of a future list. By contemplating the genre of writing known as a shopping list, what we mean by 'presence' - of mind and of moment - can be seen as complex and slippery.

Yet, just as it is still important to make shopping lists, and successfully acquire desired goods, presence remains an important term. As Royle explains:

Your shopping list never was purely present to you, in yourself. This is not to suggest that Derrida is suggesting that we do away with the concept of presence. He loves the concept of presence, he is fascinated by it. In his singular fashion, Derrida inhabits the real world, just like other people... It is not a case of getting rid of the concept of presence, anymore than it is of getting rid of the human subject (the shopper, in this case). Rather it is a question of the transformational possibilities of thinking presence, identity, the subject etc. anew and differently (Royle 2003: 79).

Royle's observation would seem to put a somewhat different complexion on Derrida's Christmas, as does Derrida's clear declaration in his key work *Of Grammatology*: 'To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words "proximity", "immediacy" and "presence"... is my final intention in this book' (Derrida 1974: 70). I will argue that Derrida,

far from being 'against' presence, is concerned instead to draw out its complexities and instabilities, and theatre is a medium through which 'the transformational possibilities of thinking presence' (as Royle puts it) can be most deeply explored. By considering in more detail Derrida's writings on the theatre of Artaud, it becomes clear that there is no attempt to dismiss the 'whole notion' of theatrical presence.

While Elinor Fuchs in particular picks up on the theme of phonocentrism lying within Derrida's explanation of the 'theological stage', Derrida's critique of Artaud does not reduce the notion of theatrical presence to 'phonocentrism' - and there is no obvious 'absence of presence'. In looking at 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation', (1978: 232-251), I must acknowledge from the outset that overt suggestions such as 'Derrida claims that...' can be problematic. Like many philosophers, scientists and writers that he has written on, it is difficult to be sure about when Derrida is actually *paraphrasing* Artaud, when he is taking *about* Artaud, and when, if ever, he is making a *general* comment of his own about theatre. While a 'definitive' reading of Derrida's text would perhaps be a contradiction in terms, I hope nonetheless to (mis)represent the general spirit of Derrida's arguments (I think there *is* an argument) and to explore some of the possibilities of a richly suggestive text. In Derrida's characterisation of Artaud's (proposed) Theatre of Cruelty:

The theatre of cruelty is not a representation... The stage, certainly, *will no longer represent*, since it will not operate as an addition, as the sensory illustration of a text already written, thought, or lived outside the stage, which the stage would only repeat but whose fabric it would not constitute. The stage will no longer operate as the repetition of a *present*, will no longer *re-present* a present that would exist somewhere prior to it ... (Derrida 1978: 237).

Artaud, according to this account, sought a kind of primal presence which pre-exists any form of mediation. This must also preclude representation itself, which works by putting something (an actor or a piece of scenery) in place of something else (a character or a forest). Theatre

cannot be fully 'present' (in Artaud's sense) until it gives up being the bearer of a drama or representation and becomes – somehow - itself, a living 'present' spectacle. In Derrida's analysis, representation is inescapable and 'pure presence' is unattainable. However, although deeply sceptical towards the notion of unmediated presence in theatre, Derrida doesn't merely dismiss Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty as naïvely implausible, but draws out the ambitious and impossible desire that Artaud held for the theatre. The paradox on which Artaud's case rests is that he sought to escape representation within an inherently representational art form. As Derrida put it, 'the theatre of cruelty neither begins nor is completed within the purity of simple presence, but rather is already within representation' (1978: 248). For instance, any show might at some level be a *re*-presentation of a rehearsal, while a purely improvised piece (were such a thing possible) would arguably *represent* the idea of a rehearsal-free show.

As opposed to Fuchs, for whom theatre has always (until just recently) fostered the illusion of presence on a text-invisible stage, Artaud seems to have envisaged the theatre as a place where presence - however desirable - is never fully achievable. From an Artaudian standpoint, we might say that most western theatre, particularly dramatic theatre - in which the 'world' of the audience is separated from that of the actors - is the last place we should go looking for 'presence'. We might even say, *contra* Fuchs, that the dramatic form has always constituted a subversion of the 'metaphysics of presence', that it exemplifies notions of repetition, representation and absence which, as Artaud realised, are the very enemies of Presence.

Perhaps the dividing line between Presence and its reverse is not quite as clear as Fuchs' and Auslander's accounts would tend to suggest. In 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation', Derrida seems to envisage the stage as a battleground fought between two opposing armies: one 'longing' for a 'here and now' sense of 'immediacy', fighting under the banner of Presence - against the other, valorising 'representation' and 'repetition', under the

banner of the House of Absence. The strength of this interpretation is confirmed not by the fact that this is what Derrida 'says' (which might be no confirmation at all), but by the number of allusions to this sense of struggle in relation to the stage which permeates the essay. Acknowledging that 'The menace of repetition is nowhere else as well organised as in the theatre', Derrida adds rather enigmatically that: 'Nowhere else is one so close to the origin of repetition' (1978: 247). It is almost as if Derrida is qualifying the assertion that theatre is more about repetition and absence than presence by attaching the additional clause that theatre, like 'nowhere else' brings one 'close to the origin of repetition'. The terms 'origin' and 'repetition' are intimately related; Derrida further defines theatre as 'the repetition of that which does not repeat itself, theatre as the original repetition of difference within the conflict of forces' (1978: 250). Even if a performance is repeated from one night to the next, each repetition will be 'different'. No two performances will be exact simulacra of each other; as Edward Gordon Craig realised, in an actor centred production there will be inevitable variations within contingent time-space, from one performance to another. Derrida seems to be making equivocal the notions of presence and absence by tying both terms together (theatre as 'original repetition') into paradoxical knots.

At no stage does Derrida appear to exclude or 'close' the notion of theatrical presence, or posit absence in its favour. Rather, his text holds the two terms in tension with one another (as a 'conflict of forces'): one cannot exclude the other. Indeed, where Fuchs and Auslander are concerned, it is difficult to know how far an 'aesthetics of Absence' or an 'escape' from presence could be pushed before there is no longer any theatre at all. As Derrida observes in *Of Grammatology*, 'The stage is not threatened by anything but itself' (1974: 304). In the struggle of the stage to be 'itself' (as Artaud conceived it) whilst also representing something *other* than 'itself' lies the problematic of theatrical presence.

To pursue these questions I would like to investigate an example of a play which Fuchs had alluded to in terms of exposing the 'illusion of presence' (Fuchs 1996: 75). Samuel Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) might fruitfully be read, in the light of Derrida's shopping list, as a play which makes presence enigmatic. It is easy to see how the play could be read as a deconstruction of the traditional 'now' of dramatic action; the play largely consists of Krapp - now elderly - listening to the recorded journal entries he has made since his twenties. The sound of the recorded voice is interrupted intermittently when Krapp stops the tape to 'brood' or pass bitter comment, or occasionally to disappear 'backstage into darkness' to procure alcohol, before resuming his position at the desk with tape recorder and boxes of recorded tape. Krapp is so obsessed with his recordings that he seems incapable of living for any other purpose. He seems to regard his 'present' situation and thoughts as nothing more than material for recording; indeed when it comes to recording his 'present' thoughts, Krapp 'consults' from notes he has written - at some unspecified point in the past - on the back of an envelope. While Fuchs reads *Krapp's Last Tape* as a 'rupture' of 'the fabric of presence' (1996: 75), I will suggest that it may also be understood as an *exploration* of stage presence rather than an evasion or escape from it.

If Beckett appears to 'rupture the fabric of presence' he also draws attention *towards* presence by highlighting the actor-audience situation. The stage setting comprises of a small table with two drawers '*which open towards the audience*' together with an '*adjacent area in strong white light*' leaving the '*rest of the stage in darkness*' (Beckett 1959: 9). The minimal use of props and the specifically illuminated playing area ensures that the playing space signifies its own theatricality; the audience remains conscious of being *in* the theatre. Krapp not only faces the audience for much of the play, but also through his actions, draws attention to the present moment of performance. At the beginning of the play Krapp paces to and fro in the area of white light consuming a banana, before discarding the skin at his feet. As he continues to pace

he *'treads on skin, slips, nearly falls...and finally pushes it, still stooping, with his foot over edge of stage into pit'* (1959: 10). Beckett's character - even as he loses his footing - emphasises his anchorage on the stage before the audience. Elsewhere Krapp's grounding on the stage (and the actor's 'contingent presence') is highlighted at various moments through the physical interface between the character and the objects and space which he occupies. As he interrupts the flow of his recorded voice, intermittently switching off the tape, brooding, before switching on again; or - more dramatically - as he *'sweeps boxes and ledger violently to the ground'* before *'settling himself more comfortably'* to listen (1959: 11), the character's existence in his immediate environment is foregrounded.

In other words, Krapp does not merely dissolve into a dematerialised zone of textuality, but simultaneously draws attention to his 'presence' before the audience whilst that very presence is unravelled in reels of tape. If the traditional structure of theatrical presence is encapsulated in Elam's succinct formulation as 'an *I* addressing a *you here and now*', then Beckett does not simply discard this traditional form so much as *play* with its possibilities. Even as the play takes place in 'real time' (the action is not artificially divided into scenes or a specifically 'fictional' time and place), the voice on the tape exists in the past, just as Krapp's voice in the present is in the process of being recorded. Beckett further complicates the play's temporality by indicating in the very first stage direction (perhaps communicable through a slide caption - a 'text' - to an audience in performance) that the action takes place 'in the future'. We are reminded that, just as Krapp's 'present' is to be recorded and played back in some future 'present', each performance of the play 'in-the-present' merely anticipates a 'future' performance where all will be repeated.

There is perhaps something about Krapp that may remind us of the 'perturbed spirit' in

Hamlet, 'doomed for a certain term to walk the night', whose presence in the play is the register of his existence in the past. Jon Erickson in his discussion of the play, makes reference to the 'ghostliness' evoked in *Krapp's Last Tape*:

While his voice and certain memories retain their sensuous strength on the old tape, the present Krapp becomes ever more a ghost of what has been recorded: a strange reversal, since the disembodied voice would seem more the ghost (Erickson 1995: 79).

By highlighting rather than evading the present relationship between stage and auditorium, Beckett is able to explore the impossibility of ever being 'fully' present on one hand, or of simply removing presence from the equation on the other. *Krapp's Last Tape* seems to demonstrate that presence haunts theatrical performance even as the 'now' of the action seems to be a ghostly reflection of something which may, or may not, be 'happening'. Theatre, with its mode of representation specifically grounded before an audience, is an art form whose *presentational* possibilities are especially suited to rupturing 'the fabric of presence'.

Krapp's Last Tape might perhaps be seen as the 'shopping list' of the protagonist's life, the attempt to categorise and remember a series of moments, to keep hold of one's thoughts by giving them material form - either on paper or on tape. The theatre may well be the best place to stage this struggle to maintain the present; the performance which takes place before an audience is already disappearing as it is being experienced. An understanding of presence in theatre must take into account that the complexity of the stage forbids a simple presence/absence binary. While Fuchs and Auslander have pointed to the potential dangers of traditional understandings of presence in theatre, we must also recognise that presence is not simply dispelled from theatre when it acknowledges its own textual construction, or attempts to value the text's 'literal' presence in performance. We may need a different approach to

understanding theatrical representation in terms of how presence is put into play rather than evaded, to reconcile the necessary critique of presence with an appreciation of a medium which reveals - and conceals - presence in many guises and variations.

I would like to return to the question of how theatrical presence *should* be addressed in the light of Derrida. Perhaps it should not be so much a case of deciding whether or not theatre might be allowed to have presence 'after' Derrida (as though it were an optional nicety), than addressing the ways in which theatre may allow us to think about presence. Derrida, as I have suggested, is deeply interested in presence, he has a declared interest in making presence 'enigmatic' (*Of Grammatology*) and, as Nicholas Royle puts it, in its 'transformational possibilities'. Presence - even including presence in the supermarket - is perhaps nowhere more 'enigmatic' than in the theatre where bits and pieces of our own immediate 'real world' are arranged before us to represent an absent (often fictional) 'world'. As Herbert Blau has written, in theatre the simple becomes enigmatic:

Consider simply an object in front of your eyes: on stage it is no longer simple. A real chair used for a real chair in a "realistic" setting remains though a real chair, a *sign* for a chair. It is what is not, though it appears to be what it is (cited in Copeland 1990: 35).

Representation in theatre, far from being opposed to the realisation of 'presence', makes things present in ways that transcend the 'simple' or the obvious; in Blau's example the notions 'real chair', 'object', 'realistic', 'appears', 'sign' become equivocal in the context of theatrical representation. Theatre has the potential to put the world, in Hamlet's words, 'out of joint' (I, v, 188), to make presence strange.

Since the Wooster Group is a common point of reference for both Elinor Fuchs and Philip

Auslander, let us explore the ways in which the Group can be seen - not as attempting to dispel presence from the theatre - but as exploring and extending the notion of presence. The performance *Rumstick Road* (1977) was highly autobiographical, and like the earlier performance *Sakonnet Point* (1976), it dealt particularly with memories and documents of the life of Spalding Gray. The documents consisted of Gray's home-made slides from his childhood in Rhode Island, letters written or received from family and neighbours, taped conversations with Gray's family and psychiatrist, and music from the period.

Michael Vanden Heuvel in *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance*, has also written on the *Rumstick Road* performance, and sees this work as being particularly concerned with theatrical presence. In his description of one particular section in *Rumstick Road*, where Gray has a 'conversation' with his mother's psychiatrist, Vanden Heuvel notes that whereas Gray speaks his lines 'live', the psychiatrist's recorded voice is played on tape. In Vanden Heuvel's analysis, the effect is one of making the "truth" of the conversation more problematic: is it to be found in Absence (mimesis/representation, writing/documentation/recording, objectivity), or Presence (presentation, the aura of the speaking performer, subjectivity)? (Vanden Heuvel 1991: 120). In other words, the 'conversation' is both happening before the audience through 'the aura of the speaking performer', while it is also a 'recording' and re-enactment of a conversation which took place in the past; neither unproblematically 'Present', nor marked as 'Absence'.

One description in particular serves to highlight the richness of the Group's exploration of presence. In reference to the same performance, Vanden Heuvel describes a moment when the face of Spalding Gray's deceased mother is projected onto the face of a live/living actress, creating an extraordinary effect:

a slide of Bette Gray's face is projected onto the face of Libby Howes, and for one startling moment it looks as if the performance has succeeded in re-presenting the dead... The illusion, powerful as it is, must of course be ephemeral because as soon as Howes begins to speak she 'breaks the picture plane' and disables the illusion. The two realities cannot exist simultaneously, but the spectator is left with a disquieting residue, a mixture of wonder at theatre's ability almost to achieve the transcendent through the concrete, on the one hand, and theatre's inability really ever to get beyond the concrete on the other (1991: 122).¹⁰

Despite the momentary 'illusion' that Vanden Heuvel describes, Howes was never identified as 'playing' Bette Gray in the piece. As Savran points out:

Rumstick Road does not attempt to represent Bette Gray... It suggests that any representation will be a dehumanising act, violating both the performer, who will be robbed of her subjectivity and identity, and Bette Gray, who will be reduced to a vehicle for arousing pathos (Savran 1988: 81).

Both performer and object of representation are held apart, creating both a powerful theatrical image and questioning theatre's capacity to make the image concrete. Vanden Heuvel offers a powerful description of the 'conflict of forces' to which Derrida alludes in relation to Artaud: the authority of theatre to represent a present is at once exposed and undermined, while a moment is created which affirms the power of theatrical representation. To appreciate the potential of such moments in the theatre is at once to acknowledge the necessary suspicion with which traditional formulations of presence are held, while valorising theatre's capacity for disclosing and playing with the instabilities of presence through its various overlapping modes of presentation.

Theatrical presence can therefore be seen as a much more dynamic and unstable concept than hitherto envisaged by many theatre theorists. Presence is not just focused on the actor, but on

¹⁰ A similar description of this moment in terms of the 'magic of theatrical conjuration' is offered by David Savran in his survey of the Wooster Group's work (Savran 1988: 84).

the interaction between the whole range of signifying elements with respect to any given performance. We might perhaps describe this fluidity between the 'physical' and the 'imaginary' spaces of performance - well illustrated in that moment from *Rumstick Road* - as (re-presenting) a 'post-metaphysical presence'. The image does not make any claim to truth or validity, but exists as a 'conflict of forces' (to re-deploy Derrida's phrase) inducing us to question the nature of reality, truth and presence. What or who is being made present? Through whom (or what) does 'presence' emanate - through the actress, the slide projection, or the 'spoken' text? From a semiotic perspective, we might say that there is no clear hierarchy amongst the visible and auditory signs; the presence of the actress is not privileged above the other visual and auditory elements, no single element seems authorised to transmit 'meaning' to the audience. This peculiarly arresting demonstration of theatre's capacity to produce a sense of palpable unreality points towards a conception of theatrical presence based on how theatre's competing modes of presentation can reveal presence as 'enigmatic'.

Conclusion

To recall the opening scene from *Hamlet*, there is something 'ghostly' about the Libby Howes/Bette Gray moment that Vanden Heuvel describes, as though presence has become spectral. Herbert Blau refers to Old Hamlet's Ghost as more than just a character, but as an entity that exists 'outside categories': 'We cannot say what the Ghost is, for it-is-not'. For Blau, theatre *is* a 'ghosting process'; both there and not-there: 'the performance *is* the Ghost...it must somehow appear again tonight. If it doesn't, there is no performance' (Blau 1976: 15). Neither Libby Howes nor Bette Gray are 'fully' present in this resonant moment, but perhaps each haunts or 'ghosts' the other. Like the Ghost that appears before us yet exists

in some other world (to *where* does Hamlet go as he agrees to follow the Ghost to some 'removed ground'?), Vanden Heuvel reminds us that the 'two realities cannot exist simultaneously' - yet we see them nonetheless. Unlike Hamlet's mother Gertrude, who cannot see the Ghost ('Do you see nothing there?' 'Nothing at all. Yet all that is I see') (III, iv, 133-134), theatre involves seeing more than 'all that is', for onstage all that is, is-not. Presence is not so much one of theatre's special possessions, but is that which theatre, perhaps more than any other art form, puts into play.

Before further developing these ideas, another problem for this discussion may have emerged in the very example I have used. The use of recording technology in *Rumstick Road* raises further questions about the meaning of theatrical presence which I have not yet explored. Is this account of theatre and the 'transformational possibilities' which the medium makes possible *itself* rooted in an additional assumption: that theatrical performance is a real 'live' process? With the increasing availability and use of recording technology in performance, to what extent does theatre lose something of its 'liveness'? Perhaps the interaction of theatre's various signifying elements takes place less within a shared temporal zone which the audience partakes of, than in a mediated zone in which technology, and not just 'real things' like chairs and actors, construct the experience. While the examples of *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Rumstick Road* suggest that presence onstage can be complicated through the interaction of technology and 'live' actors, in the next chapter I ask whether 'presence' remains a viable idea when the very concept of theatre as a 'live' event is apparently under threat.

Chapter 5

The Presence of Liveness

Alongside the notions of presence I have looked at so far, there is a related debate surrounding the notion of 'liveness'. Theatre is often seen as a 'live' event in which the actor-spectator relationship constitutes the essence of the art form. No matter how good film and television may be at creating fictional worlds, it is said that film screens or cathode ray tubes cannot match the live interaction between living, breathing human beings. This view is aptly summarised by playwright Peter Weiss in an interview published in the *Tulane Drama*

Review:

I spent many years making films. And I moved to theatre because I found that there was always one great lack in film: living contact with the action and the audience. Film seemed two-dimensional, a reproduction of an action, while theatre was closer to the direct action itself. The spectator at the movies is more passive than he is in theatre, and I like a close and active contact with people in the audience (Weiss 1966: 106).

An important question to be addressed in this chapter is what kind of presence is evoked by the term 'live'. Ostensibly, liveness seems to relate most closely to the literal mode of presence; to one's *being there* before actors on the stage and being in 'living contact' with the performance, as Peter Weiss put it. However, liveness is not simply interchangeable with the literal mode of presence, for the valorisation of the live assumes the auratic as its foundation. As Weiss' comment suggests, there is an 'aura' about live presence in theatre of which there is a 'lack' in film; literal presence as the 'living presence' of the 'original'. Grotowski's notion of the 'literal' actor-audience relationship *as auratic* relates to this tendency to see

theatre as a place whose purity - unsullied by the technologies of mass consumption and reproduction - is to be venerated.

To assume that in theatre we are in '*living contact* with the action and the audience' of which there is a 'great lack' in film, is to construct a binary opposition between theatre as 'live' and film as 'recorded'. It is an opposition which perpetuates the 'myth of presence' explored in the last chapter; theatre is frequently and often unthinkingly associated with notions of presence and immediacy. The myth of presence frequently surfaces when distinctions are made between theatre and the media. Steve Wurtzler summarises (without endorsing) this traditional view: 'the notion of the live is premised on the absence of recording, and the defining fact of the recorded is the absence of the live' (Wurtzler 1992: 89). This binary opposition between the live and the recorded, while it has been critiqued particularly with reference to the writings of postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard, can also be seen as a version of the speech versus writing privilege that Derrida has sought to deconstruct. The 'live' is analogous to speech in which the actors and audience (speaker and listener) are in 'living contact' with one another's thoughts, whereas the 'recorded' is merely derived from the 'live' (just as writing is from speech), and is therefore lacking in directness and authenticity.

However, there is an increasing cross-over between the so-called 'live' and the 'recorded' in performance: the 'live' stage is becoming ever more technological. Weiss's view is complicated therefore by the fact that much contemporary performance seems to include *both* 'a reproduction of an action' *and* 'the direct action itself'. The view that theatre is live and therefore essentially distinct and perhaps even superior to film and television is one which has invited a number of theorists to query the meaning and application of this concept of liveness.

It has been argued that notions of 'live' presence in theatre have become untenable at a time when microphones, film projections, television screens and computer animation technology are becoming increasingly common features of the stage. To suggest that theatre is 'live' and distinct from performances mediated by technology is to ignore the fact that much theatre explores today's technological landscape, both in form and content. The major question to which a number of theorists have addressed themselves is whether the distinctiveness of theatre as a medium is under threat if 'live' presence is undermined. Theatre, it might be argued, does not 'have' presence which recorded forms of representation lack, since technological mediation, in various ways, already challenge the idea of a 'living present'.

My investigation up to this point already presupposes that there is no singular notion of a stable actor-to-audience relationship in theatre, rather presence in theatre takes many forms and relates to a number of different issues. The question here however, is whether notions of making-present, having-present, and being-present (or a play between all three), are in a way bypassed by the technologies of reproduction and more generally the way in which these technologies mediate and colour all our experiences and interactions within a 'mediatized' frame. In other words, is the critique of liveness tackling (only) a limited understanding of presence in theatre, or does it - by extension - put the whole question of presence out of bounds?

The Critique of Liveness

In his article 'The Presence of Mediation', Roger Copeland is highly critical of claims that theatre's 'liveness' differentiates it from technological performance. Copeland attacks the

‘traditional (if middlebrow) argument’ that theatre’s ‘unique glory’ consists in the live presence of actor to audience, concluding that:

The balance between what we glean about the world directly through our senses and what we absorb vicariously through the media has been irreversibly tipped in the direction of the latter. And to assume that a few hours of ‘live’ theatre will somehow restore a healthy sense of “being there” is naïve and self-deceptive. The ongoing critique of presence is also valuable insofar as it reminds us that no experience (no matter how “live”) is entirely unmediated... Furthermore, the idea that theatre’s “liveness” is - in and of itself - a virtue, a source of automatic, unearned moral superiority to film and television, is sheer bourgeois sentimentality (Copeland 1990: 42).

The problem for those who have critically interrogated the notion of liveness is that it casts the literal mode of presence (the ‘being there’ that Copeland notes), as an auratic source of authority and ‘sentimentality’. That such sentimentality is alive and well is evidenced in this characterisation of theatre practice by American theatre director Roberta Levitow:

We [theatre practitioners] are like practitioners of an ancient artisan craft, anachronistic in a world of mass production and advanced technology. Only the rarest individuals today prefer their shoes handmade or their kitchen glasses hand-blown. We are not the medium of the masses. We are like monks preserving a library from antiquity - that rare entity, once so prized, of a storyteller and players recounting adventures for those gathered around a sacred campfire (Levitow 2002: 26).

There is more than a hint here of bestowing an (aura of) ‘automatic, unearned moral superiority’ on theatre which - as Copeland warns - risks creating a self-serving elitist cocoon from which the ‘masses’ would be excluded. However, Copeland’s suggestion that the esteem for ‘liveness’ is merely the product of ‘bourgeois sentimentality’ may raise the question as to whether the ‘ongoing critique of presence’ is itself the product of a certain bias. There may be significant aesthetic and phenomenological differences between theatrical and technological forms of representation that the critique of presence would seek to erode. In assessing the

debate as to whether or not theatre can continue to be seen as a 'live' phenomenon, it will be important to separate an understanding of theatre's aesthetic distinctiveness from the mistaken view of theatre as the *opposite* of - and intrinsically superior to - film and television.

Philip Auslander has explored the status of live performance in a culture dominated by mass media technology in his influential book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999). Auslander is particularly concerned with live performance as a cultural phenomenon, and with how 'liveness' is increasingly co-opted as a reproducible, saleable commodity. Like Copeland, who sees appeals to live presence as the product of bourgeois sentimentality, Auslander also tells us that he has become 'impatient' with what he considers to be:

traditional, unreflective assumptions that fail to get much further in their attempts to explicate the value of "liveness" than invoking clichés and mystifications like the "magic of live theatre", the "energy" that supposedly exists between performers and spectators in a live event, and the "community" that live performance is often said to create among performers and spectators (Auslander 1999: 2).

While not denying the appeal of these 'assumptions' to those who 'believe in them', Auslander proposes that they yield a 'reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatized' (1999: 3). Unlike Michael Fried's attack on 'literal presence' in art, Auslander's impatience is not about the aesthetics of 'being there' in the theatre, but the auratic quality that is attached to the notion of liveness in terms such as 'magic' and 'energy'. To understand Auslander's position more clearly, we need to look at the wider theoretical framework on which he is drawing.

Auslander's term 'mediatization' comes directly from Jean Baudrillard's work *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981) which defines the term not merely in reference to the products of the media, but to the larger ideological framework within which objects and discourses are located. As Baudrillard explains:

What is mediatized is not what comes off the daily press, out of the tube, or on the radio: it is what is reinterpreted by the sign form, articulated into models, and administered by the code (Baudrillard 1981: 175-6).

Baudrillard's notion of 'mediatization' is related to his conception of 'simulation'; it describes a general process in which reality becomes increasingly mediated by the technical and institutional mechanisms of late capitalist society. In his key work *Simulations* (1983), Baudrillard proposes that, since the industrial revolution and the development of mass reproduction, modern capitalist societies exist in a world in which 'simulations' have replaced the real. As Walter Benjamin had pointed out, mass reproduction threatens the uniqueness and originality traditionally bestowed upon aesthetic objects; no photographic print is more original or unique than any other. Of course, while a photograph may not *be* an original, it can still be seen as a representation *of* an original. However, Baudrillard goes further in suggesting that there can no longer be any direct reference to an original or a real at all. As Baudrillard explains by drawing on the metaphor of the map's relationship to the territory it represents:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory (Baudrillard 1983: 2).

Baudrillard argues that this loss of 'origin or reality' is tied to the development of modern consumer society and the increasing pervasiveness of the media and technology. Whereas the map traditionally implies a stable sign-signifier relationship in which a representation refers to an external reality, certain historical processes have led to what he terms the 'emancipated sign' (1983: 85). In past societies, where class mobility was limited and where rank and privilege were guaranteed within a feudal order, Baudrillard asserts that signs (such as dress codes) reflected a basic social reality. However, from the age of the Renaissance to the industrial revolution, the relationship between sign and referent began to change. As the feudal order became superseded by a bourgeois social mode, signs were no longer plugged into a fixed social order, and were free to play with social reality. With the rise of fashion, from the wearing of the fake shirt front to the use of the fork and the appearance of stucco interiors, Baudrillard notes that a transition had taken place from a world in which signs *reflected* a social reality, to one in which signs disguised or *masked* reality. This process in which signs become increasingly self-referential and detached from any kind of reality has accelerated since the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century. The ability to mass reproduce, to copy and to clone has enacted a further transition whereby signs no longer simply mask reality (like the fake interior), but replace reality altogether. By way of example, Baudrillard suggests that Disneyland, as an imaginary model of the late twentieth century American landscape, actually replaces the 'real' America:

Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation...The objective profile of the United States, then, may be traced throughout Disneyland, even down to the morphology of individuals and the crowd...Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real (1983: 22-25).

Disneyland is not merely a fake or copy of reality, fulfilling an illusion of a childhood domain within a 'real' world of adults; rather Disneyland masks the childishness in the world at large, 'especially', Baudrillard notes, 'amongst those adults who go there to act the child' (1983: 26). Theme parks, films, news broadcasts, opinion polls and other forms of representation all help to create imaginary spaces that simulate the real rather than refer to it. Ultimately what Disneyland masks is not a 'real' world of adults in Los Angeles and elsewhere, but that Los Angeles itself is a script, itself a reflection of collective imagination. The correspondence between perception and reality, sign and referent, has been severed through the ubiquity of the mass media, to such a degree that objects and discourses have no firm ground, foundation or origin. As Baudrillard asserts:

The very definition of the real has become: that for which it is possible to give an equivalent representation [...]. The real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced (Baudrillard 1983: 36).

Just as the map precedes the territory so is the world that we experience one that is already mediatized. If Jacques Derrida is associated with the phrase 'There is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida 1974: 158), then it might be said of Baudrillard's conception of contemporary western society, that there is nothing outside of mediatization. In relation to the arts, Fredric Jameson explains that mediatization would bring all art forms within the dominance of a single 'code'. Mediatization is understood as 'the process whereby the traditional fine arts...come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system' (Jameson 1991: 162). Neither Baudrillard nor Jameson suggest that all modes of artistic production have become the same, but that increasingly, artworks, including theatrical performances, do not directly address *the* world, but refer to a world *already* mediatized.

Under a Baudrillardian sky, the 'mediatized' becomes the single dominant code into which discourses - including sentimental bourgeois ones - converge.

For Philip Auslander, appeals to theatre's specificity on the basis of its 'live presence' have become untenable in an age where 'The ubiquity of reproductions of performances of all kinds has led to the depreciation of live presence' (1999: 36). Theatre audiences are, he claims, 'seeing live performances that resemble mediatized ones as closely as possible' (1999: 25). He cites the helicopter effect in *Miss Saigon*, as 'representative [of] a direct incorporation of cinematic or televisual realism into the theatre', and refers - albeit in rather hyperbolic terms - to the 'ubiquity of video in performance art' (1999: 32), through which a given performance may be - largely - perceived. The use of such technologies extends beyond the sphere of performance art to include much mainstream theatre. Apart from *Miss Saigon* Auslander refers to the 1995 Broadway revival of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, in which a wall of the set was composed of 'thirty-two projection cubes showing a video of computer generated three-dimensional images' (1999: 25). Such is the extent to which many performances are now experienced through the veil of technological mediation, Auslander argues, that it seems hardly possible to characterise some performances as 'live' at all. Live performance, far from being a precious commodity essentially separate from television and film, is, according to Auslander, increasingly aspiring towards the 'discourse' of mediatization.

Auslander's argument therefore, is not merely that we are seeing more technology on the stage, but that the stage itself is increasingly absorbed in the language of film, television, and other media. In Patrick Marber's play *Closer* (1997) for instance, the characters Dan and

Larry meet over the internet. Both characters are seen in separate rooms sitting at a computer; as each type in his 'dialogue', the words simultaneously appear on a large screen so that the audience can follow the conversation. Although the characters themselves may not be technologically mediated (seen through a screen) they are clearly depicted within a mediatized environment; their representations of themselves to each other through the media take precedence over direct fact-to-face contact. However, to follow Baudrillard's arguments, it is not merely that one may observe plays and performances that make reference to the workings of the media, but that theatre is *conceived of* in a cultural imagination that is shaped by the media. Thus a play like *Closer* is no more and no less 'mediatized' than a new production of *Hamlet*, irrespective of whether or not technology is directly incorporated or alluded to in the performance. If theatre exists within a mediatized paradigm, then Auslander's conclusion proceeds that, 'It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media' (1999: 40).

Very importantly, Auslander points out that the 'live' event, far from being the 'original' whose aura (like Benjamin's 'work of art') depreciates when recorded, is itself a product of the recorded. As Auslander points out 'Prior to the advent of those technologies (e.g. sound recording and motion pictures), there was no such thing as "live" performance, for that category has meaning only in relation to an opposing possibility' (1999: 51). Furthermore, any attempt to privilege the live over the recorded must, it seems, admit that 'the live is actually an effect of mediatization, not the other way around' (1999: 51). This follows precisely from the etymological development of the term 'live', which, prior to the possibility of making recordings, would have had no meaning. Though persuasive on one level, Auslander's case that the term 'live' is linguistically tied to the possibility of recording can be

seen against a much broader historical backdrop. There has been a long held conceptual difference between the notion of presenting an enactment of a story or event, and the recounting of a story through written narrative. This distinction, as I suggest in Chapter One, is found in Aristotle, and continues to inform theatre semiotics.

The thrust of Auslander's arguments seem convincing; namely that the relationship between theatrical and mediated performances is not one of fixed, eternal opposition, but one of interaction and historical contingency. I opened this chapter with Weiss's distinction between theatre and film, which suggested that 'living contact between actors and audience' is the defining distinction between the two. Auslander's arguments should convince us that such appeals to live presence no longer form a secure basis for making such a distinction. If theatre, film and every other mode of artistic production are taking place within an already mediatized environment, then it is difficult to see how the 'immediacy' of any one art form could be privileged above another. Indeed, it does not escape Auslander's attention that the term 'immediacy' is itself derived from the root 'mediate'; even on an etymological level it seems that the mediated precedes the immediate rather than the reverse.

One of the major difficulties with Auslander's argument however is that it confuses Baudrillard's specific notion of mediatization with a narrower conception of mediation. Auslander's assertion that 'live events are becoming more and more identical with mediatized ones' (1999: 26) is problematic; the term mediatization - as Baudrillard seems to have intended it - does not apply to specific events but to culture as a whole. The point, as I would understand, is that all modes of cultural production exist within a mediatized culture and *any* cultural event, whether on screen or stage, is liable to be read in relation to a network of mediatized intertexts. Auslander's claim that 'as soon as electric amplification is used, one

might say that an event is mediatized' (1999: 25) seems greatly to simplify Baudrillard: at the cultural level an event is mediatized whether or not a microphone or any other piece of technological equipment is in use. The point is surely, as Jameson pointed out, that the various art forms are becoming more 'conscious of themselves as various media within a mediatic system' (Jameson 1991: 162), not that previously 'live' events are becoming pre-recorded or are using recording technology. A microphone or a screen arguably mediates an actor's presence before an audience; but so too do masks, stage lights and costumes. Mediating devices of various kinds are hardly a new phenomenon on the stage.

The attempt to show that theatrical events are *becoming* mediatized may ultimately obfuscate the issue; it is beside the point to look at two different performances and decide that the one with the technology is 'mediatized'. It may be more profitable to look at the ways in which theatrical performances *address* (rather than aspire to) a mediatized culture. Theatre's distinctive modes of address are not *themselves* undermined or negated in a mediatized environment. Indeed, I will suggest that when theatre does highlight its existence as part of a mediatic system rather than as a privileged bearer of unmediated 'nowness', it is more likely to realise its potential to show how the '(im)mediate' is itself 'mediated', in ways that Baudrillard might well appreciate. In Baudrillard's description of the contemporary world, in which 'simulation threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary"' (Baudrillard: 1988: 171), one could easily substitute the word 'simulation' for 'theatre' to explain an art form in which time and space is simultaneously real and unreal, where actors are actually before us, even as they pretend to be other people.

Reviving the Live?

Roberta Mock, in *Performing Processes* (2000), makes an attempt to resuscitate the idea of liveness by tackling Auslander's critique. Conceding that Auslander 'shows that it is impossible to sustain theories which privilege live performance on the basis of its authenticity, reception, intimacy, or resistance to reproduction', Mock nonetheless attempts to reopen the liveness discussion. 'By defining what liveness is not', Mock suggests, '(that is not "not mediatized")', he [Auslander] raises questions of what it *is*' (Mock 2000: 4).¹ At one point Auslander cites the theatrical production of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* as an example of a live performance economically tied to a recorded one; the live performance is experienced in relation to its mass-produced original. Mock takes this example, and uses it to demonstrate that, while live and recorded performances may be interconnected in various ways, live performance still retains a basic experiential specificity. Mock describes one moment of the production in particular:

Following a production number in which singing and dancing crockery and cutlery whirled impossibly through a field of pyrotechnical illusion, the audience sat in stunned silence. Then applauded. Then stood up and applauded. They were not moved emotionally or intellectually challenged by its content or even spectacular appearance (since it was a close reproduction of the "original" animation which probably did not raise lumps in the same throats), but by its "liveness" and the potential this includes (2000: 5).

Despite the reliance on sophisticated technology and the homage it pays to the original animated film, the description Mock offers here - of the experience of seeing remarkable effects being achieved within the spatio-temporal limitations of a theatre - suggests a qualitatively difference between film and theatre spectatorship. Mock seems to suggest, like

¹ Although Mock defines the 'live' as 'not mediatized', a Baudrillardian understanding of the latter term might suggest that live performances do not exist outside of the mediatized.

Peter Weiss, that there is a 'living' quality to a theatrical performance that is not reproducible on film - even when the theatrical production is a faithful *re*-production of a film.

Mock draws on this description to offer a theory of liveness which can incorporate certain mediated performances. Liveness is now defined in these terms: 'It is the *potential* for discourse between the processes of presentation and the processes of preparation (which are never "finished" until the performance is "finished") and reception which is the defining characteristic of "live performance"' (2000: 6). By 'potential for discourse', Mock means that live performances are subject to variance and alteration, that the finished product has not been fully predetermined. As Mock explains, 'in non-live performances the processes of preparation, presentation and reception can only move (or influence) in a clockwise direction; in live performance the potential always exists for the process to be influenced either way'. In other words, with a recorded performance we can pause, rewind or fast-forward the tape or CD, without being able to influence the outcome of the performance itself. We cannot, as it were, turn back the clock and influence the conditions of the performance as it was being recorded. A live performance on the other hand is in a continual process of making itself. Between the beginning and ending of a live performance, there is a zone of indeterminacy; the result of the performance is discovered *through* the performance. A pre-recorded performance reproduces an event that has already taken place, the event is experienced outside of its temporal and spatial context, and cannot itself be influenced. Mock's proposal seems promising, for it incorporates the pre-recorded into a conception of liveness, while still managing to differentiate live performance from pre-recorded performance.

Theatre director and theorist David Saltz has also responded to Auslander's critique by attempting to reconcile a notion of liveness with a conception of theatre's increasingly close

ties to technology. For David Saltz, 'The thrill of the live is to see a performance event unfold, with all the risk that entails' (Saltz 2001: 109). In his article 'Live Media: Interactive Technology and Theatre', Saltz suggests that risk and 'variability' are the distinguishing characteristics of live performance, helping to explain the continuing appeal and viability of the theatre:

If perfect invariance between performances and the absence of risk were the ultimate ideals, then live theatre would have no reason to exist in the twenty-first century; the art form should have ceded to recorded media such as film and video long ago (2001: 109).

Although Saltz may appear to restate the clichés ('the thrill of the live') by which theatre is frequently privileged above 'recorded media', this article is an attempt to build a conception of liveness which accommodates the use of interactive technology in theatre. For Saltz, the incorporation of 'interactive technology into theatre opens up dynamic new possibilities for theatre artists, but more deeply [...] it compels us to reexamine some of our most basic assumptions about the nature of theatre and the meaning of liveness' (2001: 107).

Saltz goes on to describe three performances produced by the Interactive Performance Laboratory at the University of Georgia, Atlanta, to demonstrate the principles behind interactive media. The IPL's production of *The Tempest* (2000) is perhaps the most evocative of Saltz's examples. Most of the 'action' was played out in a space before a giant screen. Prospero's island environment was 'created by digital images that filled the large projection screen...As the characters moved throughout the island (or at least thought they were moving throughout the island), the landscape reflected changes in location as well as in weather and time' (2001: 118-19). But perhaps the most impressive use of interactive technology was the enlisting of 'motion capture technology' to depict the magical and incorporeal nature of Ariel.

Ariel was seen simultaneously by the audience both as a 'live' actress and as a computer animation: 'The live actress performed in full view of the audience with sensors strapped to her head, wrist, hands, waist, knees and ankles' (2001: 120). These sensors then produced three-dimensional animations of Ariel, responding to her movements and even 'allowing the animation's lips to move automatically in sync with the actress's voice'. The screen allowed Ariel to change shape: 'when Ariel sang she often assumed the form of an undulating bubble that the actress moved around the screen with her hand' (2001: 123). When Ariel conjures a storm, the actress can be seen to control the undulations of the sea with her movements. The other characters only experienced Ariel onscreen, and never see the actress, until the end of the play when Prospero sets her free:

Prospero liberated Ariel by opening the cage and removing the sensors from her body, at which point the actress ran through the audience and out of the theatre, leaving Prospero alone in an empty, media-free world, his "magic" gone (2001: 120-1).

Saltz's productions with the Interactive Performance Laboratory appear to demonstrate that the increasing availability and complexity of technology is not simply replacing live performance, but is 'reviving the cult of the live in a way that demands close critical scrutiny' (2001: 128). The images of Ariel on the projection screen may not be live in the sense that the actress is (a)live, but at the same time, its *actions* are created live: 'The animated Ariel has the same capacity to react, improvise, and make mistakes that a live performer does' (2001: 127). Whether animated Ariel can actually 'make mistakes' as a live performer might, is perhaps a little debatable. However, the 'give and take' that Saltz describes between actor and medium is one of spontaneity and variability, suggesting that the performance is indeed being created anew as and when it is being seen.

While Saltz attempts to show that theatre's use of technology as an integral scenic element can maintain, or even highlight 'liveness', he nonetheless leaves us in no doubt that live and *recorded* performance are oppositional rather than complementary. Indeed, Saltz forcefully distinguishes between interactive technology which is responsive to the performer and 'linear media' such as audio tape and VCR. Whereas the older 'linear media' are incapable of responding directly to a performer in a performance situation (as Mock would say, they can only move in a 'clockwise direction'), interactive technologies programmed through computers are capable of responding to what a performer is doing at a given moment. In using these new technologies, Saltz suggests that practitioners have 'the potential to combine the strengths of both live performance and media' (2001: 109).² Unlike an interactive computer system, a pre-recorded video projection is incapable of responding to a 'live' actor's variations or errors. Saltz gives a rather critical account of performances using 'linear media' in this way:

The medium forces the live actor to conform rigorously to it. Such a performance combines the worst of both theatre and media: it lends the live performance a canned quality without endowing it with any of film or video's advantages, such as the ability to select the best takes, edit out the mistakes, or apply camera movements or jump cuts to the live actor's performance (2001: 109).

For Saltz, television monitors and VCRs will only serve to ossify the live experience, whereas interactive media can retain the presence of the theatrical event as a developing process unfolding before the audience. In contrast to the use of linear media, 'interactive media [do] not sap the spontaneity or variability from a live performance, as linear media do, since they embody those qualities' (2001: 109).

² It may be worth noting that the deployment of certain phrases, such as 'live performance' as opposed to 'media', can be potentially problematic. In this context, the term 'media' suggests that which has been mediated and re-produced, in contrast to the immediacy implied by the term 'live performance'. Theatre, with or without technology, is also a medium, and material produced upon the stage is also reproduced and mediated in various ways.

However, what Saltz's interactive production seemed to demonstrate is that liveness is *not* an ontological property of theatrical performance, but a constructed, mediated experience. For example, had the actress playing Ariel been invisible to the audience, how would they have known that the screen animation was not pre-recorded? The audience must actually *see* that the actress is hooked up to the computer system, directly influencing the environment by inputting information via sensors attached to her body. The 'liveness' of the performance - that the relationship to actor and technology was subject to 'variability' and 'risk' - was itself deliberately *signified* to the audience. The audience is encouraged to read the performance 'as live', as unfolding as a result of spontaneous give-and-take rather than in accordance to pre-programmed data which would lead to the same result night after night. While Saltz and Mock help to show that some form of 'liveness' can still be found in the midst of technology, we can see, particularly from Saltz's description of *The Tempest*, that the immediate is always already mediated. Saltz's 'live' performance must also be supplemented by a sign or indication that it is - indeed - live. In other words, the category of liveness seems to refer as much to the way in which certain performances/events are constructed and framed, as to the ontological status of performance prior to recording. 'Liveness', like the notion of auratic presence I discussed in chapter two, is constructed and signified, and not simply an ontological foundation of theatre.

Saltz's critique of 'linear media' is limited, and does not take into account the potential for video technology to become integrated alongside stage performers. In 2002, an adaptation of Racine's *Phèdre* by the Wooster Group called *To You, The Birdie!* employed video technology to elaborate upon the play's themes. In Racine's tragedy, the body militates against the mind as Phèdre struggles helplessly against her incestuous lusts. In the Wooster Group production, this conflict is played out between actors and video screens; as Willem

Defoe as Theseus walks across the stage his naked torso turns into marble via a screen interposed between performer and audience. As RoseLee Goldberg points out in her review of this production, video and performers wove successfully together:

Sometimes the prerecorded digital video on the screen showed the stuff of ordinary life: As Phedre stood behind it, we saw her lower half onscreen in stop-action animation, trying on her favorite sandals. At other times the video was the telltale indicator of the subconscious: While the men sat on a bench behind it, the screen showed them restlessly fondling their balls (they were naked under their kiltlike skirts). The advanced technology in this production was so integrated into the meaning of the words it accompanied that it was easy to forget we were being manipulated by controllers at the board (Goldberg 2002).

It does not follow that notions of presence in theatre evaporate or become any less significant in shaping an audience's experience if 'liveness' is problematised by pre-recorded technology. Indeed, if 'liveness' is more to do with a performance's signification process than its literal presence before an audience, then we might question Saltz's assertion that performances which incorporate audio and video tape are somehow robbing the theatre of its distinctive qualities. Indeed, theatre's potential to highlight or interrogate notions of presence, far from being suffocated by the introduction of 'linear media' to the stage, may actually be highlighted when performers and recording technology are juxtaposed. As I will now illustrate with the following example, the interaction between recorded screen images and stage performers can create the kind of rifts in space-time which draw attention to dimensions of theatricality far exceeding the limited notion of liveness.

At the 2002 Edinburgh Festival, I had the opportunity to see the renowned Black Light Theatre of Prague produce *Gulliver*, which demonstrated how theatre's potential to engage with issues of presence can be affirmed even with 'linear media' in use. The piece consisted of a series of episodes taken from Jonathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels*, in which the

protagonist visits extraordinary lands, appearing to the inhabitants either as a thumb-sized midget, or a giant, towering over townscapes. The performance utilised widescreen projections, oversized puppets, black light animation and computer generated effects. A thin white cloth hung right across the middle of the stage was used as a screen. Actors could be seen behind the screen onto which video footage was projected, as though 'in' a film, or they could stand in front of the screen and interact with a recorded image.

The effects produced were often astonishing and a delight to the eye. In one scene a 'miniature' Gulliver (played by a 'real' actor behind the screen) appears to be surrounded by enormous hands and faces, and has to perform tricks such as juggling with dice the size of television monitors ('real' oversized objects) which flew up into the air and landed back in his minute hands. In another sequence, Gulliver (stage actor) is trapped in a (film projected) glass jar, and taunted by two ill-disposed screen giants who place a white mouse in the jar and are greatly amused by Gulliver's desperate attempts to scramble away from this fearsome creature against the slippery glass.

Throughout the performance, the audience's attention was firmly placed on how well the actor manages to interact with the projected images; moving at just the right moments, into just the right place, to make it appear as though he is moving against the walls of the jar, kicking desperately at the predatory mouse. At another time we see Gulliver asleep on his prison mattress, and then, as he dreams, the mattress is seen to float into the air as the waves of the sea appear on the screen, and the same mattress - now a ship - sways and buffets in a raging storm. It sinks and Gulliver plunges deep in to the ocean and is seen swimming freely in the depths with giant fish puppets moving around him. These effects were achieved by actors - effectively invisible to the audience - dressed head to toe in black velvet, who lift

Gulliver into the air, so that he is seen swimming, tumbling and moving freely perhaps two metres above the ground. All the underwater images were projected onto the screen so that we were given a contrast between the filmic image and palpably real objects moving through space.

The major focal point of *Gulliver* did not reside in the presentation of a fictional 'world', so much as a theatrical process of *world-making*. The delight of the show's amazing illusory effects resided in our being able to imagine Gulliver in some terrible pickle, while simultaneously 'seeing' the actor create the effects. In that sense, the film projections colluded in creating this 'gap' between medium and representation; one of the show's features being the always obvious distinction between filmic simulation, and actorly/material activity. Even the film itself was brought under the material terms of the performance. In one section of the show, Gulliver stood in front of the screen on which was another giant; this time a young lady who had taken a fancy to the little man. Gulliver revelled in her attentions, and even picked up a comb the size of a small sofa, and brushed her hair, by literally 'brushing' the screen cloth. Becoming ever more daring, he disappeared through a split in the woman's dress - (the actor moved through a gap in the screen precisely where the 'split' is located). Gulliver momentarily disappeared, but movement could be discerned within the dress 'in the film', as the actor behind the screen created a kind of billowing effect to produce a sense of three-dimensionality. Gulliver then re-emerged from behind the screen, triumphantly facing the audience and brandishing a curtain sized bra. The frolics were brought to an abrupt halt when the lady's father entered the film, looking none too pleased.

I would suggest that when the filmic projections are seen to be incorporated as tangible material elements in the performance, the projections thereby become an element within a

theatrical process. On the one hand we are presented with an ingeniously conceived illusion or fictitious scenario, while we also see the making of the fiction. We see both the literally present and the fictionally present. This point was especially brought into focus at the very end when an actor dressed in black - perhaps one of the invisible puppeteers - moved through the auditorium and onto the half-lit stage. He passed through the inanimate curtain and sat at the back of the stage, toying with and contemplating the strange, lifeless objects on the floor - a giant comb, a fish puppet, and a piece of meat about six feet long - all as if to emphasise the point: such theatrical fiction from the mobilisation of such lifeless material.

Perhaps that which distinguishes theatre from the experience of television or film is less to do with 'liveness' and more to do with how theatre's various modes of presentation interact to create a 'theatrical experience'. Presence in theatre, far from being suffocated by the introduction of 'linear media' to the stage, may actually be highlighted in its ambiguity and complexity through the juxtaposition of performers and technology. The actor in *Gulliver* seems to be 'there' onstage, and yet we see him interacting with characters we know to be pre-recorded. The 'apparatus of representation' - consisting of both 'live' actors and pre-recorded film - means the performance is both 'here' and 'not here'. *Gulliver* is made present to us thanks to the way the film frames his actions, while what goes on in the film is made present on the stage because it is grounded on a stage and by a 'real' actor. At the same time, the actor is present as the character only in relation to the pre-recorded images, all of which enable the performance to ask questions about what *is* present at any moment. However, *Gulliver* is doing what so much theatre with or without technology can do, in problematising and playing with our experience of the present. Theatrical representation may be viewed not so much in terms of its 'liveness' but in terms of 'double-exposure'; we watch an actor *do* one thing in order to *represent* another. The use of a screen for instance - as Saltz's Ariel

illustrates - can make particular play on the difference between what the actor *physically* does, as against what she represents or the image created. Likewise with *Gulliver*, we see the actor tumbling and grappling with thin air while we watch the protagonist trapped in a jam jar.

When looking at theatre in terms of presence, the point is not so much whether a performance is 'live' and whether it demonstrates a sense of unproblematic 'immediacy' but with how the interrelation between action and representation reveal the ambiguity of presence when placed under theatrical manipulation. We might conclude that the notion of liveness is far too limited to express the various ways in which presence operates in theatre. Indeed, the notion of liveness may be one whose illusions theatre is better equipped to expose than to affirm. There seems to be a clear differentiation to be made here between the notion of liveness and the ways in which presence is constructed in this theatrical example. For instance, a 'live' broadcast on television may produce the 'illusion' of immediacy, even though it is heavily mediated (in being received through a television screen). No such illusions were generated in *Gulliver*, which problematised the apparently simple contingent presence of actors by 'broadcasting' them from somewhere else, in a space-time both fictional and pre-recorded. Perhaps debating whether or not theatre is losing its 'liveness' may serve to distract us from recognising that theatrical representation is more liable to expose than to exemplify the qualities of direct immediacy with which liveness is associated.

The Meanings of Liveness

I would suggest that it is time to re-assess the value of the term 'liveness' as a means of describing 'presence' in the theatre. I propose neither to envisage an erosion of distinctions between theatre and recorded performances, as Auslander's critique points to, nor to revive

the notion of liveness within a technologised stage as Saltz has suggested. My proposal is instead to challenge the association of presence in theatre with liveness. Starting from the assumption that theatre tends to present us with a 'now' which at the same time is *not* now, a 'here' which is also *not* here, it quickly becomes apparent that theatrical presence has little in common with liveness. By first considering the meaning(s) of the term 'liveness', I will suggest that thinking of theatre in terms of *presence* implies qualities far more elusive, enigmatic, and perhaps 'magical' than the notion of liveness.

At face value, the word 'live' seems fairly straight-forward. 'Live' means that we receive an event or performance at the same time as it is happening or being performed. It is easy to confuse the notion of liveness with that of presence, as has been done by both advocates of theatrical presence, and its critics like Auslander and Copeland. However, the notions of liveness and theatrical presence should be seen as separate and distinct. As I have already suggested, presence in theatre is an inherently complex notion that has undergone numerous historical reconfigurations, whereas liveness is a relatively limited notion that applies only to events within a technological context. Perhaps a critique of liveness should involve the analysis of various uses of the term, rather than taking the word as a stable, homogenous concept. We do not encounter the live within the 'thickness' of everyday life. When we talk to people, we do not say that we talk to them 'live', nor do we encounter objects 'live' as we walk down the street. It would be more correct to describe a conversation via video-link as a 'live link-up'; in this case, the 'live' conversation is the very antithesis of the unmediated 'face-to-face' variety. Undoubtedly, the word 'live' has been, and (perhaps) continues to be used as a byword for a form of presence unsullied by the mass media. But the word can equally be used in the *opposite* way. For example, were I to announce my intention to watch a

'live' football match, my companions might assume that I will spend that afternoon in the pub in front of a big screen, rather than actually *going* to the ground to see the game.

When we speak of the live, we refer to the liveness *of* something, be it a television broadcast or a sporting event. The live is always mediated and framed in such a way as to bring us into contact with the 'immediacy' of its subject - or at least to convey this impression. Indeed, the term liveness is often used to refer more to the *illusion* of immediacy than to the actuality of 'being there'. A televised event may be advertised or in some way marked as 'live' to convey the impression that we the viewers are closer to the circumstances of that event, just as David Saltz's production of *The Tempest* constructed the audience's experience of 'liveness' through an elaborate theatrical spectacle. Indeed, contrary to Saltz's assertions, 'risk' and 'variability' do not necessarily distinguish theatrical performances from televisual performances. They are also defining features of live television broadcasting, as, for instance, Janet Jackson's unexpectedly revealing performance during the intermission the 2004 'Superbowl' has demonstrated. Whereas liveness very often refers to a veil of pretended now-ness and immediacy, presence in theatre is a much more slippery and ambiguous concept. If the concept of liveness has been conceived as the battle ground on which theatre's distinctiveness either stands or crumbles in a mass media age, then perhaps it is time to shift this ground. Theatre's distinctiveness may lie not in its unproblematic 'presence' before spectators, but in its capacity to complicate the pretence of immediacy so often generated by television and the media.

In a thoughtful article entitled 'The moment of realized actuality' (*Theatre in Crisis* 2002), Andy Lavender attempts to re-think Auslander's critique of theatrical liveness by considering

how multi-media performance can highlight theatre's medium specificity. For Lavender, presence has always been a vital component of theatrical experience:

Theatre has always traded in nowness, and at various points in its history has developed new ways in which to heighten the spectator's awareness of the present moment (Lavender 2002: 189).

However, Lavender's conception of the 'present moment' does not reduce itself to the more limited notion of liveness, and he demonstrates that our awareness of presence continues to be 'heightened' in mixed media events. Lavender discusses Blast Theory's production *10 Backwards* (1999) in which a single performer stands in the middle of a traverse stage with two screens at either end, onto which are projected different times and places which frame the performer's actions on the stage. As in the example of *Gulliver*, there is no live 'immediacy' but a sense in which performer and images combine to pull the audience in different perceptual directions simultaneously. Lavender makes an important observation in relation to such performances:

In mixed media performance there is a state of being simultaneously elsewhere, of being doubled...Mixed media performance presents spatial continuity (the stage remains the same) and discontinuity (screen space is fundamentally different from stage space). This is a *multiple* theatre, where perspectives, ontological states, and meanings are not only plural but simultaneously so (2002: 189-90).

The potential to rupture the stability of time and space is explored in many multi-media performances. As with *Gulliver* or *The Tempest*, the stage conveys, in Lavender's words, 'a state of being simultaneously doubled' which is underpinned by a basic theatrical tension: the fixed continuity of the stage space competes with the fluidity of the fictional space. This basic theatrical tension may be highlighted by the juxtaposition of actors and screens, but it is by no

means unique to multi-media performance. We find it throughout drama, from Shakespeare's *Henry V* to *Our Town* and *The Serpent*; the complexity of fictional worlds we are asked to *imagine* are playfully contradicted by the simplicity of the stage we actually *see*. We experience the almost infinite capacity for theatre to produce fictions, while we see how these fictions and overlapping time-space frames are anchored to a limited three-dimensional space.

We return to that 'unreflective cliché' to which Philip Auslander referred at the beginning of his critique of liveness: 'the magic of live theatre'. We may wonder why the phrase does not simply read 'the magic of theatre' and whether *this* phrase would be quite so problematic. IPL's *The Tempest*, Blast Theory's *10 Backwards* and the Black Light's *Gulliver* seem to show - as technology is co-opted into theatre's self-construction before its audience - how theatre *presents* itself and its fictions. These performances might function not so much as examples of 'liveness' as demonstrations of 'the magic of theatre' (without the liveness); a kind of conjuring act in which raw materials of various kinds are presented for imaginative re-assembly by a collaborating audience. Theatre's capacity to multiply perspectives by complicating time and space - which is potentially enhanced by the introduction of technology - should encourage us to separate the notion of liveness from the ways in which theatre constructs presence. While liveness as a term is concerned with a narrow and rather idealistic notion of unproblematic immediacy, multi-media performance, as Lavender suggests, can create an experience in which 'the spectator's own sense of presentness is expanded' (2002: 189).

Enacting Disappearance

Lavender's notion that theatre has the potential to 'expand' our 'sense of presentness' has been well rehearsed in Peggy Phelan's influential work *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993). Although Phelan's arguments are ultimately to do with presence and visibility for a politicized performance art practice, I will concern myself with how these arguments may relate to understanding presence in theatre. In a chapter entitled 'The Ontology of Performance', Phelan advances a basic definition of performance as 'representation without reproduction'.³ She argues that performance 'becomes itself through disappearance' (Phelan 1993: 146); a performance is only a performance insofar as it disappears. As Phelan puts it:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance (1993: 146).

For Auslander, Phelan represents an anxious attempt to privilege the live over the mediated, to posit the 'live' as existing prior to reproduction, as authentic, intimate and resistant to reproduction. Indeed, it might appear that Phelan romanticises the virtues of 'live' performance in her apparent devotion to presence:

To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology...For only rarely in this culture is the 'now' to which performance addresses its deepest questions valued (1993: 146).

³ Although this phrase of Phelan's has been taken as positing an opposition between 'performance' and media output, it is also reminiscent of Derrida's characterisation of theatre as the 'repetition of that which does not repeat itself' (Derrida 1978: 250). Theatrical performance is repeated, but no two repetitions are the same.

Whereas Phelan defines a performance by its necessary disappearance, Auslander defines performance by its very participation *in* the 'circulation of representations of representations', and not by its resistance to reproduction. Auslander sees Phelan's definition of performance as a valorisation of the live over the recorded, in which performance is defined by its non-reproducibility. He dismisses what he sees as an eloquent but idealistic account of live performance's position in a mediatized world: 'It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media' (Auslander 1999: 40).

However, Phelan's position is far more complex than Auslander's critique suggests; her account clearly envisages performance *within* rather than without a mass media economy, and she never bases her definition of performance specifically on the notion of 'liveness'. While she uses the term 'live performance' as a shorthand way of referring to theatre and performance art, her discussions of presence do not reduce themselves to a binary opposition between the live and the recorded. Indeed, Phelan's concern is not to distinguish between live and recorded performances *per se*, but to show how certain performances celebrate and value the 'impossibility of seizing/seeing the real anywhere anytime' (1993: 192). In this sense, Phelan, as I will suggest, has close affinities with the Baudrillardian notion that we have no access to the 'real'. For Phelan, 'live' performance is not more real (and authentic) than recorded performance, but it provides the potential for highlighting the problematic status of the real in a mediatized age.

In a chapter of *Unmarked* specifically addressed to theatre, Phelan considers Tom Stoppard's play *Hapgood* (1988) - in which the world of quantum mechanics is overlaid upon that of Cold War espionage - as a focal point for a broader discussion of theatrical presence. Reading

the play as ‘an overt meditation on the nature of perception’, she discusses more broadly ‘the anatomy of (a theatrical) presence which is made up [like *Hapgood*] of deception, doubles, and uncertainties’ (1993: 115). Like Derrida for whom ‘The theatre is always born of its own disappearance’ (Derrida 1978: 233), Phelan asserts that ‘Theatre continually marks the perpetual disappearance of its own enactment’ (1993: 115). She recounts attending a performance of *Hapgood* in London in which a moving map of the streets outside the theatre was projected onto the back wall of the stage, creating an ambiguous sense of presence:

They [the street maps] change as the detective’s target approaches the men’s swimming pool where the first scene takes place. The streets outside the Aldwych theatre are made to move within it. Through the play of projected light, the map of a solid city slides across the walls. The city moves and disappears, but the theatrical set is solid...the theatre set itself stays firm in its architectural rigidity (1993: 113).

Just as Andy Lavender has drawn attention to the tension between the fixed stage space and the sheer mobility implied by onstage screen images, Phelan also draws attention to the tension between that which is seen and that which is represented. Phelan points out that the solidity of the ‘theatrical set’ contrasts with the ‘play of projected light’ in terms not dissimilar to Lavender’s notion that ‘Mixed media performance presents spatial continuity (the stage remains the same) and discontinuity (screen space is fundamentally different from stage space)’. That which is represented on the stage is never as ‘solid’ as the architecture of its set, and part of theatre’s potential as a medium is its very ability to question the fixity of the world around us by setting up perceptual contradictions.

In her chapter, ‘The Ontology of Performance’, Phelan’s central example is that of performance artist Angelika Festa’s 1987 performance *Untitled Dance (with fish and others)*. Performed in a New York gallery space rather than a proscenium stage, *Untitled Dance* is an

example of performance art, and Phelan's observations of this performance's capacity to question the construction of presence seems relevant to a discussion of multi-media theatre. Phelan reads this performance as 'contingent upon disappearance', enacting the appearance and disappearance of the female body. Festa's body is suspended from a pole for a period of twenty-four hours, wrapped in white sheets with her eyes covered with tape. Behind her, her bare feet are projected onto a screen, while in front of Festa is a video monitor repeatedly running the embryology of a fish, while another monitor displays a time-elased film of the entire performance. The spectators, who can wander freely around the space and take up different physical positions in relation to Festa and the screens, are thus given numerous points of attention. Although Festa's body dominates the space, Phelan suggests that the projections and monitors also 'force[...] the spectator to look *away from* Festa's body' (1993: 156). With this complex relationship between body, screens and 'self-contradictory' iconography - Festa's wrapped body seems to suggest birth and death simultaneously - the performance is 'almost impossible to map or lay claim to' (1993: 153). The performance, which Phelan reads as an attempt to stage the problematic of representing 'a woman', thus offers no firm ground or singular 'presence'. A spectator experiences the performance simultaneously in the 'now' while that experience is already shaped by a recording of the performance from the past. Even as Festa's suspended body seems to ground the performance in the 'now' (performer and audience occupy the same space-time zone) the video screens seem to draw attention away to a point in the past, serving to fragment any secure time-space within which the work may be experienced.

What is demonstrated by these accounts of technology's interaction with the stage in the various performances under discussion, is that this interaction can complicate spatial and temporal frames of reference in a way that disrupts the construction of any 'complete' sense

of presence. In performances such as *Gulliver* and *Hapgood* the use of screen projections sets up a particular dynamic; while the projections seem curiously 'absent' compared to the actors onstage, the actors themselves are not fully 'here' when seen within filmic matrices. The stage-technology interaction can create overlapping time-space frames which at once question a simple actor-audience relationship, while underlining the stage as a site which, in Phelan's words, 'marks the perpetual disappearance of its own enactment'.⁴ Indeed, Phelan would seem committed much less to a 'devotion to the "now"' of performance as Auslander suggests, and more to the potential of theatrical performance to expand and extend the notion of presence beyond the supposed 'immediacy' of the 'live' experience. Phelan's case is not that theatre is more immediately present than recorded forms of representation, but that theatre - because of the specific time/space frame of its enactment - has the potential to narrate its own disappearance, its failure to achieve full presence.

Conclusion

Philip Auslander's scepticism towards the aspirations of some for live performance to exist outside of or in opposition to the 'economy of reproduction' is well taken. However by highlighting the reproductive and replicative potentials of the mass media, in particular television, Auslander inadvertently draws our attention towards theatre as a representational form particularly well suited to critiquing the illusions of liveness. Whereas television, as Auslander has shown, can replicate liveness and thus create the illusion of a shared time-space frame between audience and representation, theatre seems to have a basic capacity to

⁴ Johannes Birringer advances a similar view on the non-reproducible aspect of performance: 'One could ... say that the repetition of movement (e.g. in its replay on film) is never the same movement because the momentarily present movement vanishes the moment it is enacted and perceived. It can be "recorded", yet it cannot be recorded and played back as the same, for already in the present, in the presence of the act of moving, the movement cannot be repeated. The recording creates another movement' (Biringger 1998: 29).

challenge such illusions. One of theatre's distinctive qualities (and pleasures) is frequently that of watching actions and objects in *our* space-time represent actions and events in a *representational* space-time. The performances that have been discussed, such as the Black Light Theatre's *Gulliver* or the Interactive Performance Lab's production of *The Tempest* attest to this aesthetic principle; we see a difference between what the actor does and what the actor represents. Part of the pleasure that these performances afford is that we match actions to representations (the actor leans to one side as we see a representation of Gulliver's jar being tipped over by an unfriendly giant), and it is this difference and cross-matching between action and representation that these performances highlight. This theatrical 'double-exposure' is often highlighted in multi-media performance. As Matthew Causey has written:

Live performance that incorporates digital and interactive media is uniquely situated to represent the conflicts and convergences of the human and technology. What is needed is the creation of hybrid forms of performance, forms of a monstrous theatre that bridge, extend and explore gaps between the live and the mediated. Such a theatre would violate norms of live theatrical performance of the "here and now" with dislocation and fluidity of narrative, character and theme, both "here and now" and "not here and now" (Causey 2002: 182).

Although Causey's account of multi-media performance is characterised by the disruption of traditional live presence, his observations may extend well beyond 'live performance that incorporates digital and interactive media'. Causey's characterisation of multi-media performance - that it is 'both "here and now" and "not here and now"' - could be taken to describe theatre more generally, and could support the examples I explored in the first chapter. In other words, theatre questions the very idea of presence, even when theatre, as an art form, seems to have presence as its foundation before an audience.

Baudrillard's conception of 'simulation', wherein the difference between the real and the illusory is obscured - 'Illusion is no longer possible because the real is no longer possible' (Baudrillard 1988: 180) - does not sound like a death-knell to 'the magic of theatre' and theatrical presence, but rather a way of approaching and valuing theatre as a medium. In the age of mass media, theatre perhaps realises its potential as a viable art-form when it asserts itself, not in terms of presenting the 'live' real or the purely fictional, but as a site where reality and unreality overlap to reveal their mutual instabilities. Theatrical representation should not be looked at in terms of *liveness* per se, but in terms of how theatre presents objects of representation within predefined spatio-temporal parameters - often in ways that tend to militate against the idea of live immediacy. To equate the notion of liveness with that of presence in theatre is somewhat misconceived. Liveness is a historically limited notion specifically conceived around theatre's relationship to recording technology, whilst presence is an inherently complex notion that theatre has reconfigured throughout its history. In the next chapter, I will look at how a phenomenological analysis of presence might be reconciled with the poststructuralist concern for exposing the illusions of presence. While Derridean and Baudrillardian critiques may help to open up - rather than foreclose - an appreciation of presence in theatre, it remains to be seen whether a framework for understanding presence can become a useful tool in the analysis of theatrical performance.

Chapter 6

Signifying Presence

As I have proposed through numerous examples thus far, presence seems central to the appeal and effectiveness of much theatre, yet attempting to quantify that presence (let alone deconstruct it) is far from straightforward. This chapter aims to draw together the paradigms of presence that have been outlined, and to develop a theoretical framework for analysing the interaction of these modes of presence in theatrical performance. Anne Ubersfeld points to the ‘fundamental paradox’ of a ‘*here-and-now*’ in the theatre: ‘Where is *here*? When is *now*?’ (Ubersfeld 1999: 175). If we see theatre as an art form that poses questions about presence rather than one that asserts an unproblematic ‘here and now’, this may suggest a way to re-think and re-position the notion of presence in the theatre. A common approach to the topic has hitherto been to see presence - in Baz Kershaw’s words - as one of theatre’s most ‘important attributes’ (Kershaw 1996: 143). I will argue instead that presence is not an ‘attribute’ of theatre. Theatre has no special or privileged claim on ‘presence’. Indeed, I think we can go further and add that there is no such thing as ‘theatrical presence’ *per se*; there is no a priori formula for determining what theatrical presence is. Instead, a discussion on presence in the theatre should focus on the particular ways in which the theatrical medium constructs objects of attention, and how these objects of attention are *presented* to an audience. In other words, presence may best be seen as a *function* of theatre - theatre is a place where different levels of presence are manipulated and played with - rather than an (essential) attribute. By thus redefining the parameters of the investigation into presence in theatre, I believe it will be possible to reconcile two currently contradictory positions. On the one hand there is the intuitive notion that ‘presence’ (of some sort) is a vital ingredient of theatrical experience,

while on the other there are well established critiques of presence in theatre. Rather than posit presence as theatre's essential attribute, I will suggest that one way to understand theatrical experience is to investigate the particular ways in which presence can be explored and complicated on the stage. Not only will this approach allow a deeper consideration of connections between presence and theatrical representation, my investigation also hopes to take up the challenge left to us by Derridean poststructuralism. As I have argued in chapters Four and Five, while attempts to confer special value on theatrical representation on the basis of presence - or liveness - are at best problematic, presence cannot simply be removed from the equation of theatrical experience without disregarding the specificity of the medium. In making the case for a re-thinking of presence in the theatre, I will argue for the importance of this concept for theorising key features of theatrical representation and experience, and for its potential to illuminate the analysis of theatrical texts and performances.

Approaching Theatre through Phenomenology

In his work *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (1994), Stanton B. Garner points to both the limitations of poststructuralist critiques of theatrical presence, and to a way of moving the discussion forward without sliding back into complacent essentialism. As Garner points out:

Poststructuralist discussions of performance tend to stop at the point where presence is made to betray its noncoincidence, its infiltration by principles of difference...But this is precisely the point at which phenomenological investigation of givenness can fully begin. Understanding theatrical presence as the play of actuality (rather than as a stable essence, given in itself within the perceptual act) enables one to approach dramatic performance with an appreciation of its phenomenological complexity - a complexity that comprehends, indeed is fuelled by, difference and absence (Garner 1994: 43).

Examining theatre's 'phenomenological complexity' may provide a way of progressing towards an analysis of presence in theatre in ways that seem foreclosed to poststructuralist approaches grounded in semiotics. Indeed, most approaches to performance analysis posit theatre in terms of 'textuality' by which theatrical signs are read in relation to conditions and references *external* to the theatre event itself. As Colin Counsell explains:

When reading any cultural text - a play, painting or poster - we do not spontaneously create a means of interpreting it but employ the instruments our culture makes available. We call on our experience of other texts; not only simply other plays, paintings and posters, but discourses and sign systems, iconographies and ideologies, using their logics to weave the work's parts into a single whole (Counsell 1996: 14).

Such an approach to theatre analysis seems to direct our attention away from issues of 'presence' within the performance event (and certainly away from Appia or Grotowski's notions of experiencing the presence of the theatre event in its own terms), and towards the 'discourses' and 'sign systems' which surround the theatrical experience. Garner's invocation of phenomenology as a means of approaching theatre as a 'play of actuality' (and not merely as a play of signification), suggests the possibility of balancing an awareness of the textual with an appreciation of theatre's abundant corporeality.¹

Dermot Moran has described phenomenology, which has undergone numerous revisions and transitions, as:

the attempt to get at the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is, as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer (Moran 2000: 4).

¹ For phenomenologist James N. Edie, theatre's particular appeal resides in the notion that 'the world of a theatrical play requires an *enactment* which must take place within our mundane world in a special way' (Edie 1982: 342).

While an attempt to describe things as they appear 'to consciousness' may sound relatively uncomplicated, phenomenological description has also shown that the relationship between consciousness and the appearance of 'phenomena' is far from straightforward. For Martin Heidegger, the familiar objects surrounding us are not usually experienced as simply being present to us, because objects only exist in a context of 'total relevance'. As Heidegger explains, 'objective presence' is bound up with the notion of 'handiness'. A hammer *in itself* is not present; it reveals itself only according to its relationship to other things and to us:

For example, the thing at hand which we call the hammer has to do with hammering, the hammering has to do with fastening something, fastening something has to do with protecting against something...(Heidegger 1996: 78).

Objects only become 'present' in themselves when this total context is somehow broken or disrupted: 'When this totality is broken, the objective presence of beings is thrust to the fore' (1996: 71), if the hammer breaks its usefulness disappears and its 'hammerness' becomes literally present.

Phenomenology has been taken up by theatre theorists as a methodology for analysing the materiality of the theatrical medium, and for emphasising how a range of familiar 'phenomena' are used to create representations. As Bert O. States sets out to show in his work *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (1985), the stage is a place where familiar and everyday objects and materials can - like Heidegger's hammer - become 'thrust to the fore' and presented to us in unusual and striking contexts. For States, phenomenology and theatre are intimately linked in that both aim to cast the familiar in a fresh and unfamiliar light. Drawing on Victor Shklovsky's notion of art as defamiliarisation, States discusses theatre's way of 'removing things from a world in which they have become

inconspicuous and seeing them anew' (1985: 23). In Shklovsky's famous definition, 'Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*' (cited in States 1985: 21).² Even familiar objects like chairs and tables, by virtue of being 'staged' within a representational space, can be 'seen anew' outside of their everyday contexts.

Theatre presents not just plays and characters but also pieces of the world we inhabit, and States' book attempts to challenge the dominance of semiotic discourse whose 'implicit belief' is that 'you have exhausted a thing's interest when you have explained how it works as a sign' (1985: 7). Hoping to 'recover' the 'delight' of theatre, States employs phenomenology to redress an ethos he regards as unjustly reductive to theatre's 'liveliness' (1985: 10), and too 'narrow' to accommodate theatre's excessive corporeality. For, as States suggests, entering the 'world of a play' is not merely a matter of 'the illusory, the mimetic or the representational, but of a certain kind of *actual*' (1985: 46). Theatre is a medium whose 'language' - unlike novels, paintings and films - is one whose 'words consist to an unusual degree of things that *are* what they seem to be' (States 1985: 20). Not only does theatre represent things *as* present: many of the things represented '*are*' present. It is theatre's ability to present the everyday and the commonplace as strange or unusual that has driven States' inquiry into how theatre makes itself out of its 'essential materials: speech, sound, movement, scenery, text, etc' (1985: 1).

However, far from adopting an adversarial attitude to semiotics, States set out to reconcile a view of the stage as a codified communicative structure, with an account of theatre's phenomenology, by 'rounding out a semiotics of theatre with a phenomenology of its imagery

² Phenomenologist Bruce Wilshire has also suggested that in theatre 'actual things in plain view - not things dressed up or illuminated so as to appear to be what they are not - are nevertheless seen in an entirely new light' (Wilshire 1982: xii).

- or, if you will, a phenomenology of its semiology' (1985: 29). For States, the semiotic and phenomenological viewpoints constitute the polarities of theatrical experience. States refers to both aspects in terms of 'binocular vision':

If we think of semiotics and phenomenology as modes of seeing, we might say that they constitute a kind of binocular vision: one eye enables us to see the world phenomenally; the other eye enables us to see it significantly (1985: 8).

States draws from a range of examples which demonstrate the strange actuality of the theatrical; a theatrical sign may also be an everyday object which never fully loses its 'everyday' status. On stage, a working clock, a fountain, or fire retain 'a certain primal strangeness'; the water fountain is 'a happening taking place within the aesthetic world: with running water something indisputably real leaks out of the illusion' (1985: 31). Perhaps States' most evocative example of the theatrical object refusing to be comfortably absorbed into the flow of signification is that of the stage animal. A dog onstage can reveal the paradoxical nature of theatre: 'a real dog on an artificial street' (1985: 33). The dog, no matter how well trained, cannot really avoid simply being 'itself' even when it is incorporated into the world of an illusion. In watching *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, States argues, we may perceive the dog in two different ways:

We may see the dog as dog or as image, or we may allow our minds to oscillate rapidly between the two kinds of perception, as with the duck/rabbit sketch of the gestalt psychologists (States 1985: 36).

States' example points away from a conception of theatrical presence as stable and secure, and towards a conception in which presence is bifurcated and unstable. Instead of 'presence' we have a theatrical object, namely Launce's dog 'Crab', oscillating between two registers of

presence without ever coming to rest. From this phenomenological perspective, 'presence' seems less of a unified, coherent concept, and more a way of describing the constant play between image and object - or medium and representation - in theatre. To see the dog 'as image' - as Launce's fictional dog - would be to see the animal through a semiotic lens, whereas to see the dog 'as dog' would - in States' terms - be to see through a phenomenological lens. States sees these two opposing tendencies as different modes of awareness: 'in those moments when we see only the real dog rather than Launce's dog, our consciousness has simply slipped into another gear' (1985: 36).³

While States' binocular analogy is a useful means of broadly distinguishing between semiotic and phenomenological ways of thinking about theatre, the distinction he invokes between 'object' and 'image' is potentially problematic in that it tends to prioritise the literal mode of presence over the fictional mode. States, as with the example of the staged animal, tends to privilege the phenomenological as more 'actual' than the semiotic, without fully recognising that the 'actual' or the 'real' when framed on the stage, is itself also signified. In States' phenomenology, there is a disposition to extol the 'literal presence' of the object and to underplay the semiotic construction of the object's 'literalness' within a theatrical display. The distinction States sets up between the dog 'as image' (the semiotized fictional dog), and the dog 'as dog' (the literal presence of the animal) belies a greater complexity. The dog, like the lamb in Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*, may *signify* its 'realness' through animal behaviours (such as bleating or tail wagging), which an audience may then *read back* in relation to other signs within the performance. In the Shakespeare play, the dog's presence onstage is accompanied by a lengthy speech in which Launce confuses categories between the real and the represented: 'I am the dog; no, the dog is himself, and I am the dog, - O! the dog

³ In his essay 'The Phenomenological Attitude', States argues that semiotic and phenomenological modes of inquiry can 'compatibly blend into each other' (States 1992: 375).

is me and I am myself; ay, so, so' (I, iii, 23-25). The physical presence of the animal (assuming it isn't being represented by a human or a puppet) may be used (or read) as a playful comment on the problematic notion of 'actuality'. While States' attempt to address an imbalance in theatre analysis usefully points out the potential richness of phenomenological analysis when used in conjunction with semiotics, it does not pay sufficient attention to the interaction of different presentational modes, and their tendency to undermine the stability of the 'actual'.

Critics of phenomenology have tended to concentrate on this apparent commitment to positing 'presence': the attempt to uncover a direct correspondence between perceiver and the 'actuality' of the object perceived. In *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), Jacques Derrida is critical of phenomenology's founder, Edmund Husserl, specifically for his attempts to capture the essence of consciousness. While Derrida can hardly be described as a straightforward 'critic' of phenomenology - his thought is so deeply bound up with phenomenological themes and concepts - he nevertheless interrogates Husserl's commitment to presence. Husserl initially conceived phenomenology as a means of circumventing bookish discussions concerning the foundations of knowledge and reality. Instead of questioning the existence or otherwise of the objective world, philosophy should return from the realm of the purely abstract and theoretical, to that of 'immediate' lived experience. As Husserl hypothesised, we may not be able to guarantee the existence of the perceived world around us through philosophical analysis, but what we can be certain about is the experience of *having* perceptions. Husserl attempted to describe the structure of consciousness by emphasising the process whereby we relate to the world and make it our own. I may not be able to *prove* that the apple in my hand is 'real' beyond my perception of it, but I am aware of its 'redness' and its 'roundness', universally intuited qualities with which my consciousness allows me to make

sense of the world. It is by 'bracketing' anything beyond our immediate experience that Husserl attempted to account for the *essence* of experience, a pure transaction between world and consciousness.

However, Derrida has questioned whether we can ever perceive what Husserl termed 'the things themselves' directly and without mediation. One sense may represent an object to another sense, so that an apple can *look* tasty, or *taste* red, or our sense of touch can 'illuminate' a darkened room. Derrida draws on the perception of that most enigmatic of objects, one's own body, which is never simply 'present' to us:

When I see myself, either because I gaze upon a limited region of my body or because it is reflected in a mirror, what is outside the sphere of "my own" has already entered the field of this auto-affection, with the result that it is no longer pure. In the experience of touching and being touched, the same thing happens. In both cases the surface of my body, as something external, must begin being exposed in the world (Derrida 1973: 79).

Even one's own presence to oneself is not secure and unproblematic, as is demonstrated by the 'experience of touching [myself] and being touched', the 'I' that touches never quite coincides with the 'I' who is touched. The object, whether it be a chair, an apple, or my own body, is never simply 'there' before me as a fully present object, but is forever being modified, portrayed and represented. In summing up at the end of his study of phenomenology, Derrida concludes:

And contrary to what phenomenology - which is always a phenomenology of perception - has tried to make us believe, contrary to what our desire cannot fail to be tempted into believing, the thing itself always escapes us (1973: 104).

Derrida's critique unravels Husserl's devotion to presence by demonstrating that consciousness and world do not simply coincide with one another as equal partners sharing the same time-space: *presence* is always already represented. Husserl's promise to return to 'the things themselves' is ultimately defeated by the very notion of consciousness he tries to construct; the complexity of perceptual experience ensures that 'the thing itself always escapes us'. However, despite the criticisms of phenomenology that are frequently directed towards Husserl, phenomenology did not end where Husserl left off; if anything, Husserl marks the starting point of phenomenology as a philosophical process. Indeed, much of Derrida's critical focus on the writings of Husserl have been key to the work of the post-war French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who points to many of the same ambiguities inherent in the notion of presence.

In his most famous work, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty argues that phenomenology does not consist of a 'body' of thought which might be discoverable in historically limited texts. For Merleau-Ponty phenomenology is first and foremost '*a manner or style of thinking*' whose parameters are not found in philosophical tracts but within human consciousness: 'we shall find in ourselves the true meaning of phenomenology' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: viii). For Merleau-Ponty, the world is 'lived' before it is known, and subjectivity is a constant process of interaction between world, body and consciousness, in which 'world' is defined by our own particular 'grasp' of objects and space. At the heart of his phenomenology lies the ambiguity of fleshed existence, a kind of unresolved tension between being physically a part of the world and nature, while also feeling detached from this world. The body is a material object, but it is also far more than this, for it has the peculiarity of 'always being there', it brings me into the world, allowing me to move, sense and fix my perceptions, while at the same time rooting me to this world. Where Derrida had questioned

Husserl's commitment to presence by pointing out the ambiguities of both touching and being touched (the body is experienced as both 'me' and 'not me'), we find that Merleau-Ponty was also fascinated by these 'double sensations':

My body [...] is recognised by its power to give me "double sensations": when I touch my right hand with my left, my right hand, as an object, has the strange property of being unable to feel...the two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and touching to each other. When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of touching and being touched (1962: 93).

For Merleau-Ponty this represents a moment of profound recognition in which we are revealed to be *both* in the world (physically), and outside the world (as conscious beings); our existence is permeated by this ambiguous doubleness. Presence is put into play at the very point of interface between consciousness and world, there is no stepping 'outside' of the world - or of one's consciousness - in order to examine its contents, for we are forever caught up in this interplay.

If States' concerns for the 'actuality' of theatrical display has something in common with Husserl's desire to draw a relation between consciousness and the presence of 'things themselves', then Merleau-Ponty's interventions may suggest a different phenomenological approach to presence.⁴ He also uses the example of 'binocular vision' to aid his discussion on the intentional structure of the perceptual act. However, Merleau-Ponty's binoculars differ slightly from those of States. It is not that we simply perceive something through two different lenses as States suggests, but that - even if we look at a blurred, bifurcated image -

⁴ Alain Robbe-Grillet offers a phenomenological analysis of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* which prioritises presence: 'The human condition, Heidegger says, is *to be there*. Probably it is the theatre, more than any other mode of representing reality, which reproduces this situation most naturally. The dramatic character is *on stage*, that is his primary quality: he is *there*' (Robbe-Grillet 1965: 111). However, in a play such as *Waiting for Godot*, it is not clear what 'being there' means; arguably it is a play in which notions of 'being' and 'there' are problematised.

we must focus towards a specific object of attention. 'Perception brings together our senses into a single world ... in the way that binocular vision grasps one sole object' (1962: 230). In order for an object to become visible, we must move towards it by focussing, so that two ocular receptors may converge 'on what is to be the single object'. It is not as though one thinks of the two images as one, or deduces that two images must belong to one object, for the sight of a double image through the lenses presupposes a single object which one automatically focuses towards. Merleau-Ponty's use of this analogy represents an attempt to re-think the relation between perception and object perceived; he does not take for granted that objects appear as a perfectly presented unity by the senses. Double-vision, or at least blurred vision, is for us quite a common phenomenon. If one swivels the eyes rapidly round a room, objects go out of focus, but inevitably the eyes will come to rest on one particular object or part of the room, and the senses will focus towards the 'unity' of that object. But Merleau-Ponty's point is not that the focussing itself brings us towards the 'single object', for the 'single object' is not spontaneously revealed in the perceptual act, but is 'already anticipated in the very act of focussing' (1962: 232).

For Merleau-Ponty, the binocular vision analogy is used to demonstrate that 'presence' as such is problematic. 'On passing from double to normal vision, I am not simply aware of seeing with my two eyes *the same* object, I am aware of progressing towards the object *itself* and finally enjoying its concrete presence' (1962: 233). The 'concrete presence' *is* the end product of this progression towards the thing itself, which we try to grasp in the instant of perceptual orientation. At the same time, it is this act of progressing towards the object - which we never fully 'reach' - that problematises the simultaneous unity of the perceptual act, the world is elusive and is, finally, always escaping our grasp:

If the thing itself were reached, it would be from that moment arrayed before us and stripped of its mystery. It would cease to exist at the very moment when we thought to possess it. What makes the reality of the thing is therefore precisely what snatches it from our grasp...its unchallengeable presence and the perpetual absence into which it withdraws are two inseparable aspects of transcendence...That is what we learn from the synthesis of binocular vision (1962: 233).

We never reach the 'thing itself', for 'what makes the reality of the thing is therefore precisely what snatches it from our grasp'; to focus on something is to realise that one will soon focus on some other object, leaving the former obscured, and so on *ad infinitum*. The perception of the 'everyday' object does not simply lead to its 'literal presence' as a unified self-present entity. The attempt to make objects of attention present to consciousness can never be fully realised because each perceptual act must be 'remade by its successor' in order to maintain its 'presence':

The object remains clearly before me provided that I run my eyes over it, free-ranging scope being an essential property of the gaze. The hold which it gives a segment of time, the synthesis which it effects are themselves temporal phenomena which pass, and can be recaptured only by a fresh act which is itself temporal. The claim to objectivity laid by each perceptual act is remade by its successor, again disappointed, and once more made (1962: 240).

Thus Merleau-Ponty's account of presence is not unlike Peggy Phelan's notion that performance is characterised by (its) disappearance. The temporality of the perceptual act, like that of a theatrical performance, implies that the thing seen or experienced is never fully 'there' at any one point, but is always on the point of disappearing into 'perpetual absence'.⁵ I have no hold on the 'present' just as I have no hold on 'presence'. There is no pause button with which I can freeze my situation, step outside it, and examine its contents 'objectively',

⁵ Theatre, perhaps more than any other medium, mirrors the co-penetration of the perceptual array, presenting the world not as the sum of different sensations or modes of representation, but as a complex layering of phenomena (or sign-vehicles) which are grasped simultaneously. As Merleau-Ponty explains: 'It is impossible...to decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts' (1962: 15).

because my perceptions are following one another relentlessly from past to future. As Merleau-Ponty remarks 'nowhere do I enjoy absolute possession of myself by myself, since the hollow void of the future is forever being refilled with a fresh present' (1962: 240). His notion of a subject forever having to (re)-constitute the surrounding world is itself strikingly theatrical. There is an evocative description within Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2001), of a young girl who tries to construct her environment by creating a kind of 'theatrical' situation. Briony Tallis, who is peculiarly prone to indulging in fantasy (being absorbed in writing plays and short stories), decides to go out and slash at nettles in the garden whilst in a childish pique. At first the swiping of nettles with a stick is an act of pure frustration, as each nettle in the game becomes part of a narrative with Briony situated in the middle. McEwan writes: 'It is hard to slash at nettles for long without a story imposing itself...' and soon she finds that, irresistibly, the nettles are taking on the personification of all those family and cousins who have annoyed her during the day. When she has disposed of people, the act of nettle slashing itself takes over:

Soon, it was the action itself that absorbed her, and the newspaper report which she revised to the rhythm of her swipes. No one in the world could do this better than Briony Tallis who would be representing her country next year at the Berlin Olympics and was certain to win gold...(McEwan 2001: 75).

But soon, as Briony starts to get tired, fantasy starts to fade and a more mundane and oppressive reality begins to reassert itself:

...the cheers of the crowd were harder to summon. The colours were ebbing from her fantasy...her arm was aching. She was becoming a solitary girl swiping at nettles with a stick...The cost of oblivious daydreaming was always this moment of return, the realignment with what had been before and now seemed a little worse. Her reverie, once rich in plausible details, had become a passing stillness before the hard mass of the actual (2001: 76).

The 'theatre' here emerges from the interaction between subjectivity and objective world, in which the nettles simply cannot remain nettles 'without a story imposing itself'; consciousness and materiality become doubled and blurred together as Briony - her imagination - and the nettles in her garden become fused together in a 'theatrical experience'.⁶ This theatricality is reflected in the interaction Merleau-Ponty describes between consciousness and world; a continuous slippage of 'presence' between perception and the 'passing stillness' of the 'actual'.

In many ways, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of subjectivity is in agreement with Derrida's critique of phenomenology's founding figure, Edmund Husserl. Merleau-Ponty would agree with Derrida's critique of presence in Husserl, in particular with the notion that 'things themselves' can never be directly experienced. Derrida's observation that, *pace* Husserl, 'the thing itself always escapes us' (Derrida 1973: 104), is itself an idea deeply entrenched in phenomenological thought. Unlike States' version of the phenomenological 'eye' presupposing a binary between the 'actual' and the 'signified', Merleau-Ponty's 'binocular vision' metaphor conceives presence as a dynamic process of engagement with the world.⁷

I opened this discussion by citing from Stanton B. Garner's work on phenomenology and theatre. Garner has proposed to advance the poststructuralist critique by engaging with theatrical presence as a 'play of actuality' which is 'fuelled by difference and absence', as

⁶ In *Playing and Reality* (1971) D. W. Winnicott argues that human infants explore an emerging objective realm through play. For Winnicott, imaginary activity carves out a space which can be filled with all kinds of more complex cultural activities - such as theatre - that take place between the world of imagination and actuality, which he terms 'transitional phenomena' (Winnicott: 1971: 4). Theatrical enactment can be seen as an extension of Briony's nettle slashing; the use of familiar objects to create a 'potential space' for exploring the environment through imaginative activity.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty's insistence that consciousness and world have a way of invading each other's territory ('We are involved in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world', 1962: 5), has particular resonance for the theatre. As art theorist Jon Erickson put it: "'Presence" in the theatre is a physicality in the present that is at the same time grounded in a form of absence' (Erickson 1995: 62).

opposed to the (Husserlian) notion of presence as 'given in itself within the perceptual act'. Garner, in initiating a phenomenological investigation of the work of playwrights writing after 1950, including Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Shepard and Bond, moves consciously away from a Husserlian commitment to a stable 'presence', towards a model based on post-Husserlian phenomenology. Indeed, Garner suggests that Derrida's critique of presence in Husserl can be reconciled with an understanding of the interaction between performer and spectator which does not rely on the foundation of an essential presence. By disengaging from an Husserlian perspective on presence towards one with a deeper attachment to Merleau-Ponty, Garner asserts:

If post Husserlian phenomenology has rejected presence as a unitary self-givenness in favour of a view of presence as constituted by vanishing points and dissociations, then surely few environments reward a post-Husserlian phenomenological approach more than the theatre (Garner 1994: 39).

While States' suggestion that theatrical objects can be seen through both a semiotic and phenomenological lens aims at a more 'rounded' and definitive way of perceiving, Garner - strongly influenced by Merleau-Ponty - suggests that theatre works precisely by making 'objects of attention' complex and ambiguous. Garner reminds us that in addition to States' notion of the binocular, theatrical objects are constituted by 'a range of manifestations', a 'range' which includes that which is 'actual, simulated, fictitious, linguistically evoked' (1994: 43). Just as the relationship of consciousness to object is not a simple matter of a stable presence but of various overlapping presences, so should theatre be approached - not in terms of (theatrical) presence - but in terms of its potential to posit objects of attention within a range of presentational possibilities. A theatrical object can be constructed in numerous ways. To invoke some Shakespearean examples: a theatrical object may be conjured up through language (as the Chorus to Shakespeare's *Henry V* indicates), or simulated (as in the murder

of Desdemona in *Othello*); or it can be 'actual' (like Launce's dog in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*). Within this range of possibilities, a further complexity is afforded inasmuch as these different ways of presenting theatrical objects can overlap with one another. Thus, as Bert States points out, in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the 'actual' and the 'fictional' overlap: 'In short, we have a real dog on an artificial street' (States 1985: 33). Not only is Launce's dog represented by a real animal, the words used to describe the dog adds a further layer to this theatrical object ('I think Crab my dog be the sourest natured dog that lives...'). Indeed, much of the humour of this scene will derive from a tension between these overlapping modes of presentation: the dog as 'actual' and as *linguistically* constructed within a *fictional* setting. Inevitably, the possibility of the 'real' animal conforming to his master's description, or ignoring the words by yawning or wagging its tail, suggest two apparently contradictory modes of presence whose potential failure to coincide underscores the scene's comic value in performance.

One can visualise Launce with his companion in the abstract, but it is only by attending to the stage's specific (interrelating) modes of expression that we get a sense of the complexity with which this theatrical object is disclosed to us. Just as, from a phenomenological standpoint, our relationship to the world is complicated by our senses simultaneously presenting objects to us by different means, so objects of representation onstage are simultaneously (re)-presented in different ways. It makes no more sense to talk of 'theatrical presence' than it does to speak of 'perceptual presence'; as Merleau-Ponty's analysis suggests, the nature of the perceptual act precludes the stable consciousness-to-object relationship which it sets out to achieve.

In a progression that parallels phenomenology's own turn from Husserl's commitment to a stable transaction between consciousness and world towards an understanding of the instabilities and ambiguities of embodied perception, Garner's phenomenology of theatre proposes to look at presence in its 'complex and often elusive modes of disclosure' (1994: 230). Just as the Husserlian reduction would attempt to place the intricacies of subjective experience within the confines of a simple subject-object transaction, so establishing theatre's 'liveness' on the basis of a direct actor-audience relationship given 'in itself within the perceptual act', would reduce theatre's complexity to the simplicity of a formula.⁸

Understanding theatre as a 'play of actuality' leads away from a conception of presence as singular, and guides us instead towards thinking of theatre in terms of *presences* - or as

Garner suggests '*presencing*':

Instead of presence, the theatre asks to be approached in terms of *presencing*; theatrical phenomena are multiply embodied, evoked in a wide variety of experiential registers, refracted through different (and sometimes divergent) phenomenal lenses (1994: 43).

By proposing to investigate 'presencing' instead of presence, Garner opens up new possibilities for thinking about presence in theatre, and how theatre constructs objects of attention. Garner's term is more dynamic and alive than 'presence', which in comparison sounds static and rather stodgy. Furthermore, 'presencing' is a term which itself can be used to critique the illusion of an immanent 'here and now'; presencing suggests a play of appearance and disappearance, while presence suggests the very manifestation of the object and the arrest of play. By introducing this Heideggerian term, Garner throws the emphasis onto the ways in which objects of representation are disclosed through overlapping

⁸ The ambiguity of theatrical presence was well expressed by French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne, who wrote of witnessing a play: 'I do not posit the real as real, because there is also the unreal which this real designates; I do not posit the unreal as unreal because there is the real which promotes and supports this unreal' (Dufrenne 1973: 10).

perspectives, complementing the semiotic tendency to locate 'meanings' rather than the 'experiential registers' in which they are found.

While 'presencing' is a richly suggestive term, it is one which could well be applied to any number of representational forms besides theatre, which possibly limits its usefulness for analysing the particular ways in which presence is constructed and manipulated in theatre. The term 'presencing' might be applied to film, literature or painting to describe the ways in which objects of representation are 'evoked' in complex or surprising ways. Even literary fiction, though it may seem an unpromising medium for phenomenological analysis - given that it consists of marks on a page rather than tangible phenomena - has been studied by phenomenologists such as Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser. Far from taking a piece of literary fiction as a complete, self-contained work, reader-response theorists envisage an interaction between text and reader. The text finds different means to stimulate the reader's imagination; there may be different narrative directions which cut or run into one another, the reader may be required to follow a number of narrative perspectives (from that of a hero to minor characters), or there may be sudden changes in the narrative flow as denoted by chapter segments. In other words, the literary object of representation is not simply 'there' within the text, but constructed through a number of overlapping perspectives and images which the reader tries to reconcile. As Iser explains, the reader's attempts to draw together these different perspectives and narrative fragments is a matter of filling in the 'blanks':

As the reader's wandering viewpoint travels between all these segments, its constant switching during the time flow of reading intertwines them, thus bringing forth a network of perspectives, within which each perspective opens a view not only of others but also of the intended imaginary object. Hence no single textual perspective can be equated with this imaginary object, of which it forms only one aspect. The object itself is a product of interconnection, the structuring of which is to a great extent regulated and controlled by blanks. (Iser 2001: 183).

Iser here describes a kind of ‘presencing’; at no point is the ‘imaginary itself’ present to the reader since there is ‘no single textual perspective’ from which it can be experienced. Instead, the world of the narrative fiction is, as Garner says of stage representation, ‘evoked in a wide variety of experiential registers’, through ‘complex and often elusive modes of disclosure’. While the notion of presence, reconfigured through phenomenological investigation into ‘presencing’, provides a more dynamic and less essentialising perspective, it stops short of providing a medium-specific perspective on the ways in which presence is constructed and manipulated in the theatre. Building on this notion of presencing, I shall attempt to develop such a perspective, and to suggest ways in which a framework for analysing presence in theatre can be applied to performance analysis.

Although it is my intention here to investigate theatre’s potential to generate certain kinds of aesthetic experience, the proceeding discussion does not aspire to construct an essentialist account of theatre’s specificity as a medium. There is no reason why a presence-oriented analysis might not be brought to bear on an installation, a sculpture, or a live television show in a studio. As Michael Fried has pointed out (albeit disparagingly), ‘theatricality’ can be understood in terms of a wider aesthetic field where objects of representation are seen to overtly engage with the spatio-temporal context in which they are encountered. The emphasis here on theatrical enactment should be taken in the context of my specific concern to engage with discourses which have centred on theatrical presence, rather than an attempt to make essential distinctions between theatre and other modes of artistic production.

Performing Presence

I would like to take this discussion back to the actor-audience relationship on which so many theories of theatrical presence have been based. Theories of presence in theatre, ranging from the notion of 'liveness', to Grotowski's communal actor-audience relationship, to the emphasis on fictional characters' being '*there*' before the audience; all presuppose a simultaneity between production and reception. Theatre is seen to establish a secure self-contained context in which in which an object of attention or representation is made present (or is *directly communicated*) to an audience. Whether a given definition is found within the mode of making-present, being-present or having-presence, the presupposition of a stable and secure context between performance and audience has been central to theories of theatrical presence. This context of representation has been theorised by semioticians who have tried to account for the operations of textuality on a concrete stage. In his *Dictionary of the Theatre*, Patrice Pavis suggests a definition of theatrical presence, not in terms of the actor's presence, but rather of the 'continual *present* of the stage and its enunciation' (Pavis 1998: 286). In other words, theatre communicates *from* somewhere - characteristically a stage - and this 'somewhere' is continuously present throughout the experience.

This '*situation of enunciation*' (1998: 91) is also discussed by Elam in relation to the concept of 'deixis'. Deixis literally means to indicate or to point to, either verbally through the use of pronouns such as 'I' and 'you' or adverbs such as 'here' and 'now', but also through physical means such as pointing to or spotlighting an area of significance. Moreover, deixis refers to the relationship in time and space between speaker and listener, and any actions or utterances which directly or indirectly indicate the place and time from which they originate. Theatre semiotician Keir Elam suggests that deictic relationships are also of 'decisive importance to

theatrical performance, being the primary means whereby the presence and the spatial orientations of the body are established' (Elam 1980: 72). As semiotic analysis has demonstrated, a sense of the 'here and now' of theatre is constructed through an interrelation between gesture and speech within the physical context of the stage. Unlike characters in novels or films, the speech and gesture of *staged* characters are seen in a concrete spatio-temporal context before an audience. Stage actors speak *from* somewhere and point *to* someone; they can move *towards* or *away* from the audience, a fellow actor, or a point in space. Elam suggests that deictic gesture and utterance are the "zero-point" from which the dramatic world is defined' and is the means by which the 'dramatic world' is *actualised* as the hypothetical world we view on the stage (1980: 142).

One of the key debates surrounding presence in a communicative context, like that of the actor-audience relationship, has been played out in an area of investigation known as performativity. While performativity encompasses a wide range of topics concerning communication and the construction of social contexts, I believe it offers possibilities for thinking about how presence is manipulated on the stage. In addressing theatre 'performatively', we might look at a show in terms of what it *does* to an audience, impacting upon them emotionally or inviting them to voice pleasure or displeasure. However, I wish to look not so much at how a performance acts on an audience, as the ways theatrical signification acts on and slices into the continuous (present) relationship between audience and the locus of theatrical representation (usually a stage). An attempt to understand presence in theatre should take account of the performative relationship between theatrical signification and the 'experiential field' in which the theatrical performance takes place, and how theatre *plays* with the temporal/spatial sphere occupied by actors and audience.

What the phenomenological investigation of theatre - especially that of Garner - has consistently tried to show, however, is that this self-contained context (or 'experiential field' to use a phenomenological expression) is subject to instability. Familiar everyday objects, whether they are furniture, animals, toasters or human bodies, can be framed on the stage in such a way that they can become defamiliarised. To put it more directly, while things may be done on a stage, the stage itself, as a representational frame, can also 'do' things to the phenomena placed upon it. Theatre does not simply 'present' objects of representation to a watching audience, it can also alter and complicate our perception of those objects within its representational frame. To build on the foundations of phenomenological analysis, we need to develop ways of not only accounting for the presence of theatre's 'essential materials' (to use States' phrase), but moreover, how theatrical signification interrogates the presence of those materials before an audience.

If notions of presence in theatre have been established via what Elam refers to as a 'zero point' relationship between stage and audience, then perhaps the very premise of a 'zero point' should be examined before a framework for analysing presence in performance can be attempted. I should therefore like to reflect on Derrida's essay 'Signature, Event, Context' (1977), which principally sets out to interrogate a central premise of J.L. Austin's theory of performative speech acts; namely that all communicative acts are founded on the possibility of a shared communicative context. Derrida's intervention in speech act theory should make us rethink the notion of a theatrical 'zero-point', and with it the concepts of presence which pivot around the idea of a shared production/reception context.

Derrida argues that the force of any speech act (or any act of 'communication') is to rupture any *present* context between speaker and receiver. Derrida writes of the 'force of rupture'

inherent in all acts of communication, 'a force of breaking with its context' (1982: 317) which, Derrida proposes, extends to 'all "experience" in general, if it is granted that there is no experience of *pure* presence, but only chains of differential marks' (1982: 318). While it may be a truism that 'experience' can only ever be occurring in the present, the experience of that present is shaped and mediated by prior experiences and the anticipation of future experience. Communication, whether it consists of internal dialogue or speech-acts to an external listener, already ruptures the present context it tries to establish. Derrida makes great play from considering the written signature as an act of (self) communication which reveals the complexity of the present. The signature marks a 'transcendental form of nowness' in which the signer is always present. At the same time it marks the signer's 'having-been present in a past now', while the written signature also implies 'the actual or empirical nonpresence of the signer' (Derrida 1982: 328). What we may note here is that Derrida does not simply affirm absence (citationality, representation) instead of presence but rather the signature performs - to use 'his' words - 'a continuous modification, a progressive extenuation of presence' (1982: 313). I believe such an approach can provide a useful way of thinking about theatre. We don't need to deny that there is a basic (present) context between audience and stage - anymore than Derrida denies the existence of signatures - instead we need to look at how theatrical representation ruptures and plays with that present context.

While it has not been my purpose here to develop a detailed methodology for analysing the construction of presence in performance, I will offer an outline of how such analysis might be undertaken. If presence hinges on the context in which signification takes place, then emphasis should be placed on how the semiotic dimension of theatre 'performs' on the phenomenological context underpinning the actor/audience situation. The point is not to restate Bert States' 'object'- 'image' dichotomy, but to show how theatrical semiosis ruptures

the stable 'situation of enunciation' on which semiosis takes place. The spatial and temporal parameters of theatrical performance, far from housing a secure and stable 'present' experience, should instead be seen as delineating a place of almost infinite possibility in which a 'progressive extenuation of presence' can be enacted. To take a simple example, the act of placing a chair onto a bare stage can do strange things to 'presence'. The chair immediately complicates an audience's 'zero-point' relationship with a stage space, it both stands in for the 'class of objects' of which it is a member, and transforms the space around it. The chair sets up a relationship between stage and auditorium, grounding an abstract space in a familiar quotidian reality, suggesting an inhabited environment that an audience may feel compelled to imagine, while anticipating its occupation as a position through which an actor's voice will flesh out a theatrical world. If the chair faces the audience, we may prepare to be spoken *to*; if the chair is turned to a ninety-degree angle towards the wall stage right, we may already envisage not only the chair's occupant, but also the - as yet - invisible third party to whom the voice will be addressed. That 'zero-point' that we started with has been prised open; it is as though what we thought was a stable, secure perceptual field, has been found to have hidden trapdoors and passageways, creating layers of ambiguity within an - apparently - perceptually fixed, unambiguous space.

In the introduction, I used the example of Robert Lepage's *The Far Side of the Moon* as a way of illustrating the difficulties of quantifying the notion of presence in theatre. By returning to that example it can be seen that presence is not some predefined notion of 'nowness' or 'immediacy' but is discovered at the interface between theatrical signification and its 'situation of enunciation' (Pavis). One of the remarkable features of the performance was not only the speed with which settings changed - from the school of the character Philippe, to his one bedroom flat, to a late night bar, a lecture theatre, and the surface of the moon - but (the

audience's) being able to *see* these transformations taking place on the stage. The show's 'magic' arose from the dynamic between the ever moving imaginary space and the fixed stage space on which this conjuring act pivoted. As the ironing board is inverted to become a piece of gymnasium equipment or the laundry machine window is transformed into a goldfish bowl, a brain scanning machine, a porthole into space or an image of a full moon, the 'present' is being manipulated through theatricality. Semiotically, these mutations demonstrate the elasticity and transformability of the theatrical sign, but they are also operating on a situation of enunciation, slicing into that continuous present relationship between stage and auditorium. Even as the round window represents the moon it still remains that round window, while we may also remember it as being - only moments ago - a goldfish bowl in an apartment. Lepage forever complicates the relationship between stage and audience by keeping the stage space in an almost constant state of transition. As the ironing board is flipped over, extra layers of signification are added to the mix and another dimension of possibilities is added to the stage as a place of disclosure. Lepage creates a fiction in the mode of 'making-present', while also displaying the object-as-object in the mode of 'being-present'. Moreover, the effecting of such transformations and feats of theatrical mastery, contribute to Lepage's charismatic presence and confer a sense of the 'auratic' on the production; an overlap of the three modes of presence underlie the dynamics of the production.

Not only is it in the 'world' of *The Far Side of the Moon* that these transformations are taking place, the stage space is also being reconfigured. Familiar objects are imbued with a fictional potential, always liable to be taken up and reshaped. Lepage plays with that 'zero-degree' context between stage and audience in a manner analogous to the way that Derrida complicates Austin's attempt to establish a 'total context' between speaker and listener as a basis for the successful speech act. What appears to be a simple and direct relationship

between speaker/listener, stage/auditorium is 'ruptured' and progressively 'extenuated' by the very act of communication/representation. What *The Far Side of the Moon* makes explicit is that theatrical signification does not simply reinforce presence between stage and audience, but manipulates that context, playfully revealing its possibilities.

Towards the end of the performance, Lepage uses the giant mirror across the back of the stage to produce one of the show's most memorable moments. With a row of chairs fastened at an angle onto the floor we see Lepage lying on the stage, but in the mirror it is as though we are watching Lepage from above, sitting in an airport lounge. As he rolls across the floor, we see the character in the mirror moving effortlessly off his 'seat' and through the air, as though defying gravity as he dreams of space travel. In this moment, Lepage is both using - and fighting against - the gravitational pull of the stage, creating a remarkable illusion of flight, but at the same time anchored literally to the floor of the stage. Lepage demonstrates that while the stage is a place of infinite imaginary possibility, it is also a concrete place onto which the imaginary must be grafted.

Of course, *The Far Side of the Moon* is a very particular kind of theatre piece. By contrast, stage naturalism might seem to display a world more strictly gravitated and explicitly 'present'. However, as I have suggested in Chapter One, the very abundance of 'real' objects creates a potential to rupture distinctions between the actual and the illusory, the sign and the referent. In Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962), scenic illusion is pushed to the limit when George produces a short-barrelled shotgun and points it to his wife's head. Once George pulls the trigger the 'naturalism' is at once destabilised and reinforced; as the gun goes 'Pop' the pretence is revealed, 'from the barrel of the gun blossoms a large red and yellow Chinese parasol' (Albee 1962: 41). We are reminded of the theatrical situation, one

that is 'not real' even as the scene itself remains within the bounds of plausibility. The play demonstrates stage naturalism's power to maintain an uneasy balance between reality and illusion, to create a source of theatrical tension. George's utterance - 'Truth and illusion. Who knows the difference...' (1962: 119) - is both fictional and real; it relates simultaneously to a fictional world, and to the *impact* of that world on the spatio-temporal context of its performance.

The emphasis within such an approach to analysing presence in theatre leans not so much towards 'presencing', but to exploring how the 'extenuation of presence' is enacted on the stage. From the perspective of deconstruction, Jonathan Culler, recounting Zeno's paradox, makes a telling observation about how motion always displaces an object's being 'there':

Consider...the flight of an arrow. If reality is what is present at any given instant, the arrow produces a paradox. At any given moment it is in a particular spot; it is always in a particular spot and never in motion. We want to insist, quite justifiably, that the arrow *is* in motion at every instant from the beginning to the end of its flight, yet its motion is never present at any moment of presence. The presence of motion is conceivable, it turns out, only insofar as every instant is already marked with traces of past and future. Motion can be present, that is to say, only if the present instant is not something given but a product of the relations between past and future. Something can be happening in a given instant only if the instant is already divided within itself, inhabited by the nonpresent (Culler 1983: 94).

If presence is always already deferred - even within the perceptual act - then theatre might be seen as an art form that can embody this deferral. Culler's allusion to flight as that which defers the present seems appropriate in the context of *The Far Side of the Moon*, a performance obsessed with flight, whose longings to leave the earth's orbit are playfully rebuffed by the 'gravity' of the stage. The motion initiated between the shifting settings and characters seemed to disrupt 'presence'. Thus the paradox that Culler alludes to regarding the arrow has its reflection in the theatre. The arrow *is* somewhere at every given moment, yet is

never fully present at any one moment; while theatre's particular facility for playing with the ambiguities of presence is based on - to repeat Pavis' phrase - 'the continual *present* of the stage and its enunciation'. In *The Far Side of the Moon*, our attention is drawn to the stage and its properties as a concrete place, but, as the stage we see before us constantly shifts between fictional spaces, our perceptual relationship to the stage is mediated through the screen of signification. What Lepage demonstrates is that presence in theatre is *performed*, that theatrical signification - from the simple act of placing a chair onstage to the complex acts of conjuration in *The Far Side of the Moon* - carries a phenomenological *force*, modulating and shaping a concrete site of 'enunciation'. Theatrical experience is not so much underpinned by 'presence', but rather by what theatrical signification does *to* the experience of the present. As Lepage plays Philippe's mother taking clothes out of the laundry machine, she pulls out a tiny puppet astronaut through the round window, cuts an umbilical cord connecting the astronaut to the rocket (and to earth), and places the baby in the laundry basket - which becomes a pram as she wheels it away. With such fluidity of motion, the performance, like Culler's arrow, 'is never present at any moment of presence'.

However, to re-examine the flight of the arrow from a phenomenological perspective, we would also have to mention the 'zero-degree' physical position from which we observe the object. Culler's description is one of observing the arrow from no particular vantage point, but in a given context we would have the impression of the arrow's motion from an embodied perspective; it advances towards us, goes (hopefully) past us, and travels away from us. The arrow's presence is deferred because it is observed from a specific spatio-temporal point - from a *perspective* - and not, as it were, through the eyes of some all-seeing being. In other words, this deferral of presence is underpinned by a basic experiential context (a 'life-world')

as Husserl would call it), in which such a projectile can be encountered.⁹ With regards to theatre's potential to explore the elusiveness of presence, this ability arises from the gravitational pull of the stage, and its anchorage within a perceptual field inhabited by the audience. The transformational effects in *The Far Side of the Moon* were especially resonant because they were performed on a fixed location: such flights of imagination upon a few square yards of space.

A conceptual framework for thinking about presence in theatre allows us to make the following assertion: that presence in theatre does not refer to that which lies beyond or outside signification (the 'immediate', the 'live', the 'manifest'), but instead that presence is a *function* of theatrical signification. Thinking about theatre in terms of how signification can modulate or rupture this shared context allows us to resituate the notion of presence at the heart of theatrical experience. At the same time, approaching presence in terms of how it is constructed/manipulated/played with in performance does not limit us to making essentialist claims - however covert - about theatre's superiority to other media. Presence may not be theatre's final referent or defining attribute, but how theatre performs (or *acts*) on the present - on its 'situation of enunciation' - is arguably one of the specific features, and delights, of the theatrical medium.

Conclusion

Presence in theatre need not be seen as a romanticised and out-dated notion, nor an impossible aspiration or an instrument of political manipulation. Instead, we can look at presence in

⁹ I am of course assuming a direct perceptual relationship between the observer and the arrow; matters might be different were the arrow's flight being observed via a television!

theatre as an activity of signification, a constant dynamic process of disclosure and one of the most compelling elements of theatrical experience. One of the challenges left to us by theories of phenomenology and poststructuralism is that of appreciating theatre as a representational form that explores the intricacies of presence in particular ways, as we move away from merely privileging theatre as an essentially 'present' phenomenon. The spatial and temporal parameters of theatrical performance, far from housing a secure and stable 'present' experience, should instead be seen as place of almost infinite possibility in which presence is subjected to playful manipulation. Potentially, every action, sound and object, while contributing to a web of theatrical signification, is modulating a shared experiential context. It is my hope that this thesis contributes to a re-opening of the question of presence in theatre, and suggests new paths by which we might re-think the importance of presence as a critical concept for theatre studies.

Proceeding from a phenomenological insight, presence (the relationship between consciousness and object) can be understood in terms of our physical and perceptual grounding *in* the world. The striking theatricality of *The Far Side of the Moon* derives not just from its 'illusory' effects, but from its very grounding before an audience. That theatre is a site - like the body - a nodal point of representation and perspective, is also demonstrated by many other examples I have used throughout this thesis. We are seeing these characters in Grover's Corners, or imagining Robert Lepage as Philippe and André in *The Far Side of the Moon*, while these imaginings are taking place from *within* the world we inhabit. As Erika Fischer Lichte's puts it in her article 'From Theatre to Theatricality - How to Construct Reality': 'in theatre as well as in every day life we construct our own reality, proceeding from our perception of more or less the same kind of material (human beings in an environment)' (Fischer-Lichte 1995: 103). Like Briony, who constructs a fantasy world around the slashing

of nettles, a theatre audience engages in the (re)-moulding of the commonplace. Starting from a 'zero point' of theatrical enunciation ('human beings in an environment' as Fischer-Lichte puts it), theatrical signification punctures this basic context as we are drawn into different perceptual directions. In other words, we should not look at the stage as a place which reinforces a stable conception of presence, but as a site where the familiar quotidian reality of a shared human space is opened up to an array of presentational possibilities.

Conclusion

The Magic of Theatre

Presence - especially when alluded to in terms of the 'magical' appeal of actorly creativity in proximity to an audience - has been seen as a stale and clichéd way of applauding theatre's specificity, particularly when set against a critical backdrop which includes the likes of Derrida and Baudrillard. While phrases such as the 'magic of theatre' can be, as Philip Auslander and Roger Copeland point out, mawkishly sentimental, this phrase in particular seems oddly resonant in the context of a more critical approach to presence in the theatre. As I suggested briefly in chapter five, thinking of theatre in terms of 'magic' can evoke the idea of theatre as a conjuring act that forbids any straightforward sense of stability or presence. I would like to further consider the potential of this phrase, not with the aim of defending the complacent use of hackneyed expressions, but to reflect on one of the central threads of my discussion: theatre's potential to stage presence in a play of appearance and disappearance.

Tony Kushner's acclaimed work *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika* (first staged in 1992), a sweeping epic embracing American culture and politics in the 1980s, provides plenty to think about in terms of 'magic'. Not only do characters undergo supernatural experiences, but the 'magic of theatre' is also directly alluded to - both pointedly, and ironically - by one of the characters. The play centres around two couples; Prior and Louis' homosexual relationship breaks down after Prior contracts AIDS, while Joe, a Mormon lawyer, leaves his wife Harper, and strikes up a relationship with Louis. In Act 3, scene two, Harper and Prior meet in the diorama room of the Mormon's Visitor Centre. They fail to recognise one another in the dark. Harper has taken comfort from her voluntary work at the centre and from her

daily viewing of a diorama, a chronicle of Mormon migration across the desert. It so happens that the diorama features a 'father' dummy bearing a remarkable similarity to her estranged husband Joe. Prior, meanwhile, visits the centre at a time when he is both struggling to come to terms with his disease, and with his recent encounter with an angel. He tells Harper that he is engaged in research as an 'angelologist' (Kushner 1995: 194). The diorama begins as the red curtains before a small stage are pulled back and a recorded voiceover introduces the story; mannequins representing a Mormon family against a desert backdrop are revealed, consisting of two sons, a daughter, a mother and a father. Curiously however, the boy dummies remain immobile, their speech being recorded, whilst the 'father' - though his body also remains immobile - talks. The actor playing Joe takes the role of the father's dummy, but the weirdness of the scene is accentuated when Louis '*suddenly appears in the diorama*' (1995: 196). Louis and Joe proceed to act out a kind of domestic debate, much as if this scene were taking place 'at home' rather than within the patently artificial surroundings of the diorama.

While Prior watches Louis in disbelief, Harper observes: 'he's got absolutely *nothing* to do with the story' (1995: 197). As their debate becomes more heated, Joe and Louis exit the diorama, leaving Prior to exclaim: 'I JUST SAW MY LOVER, MY...ex-lover, with...your husband, with that...window-display Ken doll'. Harper however, who is not unaccustomed to experiencing drug-related hallucinations, is quite unfazed, and tells Prior not to 'have a hissy fit...it's just...the magic of theatre or something' (1995: 199). Meanwhile, the curtains, having been closed, are reopened to reveal that '*The father dummy is back - a real dummy this time*'. Perhaps it was a fantasy all along? The diorama is 'closed for repairs' and Prior leaves; while Harper sits before the stage, the Mormon mother 'comes to life' and beckons her to leave - which they do - as the scene comes to a close.

This is a scene which gives us much to think about in terms of theatre's potential elusiveness, instability, and 'magic'. Louis and Joe's interaction takes place as though it were in another time and place from the diorama, as Kushner exploits the 'split stage' technique that he employs throughout the play, only to collapse two separate locations into one indeterminate (though oddly plausible) zone. An 'appearance' from another time and place 'disappears' the immediate 'reality' of the (blatantly artificial) diorama.¹ When Harper speaks of 'the magic of theatre', the phrase itself adds a further complexity; it functions both as an attempt to explain the extraordinary scene within the diorama, and as an ironic meta-theatrical nod to the 'real' theatre audience. On the level at which Harper seems to aim, the phrase seems to suggest the auratic mode of presence ('wow, isn't theatre amazing...'), evoking the complacent sentimentality that occasionally creeps into the extolment of theatrical presence. Harper explains the unfathomable by referring to theatre's authority and power to conjure illusions - theatre's 'magical' properties. Simultaneously however, the phrase seems to demystify the 'aura' of the stage. The invocation of such a cliché serves to underline the 'real' audience's awareness of how Prior and Harper's experience is being constructed. The 'magic of theatre' is the game that Kushner plays with his characters: elaborate deceptions are set up to which the characters have to respond, and attempt to rationalise. The aura of the stage is thus invoked and disarmed in the same moment: the 'magic' is itself a conceit produced by the play's own manipulation of theatrical convention.

However, the collapse of spatio-temporal locations not only challenges the perceptual orientation of the characters. Just as Harper and Prior's sense of reality and perspective is destabilised, the audience is never simply allowed to be 'wiser' than the characters. When the diorama curtain opens the second time to reveal a '*real dummy*' where Joe had been, the

¹ For cultural historian Steven Connor, contemporary theatrical performance - specifically that which he describes as 'postmodern' - can be understood in terms of how presence is complicated. Connor's suggestion that postmodern drama frequently contains 'manipulated lurches between realistic drama and staged artificiality' (Connor 1996: 114) would seem especially true of *Angels in America*.

audience's sense of perspective is challenged as well as that of the characters. At the end of the scene, when Harper begins to interact with the 'mother' figure in the diorama - a moment which points to theatre's ability to puncture and expand its own fictional parameters - it is the audience who may be left to ponder on the 'magic of theatre'.

The sense in which the 'magic of theatre' refers to a simultaneous construction and disassembling of aura is reinforced in Kushner's insistence (in his notes at the start of the play) that:

The moments of magic - all of them - are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion - which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing (1995: 141).

The 'magic' Kushner aims at is *not* that expressed in the sentiments of Harper, whereby theatre is lauded for its apparent ability to spontaneously bring characters or fictional worlds 'to life', rather it is theatre's potential to undercut any such apparent spontaneity. Theatre is at its best, Kushner seems to suggest, when it comments on its own inability to achieve a moment of stable presence: 'when the angel comes through at the end of *Millenium* you see the wires, and that's the magic of theatre' (cited in Vorlicky 1998: 215). The aura of theatre refers to its own ability to play with contingency, rather than, as with practitioners such as Appia and Grotowski, the overcoming of this contingency.

Indeed, when we think of the 'magic of theatre', we are perhaps not referring to any straightforward notion of 'presence' (where would be the 'magic' in that?) but to a much more complex interaction between disclosure and concealment. A magic trick for instance will often begin in quotidian reality - an 'empty' hat or a mundane object - only to make that

very reality disappear, reappear or miraculously multiply. Magic playfully ruptures the apparently simple consciousness-to-object relationship we have with the world that surrounds us. David Mamet in his book *Three Uses of the Knife*, reminds us that ‘of course the magician didn’t make that duck disappear. What he did was something of much greater worth - he gave a moment of joy and astonishment to some who were delighted by it’. (Mamet 1998: 68) We know that the magician didn’t make the duck disappear, yet the magician gives us the opportunity to ‘see’ something that did not - could not - happen. There is willing imaginative collusion involved in watching the conjuring act, and in theatre this collusion forms the ground on which presence is manipulated on the stage. The ‘magic of theatre’ can therefore suggest an overlap of the three modes of presence; the literally present is manipulated to *make-present* fictional propositions, whose very interaction points to the ‘aura’ of the stage with its potential to put presence into play.

Many of the theorisations of presence I have examined throughout this thesis have been opposed to this unstable shifting between modes of presence in the theatre. Theories I have looked at under the ‘fictional mode’ of presence, have tended to emphasise theatre’s ability to overcome the materiality of theatre, whilst theories of ‘literal presence’ have pointed to this material basis as a means of liberation from the fictional. Notions of ‘auratic presence’ have theorised theatre’s potential to transcend both contingency and pretence, and to generate a sense of reverence for theatre’s ‘magic’. Such notions ultimately seem to aim at an arrest of theatre’s playfulness, to ‘smooth out’ the bumps and inconsistencies within theatre’s complexity as a medium, to impose a singular notion of presence upon an art form whose modes of presentation frequently displace one another. Perhaps it is not surprising therefore, that theatrical presence has been subject to serious examination and questioning.

However, it is just this potential, to question and disrupt 'presence' of any singular kind (or with a capital 'P') which, as Kushner's *Angels in America* seems to suggest, brings us closer to understanding the 'magic of theatre'. At a time when concepts of presence are seen as problematic, when notions of perception and subjectivity are being (re)addressed in terms of how experience is never 'pure' but always encoded within cultural inter-texts, theatre's ability to complicate the experience of the present seems especially relevant. Indeed, theatre's manipulation of presence can be seen as a crucial asset at a time when technologically produced representations are increasingly capable of concealing the artificiality of their construction. In his book *Performance*, Julian Hilton wrote of 'the central theatrical paradox: that a mode of expression so transparently manufactured and artificial is simultaneously the agent of the most intense perception we may ever have of the real' (Hilton 1987: 1). Theatre, through its very 'artificiality', does not merely point to an a priori reality which is 'there' for us, but complicates the relationship between consciousness and world, highlighting our part in the construction of what we perceive around us. Furthermore, it is theatre's situation 'within' our space-time that allows its representations to make presence strange and ambiguous, exposing the illusions of 'liveness' and 'immediacy'. David George has written of theatre that it recognises and enforces a conception of reality as plural and parallel, indeterminate and hypothetical, the co-creation of spectators-players - in a word, potential (George 1989: 174). In theatre, 'presence' can become an undecided field of potential rather than a fixed spatio-temporal point securely given in the act of perception.

Not all theatre resembles a magician's act of conjuration to the extent of say *The Far Side of the Moon* or *Angels in America*, but a potential on which theatrical representation can capitalise involves this rupture of the present. If these theatrical examples seem to exhibit this sense of magic, they do so by drawing attention to theatre's overlapping modes of presentation, and

how they converge to construct an experience which reveals the potential for magic in the theatrical. Approaching theatre in terms of 'magic' does not demonstrate that all theatre is the same, but offers a framework for understanding the ways in which theatrical experience is shaped by (amongst many other factors) theatre's manipulation of presence. Thinking critically about presence should in no way diminish or negate theatre's 'magic', but should help us to better appreciate it.

This thesis, in attempting to explore the question of presence in theatre and to demonstrate the continuing relevance and usefulness of this concept to contemporary debates, is situated at the cusp of much broader issues. How do we analyse the complex convergence of presences in theatre? How do we approach the new experiential possibilities opened up by the interaction of media technology and stage performers? How do we understand theatre's potential to critique and expose the illusions of 'full' presence without losing sight of theatre's medium specificity? These are among the questions facing the continuing analysis of presence in theatre, and which this thesis has attempted to suggest ways of approaching. Analysing theatre not only needs to address how theatre signifies, but also what that signification *does* to the experiential field encompassing stage and audience. Presence, as Herbert Blau has pointed out, may be one of theatre's most powerful illusions, but this does not release us from the need to understand the particular ways in which theatre's 'magic' makes those illusions present for us.

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