

Invisible Presences—Performance Intertextuality

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The analysis of theatrical performance has always provided a problem of particular difficulty to semiotic theory, for a variety of reasons—the ephemerality of the event, the complexity of the interrelationships of so many communicative channels, the almost infinite variety of physical realizations that may be generated from a single written script, the phenomenological concerns generated by the physical presence of the event, and the effects upon interpretation of changing historical and social reception strategies. Historical placement is of course a concern involved in analysing the interpretive process of any work of art, but it is particularly obvious and important in theatre, where an institutional collective process at a particular historical moment is always involved both in the specific realization and in the specific reception of the work.

Certain aspects of this complex problem have received useful attention, others have been very little considered. The Prague circle provided some useful distinctions in dealing with, for example, the various operations of the actor in the semiotic process.¹

More recently, theorists with a phenomenological orientation or with an interest in reception aesthetics have further enriched our understanding of what is involved in the theatre event. Clearly much remains to be explored. One area is the effect on theatrical reception of the re-use of the same performance elements or combinations of elements in physical realizations of what might be quite different written scripts.

The most obvious example of this is the individual actor, who in the course of a career will be seen by the public in many different roles.

Even in the case of actors who give particular attention to creating a very different character for every play in which they appear, the memory of their previous performances, especially if these are effective ones, will inevitably remain as a part of the theatrical institution, and affect future casting, future publicity, and through casting, publicity, and collective memory, future experiences of audiences in the theatre.

The Prague School theorists provided a useful three-part model for the analysis of acting—actor, character, and stage figure, where the stage figure was the product created by the actor, the character that figure as interpreted by the audience. The expressive function of the acting sign is centred on the actor, the referential on the stage figure, the conative on the audience. The conative work of the audience always results from a blending of the expressive orientation of the actor and the referential of the stage figure, and the creative collision of these two elements. This balance between the work of the actor and the work of the audience so widely found in the Prague writings of the 1930s and early 1940s was rarely if ever found in the theoretical studies of the 1960s and 1970s when semiotic analysis was again taken up for the study of theatre. This new generation focused almost exclusively upon the production of signs, acting signs among them, in the theatre, with almost no attention to the interpretative contribution. Later theorists, modifying this position, have suggested that the semiotic theory of the 1960s and 1970s took too literally Ferdinand de Saussure's binarism of signifier and signified and would have found a more sensitive model in C. S. Peirce's triad, which lays equal emphasis upon interpretation. In terms of acting analysis,

and of the Prague theorists, one might say that theorists of the 1960s and 1970s emphasized the construction of the stage figure by the actor, but paid little attention to the connotative construction of the character by the audience. Perhaps this was because the newer theorists, unlike the members of the Prague school, generally had little personal experience in actual theatre production and thus were less aware of the importance and the dynamics of reception.

Literary and film theory, also, which provided models for this later generation of semiotic analysis, tended at first to ignore reception, but during the 1970s this attitude sharply changed, a change soon reflected in theatre theory as well so that by the beginning of the 1980s Marco de Marinis and others had begun to call for a new approach to semiotic analysis of the theatre, and one much closer to that of the 1930s, an approach that would end the almost exclusive focus on the production of the sign, while bracketing any contributions from the audience.² This same unbalance has also resulted, these theorists noted, in an emphasis on the referential function of the sign, while the expressive is ignored or treated as raw material to be absorbed if possible by the referential. A more balanced view has been more recently reached by such theorists as Jean Alter and Michael Quinn. In his *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre* (1990), Alter proposed a model of theatre based upon a creative dialectic between what he calls referential and performant functions, the former semiotic, the latter 'experienced directly'.³ Similarly in his article 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting' (1990), Quinn provides a rich analysis of one major aspect of the expressive function, in which the personal qualities of the individual actor dominate the perception of the actor's reference to fictional events.⁴

While these studies by Alter and Quinn are extremely important in stressing the critical tension, sometimes positive and sometimes not, between the actor and the character, another but different phenomenon has been relatively unexplored. This phenomenon may involve any and every aspect of theatrical production, though it is perhaps most clearly seen in acting. It is also not so easily placed in the semiotic/direct experience dialectic as Alter's 'performance' or

Quinn's 'expression', but it is related to both. Alter's 'performance', although it acknowledges the importance of reception, continue to emphasize the stage figure, through the exhibition of performative skills by the actor. Here the audience's role is still essentially one of passive appreciation. Quinn's interest in 'celebrity' comes closer to the more general phenomenon that interests me, since celebrity, unlike Alter's performance, is not something created during the theatrical experience by the actor, but is dependent upon a specific audience contribution, the result of the audience's previous exposure to socially generated information about the actor. Clearly this phenomenon has little to do with the stage figure, and Quinn goes so far as to suggest that it operates outside the bounds of character as well: 'in the context of public identity there comes to exist a link between performer and audience quite apart from the dramatic character'. In both America and Europe in recent years theatres have sought to attract audiences by featuring well-known television or recording personalities as stars, but the danger of featuring Sting as Mack the Knife or putting Madonna in Mamet's *Speed-the-Plow* is that their already established persona will simply not fit into the rest of the dramatic structure. Quinn is surely quite correct in stressing the tendency of celebrity to subvert both the authority of the dramatic role itself and that of the production ensemble.

Yet celebrity often bears a more complex relationship to character than a merely adversarial or subversive one, and it is, moreover, by no means the only element extraneous to the fictive world that an audience brings to its reception of an actor's work. As Quinn notes, the school play and the folk drama, utilizing people known in other contexts, also encourage an attention to the actor at the expense of the stage figure. Still more important in the normal theatre experience is the audience's experience with an actor in previous roles, a concern not dealt with by either of these theorists. We are not talking here of celebrity, which concerns a public persona of an actor that may or may not be related to actual theatrical performance, nor of a possible acquaintance with the actor in any non-theatrical context, but of the audience's specific experience of that actor in previous per-

formance situations. An individual actor in the course of a career will be seen by a public in many different roles. Even in the case of actors who give particular attention to creating a very different character for every play in which they appear, the memory of their previous performances, especially if these are effective ones, will inevitably remain as a part of the theatrical institution, and will affect future casting, future publicity, and through casting, publicity, and collective memory, future experiences of audiences in the theatre. This dynamic will operate whether the actor is a 'celebrity' or not, or even whether the actor has been particularly successful in Alter's 'performative function' or not.

The process of recalling previous roles while watching the creation of new ones is particularly encouraged by the rather odd practice of providing in theatre programmes actors' biographies listing previous roles, a practice so honoured in the American theatre that this information is offered even in the absence of almost any other background information on the play or production. Further, 'ghosting' of previous roles in our reception of later ones is institutionally encouraged, not only by programme practice, but by marketing and publicity. A recent article in *New York Newsday*, for example, began:

Three of the most-loved women in America will be on stage together tonight. There's actress Jean Stapleton. There's Julia Child, as played by Stapleton (stage figure and character). And there's the invisible but inevitable presence of Edith Bunker, the loveable Queens housewife Stapleton created for *All in the Family*.⁵

Although Jean Stapleton is a stage actress of considerable experience and ability, any role she plays at this point in her career will for much of the audience be 'ghosted' by the 'invisible but inevitable' presence of Edith Bunker. When Greg Mosher cast Spaulding Grey as the Narrator in *Our Town*, it was reportedly not for commercial reasons but to give a more contemporary 'feel' to the play, since audiences could be expected to associate Grey with such material. This succeeded all too well. The New York audiences most familiar with Grey's work

thought not only of his recently released film *Swimming to Cambodia* but also of his connection with the Wooster Group and the famous parodies of *Our Town* in *Routes 1 and 9*. Thus when Grey delivered such a line as 'Nice town, y'know what I mean?', the ghost of his flip modern persona converted it into a modern, ironic, cynical put-down, and the sentimental nostalgia that drives the play was constantly disrupted.

Even when actors are not associated in the public (and media) mind with a certain specific role or a certain stock type, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, once their career is under way, for them to avoid an aura of expectations based on past roles. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the theatre-going public in any city with a continuous theatre establishment is very likely to view any new creation by an actor with some experience not only 'ghosted' by previous roles, but by an interpretive persona created and maintained by the institutional structures of media and publicity, that offer for all but the most obscure productions the complex interpretive matrix that arouse certain expectations often even before the play opens and almost certainly before the play is experienced in the theatre.

The 'invisible but inevitable' ghosts of previous roles in the theatre has certain parallels to the phenomenon of intertextuality in reading where 'ghosts' of previous reading experiences continually condition our activity, though the phenomenological physical presence of the actor in different performance texts gives this phenomenon a particularly complex and powerful quality in the theatre. Like literary intertextuality, but perhaps even more strikingly, it may be a source of distraction, a valuable tool for interpretation, or a source of enrichment and deepened pleasure in the work. Many a stage character, as Quinn suggests, has been confused or destroyed by distractions arising from the celebrity of a well-known star, but it is also true that many characters, inadequately drawn in the script, have been made rich and interesting on stage by the infusion of some particular actor's celebrity.

To extend this positive benefit of celebrity even further, one of the most powerful and positive experiences in the theatre arises from

seeing a series of creations by those great actors in every theatre generation who in addition to creating memorable roles gradually take on a special aura of achievement, becoming in a sense indices of the art itself, celebrity, if you will, but celebrity of a particular kind, based not so much on public notoriety but on a reputation for theatrical achievement. Gielgud and Olivier are two obvious contemporary examples. When such actors appear in a role, their stage figures and characters are ghosted not only by memories of specific past performances, but perhaps even more importantly, by a general audience awareness of the significance of the achievement represented by those performances. Returning to the Prague distinctions, we might say that audiences are here unusually aware of the actor as well as of the stage figure and character, but in a particularly powerful and positive way. This effect is of course further heightened when the artist is nearing the end of a distinguished career. When John Gielgud plays Prospero, as he has done several times in recent years, the audience's view of the character is powerfully conditioned by ghosts of this great actor's own career, and Gielgud can draw upon that phenomenon to achieve an almost unbearable poignancy in his final 'Now my charms are all o'erthrown/And what strength I have's mine own,—/Which is most faint.' Similarly when the ageing Olivier played the ageing James Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, he created an unforgettable moment when the miserly Tyrone climbs on the table to turn off an overhead light and pauses a moment, looking out into the audience with the light sharply defining his features. In that instant the fictive actor Tyrone, created at the matrix of stage figure and character, achieved a further stunning fusion in the minds of the audience with the awareness of Olivier as actor and, through a sudden flashback to Olivier's achievement through a long career, as an index for the art of acting itself.

So far my examples of performance 'ghosting' have been drawn from the work of the individual actor, and this is the most familiar form of this phenomenon, particularly in the American theatre, where actors are normally assembled for a specific production and then dispersed. Since every physical element of a production

can in fact be recycled in other productions, however, one could extend the workings of 'ghosting' upon audience reception throughout the production apparatus: to costumes, to scenic elements, and to very complex mixtures of production elements. This is most clearly seen in those theatres (the most common arrangement in the history of the art) with established performance ensembles and a certain stability of relationships among performers and between groups of performers and their audiences. Obviously this dynamic was an important part of the performance experience, for example, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stock companies. The noble father, the ingénue, the *jeune premier* and so on repeated predictable structures of relationships in play after play, and audiences obviously used their memories of past performances of these actors to orient themselves to each new production.

Even in the more individualized plays and productions of today, however, particular repeated combinations of actors and relationships can easily summon up echoes of sequences in other dramas. For example, in the recent production of Ibsen's *Wild Duck* at the National Theatre of Norway there was a powerful and original sequence when Gina confesses to Hjalmar that he may not be Hedwig's father. Hjalmar reacted violently, pursuing her about the stage and then gives his unresisting wife a series of blows. This reaction is itself unusual and striking, but the experience of it was clearly coloured, audience members and critics have alike reported, by the memory of a recent *Hamlet* at this same theatre when the actor then playing Hjalmar had played Hamlet, and in the bedchamber scene very similarly attacked Gertrude, played by the actress now playing Gina. In such cases, one might speak of a kind of performance intertextuality, based not on literary, but on performative echoes, since the literary texts of these two scenes have very little in common. Ghostings of this sort are quite different from the consciously foregrounded performance quotations found, for example, in theatrical parodies, and, much more rarely, in serious drama (as when the actress playing Lavinia in Daniel Mesguich's *Titus Andronicus* clearly imitated Helene Weigel's famous 'silent scream' from *Mother Courage*). Like the invisible presences of the

past roles of individual actors, past interactions of actors may be a calculated part of the production apparatus or may arise unexpectedly in the minds of the public, but in either case they may work equally strongly to condition the reading of the scene.

In the modern theatre, where directors or designers may be as responsible as the actors for the effects of a particular production, this same dynamic can operate for them. Were we to adopt the Prague three-part acting model to directing, the part represented by the actor would now be filled by the more complex combination of the director's vision and the various raw material available: actors, costumes, lighting, and so on. The role of stage figure would correspond to the specific way that raw material was shaped into the *mise en scène*, and the character would be that *mise en scène* as interpreted by the audience. In the modern theatre one may clearly speak of something very akin to celebrity as an important part of the reception, whether it is regarded as a reinforcement or a distraction. The majority of the public that attends a new production by any well-known director, a Peter Stein, a Patrice Chéreau, a Giorgio Strehler, a Luca Ronconi, especially when the director is associated with an entire production apparatus, will inevitably bring to the experience memories of earlier productions by these directors and view each new work in part in its relationship to a developing *œuvre*.

Recent productions by Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine, two of the most renowned current directors, provide clear examples of this. Mnouchkine used visual referents from the Japanese Kabuki theatre in her visually stunning and highly successful *Richard II* in 1982 as well as in her subsequent *Twelfth Night* and *Henry IV*. After these she undertook two major epics based on recent Asian history, *Sihanouk* and the *Indiade*. Her most recent project, *Les Atrides*, a tetralogy combining Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* and the three parts of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, achieves brilliant visual effects by the evocation of Indian, and especially Kathakali costumes, makeup, and performance style. For those familiar with Mnouchkine's previous work, however, and this would surely include the vast majority of those who are attending *Les Atrides*, the primary interpretive contextualization of

this major work is not the Greek dramas presumably being presented, nor even (as it may have been in the case of *Richard II*) the specific Asiatic performance tradition being invoked, but rather the now decade-long Orientalist project, which has now come full circle, with the geographical orientation of the recent *Indiade* joined to the grafting of Oriental performance onto a Western classic in the manner of *Richard II*.

Although Peter Brook's stated goals are quite different from Mnouchkine's, the dynamics of contemporary publicity and reception have resulted in an interesting convergence in response to their work. Brook has been involved now for a number of years at his Research Centre in attempting to create a kind of trans-cultural theatre, speaking in a voice unique to no specific group, but attempting to express something essential in the human experience in a manner immediately accessible to viewers from any culture. The problem with this project is that theatre itself is a culturally encoded phenomenon, and anything that goes into it is invariably going to be filtered through some kind of cultural consciousness. Instead of a truly transcultural theatre, Brook has produced a theatre that continues to repeat certain images and techniques that have now become a hallmark not of some universal expression but of the modern 'Brook' style—dirt floors with pools of water, Indian musical instruments, rugs, earth colours, poles and banners, and so on. For most audience members Brook's recent *The Tempest* inevitably summoned up ghosts of his *Mahabharata*, not because both draw upon some pre-cultural repertoire of basic human images, but because both draw upon the visual and aural vocabulary and use most of the same actors. These are of course immediately recognizable to any audience member familiar, as almost any Brook audience member will surely be, with those works. The 'character' of any new Brook production, like that of any new Mnouchkine production is now heavily conditioned by the 'celebrity' of the Brook and Mnouchkine continuing enterprises.

Despite the fact that Brook, by his recirculation of the same visual elements and both directors by their return to Eastern, and especially Indian motifs, have provided a performance context that seems to encourage this sort of

Plate 6: The male chorus in the recent Théâtre du Soleil production of the *Agamemnon*, the second in their four-play cycle, *Les Atrides*, which began with Euripedes' *Iphigenia in Aulis* as a prelude to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. [Photo: © Martine Franck/Magnum, BAM Press]



audience response, there is little evidence that either has sought to capitalize on the effect of 'ghosting'. To the extent that it caused the audience to associate a work with its director, as it clearly does, Brook in particular would probably not even see this effect as a positive one.

Yet like celebrity in acting, the audience's continued awareness of a director's previous work can, if imaginatively utilized, provide a source for enriched experience rather than a distraction. Perhaps the outstanding modern example of this is the work of Tadeusz Kantor, who continually introduced in his later works conscious echoes of previous ones, utilizing the same actors, the same images, sometimes even the same entire sequences, with the result that his final compositions offered a deeply moving evocation of years of theatrical experience for those in his audience, by this times a clear majority, who had seen a number of his works.

This inescapable contextualization of a new work within the *œuvre* of a well-known director or producing organization has been scarcely touched upon by semiotic or other production analysis, yet any meaningful discussion of a production such as, for example, Brook's *Tempest*, Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides* or Kantor's *Today is my Birthday* in terms of the process of audience concretization involved in the Prague School

concept of productive reception, really should begin with the momentum and expectations developed by the project of each of these directors up to this new work, which is very likely to have a greater effect on the actual experience of the work than any specific production choices made, or even the choice of the play itself. Semiotic and materialist researchers have commendably recognized that a proper study of the theatre must move beyond the literary text to the socio-cultural matrix of the performance, but such researchers have been understandably reluctant to venture far outside the phenomena of the specific performance event in the analysis of an audience's response to that event. An important part of the actual reception process of theatre has thus been little considered.

Such caution seems particularly misplaced in the case of so important and so readily documented a phenomenon as past performance experience with the specific artists engaged in an event. Obviously the theatre-going public develops attachments to particular artists or companies and sees their work more as a continuing project than as a series of discrete events. Advertising and publicity before the production appears and reviewing afterward reinforce this 'ghosting'. We are not likely ever to come very close to understanding the Prague school's con-

cept of character, or the equivalent of the dramatic character on the level of the production as a whole, unless we take into account those 'invisible but inevitable' figures and experiences that the theatre's recycling of elements of the production apparatus inevitably introduces into the experience.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Ladislav Matejka and Irwin Titunik, eds., *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* (Cambridge, MA, 1976).
2. See, for example, Marco de Marinis, 'Theatrical Comprehension: A Socio-Semiotic Approach', *Theater* 15:1 (Winter, 1983), pp. 12–17.
3. Jean Alter *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre* (Philadelphia, 1990), p. 32.
4. Michael Quinn, 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting', *New Theatre Quarterly* 22 (1990), pp. 158–67.
5. 'Bon Appetite', *New York Newsday*, 11 October 1991, p. 52.