UNSETTLED SPECTATORSHIP: THE UNFORESEEN IMPLICATIONS OF
VIEWING THE WORKS OF ANTONIN ARTAUD, SAMUEL BECKETT, AND
MARTIN MCDONAGH

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by

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Abstract

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In this dissertation, I ask what happens when spectatorship becomes unsettled by troubling ethical questions directed by the play-world at the spectator.

In Chapter One I approach the problem of performance studies—a discipline in which definitions and aims are still hotly contested. In recent years, a new approach to performance has come to prominence through the work of the International Federation for Theatre Research, studying theatre as event. From the works of John Tulloch and Willmar Sauter, I take certain concepts and methodologies, such as frames, borders, and contexts, and analysis and description of audience reaction and composition. I expand on their work by linking this school of performance studies to phenomenological studies of the event by Jean-Luc Marion and Claude Romano. I show how earlier performance theory from a phenomenological standpoint can be enhanced by these notions of the event as unforeseen and the spectator as a receiver who is, in a sense, constructed by the event and not constructing it from his own intending consciousness.

I then look at specific ethical quandaries provoked by performances of Antonin Artaud’s, Samuel Beckett’s and Martin McDonagh’s works. In Artaud, I look at the apparent inconsistencies between his acclaimed theories and the dismal performance
histories. Comparing him with British playwright, Sarah Kane, I conclude that any Theatre of Cruelty, even in 1990s Britain, alienates audiences because it forces spectators into an uncomfortable proximity to the artist’s mental and physical anguish. Chapter Three takes up the question of the centrality of Waiting for Godot’s popularity in prison theatre venues and programs to the creation of an Existentialist “Godot construct.” By comparing the prison machine to the Cartesian mind-body unity, I conclude that these performances force the spectators who watch them on video recording into an uncomfortable position of dual identification: both with the Godot-machine (the penal system which represents them) and with the actor-inmates, pursuing and at times rejecting an Existentialist concept of freedom. In the final chapter I examine the role of laughter in Martin McDonagh’s Leenane Trilogy, and the role of postmodern kitsch and multimedia intertextuality in simultaneously globalizing and hyper-localizing McDonagh. Familiarity with globalized pop culture lulls audiences into incriminating laughter and, often, outrage.
For David,
who cheerfully encouraged me to continue somehow on through the merdecluse
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1.1 Amateurs: For the Love of Theatre

Peter Brook, the theatre director and founder of the International Center for Theatrical Research (CIRF), famously looked at theatre as an “empty space,” falling into one of four models: deadly, holy, rough and immediate. That empty space is quickly filled with objects, actors, sounds, light, and finally spectators, any of which can transform a theatrical event from ordinary (deadly and dull) into something extraordinary (holy, rough, or immediate). Reacting in what Antonin Artaud would call an alchemical relation, these elements add up to so great a whole that no exhaustive catalogue of the parts could sum up what transpired in that formerly empty space. The space overflows with meanings. It is saturated with experiences.

Let’s imagine alchemy possible when two different audiences react to very different types of theatrical forms: the avant-garde and the standard American musical. Both were amateur performances. Though we could (and will) compare professional productions, these amateur events offer a brief introduction to what will emerge as a phenomenological mode of performance analysis. The first event is a performance of Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* at the University of Notre Dame in 2007 and the
other a performance of Irving Berlin’s *Annie Get Your Gun* by the Grove City Area High School in 2011. In the case of *The Pillowman*, an independent student production taking place in a black-box theatre, a team of student ushers welcomed the audience and asked them in friendly but firm tones if they would like to take off their shoes and perhaps recline on the mattresses strewn around the perimeter of the stage? The audience filled perhaps three-fourths of the seats. No one other than my companion and I chose to recline on the mattresses. The mattresses had lots of pillows for resting one’s head. In the case of *Annie Get Your Gun*, due to a schedule conflict, I attended on the night of the last dress rehearsal to see a young friend playing the title role. I entered from a side door that led to the backstage area common to high school theaters and was led to the auditorium by a student who asked if I was a member of the George Junior group. George Junior Republic is “one of the country’s largest, private, non-profit residential treatment facilities for at-risk youth.”¹ I would be attending the performance with about one hundred students of high school age from this facility, which exists on the edge of a rural Pennsylvania town.

Some unexpected events occurred at both performances—certainly unexpected on the part of this spectator. In the case of *The Pillowman*, abandoning my shoes left me and my companion feeling vulnerable and trapped. If the play became too uncomfortable, we had no way of finding our shoes and leaving. Others in the audience expressed annoyance at having to display their socks in public. The mattresses and pillows and the suggestion to lie down seemed fun and quirky in an avant-garde drama about bed-time stories gone awry. My friend and I stretched out on the floor and relaxed, only to be made uncomfortable immediately upon the play’s opening violent exchanges between the main character, Katurian, and the secret police that suspect him of murder. We tried to

¹ [http://www.georgejuniorrepublic.org](http://www.georgejuniorrepublic.org)
surreptitiously move from a reclining position to a seated position, despite our full visibility on the edge of the stage. Our discomfort at the proximity of the violence was always fully lighted and visible to others. The inability to move to another seat (or to take our shoes and leave) heightened the sense of danger.

*Annie Get Your Gun* opposes almost every element of the avant-garde with its big-budget Broadway show-tunes, racially inappropriate American history, antiquated gender roles, and popularity with high school musical directors. In this performance event, the element of danger came from the presence of a possibly hostile audience. As the musical moved in its familiar formula of songs and shooting antics, the audience’s reactions became the most interesting performance in the room. They scoffed in derision at many of the supposedly dangerous shooting tricks. They reacted with outrage when the young Annie is talked into the first shooting contest and promised $5 if she wins. The man who arranges the match keeps the other $95 of the prize money for himself. The young men audibly reacted, “He’s cheating her!” And “He’s only giving her five!” They laughed at the love scenes and cat-called all kisses. They whistled and stomped when the dancing girls did a series of back flips that ended in deep splits. And they were moved by Annie’s inability to read the newspaper reviews of her performance. “She can’t read!” they commented in sympathy.

These performance events are unusual, unexpected…unforeseen even. I call them unforeseen because of the peculiar alchemy that developed between play, performers, and spectators on that particular night, never to be repeated. In the case of *The Pillowman*, only my friend and I chose to recline on the mattresses. The other audience members sat in chairs on risers behind the floor-level mattresses. They were thus both “above” us and behind us, making us part of the performance, in essence. Thus, without intending to, my
friend and I were acting in the event by our visible reactions and even the choice of where to sit. In the case of *Annie Get Your Gun*, the presence of a boys’ reformatory as co-spectators surprised me and added to my delight in the repetition of an otherwise trying musical. Their interest in the cheating and Annie’s illiteracy showed their attentiveness—an attentiveness contrary to their slouching postures and frequent sighs of boredom.

The question of what *happens* in any given performance is, at its base, a deeply phenomenological question. It asks, “what appeared on that night?” and seeks to answer the question with the powers of description. Theatre criticism and performance studies have been trying to map and predict audience responses for decades. Whether materialist (Augusto Boal), semiological (Patrice Pavis), semiotic (Keir Elam) or sociological (Richard Schechner), the field of performance studies creates models to understand how a performance works. In this dissertation I will look to newer iterations of performance theory, so-called event studies, to understand how a performance unfolds and even explodes before performer and spectator alike. The Theatrical Event Working Group of the International Federation of Theatre Research has provided several useful paradigms for analyzing performance as embedded within both frames and contexts. Because every theatrical event is a profoundly contextual experience, I will give context and text equal weight, asking questions about where and when and how certain performances came to be, and what effect time and place and demographic have had on an author’s perception and reception across time.²

² Especially useful is Willmar Sauter’s category of “cultural contexts” to describe the interplay of both “socio-political content and modes of presentation” (22-23). Henri Schoenmakers and John Tulloch. “From Audience Research to the Study of
Though the many methods of performance studies can detail how a performance signifies, how it transmits culture, and how it can reform economic injustices, I want to show how the ethical demand certain performances place on their spectators are best described phenomenologically, or through narrative. I will use several new concepts from the phenomenological works of Jean-Luc Marion and Claude Romano to show how theatrical performances can, in certain conditions, change the spectator’s world. The spectator in perceiving the world anew can no longer live as he had before. The case of Claudius’s encounter with “The Mousetrap” in Hamlet will illustrate this power of the theatrical event to challenge individual spectators’ beliefs and actions.

1.2 Why The Avant-Garde?

“Abstract expressionism is so mid to late-eighties.” ---Spaced

“Avant-garde” has become a cliché for an inscrutable form of performance art that alienates and shames bourgeois audiences. The cult classic television series Spaced mocks this type of performance, characterized as it is by trendiness, deliberately obtuse gestures, setting, and costuming, and nonsense monologue. What I hope to demonstrate in the course of analyzing Antonin Artaud, Sarah Kane, Samuel Beckett, and Martin McDonagh, is the progress the avant-garde has made into the mainstream of global culture. Richard Schechner, father of “performance studies” as a discipline, defines the avant-garde as both a historical phenomenon and a set of practices. In The Future of Ritual (1993), he identifies five sub-headings under the “avant-garde”: the historical avant-garde, the forward-looking avant-garde, a tradition-seeking avant-garde, and an

intercultural avant-garde. Looking at authors as diverse as Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, and Martin McDonagh can only be justified by situating them within their respective positions in this multifaceted avant-garde tradition. So, though the historical avant-garde, according to Schechner, was characterized by a dual tendency to “make something new that was also in opposition to prevailing values” the “tradition-seeking avant-garde” looks to “roots” movements or “shamanic performances,” seeking out the wisdom of ancient, most often non-Western, cultures. Artaud’s work crosses these divisions, looking as it does to overthrow Western logic by way of the wisdom and ritual magic of the East and West. Beckett, meanwhile, the colossus astride the “current avant-garde” befuddles and confounds Schechner’s divisions because though his work might be called “forward looking,” it does not imagine a future that is amazing, but is instead a future characterized by entropy’s inevitable decay and the human mind’s inability to encompass the extinguishment of narrative. As a profoundly text-based theatre, though, Beckett’s long and short plays have become so much part of the tradition, that their formerly arresting images are now theatrical shorthand for generic “avant-garde.”


4 6, 11. In The End of Humanism (1982) Schechner defined the historical avant-garde in more detail as “wave after wave of anti-bourgeois, mostly left-leaning, angry yet visionary artists pouring themselves out onto a hostile shore…Each wave is soaked up by the society it apparently hates and opposes—co-opted and made fashionable, turned into style” (The End of Humanism: Writings on Performance. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982. 15).

5 For Artaud’s impressions and arguments for importing Oriental techniques and mysticism to renew Western theatre practice, see the essay in Le Théâtre et son double concerning “Le Théâtre Balinais,” in which Artaud claims…. For his account of his trip to Mexico to visit the people of the Tarahumara, see the records contained in Tome IX of the Oeuvres Complètes.
Schechner documents the avant-garde’s attempt to escape this ironic appropriation of the avant-garde as old-news, citing how at least as of the 1990s “the current avant-garde is one where producing organizations and particular venues celebrate their receptivity to various styles.” Broadway and the West End “freely borrow techniques and people from the current avant-garde,” a state of affairs Schechner calls “a monoculturalist’s nightmare” and “the way things are going to be for a long time” (*The End of Humanism* 10).

This brings us to the last subset of the avant-garde and the one that interests me the most: the intercultural—the answer to the “monoculturalist’s” nightmare of an avant-garde that freely loans its techniques to the Broadway and West End establishment theatres of Anglophone capitalism. As the twentieth century closed, more and more theatre has been produced under intercultural conditions about these highly charged contact points and crossroads of cultural commerce. In the case of Martin McDonagh, his great international success has led to one of the strongest criticisms of his plays—that they exploit cultures such as the West of Ireland (The *Leenane Trilogy* and the *Aran Islands Trilogy*) or that they exploit and denigrate African Americans (*A Behanding in Spokane*). Schechner says that artists working in the intercultural avant-garde write and perform about “belonging to more than one culture, subscribing to contradictory values, conflicting aesthetic canons…The ‘nation’ no longer describes how or even where hundreds of millions of people live.”

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7 *The Future of Ritual*. 17.
timeless qualities of the avant-garde in various venues such as radio transmission, prison theatre, and postmodern, global, mediatized culture.

The avant-garde offers what I call a theatre of surprises, creating unforeseen objects of contemplation for spectator, actor, and director alike. It is my intention to ask, can the recent wave of phenomenology that concerns itself with the unanticipated self-giving object give us any tools to understand avant-garde performance events that do not unfold according to the plan, the ideal, recorded in the dramatic text? Can phenomenological description of the unforeseen event show us how the spectator/audience can precipitate a theatrical event while both being the passive receiver of it and being displaced by it as intending subject. Lastly, can phenomenological vocabulary describe the ethical demand these avant-garde, unanticipated events place on the communities that form around their happening?

1.3 Phenomenology and Performance Theory


Performance studies resists fixed definition. Performance studies does not value ‘purity.’ It is at its best when operating amidst a dense web of convictions. Academic disciplines are most active at their ever-changing interfaces. In terms of performance studies, this means the interactions between theatre and anthropology, folklore and sociology, history and performance theory, gender studies and psychoanalysis, performativity and actual performance events—and more.\(^8\)

So, although the sciences and theories of such fields as semiotics, linguistics, and anthropology can be useful for describing the events that transpire in performance, Schechner alludes to an “and more” into which new performance theorists can venture. In that spirit, there are certain elements of the theatrical event that the anthropological approach cannot account for: namely, the confrontation between theatre and philosophy that characterized much of the twentieth century avant-garde. Due to this confrontation, these events have raised metaphysical, aesthetic, and ethical questions for spectators and scholars who witness them and study them. The border between philosophy and performance is porous, as the plays represent ethical situations to a spectator at the same time that a performance might provoke an ethical dilemma for that spectator. A more phenomenological approach—by which I mean one based on close description of the phenomenon such as we can reconstitute it after the event—can help in understanding not just what transpires on the stage within the world of the play, but what happens in the alchemy between performance and the spectator. I call the totality of these relations the theatrical event, because they exceed simple categories such as play, performer, or audience. In the totality of the event, sometimes the audience performs as loudly as the actors.

To this point, the various schools of performance theory have situated the critic at different positions in relation to the performance event. In each case, the approach hopes

9 In the case of Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*, one audience member came prepared to walk out at some point in the performance but chose the very last moment of the play, realizing nothing worse was to come. She expressed her disbelief that someone would purchase a ticket and witness the entire performance before performing this symbolic rejection of the play’s content, “I thought, ‘Well you’ve obviously found nothing to walk about, but you want to walk out—you realize it’s about to end, so you’re going.’” (Graham Saunders. *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theater of Extremes*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002. 38).
to see something that is usually invisible made visible by the performance. In the Materialist approach as represented by Brazil’s Augusto Boal, the critic casts his gaze on the movement of historical forces; through cleverly devised “impromptu” situations that provoke audience reactions, social forces such as oppression and economic manipulation come to visibility.10 Following a semiotic approach critic Keir Elam, tracks the system of meaning production between performer and spectator in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980).11 Meanwhile, theatre semiologist Patrice Pavis maps out the system of sign and signifier encoded in motion, gesture, object, character, and plot to reconstruct the performance after the fact.12 Schechner’s anthropologized performance studies made it possible to examine more kinds of events under the heading of “performance” with an

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11 Elam’s seminal work is his *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1980. The difference between “semiotics” and “semiology” is one of tradition and focus, with the practitioners of semiologic studies following in the more linguistic tradition of Suassure and Roland Barthes, while those who practice semiotics are more focused on the theory of signs as elucidated by the American philosopher and logician Charles Sanders Pierce. But as Winfried Nöth declares, the two terms have become almost interchangeable (13). Nöth. *Handbook of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.

emphasis on the cultural values and traditions at work in individual theatrical events. These schools provide a number of tools for analyzing performances, but each tool limits the critical perspective by choosing what aspect of the event as a whole it will describe.

Peter Brook opens *The Empty Space* with an apt criticism of the sort of spectator these various schools of performance theory tend to produce. Before a theorist can apply his tools—be they semiotic, Marxist, or anthropological—he is first and foremost a spectator. According to Brook he is:

a deadly spectator, who for special reasons enjoys a lack of intensity and even a lack of entertainment…the scholar who emerges from routine performances of the classics smiling because nothing has distracted him from trying over and confirming his pet theories to himself. (10)

Though the charge is sarcastic, it nonetheless highlights what I would call a critical narrowness when face-to-face with an aesthetic experience, which ought to—to varying degrees—overwhelm the senses and the intellect. But, beyond the unimaginative critical stance, Brook also points out a certain ethical responsibility on the part of all spectators to leave theory at the door, so to speak. In essence, ethical spectatorship requires the spectator to voluntarily strip away these theories to allow the play to *act* on him as much as be acted *for* him.

At this juncture, we can begin to see where a phenomenological approach to spectatorship explains this movement away from controlling the event, and toward receiving it as a perceiver open to how the event can change my individual perspective or world. As an art intended for performing bodies and perceiving bodies, phenomenologists such as Stanton Garner are right to push performance studies toward a discipline that

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“offers our understanding of dramatic language … a chance to reembody it in its multiple relationships to the moment of performance. Like the actual body to which it is bound, … theatrical language [is] caught up in a play of bodiedness and disembodiedness, presence and absence, self and nonself” (Garner 124). Philosophy—and phenomenology in particular—has not yet been fully mined by performance studies for its richness of perceptual and conceptual descriptions. These two writers, Bert O. States and Stanton Garner, have turned to the philosophical school of phenomenology for tools to analyze perception and reception of the thing we call “theatre.” After examining their works—which range across phenomenology and semiotics and semiology—it will become apparent that much remains to be said about both how performance studies can benefit from a more refined phenomenological analysis and how theatre itself is the school for this phenomenological “method” of performance analysis.

Bert O. States introduces his Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre by circumscribing the scope of the book from the start, declaring, “It does not have an argument, or set out to prove a thesis…it is not even a phenomenology of the theater, properly speaking” (1). Yet in the next paragraph he asks a key question to any phenomenological analysis: what kind of being appears in a theatrical event? Or as States puts it, “What kind of being would choose impersonation as a means of securing any advantage?” (2) Impersonation in the theatre is not simply mimesis; States wants to avoid the more mimetic interpretation of Aristotle’s famous definition of theatre as “an imitation of an action.” Seeing theatre as mimesis leads us to conclude that the imitated action exists elsewhere, “outside the drama, a ‘form…which the tragedian contemplates, and it stands logically and chronologically before the business of composition’” (5). States proposes instead that the “action” in this equation
exists inside the play as “an indwelling form,’ a ‘soul,’ an ‘order of events’” thus transforming the imitation side of the formula into “the medium in which the work presents its representation” (6). States wants to set up this phenomenological attitude toward the theatre as a direct response to semiotics, which he calls “the scientific analysis of the means, or apparatus of the mimetic process” and which he thinks must be based on a wooden notion of the theatre as a representation of a reality prior to and apart from the performance. Semiotics seeks to explain the system of codes by which theatre transmits meanings between the theatre producers (writer, director, actor) and society. States refutes the project at its inception using the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s declaration that “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” (7). This priority of the whole will come to be called “the event” by phenomenologists such as Claude Romano and Jean-Luc Marion. As a prior whole, the play gives itself entirely in the event of its happening. Though theatre uses language and has its own language (of gesture, sound, mime, spatial relationships, and light), the project for understanding what happened in performance is necessarily phenomenological, because the performance is an event as much as it is a system of signs and signifiers.

However, despite this nuanced phenomenological beginning, States relies heavily on semiology resulting in a performance analysis that stays within the dramatic text. States resists analyzing performances proper, by making his project, “a semiotics of theater with a phenomenology of its imagery—or, if you will, a phenomenology of its semiology” (29). He does this despite meditating at times on the unforeseen (even

14 States makes this distinction to separate what he’s doing from literary criticism, in which the critic “dreams” the text of the play and the “eye is an anesthetized organ,
magical or miraculous) quality of theatre. In his section on the Actor and the Text, he writes of the spectator’s presence at the performance as “an event in the real world as well as an illusion of an unreal world,” and our participation in an event “at [a]…world’s origination under all the constraints, visible and invisible of immediate actuality” (155). This layering of visible and invisible worlds happens in performance and necessitates a phenomenology of the theatrical event, not of the reading event of a dramatic text. By making the methodological choice to treat the text as a performance event on its own, both States and Stanton Garner (in Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama) privilege the dramatic text—stage directions included—as the repository of an “ideal” performance that actors, directors, and audiences try to approximate in actuality. Garner’s study purports to describe how embodiedness enriches a theatrical event but is similarly text-bound and does not develop tools for the analysis of actual performance. In fact, Garner’s emphasis on the dramatic text as “a subset of performance” that offers “the thing itself” uniquely poised between the general and the particular” evades the messy and illusory perceptual content of actual performance events (6). In the end, neither ventures into actual performances or performance history to test the possibilities of a phenomenological mode of analysis.

Stanton Garner’s Bodied Spaces applies the phenomenological notion of the epoche—in which an object of perception is held in consciousness reduced to its idea—

little more than a window to the waiting consciousness on which a world of signification imprints itself with only the barest trace of the signifiers that carry it.” Theatre, in contrast to reading, “awakens” the eye and “confiscates the image,” by an increase in “corporeal power” thus making semiotics insufficient and necessitation “a phenomenology of [theatrical] imagery” which the calls the “phenomenology of its semiology.” Bert O. States. Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On The Phenomenology of Theatre. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

by equating it to the dramatic text. As the subtitle of the work is “Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama,” this focus on the dramatic text as the object of study is not hidden. Yet, Garner fails to plumb phenomenology’s ability to describe what takes place in the live performance: the complex web of interactions between writer, text, director, company, actor, and spectator (not to mention the world of objects: lights, sounds, props, doors, etc) as situated within specific historical, social, and political contexts. When Garner declares that opening and reading the dramatic text performs what Husserl calls “bracketing,” by closing off the rules and theories and sciences of everyday life, better than the physical and intellectual experience of entering a theatre, taking a seat, and watching a performance unfold before your eyes and ears, he commits the same textual elitism and anti-embodiment stance that led William Hazlitt to call all performances of Shakespeare a diminishing of the actual text. Certainly, it can be useful (and I intend to consider Garner’s analysis of Beckett’s work later on) to examine how certain dramatic texts operate “like” phenomenology. Indeed, Garner correctly asserts that theatre and phenomenology share a common philosophical quest,

Far from signaling the ‘exhaustion’ of a phenomenology restricted to its Husserlian prototype, Beckett’s drama—and (I will argue) the theatrical event as a whole—falls squarely within a set of ontological problems that constitute the heart of phenomenology as it has constituted itself to be revised and rearticulated. (24).

16 In *Ideas: A General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, Edmund Husserl explains the “phenomenological” epoche as that which “completely bars me from using any judgment that concerns spatio-temporal existence...Thus all sciences which relate to this natural world...I disconnect them all. I make absolutely no use of their standards, I do not appropriate a single one of the propositions that enter into their systems, even though their evidential value is perfect, I take none of them” (Section 32). Looking at this, we can see how much performance theories such as semiotic or anthropological approaches never leave behind the “sciences which relate to the natural world” when considering the object of a performance event.
My project takes up Garner’s phenomenological project but pushes it beyond the limit of the dramatic text by putting theatrical events in conversation with even newer revisions and rearticulations of phenomenology.

Theatre and phenomenology are peculiarly suited to reverse what Garner calls a “a current of anti-theatricality” in poststructuralist criticism, especially evident in the privileging of Beckett’s fictional works over the dramas (26). This anti-theatricality is actually a deep uneasiness with the body as contained within the texts and as an object on the stage. In a section titled “Staging the Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Mise-en-Scène,” Garner begins much like States by emphasizing the coincidence of two worlds in any theatrical event: the imagined world and the physical, perceivable world of stage, bodies, objects, and motions. Though through a theatrical event the real world is pushed back by what he calls “the theatrical mode…or givenness,” the actuality of the real world continues to intrude on the theatrical world and in fact constitutes its “ground” (42). Ground simply means the “backdrop” in which the event is perceived; we never really leave our own world. Watching a live performance—objects actually fall with “real world” weight. Actors breath audible sighs, sweat, and spit, sometimes, on the audience (one factor in why newer, more intimate theatres produce discomfort in audience). Thus, though the “real world” of cause and effect is bracketed from the ostended dramatic action, the real world is carried into the event both by the physical, embodied nature of performance and by the audience—who bring their expectations, their ability to misunderstand or anticipate, and their senses of humor. These visible and invisible factors that the audience emits (sighs of derision, bursts of applause, held breaths of anticipation, blank affects of disinterest) can change the event as much as a broken prop or an improperly executed pratfall.
The audience, therefore, has much work to do in a theatrical event. Garner says that they have “an authorizing presence” (47). A phenomenological performance theory would differ from the pessimistic or mechanistic attitude of Herbert Blau who infamously asserted “I am one of those who could imagine theater, even prefer it, without an audience…There is, after all, a tradition of dramatic theory that sees embodied performance as an inevitable reduction of the play,” because it would see the audience as co-creators of the event (40). Likewise it departs from the scientific methods employed in theatre theory, because a phenomenological stance sees the audience not only as one side of a communication system, but as dynamic initiators of the communication and co-determiners of the course of events. The exchange between performer and spectator, far from being a one-way of information and reception, is an endless circling of giving and receiving but—finally—of judgment. The audience initiates and judges the event, as do the performers and the play itself, which has the ability to gaze back at the audience and judge their responses. For Garner, this dynamic creates Sartrean danger, in which the performer’s gaze “destabilizes…the field of performance.”

17 This hatred of the audience finds peculiarly strong embodiment in Peter Handke’s play, Offending the Audience (1966). In this play, a chorus of actors attack the audience from every possible angle, constructing it with a dialogue that determines its audience to be “You deadbeats. You phonies… You abortionists. You anti-heroes. You everyday heroes” because, according to the chorus, “offending you is also one way of speaking to you. By offending you we can be straight with you. We can switch you on. We can eliminate the free play…We can observe you” (33, 29). Offending the Audience removes every element of theatricality (except as represented both by fake sounds before the curtain is raised and as is described by the litany of voices as absent) not to alienate the audience, as might seem inevitable from the title, but to welcome it. The play closes it’s offensive barrage “…you worthy listeners you, you fellow humans you. You were welcome here. We thank you. Goodnight” (33). Handke calls a piece such as this a “speak-in.” It requires at least one hearer, and its purpose is “not to revolutionize, but to make aware” (Note to Offending the Audience by Peter Handke. In Kaspar and Other Plays. Trans. Michael Roloff. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969).
points out the deficiency of semiotics to describe the embodied nature of theatrical communication, going so far as to characterize its unforeseen quality as a “catastrophe,” and the body as “a sign that looks back” (49). This perspective on the function of the body in performance provides a much-needed corrective to a tradition dominated by either the dramatic text or a science bent on decoding and mapping the transmission of signs. But in the following chapters, Garner does not consider actual audiences confronting performing bodies in theatrical events. Instead he imagines them based on reading the dramatic texts, performing the same phenomenological descriptions of what is ultimately a reading event and not a theatrical event.  

Garner calls this danger Sartrean because when the actor-as-Other appears on the stage the possibility that the spectator might be beheld (and therefore judged) is activated, thereby decentralizing the subject (48).

In his chapter on Samuel Beckett’s later plays, Garner bases an argument that claims the late plays subvert the all-seeing power of “Cartesian observation” by forcing the audience into a viewing position “disembodied toward nonexistent points and uncomfortably embodied in the seats they cannot escape, ‘clawed’ by the perceptual dissonances of Beckett’s stage which preclude the satisfaction of spectatorial centrality” (84). But which audience felt “clawed” by which productions plays of plays like Not I or That Time? Compare this generalization based on the text’s stage directions to an account of the first production of Sarah Kane’s (posthumous) 4.48 Psychosis and how the use of a mirror structured the audience’s perception:

While the stage props of table and chairs were functional to the point of being anonymous, the intriguing feature that dominated the set was a mirror slanted at a 45-degree angle, cutting off the back of the set so that it resembled a small attic room. The mirror’s presence meant that the audience could simultaneously see the drama on two planes, so that they could both witness the actors playing in front and above their heads. Audience members seated further back could also observe a vertical view of the first two rows of their fellow theatre-goers. (Saunders 116)  

At the play’s ending, the final (salvific) line, “please open the curtains” was followed by “the actors moving to the side of the stage and opening the shutters to the windows, and summoning in the light and sound of the London street outside. The experience was simple and yet profoundly moving” (116-117).
1.3.1 The Unforeseen Event: Phenomenological Description

Thus we have seen in this quick summary of the current field that, for a relatively young field, performance studies is a hotly contested territory with competing claims as to the nature of the spectator, performance, text, and theatre. One fact that emerges from all of these theories, however, is the notion of the enormity of the performance event as an object of analysis. Performance theorists often acknowledge where their particular theory falls short in describing or predicting performance.\(^{20}\) A performance always is an “event” because of its latent possibility to exceed the dramatic text and any science we have developed to explain the mechanisms of dramatic communication. This excess overwhelms discipline-specific theory because the theatrical event is not discipline specific. Ranging across the performing and visual arts and across the humanities from literature and film to philosophy and sociology, dramatic texts, theatre directors, and audiences saturate twentieth century theatre with these multiple frames. In the same way that a performance is “given” colloquially, it is given phenomenologically in a richness of particularity that far exceeds the Platonic “idea” of what the play essentially is that

\(^{20}\)For instance, Pavis recognizes the limits of a semiological approach to account for the audience’s role in the communicative event of a performance. If, as he writes, “Semiology was set up as a means of avoiding an impressionistic discourse on performance,” the result has been to replace the spectator’s subjective gaze with “a conceptual and methodological apparatus.”\(^{20}\) An apparatus necessarily closes off other modes of seeing the performance. This may be deemed necessary because, “The stage event is not always easy to describe, because signs in current performance practice are often tiny, almost imperceptible, and invariably ambiguous” (*Analyzing Performance* 24). Pavis continues to anticipate new ways of accounting for the ineffable in performance when he writes in a subsequent book, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, that the model of intertextuality based in semiotics and interculturalism in which the relationship between texts is merely described, is “no longer enough.” Now, “it is also necessary to understand their inscription within contexts and cultures and to appreciate the cultural production that stems from these unexpected transfers,” a descriptive task that we shall see has been taken up the International Federation for Theatre Research in their recent work on theatre’s “borders, dynamics, and frames” \(^{20}\).
resides in invisible possibility between the lines of the dramatic text. This dissertation intends to question rigorously how the play “gives” its invisible content to an audience which must be poised to receive it, and in fact, must be constructed by the performance to adequately receive the ethical demands of that particular event.

1.3.2 Theatrical Events

The Theatrical Event Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research has published several volumes in the last decade that combine both theory and praxis in the analysis of theatre as event. I wish to take from their works certain key terms and parameters for discussing specific theatrical events under the heading: the unforeseen in the theatre. Theatre as event opens up specificity in analysis: the location of a performance becomes as important as the fictional locale of the dramatic action. The spectators attitudes, values, and education testify both for and against box office earnings, making it possible to read failure as success (important in understanding the ongoing legacy of Antonin Artaud). As Willmar Sauter conceives of the problem, the theatrical event as a term should represent the “complexities of theatrical processes” without “push[ing] for certain methodologies” (The Theatrical Event 175). This openness to both traditional and post-structuralist approaches in describing theatrical events means that scholarship will recognize that “the theatrical event… includes also the complexities of the society in which it takes place. A theatrical event does not happen in a vacuum, but is closely related to such factors as aesthetics, the economy, education, attitudes, status, traditions, etc” (Sauter “Festival as Theatrical Events: Building Theories” 19).21 He
continues to build the theory that will unify the collection titled *Festivalising!* by providing four basic parameters for describing a theatrical event:

1. Playing culture: opposition to written culture, related to other non-literary art forms such as film, music and dance, but also other forms of play such as sports, games, races, etc. Contains “strong physical elements which must be learned by doing.”
2. The cultural context: “the societal frames of the theatrical event, namely the socio-political environment in which it is taking place.”
3. Contextual theatricality: “the conditions under which a theatrical event takes place…the aesthetic conventions, the division of genres, the locations, the organizational traditions, equity rights, legal traditions, etc…the conventions, expectations, habits, and economy of the potential audience also belong to the sphere of contextual theatricality.”
4. Theatrical playing: “the actual encounter between performer and spectator…communicative process, through which all the other aspects of the theatrical event concentrate for the time of the performance.” (19-21)

With these categories, theatre scholars can avoid the two-dimensional communicative model of semiotics and semiology by showing how the field of a performance event (its horizon, as it were) stretches both into the past and the future from the vanishing point of the performance itself, the “actual encounter” that we try to reconstruct through performance histories.

These reconstructions can take place more or less systematically as described by the various authors included in the *Theatrical Events* collection. Hans Van Maanen in his article titled “How Contexts Frame Theatrical Events,” puts forward four frames, or contexts that condition how theatrical events are perceived. These are (1) the communicative frame which “consists of the systems of perception shared by the participants, in particular by the two parties involved: performers and spectators and determined by defining “a shared field of perception”; (2) the organizational frame, which “organizes the physical aspects of a meeting within which the event will happen,

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particularly the aspects of place and time of the meeting and the ways in which these aspects are used in the particular event; (3) the institutional frame, or “the theatre world as a whole, understood as a historically developed system of production, distribution and reception in a certain cultural entity” and in which Van Maanen would include “new, marginal, or even subversive organizations” (4), and the societal frame, meaning the “constellation of different, but mutually linked societal subsystems: the social, educational, aesthetic and media worlds, the world of law, and the political, economic and technological worlds” (243-246). At different points I will analyze the theatrical events through their contextual frames. In the case of prison theatre, I will question the role of the dual institutional frames—theatrical and prison—in structuring our responses to suffering bodies in pursuit of Existential freedom. In the case of McDonagh’s global success, I will lay out the intersecting and at times conflicting media, cultural, and political frames in the Anglophone reception of his *Leenane* trilogy.

John Tulloch in his article in *The Theatrical Event*, “Chekhov in Bath: Dimensions, Experiences, and Concepts of an ‘Everyday’ Theatrical Event,” shies away from this highly methodological approach (Van Maanen uses multiple and complex diagrams to illustrate the production of meaning across these four “frames”) in favor of what he calls “tales from the field,” a term he takes from cultural studies. The situatedness of such an approach results in studies that read more as narratives. Yet, Tulloch wants to emphasize that such a narrative approach is in no way relativistic, and instead analysis that approaches theatre as event will account for not only the political

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22 He draws primarily on the works of Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audience for a Postmodern World*, and N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* for the article he contributes to *The Theatrical Event: Borders, Dynamics, Frames*. 22
and interpretive acts of performer and producer, but also those of the spectator and critic (182). For Tulloch, the “places and “occasions” of a theatrical event matter greatly in understanding certain spectators’ reactions and the frames with which they process and remember the event (180). As I proceed through the examinations of various performances, the narrative dimension to the performance histories will illuminate the contextual frames that influence both the performer’s and spectator’s reactions to the event that has taken place. By way of a short example, in her work on Shakespeare in prisons, *Shakespeare Inside*, Amy Scott Douglass reflects often on her own preconceptions and values as she records her experiences with the inmate-performers. Far from detracting from a sense of objectivity in the work, this attention to the situated-ness of the interviewer in her own socio-economic and educational contexts illuminates her role as meaning-producer in the reading event.

1.4 The Play’s The Thing: Event Phenomenology

*That’s what it’s all about. Doors and sardines. Getting on — getting off. Getting the sardines on — getting the sardines off. That’s farce. That’s the theatre. That’s life.*

-- *Noises Off*

The work contained within *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames* has described the theatrical event from numerous angles and “approaches,” and provided examples of such description applied to specific performance. Why further nuance the concept of event with a phenomenological perspective? According to Sauter’s introduction to *The Theatrical Event*, the concept of “theatrical event” is open to many approaches and should be more than a single methodology. So, rather than saying that I will lay out a phenomenological method, I assert that theatre events make every spectator
a phenomenologist. Entering a theatre focuses one’s perception on how things appear, as
the “real world” is left behind.

Phenomenology is the school of philosophy that developed to study the structures
of thought as vision and consciousness directed at an object. It can take the form of
perceptions, memories, or thoughts, to name just a few. Edmund Husserl formulates the
motivating principle of this new science as an “absolute beginning” in intuition (the
activity of intentional consciousness). This intuition “is a source of authority for
knowledge, that whatever presents itself in ‘intuition’ in primordial form (as it were in its
bodily reality) is simply to be accepted as it gives itself…within the limits in which it
presents itself” (Ideas Sec. 24). The phenomenological project has been subject to many
revisions since Husserl’s early formulations. Notably, Merleau-Ponty analyzed the
embodied nature of all perception, opening phenomenology to approach and describe the
consciousness of the body within aesthetic experiences. In “Eye and Mind,” a
phenomenological analysis of painting, Merleau-Ponty insists that because the body is
“immersed in in the visible by his body, itself visible” the position of “the see-er” is one
of openness to the object of perception. “The see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he

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23 René Schérer describes the development of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology
as a return “aux choses elle-mêmes” by way of a new conception of consciousness as
“activité spécifique au fondement de des systèmes de signification, et comme possibilité,
audelà de son contenu représentatif, de se diriger vers l’objet, de le viser et
l’appréhender en tant que tel” (530).

24 For a full summary of phenomenology’s content and aims, see David Woodruff
Smith’s article, “Phenomenology,” in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (Fall

25 Edmund Husserl. The Idea of Phenomenology. Trans. William P. Alston and
merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world” (162). This “opening” up to the world is the entry point for this dissertation to ask: what sort of thing is a theatre performance and how do we open ourselves to it as perceiving, feeling, emotional, embodied subjects? The theatrical event “gives itself,” is an aesthetic experience, but not a static and unchanging object held before a viewer’s gaze, like a painting or a sculpture. It exists in and through time and then exists no more except in its effects (memory, calls to action, reviews and criticism). It appears and then must be reconstructed from artifacts, records, or memoirs for those who were not present at the time but yet still wish to understand how it came to pass and what effect it continues to have. It is this quality of excess and of elusion that leads me to call performances theatrical events. Jean-Luc Marion (1946-) in both Being Given and In Excess calls this excessive phenomenon the event, or more specifically the historical event. As event, the phenomenon of performance fulfills all of the requirements Marion sets forward for this type of phenomenon. First, it (even the one-man show) cannot be limited to “an instant, a place or an empirical individual” and second, it “covers a physical space such that no gaze encompasses it….and encompasses a population such as none of those who belong to it can take upon themselves an absolute or even privileged point of view.”

Anyone who has attended even one play understands how such a description applies to theatrical events: first, a play often has a rich interpersonal and intercultural


27 Marion provides an analysis of phenomena that inverts Kant’s categories of intuition. In the case of the event, the phenomenon exceeds the category of quantity, meaning that it is simply to great for any one observer to account for it.

28 Being Given. 228.
context. Many individuals (the writer, the directors, actors, spectators) have their own “take” on what has occurred, and plays have international tours and performance histories that take place in varied cultural contexts as adaptations and translations. Second, the relation of stage and backstage means that no single gaze can behold everything that transpires in the course of the performance. And lastly, this multitude of gazes means that no one point of view prevails to authoritatively declare what has happened. The event therefore exceeds the intentionality of each and every one of its participants; no gaze could sufficiently turn and rework the event in such a way as to reconstitute it.

Michael Frayn’s *Noises Off* (1982) dramatizes the event nature of performance in the form of a dizzying meta-theatrical farce. The first act presents the dress rehearsal of an English farce, a dress rehearsal in which the rehearsal is constantly interrupted because of the mistakes and conflicting interpretations of its actors, director, and technical crew, all of whom belong to the event but none of whom has a total grasp of it. Behind them all looms the absent author, of whom the director moans to an actor, “Freddie, love, I’m telling you – I don’t know. I don’t think the author knows. I don’t know why the author came into this industry in the first place.” The phenomenon, even of the dress rehearsal (which is actually a play within a performance of the meta-play *Noises Off*), offers an excess of intuition to all of the witnesses to its apparition. Marion uses a similar—if less

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29 The fascination with the “behind the scenes,” explains not only America’s rich tradition of amateur dramatics referenced in the introduction, but the entire genre of “let’s put on a show!” films, musicals, and television series. Just as a cursory list, consider the kind of amateur theatrical depicted dramatically in plays such as Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard, The Muppets Take Manhattan* or even *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* or longer studies such as Moira Curley’s *Beyond the pocket doors: Amateur theatricals in nineteenth-century New York City.* (Dissertation. Indiana University, 2006).

uproarious—example in *In Excess*, when he cites the phenomenon of the lecture hall as an event, writing:

> And this is a moment that, accordingly, will be inserted in other occasions....but which will never be reproduced identically as such. Tonight, on *this* theme and no other, between us and no one else, an absolutely unique event is played out, unrepeatable and, for a large part, unforeseeable.\(^{31}\)

The second act of *Noises Off* enacts the event of a performance, but seen from behind the set (and the set is “a superb example of the traditional English set-builder’s craft—a place where the discerning theatre-goer will feel instantly at home”\(^{32}\)). By turning the set around, Frayn dramatizes what Marion has elucidated philosophically: the greatest events have too many sides, too many perspectives, a hiddenness that they will always retain, to be mastered fully by a single spectator.

When the set is turned in *Noises Off*, the play within the play becomes hidden and the “real world” behind-the-scenes becomes the stuff of performance. Frayn’s play enacts farcically what Marion would give us philosophically: that what appears in the saturated phenomenon “escapes all constitution” (remember, if the set is turned, the play-within-the-play is now hidden from the audience). To “escape all constitution” simply means that the event was more than the either the writer, director, or audience could have anticipated or willed to make come true. And despite the fact that it follows a known formula (the curtain is raised and lowered, the play follows a two act structure), the theatrical event “shows *itself* from itself, starting from itself. And in the *itself* of its


\(^{32}\) Frayn. 1.
phenomenality is anticipated—better, is announced—the self of what gives itself.”33 The phenomenality Marion refers to here means all of the perceivable aspects of the theatrical event. By becoming “phenomenal,” invisible things such as jealousy must be manifested in perceivable ways—by gestures, glances, spoken words, plot. We could not receive Hamlet if Hamlet did not give itself in a way that we could perceive. When we read the text, our mind imagines and perceives, but a live performance has the unforeseen quality that opens the possibility to an infinite number of new Hamlets appearing. The characters of Noises Off dramatize the saturation of performance as they argue over the interpretation, missed cues, lost props, and the world outside the world of their performance hall.

This meta-theatre dramatizes the excess of the performance. Even when giving the audience the “behind the scenes sneak-peek,” Frayn preserves for the audience the sensation that something else is happening which they cannot perceive (the performance within the play). I can hold the text of Noises Off in my hand; it is quite a small text. But to describe the givenness of a performance of Noises Off is an inexhaustible enterprise. A performance of Noises Off might give itself fully within a world (a theatre in Chicago) and within a time (two hours on a Saturday night). As an event, it would follow established forms, (the institutional frames described by Van Maanen) but it can never be adequately “unpacked.” An actor might misspeak a line and change the meaning from what it ought to have been (for those familiar with the play) to what it now is. For those unfamiliar with the play, the slip would carry no meaning, and so their perception of the play would be radically different from the person sitting, perhaps, even right next to them. Thus, as Marion asserts, an event does not “proceed from our initiative, or respond

33 In Excess 33.
to our expectations, and could never be reproduced.” Not even the actor who pronounced the altered line intended the change. A performance unfolds as an event, which gives itself and whose causes and intuition exceed the intentionality of all participants. Here we find the answer to the various inadequacies of performance theory: they try to count the uncountable, to give a word to the ineffable.

Can the event of a performance, then, be read? Marion tells us that, effectively, no the event cannot be completely described, and that to do so “happily remains impossible.” Reconstituting the event as an object (as I can reconstitute a pear in my memory, even after having eaten it) is impossible precisely because it is saturated and no single participant could “follow from it the consequences of the individual and collective evolution of all the participants….Such a hermeneutic would have to be deployed without end and in an indefinite network.” Similarly, I cannot eat again the same pear by remembering it, describing it, or theorizing it. Prosaically, theatre has always grasped intuitively this dimension of the saturated phenomenon and has sought to address its structures and its texts to the multiplicity of perspectives within a theatre on a given night. A director in rehearsal watches the performances from as many perspectives as possible; stage business may be added for only the segment of the audience that can see it; theatre design, from the proscenium arch to the three-quarter thrust stage to theatre in the round, has developed different degrees of visibility in performance. And yet, despite theatre’s remarkable self-reflection, it has always had to allow that a performance is beyond the control of even the director (a possible explanation for the myriad theatre ghosts and superstititions?) A performance is unrepeatable and irreversible, and it cannot

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34 In Excess 34-35.

35 In Excess 33.
be assigned what Marion calls “a unique cause or an exhaustive explanation,” nor can it be foreseen. As Marion clarifies when speaking of the event, its “partial causes not only always remain insufficient but are only discovered once the fact of their effect has been accomplished.”

In the moment of the event’s unfolding, a performance’s partial causes often remain hidden to most, if not all, of the spectators and participants. There exists, first, a highly conscious hiddenness: the trapdoors, ropes and pulleys, and special effects. Behind that first level of illusion, though, there exists a second dimension of hiddenness, and this is what we have been using Michael Frayn’s *Noises Off* to illustrate: the partial causes that may result in the lights failing, the props being misplaced, an actor missing a cue, etc.

Therefore, a “reader” of performance might accept, however tentatively, Marion’s assertion that to attempt to reconstitute the event is impossible and would require an endlessly expansive hermeneutic, developing a “surplus of effects and fait accompli over every system of causes.” It is the wealth of analysis to be performed in this surplus of causes that should excite directors, actors, and theatre critics; so let us turn now to the writings of Claude Romano and Jacques Derrida further to nuance the phenomenon of the spectator within the theatrical event.

1.4.1 The Spectator

Performance as event requires a self-conscious spectator whose gaze transforms text and objects and action into the givenness of the play. A wooden sword must be accepted as a real sword, for example. The unfolding of the theatrical event transforms the audience member into a receiver, a nameless, nearly faceless observer who—in

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36 *In Excess* 36-37.
watching a play—becomes a different kind of subject, characterized by an openness to
the world of the play. For Marion, it means openness to an unexpected gift (in French,
l’adonné). For Claude Romano it means being the one to whom something happens
(l’advenant). 37

Romano first defines the event negatively, writing, “The event is not (a property
or an ontic attribute), it contents itself with “happening”; it is the pure fact of a happening
that does not manifest except in having taken place, or in nothing having taken place but
the “taking place” itself: the event in the strict sense.” 38 In describing the event as pure
happening, a happening in which nothing may have taken place, Romano furthers open
up the field of performance studies to describe letdowns, catastrophic failures, and
cancelled performances—events that have not taken place yet nonetheless manifest
themselves by not happening. Let me explain: in Martin McDonagh’s recent play A
Behanding in Spokane, the audience spent the full ninety minutes in breathless, highly
attuned anticipation of excessive stage violence. The various dramatic events taking place
on the stage were received as prelude after prelude to one final huge explosion which was
certain to take place. This explosion never took place, manifesting in a collective
letdown, a sigh of relief and, finally, confusion, as the event that did not take place had to
be understood only in retrospect after the curtain fell. Whereas Marion describes an event
by its excess—its enormous reach into the past and future as a surplus of effects—here
we see Romano pointing to the void at the moment of the event happening. After a play

37 See Claude Romano’s L’Événement et le monde (Paris: Épiméthée, 1998) and

38 “L’événement n’est pas (une propriété ou un attribut ontique), il se contente
de ‘se produire’: il est le pur fait de survenir qui ne se manifeste que quand il a eu lieu, ou
rien n’a lieu que l’avoir-lieu lui-même: l’événement au sens strict” (L’Événement au sens strict
39). (All translations of Romano are my translation).
concludes, what remains? A playbill, some chatter, a few reviews in the newspaper and perhaps a poor quality video recording. Such a void recalls the echoing space of the stage—what Peter Brook calls the “empty space”—where it all begins and ends. 39

Events are constantly happening and each one, according to Claude Romano carries with it a context and a world. When I break an egg, an event has occurred—something has happened and something has changed in a world, the world of this event. He calls this the “eventmental context,” regarding which “only it finds direction/makes sense: in every event within the world, a ‘world’ already glows.” 40 All aesthetic experience recreates this phenomenological eventing, in that each aesthetic experience teaches the viewer, reader, hearer, or spectator to see the world of the event glowing, as it were, within the world of mundane or natural reality. The aesthetic experience provides the context for the spectatorial gaze. In painting, the context, or “bracketing” of the aesthetic experience from everyday life is created by the frame and even the superstructure of the museum. Likewise, in theatrical events, structures such as opulent theatres or gestures so simple as donning a bowler hat can signal that a different sort of event has begun. 41 These buildings and rituals (will call, coat checks, and ushers) perform the bracketing on the part of the spectator and structure the hermeneutic of her experience. At the circus, the spectator does not expect, nor should he, to hear Macbeth’s

39 Brook opens The Empty Space by declaring “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (9).

40 “Un contexte événementiel, par rapport auquel seulement il prend sens: en tout événement intra-mondain luit déjà un ‘monde’” (Le Monde 40).

41 While on a literary pub crawl in Dublin in November, 2010, the actors began a performance of part of Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot precisely with this casual gesture.
“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” monologue. Nor, at any performance of 
*Macbeth* does a spectator react with surprise when Duncan returns in the final moments 
to take his bow. The applause at the end of a performance is the fading out of the world 
of the performance and the fading in of the natural world, which had hung suspended, 
bracketed, in the theatre lobby through all five acts.

Confusing the eventmental context with the world of lived experience happens all 
of the time, though. We find an example of that in Augusto Boal’s account of his early 
street theatre experiments in Brazil:

After the show, a peasant approached Boal’s actors enthusiastically, 
inviting them to join in the armed struggle they obviously all believed in. 
Boal explained that his rifles were props, that he was an artist not a 
peasant. The peasant then offered real weapons—but Boal had to refuse. 
At that moment he realized his hypocrisy: how could he advocate to others 
what he was not ready to do himself?\(^42\)

We see here Boal’s self-accusal because he recognized that he had unintentionally been 
playing within the context of agitprop theatre, a dramatic mode he would modify to 
become both more Brechtian (distancing) and therapeutic (looking inward), whilst 
maintaining his Marxist critique of the power structures of his political context:

Boal does not deny the usefulness of propaganda or agitprop. But he sees 
it as false and dangerous if not firmly grounded in cultural analysis and 
self-observation through which actors and spectators alike learn about the 
dialectic of the oppressor and oppressed within themselves as within 
society.\(^43\)

And so the confusion that almost led to a revolution led to a modification and refinement 
of both Boal’s theory and technique. Boal’s theatrical events still intend to move between 

\(^{42}\) Mandy Schutzman. “Activism, Therapy, or Nostalgia?” 80.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
the world of the play and the world of lived experience, but in a controlled way, using the aesthetic gaze to train spectator’s eyes to see oppression within the ordinary world.

Theatre—like literature or music or painting—teaches us to see the world with an aesthetic gaze and I would say a phenomenological gaze, both of which are barely distinguishable according to Husserl. Romano, in *L’Événement et le monde*, wishes to take as his object the “phenomenological hermeneutic of l’advenant.” The theatrical event makes things happen in the world it creates on the stage (the world Romano tells us “glows” within the ordinary world). This world brings with it the manner in which it should be read, or its hermeneutic. There is nothing remarkable about magic in fairy tales, but it would be strange in a drawing room comedy. So, while literary and stage conventions teach us to expect certain things from different kinds of events, something about the theatre also hopes to shock, surprise, delight, or horrify the spectator. Indeed, spectators enjoy watching other people (especially characters) be horrified by an unforeseen event. Thus, we see in the highly regulated and censored theatre of romantic era England that one of the age’s most successful playwrights, Joanna Bailie, recognized the human delight in seeing an event happen to the happened one. She writes in the “Introductory Discourse” to her plays on the passions, “No man wishes to see the Ghost himself, which would certainly procure him the best information on the subject, but every

44 Husserl explicitly related the two ways of gazing in a letter, in which he wrote, “Le voir phénoménologique est donc proche parent du voir esthétique dans un art 'pur.’” (In "Une lettre de Husserl à Hofmannsthal.”, *La part de l’œil*. 7 (1991): 14).

45 The “subject” of the event, which Romano calls l’advenant, can best be translated as “he to whom things happen,” a clunky rendering at best. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the French, as no English word can appropriately render its meaning. “L’herméneutique phénoménologique de l’advenant est l’objet de ce livre” (Le Monde 33)
man wishes to see one who believes that he sees it, in all the agitation and wildness of
that species of terror. To gratify this curiosity how many people have dressed up
hideous apparitions to frighten the timid and superstitious!" With her candor, Bailie
points to quite a sophisticated phenomenon—that of terror in the unwitting victim of a
joke. The one to whom the ghost “appears” receives an excess of unanticipated sights or
sounds and reacts in fright. Yet, as Bailie points out, the point of real interest is that we,
the audience, delight in watching those event happen to the subject and then seeing the
subject’s capacity to respond to the demand of the specter.

1.4.2 Beyond the Footlights: The Ethical Call

The theatrical event calls out to the spectator, “React!” And it often anticipates
specific kinds of reactions. As we shall see in the cases of Artaud, Beckett, and
McDonagh, spectators bring their own frames and contexts to theatrical events which


46 Joanna Bailie “Introductory Discourse.” In The Broadview Anthology of
Romantic Drama. Jeffrey N. Cox and Michael Gamer, eds. Peterborough, Ontario,

47 When a character happens upon something surprising, the plot is often set in
motion. Marion would say that these events “call” to the subject, but that call only has
meaning if the subject responds. This could be read as a theme in many dramatic texts.
Consider Macbeth’s response to the witch’s “call,” a response which sets in motion the
action of the play. If Macbeth had ignored their prophecies, the “call” of ambition would
not have been received. Marion examines the call through the phenomenon of seduction,
illustrating that for the call to be constituted as a phenomenon, there must be a response.
Seduction only happens if its target recognizes and responds to the “call” of gestures such
as hair flipping, suggestive body language, flirty banter. Unfortunately, “as long as the
target is unaware, can stay unaware, or wants to believe himself unaware of the attempt
whose object he has become, every seductive enterprise will be null and void” (Being
Given 286). If we return to Joanna Bailie’s example, unless the target reacts in fright, the
“ghost” remains merely an actor under a sheet. The recent film Shaun of the Dead
parodied the oblivion of the target of the call (Shaun and his best friend fail to notice that
the entire population of London has become zombies; they fail to phenomenalize the
“call” of horror), producing hilarity for the audience.
might frustrate the goals of writer and director and change the performance’s final meaning. Much as Marion took recourse to the language of theatre to describe the reduction, Romano borrows a term from Paul Claudel, playwright and novelist, to describe the apparition of the phenomenon independent of all human agency. The phenomenon performs its “montrance” (or in English: showing, manifesting, giving) from itself, “appearing such as it is in itself.” Montrance, for Romano, names “the manifestation belonging to the event insofar as this is a pure occurring from itself, which supposes no subject behind-itself other than the self.” In terms of performance studies, the performance is the event which opens a world through its occurring. In realizing this, we might further liberate performance from the tyranny of both the text and the idea of an ideal performance or interpretation of canonical plays. A critical aloofness toward performance led Charles Lamb in his “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation” (1811) to write,

I confess myself utterly unable to appreciate that celebrated soliloquy in Hamlet, beginning 'To be or not to be', or to tell whether it be good, bad, or indifferent, it has been so handled and pawed about by declamatory boys and men, and torn so inhumanly from its living place and principle of continuity in the play, till it is become to me a perfect dead member. It

48 “C’est seulement en vertu de sa présence que l’événement peut précisement surgir avec l’ ‘indépendance’ qui lui est propre à l’égard de tout ‘faire’ proprement humain: qu’il peut se produire lui-même à partir de lui-même et apparaître ainsi tel qu’en lui-même il a eu lieu; qu’il peut être, rigoureusement, ‘phénomène’ si le phénomène est ce qui se montre à partir de soi-même, tel qu’en lui-même, ce pour quoi l’allemand possède le mot Erscheinung—qui distingue le ‘phénomène’ du Schein, de l’apparence—and pour quoi le français, s’il veut éviter toute équivoque, doit peut-être recourir à un mot inventé par un poète, et qui n’a rien d’un mot ‘technique’: la montrance. La montrance nomme admirablement bien le ‘luire’ propre à l’éclair, la manifestation propre à l’événement, pour autant que celle-ci est un pur ‘se produire’ à partir de soi-même, qui ne suppose ‘derrière-soi’ aucun sujet autre que soi; et ce n’est pas un hasard si Claudel parle précisément de ‘montrance’ à propos d’événements ou de processus qui ne font que se produire, et qui n’ ‘ouvrent’ qu’à eux-mêmes; à propos des intermittences d’un ciel brouillé” (L’Événement et le monde 42).
may seem a paradox, but I cannot help being of the opinion that the plays of Shakspeare are less calculated for performance on a stage.

This attitude, which elevated the poetry of Shakespeare’s plays above their performance value, exists to this day and, I would argue, can prevent the audience from fully receiving the apparition of the performance due to a filter clouded by a “textual ideal.”

When the curtain opens on a theatrical performance, an event happens and a world appears for the audience. The curtain is raised on a world of limitless possibilities (the king of Denmark might be dead, a Sphynx may have posed a riddle, a crocodile might have swallowed Captain Hook’s hand), all of which are determined by the events that unfold on the stage within the world of the play. According to Romano, an eventmental world is a world in which “Every cause is an event, a thing, or a state-of-things from which comes to completion a pre-existent possible in the horizon of the world” that looms “as the totality of preexistent possibilities from which all that can happen happens, and is susceptible, therefore, to explanation.” An event’s happening then is always a consummation of possibilities. As inevitable as it is inexplicable, the event demands the work of explanation. “How did this happen?” the spectator should ask

49 By way of an anecdotal example, I received intense criticism for changing the setting of a production of As You Like It from strict Elizabethan to an anachronistic “no time,” and changing the traditional interpretation (in which Orlando is unaware of Rosalind’s gender) to a more winking and playful joint play-acting on the part of everyone in the Arden forest. Certain founding members of the Montford Park Players’ Board of Directors were displeased at my departure from the “correct” way of putting on the play.

50 “Toute cause est un fait, une chose ou un état-de-chooses à partir duquel vient à effectuation un possible préexistent dans l’horizon du monde, le monde s’annonçant, dès lors, comme la totalité des possibles préexistant à partir desquels tout ce qui arrive arrive, et est susceptible, par suite, d’expiation. Cette détermination du ‘monde’ sera désignée, par la suite, comme purement événementielle, par opposition à sa détermination événementielle qui repose sur un tout autre concept de ‘possible’” (Le monde 47-48).
himself. On a metatheatrical level, the spectator becomes responsible to ask himself to explain the event of her own hatred, laughter, discomfort, or even departure.

If we take Hamlet as an illustration of an event as eventmental, we can see that the event of the Ghost’s appearance (and a ghost appearing is always possible, if not probable) is the totality of preexistent possibilities by which the action of the play occurs. The character of young Hamlet models the function of l’advenant to the audience by virtue of his confusion and terror at the event. Romano describes the process as:

_The event, in the eventmental sense, in effect, is that which illumines its own context and receives none of its sense from that context; it is not the consequence of it, in the face of pre-existant possibilities, but it reconfigures the possibilities that precede it and signify, for l’advenant, the advent of a new world…that this is no longer, properly speaking, the same world: the event, by happening, makes the former world insignificant, since it is no longer comprehensible in light of its context; insignificant, the world loses then the fundamental phenomenological trait that determines it precisely as context; its significance—it abolishes itself in as much as such._

Thus, with the Ghost’s appearance, a new context is illuminated (death becomes murder, accession becomes usurpation). Hamlet, therefore, receives a new world from the Ghost’s appearance, rendering the previous world insignificant. His love for Ophelia, his friendships with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and his own identity as nephew, son and prince; the context of that world has been abolished by the breakthrough of the event.

The shock is not mere shock, however. The Ghost comes with a demand—for justice.

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51 “L’événement, au sens événemential, en effet, est ce qui éclaire son propre contexte et ne reçoit nullement son sens de lui: il n’en est pas la conséquence, explicable à l’aune de possibles préexistants, mais il reconfigure les possibles qui le précédent et signifie, pour l’advenant, l’avènement d’un nouveau monde….que ce n’est plus, à proprement parler, le même monde: l’événement, en survenant, rend le monde ancien insignifiant, puisqu’il n’est plus compréhensible à l’aune de son contexte; insignifiant, le monde perd alors le trait phénoménologique fondamental qui le détermine justement comme contexte: sa signification—il s’abolit en tant que tel” (Le Monde 55).
The rest of the play will reveal how Hamlet answers that ethical call, including how he uses a theatrical event to create the same condition for his uncle, Claudius.

Much of literature and art observes how ordinary people react to shock and surprise and the unforeseen and to say so is as much literary criticism as performance studies. The question remains: does the performance itself function as eventmental within the world of ordinary experience? Does a performance fall or crash or flash on to the audience member as receiving subject as do the events within the dramatic world? Or does the audience leave the performance hall unchanged, ushered in and out by the distancing effects of architecture, attitudes, expectations, and technique? I propose: no. Theatrical events can and often do happen as unforeseen events for the spectators and societies in which they occur. *Hamlet* again provides us with a model for event and hermeneutic with the case of the play-within-the-play. When Hamlet “stages” his “Mousetrap,” the character of Claudius re-acts as the subject overwhelmed by the unforeseeable event. He re-presents a reaction we will see throughout the examinations of historical performance events within the avant-garde tradition: the aesthetic dimension bleeds into the ethical dimension (of actual, lived experience) and forces a reaction that is ethical.

The Ghost happens for Hamlet, first gesturing that he follow to which Hamlet responds willingly despite Horatio’s demand that he not do so. The tale of Claudius’s actions must, according to the Ghost, compel Hamlet to “revenge his foule and most unnatural murder” (1.3.710). Hamlet in turn uses the power of a theatrical event to provoke a similar shock-response in his uncle, summoning the “ghost” of this murder by way of theatrical representation. The world of *The Mousetrap* unfolds before the royal court in Act 3 and remakes Claudius’s world, despite being the retelling of a supposedly
old Italian story. The murder dramatized by the players is summarized by Hamlet as “’A poisons him i’ th’ garden for his estate. His name’s Gonzago. The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago’s wife.” Surprisingly, Claudius sits through the Pantomime which precedes the spoken play. It is only at the lines of the actor playing Lucianus, the usurper, “Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing…Thy natural magic and dire property on wholesome life usurp,” that Claudius rises (3.2.238, 243-4). Hamlet characterizes the motion as “frighted” as Claudius demands that the theatrical world disappear, “Give me some light. Away!” With that gesture, the theatrical world demonstrates its power over the co-incidental “real world.” The “Mousetrap” has provoked an ethical reaction that serves as real-world proof.

1.4.3 Who Receives the Call?: Modeling the Role of the Spectator

Hamlet had arranged both the play and the audience in such a way as to make something invisible—Claudius’s “conscience”—visible. Claudius’s reaction betrays his deep discomfort as the play sees him and judges him in an ethical mode. His own reaction judges him further, as he flees. His next actions—plotting Hamlet’s death and his failed confession, show his guilt in a stronger light. The avant-garde, too, states time


53 The failed confession also shows the hiddenness of invisible realities onstage within the dramatic situation and also to the audience. Hamlet does not kill Claudius as he kneels in prayer because he believes that for Claudius to die confessed will only send him to heaven and be no vengeance after all. He exits before Claudius makes known the
and again in its various manifestoes and individual dramatic texts that it wants to turn the mirror of representation on to the audience, to force the audience to see itself in its passivity and its tacit sponsorship of all sorts of evils. Specific performances always carry with them this possibility for the l’adonné, the audience member. Or, an audience member functions as a sort of model of l’adonné or l’advenant. The position of an audience member is one that enhances the receptive faculties of hearing and seeing. Rather than a “School for Scandal” the theatre is a school for self-examination.

Innovations in theatre design, the ability to artificially darken the house while lighting the stage, and the anonymity in the audience all serve to render the autonomous subject into l’adonné. The receptive quality of the subject, according to Marion, “phenomenalizes in receiving the given, precisely because it is an obstacle to it.” L’adonné receives its phenomenality from the given; an audience is only an audience if a performance is being given. As we saw in the theory of Herbert Blau, the audience has this character of only existing when called forth by a performance. Audiences are fundamentally passive—seated, expectant, vulnerable, “in the dark.” They mimic the passivity of the receiver as described by Jean-Luc Marion. They are the screen onto which the event crashes, a metaphor created by Jean-Luc Marion. As the film screen is merely blank until the phenomenon of light and dark falls upon it from a projector, so the subject of a theatrical event is a passive void until he manifests a reaction to the event, provoked by the event.

In any performance, the unseen (such as “guilt” or “racism”) glows through the visible. These apparitions can surprise more than murders or mayhem because the spectator was not expecting to see parts of himself in the play that night. As the play actual quality of the prayer, “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (3.3.97-98).

54 In Excess. 50.
within *Hamlet* models, (presented first as a dumb show in which the invisible phenomenon (here guilt and self-incrimination) becomes manifest in the act of standing) Claudius receives the visible phenomenon and responds to the call of the invisible, phenomenalizing it as guilt. Marion recognizes this exchange relationship between given and *l’adonné* when he writes, “With this operation—precisely, reception—the given can begin to show *itself* starting from the outlines of visibility that it concedes to *l’adonné*, or rather that it receives from it.” When Claudius rises to leave the performance, he gives visibility to the unseen within the performance. In a way, he steps into a “mousetrap” of his own construction, as it is he who has given phenomenality—or made visible—the play’s ethical charge by rising and leaving the room.

Claudius reacts in a way that phenomenalizes guilt (which until then had been invisible to Hamlet and to the spectators). He is someone to whom the play happens (*l’advenant*) and he reacts with anger and impenitence; he more than passively receives it (*l’adonné*). *L’adonné* remains problematic in its passivity. The dative dimension of the subject is a useful concept for understanding what occurs during a performance in that vast, dark region called the “house.” But the house consists of a number of conscious (sometimes unconscious, sleeping) subjects with the ability to receive, judge, interpret and act. Anyone who has been to a performance in which the audience has booed or left en masse during the show can attest to the fact that an audience member, as receiving subject or he-to-whom-things-happen, exceeds the dative dimension of his subjectivity.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{55}\) *In Excess*, 50

\(^{56}\) I had the privilege of experiencing this kind of mass exodus fueled by outraged disapproval at the 2005 Avignon Theatre Festival in which dozens of respectable, middle-aged theatre goers walked out of a performance in which the actors performed
Romano’s phenomenological subject, *l’advenant*, provides a reader of performance with a much richer and more active subject as a model for theatrical spectatorship. Romano describes *l’advenant* in *L’Événement et le monde* as, “Understanding, interpreting, are the behaviors of *l’advenant*. Under this title, they constitute the fundamental modalities of his experience, or eventmental. This understanding can be more precisely defined as a *project.*”

*L’advenant* has the power to begin this project because the event, which we have seen breaks through the horizon of the world with a new horizon, provides a hermeneutical structure that “indicates the totality of possibilities from which a sense, as such, can therefore come to light.”

A great hope emerges for theatre practice; understanding and interpretation, the entire theatrical project, is reborn with each performance and for each audience member. The “correct” interpretation has been dethroned; the project of understanding can begin.

The spectator, then, loses certain markers of subjectivity in the process of receiving the event. He is nameless—marked only by a seat and row number. He is (usually) faceless from the vantage point of the actor—ensconced as he is in darkness. This dissolution of identity protects the spectator, and, in a sense, can absolve him of the responsibility for his reactions. As I look at performances of the plays of Artaud, Beckett, and McDonagh, modernity’s uneasiness with this simultaneous passivity and freedom will repeatedly foreground itself. Artaud hoped that audiences would lose themselves in half naked, yelled epithets and accusations into microphones, and wore inexplicable afro wigs.

57 “Comprendre, interpreter, sont des comportments de l’advenant. À ce titre, ils constituent des modalités fondamentales de son adventure, ou événementiaux. La compréhension peut être déterminée plus précisément comme un *projet*” (50).

58 “Cet ‘horizon’ est lui-même une structure herméneutique et désigne la totalité des possibilités à partir desquelles un sens, comme tel, peut donc venir au jour” (51).
the whirlwind of his total theatre and encounter their taboo desires and the cruelty at the center of our every action. Beckett, despite experimenting with the dramatic form until almost nothing recognizable as drama remained, nonetheless retained the dark house and the spotlight. McDonagh’s plays trick the audience in to responsibility-free laughter before raising ethical questions about that reaction. Though avant-garde, these three authors seem stubbornly traditional in this aspect of their dramaturgy. They retain the darkened house and the strict division between stage-world and house in order to provoke reactions that can be interrogated and understood from that safe position of anonymity.

Bruce Wilshire, in his phenomenological study of theatre _Role Playing and Identity_, emphasizes the protective role of spectator anonymity that nonetheless lays bare something that is otherwise invisible: our assumptions, our desires, our vulnerabilities are often masked by the layers of public identity.

As audience encounters actors, and world encounters ‘world,’ an inviolable rule typically regulates their intercourse. The anonymity and privacy of the audience member are protected as he sits in the theatre house…An aesthetic funneling and restricting—an aesthetic ‘distance’—regulates the intercourse of ‘world’ and world. It is just because of this protection that the audience can uncover itself at its most vulnerable levels: its archaic mimetic fusions with others, and its odder and deeper sympathies, about which it has never learned to speak in words. (23)

Wilshire calls attention to the location of the true dramatic moment in a theatrical event—one dramatized by Hamlet’s Mousetrap—the encounter of the spectator with unspoken and unperceived aspects of himself.

Marion’s event “crashes” onto the screen of _l’adonné_; Romano’s event happens like a bolt of lightning; and the event, according to Jacques Derrida, falls on to the subject. They share a common definition of the event as unforeseeable to the subject. Derrida said in a lecture titled, “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Speaking the Event,” that:
Horizontally, I see it come, I fore-see it, I fore-say it and the event is that which can be said but never fore-said (predicted). A predicted event is not an event. It falls on me because I do not see it coming. The event, like the arriving one, is that which falls on me vertically without my being able to see it coming: the event cannot appear to me as anything but impossible before it arrives.\(^5^9\)

Thus, as we have seen intra-textually, the appearance of the Ghost in *Hamlet* operates as an event par excellence. It is un-fore-seen because though Hamlet can see the approach of the Ghost, he could never have anticipated it. The Ghost as figure appears as a manifest object, the event of the Ghost—his revelation of murder, his demand of vengeance—falls from above, vertically, as an immutable Law that will drive Hamlet’s action until his eventual death. For Romano, the fullness of the event and its ability to remake the world make it difficult to locate it on what he calls the horizon of our experience:

> [It] reconfigures the world each time for he to whom it happens. If every thing, in effect, is encountered within a horizon, if every event itself looms under the day of its context, the event is never encountered within a horizon, it is the horizon of its encounter; because every event and every being are able to be encountered in the world in as much as they happen in the opening of their montrance: now the event is that which opens to itself, gives access to self and, far from submitting itself to a prior condition, furnishes the condition of its own happening.\(^6^0\)

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> “À l’horizontale, je le vois venir, je le pré-vois, je le pré-dis et l’événement c’est ce qui peut être dit mais jamais prédit. Un événement prédit n’est pas un événement. Cela me tombe dessus parce que je ne le vois pas venir. L’événement, comme l’arrivant, c’est ce qui verticalement me tombe dessus, sans que je puisse le voire venir: l’événement ne peut m’apparaître avant d’arriver que comme impossible” (97).

\(^{60}\) “L’événement reconfigure à chaque fois le monde pour celui à qui il survient. Si toute chose, en effet, est rencontrée sous un horizon, si tout fait s’annonce lui-même sous le jour de son contexte, l’événement n’est jamais rencontré sous un horizon, il est l’horizon de sa rencontre; car tout fait et tout étant sont rencontrables dans le monde pour autant qu’ils adviennent dans l’ouvert de leur montrance: or l’événement est ce qui ouvre à lui-même, donne accès à soi et, loin de se soumettre à une condition préalable, fournit la condition de son propre avènement” (*Le Monde* 60).
Precisely because the event breaks through the horizon of possibility, reorienting both interpretative possibilities and causal explanations by means of its “incomprehensible sense,” the event obliges *l’advenant* “to understand himself and his world otherwise.”

Therefore, in the case of Hamlet and the Ghost we see a dramatic representation of what a theatrical event can do to the spectator. A play performance may indeed “crash” on to the subject and quickly lead to the subject developing new understanding. It is this *eventmental* possibility of an extra-theatrical ethical possibility that motivates theatre practitioners such as Augusto Boal to use theatre to effect political and social change.

The performance record in the cases of Antonin Artaud, Sarah Kane, the curious case of prison theatre programs, and Martin McDonagh’s Irish roots at Druid Theatre Company reveals that dramatists, directors, and theatre companies have plans to reform the spectator as a political, philosophical, and social being. Theatre has become a zone in which, as Julia Kristeva says of art, existing *ethical* codes “must be shattered in order to give way to the free play of negativity, need, desire, pleasure, and jouissance, before being put together again, although temporarily and with full knowledge of what is involved” (23). Theatre has long been fostering this sense of anarchy followed by reflectiveness in an avant-garde movement that sought to effectuate change in the spectator as agent in his or her community. Baz Kershaw develops an idea of theatrical

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Car, si le monde est la totalité des possibilités interprétatives à partir desquelles les faits deviennent compréhensibles dans leur articulation mutuelle et prennent un *sens* pour l’advenant, l’événement est justement ce qui, en brisant l’horizon des possibles préalables et en y introduisant un sens incomprehensible à l’aune de toute explication causale, apporte avec soi son propre horizon d’intelligibilité, obligeant l’advenant à comprendre autrement et lui-même et son monde” (*Le Monde* 61-62).

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efficacy, or “‘the potential that the theatre may have to make the immediate effects of performance influence, however minutely, the general historical evolution of wider social and political realities’” (60). Interestingly, Kerhsaw calls the effect of a performance (laughter, tears, fright, etc.) the “main lever” for change to an audience’s future actions, community, and culture (1). In other words, when the spectator manifests a reaction, that historical event becomes the evidence she needs to effect personal and community changes. Kershaw puts forward a model for performance analysis that would get beyond the limits of audience analysis dependent on questionnaires and other quantitative research and would instead interrogate the conditions of a performance that make it what he calls “efficacious” (2-3).

In recent years, theatre critics and theorists have insisted that the cultural and historical situatedness necessary to spectatorship opens up this aesthetic experience to specifically ethical questions of right and wrong action. R.D. Crano argues that purely theoretical approaches to Artaud’s concept of life tend to “overlook the ‘moral’ concerns that frame his text, moral concerns specific to the Europe of the early twentieth century (50). In the act of spectating, Crano believes, the spectator reveals herself “as not just socially constructed and therefore mutable but also powerfully, profoundly inhospitable to ‘life’” and this lack of hospitability has “profound moral, ethical, and political ramifications” (Crano 51). Jurgen Siess examines the power relations between actor,


director, and author in Beckett’s late plays, specifically how the actor’s body is so often subjected to and portrayed as “subdued to” an invisible, authorizing violence” (299). The problem of purchasing tickets to witness actors subjugate themselves to what Siess calls “institutional tensions,” such as the violence that Beckett foregrounds, raises ethical questions for spectators about sponsoring these events (a question examined by such theorists such as Keir Elam and Susan Bennett). At the close of the twentieth century, avant-garde writers in nineties Britain likewise challenged the spectator, not as sponsors, but as witnesses to heretofore unseen levels of stage violence. The violent onstage worlds of Sarah Kane have been called “catastrophic” by Ken Urban, who calls for a new “ethics of catastrophe” based on the possibility of change, yet “not as the end point of some utopic political narrative” (69).

Baz Kershaw insists on particular, local community-based reactions to measure how “efficacious” any performance event may be in achieving its political, moral, or philosophical objectives. The theatrical projects examined in the course of this dissertation will move from the utopian objectives of Antonin Artaud—whose total theatre sought to remake the spectator (and by extension society) through a total assault on the senses—to the equally ambitious performances of Samuel Beckett, Martin McDonagh, and Sarah Kane. Behind the bleakness and violence of the postmodern stage, is what Karoline Gritzner calls “a residual reminder of the unrealized (utopian) promise that was once central to the categories of subjectivity and modernity—namely, the


promise of freedom” (330). The avant-garde stage, in its most utopian moments, re-enacts a modernist quest for a renewed, free subjectivity. The chapter on prison theatre and Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, will reveal the utopian impulse of program directors to resist the de-subjectification of the prison system by offering inmates a sense of freedom possible through performance. Jill Dolan’s *Utopia in Performance*, in which the performance event leads to “‘both affective and effective feelings and expressions of hope and love’” puts forward a utopian model of spectator response, which does not manifest itself in recognizable changes in behavior but of attitude (quoted in Lisa Fitzpatrick 59). Dolan uses “utopian performative” to indicate that the performance itself is a “doing,” and through the “magic” of theatrical events, we can access “a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (Dolan 5). The performative of a “utopian performative,” then, makes itself apparent in expansive feelings, or a rekindling of what Dolan calls “humanism” in a post-9/11 world of racial and religious ghettoization. The “utopian performatives” at play in the performances of Artaud, Kane, Beckett, and McDonagh will raise troubling questions about the efficacy of these various projects and whether or not a mere kindling of “expansive feelings” amounts to a rebuilding of a lost common ethical standard.

As the twentieth century closed, playwrights such as Sarah Kane and Martin McDonagh began to exploit the popularity of Broadway and the West End to challenge what Schechner called “the monoculturalist’s nightmare”—a popular avant-garde. The theatrical events that I will analyze range from both popular (the highly acclaimed Martin

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McDonagh) to almost inaccessible (the performances of American and European prison theatre groups), but each illuminate the progress of the avant-garde in a utopian project to act upon and change both actor and spectator.

1.5 Conclusion: Toward an Ethical Spectatorship

This chapter has opened the possibility of “understanding the world otherwise” when it comes to performance theory, specifically imagining spectatorship otherwise than mere aesthetic consumption. While understanding the anthropological or semiotic factors at play in a theatrical event can be beneficial for performer, spectator, and critic alike, the ethical dimension—the invisible call moving between spectator and drama—requires an approach that can see the invisible becoming visible in everyday, actual objects and gestures. Though so far I have remained inside the texts of *Noises Off* and *Hamlet* to illustrate certain points about how dramas implicitly comment on their own power to focus our perception and enact ethical demands, in the coming chapters actual recorded performances will demonstrate this essential excess of theatrical events. According to Bruce Wilshire, the peculiar scope of theatre is not that it shows us a “slice of life,” but the whole of it in a perceivable distillation that then reorients the spectator toward “ordinary” life. He asks at the beginning of *Role Playing and Identity: Theatre as Metaphor*:

What if it were the case that theatre allowed us not only to see and to grasp an appearance of what something is when the actual thing is not present, but to see it better….Life itself is too large and strung-out to be taken in as a whole by the mind…usually we are absorbed in a meager portion of the whole so totally that we cannot be aware that we are thus absorbed. (32)

It is this excess, the surprise at seeing ourselves in the characters and the whole of life in two hours’ time, that will provoke unexpected responses time and again. These
responses—uncomfortable, rejecting, or celebratory—make apparent the spectator’s ethical response to what he has seen unfold in the world that “glows” on the stage.
CHAPTER TWO

COMMUNICATION, TRANSMISSION, AND PLAGUE: ANTONIN ARTAUD AND SARAH KANE’S INFECTIOUS THEATRE

2.1 Introduction: “Comment dire Antonin Artaud?”

“Artaud was a great theatre-poet, which means a poet of the possibilities of theatre and not of dramatic literature.”

---Jerzy Grotowski

Theatrical events are both discursive and performative: they communicate at the same time that they happen. Furthermore, a wealth of discourse surrounds individual performances—preparatory media coverage, theatrical reviews, and critical scholarship predigest and digest the performances and the dramatic texts for a reading public, both nonspecialist and specialist. The post-performance discourse seeks to understand what has happened to the performer and spectator in the course of participating together in the event.

As recently as 1970, Alain Virmaux asked a question that demands an answer by any one seeking to say something about Artaud and his oeuvre: “Peut-on écrire aujourd’hui sur Artaud et le théâtre?” (Virmaux 15). A collective of scholars, poets, and friends gathered under the title Obliques: Antonin Artaud to address that very question.

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Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze have each asked in their own disciplines “comment dire Antonin Artaud?”70 “Artaud le Mômo”—as he called himself late in life—was the visible sign of a tormented and absent spirit.71 Looking through the dessicated flesh, Artaud used his body as the intersection of his critique of Western philosophy, language and art. Yet, despite taking on the personality of le Mômo, Artaud’s mummy spoke continuously throughout his tumultuous fifty-two years. As an artist, poet, and playwright, Artaud le Mômo always spoke to a stubborn public unwilling (and unable) to decode the image of his flesh.

In Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, the artist (Artaud) takes advantage of the communicative power of newsprint and publishing to transmit a radical new notion of what it means to be human. Artaud overthrows what he calls the old, Western reliance on logic and reason and a discredited religious authority and holds up in its place a pagan, pre-civilization taboo-shattering moment of theatrical renewal that he likens to magical rites, intoxication and hallucination, and most importantly, to plague. Artaud sees a world that has suppressed the essentially human in the service of false explanations for human behavior (psychological realism, especially serves the interests of established government and religion). The newspapers and journals he published in served as the avant-garde coverage he needed to transmit the ideas and entice a public to his various theatrical experiments. But his theatre, as a physical and spiritual event, was always the actual sight

70 See Derrida’s two essays on Antonin Artaud in L’Écriture et la différence, “La Parole soufflée” and “Le Théâtre de la Cruauté et la clôture de la representation.” See Foucault’s The History of Madness. In Deleuze’s Capitalisme et schizophrénie; Anti-Oedipe, and Mille-Plateaux.

71 The full record of the evening at the Vieux Colombier in which Artaud put himself forward as “le Mômo” can be found in Volume XXVI of the Oeuvres Complètes. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.
in which he communicated new ideas about what it means to be human (an existence subject to gratuitous cruelty). Though his various theatrical projects each failed in their turn, the ideas contained within *Le Théâtre et son double* continued to influence theatrical practice throughout the twentieth century, especially up to the present day when a young playwright in Great Britain named Sarah Kane would use the theatre to infect her audiences with a new vision of the cruelty at work in ordinary local spaces and distant Bosnia.

Born in Marseilles in 1896, Antonin Artaud first fell ill with what is supposed to be meningitis at the age of four (Hayman 36). In 1915, after a fit of rage in which he destroyed all of his writings and his books, he was sent for his first institutionalization in a sanitorium near Marseille (39). The following year he was well enough to serve in the military, but was released after nine months for poor health. Travelling to Paris to be under the care of Dr. Toulouse, Artaud became involved in theatre, notably under Charles Dullin (42). In 1921 at Dullin’s atelier and school, Artaud met the woman with whom he was to have his closest relationship, Génica Athanasiou (43). Numerous roles followed in plays ranging from Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* to Cocteau’s *Antigone* to Shaw’s *Androcles and the Lion*. He joined with the surrealist movement in 1924, writing for the *centrale surréaliste* and publishing *L’Ombilic des limbes* and *Le Pèse-Nerfs* in 1924 and 1925 and breaking with the surrealists in 1926 (63). In 1926 and 1927, he worked to bring his *Théâtre Alfred Jarry* to fruition, with a performance from June 2-3, 1927 featuring three plays: Artaud’s *Ventre brûlé ou la Mère folle*, Robert Aron’s *Gigogne*, and Roger Vitrac’s *Les Mystères de l’amour*. The venture lost 7,000 francs (70-71). A second program of the Alfred Jarry Theatre took place on January 14,
1928. His health suffered in 1929 and he wrote very little (76). In the two years following he would begin to formulate the ideas that would become the Theatre of Cruelty, in letters and in manifestoes and the lecture, ‘Le Théâtre et la peste,’ given at the Sorbonne on April 6, 1933 (89). His adaptation of Shelley and Stendhal’s works on the Cenci story appeared as Les Cenci, the inaugural production of the Theatre of Cruelty, in 1935 to almost universal derision. He left Paris in 1936 for Mexico. During his visit he received a grant from the government to travel into the interior of the country where he would visit the Tarahumaras where he sought out the Indian tribe that continued to use peyote in ritual celebrations (108). Upon his arrival back in France, he was in and out of asylums and clinics for his opium addiction and other afflictions. In July, 1937, he departed for Ireland, travelling as far as the Aran Islands before returning to Dublin to “wake the Irish up by making them recognize the cane of St. Patrick,” a stick he carried with him (120). The Irish police sent him back to France on a ship, where he was finally restrained in a straitjacket until being handed over to port officials in Le Havre (122). He returned a reconverted Catholic and took communion frequently at the institutions until electric shock therapy was begun and he renounced all faith once again. His friends organized his ultimate release in July, 1946 and he spent his last two years in a convalescent home in Ivry-sur-Seine (Barber 126).  

73 In his last works he develops his own language, recording glossolalia in works such as Artaud le Mômo and Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu, a play for radio which was recorded in 1948 but banned by the Director-General of Radiodiffusion Française (142). He died just a few weeks later on March 4 at the clinic in Ivry (143).

The Theatre of Cruelty arose as a reaction against the text-based, realistic dramas that dominated European theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Innovations in stage design and the invention of gas and then electric light made it possible to isolate the audience in darkness and allow them to look down upon a scene of domestic life as distant observers. Whereas audiences had previously been quite vocal and engaged in performances as late as the early nineteenth century, by the 1850s, audiences members no matter their rank or seat in the house had become—on the whole—well-behaved. As dramatic convention changed over the following forty years, dramatic action became constricted from the epic landscapes of Romantic-era drama to the psychological realism of Ibsen and Strindberg, whose dramas required the audience to pay careful attention to facial expression and subtle psychological transformations.

Artaud emerges in theatrical history during a moment of innovations (Futurism, Brechtianism) and demands that those who write, produce, and attend theatre consider its origins and what it ought to be manifesting on the stage. Theatre directors such as Peter Brook would combine the spirit and techniques of Artaud and Bertolt Brecht in anachronistic and contradictory experiments; the lights in the theatres were often switched on precisely to change the spectators’ perceptions at crucial moments and to

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75 Strindberg himself called for innovations in stage lighting because the harsh light from the footlights prevented actors from engaging in naturalistic glances: “In modern psychological dramas, where the subtlest movements of the soul are to be reflected on the face rather than by gestures than noise, it would probably be well to experiment with strong sidelight on a small stage.” (“Strindberg’s Naturalism.” *A Source Book on Theatrical History*. A. M. Nagler. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1952. 583-586. 585.)
force them to reflect on their spectatorship in the middle of the event. However, in contrast to Bertolt Brecht, situates that reflexivity in pre-performance and post-performance interviews and essays. The performance event was a time for full immersion in an extra-ordinary experience of chaos and cruelty. Artaud’s critique is really a familiar one, and fulfills all Adorno’s criteria for aesthetic greatness as set forth in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Far from tolerating the “innocuous,” Artaud remained an alienated figure in the theatre of his day because his plays’ content (not their form) was so revolutionary. Adorno calls modern art “modern” because it is a mimesis of “the hardened and alienated.” As I progress through various touchstones in Artaud’s oeuvre, he will shatter various brittle taboos and seek to make visible the alienated drives at the foundation of human experience. The performance event, for Artaud, is not merely a

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76 For Peter Brook, to whom “Artaud applied is Artaud betrayed,” the spirit of *The Theatre and its Double* informed his 1963 Royal Shakespeare Company *King Lear* at the same time that many specific mise-en-scène choices were directly influenced by Bertolt Brecht and Eastern theatrical styles. For instance, Brook left the stage bare rather than crowding it with a more pictorial/realist representation of druidic landscapes and crumbling castles. Leggatt called the effect this empty space produced a “stylized idiom that carried full conviction” (Leggatt 37). The lighting, from the opening moment in which Kent enters with the house lights still up, remained bright, invoking the Chinese theatre, as Kenneth Tynan writes in his review for the *Observer*. Brook also used certain concepts of Brecht to force the audience into a new relationship to Shakespeare’s text. He recalls of the production, “At the end of the first act of Lear when Gloucester is blinded, we brought the house lights up before the last savage action was completed—so as to make the audience take stock of the scene before being engulfed in automatic applause” (*The Empty Space* 73).

77 Adorno meditates on why the most critical artworks suffer from a cold reception: Their outsider status is by virtue of its content, “Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent; this is why art no longer tolerates the innocuous” (*Aesthetic Theory* 21). Interesting is the use of the word “innocuous,” sharing the root of the word “inoculate.” Artaud, like other artists considered in Adorno’s works on aesthetics, eschewed the numbing and inoculating effects of “decadent” Western drama, preferring to use the theatrical even to awaken the audience to the plague of cruelty besieging them.
discursive exercise but a call to action, specifically for a performance event that we call “total theatre.” This action demands the participation of its spectators. Even his works of theory (*Le Théâtre et son double* and the manifestoes) operate on a performative level, inviting the reader/hearer to react to the event physically and mentally. Artaud as image-creator sets images before the spectator as living hieroglyphs to reform the thought processes by force, violence, and cruelty. For Artaud, images act on the senses of his spectator in order to exceed reason and to manifest to the spectator the problem of Artaud’s suffering within his body. This radical quest to collapse the insurmountable divide between Artaud’s proper experience and that of his spectators is a mystical and physical exercise in opening the subjective experience of embodied suffering to an Other.

Situating Artaud within the context of the various traditions he is arguing with and through opens up the deeper question of why the Theatre of Cruelty continues to guide avant-garde dramatists to this day. Though it might be tempting to read Artaud as a reactionary, opposing text to staging, or West to East, a close reading of both the plays and the theoretical works will reveal Artaud’s reforming agenda—reinvesting concepts like Life, Thought, Force, and Myth with their ancient, pre-Western civilization significance. Despite the radical content and the utopian zeal to re-form his spectator’s senses and thought, Artaud never abandoned the conventional form of stage and audience.

As we trace Artaud’s career through four seminal works, we will be tracing what turns out to be the trajectory of a full circle. To begin with, *L’Ombilic des limbes* (1925) weaves an intensely interior narrative of the self in conflict with various cruel forces in

78 “*Le Theatre et la peste* was performed by Artaud for an audience at the Sorbonne.
the world (madness, society, the current state of aesthetic production) with a short Surrealist drama (which was not staged for decades) that turns out to be more than simple parody. His interests then become more focused on theatre as his preferred means to “shatter language to touch life” as we will see in the manifestoes and essays in *Le Théâtre et son double* (1931-1935). The manifestoes anticipate a project to reform Western theatre from a text-based tradition that had rendered the spectator passive to a precivilization theatre of magic in which the spectator would both participate in the event’s creation and be profoundly changed by the experience. This total theatre will be developed theoretically in the essays in *Le Théâtre et son double* before debuting experimentally in the performances of *Les Cenci* (1935). Artaud’s narrative of persecution and cruelty is often read as an exteriorized, generalized narrative of the condition of Western humanity. But beneath the text, in the performance history, we can read how the performance was an experiment in communicating the experience of physical and mental anguish from performer to spectator. For the performance of *Les Cenci* to succeed, Artaud must prepare a specific sort of spectator to participate with him in the moment of the event’s unfolding. Lastly, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* (1947), closes Artaud’s short and troubled career with the artist again seeking to impress as immanent experience his own physical torment on the eyes and ears of his spectators/listeners. As a radio play that was not aired for over three decades, the records of the performance event reveal the deeply troubled reaction to this last exercise in ritualized sharing of suffering. Though the circle seems to close with Artaud’s death in 1948 and the supposed failure of the Theatre of Cruelty to find an audience, it was still

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79 “Briser le langage pour toucher la vie, c’est faire ou refaire le théâtre.” (From “Le Théâtre et la culture” in *Oeuvres Complètes*. 509. My translation). All citations from the *Oeuvres Complètes* edition will be marked as (OC).
open, as we shall see in the late twentieth century example of Sarah Kane, criticizing so-called civilization and reminding meek Western audiences of the cruelty necessarily motivating all human action.

2.2. Surrealist Beginnings

Artaud’s connection with the avant-garde movement of Surrealism in the early twentieth century had lasting repercussions for him as an artist long after his break with Surrealism’s leader, André Breton, in 1926. By tracing his intellectual and aesthetic lineage, we can better understand the full scope of the project that was the Theatre of Cruelty and why it has had such an impact on stage practices to this day despite being such a failure at its inception. “Surrealism” has its roots in the vision of poet, playwright and critic Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), who coined the term. Apollinaire can be placed in a continuum with other modernist avant-garde movements like the Futurists, in that he expresses a faith in the new and the progress of the sciences and of art.⁸⁰ Following Apollinaire, the Dadaists and the Surrealists took up the “cultivation of the scandalous” and “confrontation with the absurd” as Willard Bohn calls it. Bohn sees this not as many others have—as ultimately nihilistic—but as primarily a positive movement, “Protesting bourgeois values in art and life, effecting a tabula rasa… [destroying] and [reconstructing] reality” (200). Phillip Auslander, on the other hand, sees the Surrealist movement as having blatantly nihilistic roots, starting with Tristan Tzara and Apollinaire.

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before him. ⁸¹ We can see Artaud’s early involvement with the group led by Breton as sharing their admittedly positive ideals: a belief in the mystical side of art, the need to redefine civilization, and a privileging of emotion and the unconscious to reason and the conscious. ⁸² According to Georges Bataille, Artaud was responsible for much of the text of the 1925 Surrealist declaration. ⁸³ So, as we will see, Artaud shares his interest in the absurd, the dream-state, and the anti-rational with his Surrealist forbears.

A particular feature of Artaud’s Surrealist heritage that I will examine in detail is the use of the manifesto as a *performance* in itself. In an article titled “Manifesto=Theatre,” Martin Puchner traces the history of the manifesto in reverse to Antonin Artaud as the exemplar manifesto writer. Artaud used the manifesto form to realize a “new mode of speech,” whose “accent” influences how it is to be performed (and Artaud’s were not performed aloud, but meant to be read by readers of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*) (464). ⁸⁴ This emphasis on the reading-aloud marks the rupture between Artaud and Breton over the location of surrealism’s revolutionary battle. Breton allied Surrealism with the Communist party in 1926, because he believed Surrealism had reached its revolutionary limits in literature. Artaud, on the other hand, was becoming more interested in theatre’s ability to influence action and would come to see the performing body as the starting point for a revolution greater than the one envisioned by the Communist party. As he writes in “The Surrealist Bluff,” “the revolutionary forces of

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any movement are those capable of unbalancing the fundamental state of things, of changing the angle of reality.”

Changing the angle of reality implies a shift in stance or a redirection of gaze—already a phenomenological, spectatorial project even in Artaud’s final days with the Surrealists. Artaud had no confidence in political structures to realize such a radical renewal, but a theatre of gesture, sound, and image could do so.

In the 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton identifies the problem of consciousness for the modern man as one of timidity and truncation. Humanity is satisfied with a very small space (the waking consciousness) and a fruitless life of the mind. Breton writes of this sad specimen:

> None of his gestures will be expansive, none of his ideas generous or far-reaching. In his mind’s eye, events real or imagined will be seen only as they relate to a welter of similar events. Events in which he has not participated, abortive events. (Breton 4)

As one of his acolytes (despite his unceremonious ejection from the Surrealist coterie), Artaud in his work clearly demonstrates his complicated relationship to the conscious mind, a preoccupation he inherits from the Surrealists.

Breton’s project is deeply optimistic and celebratory of the poetic geniuses of the past. He begins a long list of “the marvelous” in many ages, admitting that it is not the same in every age, but “il participe obscurement d’une sorte de revelation generale dont le detail seul nous parvient: ce sont les ruines romantiques, le mannequin moderne” etc.

He lists Artaud among a great many handsome young men and beautiful women who people this current age of “marvelous” poetic geniuses (29). He lists in what degree

85 Quoted in *Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs*. Stephen Barber. 29.

authors from Swift to Jarry to Hugo were surrealist, appropriating these literary figures and claiming them as a move forward in the surrealist program. Artaud, on the other hand, will look with approval on few previous authors (Rimbaud, Poe, Shelley stand out), considering most of Western literature to suffer under a suffocating devotion to abstract thought over the possibility of corporeal renewal. He specifically disagrees with the optimism of the Surrealist project when he explains his rupture from the group in À la grande nuit ou le bluff Surréaliste in June, 1927. In aligning themselves with the Communist party, what Artaud calls “action réelle,” the Surrealists became fundamentally at odds with what he calls his “pessimisme intégral.” This pessimism is not crippling, but “une certaine forme de pessimisme porte avec elle sa lucidité. La lucidité du désespoir, des sens exacerbés et comme à la lisière des abîmes” (OC 240). The hopelessness of his pessimism actually casts a light on the abyss that he will come to call “cruelty,” and for Artaud, to see rightly is a far more positive project than what he dismissively calls “le mot Révolution” with the capital R (OC 236). Artaud hopes to expand the poetic genius’s reach through acting on the senses of his hearers with the goal of infecting the audience with his vision and overwhelming them with sound. Artaud calls this infectious activity the proper domain of theatrical communication, moving

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87 Anna Balakian, likewise, considers Artaud to be principally a Surrealist author who has been mistakenly appropriated by later movements such as Theatre of the Absurd (and one can imagine associating him with Sarah Kane would come under the same criticism) in Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute. She sees him as a “dark angel of Surrealism” whose influence on the theatre of the absurd in the 1950s and 60s shows an unwillingness to grow out of his “contempt for the absurdity of the world.” The Existential and Absurd legacy of Artaud, for Balakian, should have been a momentary despairing pause in the hopeful “reconstruction” possible in the arts as envisioned by Apollinaire and his followers. Balakian bemoans the continuing despair and “deconstruction” that closed the twentieth century, which would be inexplicable if you see Artaud as “uncontrolled and apocryphal” rather than prophetic. (See her note at the bottom of page 244).
through the crowd like a plague. As we will see in *Le Théâtre et son double*, we must first understand the disease Artaud hopes to spread. But before approaching the technical questions of *how* the plague will spread, we can see even in the early Surrealist writings collected in *L’Ombilic des limbes*, what Artaud intends to communicate.

### 2.2.1 *L’Ombilic des limbes*

*L’ombilic des limbes* offers several clues as to the telos of Artaud’s theatrical project, assuming that there was a traceable continuation between his early, surrealistic poems, his letters, and his later plays and performances. The first thing to note is the motivation, or quest, underlying *L’ombilic*, which we might call a crisis of “Mind” as Artaud does. In the first piece of *L’Ombilic*, Artaud opines:


The problem for Artaud and one which playwrights like him will try to solve on the stage, is the insurmountable divide between the mind and life. As we will see in most of his works, Artaud is using literature and especially theatrical performances to overcome this division between the interior (the Mind) and the exterior (Life). He will call this a separation that comes about from the instant flesh is joined to spirit and his work will be concerned with the search for a pre-Western unity of mind and world. This search will take him as far as the Tarahumaras where he will take part in the Peyote rituals of the native Indian people of the Mexican interior.

The arrangement of pieces in *L’Ombilic des limbes* can seem confusing and haphazard, being a collection of short essays, letters, poems, the play “Le Jet de sang,” the fragmentary image-laden scene, “Paul les oiseaux,” and a “surrealistic” scene of the
interior of the mind written, strangely, for the cinema. But, returning to the original motivation of the collection—to effectively communicate the suffering caused by the division between the mind and life—this collection can be seen as a meditation on the problems of the Mind as object (the cinema piece), interpretive organ (the letter on narcotics, especially, describes the “anguish” of the mind as a bodily organ subject to degeneration) and lastly Mind as image-generator (*Le Jet de sang*). In the creative dramatic works, the Mind creates fantastic images, Surrealistic at the same time that they are profoundly historical—grounded as they are in either myth or the parody. The Mind is both the source of suffering and the source of salvation, if only a new kind of Thought can be allowed to take hold.

*L’Ombilic des Limbes* opens by Artaud writing, “Je ne conçois pas d’œuvre comme détachée de la vie. Je n’aime pas la création détachée” (OC 105). The creative object should maintain a connection with the life-giving force of its creator like an umbilicus to his spirit or mind. The letters preserve as much of Artaud’s essence as an essay, even though such an essay appears to him “une grossesse indifférente de mon esprit,” or a pregnancy indifferent to (separate from, alien, and aborted) of his mind. He says this because—no matter the form it takes—his works are necessarily an exterior representation of “le châtfrage insensé de ma vie.” The collection that is *L’Ombilic*, then, will hang suspended between two states—interior and exterior. He hopes it will be “bitten” by exterior things, perhaps a reference to biting the umbilicus finally to separate Artaud from the creation by the action of what he calls “tous les soubresauts en cisaille.” He decries the impossibility of such a connection in the realistic artistic offerings of his day and, in these pieces, tries to imagine a new possibility for such a connection by way of narcotics and surrealism. Thierry Galibert
sees Artaud’s writing unfold as a mission, one to enlarge the field of possibilities for conforming language to the need of the poet. Thus, in the Theatre of Cruelty, he will turn to the power of the mise-en-scène to translate his suffering directly to the spectators with the power of a plague, rather like a mad doctor he seeks to cure by killing. He will do this by creating a new “language” of movement and gesture and scene, one suited to the task of making cruelty manifest to a sedated Western audience.

Artaud includes in this publication several letters to his doctors concerning his malady, a malady of the mind and spirit, whose treatment affects more “le moi”—or self—he knew within himself than the “moi” visible to others (OC 105). He desires that the drugs will help with the disequilibrium he experiences not in his “moral soul” but in his possiblités pensantes, or his thinking possibilities, his “useable intellectuality.” He hopes that the doctor can provide him with the right drugs in the right dose to “exhauser mon abaisement, d’équilibrer ce qui tombe, de punir ce qui est séparé, de recomposer ce qui est détruit” (OC 107). Again, he looks for healing of a rupture, a fall, a split, a

88 He marks the works collected in this volume specifically as the beginning of an Artaudian project regarding language: “Dès L’Ombilic des limbes, et Le Pèse-nerfs, les mots doivent couper leur cordon social pour rendre compte d’états individuels…et si les potentialités linguistiques ne suffisent pas…la première mission du poète sera d’élargir le champ des possibles pour le mettre en conformité avec ses besoins” (161).


89 Pauliska où la perversité moderne by Jacques-Antoine de Révéroni Saint-Cyr (1798); Johann von Goethe’s Faust (1808); Frankenstein by Mary Shelley (1818); The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson (1886); “The Birthmark,” and “Rappacini’s Daughter” by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1843, 1844); In the mad scientist or doctor of Romantic era fiction, we see the antagonist willing to destroy the individual to prove his theories or expand his vision of the world. The anxiety toward science (rationalism) crosses national and linguistic borders easily, as the totalizing influences of industrial efficiency, scientific progress, and social engineering sweep across the Western world.

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fragmentation. Later in *L’Ombilic* he writes a “Lettre à Monsieur le législateur de la loi sur les stupéfiants,” in which he accuses the establishment “dictators of the French pharmaceutical school” of not understanding the malady that drugs such as opium address.

Il y a un mal contre lequel l’opium est souverain et ce mal s’appelle l’Angoisse, dans sa forme mentale, médicale, psychologique, logique ou pharmaceutique, comme vous voudrez,
L’Angoisse qui fait les Fous.
L’Angoisse qui fait les suicidés.
L’Angoisse qui fait les damnés.
L’Angoisse que la medicine ne connaît pas.
L’Angoisse que votre docteur n’entend pas.
L’Angoisse qui lèse la vie.
L’Angoisse qui pince la corde ombilicale de la vie” (OC 115).

In these fragments, Artaud is working out a connection between thought (*la pensée*), life (*la vie*) and mind (*l’Esprit*). Dividing them from each other is this Anguish, which “pinches the umbilical cord of life.” Medicine’s solution, according to Artaud, is for him to feign equilibrium in a sort of numbed state. But this numbing will not alter the fact that he senses himself the victim of a cruel separation. He writes in a footnote to the collected writings of *L’Ombilic des limbes*, that the world sees him as a thinking individual since he does produce thoughts of a kind, “On me dit que je pense parce que je n’ai pas cessé tout à fait de penser et parce que, malgré tout, mon esprit se maintient à un certain niveau et donne de temps en temps des preuves de son existence.” Life and thought are more than the mere absence of death, “Mais penser c’est pour moi autre chose que n’être pas tout à fait mort” (OC 116). He alludes here to a more vivid and real sort of experience, one he yearns for and of which he believes he hears echoes. Experience has shown him that there are multiple instances of “me,” the one he knows to be himself, and the one others see, and that these selves are the crystallization, “sourde et multiforme de la
pensée, qui choisit, à un moment donné sa forme. Il y a une cristallisation immédiate et directe du moi au milieu de toutes les formes possibles, de tous les modes de la pensée” (OC 107). On the basis of this instability of the self, one which seems to choose its form at a given moment from multiple possibilities, Artaud has begun to identify the source of this anguish.

He rejects the torment of his illness and instead demands relief through opium, the only substance that offers him a respite from this overwhelming anguish—an anguish that offers him “echos” and “labyrinths” and “caves.” And, as we see in his letter to the physician, we witness in his footnote a division between the actual product of his thought (L’Ombilic des Limbes as published by La Nouvelle Revue Française in 1925) and the “multiform” possibility of the artistic work that never took on form. He laments this still-born offspring of his thought, “If what I know to be my thought were available to me, I might perhaps have written The Umbilicus of Limbo, but I would have written it in a completely different way” (Sontag 70). And, as we saw earlier, the Anguish plaguing him is what has robbed him of his thought, rendering the pages of L’Ombilic des Limbes that we hold in our hands, the object resulting from his action, are the dead remains of his creative will. He expands this image pattern in the last prose piece before the drama “Le Jet de Sang” where again, he contrasts two kinds of anguish: the one that “ne consume rien qui ne lui appartienne, elle naît de sa propre asphyxie” compared to what he calls “l’angoisse opiumique” which has a metaphysical pitch/“pente métaphysique,” And a marvelous imperfection of tone/“merveilleuse imperfection d’accent,” an anguish characterized not by loss but by plenitude, “pleine de langues de feu parlantes, d’yeux mentaux en action et du claquement d’une foudre sombre et remplie de raison” (OC 117). This anguish has eyes, a tongue “full of speaking fire,” with “lightning bolts somber and
full of reason.” This is the anguish of the body, itself envisioned as a demon in Artaud’s corpus, not so much because of its savage impulses, but because of society’s civilizing repression (Galibert 152). To release this energy and face the savage impulses that Western culture has submerged, Artaud proposes a theatre of taboos. By breaking the remaining taboos, Artaud can make apparent the cruelty that operates as a necessary condition for all true life and thought.

2.2.2 Le Jet de sang

*Le Jet de Sang* closes the collection with its opaque imagery and Surrealist themes. First, even if it could be performed, its original production was as a “pièce à lire”—much like Shelley’s *The Cenci*, which was a closet(ed) drama for decades due to strict British censorship laws. Ruby Cohn, meanwhile, points out that the play is indeed a “parody” of an earlier surrealist work, *La Boule de verre* by Armand Salacrou, but that its status as parody is tenuous, and the play is more an expression of Artaud’s fixation on “le mal du ciel,” which she links to Artaud’s own malady and the concept of cosmic cruelty (313, 316). The play opens with mutual expressions of love on the part of a Young Man and a Young Woman who affirm that the world is right. Immediately following the Young Man and the Young Woman’s expressions of love, a storm arises to separate them, a first dramatic instance of what Artaud will call “cruelty.” As the temples, colonnades, body parts, etc fall from the sky all around him, the Young Man “criant de toutes ses forces” shouts “Le ciel est devenu fou” (OC 118). As “reader’s theatre” it can

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be read in a matter of minutes. Unraveling the interplay of images, however, would take hours. For now, let’s consider only the experience of the body in this play and then its (brief) performance history. Of the Young Man who is the hero of the play, Cohn writes:

Like his author, he recognizes cosmic cruelty. Having seen, known, and understood that, this Young Man finds mundane life intolerable…he reflects his author’s desire for unity of flesh and spirit. When the Priest asks the Young Man what part of the Young Girl’s body he refers to most often, her brother-lover answers: “To God.” This is not simple blasphemy but an excarnation, not spirit made flesh, but a flesh-spirit union, a constant through Artaud’s writing. (316)

The Priest responds to the Young Man by saying, “But that’s out of date. We don’t look at it that way. For that you must go to volcanoes, to earthquakes. As for us, we must be content with the little obscenities of man in the confessional. And that’s it, that’s life.”

The Young Man’s cryptic reply to the Priest colludes against clarity by collapsing the body and spirit into this concept of “God,” which contains not only their pure love but also the explosive effect of their breaking the taboo against incest. Their repeated declarations of love, “Je t’aime et tout est beau,” occasion the storm and destruction of a world that the Young Man had just declared to be “bien établi.” Their love has changed the world, sharing some essential quality with volcanoes and earthquakes. The volcano happens, irrespective of what taboos it might be breaking or the social order that surrounds its base. The explosion Artaud symbolizes in this dream play could be seen as the collision of Nietzschean forces, as explained by Gilles Deleuze in his work *Nietzsche and Philosophy* “All force is appropriation, domination, exploitation of a quantity of reality. Even perception in its divers aspects, is the expression of forces which appropriate nature,” and, “It is important to see that forces enter relations with other forces. Life struggles with another kind of life…” This is why we must take seriously the resolutely anti-dialectical character of Nietzsche’s philosophy…the concept of the
Overman is directed against the dialectical conception of man” (Deleuze 3, 8). Geoffrey Baker has remarked on the many debts Artaud owes Nietzsche, but he, like the Surrealists Artaud would reject, wants to steer Artaud’s project toward political action instead of spiritual rebirth.91 Artaud dares to stage this other kind of life as a counter-force to the received concept of man that filled the theatre and philosophy of his day. Later on, I will explore how Count Cenci and Beatrice enact the incest taboo in an even more explosive way; but for the present, let us continue to analyze how even at this early point in his writing, Artaud’s heroes are figures of Nietzschean will, not psychological realism or a dialectical concept of the human.

*Le Jet de sang* decries both the modern mind-body split and the suppression of sexual desire at the same time that it betrays a certain grotesque horror at the sexual desire of the Knight and the Bawd. The “God” of this play bleeds profusely from his wrist after having been bitten by the Bawd, whom he attacks, grabbing her by her hair which “catches fire and expands visibly”, saying “Bitch, look at your body!” The audience then sees her body, which “appears absolutely naked and hideous under her blouse and skirt, which become like glass.” The sexual ethics of the play might seem ambiguous, but only if we fail to see that for Artaud the goal is transgression, and the social taboo against incest is one of the few taboos that remains universally accepted. In a sort of argument *ad absurdum*, Artaud pushes his audience (in the case of *Les Cenci*) or his reader’s sensibilities (in *Le Jet de sang*) to the limit. He demands of them: which love

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91 “Nietzsche, Artaud, and Tragic Politics.” *Comparative Literature.* 55.1 (Winter 2003): 1-23. Baker’s thesis is that Nietzsche and Artaud’s dramatic theories “contribute to a transformative tragic politics that seeks to overcome unpalatable social regimes by interrogating the epistemological formations and structures of representations from which they spring” (2). This interrogation would collectivize the masses and change culture on a fundamental level before effecting tangible political transformation.
is pure and true? That of the bawd and the knight (undoubtedly meant to be distasteful) or that of the Young Man and the Young Girl? Yet, they are brother and sister—a taboo in Christian society. Artaud begins his exploration of how life as a drive and as a force is itself transgressive, a concept he will continue to refine in the works of *Le Théâtre et son double*.

2.2.3 Life, Love, and Cruelty: Continuity Between the Surrealist and Post-Surrealist Artaud

To pursue the sort of purity pictured in the love between the Yong Man and the Young Woman is to pursue a new kind of life founded on ancient, pre-civilization principles. In “Le Théâtre et la culture,” Artaud again describes a renewed concept of life. One must believe in what Artaud calls “un sens de la vie renouvelée par le théâtre, et où l’homme impavidement se rend le maître de ce qui n’est pas encore, et le fait naître” (TD 19). As man fearlessly makes himself master of “what is not yet” to bring it to life, this new idea of life will appear. We must ask what, then, appears under this new concept of life? And how does the theatre make it manifest? Artaud turns to the image of a martyr burning at the stake, “signifying from their pyre” what we—and here he means those who create theatre images—must be like:

> Quand nous prononçons le mot de vie faut-il entendre qu’il ne s’agit pas des faits, mais de cette sorte de fragile et remuant foyer auquel ne touchent pas les formes. Et s’il est encore quelque chose d’infernale et de véritablement maudit dans ce temps, c’est de s’attarder artistiquement sur des formes, au lieu d’être comme des suppliciés que l’on brûle et qui font des signes sur leurs bûchers. (TD 19-20)

*Life* is not a matter of externals, facts, or forms. Instead, it is the seat or source of life (used here in an epidemic sense as the source of a plague), which forms cannot come close to approximating, capturing, or explaining. Thus, in the theatre event, the artist has
a responsibility not to “linger” with forms but should instead imitate the signifying actions of the martyr. The life, then, ushered forth in the theatrical performance, burns itself out, exhausts itself in being born, in the glorious moment of attaining itself.

This notion of life is often expressed by Artaud as a consuming fire which reveals the cruelty underlying the entire world. According to Artaud in the third letter on cruelty in *Le Théâtre et son double*, every living thing lives by what he calls an ineluctable “law” of cruelty or viciousness.

Il y a dans le feu de vie, dans l’appétit de vie, dans l’impulsion irraisonnée à la vie, une espèce de méchanceté initiale : le désir d’Éros est une cruauté puisqu’il brûle des contingences ; la mort est cruauté, la résurrection est cruauté, la transfiguration est cruauté, puisque en tout sens et dans un monde circulaire et clos il n’y a pas de place pour la vraie mort, qu’une ascension est un déchirement, que l’espace clos est nourri de vies, et que chaque vie plus forte passe à travers les autres, donc les mange dans un massacre qui est une transfiguration et un bien. Dans le monde manifesté et métaphysiquement parlant, le mal est la loi permanente, et ce qui est bien est un effort et déjà une cruauté surajoutée à l’autre. (TD 161)

Eros operates according to cruelty because it is fueled by contingencies—it is propelled by possibility, not reality. Death, likewise, cannot have meaning in what Artaud calls a “closed and circular” world. As we will see in examining *Les Cenci*, both Count Cenci’s and Beatrice’s deaths are evacuated of meaning (justly murdered, unjustly martyred) when the play reveals how their actions were ultimately motivated and undercut by a cosmic cruelty. Lastly, to ascend or to be resurrected is a cruelty because it tears apart. Transfiguration, too, is cruelty, dependent as it is on the consumption of weaker lives by stronger ones. We call this “a good,” but Artaud calls it a massacre. Therefore, in the apparent world, metaphysically speaking, whatever is good comes by effort, multiplying the cruelty already at work.
Removing the taboos will unleash an energy that Artaud refers to as force, the powerful attractive center of the cyclone (an image he uses for his play, Les Cenci).

Theatre, again, is the medium in which the unnatural separation between the visible (the material world) and the invisible (these taboo forces) becomes apparent:

Le théâtre lui aussi prend des gestes et les pousse à bout ; comme la peste il refait la chaîne entre ce qui est et ce qui n’est pas, entre la virtualité du possible et ce qui existe dans la nature matérialisée. Il retrouve la notion des figures et des symboles-types, qui agissent comme des coups de silence, des points d’orgue, des arrêts de sang, des appels d’humeur, des poussées inflammatoires d’images dans nos têtes brusquement réveillées ; tous les conflits qui dorment en nous, il nous les restitue avec leurs forces et il donne à ces forces des noms que nous saluons comme des symboles ; et voici qu’a lieu devant nous une bataille de symboles (TD 40).

Theatre, like the plague, will reconnect what is and what is not; it will reforge the chain between what Artaud calls “the virtuality of the possible” and what already exists in the natural world. It is theatre’s task to find anew the idea of symbols and “symbol-types” which act with energy and violence upon us. Particularly, he says they act by the inflammatory force of suddenly revealed images within our heads. Like a pulsing infection of the mind, the theatre awakens the conflicts that sleep in the center of our beings and restores them with their force and gives these forces names that we are to welcome as symbols.

It can now become clearer why Artaud chooses the taboo of incest so frequently in his work, as it is the last remaining taboo that can appear with sudden and visceral force in the minds of Western audiences. The shock of breaking the taboo, like the plague, will cure the ills of the Western mind with a burning fever. We must ask what appears when theatre ushers forth these images? We saw in L’Ombilic des limbes that the incestuous love of brother and sister in Le Jet de sang contrasts with a Church that can only “gratify [itself] with man’s minor indecencies in the confessional. There it is, that’s
all, that’s life.” The Young Man’s response that “Life’s a mess!” does not refer to the many disturbing images that unfold in the play, but to the idea of life as a series of minor infractions against a dead moral code. The beautiful love between the brother and sister, transgressive while at the same time pure (the girl cries “The Virgin! Ah, that was what he was looking for”), operates as a symbol of a force that predates civilization and is antagonist to rationalism, civilizing work, and moral codes. The play represents this in that stage direction when “the sky becomes mad” and the markers of civilization: colonnades, temples, human members fall from the sky. In “Le Théâtre et la peste,” Artaud turns to John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore (1633) with admiration for the hero’s unflinching pursuit of his incestuous passion. The main character, Giovanni, is:

> criminel avec héroïsme et il est héroïque avec audace et ostentation. Tout le pousse dans ce sens et l’exalte, il n’y a pour lui ni terre ni ciel, mais la force de sa passion convulsive, à laquelle ne manque pas de répondre la passion rebelle, elle aussi, et tout aussi héroïque d’Annabella (TD 41).

Artaud admires the complementary passion of the brother-sister pair, with the sister’s passion equal in its response to her brother’s. After consummating their love, Annabella falls pregnant and marries one of her many suitors to cover up the crime, but it soon comes to light. In a final act of grand and pure passion, Giovanni comes to her where she has been imprisoned by her husband and after they again make love, he kills her with a kiss to save her from the vile prosecution certain to follow, declaring “white in thy soule” and believing that “The lawes of conscience and of civill use/ May justly blame us, yet when they but know / Our loves, that love will wipe away that rigour / Which would in other incests bee abhorrd” (5.5. 70-73). The forces at work in ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, which Artaud calls “noires” should not be confused with the passion and love of the hero and heroine. The forces that propel Giovanni (and later will drive the character of
Beatrice Cenci) to his death are grounded in the necessary cruelty that undergirds all of life. And incest is not simply a cathartic theatrical representation, but, a drive whose very orientation is metaphysical (Virmaux 57). If civil authorities were to judge rightly, they would find that it is this false life that is guilty of instigating the violence and destruction that Artaud sees as so purifying, “Le théâtre, comme la peste…dégage des forces, il déclenche des possibilités, et ces forces sont noires, c’est la faute non pas de la peste ou du théâtre, mais de la vie” (TD 45). Cruelty means that life itself is culpable, because the very drives of life, life’s propagating force, propels us toward these destructive acts while calling them taboo. Theatre’s work, then, is to make that cruelty apparent so that we do not live under false ideas about life. Theatre, like plague, makes these forces visible in their manifestations in the human body as suffering.

Like Percy Shelley’s The Cenci, Le Jet de sang was not performed until decades later by the Royal Shakespeare Company in their Season of Cruelty. Playing up the cruelty within the piece, rather than the parody (perhaps a wise decision, as the original play was so obscure as to be unknown by most audience members), the performance of Le Jet de sang “drew laughter of the wrong kind” (Cohn “Parody or Cruelty?” 316). Two years after the publication of L’ombilic des limbes, the Théâtre Alfred Jarry premiered its first show in June, 1927 with three pieces by its founders: Les Mystères de l’amour by Roger Vitrac, Ventre brûlé ou la Mère folle by Artaud, and Gigogne by Robert Aron under the pseudonym Max Robur. Artaud directed the three pieces using actors from Charles Dullin’s group (with whom he himself had worked beginning in October 1921) (OC 1712-1723). According to Phillip Auslander, “Despite a lack of rehearsal time, he attempted to develop a surrealist acting style in which each gesture carried in itself ‘all of the fatality of life and the mysterious encounters of dreams’” and yet “the organizers of
the Théâtre Alfred Jarry were disappointed with their product. According to Max Joly, who knew Artaud, the director was unhappy ‘...in failing to ‘awaken’ its audience, the play had the same effect that a Boulevard production, or a production with aesthetic intentions would have had’” (“Surrealism in the Theatre: The Plays of Roger Vitrac.” Theatre Journal. 32.3 (October 1980): 357-369. 367-368). This laughter of “the wrong kind” would follow Artaud throughout his career and contributes to the misappraisal of his work as a failure. The performances of Les Cenci also drew laughter of the wrong kind, according to the traces left behind in letters, reviews and newspaper articles. But, despite its continued failure on the stage (it is rarely reprised), the Theatre of Cruelty of which Les Cenci was to be a prelude, continues to influence stagecraft and the philosophy of performance to this day.

2.3 The Impossible Double(d): Theatre’s Task as Described in Le Théâtre et son double

“The paradox of Artaud lies in the fact that it is impossible to carry out his proposals.”
---Jerzy Grotowski

The works collected under the title Le Théâtre et son double have served as the springboard for many a successful theatre project in the eighty years following their publication at the same time that the theatre described therein has been frequently denounced as “impossible” by critics and philosophers. In terms of success, the “Theatre of Cruelty” that Le Théâtre et son double describes inspired theatre playwrights and directors such as Edward Bond, Peter Brook, and most recently, Sarah Kane. Works such

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92 Grotowski. “He wasn’t entirely himself.” In Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader. 60
as Bond’s *Saved* (1965) and Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) or *Cleansed* (1998) take Artaud’s charge to make theatre as infectious as a plague and translate into the representation of such taboos as child murder, blinding, cannibalism, and sodomy on the stage. So, at the same time that Artaud has inspired critically and commercially successful directors such as Peter Brook, later assessments of Artaud’s corpus have led critics to call his theatre impossible.\(^{93}\) Martin Puchner in his article “Manifesto=Theatre,” claims that because much of *Le Théâtre et son double* was written in the mode of the manifesto of the Theatre of Cruelty, that Artaud may have begun to realize “that the Theatre of Cruelty was a vision not so much of a physical theatre, but of a mode of speech…akin to…the manifesto.” Puchner then concludes that the Theatre of Cruelty was an impossible theatre that “cannot be realized in any other form than in the form of the manifesto” (465). Yet, to call the Theatre of Cruelty “unrealized” ignores a brief, yet rich performance tradition—Artaud’s own and those of the authors and directors who have used the principles contained within the theoretical *Le Théâtre et son double* to realize a deeply physical theatre of surprising events. Even the theoretical texts were not simply “manifestic,”—meant to be read and internalized, but having neither and immediate or long-term physical effect. In one particular case, Artaud meant one of his theoretical texts to have profound psychological and physical effects on his audience.

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\(^{93}\) See the 1963 Royal Shakespeare Company *King Lear* and the 1971 film adaptation for how deeply Artaud and Beckett influenced Brook’s mise-en-scène. The “Season of Cruelty,” in which *Le Jet de sang* and other “cruel” productions were put forward by the RSC was inspired directly from Artaud’s writings. Brook writes in *The Empty Space*, “The title was by way of homage to Artaud, but it did not mean that we were trying to reconstruct Artaud’s own theatre” (49).
2.3.1 Theory/Theater: *Le Théâtre et la peste*

Daniel Gerould opens his anthology of *Theatre/Theory/Theatre* by asking what is the role of theatre theorists in society? He emphasizes that all theatrical theorizing begins with spectatorship, while the reverse is equally important—that theorizing on the theatre is also a performance (13-15). As though writing a brief biography of Artaud, Gerould describes the work of theatre theory as “predicated on personal theatricality as well as passionate spectatorship.” Citing the example of the dialogic form of Plato’s *Republic*, he insists, “theatrical theory is inherently dramatic” (15). Those who accuse Artaud of imagining an essentially impossible theatre fail to take into account the lasting popularity of *Le Théâtre et son double* or the rich performance record we have of *Les Cenci*, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*, and the performance of one of the texts of *Le Théâtre et son double*, the essay on “Le Théâtre et la peste” which Artaud performed (for it was no simple reading) at the Sorbonne on April 6, 1933. Though Artaud himself perceived the event as a failure, its effect on the audience was undeniable, if unanticipated by the performer/theorist. Anaïs Nin recorded the event in her journal as follows:

> His face was contorted with anguish, one could see the perspiration dampening his hair. His eyes dilated, his muscles became cramped, his fingers struggled to retain their flexibility. He made one feel the parched and burning throat, the pains, the fever, the fire in the guts. He was in agony. He was screaming…
> At first people gasped. And then they began to laugh. Everyone was laughing! They hissed. Then one by one, they began to leave, noisily, talking, protesting. They banged the door as they left….But Artaud went on, until the last gasp…
> He was hurt, wounded, baffled by the jeering. He spat out his anger. “They always want to hear about; they want on objective conference on ‘The Theatre and the Plague’, and I want to give them the experience itself, the plague itself, so they will be terrified, and awaken. I want to awaken them. They do not realize they are dead. Their death is total, like

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Artaud makes a distinction between life—which is suffering—and death—which is blindness, deafness, numbness and a lack of awareness. In a letter to André Rolland following the event, Artaud complains that audiences react negatively to his presence, apparently preferring to read the text evacuated of the bodily presence of suffering: “Il est certain que ma seule présence quelque part cause des remous, fait naître chez certains une irritation anormale, comme devant une monstrosité, un phénomène abject de la nature” (OC 1740). Alain Virmaux reports that Artaud had complained to Roland de Renéville that the lecture had oscillated “perpétuellement entre le ratage et la bouffonnerie la plus complète, et une sort de grandeur” (Virmaux Obliques 71). The Theatre of Cruelty, of which this performance was a preliminary event, is a body of work that would try to shock people from death into life. Furthermore, it was a body of work signified first and foremost through the gyrations, contortions, and eventual degeneration of Artaud’s body. By the 1940s, Artaud’s suffering body was the content as well as the form of works such as Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu. When Artaud complains that his audiences only want to hear “about” he indicts them for failing to see the theatrical event as a mirror and failing to recognize themselves in the image of the fever-ridden, plague-infested Artaud.  

Anaïs Nin, on the other hand, was so convinced of Artaud’s theories

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95 Quoted in Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs. 62-63.

96 Likewise for those who often accuse Artaud’s theatre of “failing,” the structure of “Le Théâtre et la peste” bears examination, beginning as it does with an extended historical examination of various European plagues, most notably the 1720 plague that arrived by boat in Marseille, though he also discusses the 1347 Florentine plague, the 660 B.C. plague in Mékao, Japan, and the 1502 plague in Provence. As a work of scholarship, it begins as a normal colloquy before Artaud’s performance of plague offended the majority of his audience. If we read it intended as a performance piece, the first portion
that, according to Elizabeth Podnik, she enacted his Theatre of Cruelty in her own incestuous affair with her father. The 1933 lecture, “Le Théâtre et la Peste,” which included Artaud’s extended valorization of John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, occurred a month after their first meeting and during a brief sexual relationship that Nin recorded in her journal. Podnik concludes that Nin uses the “drama” of incest to “prove that she is capable of transcending the rational world, breaking the ‘barriers’ in the dramatic spirit of Ford’s protagonists…brave enough to have taken challenges posed by Freud and Artaud.” Other critics of Artaud such as Jacques Derrida and Helga Finter have been clear that they find his theatre to have been an important moment in literary and philosophical history, but that the project proved untenable for various reasons.

Jacques Derrida’s “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” claims early in the essay that “all theatrical audacity declares its fidelity to Artaud” along with his conclusion that the theatre of cruelty is in a present state of “inexistence.” The question will remain to be answered in the course of this investigation whether the principles of cruelty are at the same time, an “implacable necessity” and the historical origin in an “absolute and radical sense” of the Western stage’s exploration of the limits of representation (233-234). Helga Finter claims in “Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre” that Artaud’s career-long search was for an impossible theatre whose “loci can and should only be realized in the minds of its individual spectators and readers” (18). By this, Finter means that Artaud did not intend his later works to create new communities with its long descriptions becomes ominous, anticipating the irruption of the body into the text. As a descriptive and discursive essay, on the other hand, it lacks this sense of what Artaud will call Danger and which is dependent on the interplay of text, audience expectations, and the body.

around their performances, but instead will address themselves to the imaginations of individuals (best achieved by the turn to radio in *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*). Since the performance event becomes disseminated by way of radio, it cannot be located—and with the advent of cheap digital copies, “performances” of Artaud’s last work are accessible today. This leads Finter to conclude that Artaud’s work concludes in a utopian mode, since it exists nowhere for no one in particular.

Jacques Derrida in his essay “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” also emphasizes this dislocation inherent to Artaud’s work, saying that “the festival of cruelty could take place only one time” and “theatrical representation is finite, and leaves behind it, behind its actual presence, no trace, no object to carry off, It is neither a book nor a work, but an energy” (247). This energy is unleashed on a stage which Derrida contends Artaud wanted to “erase” because he “desired the impossibility of the theatre” which is “always inhabited or haunted by the father and subjected to the repetition of murder” (of the father) (249). Artaud does take up this originary murder which theatre takes as its task to represent (consider Oedipus, Hamlet, etc), but not as an impossible enterprise but rather as a rigorous discipline, in the case of both *Les Cenci* and *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*. In both pieces the Father is murdered, whether Artaud plays the father, Count Cenci, or the murdering son, or in *Pour en finir*, siding with those who crawled down from the cross to defy God’s judgment. The charge of impossibility is a serious one, as we shall see—and have seen—the performance history of Artaud’s work reflects jeers, disbelief, derision and mass departures on the part of audiences.

Yet, to recognize the unreadiness of Artaud’s audiences should not lead us to say with Finter and Derrida that the Theatre of Cruelty had impossibility and unrealizability
built into its very telos. As we will see in the various manifestos and essays collected under the title *Le Théâtre et son double*, Artaud intended readers and viewers alike to come away from the experience of his work with renewed concepts of life, force, work, and cruelty. He describes a theatre of rigorous metaphysical aims and equally rigorous physical requirements. And, like the possibility of the plague, the possibility of the Theatre of Cruelty requires physical and mental communication and communicability by its repetition—through reading the texts of *Le Théâtre et son double*, uncovering the performance histories of *Les Cenci* and *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*, and lastly, by following its communication through time in the work of later dramatists such as Sarah Kane.

2.3.2 Artaud’s Manifestos: Principles and the Flesh

As we saw in Nin’s account of Artaud’s lecture, the theatre, like the plague, is the “killing cure,” not the new state of wellness. The failure of Artaud’s performance of “Le Théâtre et la peste” came in the space between the gasp and the laughter that Anaïs Nin recorded. Once the audience rejected the image put forward by Artaud, perhaps too shocked by their expectations surrounding the event being subverted, their response of laughter, jeering, and departure easily followed. But a performed reading differs greatly from a play performance proper. The fullness of the theatrical event which would include the audience’s willing participation in it as “performance” and not lecture or conference, will increase the doubling effect, Artaud explains in “Le Théâtre Alchimique:

“Le théâtre aussi doit être considéré comme le Double non pas de cette réalité quotidienne et directe dont il s’est peu à peu réduit à n’être que l’inerte copie, aussi vaine qu’édulcorée, mais d’une autre réalité dangereuse et typique, où les Principes, comme les dauphins, quand ils ont
montré leur tête s’empressent de rentrer dans l’obscurité des eaux” (TD 74).

Like the life/death dichotomy and the traditional theatre vs. the theatre of cruelty, Artaud again sets up a division between what the theatre might double: either the “daily reality” to which it has been reduced to mere copying, or it could mirror what he calls “this dangerous reality… in which Principles, like dolphins, when they have raised their heads hurry to hide again in the depths of the water.” These Principles echo the meaning-giving images we examined earlier in that, as soon as they appear on the horizon, they disappear again. But to catch sight of this primal existence will change the viewer.98 Though the performances have only a brief historical record, the work of recapturing their appearing bears witness to the possibility of a theatre of cruelty.

*Le Théâtre et son double* privileges live performance given to a feeling, hearing, seeing spectator. The manifestoes contained within it will challenge the dialogue dominated theatre of the day by putting forward new concepts of “meaning,” “knowledge” and “reason.” In the “Manifesto in Clear Language,”99 we find Artaud’s clearest meditation on the image as the source of “Knowledge,” making images the basis for a new language, one unpolluted by reason and logic. He begins by setting up a

98 Indeed, it will traumatize viewer and performer alike, as Michel Camus concludes. When encountering theatre, life’s double, the very “langage du dédoublement de notre conscience (sa réflexion) est toujours traumatisant” (“Paul les Oiseaux ou la dramaturgie intime d’Artaud” 29). Thus, viewers of “Le Théâtre et la peste” as performed at the Sorbonne, were, in a sense, traumatized. As we shall read in the case of *Les Cenci*, the sound effects were designed to assault the spectator so that he might experience bodily trauma. And in the case of the last performances Artaud gave, specifically the night at the Vieux Colombier, Odette and Alain Virmaux provide a great summation of the varying reports of distress and awe spectators reported when encountering the ravaged Artaud (“La séance du Vieux-Colombier” In *Obliques* 79-88).

99 First published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in December, 1925.
dichotomy between “principles” and “the flesh,” which becomes an alternative and ultimately purer reason-giving foundation. “If there is nothing in the order of principles to which I can reasonably accede, the underlying reason is in my flesh” (Sontag 108). In the same way that he opposes Occidental to Oriental theatre or West to East, here he opposes “principles” to the “flesh,” without voiding the flesh of reason-giving power. Artaud trusts the flesh as sensory gathering and reason-giving, meaning that it gives superior reasons than those that rational propositions can give. He sees the flesh as a receiver of concepts; the flesh acts as a screen on which concepts appear, projected: “And so it is that I watch the formation of a concept which carries within it the actual fulguration of things, a concept which arrives upon me with a sound of creation.”

The manifesto makes sweeping claims about Meaning, Knowledge, Logic, and the Madman in order to overwhelm the hearer/reader with its revolutionary force. First it manifests a preoccupation with the problem of perception and subsequently of knowledge. “No image satisfies me unless it is at the same time Knowledge, unless it carries with it its substance as well as its lucidity. My mind, exhausted by discursive reason, wants to be caught up in the wheels of a new, an absolute gravitation,” Artaud begins (Sontage 108). An image cannot be received merely as a sense datum but must also carry with it its meaning; it should contain within it what it means and how to understand that meaning. This “Meaning” is entirely new, and could not have been reached by the old avenues of logic and of conventional reason.

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Jean-Luc Marion formulates the flesh as an “invisible screen” which makes the world appear to the cogito. It does this because it “has for its function to make appear in feeling… the body appears, but flesh remains invisible, precisely because it makes appear.” So when sense data “lands on” the flesh, like the light particles of a film projected onto a screen, an image appears to the mind of the world. Without the flesh, there would be no world for the mind to contemplate. (In Excess. 88).
In the First Manifesto, Artaud will return to the problem of perception. In this manifesto, he concludes that completing the creation-act on the level of rational thought would be to “diminish” it, as he writes:

> il importe peu que ces autres plans soient réellement conquis par l’esprit, c’est-à-dire par l’intelligence, c’est là diminuer et cela n’a pas d’intérêt... Ce qui importe, c’est que, par des moyens sûrs, la sensibilité soit mise en état de perception plus approfondie et plus fine, et c’est là l’objet de la magie et des rites, dont le théâtre n’est qu’un reflet.

The path to understanding, to *perceiving rightly*, is a physical path “ils...devaient mettre physisquement l’esprit sur la voie de quelque chose” that leads to an impasse that enforces humility on the intelligence. I say humility, because the mind may not be able to “conquer” on this level, and Artaud has declared that it does not matter, “il importe peu,” if reason and the mind can *explain* everything they have witnessed. What matters, he writes in the above citation, is that the sensibility be molded in these theatrical experiences, attuned to a “a state of deeper and finer perception,” the proper domain of magical rites of which theatre is the proper double. A spectator can perceive on two levels: the intellectual level and the spiritual level. The travel between the two can be called an ascent, as Artaud privileges those who can follow to the higher level and abandon themselves to the physical sensations. By re-envisioning theatre as the double of magical rites, Artaud will need not only to remake our notion of reason, but also our ideas about language

The dynamic Artaud envisions between image and spectator (mind) reveals his preoccupation with language as able to express and interpret the meaning of what the spectator has perceived:

> Meaning [new meaning brought by the image] is a victory of the Mind over itself, and although it is irreducible by reason, it exists, but only *inside the mind*. It is order, it is intelligence, it is the signification of chaos.
But it does not accept this chaos as such, it interprets it, and because it interprets it, it loses it. It is the logic of Illogic. And this is all I can say. (Sontag 108)

So, we arrive at the unsayable, or the unnameable, or, to be more precise, the *untranslateable*. The image cannot be translated into a language accessible either to the mind that holds it as an object of consciousness or to other people, but it can be received as sensible phenomenon. According to this first manifesto, because the mind ultimately is alienated from the exterior world, the images which appear to that mind cannot be translated or put into words as meaning. Practically, this resulted in a rehearsal process during *Les Cenci* characterized by frustration between Artaud as director and his actors, many of whom had trouble “translating” the theories of cruelty into stage action:

He wanted each of the princes to resemble an animal. But it was extremely difficult because none of the actors had any idea about this kind of acting. They hadn’t been trained for that sort of thing. They came from the Conservatoire or the boulevard theatre where all that was asked of them was good diction, and here Artaud was asking them to play animals and make throaty noises…Most of the actors understood his ideas, but they couldn’t carry them out, but then Artaud hadn’t taken the trouble to explain himself. He was so completely inside his subject and tended to have faith, perhaps too much faith, in their abilities to comprehend him” (Blin 110).

Roger Blin records this memory of the rehearsal process in a collection of documents surrounding the rehearsal process, production, and after effects of *Les Cenci*. Blin himself served as Artaud’s assistant, recording not only all of the directions Artaud gave but also, as commanded, “even on what I don’t say. You must act as a medium and be able to divine what I think and what I am going to say” (Blin 108).

Note that before the rehearsal process of *Les Cenci*, Artaud had devoted extended thought to this problem of language to express the concepts that appear to the flesh, and which exceed language. Western theatre in the 1930’s, according to Artaud, had fixed the
theatre as an art devoted primarily to the text at the expense of gesture. Therefore, it has become necessary to break “l’assujettissement du théâtre au texte, et de trouver la notion d’une sorte de langage unique à mi-chemin entre le geste et la pensée” (558). Theatre, according to Artaud, must not be enslaved to the text, a problem of Western theatre in the throes not only of psychological realism but also dependent on a pantheon of writers such as Racine, Corneille, Shakespeare, etc (Shakespeare had become so synonymous with the textual record of his plays that William Hazlitt in his study of Shakespeare’s characters infamously averred that “We do not like to see our author's plays acted, and least of all Hamlet. There is no play that suffers so much in being transferred to the stage”).

Artaud, on the other hand, defies this enshrinement of the text as the holy object, which the performance can only represent in its absence. The Theatre of Cruelty is a quest to find a new language halfway between “gesture and thought” to express something much more important than little psychological dramas. Theatre’s task is to express the suffering that characterizes human existence. Arthur Adamov points out the alchemy Artaud envisions between language, gesture, and speech in his introduction to the special edition of Obliques devoted to Artaud in 1976. He writes, “Artaud rejette la suprématie du langage au détriment du geste, du son, du cri, en d’autres termes tout le théâtre tel qu’on le conçoit de nos jours en Occident. Il voudrait que le langage, s’il existe, se confonde nécessairement avec la mise-en-scène considérée comme la matérialisation visuelle et plastique de la parole” (6). From this perspective—in which language is subordinated to gesture—the mise-en-scène becomes the materialization or embodiment of speech (la parole).

101 Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays. London: Bell & Daldy, 1873. 73-80.
Maurice Blanchot, novelist, literary critic, and philosopher, concludes his article on Artaud’s life and writings by asking whether or not extreme thought (pensée) is not the same as extreme suffering? According to Blanchot, Artaud’s work reveals that “le fait de penser ne peut être que bouleversant” and that suffering and thought are aligned by “une manière secrète” because suffering, once it becomes strong enough, is such that it destroys suffering’s power: “détruisant toujours en avant d’elle-même, dans le temps où elle pourrait être ressaisie et achevée comme souffrance, et s’élevant ainsi à l’impuissance infinie d’une erreur éternelle, il en est de même la pensée.” This “strange rapport” that Blanchot teases out of Artaud’s thinking between immense suffering and thought is that suffering serves as the infinite fuel of this kind of thinking: “que ce qui est à penser est dans la pensée ce qui se détourne d’elle et s’épuise inépuisablement en elle…Est-ce que souffrir serait, finalement, penser?”

Because suffering, according to Artaud, is limitless, he requires a stage language able to express this thought. This language must be corporeal, composed of motions and sounds and light because suffering is experienced in the body and as a result of the body, as Artaud will conclude with his last full performed work, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu.*

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103 Some critics such as Bettina Knapp claim that Artaud’s rejection of discursive thought in favor of this new type of thought based on the body’s suffering is a direct result of his *inability* to think clearly due to his degenerative physical ailments and addictions:

She writes:

Strangely enough, Artaud’s [theatrical] innovations, for the most part, arose directly as a result of his malady. An inability to think in a Cartesian manner and an overly sensitive and high-strung nature, had led him to opt for a theatre which worked on the nerves and the sense, and reject one which sought to speak to the intellect alone (45).

2.3.3 Occidental or Oriental: Dialogue or Gesture?

The problem with the written text is its one-dimensional possibility: dialogue. Performances are limited to representing the text to the audience. But, if liberated from the strictures of representing the text to the audience, theatrical events will actually be able to “expand” speech. Theatre is uniquely situated to coax more possibilities from language than any other medium. As Artaud puts it in the first manifesto:

Et ce que le théâtre peut encore arracher à la parole, ce sont ses possibilités d’expansion hors des mots, de développement dans l’espace, d’action dissociatrice et vibratoire sur la sensibilité. C’est ici qu’interviennent …le langage visuel des objets, des mouvements, des attitudes, des gestes, mais à condition qu’on prolonge leur sens, leur physionomie, leurs assemblages jusqu’aux signes, en faisant de ces signes une manière d’alphabet (OC 558).

What Artaud envisions here is a multiplication of signs in the theatrical language. Whereas traditional theatre works by representing the author’s text, Artaud envisions an experience in which the language of theatre is expanded to include sound, gesture, motion, intonation, light, and the relationship between these elements within space. This “alphabet” he prefigures in this manifesto is actually a rejection of the Phoenician grammar familiar to Occidental readers and spectators and an embrace of a more ancient language. He wants to rewire the brain of the spectator to receive the elements of the theatrical experience as hieroglyphs. “Le théâtre se doit de l’organiser en faisant avec les personnages et les objets de véritables hiéroglyphes, et en se servant de leur symbolisme et de leurs correspondances par rapport à tous les organes et sur tous les plans” (OC 558).

Characters and objects, when used as hieroglyphs, can then be read according to their symbolic value and according to how they act upon the sense organs through the many levels of meaning-creation available in the theatre. What we would have, then, is a layered text, which unfolds in time and space, speaking in a new symbol-based language.
of character and object and movement. Objects, sounds, and gestures would operate as the ambassadors of concepts and so would arrive with the force of a revolution.

Now that we understand what he proposes, we must ask why he intends to recreate theatre in this image as an anti-Occidental, “Oriental” theatre that will seize the spectator’s organs in its tight embrace? Artaud uses this violent imagery because he sees theatre as hopelessly trapped by the conventions of spoken theatre. This new metaphysics of language is necessary to free the theatre from its “psychological and human torpor” (OC 558). Artaud is quick to then cast his metaphysical project as a positive movement, so it is not merely contra the psychological theatre of his day. He writes that any attempt to free theatre from the crushing weight of psychological realism would be useless if there were not also a subject matter full of what he calls “unusual ideas” like Chaos, Creation, and Becoming, invisible realities, and mythic themes to be put on the stage to become hieroglyphs, Artaud hopes to create an equation between man, society, nature, and objects (OC 559). Yet, the spectacles themselves would not commit any such mechanical verbal didacticism as a play woodenly examining the theme of “Nature” or “Society.” Instead, these metaphysical ideas will be evoked by the interplay of humor and anarchy, poetry, symbolism, and images. So, the domain of theatre is vastly expanded (from the drawing room of the bourgeoisie to the cosmos), and the methods for communication must likewise be re-envisioned by the metteur-en-scène. Metaphor and symbol are the starting point for dramatizing these metaphysical concepts.

The manifesto concludes rapidly after the outline for this radical project, alluding to mystical or “Oriental” methods for achieving this new language. What Artaud calls “L’HUMOUR-DESTRUCTION” operates by laughter and has a bewildering function, overwhelming reason with this new theatrical language. The method is “oriental” and the
performance shifts from a performed representation of a text to a magical incantation or religious rite. The body is intimately involved in the apprehension of these new concepts, which Artaud anthropomorphizes as possessing faces. It performs a stage alchemy in which performer and spectator alike participate in an intersubjective magical rite:

All this poetry and these direct means of seduction would be nothing if they were not designed to put the mind physically on the track of something. If the true theater could not give us the sense of a creation of which we possess only one face, but whose completion exists on other levels. (Sontag 244)

The theatrical event, then, is the richer presence of this new being, and its completion occurs on other levels, which Artaud, in this manifesto, dismisses as unimportant.

2.3.4 Life Revivified: The Second Manifesto, The Theatre and the Gods, Theatre and Culture

In the second manifesto, which appeared a year later, Artaud expands the scope of the Theater of Cruelty. He responds to the threat of the cinema by claiming a much more ambitious goal for the theatre than entertainment. According to Artaud, it is theatre’s task to “revive the idea of a passionate and convulsive life.” In an era characterized by restlessness, anxiety and spiritual wasting, the theatre of the day—addressed to “psychological man” cannot adequately speak to the “total man” that Artaud hopes to free from his social and religious restrictions. Theatre’s proper subject matter is mythic—taking from ancient Mexican, Iranian, and Hindu cosmogonies—to manifest a humanistic mythos that is the domain of theatrical performance and not of the cinema (which with its technological capabilities and novelty threatened theatre’s popularity).

104 This appeared first in a sixteen page brochure in 1933.
Theatre as this wellspring of true life in which man’s ability to perceive rightly will preoccupy Artaud throughout the essays collected in *Le Théâtre et son double*.

In “The Theatre and the Gods,” Artaud expands on an idea of the theatre as the place and the activity in which human thought will recover from a deep malaise. Theatre operates as a cure to restore *la vie* from “a state of acute desolation” felt particularly by young people today who “have dreams of life” and “they want to know why life is sick and what has debased the idea of life” (AT146-147). Theatre, and more broadly, culture, are peculiar manifestations of human thought that are uniquely equipped to reveal the hidden power of what Artaud calls life, but they have for too long been in the service of false ideas about life. Artaud wants to wrench the privilege of explaining life away from the universities, with their emphasis on text and abstract knowledge, saying “Life for us is neither a lazeret, nor a sanatorium nor even a laboratory, and anyway we don’t think that a culture can be taught through words or through ideas…It is our aim to revive the forgotten virtues of a people who might thus, by itself, achieve self-civilization” (AT 147). Artaud blames “science” (which resides in the universities) for quarantining people at a distance from what could cure them—symbolized here as lazarets, laboratories, and sanatoriums—interjecting itself between people and an idea of life which is “magical.” This notion of magic is neither fanciful nor pretty but profoundly dangerous, a magic that would unleash the energy contained by the false idea of culture’s many taboos: “We are beginning to reveal the Taboos with which a petrified and petty-minded science has masked the vestiges of a culture which was able to explain life” (AT 148).

Theatre, more than the texts for reading found in *L’Ombilic des limbes*, offers Artaud the communal aspect he desires to renew the ideas of life and culture by performing the taboos that science and civilization have suppressed for so long. He must
involve others in his quest to change what it means to be “cultured.” With fellow actors and an audience, he can enact this tearing down of Taboos in order “to burn down the forms to achieve life… to learn to stand upright amidst the continual movement of forms which are successively destroyed (AT 149). As a cure burns its way through the body, destroying the disease, Artaud envisions a theatre, one which exists only to express “the image of human through which catches fire,” that will burn away the carbuncles of false forms. While this sacrificial model is positive (sacrifice for something) it is also negative (sacrifice of something, namely life). In the service of this renewed life, Artaud calls on artist, actor and spectator to sacrifice everything in the pursuit of this life. This is why, in December of 1946 Artaud could write:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Et maintenant je vais dire une chose qui va peut-être stupéfier} \\
\text{bien des gens.} \\
\text{Je sui l'ennemi} \\
\text{du théâtre.} \\
\text{Je l'ai toujours été.} \\
\text{Autant j'aime le théâtre} \\
\text{autant je suis, pour cette raison-là, son ennemi. (OC 1177)}
\end{align*}
\]

He writes this because even the theatre is secondary Ruby Cohn claims that this impulse to pursue life sometimes even at the expense of art goes back to Artaud’s Surrealist roots, an impulse he shares with André Breton (with whom he would be reconciled after his nine years in the sanatorium).\textsuperscript{105} The life, then, ushered forth in the theatrical performance, burns itself out, exhausts itself in being born, in the glorious moment of attaining itself

2.3.5 Accosting Cruelty: The Necessity of Theatre

In the second letter on cruelty in *Le Théâtre et son double*, Artaud defines cruelty as cosmic rigor, implacable necessity and the unrelenting sorrow without which life could not go on. This cruelty is not bloody violence or other stereotypes of cruelty that we might come up with such as torture or mutilation. It is, rather, the necessity that theatre obeys in creation, in which “le bien est voulu, il est résultat d’un acte, le mal est permanent” (TD 159). This evil, which as we saw before is the permanent law of the universe, should inspire theatrical events that would welcome what Artaud calls, “cette volonté, cet appétit de vie aveugle, et capable de passer sur tout, visible dans chaque geste et dans chaque acte, et dans le côté transcendent de l’action.” Plays that do not contain this overwhelming will and blind appetite for life, visible in every physical gesture and act and in what Artaud calls the “transcendent” side of the action—in the story—would be “une pièce inutile et manquée” (TD 159-160). Artaud identifies this lacking theatre with the text-heavy, psychological theatre of Racine, in whose wake we have become “déshabitués de cette action immédiate et violente que le théâtre doit posséder” (TD 131). Artaud charges Racine (and all of those composers of realist, Western drama) with instigating the decline in theatre practice, saying, “Sans un élément de cruauté à la base de tout spectacle, le théâtre n’est pas possible. Dans l’état de dégénérescence où nous sommes, c’est par la peau qu’on fera rentrer la métaphysique dans les esprits” (TD 153). Ultimately, what they produce does not qualify as theatre—indeed it makes theatre impossible—because it lacks the element of cruelty that allows metaphysics to penetrate to the audience’s minds. This cruelty requires a new language—a principally theatrical language of image, gesture, and sound—to find its expression. Though the masses receive primarily through their senses, this cruelty is not simply
staged violence, but theatre’s charge to reveal the determinism and ineluctability to which we are all subject:

Cruauté signifie rigueur, application et décision implacable, détermination inévitable, absolue… La cruauté est avant tout lucide, c’est une sorte de direction rigide, la soumission à la nécessité. Pas de cruauté sans conscience, sans une sorte de conscience appliquée. C’est la conscience qui donne à l’exercice de tout acte de vie sa couleur de sang, sa nuance cruelle, puisqu’il est entendu que la vie c’est toujours la mort de quelqu’un (TD 158-159).

Recognizing the cruel nuances in every action, understanding that life is always someone’s death, can only be grasped by a focused attention. Theatre performs this focusing role by shutting out the pettiness of daily life (false life, as Artaud considers it). Or, we could see the operation of theatre as illuminating, the “lucidity” that cruelty carries with it in any true theatre. A theatre of cruelty is a theatre of true sight.

This trope of sight permeates Artaud’s thinking on Cruelty in the essay “Le Théâtre et la Cruauté,” directed toward a therapeutic purpose. If we put it in phenomenological terms: the theatre that Artaud describes requires light to illuminate the cruel mechanisms of the universe. With this light, the spectator can see the phenomenon which Artaud describes throughout both his dramatic and theoretical works: that the very motivation behind material existence is cruelty. “Cruelty” as such is invisible, and so it is the proper work of theatre to make this invisible structure of lived experience visible to the audience. Everything that acts is a cruelty, “Tout ce qui agit est une cruauté” (TD 132). *Le Théâtre et son double* imagines a theatre capable of harnessing the chaotic energy of the crowd and infecting the audience with that energy (infection and plague as we already saw being the analogy for how the communicative process works in Artaud). The essay *Le Théâtre et la Cruauté* sets forth the theory behind the adaptation of Shelley and Stendhal’s works on the Cenci tale. Shelley took his inspiration from scanty
historical record: a painting purported to be of Beatrice Cenci and an account “Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci.” This criminal account especially interested Artaud as raw material because he could better use the bare outlines of the terrible events to shock an audience that, if they were to read the report of the crime in the newspaper, would be nonplussed by the events: “Nous croyons qu’il y a, dans ce qu’on appelle la poésie, des forces vives, et que l’image d’une crime présentée dans les conditions théâtrales requises est pour l’esprit quelque chose d’infiniment plus redoutable que ce même crime réalisé” (TD 133). If necessary theatrical conditions are met, the poetic effects of theatrical representation operate as a “living force” on the spectator to confront them with the horror of an action, which if it were a mere newsworthy crime, would not impress the spectator’s soul so dreadfully. These sorts of stories, then, mined from a surrealist dream state (as in Le Jet de sang) or from history, as in Les Cenci, offer the theatre what Artaud calls “cette idée d’action poussée à bout, et extrême” which hold out the promise of theatre’s renewal from death to life (TD 132).

Western theatre, contented as it is with mere representation, cannot even imagine what Artaud calls the anarchy possible in poetic activity. His charge to the contemporary theatre is that “il a perdu d’autre part le sens de l’humour vrai et du pouvoir de dissociation physique et anarchique du rire” (OC 528). Because traditional drama was content with representing the ordinary world it could not open up to its spectators a sense of danger and questioning: by losing both true humor and what he calls “the power of physical dissociation”—or a going-out-of-oneself—the contemporary, Occidental theater

106 To read the full account which appears in an appendix to an early edition of the play, see The Cenci: A Tragedy In Five Acts by Percy Bysshe Shelley. London: Reeves & Turner, 1886. 93-106.
has lost all sense of danger. By challenging the relations between objects, the theatrical event can “remet en cause toutes les relations d’objet à objet et des formes avec leurs significations. Elle est anarchique aussi dans la mesure où son apparition est la consequence d’un désordre qui nous rapproche du chaos” (OC 528).\textsuperscript{107} Rather than being born of a dead, Western logic, the theatrical event is born of anarchy, and its appearance is “the consequence of a disorder that brings us to an experience of chaos.” Artaud dismisses the theatre of his day as nothing more than “texte réalisé“ (TD 105). Dialogue has become conflated with theatre, “Le dialogue, chose écrite et parlée, n’appartient pas spécifiquement à la scène, il appartient au livre” (TD 55). And Artaud proposes a new language that unites body, voice, and gesture to create images, not dialogic meaning.

Artaud wants theatre to return to its ancient roots as mystification, wonder, and alchemy: the site of magic rites. Artaud’s metaphysics isn’t a metaphysics of the ordinary, but a metaphysics of the magical—conjured up by the theatre’s alchemy of objects, gesture, and language. Ultimately, Artaud wants something as simple as a Marx Brothers joke because the joking allows the spectator to begin to question the assumptions behind how he approaches all of the objects in his daily world. At this point the imminent danger in Artaud’s manifestos becomes more clearly visible. He expands on it after delighting us with how the theatre could create similar gags to those possible in film:

\begin{verse}
J’ai parlé tout à l’heure de danger. Or ce qui me paraît devoir le mieux réaliser à la scène cette idée de danger est l’imprévu objectif, l’imprévu non dans les situations mais dans les choses, le passage
\end{verse}

\textsuperscript{107} Artaud uses accessible examples to show how our expectations of objects can be disoriented theatrically, uniting humor and danger. He is especially fond of the Marx Brothers’ antics. See the two notes at the end of \textit{Le Théâtre et son double} for Artaud’s descriptions of \textit{Monkey Business} and \textit{Animal Crackers} (OC 590-591).
By destabilizing our perceptions, the theatre can introduce the danger of the object(ive) unforeseen, or the collision between the expected image (of consciousness) and the real image on the stage. When expectations are frustrated, the consciousness is opened to new concepts.

Artaud is very clear that the theatre he outlines here is not “un théâtre de situations,” or what we could think of as plot, but a metaphysical enterprise performed by the dramaturge before an audience. The dramaturge, not unlike a plastic artist, or a musician or a choreographer, arranges objects, bodies, and sounds on the stage in order to bring forth “la métaphysique en activité.” In this respect, he recalls the medieval transgressor of physical laws: the alchemist. The twentieth century avant-garde theatre inaugurated in Artaud’s Le Théâtre et son double is a theatre of danger, or what Peter Brook calls a “holy” theatre in The Empty Space. It demands a metaphysical approach to describe the alchemy taking place on the stage. The critic then, must be a metaphysician who translates the theatre event into a language the public can understand. His role is descriptive, or phenomenological. Thus we will see in the records surrounding the performances of Les Cenci Artaud’s reliance on the news media and literary friends to help prepare public opinion for the play and to spread the word about what the Theatre of Cruelty hoped to do and did accomplish.

2.4. The Closed Circle: Les Cenci

In his production, Artaud brings together the following elements of his Theater of Cruelty: cosmic caprice or cruelty, a rejection of Enlightenment morals, use of myth, gesture and movement as symbol or hieroglyph, and a desire to shape the spectator’s
experience by means of sensory overload. The myth of the Cenci family is taken from a historical episode but expanded to universal scope first by the preliminary articles appearing in French newspapers and journals and then by Artaud’s mise-en-scène (Jannerone 204). So-called transgressive instincts, such as incest and blasphemy, are liberated from the dualistic right-wrong morals of society. For Thierry Galibert, the Artaudian hero operates outside of moral contingencies. The theatrical space is a space foreign to “civilizing” impulses, creating a world in which the spectator can encounter the full import of cosmic cruelty (173). Kimberly Jannerone sees the mythic aspiration of the Theater of Cruelty muscling out the particular and the local, “History, analysis, and individuality obstruct the grandeur and cosmic import the Theatre of Cruelty seeks.”

Artaud wrote in *La Bête Noire* on the 1st of May, 1935, as his play, *Les Cenci*, was in rehearsal, “Shelley [from whom Artaud adapted his play] embellished nature with his style and language, which is like a summer’s night that is bombarded by meteors, but I prefer the starkness of nature.”\(^{108}\) Artaud’s preference for “nature,” and his still-developing theories of theatre and cruelty, would lead him to interpret the psychic struggles of Shelley’s text as fully embodied representations of psychic states. While Artaud repeats what he keeps from Shelley’s text almost verbatim, anyone who sees or reads the two plays together sees the differences in the elisions of omission and re-envisioning. One way in which Artaud liberates the myth is by slashing the text to its barest necessities. Jacques Derrida writes in “La Parole soufflée,” that, “Artaud promises the existence of a speech that is a body, of a body that is a theater, of a theater that is a text because it is no longer enslaved to a writing more ancient than itself, an ur-text or an

The text of this play as put forward by Artaud has been liberated from the strictures of language or of representation. The motion of the bodies on the stage takes primacy over the written word. According to Derrida, Artaud sought to re-inspire the theatre after its centuries-long history of suffocation under the weight of “the text.” Theatre suffers from this stolen breath, or spiriting, because it is:

*inspired* by an *other* voice that itself reads a text older than the text of my body or than the theater of my gestures. Inspiration is the drama, with several characters, of theft, the structure of the classical theater in which the invisibility of the prompter [*souffleur*] ensures the indispensable *différance* and intermittence between a text already written by another hand and an interpreter already dispossessed of that which he receives.

(176)

For Artaud, adapting a widely celebrated drama, the source of his re-inspiration will be a series of thematic revisions that releases the characters of Beatrice and Count Cenci from historical representation by transforming them into god-like forces or titanic wills.

This whirlwind, or cyclone, inspires the staging of Artaud’s *Les Cenci*, a production which was not yet the Theatre of Cruelty, but that in a sense would lay the path, or blow away the dry leaves of stale theatre practice. In giving breath back to the actor, reinspiring the *corps*, Artaud gives Beatrice the strength to attest the crime verbally “Cenci, mon père, m’a polluée” (OC 621). Artaud strips his characters of the mediating influence of line and meter, forcing the audience into a proximity to the crime that Shelley’s text only alludes to. Beatrice asserts, “Le corps est sâle, mais c’est l’âme qui est polluée. Il n’y a plus une parcelle de moi-même où je puisse me réfugier” (OC 621).

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110 Thus we see more concern taken with the choreography of the banquet scene than the emotive qualities of textual delivery in Roger Blin’s director’s notes.
Shelley’s text, we heard of the creeping vapor of madness that filled Beatrice’s mind after her rape. In the world created by this event, the soul itself is polluted and the filth seems to fill the stage and even the theatre. Cenci cries out that there is a “pestilential atmosphere” preventing him from breathing. The desire to confront the audience with the mess that is the Cenci family did not originate with Artaud, as we see in Shelley’s Preface, the two authors sharing an antiauthoritarian project.

Because Shelley’s play was unperformed for decades, readers could not avoid Shelley’s stated interpretative goals. Shelley writes in the Preface to the print edition of the play:

The fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes. If Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better; but she would never have been a tragic character….It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she done what needs justification; it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge; that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists. (224).\textsuperscript{111}

Thus the Preface points to the actual dramatic conflict that undergirds Shelley’s \textit{Cenci}: a conflict within the moral psyche of the spectator. The trial is one in which the audience member sits as judge, witness, and defendant to the crime of the “anatomizing casuistry” of the times. Alan Richardson identifies the central tension of the play in Cenci’s desire to “confound day and night,” which he calls the “figure for the complex violation of borders entailed in the rape: the primal border between the paternal and the sexual relations; the border between erotic love and hateful violence; the border, finally, 

between one identity, one consciousness, and another” (106). The border, however, stretches further than Richardson imagines—stretches, indeed, past the curtain and into the rows of seats in the house. This blurring of the border between spectator and spectacle will become, much later, the central project in Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty.

Shelley makes this appeal directly to the audience by means of a pictorial stage convention very much in vogue in the Romanic era. The emphasis on “peace and love” signals a move toward Joanna Bailie-esque sympathy. Rather than grasping at roles, Shelley’s Preface gestures toward a social structure based on mutual sympathy rather than redress. Audiences and readers who seek to anatomize Beatrice’s crime—assigning the guilt to Count Cenci or the Roman Church—evade the tragic dimension of her character. Beatrice’s dramatic force derives from her parity with Cenci, matching his destructive energy with her force of will and beguiling goodness.

But in Artaud’s play, Beatrice and Cenci repeat each other’s rage and thirst for vengeance—with Count Cenci representing the Idea of pure malevolent will, and Beatrice representing the idea of the vengeful, justice-seeking will. In a radical reconsideration of the foundation of justice, she demands, “Où est le juge qui pourra me rendre mon âme? Il y a dans mes veines, Orsino, un sang qui ne devrait pas s’y trouver/
Je ne peux plus croire maintenant qu’à la justice que je choisirai” (OC 623). This is quite a departure from Shelley’s original, in which the rape steals Beatrice’s voice from her, robbing her of the possibility of representing her experience to herself, her family, or the court.

As we examined earlier in both *Le Jet de sang* and “Le Théâtre et la peste,” incest serves for Artaud as the supreme taboo by which he will challenge Western morality and logic by appealing to a more primal force. In *Les Cenci*, the taboo of incest is broken by the father figure against his unwilling daughter. The dramatic crisis is Beatrice’s rape by her father, but the action remains the battle between their Promethean minds, as Beatrice and Cenci’s quest to destroy each other takes on more urgency. Their transcendence of the human was an important element of Artaud’s aesthetic project as he writes in *Le Figaro* on May 5, 1935, that “Men are more than men in this play, if they are not yet gods. Neither innocent or guilty, they are subjected to the same essential amorality of the Ancient Oracles, the sources of all tragedy” (Blin 104). Like Nietzsche’s ideal theatre: this stage is between heaven and earth, the heroes are dancing in a kind of complicated cyclonic whirling, and the main-characters are god-like humans representing not men but ideas. And therefore there is a great propulsion from the beginning toward the play’s ineluctable and tragic conclusion. Beatrice demands they act hastily, “l’important est d’agir sans tarder” (OC 624). And Orsino aids her in her quest, “Mettez Bernardo dans le secret. Contre une autorité dévoyée faites bloc. Reconstituez une famille. C’est autor du sang des familles que se rassemblent les meilleurs conjurés… Pour l’acte lui-même, j’ai deux muets.” More than human, yet not quite a god, Beatrice pays the mute assassins with “une bourse et une sorte de chasuble d’église rutilante d’or qu’elle leur jette en vrac” (OC 629). She has dispossessed herself of father and ecclesiastical authority in this her moment of god-like triumph, a moment that proves all too short in Artaud’s visual onslaught.

It behooves the reader/audience to remember Artaud’s intention with this play, which he states in a letter to André Gide on February 10, 1935, as:
In this play, nothing is treated with respect. I want to make everyone understand that I attack the social superstition of the family without first asking that one take up arms against such and such an individual. The same for order, the same for Justice….I seek, therefore, to keep the public from confusing ideas with men and, more than that, from confusing them with forms. (Blin 92)

Artaud really challenges the notion of “villain” in this statement by emphasizing that his play will not first ask audiences to “take up arms against such and such an individual” (as one would be tempted to do if Beatrice were a one-dimensional victim, rather than Count Cenci’s most perfect rival). By equalizing the power relationship between the two, by setting them up as two magnetic poles according to whose pull the world of Les Cenci will revolve, Artaud hopes to make the audience see his true “villains”: justice, the family, and the Church. In Artaud’s text, the use of the stage and of circling and circles, provides a symbolic hermeneutic by which we can read Beatrice and Cenci’s actions and words. Artaud states in his preface that, “The gestures and movements in this production are just as important as the dialogue: the purpose of the dialogue is to act as a reagent to the other elements.”

The banquet scene unfolds as an elaborate pantomime of encirclement, as Cenci and Beatrice weave the circle of their impending fate. The production notes and diagrams were released in 1965 in the Cahiers Renaud-Berrault for Act 1, Scene 3, the banquet scene. The setting reads “The scene is reminiscent of ’The Wedding Feast of Cana,’ but more barbaric…Suddenly from beneath the raised curtain explodes the scene of a furious orgy in the manner of a trompe l’oeil” (Blin 112). After her entreaty to the nobles to protect herself, her mother, and her brother, a whirlwind of combat breaks out in which the guests circle and skirmish, with Colonna, “com[ing] back toward the guests, each one of whom is moving in a circle that closes in a spiral.

113 The Cenci. vii-viii.
Colonna makes a larger circle around them” (Blin 121). In their first skirmish after
Cenci has assembled the nobles to announce the death of his son, Beatrice “circles the
stage at a run, ending up standing squarely in front of her father,” to whom she says,
“You, take care.” She warns him to take care lest, “God, receiving the curse of an evil
father should give weapons to his sons,” after which she “circles the stage again, ending
up facing the crowd this time.” They, too, receive her admonishment as she cries,
“Cowards!” As she circles between the poles of authority (family and community, blood
and politics), she sets in motion the wheels of retribution. In admonishing her father and
berating the community, Beatrice effectively assumes the same position toward them as
her father has done in announcing the death of his sons. Artaud writes in La Bête Noire
on May 1, 1935, that in writing Les Cenci, he “imposed the movement of nature on [his]
tragedy, that general gravitation that moves plants and beings…All of the staging of the
Cenci is based on this movement of gravitation” (Blin 103).

As we see at the end of the play, Beatrice’s body continues this violent revolution
on the wheel of torture; unlike Shelley’s version, she never becomes the still-point of
fate’s grinding wheel in which the other characters might receive rest. The metaphorical
wheel finds its final instantiation in the final scene of Les Cenci.

Scene three opens with this stage direction:

Au plafond du théâtre une roue tourne comme sur un axe, qui en
traverserait le diamètre.
Béatrice, suspendue par les cheveux et poussée par un garde qui lui tire
les bras en arrière, marche selon l’axe de la roue.
Tous les deux ou trois pas qu’elle fait, un cri monte avec un bruit de treuil,
de roue qu’on tourne, ou de poutres écartelées, venant d’un coin différent
de la scène. La prison dégage le bruit d’une usine en plein mouvement.
(OC 633)

114 The Cenci. 17.
The scene plunges the audience and reader into an atheistic underworld of human cruelty. Screams are heard as Beatrice sings a song (just like her antecedent in Shelley’s text), scored by “Une musique très douce et très dangereuse s’élève” (OC 634). She accuses the Church “La cruauté du pape rejoint celle du vieux Cenci” and rejects her faith when she tells Camillo, “Éloigne-toi de moi, Camillo.—Qu’on ne me parle plus jamais de Dieu” (OC 635-636). Artaud’s play wants to uncover the repetition of cruelty in both the dark (incestuous rape) and the light (the Church).

2.4.1 Presentation and Representation: Why Actuality Overwhelms the Theatre of Cruelty

The performance of Les Cenci at the Folies-Wagram Theater came after a public relations effort to build interest and prepare the audience for the themes and methods which would accost them. Le Petit Parisien on April 14, 1935, publicized an interview with Artaud in which he explains the sonic and lighting effects created by Georges Desormière especially for the show, specifically a never-before heard recording of the church bells at Amiens (96-98). In La Bête Noire on May 1, 1935, Artaud penned an explanation of the themes and methods of this play that was to be the precursor to the Theater of Cruelty’s full flowering. He writes of the staging: “I imposed the movement of nature on my tragedy, that general gravitation that moves planets….which we also find in a static form in the volcanic eruptions of the earth.” Here the yearning of the Young Man in the Jet de Sang reminds us that Artaud intends for this performance to come into being like the natural phenomenon of the volcano. We read that “I have tried to make beings speak instead of men,; beings, each of whom are like great forces incarnate and retain

115 All references to audience reaction to Les Cenci are taken from Roger Blin’s collection, unless otherwise noted.
enough of rational man to be plausible from a psychological point of view” (104). 

Comoedia published an interview with Artaud on May 6, 1935 in which Artaud describes his lead actress, “I have found a tragedienne, a genuine one: Iya Abdy…Of Russian origin, of a family of writers and artists, Iya Abdy possesses a truly heroic soul, an extraordinary power of expression, a sense of grandeur” (107). By trying so hard to avoid representation, Artaud chose a lead actress who—in his eyes—was “the thing itself: tragic, grand, heroic.” The audiences, however, did not see her as such, but rather were unable to get past her heavy accent. Artaud tries to liberate man from Western society by way of myth, but cannot allow himself to go so far as to truly revolutionize either myth, tragedy, character, or in the end, stagecraft.

The critical response immediately following the production shows that Artaud’s enthusiasm for the story, for the ideals of the Theater of Cruelty, and for his lead actress led to a production suffering from extremes of emotion and energy that bewildered the critics and the audience. Without a clear idea as to how they should react, laughter and disgust quickly followed this encounter with Artaud’s vision of cruelty, which ought to have prevented the spectator from “[leaving] the theater intact” as Artaud had foreseen. Artaud, acting the lead as Count Cenci, was called “a deplorable actor” (Pierre Audiat, Paris-Soir, May 9, 1935); “not the least interesting… he is intolerable and we tolerate him. It is because his insight is that of faith” (Colette, in Le Journal, May 17); of his acting, “He exerted himself to seem demonic. He performed like the late Montflury, who shouted so much he died on stage” (Lucien Dubech in Candide, May 23) (133-140). Iya Abdy as Beatrice, meanwhile, did shock the audiences, but more as a curiously beautiful foreign nobless and not as the tragic hero struggling against cosmic cruelty. Pierre Audiat wrote in Paris-Soir on May 9, “What a startling Beatrice, with her deathly pallor, her
sylphlike postures.” Colette had mixed praise for her, “She had some very good moments of movement and silence. Violence goes well with her fair lioness looks and her often harsh and grave voice… But for a vocation as imperious as Lady Abdy’s, she should devote herself unsparingly to erasing her foreign accent and giving it a clear articulation” (Le Journal, May 17, 1935).

2.4.2 The Cenci Audience

The performance history of Les Cenci tells us much more about the play than just the staging decisions made by Artaud, the type of microphone used to record the bells at Amiens, or the height of the mannequins used in the banquet scene. The audience comes clearly forward as an intensely involved part of the performance, but not, perhaps, in the way Artaud had anticipated. We read that the crowd was one of intellectuals and other members outside of “mainstream” Parisian society in this review by Raymond Latour in:

From “Amory” in Comoedia, May 8, 1935:

Everyone that Paris considers as snobs, as spics, as homosexuals, as enemies of our French lucidity, as systematic demolishers, as anarchists of thought, as confused minds, morphine addicts, cocaine addicts, ether addicts, false aesthetes, Sapphics, decomposers of music, imported Frenchmen, servants of tiny coteries and of obscure formulas, writers of the left and extreme left, cubists, essayists, and other distressing products of the international mire, were there, submerging and wishing to impose their law, their argot, their incoherence on the ordinary habitués who generally come.

Thanks to them, it was nearly impossible for me to understand the intentions of M. Antonin Artaud, even though care had been taken to explain them to us in the program, nor was I able to disentangle anything new of value from this surrealism that appears to me, in this circumstance, to be chiefly surpasséism.(131)
The reviewer also reveals a slight tongue-in-cheek reaction to the program notes.

Raymonde Latour in *Paris-Midi* on May 7, 1935, meanwhile, comments on how the play did not stir the audience up in any noticeable way: “what struck me most during the intermissions was the absence of animated discussion. One can either love or detest this unusual play, but one should not remain indifferent to the courage and audacity of the effort” (Blin 128). Francois Porché, in *La Revue de Paris* on May 15, 1935 has a scathing critique of the avant-garde and its relation to the society people who patronize it, who follow the latest trends but were openly laughing at the performance:

> Similar evenings are ill-fated. It is certainly not by mobilizing society people that we will save the theatre. Alerted by telephone, embroiled in their obligations, their snobbishness, entangled in their meshes of good breeding, these society people come: They have come. But their presence proves nothing. They are used to unpleasant tasks. Besides, one tricks them less than one would think: They were among the laughing ones. (138)

The reviews and accounts paint a picture of a public that uses avant-garde drama as a meeting-place, as a gesture of open-mindedness, and as an opportunity to engage in mild anarchic behavior, as Lucien Dubech in *Candide* writes (May 23, 1935):

> A public came prepared to swoon. They seemed to consist of salon revolutionaries and the surrealists. We say ‘seemed’ because we do not know these ladies and gentlemen. They hoped for a moment when they could make a lot of noise, and it did not occur. Others condemned such damnable excesses and filled their columns with announcements that the theatre was dead. (140)

We have here a portrait of a much more *knowing* audience than that anticipated by Artaud in the preparatory publications. Stephen Koch thinks that Artaud’s idea of the spectator is elitist and dehumanizing, claiming, “Artaud does not regard his spectator as a thinking man, to be instructed, cajoled, seduced. Rather, the spectator is an organism, an
exalted nervous system to be set free of itself through shock… a hieratic victim” (Koch 30).

The revolutionary spirit had long been at work in European drama (Naturalism, Futurism, Pirandellism), and so Artaud’s intentions may have been confounded by an already conditioned audience. This sarcastic review (Action Française, May 17, 1935) reveals the boredom felt by an audience long accustomed to the new:

Nothing appeals to us more than attempts to renovate the theatre, but it is exactly for this reason that we are neither scandalized nor fired with enthusiasm (simply bored) by tirades against religion and the family, and by the somewhat obsolete anarchism hovering over this modern version of Shelley’s play. (139)

Artaud’s reaction to the problem of the audience supports Thierry Galibert’s thesis that, for Artaud, the audience functions primarily and perhaps irreversibly as his adversary. In an article titled “After Les Cenci” that appeared in La Bête Noire, on June 1, 1935, Artaud vents his annoyance with the audience he had courted so carefully in the run-up to the production:

From the partisan dishonesty and the total prejudice of certain people who only came to the Cenci with the intention of seeing it fail and to destroy the play, and who were finally muzzled by the fourth and last act, from this medley of reviews, restrictions, eulogies, excitement, reservations, honesty and dishonesty, I get the impression that the French public is not mature enough for a feast of the gods; there proved to be more than one spectator who recognized the unprecedented atmosphere of the Cenci as being dangerous. (Blin 142)

This public denunciation on the part of his audience precipitated his next move—to abandon French theatre and travel to Mexico to study the indigenous Tarahumara people and experiment with their rituals and Peyote signifies his abandonment of the Theatre of Cruelty project. In the next year, he pursued
various cures for his drug addiction, lived with friends or on the street begging, and took his fateful trip to Ireland, where he was arrested and sent back to France, infamously restrained in a straitjacket to be committed in various asylums for the next nine years. The Theatre of Cruelty, at this point, would appear impossible. But to declare Artaud a failure at this point would be to ignore his last great offense in the tradition of the performance of “Le Théâtre et la peste” and Les Cenci, the cancelled radio emission, Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu solicited and performed after his release from the psychiatric hospital at Rodez.

2.5. Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu

Following the Second World War in 1946, Artaud’s friends organized a benefit to raise money to support him at a recuperation home in the Paris suburbs so that he could be released from the psychiatric hospital. He took up residence at Ivry in May, 1946. Over the next nineteen months, he continued to write and perform, including the piece “Histoire vécue d’Artaud-Mômo,” in January, 1947 at le Vieux Colombier, writing Van Gogh le suicidé de la société in February, exhibiting his sketches, and continuing to write on theatre (OC 1765). The final Artaud text and performance that remains to be analyzed are the texts prepared for radio transmission by Radiodiffusion française in November, 1947 under the title Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu. It was recorded in 1947 by Paule Thévenin, Maria Césarès, Roger Blin, and Artaud before a live audience (OC 1636-1639). The transmission was suppressed by Wladimir Porché, director general of

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116 He made this trip in 1936, arriving first in Havana, then Vera Cruz. On February 26-28, he gave lectures at the University of Mexico, the Alliance Française, and published in El Nacional Revolucionario. He spent all of September with the Tarahumara Indians, where he was initiated into the “culte du peyotl,” before returning to Paris in November (OC 1746-8).
Radiodiffusion because, upon hearing the recording, he decided that Artaud’s language was “too raw.” (OC 1637). The broadcast was delayed until March 6, 1973. A remastered digital recording of the performance was produced in 1996, and I will refer to it in analyzing the text and performance history.

The performance is a collection of texts united around the word play Artaud sensed in the word “émission,” according to Évelyne Grossman in her introduction to the work. She points out first that it is an inverse of “messe,” the Catholic Mass and in a more organic sense, “cris, crachats, salive, sperme, pets, sang, excréments.” The text refers so often to farts and rank gas, evoking what Grossman calls “cette explosion organique et volcanique d’un corps théâtre atomique,” referencing the start of the Cold War surrounding the moment of its creation (1636). God, against whose judgment the hero must rebel, is necessary so that the hero can achieve authenticity. Thus, in Artaud, the physical suffering and mental anguish he experiences are persecution, not mere psychological symptoms of illness. The self, in Gnosticism, is necessarily divided with the authentic self trapped within the diseased body. Witness this portion of the poem:

But there is a thing which is something, only one thing which is something and which I feel because it wants TO GET OUT: the presence of my bodily suffering, the menacing, never tiring presence of my body. (Sontag 566)
This struggle between the limits of the body and the need for the authentic self to free itself from this body makes Artaud a true outsider in modern or avant-garde aesthetics. We have seen how he rejects the fundamental optimism of the Surrealists early in his career, and it would appear that in this final “act” of his tumultuous career in his rejection of embodied human existence.

In this, his last performance piece, the workings of the body (and how much of society is linked to the ordering of these functions!) are unnecessary at best, and torturous at worst: “Il semble que la conscience / soit en nous / liée / au désir sexuel / et à la faim ; / mais elle pourrait / très bien / ne pas leur être liée (OC 1648). However, we must remember that Artaud’s popular work, *Le Théâtre et son double*, presented a more moderate position toward the body than we see here. To embrace the theatre is to have hope in the unity of body and idea, sense and concept, to remake man. That hopefulness explains the enduring popularity of the ideas expressed by the Theater of Cruelty, despite the fact that most people cannot understand why Artaud conceives of all matter as malevolent. For Naomi Greene, the contradiction between Artaud’s choice of the theatre and support of what appear to be Gnostic metaphysical tenets is an argument in favor of how shaky his philosophical ground ultimately is.\(^{117}\) I would answer this criticism that Artaud’s supposed Gnosticism is clearly overridden by his career-long critique of the abstraction of the body beginning with the performance of “Le Théâtre et la peste” through *Les Cenci* and now in the performance version of *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*. Because the text of *Pour en finir* is so “Gnostic” in its expressions of repulsion toward emissions (semen, farts, caca), the celebratory and integral attempt to “emit” the

presence of the body through the medium of radio becomes lost (it also becomes lost because of the relative unavailability of the recording, only released digitally re-mastered in 1995).

The experience of hearing the performance (one intended to be heard broadcasted after its recording) reveals the extent to which *Pour en finir* was meant to be experienced as the tension between the performing body and a disembodying medium. The piece pushes the limits of radio to saturate the emission with as much of the embodied performers as it can carry. He does this by transmitting the voice in a variety of conditions to show the textures and reverberations caused by the body’s various situations. In the recording, Artaud exhibits astonishing vocal control and range, alternating between high-pitched whines and low-pitched litanies. Moments of “bruits”—clangs, bangs, screams, yodels—punctuate the spoken pieces. Most notably, before the concluding text, is a “noise” moment of Artaud’s “cry in the stairwell,” in which the echo effect transmits bodily distance and vocal reverberations through radio—a medium in which such irregularities would usually be controlled. These interludes of “bruitage” brought a sense of both mechanized threat (drums and other object noises) and human animalism in alingual cries and episodes of glossolalia—incomprehensible vocal performances that defy rational thought and transmit the bodily presence of the actors over the airwaves. The text, too, formally defies discursive explication as it is a series of poems that, though they communicate, they cannot be said to be logical. This clearly recalls Artaud’s search earlier in his career for a “new” logic that, once grasped, would disappear. The radio medium, likewise, imitates the appearance/disappearance action of this new logic.
Another way that the performed text diffuses its new brand of logic before it dissipates is by Artaud’s choice to perform with a masculine and a feminine voice: those of Roger Blin, Maria Casarès and Paule Thévénin, who performed portions of the text. In the same way that Artaud changes between high and low, masculine and feminine vocal registers, he opens the text to more performers. This choice emphasizes the post-sexual theme of the work, an outworking of the incest themes of his earlier plays. By the time Artaud “has done with the judgement of God,” he has concluded that to be conscious is to suffer from appetites (the same destructive appetites he saw as aligned with cruelty):

“Il semble que la conscience/ soit en nous / liée / au désir sexuel / et à la faim… / On dit, / on peut dire, / il y en a qui disent / que la conscience / est un appétit, / l’appétit de vivre” (OC 1648). Consciousness—always consciousness of something—for Artaud is to suffer under this insatiable appetite for life, characterized by hunger and sexual desire. The body demands obedience to its drives at the same time that it makes consciousness possible.

This portion of the text performed by Roger Blin is titled “La Recherche de la fécalité.” It concludes with a performed exchange between Antonin Artaud and an unnamed interlocutor who demands of him, “Vous êtes fou, monsieur Artaud, et la messe?” Blin modulates his voice to an incredulous pitch to ask the question before beginning a litany in lower tones answering the charge. He first denies “le baptême et la messe” as there is no “acte humain / qui, sur le plan érotique interne, / soit plus pernicieux que la descente / du soi-disant Jésus-christ / sur les autels.” Here, Artaud criticizes the movement of the Mass in which the incorporeal Jesus Christ descends to the altar to take on matter in the form of the bread. Christ, in this piece, is he who consents to take on flesh at the urging of what Artaud calls the “crab-louse god,” who, even though he does not exist, is like “le vide qui avance avec toutes ses formes / dont la
Artaud’s images for God, erotic transgression, have come full circle if we recall the image pattern of *Le Jet de sang*, in which the final tableaux features an overwhelming wave of scorpions emerging from the Bawd’s vagina. This void from which all life springs horrifies Artaud because he sees it as false life, trapped in the flesh. Yet paradoxically, his fascination with theatre as the means of creating a new life requires the body to create the images. In the case of *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*, the ones who overcome this false, incorporeal Christ are those who break away from the suffering in the flesh inflicted upon them by the crab-louse god and declare that they have finished with the judgment of the invisible god:

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Le nommé christ n’est autre que celui qui en face du morpion dieu a consenti à vivre sans corps, alors qu’une armée d’hommes descendue d’une croix, où dieu croyait l’avoir depuis longtemps clouée, s’est révoltée et, bardée de fer, de sang, de feu, et d’ossements, avance, inventivant l’Invisible afin d’y finir le JUGEMENT DE DIEU. (OC 1646)
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Breaking the erotic taboo of incest was the initial movement performed by the Theatre of Cruelty, followed by destroying the ideals of family, justice, and the Church. In this last performed work, Artaud overthrows the Mass and the very idea of a god-man. By performing his critique in such a way that the body is still central, still performing new feats of image-creation (in sound, glossolalia, cries, rhythmic noise), he retains the body while renewing it and preserving it seemingly for eternity (as we can still hear it).

The Post-Scriptum to *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* functions as a triumphant declaration of completion. In it, Artaud takes back his name, “Qui suis-
“Je suis Antonin Artaud” (which at various points in his life he had denied) and describes his “current body,” the one we are “seeing” in the hearing of this long poem performance (making it, strangely, a sound image) as:

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vous verrez mon corps actuel
voler en éclats
et se ramasser
sous dix mille aspects
notoires
un corps neuf
où vous ne pourrez
plus jamais
m’oublier (OC 1663).
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Artaud declares here that we see his current body “shattering” before concentrating itself in “ten thousand notable aspects,” a “new body” that we will “never again be able to forget.” The recorded performance of the event presents these aspects for view: the sound poetry, the invented language, the theological and metaphysical arguments, the presence of the body in voice and space, the diffusion of Artaud into the voices of Cesarès, Blin, and Thévénin. In a letter to René Guilly who had supported Wladimir Porché’s decision to suppress the piece in an article in Combat on February 7, Artaud emphasizes the corporal dimension of the transmission: “Je veux dire que cette emission était la recherche d’un langage que n’importe quel cantonnier ou bougnat eût compris, lequel apportait par la voie de l’émission corporelle les vérités métaphysiques les plus élevées” (OC 1673). The search for a language that “any street repairman or coalman can understand” led to this broadcast that unifies body, tone, instrumentation, and poetry to communicate what he calls “the metaphysical truths” to a mass audience.118

118 The opening text of the piece concerns the United States of America, who in this nuclear age, Artaud considers a great threat to the world. Indeed, in a letter to Wladimir Porché on February 4, 1948, Artaud accuses him of being naïve toward the threat of nuclear war, that “le capitalisme américain comme le communisme russe nous
2.6. Manifeste Pour un Théâtre Vivant: Antonin Artaud and Sarah Kane

At this point, having traced the varied performance record, Artaud’s critique of Western civilization reveals itself to be an action-based critique inseparable from theatre. The theoretical and philosophical writings (such as they are) can not be taken apart from his so-called “impossible” theatre. In examining the performance record, we can see how there is a unity of thought across the decades of his writing and performance—an outworking of the idea that this contemporary Western idea of life is unnecessarily suffocating, truncated, and false, and that a return to pre-civilization anarchy, chaos, and ritual. Spectators in a true, or renewed theatre such as the Theatre of Cruelty, will experience—without the mediation of Western logic—the suffering or cruelty that motivates all life. As we saw in the case of the performed delivery of “Le Théâtre et la peste,” at the writing and performance of Les Cenci, and in Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu (suppressed for thirty years), Artaud challenges the comfortable distance that the news media, the historical record, and academic discourse enforce between a viewer and the horrifying cruelty at work in the world. As he had said in the case of Les Cenci, :

“Nous croyons qu’il y a, dans ce qu’on appelle la poésie, des forces vives, et que l’image d’une crime présentée dans les conditions théâtrales requises est pour l’esprit quelque chose d’infiniment plus redoutable que ce même crime réalisé” (TD 133). Theatre takes as its task the representation of the reprehensible suffering at play in the world for audiences desensitized to cruelty. At the end of his life, in a letter written on April 19, 1946 from Rodez to his friend, Jean Paulhan, Artaud wondered how it could be that his thoughts “‘against evil and its scum’ could not be tolerated, but that ‘war, famine, and the mènent tous deux à la guerre’” (OC 1671). Artaud’s reaction to the suppression of his broadcast is rightly disbelieving, considering the ability of the two great nations on either side of France to “broadcast” overwhelming destruction at the touch of a button.
concentration camps are endured, since they are a fact” (Cited in Finter 17). Artaud indicts a culture of spectatorship that can consume daily news reports of distant atrocities while rejecting theatrical events that manifest that same cruelty operating within bourgeois society.

Artaud’s theatre may have failed economically in his day, but his vision remains viable as becomes apparent when one begins to explore the history of twentieth-century theatre following his death in 1948 and the astonishing popularity and influence of his theory contained within *Le Théâtre et son double*. According to Kimberly Jannerone in her article “Audience, Mass, Crowd: Theatres of Cruelty in Interwar Europe.”:

Artaud’s work has been foundational to a politically progressive experimental theatre, seen in the 1960s work of such artists as Peter Brook, Judith Malina and Julian Beck, Liz LeCompte, and others. In French critical circles, Artaud’s import lies primarily in the poststructuralist and psychological analyses of his person and oeuvre (seen in the work of Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, and Michel Foucault), and in the politically leftist interpretations by authors such as those of the *Tel Quel* group.  

Though Artaud himself wrote the “Manifeste pour un théâtre avorté” following the failure of the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, had he been able to collect the many theatrical experiments that would follow his “aborted theatre” he might have changed the title to “Manifeste pour un théâtre vivant.” In the following chapters we will consider the theatre of Samuel Beckett and Martin McDonagh, but before turning to their projects, certain areas of correspondence between Artaud and a young female playwright of the 1990s should demonstrate the radical effect Artaud’s theory and stage practice had in the transnational context of nineties Britain. Kane’s first play, *Blasted*, debuted at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in January, 1995 when Sarah Kane was twenty-three years old. In

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the next five years, she wrote four more plays before committing suicide at the age of twenty-eight. Her work, like Artaud’s, shocked and repulsed critics and audiences content to view “evil and scum” at a distance, but not as a critique of their own society by a young, female writer.

The similarities between Artaud and Kane are many. Like Artaud, she came to prominence during a time of theatrical experimentation; in her case, the mid nineties saw the rise of what has come to be called “in-yr-face” theatre or “the new brutalism,” encompassing authors such as Mark Ravenhill, Sarah, Kane, and Martin McDonagh. According to Graham Saunders in ‘Love me or Kill Me’: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes, the media reaction to the so-called school of “smack and sodomy” was premature and designed to create buzz with very little depth of criticism, “The media, quick to respond to what they perceived as a new culture emerging, christened this flurry of artistic activity ‘cool Brittania’. While Vera Gottlieb saw the whole thing as an artificial construct—‘The media and the market “named” something, then “made” something—and subsequently “claimed” something’” (6). Jez Butterworth, author of Mojo (1995) and Parlour Song (2008), recalls of the time period, “’This idea of a motorcycle gang of playwrights I was leading just doesn’t exist’” (In Saunders 7). Kane herself in an interview criticized the idea of a gang of young male playwrights whom she “outdid” in stage violence, “The media look for movements, even invent them. The writers themselves are not in it” (In Saunders 7). Yael Zarhy-Levo, chronicling the media’s about-face toward Sarah Kane’s work following her last two plays and suicide, has dubbed the critical celebration of Kane as a “Kane construct.” It reconciles journalistic inconsistencies without necessarily adding critical insight to her dramatic
Kane’s refusal of the “in-yr-face” label from the outset recalls Artaud’s departure from André Breton and the Surrealists due to their political goals. Her theatrical vision had much more to do with what theatre was capable of making happen to individual spectators than in making political statements on behalf of “Thatcher’s disillusioned children.”

Like the Artaud of *Le Théâtre et son double*, Kane desired rigor in theatrical performance and in spectatorship. Herself hoping for the kind of audiences that Artaud also tried to create, Kane decries that excellence in spectatorship should belong to sports and not to the theatre:

> I hate the idea of theatre just being an evening pastime. It should be emotionally and intellectually demanding. I love football. The level of analysis that you listen to on the terraces is astonishing. If people did that in the theatre…but they don’t. They expect to sit back and not participate. If there’s a place for musicals, opera or whatever, then there should be a place for good new writing, irrespective of box office” (In Saunders 15).

Compare this to Artaud’s detailed analysis of the demands of spectatorship both in Le Théâtre Balinais and the demands of performance in “Un Athlétisme Affectif.,” in which the actor is to be “un athlète du coeur,” able to control breathing, cries and gestures by using the body as a finely-tuned instrument, with an audience capable of appreciating the interplay of gesture, sound, and symbol, as in the Théâtre Balinais, which contains “quelque chose qui supprime l’amusement, ce côté de jeu artificial inutile, de jeu d’un soir qui est la caractéristique de notre théâtre à nous” (OC 584-589, 540). And much like

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Artaud, she expresses disbelief in audience reactions to Blasted following the media blitz after its opening. Specifically, she wonders at individual spectators who came to the play apparently with the intention of walking out midway through:

No one could come and see it fresh anymore because everyone had read about it…We had one man who walked out twenty seconds before the end, just as the rain started falling on Ian’s face, and I thought, ‘well, you’ve obviously found nothing to walk out about, but you want to walk out—you realize it’s about to end, so you’re going. (In Saunders 38)\textsuperscript{122}

Though Kane had not read Artaud until “late” in her career (1998), when she did she found him “completely and utterly sane and I [understood] everything he’s saying” (In Saunders 16). As we examine the text of Blasted, specifically the stage directions that are the blueprints for her stage images, the points of convergence with Artaud’s project will become apparent. Like Artaud, Kane used the theatrical event to reform the spectator’s vision, or as Elaine Aston puts it in Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women playwrights, 1990-2000, “Her dramaturgical, political, and aesthetic invitation is for us to feel differently” (82).\textsuperscript{123} Like Artaud, she retains theatrical form at the same time that she reinvents it from within in order to bring unanticipated images to the spectator. In an interview Kane said, “Art isn’t about the shock of something new… it’s about arranging the old in such a way that you see it afresh’” (in Aston 83). In the First Manifesto of the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud argues that the theatre, “ne pourra redevenir lui-même, c’est-à-dire constituer un moyen d’illusion vraie, qu’en fournissant au spectateur des précipités


véridiques de rêves, où son goût de crime, ses obsessions érotiques, sa sauvagerie, ses chimères, son sens utopique de la vie et des choses, son cannibalisme même, se débordent, sur un plan non pas supposé et illusoire, mais intérieur” (TD 141). As we will see in the case of Blasted, Kane begins from the same starting point as Artaud: setting before her spectators a dream-like hyper-reality in which their “taste for crime, erotic obsessions, savageness, monsters, utopic dreams for life and things, even their cannibalism, that spills over from an interior—not an illusionary—level” (my emphasis). Like Artaud, Kane will play with the breaking of taboos before an audience, specifically sodomy and cannibalism, to break through any sense of smug, civilized peacefulness in a post-Cold War London audience.

Artaud describes and begins a theatrical experiment in which what happens on the stage is not so important as what happens to the audience in the act of viewing and processing the images. This is why he consistently makes the distinction between the way theatre has been and the way it could be, anticipating the dramatists and directors who would follow him in the twentieth century and change theatre from text-presentation to image-realization. Furthermore, he anticipates how the critical approach to theatre will be transformed from its current state (in which it focuses exclusively on the text to the detriment of analyzing the mise en scène):

Tant que la mise en scène demeurera, même dans l’esprit des metteurs en scène les plus libres, un simple moyen de présentation, une façon accessoire de révéler des œuvres, une sorte d’intermède spectaculaire sans signification propre, elle ne vaudra qu’autant qu’elle parviendra à se dissimuler derrière les œuvres qu’elle prétend servir. Et cela durera aussi longtemps que l’intérêt majeur d’une œuvre représentée résidera dans son texte. (TD 164)

Kane’s Blasted opens with two former lovers meeting in a hotel room in Leeds. Ian is a middle-aged journalist dying of lung cancer. Cate is a much younger woman with
intellectual challenges and subject to sudden “fits” in which she blacks out and which Cate says “feels like I’m away for minutes or months sometimes” (10). In the course of the first act, Ian rapes Cate at gunpoint and she bites him during fellatio in revenge. As the first act draws to a close, there is a knock at the door. It is a Bosnian soldier who forces his way in and holds Ian hostage with a rifle. Cate has escaped out the bathroom window. A bomb explodes, splitting the hotel room open to close the first act. In the second act, the soldier rapes Ian at gunpoint, reenacting the rape and murder of his girlfriend by soldiers and crying the whole time before sucking Ian’s eyes out. The soldier then shoots himself. Cate returns with a baby a woman gave her to protect. Ian asks for the revolver so that he can shoot himself. Cate removes the bullets before giving it to him. The baby dies. In the last scene, Cate buries the baby under the floorboards under a makeshift cross. She leaves to find food. Ian descends into the lowest form human life can take, shitting, masturbating, laughing hysterically. He eats the baby. Then, “he dies with relief.” He awakes, saying, “shit.” Cate returns with some food she has bought by prostituting herself. She shares it with him. He says “thank you.”

One image from *Blasted* stands out as peculiarly in conversation with the goals of *Le Théâtre et son double* (albeit unconsciously). When Ian, blinded, rotting from the inside out as cancer attacks his remaining lung, starving, reduced to pure human animality, crawls into the baby’s grave, the image that Kane creates looks like this:

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The tenderness of the final offer of grace and gratefulness counterposed with the violent images (blood running down Cate’s legs, Ian’s battered, eye-less visage) stage what Aston calls “a ‘perceptual critique’ of our violent contemporary world” (82). The critique emerges through the whole of the sensible stage image, not through dialogue alone.

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125 The tenderness of the final offer of grace and gratefulness counterposed with the violent images (blood running down Cate’s legs, Ian’s battered, eye-less visage) stage what Aston calls “a ‘perceptual critique’ of our violent contemporary world” (82). The critique emerges through the whole of the sensible stage image, not through dialogue alone.
Ian tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the floor and lifts the baby’s body out.
He eats the baby.
He puts the remains back in the baby’s blanket and puts the bundle back in the hole.
A beat, then he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor.
He dies with relief.
It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.
Eventually.
Ian: Shit.

First, the taboo of cannibalism is broken in the most shocking way possible (cannibalizing an infant). Second, Kane rejects an existentialist salvation at the end for Ian, who cannot even choose relief in death. He must continue to live indefinitely. The cruel universe of Kane’s play compels him to continue to live. Lastly, the image of Ian’s head poking through the floorboards, blinded, ravaged, and despairing is an Artaudian image that could have been plucked from the pages of *Le Théâtre et son double* in which he writes:

Or cette réalité n’est pas humaine mais inhumaine, et l’homme avec ses mœurs ou avec son caractère y compte, il faut le dire, pour fort peu. Et c’est à peine si de l’homme il pourrait encore rester la tête, et une sorte de tête absolument dénudée, malléable et organique, où il demeurerait juste assez de matière formelle pour que les principes y puissent déployer leurs conséquences d’une manière sensible et achevée. (TD 74)

In this essay, Artaud is describing the cruelty that motivates a world in which man, with his manners and his character, “counts but little.” In a world such as this, it would be difficult for man to even retain his head, even so little as a head “absolutely denuded, malleable, organic,” with just enough matter remaining for these principles to make an impression. As Ian lies in the grave, reduced to the barest human drives, violated as he violated Cate, the power relationship between them has completely reversed and he is, what Cate had called him in Act One, “a nightmare” (33).
As we examined in *Le Théâtre et son double*, Artaud wanted to stage the cruelty at work in erotic love, beginning with *Le Jet de Sang* and moving into *Les Cenci*, and making reference to John Ford’s ‘*Tis Pity She’s a Whore* in *Le Théâtre et son double*. By the time we come to the new writing of nineties England, the young playwrights of the “new brutalism” school see nothing but cruelty latent in erotic love, with Sarah Kane perhaps staging the most scathing critique of sexual mores by identifying this manipulative and violent relationship with the organized rape camps in Bosnia set up by the Serbian forces. According to Ken Urban, Kane’s works dramatize an “ethics of catastrophe” that speaks in opposition to the constraining rules of morality (37).

What characterizes Kane’s writing? Urban like Saunders agrees that Kane’s most experimental and avant-garde expressions were the dramatic forms she shattered and remade in order to best express her criticism of post-Cold War Europe (Urban 40; Saunders 9). In the case of *Blasted*, the two-act dramatic structure of dramatic realism is literally blasted apart by the bomb at the end of the first act. However, from the entrance of the soldier prior to the bomb, the play enters a sort of surreal tone, as the Bosnian war seems to encroach closer and closer to this generic hotel room in Leeds.

This “unreality” of *Blasted* follows a particular logic—the logic Kane wants to make visible to her audience of sexual violence and modern warfare. In this, *Blasted* looks very much like an expression of what Artaud calls “thought” or the new logic which defies expression. Like that “thought,” Kane’s *Blasted* speaks not through logical discourse but through a series of images strung together by minimal dialogue. Elaine Aston concludes that the extreme violence and taboo nature of the acts represented in the last moments of *Blasted* call attention to “the apparatus of mimesis,” making it visible in order to alienate the audience from familiar reality (86). This alienating function recalls
the theories and techniques of Bertolt Brecht, in contrast to Artaud’s emphasis on a total theatre in which the spectator would find no space for reflection. Kane herself considered the eating of the baby to be less distressing or gratuitous an image on stage because the mimetic quality would be foregrounded:

A lot of people said to me when they read it before it was performed ‘we’re not sure about the baby eating’, and I kept looking and thinking, ‘is it gratuitous?’….Reading Blasted is much harder work than watching it, because when you read it, it’s literally he eats the baby. When you see it he’s clearly not eating the baby. It’s absolutely fucking obvious. This is a theatrical image. He’s not doing it at all. So in a way it’s more demanding because it throws you back on your own imagination (In Saunders 66).

If that is the case, reading the contemporary reviews of the play would prove much more disturbing than seeing the play performed (perhaps explaining that particular spectator’s belated departure, cited earlier). Kane was not consistent across her interviews in how she expected Blasted to act upon the spectator. At another time, she privileged the play’s power to change the spectator as a function of its form, “The play collapses into one of Cate’s fits, putting the audience through the experience they have previously only witnessed, which is a direct parallel to the truth of the war raging outside” (582).126 In which case, Blasted is an instance of Dolan’s “utopian performative,” a theatrical event with the ethical imperative to transform how the spectator feels. Elaine Aston recalled the effect of the 2001 Royal Court revival of Blasted which made her feel that “somehow the convention of applause felt ‘wrong’” (582). Aston tells us that she did manage to applaud, despite a sense that “applause returned the audience to a ‘normality’ I simply was not feeling” (583). Kane said in another interview, “for me the language of theatre is

image,” echoing Artaud’s constant thesis of *Le Théâtre et son double* (In Saunders 50).

The problem for Sarah Kane’s work, like Artaud’s, can be found in the mouth of her pro/antagonist, Ian: “This isn’t a story anyone wants to hear.” (48) Like Artaud, Kane’s ethics of cruelty, which she communicates by image, incites feelings of identification and empathy in some spectators, outrage in others, but always a rapid return to the normalcy of theatrical convention and then daily life.

Ken Urban, too, cannot imagine tangible ethical change that might follow witnessing a performance of Kane’s work.” In his reading of *Blasted*, in which he associates Kane with Gilles Deleuze, Urban posits that Kane’s theatre enacts “An Ethics of Catastrophe.” But Urban fails to recognize that the second act is the logical outcome of the realism of the first act. Instead, he sees the entry of the unnamed soldier and the second act as a break, or as he puts it, “we enter hell.” But to say so renders the second act a hell of Kane’s devising, enforcing the stereotype that she is the darkest and most perverse of the nineties playwrights. To do so fails to take into account the progression of the first act from dramatic realism to increasingly tense, violent, hyper-real expressions of erotic dependence and desire. Kane herself saw the formal progression of the play as giving image to the logic informing our contemporary sexual and gendered mores. “The logical conclusion of the attitude that produces an isolated rape in England is the rape camps in Bosnia,” Kane has said (In Urban 68). Kane’s ethics are indeed catastrophic, but not in the way Urban formulates it, as, “subject to change, even optional, emerging from specific moments and certain modes of being,” or that “good is not a moral imperative imposed from on high, but rather good is contingent, emerging from specific moments” (37, 69). Nor is her ethical charge contingent or revolutionary in the manner which Kristeva sees in art, “[giving] way to the free play of negativity, need, desire,
pleasure, and jouissance, before being put together again, although temporarily and with
full knowledge of what is involved” (Kristeva 23). Far from contingent, the good in the
play emerges from a strict moral imperative that guides Cate’s action throughout and is
linked to the revolver that remains a key prop from the beginning of the play to the end.

Cate lives by the moral imperative, “Do not kill,” and this rule explains her
actions from the beginning of the play to the end—for she has many opportunities to kill
Ian, and doesn’t. Psychological explanation can try to reduce Cate and Ian’s relationship
to mere victim/victimizer operating in stasis until the entry of the soldier, but such an
explanation cannot explain her return, her removal of the bullets from the gun before
giving it to Ian, or her sharing of her food with him. This moral inflexibility that Cate has
can be seen from the beginning of the play, though it might be mistaken for simplicity or
niceness: she knows the bellhop’s name, though Ian merely calls him by racial epithets;
she won’t—in fact, can’t—eat meat; and insists over and over again, “it’s wrong to kill”
even after he has raped her (32). Her insistence on the immorality of murder extends to
self-murder, as she silently removes the bullets from the gun after Ian has been raped and
blinded by the soldier:

Ian: I know you want to punish me, trying to make me live (55)
(she gives him the gun after having removed the bullets but there are no
bullets in it)
Cate: Fate, see. You’re not meant to do it. God—
Ian: The cunt. (57)

Kane privileges Cate as the moral superior in the play, but her superiority comes by a
negative, not a positive, movement. Despite her violation at the hands of the men of the
play (both onstage and off) Cate transcends the violence of this insane, cruel world (a
world Kane tells us is the same, mundane world of nice hotel rooms and barely
newsworthy rapes) ascending as an ethical figure even as she is debased.
2.7. Conclusion: The Rarely Witnessed Kane and Artaud

*Blasted* remains Kane’s least performed play, especially in the United States, only first being staged in 2008 by the SoHo Repertory and more recently in early 2010 on the Gable Stage in Coral Gables, Florida and at The Bang and Clatter Theatre Company in Cleveland in 2009. Her agent, Mel Kenyon, explained why, as of 2002, *Blasted* and *Phaedra’s Love* had not been revived: “one has to be quite ruthless with oneself about who her audience actually was and how finite the numbers were. A mythology can grow up. Sarah was an extraordinarily talented woman. However, one could never claim she was a populist writer” (Saunders 144). Like Artaud, her lack of popularity means that the performance record remains vital to understand how such an unperformed writer became so influential in an era of dramatic innovation. Laurens de Vos concludes in his recent study of Artaud, Beckett, and Kane, that Sarah Kane stood apart in the nineties as “the trauma that her society could not deal with,” but following September 11, 2001 and the London bombings of 2005, the British discovered “a context for her work [so] that society could come to terms with this rape-play girl” (234). While she has become critically accepted (due in large part to the “Kane construct” as explained by Yael Zarhy-Levo Yael Zarhy-Levo), considering Kane as part of society’s “normal order” overestimates her normalization. Like Artaud, her work has remained rarely performed (in relation to her importance as a dramatist) and only seen by small audiences. *Blasted* resists both updating and any softening of its content because the written drama consists of almost equal proportion of stage directions to dialogue. Its subject: the cruelty and suffering at the foundation of erotic relationships, generalized to the Bosnian war echoes

Artaud’s own juxtaposition of his bodily suffering with the dawn of nuclear war in his 1948 *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*. The presence of the bodies and the description of the mise en scène cannot be ignored when evaluating the works, as Artaud insisted in *Le Théâtre et son double*:

"Tant que la mise en scène demeurera, même dans l’esprit des metteurs en scène les plus libres, un simple moyen de présentation, une façon accessoire de révéler des œuvres, une sorte d’intermède spectaculaire sans signification propre, elle ne vaudra qu’autant qu’elle parviendra à se dissimuler derrière les œuvres qu’elle prétend servir. Et cela durera aussi longtemps que l’intérêt majeur d’une œuvre représentée résidera dans son texte, aussi longtemps qu’au théâtre—art de représentation, la littérature prendra le pas sur la représentation appelée improprement spectacle, avec tout ce que cette dénomination entraîne de péjoratif, d’accessoire, d’éphémère et d’extérieur. (TD 164)"

In the course of this chapter, it has been my intention to demonstrate how central the performances of Artaud’s work are to an understanding of his metaphysical and aesthetic project. In trying to remake life, work, language and theatre, he forced his spectators into an (oftentimes) uncomfortable proximity to his own bodily suffering. He frustrated their expectations and suffered their derision, disbelief, and state censorship. Dying penniless in the rest home at Ivry, the influence he has had over the next sixty years of stagecraft exceeds what would seem possible from the “impossible” demands of *Le Théâtre et son double*. Yet, thanks to his revolutionary manifesto, authors such as Sarah Kane took up its charge to present cruelty, not simply re-present texts.\(^{128}\) Theatre, what he calls “the art of representation” which is wrongly called spectacle, must cease dissimulating itself “behind” the text of the work.

\(^{128}\) As Paul Arnold says in “The Artaud Experiment,”: “It may be said that the entire presently fashionable generation sprang from Artaud—which does not mean it has carried out his message” (Trans. Ruby Cohn. *The Tulane Drama Review*. 8.2 (Winter, 1963): 15-29. 27).
CHAPTER THREE

SAMUEL BECKETT AND PRISON THEATRE/THEATRE PRISON

3.1 Introduction: The Godot Construct

From Samuel Beckett’s early play, *En attendant Godot* (1952) to the final dramatic works, such as *Catastrophe* (1982), a dramatic project emerges that is both aesthetic and philosophical. Concurrently, thanks to a series of unanticipated performances in unorthodox settings spanning the artist’s career, Beckett’s first and most famous play has become indissolubly linked to prisons and prisoners. Beckett’s approval of and involvement with these unusual performances of his work deserves extended consideration in contrast to a body of interpretative work that has appropriated *Waiting for Godot* for an educated audience.¹²⁹ When Martin Esslin made famous one of these early performances—the 1957 visit to San Quentin by the San Francisco Actors Workshop—this conjunction led to Samuel Beckett’s permanent association with “the Absurd.” What emerges from the critical reception of *En attendant Godot* is what I will a “Godot construct,” or a standard perspective on how spectators have reacted (and should react) to Beckett’s plays since their earliest performances Scholarly contestations over

¹²⁹ This approval comes as a shock considering Samuel Beckett’s antipathy to any “creative” interpretations of his plays, especially *Waiting for Godot*. In 1998, the Beckett estate prosecuted a Washington D.C. production of the play that approached it through the prism of American race and identity politics, casting Vladimir and Estragon as black and Lucky and Pozzo as white. For a full review of the production, see “Review: Waiting for Godot at the Studio Theatre.” *Theatre Journal.* 51.2 (May 1999) 192-194.
which field Beckett either shared in (Sartrian existential humanism) or pre-figured (Derridean post-structuralism) dominate Beckett criticism, weighting the fiction (as philosophical treatise) at the expense of the dramatic texts and their performances. Recently, phenomenology and performance studies have tried to reclaim Beckett from post-structuralist criticism by arguing the centrality of the performing body (whether the texts are read or seen performed) to any account of Beckett’s philosophical position.

Despite the work of the critical community to overthrow the Existentialist “Godot construct,” the ongoing popularity of the play in prison theatre programs continues to support the argument that mankind, serving a life sentence of waiting due to an absurd twist of fate, can find a certain degree of freedom despite his imprisonment. I will look first at the early performances in Germany and at San Quentin before looking at programs as recent as the 1980s in Sweden and the Florida state prison system. Finally, I will compare the influence of Beckett’s vision on inmate “outcomes” (as defined by prison officials) with those of the popular Shakespeare Behind Bars program in an American maximum-security prison. Interestingly, the programs that feature Waiting for Godot have a higher rate of actor-inmate dissatisfaction with the idea of freedom through art within the prison than do the Shakespeare programs. While the actor-inmates of Shakespeare Behind Bars engage in what post-structuralist writers might call the “work” of constructing a new self through the acting process, the Waiting for Godot projects contain much more venomous critique of the Western penal system. These varied audience responses trouble Martin Esslin’s tidy use of the prison-mystique to establish Samuel Beckett as an “Absurd” playwright. As this analysis progresses through the critical reception of both Waiting for Godot and Beckett’s other dramatic works to the prison performances, a phenomenological approach (as opposed to either Sartrean
Existentialism or post-structuralism) will allow me to ask to what degree are spectators of Beckett’s dramas implicated in the physical and mental anguish that take place in his plays? The San Quentin performance may have been useful for introducing Samuel Beckett to a suspicious public, but the growing number of prison theatre programs make the ethical dubiousness of taking aesthetic and intellectual enjoyment from observing another’s suffering.

3.2 Early Critical Reception of \textit{Godot}

The early theatre reviews and the critical response to \textit{En attendant Godot} (and its English translation, \textit{Waiting for Godot}) agreed that the audience frequently did not express understanding of the play’s action or identification with its characters. The shock of the reviewers at the play’s alienating effects strike one as odd, considering the general ironic “knowingness” of reviews of Artaud’s \textit{Les Cenci}, written by and about a Parisian audience accustomed to the distancing and/or shock of avant-garde performances twenty years earlier.\textsuperscript{130} The first review of \textit{Godot} after its opening at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris appeared on January 7, 1953 in \textit{La Libération}. Sylvain Zegel reports of the audience, “They heard people using everyday words, and they did not feel that by an

\textsuperscript{130} I recall specifically Raymond Latour’s scathing review of the audience in \textit{Comoedia}, May 8, 1935, in which he accuses them of being snobs...as anarchists of thought... servants of tiny coteries and of obscure formulas, writers of the left and extreme left, cubists, essayists, and other distressing products of the international mire, were there, submerging and wishing to impose their law.” What should be beginning to emerge in the analysis of these authors and the performances of their work is an odd critical complicity in the eternal “newness” of the avant-garde and the historical forgetting that occurs thanks to the journalistic and commercial requirements of sensationalism. For a fuller treatment of the repetitive nature of the avant-garde, see Richard Schechner’s \textit{The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance}. 136
inexplicable miracle—which is called art—the words suddenly acquired a new value. They saw people being happy and suffering, and they did not understand that they were watching their own lives” (11).\footnote{Ruby Cohn. Casebook on Waiting for Godot. New York: Grove Press, 1967.} Despite this noted lack of enthusiasm, Parisian audiences quickly warmed to Godot as reviews such as those by Jean Anouilh and Jacques Audiberti attest. Anouilh declared on January 27 that “Godot is a masterpiece that will cause despair for men in general and for playwrights in particular” (12).\footnote{“Godot or the Music-Hall Sketch of Pascal’s Pensées as Played by the Fratellini Clowns.” In Casebook on Waiting for Godot. 12-13.} Armand Salacrou (the noted Surrealist whom Artaud parodied in Le Jet de sang) concluded that though Beckett’s Godot was “not unique,”—meaning that such avant-garde fare had long been available—the audience had finally come who would “participate in the play” (15).\footnote{“It is Not an Accident but a Triumph.” In Casebook on Waiting for Godot. 14-15.}

Following Beckett’s own translation, Waiting for Godot premiered in England in 1955 at the Arts Theatre in London before transferring to the West End the following summer. According to Peter Bull, the actor playing Pozzo, on opening night, “Waves of hostility came whirling over the footlights, and the mass exodus, which was to form such a feature of the run of the piece, started quite soon after the curtain had risen” (41). Also, he reports, “The notices the next day were almost uniformly unfavorable, confused, and unprovocative.” An example of the sort of review Bull references is this one from August 5, 1955 by Philip Hope Wallace writing for The Guardian, “The play bored some people acutely. Others found it a witty and poetic conundrum. There’s general agreement that Peter Hall’s production did fairly by a work which has won much applause in many parts.
of the world….There was only one audible retirement from the audience, though the ranks had thinned after the interval. It is good to find that plays at once dubbed ‘incomprehensible and pretentious’ can still get a staging.”

Bull continues his memoir of the production’s early days, “We played to poor houses, but on the Sunday following our opening the whole picture was to change. We quite suddenly became the rage of London, a phenomenon entirely due to the articles written by the Messrs. Tynan and Hobson in the Observer and Sunday Times” (42).

These two reviewers are credited with Godot’s success in Anglophone countries. Harold Hobson, writing for The Sunday Times on August 7, 1955, records the opening night’s audience’s reactions of ironic laughter (in response to lines like “I have had better entertainment elsewhere” and rampant yawning. And despite what he concludes were disingenuous “shamefaced cries” of “Author!” and “warm applause” on the part of his fellow spectators, he himself experienced the play as “insidiously exciting,” with Vladimir and Pozzo evincing “each a kind of universality” (27-29). Kenneth Tynan, likewise, wrote a similar review on the same day, acknowledging the audience’s indifference while emphasizing the play’s unexpected power to move him as reviewer:

I care little for its enormous success in Europe over the past three years, but much for the way in which it pricked and stimulated my own nervous system...It forced me to re-examine the rules which have hitherto governed the drama; and, having done so, to pronounce them not elastic enough... What vexed the play’s enemies was, I suspect, [that] it was not pretentious enough to enable them to deride it. (97)


136 “Tomorrow.” In Casebook on Waiting for Godot.

137 In Samuel Beckett a Critical Heritage.
Like Salacrou, Tynan points out the essential banality of Godot, or the familiarity of its avant-garde material and message. If not for their intervention, Godot would most likely have quickly closed.

When Godot came to the United States, it was rehearsed in New York before being taken to Miami for its opening, where audiences left the theatre in droves mid-performance. Director, Alain Schneider recalls of the opening night audience, “At best not too sophisticated or attuned to this type of material and at worst totally misled by advertising billing the play as ‘the laugh sensation of two continents,’ [they] walked out in droves.” Furthermore, according to Schneider, “the so-called reviewers not only could not make head nor tails of the play but accused us of pulling some sort of hoax on them” (56). The play closed in infamy and would not be produced again until 1956 when it appeared on Broadway with advanced warning in the newspapers from producer Meyerberg, “I respectfully suggest that those who come to the theater for casual entertainment do not buy a ticket to this attraction” (76). Despite this ingenious method for both publicity and audience-selection, reviews were not entirely favorable. John Chapman in The Daily News derided the play’s intellectual bent, “Thinking is a simple, elementary process. Godot is merely a stunt.” Robert Coleman in The Daily Mirror likewise saw the play as intellectual posturing with overtones of James Joyce, “Beckett appears to have absorbed some of his employer’s ability to make the simple complex”. (quoted in Eric Bentley in New Republic, In Samuel Beckett a Critical Heritage 105).


139 Quoted in “The Long Wait for Godot” by Alan Levy. In Casebook on Waiting for Godot. 74-78.
Much like what happened with Sarah Kane’s *Blasted, Waiting for Godot*

benefitted from a second look by critics such as Norman Mailer. In his “A Public Notice on *Waiting for Godot.*” Originally published in *The Village Voice.* May 7, 1966, he recants an earlier dismissal of *Godot* as so much pretentious fodder for intellectual snobs. Sounding uncannily like the reviewers Charles Spencer and Michael Billington (who wrote their reconsiderations of Kane forty years later), Mailer concludes that he was “most unfair to Beckett” in his earlier review.\(^{140}\) He writes:

> It is never particularly pleasant for me to apologize, and in the present circumstances I loathe doing so….I am referring of course to what I wrote about *Waiting for Godot* in my last column. Some of you may remember that I said Beckett’s play was a poem to impotence and appealed precisely to those who were most impotent. Since then I have read the play, seen the present Broadway production, read the play again, have thought about it, wrestled with its obscurities (and my conscience). (69-70)\(^{141}\)

Despite this new estimation, Mailer does continue to see Beckett as a “minor artist” and Beckett fans, on the whole, as “snobs, intellectual snobs of undue ambition and impotent imagination, the worst sort of literary type” (71).

This stereotype of the intellectual spectator enjoying a performance of *Waiting for Godot* had already been smashed by two unconventional performances of the play in prisons—performances received with fervent appreciation by an audience unlikely to be called “snobs.” Almost from the beginning, *En attendant Godot* found a special place in the hearts of prisoners. The play’s Paris premiere was in January 1953 and by November, the play had been read, translated, and produced by special permission by a prisoner in

\(^{140}\) For the full account of the critical about-face see “The ‘Kane’ Mark: A Dual Construct” by Yael Zarhy-Levo.

\(^{141}\) In *Casebook on Waiting for Godot.*
Lüttringhausen prison in Wuppertal, Germany (409). A mere four years later, and not long after the play’s stupendous failure in Miami, the San Francisco Actors Workshop brought their production of *Waiting for Godot* to the San Quentin maximum security prison for the first theatrical performance to take place there since Sarah Bernhardt performed there in 1916. In the audience was Rick Cluchey who would be instrumental in petitioning prison officials for prisoners to be able to rehearse and perform the play. Watching the performance, he reports he felt that “I saw myself on that stage, amid the two tramps commenting, and the baronial character hauling another guy with a rope around his neck” (Skip Kaltenheuser. “The Prison Playwright.” *The Gadfly Online*). Most of the evidence that remains of the play exists through Cluchey’s various interviews and writings about the experience and those of Herbert Blau, actor and member of the San Francisco Actors Workshop at the time. Blau writes in a collection of essays on Beckett:

> Martin Esslin has already described our experience with the production at San Quentin, where fashion could hardly have been the reason for the play’s success. …A good portion of the inmates had, before our production, never seen a play of any kind. They knew nothing of the play’s notoriety. Nor did it appeal only to their sense of confinement. As a teacher at the prison remarked, “They know what is meant by


143 Martin Esslin. *Theatre of the Absurd*.

144 Cluchey was incarcerated at San Quentin because during a robbery, his gun went off in his pocket inside the victim’s car, injuring the victim. Because the victim continued to drive for several blocks, the crime qualified as kidnapping under California’s “Little Lindbergh Law,” and the prosecutor wanted Cluchey to receive the death penalty for the crime. This is despite the victim actively testifying that Cluchey had not intended either to kidnap him or harm him. The judge refused to consider Cluchey for the death sentence so instead he received life in prison without the chance for parole. Skip Kaltenheuser. “The Prison Playwright.” *Gadfly*. September-October, 1999. http://www.gadflyonline.com/archive/SepOct99/archive-playwright.html
waiting…and they know if Godot finally came he would only be a
disappointment.”

Later still, but with the same emphasis on bringing Godot to audiences who had
never heard of the play, Sidney Homan was commissioned to present the play at
ten Florida state prisons and describes his experience in several publications.

These early performance events reveal a wide range of spectator response: from
the laudatory praise of the critics and authors who saw the first performances and
influenced box office sales (Salacrou, Anouilh, Hobson, and others) to the “bad houses”
of the early London run and the American premiere in which audiences fled at
intermission and the critics concurred that Beckett’s play offered little new. Meanwhile,
the play had found two unlikely audiences in opposite corners of the Western world: the
Luttringhausen prison performance, translated and directed by a prisoner, and the San
Quentin performance that had been so enthusiastically received. What will begin to
emerge after an examination of the critical scholarship surrounding Waiting for Godot
(sometimes in conjunction with the fiction) is a division between a philosophical
response to Beckett’s dramatic world and an ethical response. As this investigation
proceeds, it will become clearer that theatre in a prison context almost universally evokes


an ethical response, which Beckett himself values (as reported in letters and interviews with the author following the events).

The critical heritage, concerned as it is with uncovering Beckett’s multiple philosophical intertexts and preoccupations, conditions upper-middle class theatregoers toward a philosophical response. Thus, as we see even in this early history of *Waiting for Godot*, a gulf develops between how different people experience Beckett’s theatre. The prison “frame” of the performance, whether that performance is experienced live or—as we shall rely on—is recorded in memoir or on film—demands an ethical response to the conditions of the Western penal system. Recent scholarship on and documentaries that follow these programs try to bridge the divide between these two kinds of spectatorship. Though the events are riveting in documentary form, the question remains: can one “enter into” the prison performance frame at a comfortable, middle-class distance?

3.2.1 Critical Viewpoints: The Existentialist Approach

Esslin begins *The Theater of the Absurd* (1961) with the San Quentin theatre event for the specific goal of convincing his readership that the plays he is collecting under the category of “the Absurd” “have something to say and can be understood” (3). He “demystifies” the plays by using the prison audience as a model of a pure response, one untrained by critical instruction. Following the upheaval of the early twentieth century dramatic form must be shattered to reflect the shattered moral and philosophical certainty of the time. Therefore, the two-act structure with its repetitions and endlessly deferred resolution is not mystifying but demonstrates “a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed.” According to Esslin, the

certainty provided by Enlightenment philosophy has been “swept away…tested and found wanting…cheap and somewhat childish illusions” and the form of plays such as *Waiting for Godot* make that failure perceivable to audiences (4-5). From these generalizations, Esslin moves to a more concentrated analysis of Beckett’s *Godot*, in which he concludes, as many have and will continue to conclude, that the play is an expression of hope, and that Beckett’s work to date, especially *Eleutheria* and *Murphy*, is a “search for freedom and the right to live his own life” (32, 17).

Creating the category of “Theatre of the Absurd,” Esslin tells us that plays such as *Waiting for Godot* “can only be judged by [its] standards” (4). These standards—which include a form that allows for unmediated contact with the “sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition”—lead quite handily to an Existentialist interpretation of *Godot*, and even of Beckett’s entire oeuvre (5). Esslin’s category of the Absurd leads him to conclude that Vladimir and Estragon’s repetitive and comic verbal patter is an attempt to avoid “facing the reality of the human condition.” Esslin calls this evasion, “a truly astonishing parallel between the Existentialist philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre and the creative intuition of Beckett” (39-40). In other words, Beckett feels what Sartre rationally expostulates, and much like an Expressionist painting, the image from *Godot* performed in prison is the best and clearest image of the play’s philosophical preoccupations. The prison as frame and context can then be used (viewed through a critical eye) by a bourgeois audience baffled by the play. Like Esslin, Colin Duckworth uses the San Quentin performance as evidence of the “the therapeutic value of avant-garde drama” and goes on to caution his educated readership against smugly thinking the prisoners’ reactions merely curious. For Duckworth, the prisoners, like Beckett, make
visible a general “sense of imprisonment within the boundless walls of the universe,” a sense of imprisonment which we all share.\textsuperscript{148}

Eric Bentley, like Esslin and the others, firmly situates Beckett in the Existentialist movement. His article, “The Talent of Samuel Beckett,” concludes that

Godot could just as well have been written by Anouilh or Sartre because:

It is the quintessence of ‘existentialism’ in the most popular, and most relevant, sense of the term—a philosophy which underscores the incomprehensibility, and the therefore the meaninglessness, of the universe, the nausea which man feels upon being confronted with the fact of existence, the praiseworthiness of the acts of defiance man may perform—acts which are taken on faith, as self-justifying, while, rationally speaking, they have no justification because they have no possibility of success (61).\textsuperscript{149}

He revised his original position—that the play was theatrical but “undramatic”—in a 1967 postscript, after further consideration of Beckett and subsequent viewings of the play. The revision, however, does not recant the conclusion that Vladimir and Estragon function as Sartrean Existentialist heroes. Indeed, their success increases when Bentley determines the essential drama of the play not to be waiting but “what happens in certain human beings while waiting….In waiting they show, ultimately, human dignity: they have kept their appointment, even if Godot has not” (65-66). For Bentley, this is a fundamentally philosophical conclusion, as the error in interpreting Waiting for Godot lies in assuming that Godot will not come and thus the tramps are to be pitied. The more humanistic philosophy of Existentialism allows for this notion of human triumph whether or not Godot ever appears.


This Existentialist argument held great sway for years. For instance, Alain Robbe-Grillet sees the tramps as “free” in his famous article “Samuel Beckett or Presence on the Stage” (1953). They are free simply by the fact of being there on the stage before the audience, compelled to speak:

They are there; they must explain themselves. But they do not seem to have a text prepared beforehand and scrupulously learned by heart, to support them. They must invent. They are free. Of course, this freedom is without any use: just as they have nothing to recite, they have nothing to invent either (Casebook on Waiting for Godot, 20).

Robbe-Grillet’s strange conjunction of obligation and freedom strains the credibility of any Existentialist reading of Waiting for Godot. If indeed the tramps “must invent” and therefore “they are free” how does Waiting for Godot find any continuity with Beckett’s later plays, in which the characters are subjected to ever-increasing imprisonment: in wheelchairs, urns, sand piles, and finally as disembodied faces, mouths, and minds.

Situating Waiting for Godot in the corpus as a whole destroys the credibility of any Existentialist interpretation, an interpretation that erroneously reads the prison performances as expressions of poetic, existential freedom rather than an embodied encounter with fellow men anxiously awaiting an endlessly deferred appointment.

3.2.2 Deconstructing Godot?: Philosophically Necessary Uncertainty

From these earliest critics, the role of Beckett’s philosophical preoccupations emerges as an essential ingredient in explaining Godot’s reception and centrality to the Beckett canon. Yet, these explanations concentrate on the popular philosophy of Existentialism and to what degree Beckett’s stage image captures the philosophical current of the day. The Godot construct expands and is revised as scholars trace Beckett’s philosophical and literary heritage through the play’s many allusions. Early on, the
hegemony of the Existentialist interpretation was challenged by scholars such as Ruby Cohn and Hugh Kenner who open up Beckett’s texts to broader philosophical investigations. Ruby Cohn (who has devoted many volumes to Beckett’s works), traces the “Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett,” specifically the works of Descartes and the Calvinist philosopher, Arnold Geulincx. In particular, she points to Beckett’s ongoing interest in the breakdown of Descartes’ philosophy as expressed by human bodies repeatedly breaking down in the course of Beckett’s novels and plays. She writes, “all Beckett’s work paradoxically insists upon and rebels against the Cartesian definition of man as a ‘thing that thinks,’ insists upon and rebels against the knowledge that is confined within consciousness” (Cohn “Philosophical Fragments” 170). In Waiting for Godot, this is expressed in the pair of Vladimir and Estragon, Didi who “speaks as mind” and Gogo who speaks as a body. Cohn’s early insight into the Beckettian obsession with dependent couples is supported by the rehearsal record from the 1975 Berlin production at the Schiller-Theater. For example, Beckett emphasized the earthy Gogo and the more abstract, heavenly-minded Didi by placing Gogo seated on the rock at the play’s opening and Didi standing next to the tree upstage (117).

The interdependent couples that function as “Mind” and “Body” dramatize a Cartesian dilemma Beckett found unsolvable. Split in this way yet nonetheless dependent on each other, they enact Beckett’s ongoing quest to arrive at the logical terminus of

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151 Beckett’s Master’s thesis written at Trinity College, Dublin, was a study of Descartes. (Kenner Mechanic Muse 91-92).

Cartesian, Enlightenment dualism. Hugh Kenner, in his article “The Cartesian Centaur,”
takes up the project of explicating the images in Beckett’s fiction and plays through the
philosophical terms with which they seem to be engaged. According to Kenner, the name
“Godot,” audibly indistinguishable from “Godeau” comes from “a veteran racing cyclist,
bald, a ‘stayer,’ recurrent placeman in town-to-town and national championships” riding
around France at the time of his writing of the essay, which he purports to know “from
Mr. Beckett” (Kenner “Cartesian Centaur” 56). Knowing this about Godot/Godeau
allows Kenner to find similar figures in the novels—men astride machines, a perfect
union of mind and mechanics, much more perfect than the union of mind and body.
Beckett thus solves the problem of Descartes’ muddled union of Mind and Body—in
which Descartes rather blindly trusts in an efficient human machine—by uniting the mind
with the bicycle—a modern, or Cartesian, “centaur” (54). These bicycling figures are the
heroes of novels such as Molloy, but by the time of Waiting for Godot, the cyclist is
absent and the action concerns that codependent couple, Valdimir and Estragon, who are
rooted to one spot with the sore feet and body odor to prove that the human body
disintegrates faster than the mind.

In the popular reception of Waiting for Godot, the figure of Godot became linked
indissolubly to a Western notion of God (as distant clockmaker figure, in particular). In
1953, Jacques Audiberti allows that though the tramps imagine Godot much like God,
with “the white beard and the old age portraits of the Eternal,” that Godot could simply
be “a neighboring farmer who could give work to the tramps” (14). In the early
performances in England, the “Godot is God” interpretation emerged quickly, as

153 “At the Babylone A Fortunate Move on the Theater Checkerboard.” In
Casebook on Waiting for Godot. 13-14.
postulated by G.S. Fraser in the *Times Literary Supplement* (10 Feb 1956): “The fundamental imagery of ‘Waiting for Godot’ is Christian” and, “That Godot himself stands for an anthropomorphic image of God is obvious” (99,102). This God/Godot aspect of the Godot construct began both in England and in Paris relatively quickly, despite Beckett’s adamant insistence that had he known who Godot was, he would have told readers and spectators. Ruby Cohn quotes him saying, “I don’t know who Godot is. I don’t even know (above all don’t know) if he exists. And I don’t know if they believe in him or not—those two who are waiting for him” (127).

But soon after these impressions were disseminated, the critical perspectives of Kenner, Cohn, and Ludovic Janvier followed to offer more nuanced readings. In Janvier’s *Samuel Beckett*, he is clear that the Godot of the play *is* “like” a god—a certain conception of God, the one who judges between the sheep and the goats. But to confuse Godot and God ignores the presence of the Western God in the conversation of Didi and Gogo and who is never confused with the person of Godot: “Dieu, dans *En attendant Godot*, est nommé par son nom; c’est pour être l’objet d’une petite comédie qui le distingue sans erreur de Godot lui-même” (71). Janvier then quotes the exchange when Gogo asks “do you believe God sees me?” and Vladimir tells him you must close your eyes to be seen by God.

Despite his absence, the person of Godot and the supposed appointment determines Vladimir’s and Estragon’s actions from moment to moment, The question of

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154 In *Samuel Beckett a Critical Heritage*.


why he does not come becomes immaterial. For Kenner, to whom Godot/Godeau is the real person of the bicyclist, it is plain why he does not come. Godot/Godeau is the “the Cartesian Centaur”—a seventeenth century dream “of being, knowing, and moving like a god” [emphasis mine] (61). Three centuries later, however, this creature on his machine has disappeared and “only a desperate élan remains.” Beckett creates an image of waiting, of broken bodies and frantic minds filling the void with patter, an elegy to certainty. But as elegy and image, Godot provides no way out. Specifically, Godot is neither a prelude to nor an accomplishment of Existentialist philosophy.

So, who is Godot? Beckett himself famously told an interviewer, “If I knew who he was, I would have told you.” Is he, as Hugh Kenner puts forward, an echo of a French cycliste, a consummate athlete, indefatigable making his meaningless perorations around France?

Monsieur Godeau, it is clear from our speculations, typifies Cartesian man in excelsis, the Cartesian Centaur, body and mind in close harmony: the mind set on survival, mastery, and the contemplation of immutable relativities, the body a reduction to uncluttered terms of the quintessential machine. From the Beckett canon it is equally clear that M.Godot, this solving and transforming paragon, does not come today, but perhaps tomorrow, and that meanwhile the Molloys, Morans, and Malones of this world must shift as they can which is to say, badly. Cartesian man deprived of his bicycle is a mere intelligence fastened to a dying animal. (Kenner “Cartesian Centaur” 56).

Here, Kenner looks to Godot as the “construct” to answer the crises faced by the main characters of the fiction written contemporaneously with Beckett’s first hit play. Godot is a “solving and transforming” figure, a philosophical answer that will never be spoken to a humanity in crisis in the twentieth century. But what if we were to reverse this explanation and say that Godot is the problem not only for Vladimir and Estragon, but for the Molloys, Morans, and Malones of Beckett’s fictive world? Godot’s speech, delivered by an emissary, ties the two tramps to that spot day after day. He speaks a sentence that
keeps them in an endless limbo, which—far from an opportunity for freedom—compels them to the “work” of conversation and story-telling for an interminable period of time. Seen in this light, Vladimir and Estragon (indeed, most of Beckett’s main characters) are artists in prison. Indeed, each one is the figure of what any man or woman would become if confined for such an absurd length of time.

3.3 Tu crois que Dieu me voit?: Spectator as Critical Witness

Recently, the character and absence of Godot has become less contentious than the philosophical stance from which one approaches Beckett. Instead, the proprietary role of phenomenology (that of the Sartrean Existentialist strain) to analyze and describe what happens in Beckett’s plays and fiction has become the subject of much criticism. In 1990, Thomas Trezise published Into the Breach to refute that Beckett’s work was “phenomenological” by which he means the phenomenology of Sartre, which we will call a phenomenology of freedom, or what Trezise calls separation or power. Due to the historical moment—Beckett came to prominence at the same time that France was enthralled by Sartrian existential humanism—Trezise argues that Beckett’s work has wrongly been read with “a phenomenological understanding of the human subject” as constituted in the act of speaking “I am,” a moment of power or freedom founded on separation from being (5-8).¹⁵⁷ Maurice Blanchot explains the movement of separation

¹⁵⁷ Interestingly enough, a recent collection of essays titled Beckett and Phenomenology contains only one treatment of the plays. In “Beckett’s Ghost Dramas: Monitoring a Phenomenology of Sleep,” Paul Sheehan looks at the late dramas as examples of “disembodied drama,” with the mode shifted to radio and then television. He argues that sleep is “a provisional…non-existence” and that it falls outside “the boundaries of consciousness and will” (162). (Ulrika Maude and Matthew Feldman, eds. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009. 158-176.)
necessary to existential humanism’s concept of the subject in *L’Espace littéraire*: “I am, only if I can separate myself from being…we deny, we transform nature—and in this negation which is work and which is time, beings accomplish themselves and men stand erect in the freedom of the ‘I am’” (8) For Trezise, a world peopled with persons who can speak “I am,” separating themselves from being, is “a world of work or action…of decision, of freedom, and of power.” Yet, there is not strict agreement among those who read the play as “Existentialist” as to the nature of that freedom. Alain Robbe-Grillet calls the freedom of being there a freedom to invent, while Ethel Cornwell sees the Existential drama as a flight “from identity” and a “quest for anonymity, for self-annihilation” (41). The ability to narrate, then, is both freedom and power, and it is this ability—the “feasibility” of narrating one’s—life that Beckett’s work explores in its failure or “breach.” Trezise supports this central tenet of his argument with an extended analysis of the first novel in the Trilogy, *Molloy*,

Stanton Garner, however, points out in several publications that Trezise’s refutation of phenomenology suffers from a blindness to all of phenomenology’s revisions and re-imaginations of subjectivity following Husserl’s foundational works (*Ideas, Cartesian Meditations*). Trezise may have demolished any link between Beckettian subjectivity and the Husserlian intending consciousness, but phenomenology has in the ensuing decades provided many re-envisionings of subjectivity. Indeed, we can understand Beckett as performing a phenomenological critique of naïve Cartesianism, as his work makes visual arguments about the conditions of perception, of subjeffecthood and objecthood, and of freedom. Not surprisingly, a recent volume devoted to *Beckett and

Phenomenology emphasizes phenomenology’s focus on “the experiencing subject” as he or she encounters various phenomena, or appearances.\textsuperscript{160} It is, however, strange, that in the eleven essays exploring what phenomenology offers to Beckett studies, only one essay is concerned with Beckett’s plays.\textsuperscript{161} Thus, even studies that seek to take back phenomenological approaches to Beckett from Sartrean existentialism, with “its excessive emphasis on the will and its ultimately affirmative conviction in man’s freedom and choice,” do not venture into the appearance-rich and subject-centered experience of theatre and spectatorship (Maude and Fellman 4). Such studies limit the “experiencing subject” to the solitary reader, who then reports his experience through critical essays. A segment of critics have noticed that the preponderance of Beckett criticism is directed at the texts at the expense or even denigration of the performances. S. E. Gontarski in an article titled “Revising Himself: Performance as Text in Samuel Beckett’s Theatre” describes the important revisions to the texts which emerged only through the rehearsal process when Beckett himself acted as director in 1975. These performance texts, Gontarski claims, are too often slighted by a critical community prejudiced against live performance.\textsuperscript{162} Ben Barnes, in “Aspects of Directing Beckett,” emphasizes the physical,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{159} Garner sees the late plays a “broader investigation and critique of modernity’s obsession with the image…and of the Cartesian dichotomy of disembodied observer and objectified field of vision” (\textit{Bodied Spaces} 62).
\item \textsuperscript{161} “Beckett’s Ghost Dramas: Monitoring a Phenomenology of Sleep” by Paul Sheehan. 158-176.
\item \textsuperscript{162} \textit{Journal of Modern Literature}. 22.1 (Fall1998) 131-155.
\end{itemize}

theatrical awareness present throughout the text, but which only fully happens in the
process of performance. For instance, the stage lighting is often the action that compels
the actor/character to speak—an effect blunted by merely reading the text.\textsuperscript{163} Jurgen Siess
in an article on “The Actor’s Body and Institutional Tensions from \textit{Act Without Words I}
to \textit{Not I}’ argues that spectators must witness the play \textit{in performance} to fully understand
the degree to which Beckett’s plays are about the role of the body in institutional power
relationships (of the theatre, specifically) (297-299).\textsuperscript{164} Brian Duffy, too, emphasizes the
role of light in embodying an (absent) authority figure; he looks at the fiction as well as
the plays, notably the role of light in \textit{L’Innomable} in which Worm is interrogated in his
den (58).\textsuperscript{165} Thus, any study that restricts itself to the solitary experience of reading the
dramatic text, results in an incomplete study of how Beckett’s theatre operates on and
through the alchemy of performer and spectator.

What interests me here is whether or not the newer phenomenology of Jean-Luc
Marion and Claude Romano, which we might call a phenomenology of humility, or even
of “un-power,” à la Artaud, gives us a stronger vocabulary for describing the alchemy of
text and performance specific to Samuel Beckett’s plays.\textsuperscript{166} What can a
phenomenological mode of seeing—one which asks the critic to examine the spectating
subject as an agent, not of power or work, but of humility and reception, offer? Claude
Romano repositioned the subject as the one who receives “l’avènement d’un nouveau
monde…que ce n’est plus, à proprement parler, le même monde” (\textit{Le Monde} 55).

\textsuperscript{165} “The Prisoner in the Cave and Worm in the Pit: Plato and Beckett on Authority
\textsuperscript{166} Unpower according to Artaud
According to Marion, meanwhile, an event does not “proceed from our initiative, or respond to our expectations, and could never be reproduced” (*In Excess* 34-35). The experiencing subject does not work to initiate these life-changing events. Herbert Blau, who may not be a phenomenologist but who certainly has recorded a lifetime’s worth of experience with audiences has summarized how a spectator comes to be as “It does not exist before the play but is *initiated or precipitated* by it; it is not an entity to begin with but a consciousness constructed. The audience is what *happens* when, performing the signs and passwords of a play, something postulates itself and unfolds in response” (*The Audience* 25). When seeing the spectator in this light, we can overcome the snobbish divide between so-called “educated” audiences and the “purer” reception *Waiting for Godot* receives in prison settings. The phenomenon that appears to them is the embodiment of a Beckett text in the situation or background of the prison that they cannot escape. In this situation, the speaking of Beckett’s text is more prominent than its written form. Their experience was conditioned by the priority of the spoken and embodied drama, not the priority of the theatre review.

As we have seen in the case of *Godot’s* early reception, a prior writing (the theatre review) structured most middle-class audiences’ first encounter with Beckett’s theatre. Trezise is most keen to topple the priority of speech to writing, which a phenomenological framework would see as primary. He repeats the charge frequently that the written word is so prior to speech as to render the written word “functionally” identical, as in the following:

In its very secondarity to the illusory disappearance of the sign in speech, the reappearance of the sign in writing testifies to the pre-originarity of a general economy of signification in which writing and speech are functionally indistinguishable. That the relation between speech and writing corresponds to this structure implies that speech itself is always already a *relation*, that is a *sign*, and that the only functional sameness of
speech is produced through and as the belated repetition of its…difference in the supplement called writing.\textsuperscript{167}

For anyone interested in Beckett’s theatre as performed, this analysis troubles, as it efficiently removes the performing body and voice, the receiving body as perceiver, and the performance space and time (history) from discussion. That writing should be the difference of speech, repeating the structure of signification both prior to and supplementary to speech, is a radical claim and one which Trezise would have us believe that Beckett’s oeuvre enacts. Derrida describes this excess in his article, “From a Restricted to a General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve,” in which writing and speech are functionally indistinguishable, existing as they do in a general economy of signification.\textsuperscript{168} In this economy of speech and writing, Beckett’s characters embody a poverty—or unpower—implicit to this circular, pre-originary self-identity. Trezise’s analysis is likewise impoverished by its bondage to the written text (the thesis of Stanton Garner’s chapters on Samuel Beckett in Embodied Spaces). In the novel form speech and writing are necessarily indistinguishable, enfolded together as they are in the book. What happens, however, when speech and writing are made strange to each other by embodiment in the event of performance? Speech becomes not functionally indistinguishable from, but an other to writing. Beckett’s oeuvre demands phenomenological analysis by bodies that perceive—by spectators. In any performance of En attendant Godot, the characters’ being-on-stage depends on the prior writing of the author. Thus, as we will see in prison performance, the actors’ (who are inmates) being-

\textsuperscript{167} Into the Breach. 71.

on-stage is dependent not on a prior writing but prior speech—the speaking of their judicial sentence.

The role of speech as the remains of an absent subjectivity marks Beckett’s dramatic works in particular. For example, *Waiting for Godot* is predicated on the prior speech of Godot, or perhaps his emissary, who has instructed Vladimir and Estragon to wait for him. M. Godot’s daily deferrals are delivered by an ambassador, an embodied representative, for an absent authority. According to Stanton Garner in *Bodied Spaces*, Trezise’s argument with phenomenology as inadequate to describe Beckett’s concern with the absent and decentered subject (because phenomenology relies on Husserl’s starting point: “the originary transcendental ego and the notion of presence as pure self-givenness”) does not take into account recent phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty (and even more recently—Marion and Romano) who have questioned and moved beyond the transcendental subject. For example, both Marion and Romano devote significant time to redefining the subject, not as pure presence who constitutes his world in a mode of indubitable self-givenness, but as the one to whom the phenomenon is given/to whom the event happens. Far from privileging the subject as the constituting center of the lived experience, this phenomenological school *decenters* the subject and opens up this decentered subject to phenomenological analysis. So, though an analysis in the post-structuralist mode of Derrida and Deleuze allows Trezise to approach the “breach in self-presence” at the center of Beckett’s oeuvre, it is my contention that a descriptive study of Beckett’s works in performance (of events) *enacts* that breach by forcing the spectator into the dubious position of *witness* (Garner 38). The spectator witnesses the breach in self-creation and the dispossession and ambiguity of subjectivity itself.
Yet, despite his defense of Merleau-Ponty, whose work is entirely concerned with the problem of *embodied* perception, Stanton Garner’s phenomenological study of theatre and drama in *Embodied Spaces* suffers from the same problem of most of Beckett criticism—an inability to exit the text and enter the theatre. In any performance of Beckett’s plays, multiple bodies are signifying and perceiving. Yet, from Trezise to Garner, and among many others in similar theoretical schools, the text contains everything that can be known about Beckett’s position on subjectivity. For example, in an article titled “‘A Cogito for the Dissolved Self’: Writing, Presence, and the Subject in the Work of Samuel Beckett, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze,” Sarah Gendron insists on the text-boundedness of subjectivity in Beckett’s work. She writes:

> Beckett, Derrida, and Deleuze evoke elements of traditional narrative and of the self in order ultimately to problematize any beliefs we might have about narrative and about the writing/written subject. From their work, we learn that the self is capable of producing text but is in turn subject to being produced by text, even, in the end, reduced to nothing more than text itself. (Gendron 47)

These text-bound post-structuralist interpretations, which begin and end in the “text,” lack the courage to venture into Beckett’s preferred medium: performance. Once in the performance space, such easy interpretation crumbles, as clearly, something else remains after the text works its stripping-down of subjectivity. First, bodies remain: the tortured bodies of the actors, who, as Jurgen Siess and Brian Duffy have pointed out, are the ground zero of institutional power structures. Second, the sounds, smells, sights, and objects that constitute the theatrical experience remain. Interestingly, Beckett always worked within the structure of the Western theatre system (unlike agit-prop or street theatres).

This question of the *remainder* in Beckett’s theatre opens up both standard, high-brow performances and the unusual tradition of Beckett in prison to a phenomenological
analysis. Daniel Katz approaches this essentially ethical question in his article, “What Remains of Beckett: Evasion and History,” in which he argues that Beckett’s post-war writing can be understood as operating under the power of an “image ban” or a “not-saying” that “implies a pointing not only to the place where the image does not appear, but to the ban which prohibits it.” Thus, for Beckett to make an absence felt, Katz concludes that Beckett must work within a “larger contextual economy” in which we can clearly understand the limits of the space that is being emptied by the ban (145). While Beckett makes use of fragmentary prose, white spaces, and sometimes the absence of punctuation in his fiction, this “image ban” certainly is felt more strongly in the dramatic works. The theatrical space is a shared ritual with clearly delineated boundaries in which absences can be made to be felt through the manipulation of any of the elements of dramaturgy: light, sound, gesture, character, voice, dramatic structure and text.

According to Katz, the image ban offers one tool for approaching the opacity of modern art after Auschwitz. Far from allegorizing the death camps (an abstraction), plays such as Waiting for Godot and Endgame, are about the problem of witnessing another’s desubjectification. It is tempting to think of Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm and Clov as the witnesses who remain, but to do so ignores the metatheatrical dimension of the dramas—the degree to which the dramatic text acknowledges and implicates the audience as witnesses to what unfolds on stage. Drawing on Agamben, whose work Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (2002) reflects on the possibility of witnessing and testimony, Katz sees in Beckett’s dramas and especially the prose works a project to

169 The sharing of the theatre ritual begins in formal schooling (if not earlier in families that patronize the arts), in the many special school performances that introduce students to the conventions of theatre-going. For an account of what happens when students encounter the so-called classics of Western theatre, see John Tulloch’s Shakespeare and Chekhov in Production.
understand the problem of witnessing. Katz asks the reader, if Agamben is correct when he declares “the subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to a desubjectification,” then Beckett becomes:

A quintessential ‘post-Auschwitz’ author not only from the familiar perspective first sketched by Adorno, largely in reference to the drama, but also through the post-phenomenological investigations of subjectivity and expression found above all in the prose. (146)

Thus yet again, even a phenomenological study of Beckett’s works slips into anti-theatricality to privilege the prose above performance. But, as Romano and Marion’s studies of the subject have revealed, there is nothing “post-phenomenological” about investigating and questioning the conditions of Cartesian subjectivity. The fiction makes one facet of what it means to be human visible after it performs its systematic stripping away of Enlightenment subjectivity; though the subject can no longer say “I,” s/he can yet continue to narrate. Likewise, in the dramas, the subject can no longer achieve any plot objectives and the spectator certainly does not approach an Aristotelian ideal of catharsis. But, the dynamics of theatrical exchange remain: the suffering of the actor on display for the pleasure and acceptance of a judgmental audience. This audience makes its approval or disapproval known through a myriad of gestures, some of which I catalogued in the study of the early reception of the plays. Western audiences from Paris to Miami reacted with either alienation—rejecting the play in disgust—or abstraction—using the play as a symbol of “the problem of Man/Society today.” Far from abstracting his situation into allegorical content, Beckett’s plays operate by enfolding their meaning as much in their form as their content (267). The spectator at a Modernist artwork such

as one of Beckett’s plays experiences, then, a lack of meaning, as what the play is “about” is the very impossibility of art at this moment in time. Beckett himself approved of Bram Van Velde’s painting in a series of dialogues with Georges Duthuit precisely because Van Velde is the “the first to accept a certain situation and to consent to a certain act,” namely, that he is “obliged to paint” because “there is nothing to paint and nothing to paint with” (19).  

The implication, if we transfer Beckett’s aesthetic manifesto from painting to theatre, is that the spectator, in viewing such acts of obligation and impossibility, must “for once, be foolish enough not to turn tail” (20).  

As the on-stage subjects dissolve before the eyes and ears of the off-stage subjects (the spectators), the audience faces profoundly ethical questions: how can one accept these desubjectified specimens as fellow humans? How can one witness and then testify to the violence one has witnessed (both the physical violence of dismemberment and the philosophical violence of the loss of subjectivity)? The following section will examine the ethical implications of spectatorship for what Susan Bennett calls the average theatre-goer—upper-middle class educated Western folks. Following that, I will look at the peculiar case of prison theatre and whether these performances as distributed raise the same ethical questions of witnessing for their predominately academic audience.

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3.4 A Beckettian Ethics of Spectatorship: Narrating, Observing, Continuing On

3.4.1 Narrating the Self: The Loss of Subjectivity in Beckett’s Fiction and Plays

Beckett’s plots are banal. They are intended to be such. In situating the action of his narratives most often in the intracranial space of his protagonists, Beckett’s heroes are universal at the same time they are painfully particular—trapped as they are with the shreds of their individual histories, reciting them endlessly for an audience they themselves only imagine as…they themselves. Mouth in Not I repeats the experience of a “buzzing “ and a “dull roar” in the brain and the sensation of “the whole body like gone” (216-223). A Piece of Monologue repeats “Birth” and “Birth was the death of him” to punctuate the deterioration and the bleakness of the Speaker’s final days (267-269).

This fact—that the audience for a Beckett work of fiction or a Beckett play is incidentally included in the process of the recitation—is peculiar to Beckett and consistent across his work. The audience functions as a third person in a narrative the subject is telling between “he” and “you.” Talking to himself, of himself, the character often does not suspect the hoard of eavesdroppers (or, in the fiction, the single eavesdropper/reader), an authorizing presence that brings the same indeterminate “meaning” of a Youdi (in Molloy) or a Godot. The audience motivates the performance. In essence, it authorizes the psychological and physical torment that takes place on the stage.172 By purchasing tickets, the spectator initiates a meeting with Vladimir and Estragon, yet we do not fail to arrive. Erin Post makes that argument that the spectator functions as Godot in Carceral

172 Keir Elam in The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama acknowledges the audience’s responsibility for what takes place onstage: “It is the spectator who initiates the theatrical communication process…in sponsoring the performance, the audience issues. As it were, a collective ‘directive’ to the performers…this spectacle is set in motion by our gaze.”
Theaters: Genet, Beckett and Weiss.173 She writes, “Rather than inviting the audience to see themselves within or behind the characters onstage, the theatrical premise of Beckett’s play…implicates the audience as contributing to the entrapment of Didi and Gogo on stage precisely through their passivity and concealment in the amphitheatre” (77). The shared, banal ritual of purchasing tickets for an evening’s entertainment (and here I emphasize the irony that the New York producer’s infamous advertisement warned non-serious spectators to buy tickets for a different show, as Waiting for Godot presumes an unprepared audience) takes on an accusatory dimension. The familiar, indeed innocent, activity of play going becomes an act of interrogation when seen in this light.

The banality of plot serves a purpose in Beckett’s oeuvre, and it may not be the one which philosophers of difference such as Derrida and critics like Trezise determine it to be. With their structural indeterminacy of day/night, now/later, father/son, journey/stasis—the plots bracket off the world of cause and effect (what we call realism). The quintessential Beckett narrative consists of a narrating voice dramatizing the philosophical movements of such like Descartes or Husserl in order to critique them.174


174 Husserl, in his 1907 lectures collected under the title The Idea of Phenomenology claims that while Descartes may have gone awry in his reasoning, the role of doubt as a ground upon which to build a new philosophy remains the answer to radical skepticism, which always results in absurdity (17). The act of cognition which is doubt, for Husserl, is a “primal,” and self-giving cognition beyond the read of doubt. Cognition, then, “is a name for a manifold sphere of being which can be given to us absolutely each time in the particular case” (23). In the mode of “seeing,” in which we hold before our mind’s eye an act of cognition as an object, we attain “an absolute foundation…this perception is and remains as long as it lasts, something absolute, something here and now, something that in itself is what it is” (24). Samuel Beckett will approach the certainty of these claims with the destabilizing force of language and the mystery of writing to call into question the certainty of a philosophy grounded in a transcendental subject to whom his acts of consciousness can be reduced and held before his consciousness as perspicacious objects of knowledge.
They critique the ability of the individual to construct his own subjectivity (and attain epistemological certainty) through consciousness, through narrating. Furthermore, as we shall see in the plays and films, the mise-en-scène demands that productions adhere physically to this same indeterminacy and void by prescribing dim lighting, disembodied characterizations (eyes, ears, mouths—not characters), and the suggestion of endless internal repetition by using *in medias res* without forwarding the “plot.” The plays end without any character getting anywhere, but rather resolving, like the narrator of *Worstward Ho* to continue “somehow on.”

Once Samuel Beckett turned to writing plays in 1947, he introduced a third party to any encounter with his fable-telling, feeble characters. The audience intrudes on the silent, circling exchange between reader and text with its demand for a ‘show.’ The show in Beckett’s theatrical works is almost always concerned with the narrating subject as he tries and fails to create a unified story of his life. The temporal, moment-to-moment quality of this action—as the stories shift and become uncertain—is particularly fitted to embodied stage representation. Time slips away as the event unfolds. Unlike a reader...

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175 See the character of Mouth in *Not I*, and her counterpart the Auditor. Stage directions at the beginning of the text inform the director, “*As house lights down MOUTH’S voice unintelligible behind curtain*” communicates that the history of Mouth has been endlessly repeated behind the arbitrary separation of curtain for an indeterminable length of time before the beginning of this particular performance. (*Not I*. In *Collected Shorter Plays*. Samuel Beckett. 215-223.) 216.

176 *Worstward Ho*. In *Nohow On*.

177 Beckett’s first play, *Eleutheria*, was unperformed and unpublished until much later (in French by the Éditions de Minuit in 1995 and in English by Foxrock). *En Attendant Godot* was chosen over it by Roger Blin for Beckett’s stage debut.
who can turn back pages to double-check the story for clarification, a spectator must identify with the narrating subject in frustration as the clues disappear in speech through times ineluctable erasure. Though Trezise makes much of Beckett’s shift to the first-person pronoun beginning with *Molloy*, if Beckett’s work is seen as foremost *theatrical*, then that shift was momentary. The turn to drama immediately re-introduced a host of third-person perspectives watching and judging the action on the stage. Beckett’s theatre, despite its hallmarks of subjective splitting and perceptual inadequacy, is undeniably a theatre of mutual watchfulness in the third-person. The characters and the audience observe each other. In *Endgame*, Clov turns the telescope he usually uses to survey the bleakly gray landscape on the audience. He exclaims, “I see a … multitude…in transports of joy.” Vladimir and Estragon refer pointedly to the auditorium at various times as “inspiring prospects” and “that bog.” The characters often observe themselves and talk of themselves in the third person. As we look at the shorter plays and the fiction, it is the first-person who disappears on Beckett’s stage.

3.4.2 Putting On Selves: *That Time*

The plays are not a diversion from the preoccupations present in Beckett’s fiction. In *Malone Dies*, the narrating “subject” has an increasing tendency to become lost within his own narration, merging with the subjects created by his imagination, and splitting himself between himself as speaker, himself as hearer, and himself as dying body. This self-creation and self-dissolution in the context of mental activity will become a common theme in the shorter plays, in which Beckett visibly dissects the subject into voice and hearer, narration and narrating consciousness, by way of the stage language of space, bodies, and lighting. The play text of *That Time* opens with the following direction:
Fade up to LISTENER’S FACE about 10 feet above stage level midstage off centre.
Old white face, long flaring white hair as if seen from above outspread.
Voices A B C are his own coming to him from both sides and above. They modulate back and forth without any break in general flow except where silence is indicated.\textsuperscript{178}

The direction informs us that the three voices are “his own,” but that they are never given visual presence, the audience is left to uncover the “identity” of these voices as they narrate a history to the Listener, the only one to have visible presence on stage. Visually, the Listener is given to the audience first, but as the play continues, it becomes apparent that the voices are giving much more, both narratively, and visually to the mind’s eye or the imagination of the spectators. With such a barren stage space and the sameness of delivery (“without break in general flow”), there is unity in multiplicity, and the space that opens in the narrating expands to include the audience to participate in meaning-creation.

But, as we shall see, the play resists meaning creation by fragmenting the narrative of this Listener’s life between the three voices and the figure of the Listener and a life that seems to have been as much self-imagined as imaginable. Voice B’s astonishing claim that the Listener can “have thoughts” as far as back as the womb in the early movements of the piece is quickly outdone by the claim that he can remember back prior to the birth of Christ:

B: just a murmur tears without fail till they dried up altogether suddenly there in whatever thoughts you might be having whatever scenes perhaps way back in childhood or the womb worst of all or that old Chinaman long before Christ born with long white hair (230)

\textsuperscript{178} That Time. In Collected Shorter Plays. Samuel Beckett. New York: Grove Press, 1984. 225-236. 228. All references to That Time, Not I, Eh Joe, Act Without Words I and II, Film, Catastrophe, etc. are from the Collected Shorter Plays unless otherwise noted.
In some of Beckett’s prose works, his narrators at time locate their births at the time of
Christ’s passion.179 This historical blurring of boundaries between self and archetype (the
only begotten of the Father) grafts elements of the Christ narrative into Beckett’s
narrators’ self-begetting fables. The voices further lose the listener’s identity in both the
mass of humanity and the first man in the following “murmured” revelation:

C: When you started not knowing who you were from Adam trying how
that would work for a change not knowing who you were from Adam no
notion who it was saying what you were saying whose skull you were
clapped up in whose moan had you the way you were was that the time or
was that another time there alone with the portraits of the dead (230)

“Not to know someone from Adam,” is a colloquial phrase for not knowing a certain
person from another in the great multitude of unknown others. For the subject not know
himself from Adam in this sense is the frightening dissolution of himself into the
crowd—to be simultaneously Everyman and no man. But we could also read it as not
being able to distinguish himself from Adam, the first man, the first begotten of creation,
and, in Protestant and Catholic theology, the first to fail to fulfill his identity in God’s
creation. The Beckettian subject is neither the first man, Adam, nor the second man,
Christ.

179 In Company, the narrator recalls “You first saw the light at Easter
and’now….You first saw the light of day the day Christ died and now. Then long after on
his nascent hope the murmur, You are on your back in the dark. Or of course vice versa.”
(10) Meanwhile, in Malone Dies, the narrator situates his dying journal possibly in Easter
week (208). Later he considers himself as the color grey and writing in conjunction with
Cain suffering his punishment for the first murder, “I myself am very grey, I even
sometimes have the feeling that I emit grey…but how it my little space is not visited by
the same luminaries I sometimes see shining afar and how is it the moon where Cain toils
bowed beneath his burden never sheds its light on my face?” (221) Cain, despite his
exile, has the illuminating comfort of the moonlight, while Malone bemoans that he
having lived, has “no possibility of…making light.” The Biblical Cain is illuminated by
without, but Malone can only imagine a light of which he himself would be the cause.
The question of humanity, and how he can share in the humanity of both Adam and Christ while remaining a narrating subject who is infinitely open to new instantiations, deeply troubles his work. In That Time, the Listener can not reconcile the voices—with their many, confused accounts of his life—into one certain story. Epistemological anxiety fills the short plays—separating his narrators/narrating characters in the plays not only from themselves but from the other characters and also from the audience. There is no way to know just who these characters are, what motivates them, what has happened to them, or what they will become. They cannot accept the philosophical promise—beginning with Descartes—that certainty can be arrived at through doubt. And they are most definitely not the orthodox Protestants of Anglican prayer book theology, praying to be “in Christ” at the acceptance of the Eucharist. A Beckett hero can never say with the Apostle Paul, “the old man is put off, and the new man put on,” at the same time that he uses the metaphor of “putting on” selves,

A: making it all up on the doorstep as you went along making yourself all up again for the millionth time forgetting it all where you were and what for Foley’s Folly and the lot the child’s ruin you came to look was it still there to hide in again till it was night and time to go till that time came. (234)\(^\text{180}\)

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\(^{180}\) Eoin O’Brien traveled across Ireland and France to discover the landmarks that appear as “unreal” locales in Beckett’s fiction and plays. On the real identity of Foley’s Folly, he reports: I did not trouble Sam for explanations of the obvious and there were times when I had to leave the obscure anchored in obscurity. But there were many nudges from Paris that sent me cycling again the winding roads of the Dublin mountains. For example, I had spent days in the mountains in search of Foley's Folly, and eventually arrived in Paris with the location securely in my bag of photographs - a place called Taylor's Folly, high in the mountains. Sam pored over the photographs, fascinated by the beauty of the place, but then, to my disappointment, informed me that he had never been there. Instead he directed me to Barrington's Tower, which, of course made much more sense in that it was close to Cooldrinagh, where he had been sent "supperless to bed" in punishment for his childhood peregrinations. When I asked him why he had changed the name, he said: "Eoin, there's no music in Barrington's Tower."

The desire to “hide” in the ruins cannot be fulfilled—this faith is logically ruined, and concurrent with that ruination is the displacement of the self between the one and the many, between Christ and Adam and all of the self’s many self-created identities. We are now like children banished without our suppers for our wanderings from orthodoxy. When we turn to the phenomenon of theatre in prisons, this language of “putting on selves” will return. The programs and the performances they sponsor will raise similar questions about certainty and doubt between performers and audience: what have they done, what are they becoming, what have we done, which story is “true?”

3.4.3 The Loss of Objectivity: Act Without Words I and II and A Piece of Monologue

With the self left to create and recreate his identity moment to moment in the performance of reciting an always fragmentary history, the color and form of the world must necessarily recede into the grayness that characterizes both the Trilogy’s landscapes and the plays’ serttings. With the loss of form, line, color, shape, the object/ive world

181 We see in the notes to Rough for Theatre II that the moon is invisible and on the desk is an “extinguished lamp only.” (77) In Play, the three women are encased in “three identical grey urns” and lit by spotlights only when speaking. They are further instructed to appear as “Faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of the urns. But no masks.” (147) The spotlights themselves are instructed to be faint, as well. In Film, the director is instructed that “All extraneous perception” is to be “suppressed.” (163) Breath opens with “faint light on stage” to be followed by a “faint, brief cry.” (211) Not I requires the stage be “in darkness but for MOUTH” and the AUDITOR remains downstage left “sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood, fully faintly lit,” whose only relation as listener to MOUTH’s endless monologue is “shown by attitude alone to be facing diagonally across stage intent on MOUTH.” (216) This adverbial emphasis on the fullness of the faintness is repeated in the stage directions for That Time, in which we read that the switch between the three
becomes lost to the Beckettian hero. I contend that the loss of objectivity stems from the loss of self-identity examined in the previous section, rather than leading to the confusion of self and other, narrator and narrated. Or, to put it otherwise, the problem of the objective world is an epistemological problem for Beckett’s heroes. It is not that they (and we) can not see clearly, but that once the self is unstable, objects of perception become as unstable as the contours and shades of identity: memory, history, and name.

An interesting starting point in this discussion of the dissolution of the world of lived experience is actually Beckett’s brightest plays: the Acts Without Words. Two pieces of mime, both are brightly lit, as emphasized in the stage directions for each. In Act Without Words I the stage direction reads, “Desert. Dazzling light” (43) And in Act Without Words II, the note informs the director and performers: “This mime should be played on a low and narrow platform at back of stage, violently lit in its entire length, the rest of the stage being in darkness. Frieze effect” (49). Both mimes feature humans as nameless and history-less actors in a stage-world characterized by ineffectuality and some sort of cosmic determinism. In Act Without Words I, the character is tormented by a series of objects that appear from the stage’s flies—a box, a tree, a carafe of water. In Act Without Words II, three characters, A, B, and C are in burlap sacks and prodded to action by a goad that appears from offstage and is guided by an unseen hand. They dress and undress and change positions in a pattern before the curtain falls, marking the end of what we can assume is a pattern of activity that will continue in our absence.

voices should be “clearly faintly perceptible.” (227) In Footfalls, the lights “Fade up to dim on strip. Rest in darkness.” (239) A Piece of Monologue is set in “faint, diffuse light.” (265). Rockaby instructs the director to fix a “subdued spot on chair. Rest of stage dark. Subdued spot on face constant throughout, unaffected by successive fades.” (273) Ohio Impromptu is lit only by a lamp on a table midstage. (285) Lastly, in What Where, the players are “as alike as possible” in long grey gowns with long grey hair, moving on another dimly lit stage (309-310).
The harsh lighting prescribed by Beckett deserves our attention as it comes together with a form he does not usually use—the mime. In the absence of words, the lights are brought to full brightness and the audience’s attention can be focused on the perceivable form of the human being as object, almost as animal in a series of cruel experiments. Stripping speech from the event reduces the number of frames in which the Acts unfold. This purification focuses the audience’s gaze to the event as given visually, not as given linguistically. By refusing the word, the world comes into sharper focus. Left to interpret the mimes with the objects and actions that have been shown to them, audiences will confront the inadequacy of typical narrative strategies to “fill in the gaps.” The subjects of the Acts Without Words have no relation to a discernible past or present. The antagonism of their current environment has no perceivable motivation. No matter how imaginative the spectator, the “story” behind these subject’s actions remains missing. Indeed, they must be called “subjects” because they clearly are not “characters.” Beckett accomplishes this analysis of the failure of narrative without a single spoken word, relying entirely on the spectator’s ability to receive the image.

In A Piece of Monologue, on the other hand, Beckett combines the dramatic text with the dim and formless perceived world usual to his short performance pieces both in the mise-en-scène and in the figure of the SPEAKER, described as:

Faint diffuse light. Speaker stands well of centre downstage audience left...Just visible extreme right, same level, white foot of pallet bed...Thirty seconds before end of speech lamplight begins to fall. Lamp out. Silence. SPEAKER, globe, foot of pallet, barely visible in diffuse light. Ten seconds. Curtain. (265)

The piece unfolds in several frames—the perceivable action of the play unfolds in tandem with the action being narrated by the SPEAKER, as evident in the stage directions regarding the raising and lowering of lights. The SPEAKER functions as
character, object, and director/writer as he speaks stage directions to himself as interlocutor. As he himself is the subject of the play, he narrates a repeated “history” of movements within the room. These unfold as repetitions moving from birth to the extinguishing of the light, and then begin again. The second repetition begins with stage directions to himself. “Birth. Then slow fade up of a faded form…Sun light sunk behind the larches” (267). In the second repetition he directs the light, “Then fade, Dark whole again. Blest dark. No. No such thing as whole.” “No such thing as whole” repeats by differing from the first instance in which he had asserted another philosophical proposition, that there is “no such thing as none.” He goes on to direct himself to finish this repetition and begin the next, “Stands staring beyond half hearing what he’s saying. He? The words falling from his mouth. Making do with his mouth. Light lamp as described…Waits for first word always the same. It gathers in his mouth. Parts lips and thrusts tongue forward. Birth” (268).

In *A Piece of Monologue*, death follows fast after birth (“slow fade up of a faded form”) a preoccupation we uncovered in *That Time*. The reason Beckett’s heroes narrate—and endlessly return to—the moment of their birth is because it is there that the split between self and narrator began. Or, it is there where the self entered into being many. The mise-en-scène of the plays, in which the perceived world is evacuated of light, color, and tone—is a deeply phenomenological choice. Beckett uses this colorlessness to narrow the spectator’s gaze to this particular phenomenon—which is itself a philosophical proposition. As a philosophical proposition, we can assert that it is “poor” in phenomenality—it does not appear visibly, and in fact the visible must be encouraged to recede so that the problem of being both one and many can be made to appear. The
concluding lines of *A Piece of Monologue* conclude this longing for oneness whose moment of apparition is in “the dead and gone,” and “the dying and going”:

Stands there staring beyond at that black veil lips quivering to half-heard words...Trying to treat of other matters. Till half hears there are no other matters. Never were other matters. Never two matters. Never but the one matter. The dead and gone. The dying and the going. From the word go. The word begone. Such as the light going now...The globe alone. Not the other. The unaccountable. From nowhere. On all sides nowhere. Unutterably faint. The globe alone. Alone gone. (269)

The word “go,” which he then further distinguishes as “the word begone” is the word “birth,” the starter’s pistol of the process of death and dying. As begone is not merely a present tense imperative but also in medieval usage a past tense adjectival as in “been gone,” the act of being born is always already the act of having died. As Beckett repeats so often, the end is in the beginning, an originary difference and a fundamental condition of human existence. As there is no choice or freedom in this, Beckett is fundamentally at odds with existential humanism and the philosophy of power. Only in fragmented language and an environment of shadow and half-light has Beckett uncovered this aporia that happens at the moment of our joining the human race: our fundamental separation from ourselves as “selves” and from each other as others.

3.5 The Anxiety of the Absurd: Waiting and Watching in Beckett

Strangely, as we turn to the appeal of both Beckett and Shakespeare to prison theatrical programs, what emerges is not a deep resonance with the absurdity latent within the dramatic texts but a profound freedom in acting and observing oneself in the roles and characters. In the act of waiting (for parole), the actors perform a sort of re-

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subjectification by taking on a dramatic role. Through the dramatic conventions of character and plot, and through the theatrical conventions of performance, they re-construct an identity from the sentence spoken at their convictions. The thematic qualities of certain texts draw the program organizers to the plays and certain actors to the roles. Prison theatre deliberately blurs the boundaries between culture and text and between play and punishment. It frequently transcends the boundary between performer and spectator (as we read in the records of these events) as the actors usually serve as their own audiences through very long rehearsal periods. The rehearsal process emerges as the event within the event for those seeking to capture these performances through books and documentaries. The performances-proper are available only in report, in part, or not at all.

3.5.1 Waiting: Allons-nous-en?

Beckett came to theatre as a diversion from the writing of the *Trilogy*. Ruby Cohn records in her *A Beckett Canon* an interview Beckett gave in which he confessed, “I began to write *Godot* as a relaxation, to get away from the awful prose I was writing at that time.” Cohn sees *Godot* less as an escape and more as an expansion of the themes of *Malone Dies*, both of which are overwhelmed by the dual actions of dying and waiting. The original title of *Malone Dies* had been *L’Absent*, an absence echoed in Godot’s continued absence from the barren roadside on which the two tramps wait, somehow powerless to leave.¹⁸³ It becomes apparent to the reader of *Malone Dies* that he is holding a notebook in which Malone has recorded his thoughts, stories, and the few

¹⁸³ Ruby Cohn. *A Beckett Canon*. 175.
events that occur in the final days of his life. It seems that what we are reading is the contents of the notebook in which Malone is recording both “his” story (that of Sapo, Macmann, etc.) and history. “I did not want to write, but I had to resign myself to it in the end,” he writes, because his memory was inadequate “to live really.” His idea of living is the telling of these stories, which he records “in order to know where I have got to, where he has got to” [emphasis mine]. With this early admission, we can see that Malone’s writing allows him to fragment himself into I and he. The necessity to also record the details of his daily existence (supine in the bed, meals delivered on time, piss pot taken regularly away), is unclear, “And yet I write about myself with the same pencil and in the same exercise-book…. It is because it is no longer I, I must have said so long ago, but another whose life is just beginning” (208).

Though they do not have a pencil or a notebook, Vladimir and Estragon mirror Malone’s filling of the time, waiting for an appointment that somehow signifies the end of waiting. They return day after day to the same spot, anticipating an unidentifiable fate in the person of Godot. Like Malone, they are old. Vladimir and Estragon—the buffoons, clowns, or burlesque comics in bowler hats—punctuate their jests, inquiries, and antics, with acknowledgments that they cannot cease their waiting:

E: Allons-nous-en.
V: On ne peut pas.
E: Pourquoi?
V: On attend Godot.
E: C’est vrai. (Un temps.) Tu es sûr que c’est ici? (16).184

Vladimir emerges as the leader, reminding Estragon time and time again who they await, what has happened, and how much time has passed. Estragon, on the other hand, bursts

184 All citations of En attendant Godot are from Les Éditions de Minuit. Paris, 1952.
out in frustration over his inability to track the days, “Mais quel samedi? Et sommes-nous samedi? Ne serait-on pas plutôt dimanche? Ou lundi? Ou vendredi?” (18). Time dissolves in a flattening sameness. The stage image that Beckett envisions in his mise-en-scène, “Route à la compagne, avec arbre. Soir,” does not have the same gray, indefinite quality of the later plays or of the fiction, but the sameness from day to day evoked by the dialogue and mise-en-scène creates an indeterminacy of historical time (9). Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky and Pozzo are discernible in form, caper under adequate light, and the tree even sprouts a few leaves between the First and Second Acts. Despite this, Vladimir and Estragon cannot track time or identify their place as measurable or particular.

The secondary characters, Pozzo and Lucky, likewise are trapped together, and their relationship is characterized by a mutual enchainment. They enter in an atmosphere of abuse as Pozzo drives Lucky on at the end of a comically long rope:

Un cri terrible retentit, tout proche…Entrent Pozzo et Lucky. Celui-là dirige celui-ci au moyen d’une corde passé autour du cou,, de sorte qu’on ne voit d’abord que Lucky suivi de la corde, assez longue pour qu’il puisse arriver au milieu du plateau avant que Pozzo debouche de la coulisse (28).

Beckett frustrates a simplistic reading of Pozzo and Lucky as existing in a fixed relationship of power and submission, as described by Foucault and before him Hegel. Soon after their appearance, Pozzo corrects Vladimir and Estragon’s assumptions by admitting that he wants to be rid of Lucky who refuses to give up carrying Pozzo’s luggage. Pozzo reveals Lucky’ scheme to continue as his porter, “Il se figure qu’en le voyant infatigable je vais regretter ma decision. Tel est son misérable calcul” (42). The codependent abuse of their relationship (if we are to believe Pozzo’s report) confuses the audience, as well as Vladimir and Estragon. Should we believe Pozzo when he claims that Lucky “m’aïdait…me distraîait…il me rendait meilleur…maintenant…il
m’assassine…” Like Estragon, we must ask, “Je n’ai pas compris s’il veut le remplacer ou s’il n’en veut plus après lui” (47). Vladimir sees Lucky’s inexplicable loyalty as an affront to Pozzo’s kindness and upbraids him, “Comment osez-vous? C’est honteux! Un si bon maître! Le faire souffrir ainsi! Après tant d’années! Vraiment! (46-7) The only definite thing to be said about Pozzo and Lucky is that—like Vladimir and Estragon—they do not part company.

As these four characters wait, their jokes and games consistently degenerate into melancholy. Slave though he is and dances on command, Lucky’s dance does not inspire jollity but sadness. (A sadness that the audience laughs at, as Vladimir and Estragon’s response to it is comic). Pozzo tells us after the short and dissatisfying display that Lucky used to dance the farandole, even capered for joy. He asks Vladimir and Estragon to venture a guess as to what Lucky calls this new dance:

E: La mort du lampiste.
V: Le cancer des vieillards..
Pozzo: La danse du filet. Il se croit empêtré dans un filet. (56)

Lucky’s dance represents his entrapment. Whether this net he is caught in is his relationship to Pozzo or something deeper and more metaphysical is not apparent. After an extended series of goodbyes, Pozzo himself admits to Estragon that he cannot quit the place:

Pozzo: Je n’arrive pas…(il hésite)…à partir.
E: C’est la vie (65).

Moments later, Estragon and Vladimir repeat the same passivity in the face of an interminable waiting:

E: Allons-nous-en.
V: On ne peut pas.
E: Pourquoi?
V: On attend Godot.
E: C’est vrai. (67)
When the young boy comes to deliver the message that Godot cannot come that night but will surely come the next, the two tramps most want the child to tell Godot that he saw them:

Garçon: Qu’est-ce que je dois dire à monsieur Godot, monsieur?
V: Dis-lui…(Il hésite) Dis-lui que tu nous as vus. (un temps). Tu nous a bien vu, n’est-ce pas?
Garçon: Oui, monsieur. (72)

With no plot to speak of, En attendant Godot represents a certain entrapment and an existence of futility and powerlessness. Their histories are muddled and inaccessible to both of them. They have trouble identifying and agreeing upon anything that happened prior to when they came to wait here near this tree for Godot. At one point Estragon bursts out with irritation at Vladimir’s attempt at conversation, “Mais tu as bien été dans le Vaucluse?” by crying out, “Mais non, je n’ai jamais été dans le Vaucluse! J’ai coulé toute ma chaude-pisse d’existence ici, je te dis! Ici! Dans la Merdecluse!” (86) Estragon’s pain and anxiety comes from his inability to remember any other part of his life than this “hot-piss of an existence” here on this road waiting for Godot. Despite the hours of conversation they have poured out on the stage, neither can construct a coherent narrative of their past: had they been in the Vaucluse? At the top of the Eiffel Tower?

Their worry becomes the audience’s worry, as the fragmentary tales tantalize our memories as we try to piece together clues, to make sense of their story, perhaps to discover the identity of that Godot. Sidney Homan, who brought Waiting for Godot to over ten prisons in Florida in a series of programs for the Florida Endowment for the Humanities, writes in Beckett’s Theaters: Interpretations for Performance that the audience is intimately involved in the creative act of performing Waiting for Godot because the play forces the audience into the same activity as the tramps: waiting for
meaning. “Like the clowns, we work, even if it be waiting in our seats…In this dual partnership of actor and audience, both depending on the other for their present existence, we collectively establish an artifice against an imposed, Godot-ruled world” (49). We see how like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Homan sees a certain degree of freedom in being there, in that the tramps and the audience have “a little breathing and creative space in our chains” (50). Unlike Robbe-Grillet, he extends the stage action into a work metaphor that involves the whole auditorium—actor and spectator alike. Their “work” is the work of narrative, but a fruitless one. But if the audience is not the “authorizing eye/I” observing the tramps, but co-narrators, who, then, is watching and perceiving this long wait? Who is acting the part of Godot?

3.5.2 Watching: *Esse est percipi*

Sidney Homan revealed that in his experience “Godot” is the rule-laden world outside the theatre. Within the world of the play, the tramps are not so much concerned with Godot’s identity as they are with whether or not he sees them. The two tramps exhibit anxiety both that their waiting will go unnoticed or unperceived and that their appointment with Godot, unrealized, renders them powerless to leave. As I continue to work to free Beckett’s plays from the “Godot construct”—this analysis of watching and seeing in Beckett’s work will reveal the degree to which the relationship of spectator and actor is reciprocal. Many have concluded that Beckett’s offer an almost hermetically sealed object for an isolated audience’s observation. But this conclusion, as usual, stems from an anti-embodiment stance that ignores the frequency with which Beckett’s plays look back at their spectators (In *That Time* the Listener opens his eyes to stare straight at
the audience; in *Not I*, Mouth presumably can observe the audience unobserved from her shroud of darkness, as can the Auditor; in *Happy Days* Winnie exuberantly observes the audience observing her being buried alive). Anna Fennemore in her article “The Pleasure of Objectification: A spectator’s guide,” claims that this reciprocal gazing constitutes the spectator, or as a performance event unfolds, “we see that we are acted upon, and we know that as part of this dialogical contract of interanimation we too are doing the acting. In seeing acting, we are also acting seeing” (5). As Beckett’s work progressed, the “observing” agent progressed from an absence, such as a Godot or a Youdi, to the spectator. A spectator positioned in Beckett’s mise-en-scène is a highly controlled agent of pure seeing due, now, to the absence of character and plot.

As Beckett continued writing plays, he increasingly stripped the stage of identifiable place and the characters of identifying markers. What remains to be seen is very little that is human, indeed. The figures on the stage, frequently lit only as body parts, are severed from the voices that seem to be their own (*That Time*) or interrogated by unheard voices that seem to be themselves (*Not I, Eh Joe*). In *That Time* (1976), the three voices betray the subject’s anxiety about being perceived by a nameless multitude that swarms past him, “Time to get on the night ferry and out to hell out of there no need sleep anywhere not a curse for the old scenes the old names the passers pausing to gape at you quick gape then pass pass on pass by on the other side” (232). The theatrical presentation of the old man, slightly off-center stage, elevated ten feet, white hair teased out from his head to make him appear as a bug under a glass, subject to our gaze, is mirrored by the narration about the gaping passersby. The third voice narrates a moment that might—for all intents and purposes—be the moment of the performance itself:

look round for once at your fellow bastards thanking God for once bad and all as you were you were not as they till it dawned that for all the loathing you were getting you might as well not have been there at all the eyes passing over you and through you like so much thin air was that the time (234).

“All the eyes” refers not only to the Listener’s memory but to the current theatrical event. Indeed, the narrative perhaps indicts the spectator for his “loathing” and dismissal of the subject of the play. In Not I (1972) another nameless figure is elevated above the stage and save for the mouth, is imperceivable. Mouth delivers a continuous monologue—fragmented, at top speed, periodically interrupted it would seem by the question, “Are you not talking of yourself?” to which Mouth answers “…what?..who?..no!,..she!..” (Collected Shorter Plays 217, 219, 221, 224). The other figure on the stage, the Auditor, is shrouded in a full djelleba and does not interrogate Mouth. Her agony comes from self-perception and the anxiety that she cannot identify her story as her own. The audience’s presence sponsors her anxiety and commands her performance. As theatre semiologist Keir Elam has noted, “It is the spectator who initiates the theatrical communication process…in sponsoring the performance, the audience issues, as it were, a collective ‘directive’ to the performers”186 In a sense, the audience’s presence voices the piercing question, “Are you not talking of yourself?” thus confusing spectator and performing subject in Mouth’s monologue. The perspective that Beckett’s mise-en-scène enforces promotes an interpretation that—as aesthetic consumers—we the spectators are indeed guilty of holding these actor-subjects hostage to our gaze.

In Film (1967), Beckett gives us a commentary on film spectatorship that exaggerates the violence of gazing. The struggle between the film’s subject and the

186 Quoted in “Breaking Bodies: The presence of violence on Martin McDonagh’s stage.” Doyle. 95.
camera that follows him analyzes what Peter Freund calls “the violence of contemporary viewing habits.” The piece studies O(bject) and E(ye), who are the self split into perceiver and perceived. E follows O through the streets of a city and into a room, keeping an angle greater than forty-five degrees between himself and E. The film uses this convention to spatially relate what happens when one is perceived. The piece begins with the title from Bishop Berkeley’s dictum esse est percipi, and when E diminishes the angle between himself and O, O “enters percipi,” according to Beckett’s general notes (Collected Shorter Plays 163). When E focuses his gaze on any subject in the film, their face demonstrates what Beckett calls “an agony of perceivedness” (165). As E tracks O through the streets and into the room, finally approaching deliberately to cross the angle of perceivedness, the camera cuts to reveal the identity of the pursuing subject. It is O, or O is E. The self has been fragmented into perceiver and perceived, suffering an agony of self-perception whenever the gaze approaches too directly. The directions tell the filmmaker:

Cut to E, of whom this very first image (face only, against ground of tattered wall). It is O’s face (with patch) but with very difference expression, impossible to describe, neither severity nor benignity, but rather acute intentness. A big nail is visible near left temple (patch side). Long image of the unblinking gaze. Cut back to O, still half-risen, staring up, with that look. O closes his eyes and falls back in his chair, starting off rock. He covers his face with his hands….Hold it as the rocking dies down. (Collected Shorter Plays 168)

The viewer has until this point identified with the camera’s position and has held O in his gaze with the same consuming, pursuing focus. Upon the turning of the camera, however, this dynamic of identification and dissociation is disrupted and compromised. Peter Freund claims that “Film questions a cinematography that calls upon the viewer to

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minimize the difference she or he presents to the film by projecting the control of
difference onto the film” (46). For Freund, O’s agony of perceivedness stems from an
agony of the film looking at itself or the self-reflexivity of the film. When the viewer
finds she has in fact been watching herself, pursuing herself, subjecting herself to the
“agony of perceivedness,” the conventional method of identification of the viewer with
the camera is exposed and then broken.

Though the subjects in the later plays and Film suffer from an “agony of
perceivedness,” the early fiction and plays portray the opposite anxiety: a nagging desire
to be observed coupled with an almost amnesiac inability to recall the faces of those
they’ve met before. In Happy Days, Winnie wonders with anxiety whether or not Willie
can see her from his vantage point: “Can you see me from, I wonder, I still wonder…tell
me you can see me” (149). Despite, apparently, having passed the previous evening
with Pozzo and Lucky, Estragon confesses to not recognizing them at all, which greatly
frustrates Valdimir:

V : N’est-ce pas qu’ils ont beaucoup changé ?
E : C’est probable. …
V : Probable ? C’est certain. Tu les as bien vus ?
E : Si tu veux. Mais je ne les connais pas.
V : Mais si, tu les connais.
E : Mais non. (67)

David Berman argues that Beckett’s Film, far from a filmic representation of
Berkeley’s thesis, is a radical reversal of it, as in Berkeley, the self cannot be perceived
by either God’s or human minds. If Beckett were indeed writing from a Berkelian thesis,
it would be the Berkeley of W. B. Yeats, in which the mind is a “pragmatical,
preposterous pig…dependent, vulnerable [being; it needs] the support and comfort of
42-45. 44).


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Though I emphasized before that, as Hugh Kenner concludes, man is an “intelligence fixed to a dying animal,” here Estragon calls that intelligence, the basis of Cartesian certainty, into question. If he cannot remember whom he has met from one day to the next, how he can be certain that he himself has been there one day to another? This very uncertainty, the lack of narrative continuity from day to day, causes him to burst out in anger at Vladimir, who asks if recalls the countryside of the Vaucluse:

E: Reconnais! Qu'est-ce qu'il y a à reconnaître ? J’ai tiré ma roulure de vie au milieu des sables ! Et tu veux que j’y voie des nuances ! (Regard circulaire). Regarde-moi cette saloperie ! Je n’en ai jamais bougé ! » (85-86)

This perceptual and epistemological uncertainty haunts Vladimir and Estragon throughout the play. Like Malone, the objects that constitute their subjectivity—here memories and faces—mysteriously disappear. The visual memory has faded and become suspect. In its absence, their very identities become suspect. Vladimir has trouble believing that the Boy has really seen him, begging him at the conclusion of each act to tell Godot, “Dis-lui que tu nous as vus. Tu nous a bien vus, n’est-ce pas?” (72)

Meanwhile, God, in whose image they are supposedly made, also may not see them. Or perhaps he fails to recognize their faces. Estragon who relies on Vladimir throughout asks him, “Tu crois que Dieu me voit?” Vladimir responds:

V : Il faut fermer les yeux.
E : Dieu, ait pitié de moi !
V : (vexé) Et moi ?
E : (de même) De moi ! De moi ! Pitié de moi ! (108)

Here they exhibit anxiety in their clamoring: each vying for God’s attention. These are a few examples of the tramps’ despair and desire to be held in another’s gaze as a substitute for self-begotten certainty in their identity.
So, though they demonstrate consistent fear that their presence on the road, by the tree, is not being marked by others, Vladimir also shows worry that he himself does not effectively or compassionately see others. When they first meet Pozzo and Lucky, it is Vladimir who takes an interest in and pities Lucky’s obvious physical suffering:

V: Regarde-moi ça!
E: Quoi?
V: Le cou.
E: Je ne vois rien.
V: Mets-toi ici.
E: En effet.
V: À vif.
E: C’est la corde.
V: À force de frotter.
E: Qu’est-ce que tu veux ?

... V: Il n’est pas mal.
...
E: Il bave...Il écume...Un crétin (33-34).

And as we read, it is Estragon who reacts with near-brutal disgust at Lucky’s demeanor: his dribbling and drooling. Estragon shows a constant narcissism, concerned for his feet, his hunger, his fear of the vagabonds who nightly beat him. Vladimir, on the other hand, has a greater desire to capture sights rightly and to recall accurately. In the second act, he worries that he fell asleep while the others suffered: “Est-ce que j’ai dormi, pendant que les autres souffraient ? Est-ce que je dors en ce moment. Demain, quand je croirai me réveiller, que dirai-je de cette journée” (128).

The next day, when he believes himself to be awake, what will he tell himself about this day, Vladimir asks himself. His inattentiveness—the very absence of right-seeing that frustrates him about the Boy—he now accuses of himself. If he falls asleep, if he fails to see the others suffer, how can he narrate the previous day’s activities? Vladimir’s worries in this moment reflect the deep ethical trouble Beckett diagnoses in man. With memory such a faulty witness to his own conscience, Vladimir cannot be
certain that he is not yet still asleep. Clearly, a different sort of perception is necessary. A communal act of seeing. Together, Vladimir and Estragon hobble on day to day. Perhaps, by inviting more than just a solitary reader into his work, Beckett implies the same mutual dependence occurs between the stage and the darkened auditorium. Like Vladimir and Estragon, we should remember that we were there on that night, in a darkened theatre with the two clowns.

3.6 Prison Theatre: Beckett and Shakespeare

What should be beginning to emerge is that—no matter how neatly it may solve the conundrums of Beckett’s plays—the spectators are not Vladimir and Estragon, Godot, Mouth, Winnie, Hamm, or Pozzo. This interpretative perspective is tantalizing, even for directors with extensive work in prison theatre programs, such as Sidney Homan who concludes that, “We share the same anxieties, though however aware they may be of the audience, the tramps cannot know this. If there is no Godot to witness and ratify their actions, we are there, the ‘Godot’ for whom they have waited” (50). Being like Godot (an audience shares the character of Godot in that it sponsors or “compels” the performance of waiting) is not the same as being the Godot for whom the tramps wait. Being there with them holds different ethical ramifications than does being Estragon and Vladimir. They may have “kept” this troubling appointment (as Collin Duckworth praises them), but if we are like Godot (and as we certainly are guilty of as spectators), we have instigated this anxious and fruitless task.

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190 Beckett’s Theaters.
Now as we turn to prison theatre as a subset of performance, the question of what role the spectator plays in sponsoring or instigating this peculiar type of performance. Foremost, the performance frame differs significantly from that of the usual West End, Broadway, or university theatrical production. The performance is embedded within the Western penal system, which has its own rules for entry, behavior during the performance, and exit from the performance. Second, the distribution apparatus for these performances is severely limited. The invited audiences tend to be composed of family, fellow inmates, invited scholars, and—very rarely—a wider public. Following the original performances, recordings and further documentary footage are occasionally compiled to share these events with a much larger audience in a different context (either film screenings or home viewing), raising a broader set of questions for spectatorship of these incarcerated performers.

Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* has been performed in prisons and by prisoners almost since its premiere in Paris in 1953 and the prison context has contributed to critical understanding of Beckett’s work. In order to expand our examination of prison theatre as a Beckettian exercise I will compare the records of two performances of *Waiting for Godot* with programs that bring Shakespeare to prisons. What emerges from these various events will be a troubled quest for a unified personal narrative. These prisoners perform within a theatre designed to evoke what Foucault calls “an aesthetics of punishment.” This theatre is both literal (the theatre is the prison) and metaphorical (the background of western justice and a guilty sentence). The actors are engaged in an artistic endeavor similar to what Beckett so admired in painting in “Three Dialogues,” a “less exclusive relations between representer and representee, in a kind of tropism towards a light as to the nature of which the best opinions continue to vary” (“Three
Dialogues” in Trezise 10). As they reach toward the light (of the stage) they blend who they are with what they represent.

At the same time that prison theatre programs acknowledge and foster this Beckettian quest for a unified narrative, re-telling one’s life story over and over again as a recherché that grafts in other narratives (those of the characters), the structure of the Western penitentiary system sees these programs as reformatory and a step on the way to freedom. Making their subjectivity a “work,” recalling Trezise’s critique of transcendental phenomenology, founds a world of decision, freedom and power—a world that proves an illusion (8-9). As the actors discover that no amount of involvement in beneficial or educational programs guarantees their freedom or that the power structure will agree with their new narratives (particularly forceful are the accounts of failed parole board hearings), the films about these events begin to reject the Existentialist narrative. Prison theatre ultimately reveals the un-power that characterizes the condition of a human as narrator, or what Trezise calls “a freedom...not to be.” The “work” promise of prison theatre conflicts with theatre’s structural requirement of humility. Performer and spectator must exchange as giver and receiver in a mutual work of creation. The actors recognize the narrative fluidity between self and role that they experience in the process of rehearsing the play. But by emphasizing the theatre programs as disciplining and therapeutic, the many unanticipated results of prison theatre—suicides, escape attempts, and failed paroles—make little sense. The documentary films, *Shakespeare Behind Bars* and *Prisoners of Beckett*, both end on a downbeat note, unable to alleviate the anxiety of observation and waiting that is built into the very walls of their theatre prisons and prison theatres.
3.6.1 Theatre in the Dock: *Shakespeare Behind Bars and Prisoners of Beckett*

Much has been said about the recent explosion of Shakespeare in prisons beginning in the 1980s and 90s. Groups such as Shakespeare Behind Bars in Kentucky, a group at Framingham Women’s Prison in Massachusetts founded by Jean Trounstine; Agnes Wilcox’s Prison performing Arts Project in Missouri; Laura Bates’s Shakespeare in the SHU in Indiana; and Murray Cox’s Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor program in England are treated in Amy Scott-Douglass’s *Shakespeare Inside* on the role of Shakespeare in prison education (Scott Douglass 4-5). Murray Cox chronicles the effect of several Shakespeare productions brought to the English psychiatric hospital of Broadmoor in *Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor* (1992). The Shakespeare industry has done well to track these peculiar performance events, but almost nothing has been said critically about the use of Samuel Beckett in prison theatre programs except for two higher profile instances of *Waiting for Godot*—the first in San Quentin Maximum Security Prison and the other almost three decades later in the Swedish prison at Kumla.

These events share much, including educational, reformatory and penitentiary goals. They also share a relative unavailability to conventional audiences (which, as we learn from Susan Bennett’s *Theatre Audiences*, are almost always educated, upper-middle class). Taking place in maximum security settings for audiences of friends, family, and fellow inmates, viewers of the documentaries and readers of the interviews that have been recorded are not the intended audiences of the performances in *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, *Shakespeare Inside*, or *Prisoners of Beckett*. For the highly educated, academic audience likely to read and view these secondary accounts, our presence is unanticipated. These works use the documentary format to show the simultaneous theatrical events of both the dramatic performance (*The Tempest* and *Waiting for Godot*) and the western penal
system. It is the occasion for showing a process usually hidden from ordinary eyes, but paradoxically omnipresent (in its absence) through our news media. The works on Shakespeare and Beckett in the prisons use the dramatic texts and the prisoners’ biographies as a counter text to the dominant narrative of prisons, prisoners, and punishment in western culture.

Prison as entertainment has become ubiquitous in American film and on cable and network television. Recently, the 2005-2008 series Prison Break, features brothers Lincoln and Michael Scofield as they plan a series of “ultimate” prison breaks, while various reality shows in the tradition of Cops remain popular. Among the many documentary films that offer “inside” looks at prison life, the 2010 National Geographic film Solitary Confinement “explores the potentially devastating psychological effects of isolation.”191 Cable television also offers a multitude of prison, law enforcement, and punishment drama. Investigation Discovery premiered Prison Wives, a reality show, on Valentine’s Day, 2010. The cable channel also features a series titled Notorious Prisons which has visited Alcatraz, San Quentin, Folsom, and Sing Sing, among others. Frontline’s 2009 documentary The Released follows mentally ill inmates after their release from an Ohio prison. After Innocence (2005) follows death-row inmates released after DNA evidence finally proves they had not committed the crimes for which they were convicted. The film Conviction (2010) starring Hilary Swank represented the true-life story of Kenny Waters, whose sister worked tirelessly to have his wrongful conviction overturned. The 2002 play, The Exonerated, by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, combined interviews, letters, transcripts and criminal cases to tell the stories of six

inmates given death sentences for crimes they did not commit. Prison as entertainment clearly sells and is cheap to produce for both television and documentaries.\(^{192}\)

Through the television with its isolating tendencies, the “aesthetic of punishment” enshrined within our prisons finds its most potent medium of communication. Michel Foucault, in his seminal work on prisons, *Surveiller et punir* (1975) concludes by generalizing his study of prisons to the architecture of other common Western institutions (we think of schools, hospitals, and factories, especially)—all designed to isolate and observe many individuals at once.\(^{193}\) The private spectator at home with a multitude of individual channels to observe (with all of human behavior contained on them) is a microcosm of what Foucault calls, “a society in which the principal elements are no longer community and public life, but, on the one hand, private individuals and, on the other, the state.” In this society, “relations can be regulated only in a form that is the exact reverse of the spectacle ‘It was to the modern age…that was reserved the task of…the building and distribution of buildings intended to observe a great multitude of men at the same time” [quoting NH Julius] (*Discipline* 216-7). The distancing effect of film and television removes any sense of spectacle from punishment—the body no longer suffers in the spectator’s presence. The television experience provides a comfortable distance for observation. Rather than participating in the crowd before a spectacle of

\(^{192}\) While the average cost for a one-hour television drama is $1.5 million, reality television can be produced for as little as $200,000 per episode (Hill 6). For a longer study of reality television see *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* by Annette Hill. (New York: Routledge, 2005). For more on the role of reality television in conditioning spectatorial fascination with crime, see “Fear and Loathing on Reality Television: An Analysis of “America's Most Wanted” and “Unsolved Mysteries.”” Gray Cavendar and Lisa Bond-Maupin. *Sociological Inquiry*. 63.3 (July 1993): 305-317.

medieval punishment, such as Foucault describes in the opening pages of the work, we observe the existential anguish of prisoners’ eternal waiting from a distance, and this has become entertainment.

3.6.2 The Theatre Comes to Prison: Shakespeare

With even this cursory catalogue of the television programs available, we see the extent to which American society likes prison as entertainment and as theatre. What happens, though, when theatre comes to prison and the process is recorded and filmed for a wider audience? One thing that becomes apparent in viewing the documentaries is the degree to which the participants in Shakespeare engage with the dramatic text and identify with the various characters. On the other hand, the actors in the Prisoners of Beckett documentary reject this educational and reformational process. Both films discourage viewers from romanticizing, exploiting, or objectifying the prisoner-actors either by downplaying or obfuscating their crimes or—in the case of the written works—explicitly warning the reader not to instrumentalize the process. Amy Scott Douglass confesses at the beginning of Shakespeare Inside that she can mix equal parts Genet, Foucault, and Shakespeare Behind Bars and write a quick academic article. Murray Cox, too, warns readers not to come to his text with a prurient interest in the sensationalized inpatients of Broadmoor:

Even at this very early stage, the reader will find the question of his motivation coming under the audit of self-scrutiny. The search to identify patients by name-hunting in the index will prove abortive, and the voyeuristic, the prurient and the salacious will remain frustrated. But those interested in the creative potential of drama in a secure therapeutic setting will find much to think about. (Cox xv)
These disclaimers and the enforced absence of the guilty/innocent dichotomy removes the theatre of western justice from view. Deprived of sitting in judgment on a “case,” viewers of prison theatre events witness a different sort of spectacle.

At the beginning of Shakespeare Inside, Amy Scott-Douglass confesses that she had not intended to go to the prison that was the subject of her research. She writes, “I had planned, without really realizing it, just to stay in my ivory tower and read about the various Shakespeare programs, write up a little piece, throw in some Foucault and Genet and call it a day” (Scott-Douglass ix). This remark, and the eventual expansion of her research into multiple prison programs, situates Scott-Douglass in a narrative mode that accounts for what Susan Bennett would call the “status of [the critic’s] own discourse” (Susan Bennett, Theatre Audiences. 58). The social, economic, and political contexts that structure Scott-Douglass’s access to these programs also structure her reactions to the theatrical events and how she tells about them. Her knowledge of Michel Foucault’s work on prisons means she cannot help but recognize herself on one side of the power structure encoded in the prison itself. When Foucault writes that the architectural codes perform “a way of defining power in terms of the everyday life of men… it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form…a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology” (Discipline 205). Like prisons, theatres are “pure architectural and optical systems.” Like theatres, modern Western prisons are designed to make behaviors visible (the better to analyze and judge possible motivation). Foucault calls the visibility made possible by the architectural system “so many cages, so many small theatres in which each actor is alone…constantly visible” (200). As the viewer follows the camera in Shakespeare Behind Bars, he can adopt that position of observer of the inmates. The camera chooses often to look through the glass windows and
walls at rehearsals and through the observation windows of individual cells. This observational strategy emphasizes that the viewer is not among the actors, but a privileged guest of the institution—free to observe and free to turn off the performance at any time.

When theatre comes to prison, the event has a limited audience and one that often does not reflect the usual demographic of theatre-goers: highly-educated, upper-middle class urban residents. Instead, the audiences are most often fellow prisons, wardens and guards, and family members. To make these events available to the stereotypical Shakespeare or Beckett theatergoer, especially to those who study and research in theatre and literature, these events are recorded. Viewed at film screenings, on television or DVD, or read as a collection of interviews. This secondary “audience” differs from the primary audience in its isolation and fragmentation. As Susan Bennett writes in *Theatre Audiences*, the most community available at the cinema is a sense of “co-voyeurism,” and that the assembly is not “a crowd, but a gathering of individuals, mutually suspicious rather than mutually affirming” (90). Once the film is taken into the home either on DVD or by broadcast, the isolation of the spectator is complete, as, television, more even than the cinema, lacks what Bennett calls “the sense of public event” because it severs both communication between spectators and performers and the community that forms around spectator-to-spectator communication. In the case of a prison theatre production in Northern Ireland, the idea for a documentary to sell to the BBC came first and a prison

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194 In Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*. 94.
and play was chosen afterward.\textsuperscript{195} Thus, from the beginning, the intended audience of the production had always been a diffused, English television audience.

Why do these prison performances form part of the canonical criticism of Shakespeare and Beckett in performance? Frankly, these specific performances are chosen to be recorded and interpreted by the documentary format because academic professionals are most often involved in initiating the productions. The audiences for these films, then, becomes fellow academics and the students on university campuses where these films are studied and shown. As texts for interpretation, films such as \textit{Shakespeare Behind Bars} and \textit{Prisoners of Beckett} acquire value not from any properties inherent to them but by their interpretive communities.\textsuperscript{196} Thus the existence of an educated class interested in the dynamics of prison and theatre creates first the programs and then the audience for a documentary film reportage of the events that transpired in the limited-access world of the prison. Though the title of Murray Cox’s book is \textit{Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor}, it could aptly be subtitled “Broadmoor comes to University,” as students and researchers then confront the various records of the performances while engaged in research and criticism. This “academic frame” conditions the audience for the documentary films and published studies.

There are three levels of audience for any of these productions. First, the actor-inmates themselves form the first audience, as the documentaries dwell for the greatest


\textsuperscript{196} Susan Bennett points out this weakness in reader-response criticism to critique its own critical position in not just the reception but the \textit{production} of these texts in her \textit{Theatre Audiences}. She writes, “Fish’s assertion that texts are accorded value not by any intrinsic properties but by interpretive communities can be extended to include even the existence of those texts” (Susan Bennett 44).
measure on their own position as spectators of the rehearsal process. In *Shakespeare Inside*, the actor Sammie reflects on rehearsing:

I don’t try to fight it or hide it, and although it may look painful, it’s very liberating. I had to do…I had to do Othello…because it was so like the crime I committed, and it was not so much as to recreate the crime as it was to be sure I understood it. My close friend Mike Smith played Desdemona….Then I was able to see, in the face of someone that I cared about, exactly what was going on with them, Very powerful. (Scott-Douglass 31)

The director of the program, Curt Tofteland, likewise sees the rehearsal process as the most important part of the performance event. He tells viewers of the film *Shakespeare Behind Bars* that he chooses plays that to him mirror certain realities of the day-to-day world of the prison, saying, “The fact that *The Tempest* takes place on an island and a prison is like an island and there are people on the island who have powers and there are people in the prison who have powers.” As he speaks, the camera moves to the vantage point of the central watch tower to illustrate the power that comes from the vantage point of complete observation.

The rehearsal process is used as a time for both literary and personal discovery. In one rehearsal, Big G workshops with the rest of the cast to understand his feelings toward the role of Caliban:

In a lot of ways I was like Caliban, inexperienced, scared, not knowing what I was doing. So one of the things that’s been challenging about playing Caliban is observing human nature…and I’m getting better at it, but as far as playing this actual monster character, I don’t have a lot to draw from finding the truth about him is I guess its confusing and challenging. (*Shakespeare Behind Bars*)

The cast recommends that “Caliban doesn’t see himself as a monster.” This insight into the character’s self-perception helps Big G to develop the role and to make sense of Caliban’s place in the story.
The film also follows Leonard from the rehearsal process into solitary confinement where he is serving out a punishment for a violation of prison rules. Despite his separation from the play, he continues to memorize the script in the hope of returning to join the production. He is especially taken with Prospero’s final lines delivered to the audience in the Epilogue, “as you from crimes would pardoned be, let your indulgence set me free.” The film captures Leonard expressing the hope that, “what really speaks to me is the idea that that indulgence, what he calls indulgence was actually one of the remarkable things in the world, which is to redeem someone, to set them free what they’ve done. That is the single thing I have wanted since October 1994,” against the background of relentless abuse from his fellow inmates in solitary confinement. As the camera follows his return to his cell, the disembodied voices follow his progress shouting his crime. He hopes to be paroled in order to do some good, "to redeem my life so that I am not remembered for the very worst thing that I have done.” For Leonard, prison offers no chance to add to the narrative of his life. Instead, as though trapped in a Beckettian narrative, the prison structure forces an endless repetition of the crime, even as he tries to complete a treatment program for child abusers to make him eligible for parole.

We see, then, that the actors themselves comprise the primary audience for these productions, commenting on their own actions, the dramatic content, and the larger context of their sentences and crimes throughout the process. But following the actors themselves, these performances are observed, recorded (through reports or by filming) and then edited into books or films for a larger public to view. This audience, the more academic audience, brings its own expectations to the viewing of the film or the reading of the book. The books use frequent evocative and descriptive language to capture the
performance. Scott-Douglass recalls the emotional impact of seeing *Julius Caesar* performed at Luther Luckett:

> And then Demond Bush enters the arena, cradling the body of Caesar in his arms as he walks about the stage. At first I’m impressed with his strength. I’ve never seen one man carry another man before, and Demond does it with such gentleness and ease…Demond kneels down on the ground, holding Caesar in a *pietà* pose before laying him on the ground and climbing into the pulpit. It’s actually a step ladder that Demond ascends, but it might as well be a pulpit. …Demond is captivating, breathtaking, enchanting. The words may be Shakespeare’s but the rhythm and cadence are straight out of a black Baptist seminary. (Scott-Douglass 7)

Scott-Douglass juxtaposes the emotional appeal the actors exert over her in performance and in interviews, an emotional connection she grows to trust. In contrast, a much more influential “audience” is constantly in the background of the documentary and collection of interviews—the parole board—over whom no emotional appeal can be certain to have influence. With the power to literally *speak* the actors’ freedom, the program participants frequently bring up how their involvement in the program is preparing them to reenter society. The documentary follows Sammie who is serving a life sentence for strangling his mistress but who will soon go before the parole board. The confidence his fellow actors express in his growth is not mirrored by the parole board, who are unconvinced of the efficacy of acting to prove genuine transformation.

Likewise, in Murray Cox’s book *Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor*, most of the documents that describe the events that took place over the years he organized Shakespeare productions’ special visits come from the perspectives of the actors. The actors often recall the emotional effect of *entering* the psychiatric facility and performing in the context of the infamous hospital. Juliet Georgia Slower reported the transformative effect of visiting the hospital as:

> Meeting the people in that room, talking with them, suddenly realizing they were people, normal every day people, who get up, brush their teeth,
have breakfast and all the rest of it, and that they weren’t born with a label saying “I want to grow up and kill someone for no reason whatsoever,” did very much close the gap between the “us and them.” (47)

Brian Cox, who played Lear before an audience at Broadmoor reported that “it was the most releasing performance that I have ever had because it suddenly had a point to it…I suddenly felt that I was doing it to a bunch of people that actually understood what Lear’s pain was about” (60). Meanwhile anonymous patient interviews report experiences such as: “it was a journey of self-recognition for me through madness, and it was healthy for me to experience,” and “this made me think how unaware I was about other people’s feelings when committing my crimes” (141-143). The introspection of both performer and spectator, the re-imagining of their place in the guilty-free, innocent-condemned dichotomies of the Western penal system, echoes throughout each of these prison theatre programs, though the conclusions may change. In the case of Beckett in Kumla, as we will now examine, the actors reject any therapeutic function of prison theatre as they realize that to society at large, they will always be guilty.

3.6.3 The Theatre Comes to Prison: Beckett

In contrast to the moralizing role of Shakespeare in prison theatre, when Samuel Beckett comes to prisons the inmates tend to be motivated to communicate the injustice of their sentence, the role of the play in giving them freedom, and to work for their eventual freedom from the institution. So, although Beckett’s literary work debunks an existentialist notion of subjectivity, when prisoners perform Beckett they often emphasize the freedom the performing brings them and the desire for a future freedom. We will see in the brief records of Waiting for Godot at San Quentin and at Kumla that the actors
express deep identification with the tramps, but then apply that identification to escape attempts both legal and illegal. As an audience, Western prisoners whose bodies are incarcerated will most readily adopt the Beckettian conclusion, “I can’t go on, I must go on,” as the metaphysical ground for a new existence based on the radical freedom possible through performance. Not content to merely “feel” free for a few hours in rehearsal in performance, these prisoners want to transform daily life into the freedom they were given by performing the plays. So, while Shakespeare in prisons moralizes and quiets insurrection, Beckett in the prisons clearly identifies the absurd universe as the prison system and freedom as possible. They find this freedom first by identifying with the characters of Didi and Gogo. But this spiritual freedom is only the first step in their ultimate freedom which they hope to find upon leaving prison.

As John Tulloch notes, every spectator brings with him into the theatre a “horizon of expectations” about what the play will do and so “the relationship then between culture and the idea of the theatrical event is one that is necessarily flexible and inevitably rewritten on a daily basis” (In Shakespeare and Chekhov in Production 7). In the case of the San Quentin performance of 1957, a small group of inmates first expected comedy and girls, and upon seeing Herbert Blau, the director’s introduction expected to be bored and planned to leave.

The trio of muscle-men, biceps overflowing…parked all 642 lbs on the aisle and waited for the girls and funny stuff. When this didn’t appear they audibly fumed and audibly decided to wait until the house lights dimmed before escaping. They made one error. They listened and looked two minutes too long. 197

197 Theatre of the Absurd. 2.

Amy Scott-Douglass records with a degree of disbelief the expectations of the Kentucky Correctional Institute for Women at a performance of Shakespeare Behind Bars’ Julius Caesar of a comedic performance. “They respond to the scene in which Portia shows Brutus her self-inflicted wound as if it were a Bickersons episode or a
Within just a few years, Rick Cluchey would have successfully lobbied the prison warden for the right to stage workshop productions of *Waiting for Godot*, among other plays. By that time, the audience was much more eager, to the point where the shows were staged for standing room only rooms. Cluchey, writing for *Remembering Beckett*, avers that prisoners are the most natural audience for Beckett’s plays, as “the true Beckett people: the cast-offs and the loonies, the poets of the streets…the real folk of our modern wasteland.” These people found the dramatic situation of *Waiting for Godot*, “perfectly normal.”

The San Quentin Drama Workshop has become one of the longest-running theatre programs for and by inmates. Like the Shakespeare programs, it was helped along by a university and theatre professional who would mentor, teach, and coach the actors. Alan Mandell, consulting director at the Los Angeles Theater Center, would make weekly visits to San Quentin to teach directing, acting and writing to Cluchey and others (Skip Kaltenheuser. “The Prison Playwright.” *The Gadfly Online*). Performances were held in the prison’s theatre on the former site of the gallows. Cluchey himself acted and directed in thirty-five plays before he was released by the Governor’s pardon on December 12, 1966. After becoming friends with and working closely with Samuel Beckett on several projects, Cluchey acted in the Beckett-directed productions contained in *Beckett Directs Beckett* commissioned by the Smithsonian and available in full on the internet for

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Punch and Judy puppet show, laughing so hard that tears pour out of their eyes” (Scott-Douglass 73).
viewing. He acted as Pozzo opposite his mentor and advocate, Alan Mandell, as Lucky—reversing the prisoner/freeman position they had shared over two decades earlier.

Sidney Homan records his experience bringing Godot to a series of Florida State prisons in “Waiting for Godot: Inmates as Students and –Then—Teachers.” What director Michka Saäl and Jan Jonson communicate visually through the film medium, Homan explains narratively: the process of entering the prison frame as a loss of “free” status and conformity to the prison machine’s policies. Homan describes the transition in language reminiscent of stage terminology:

The cast and crew of my production approached the first of three guard towers at the prison, introducing ourselves to some authority figure hidden behind the glare of a spotlight, not unlike the spotlight behind the audience that activates the three characters in Beckett’s Play. (156)

Prisons have long used focused light to make prisoners conform to the behavioral policies of the prison. Lights out at night, the use of natural light as healthy, and the use of the windows for observation are all hallmarks of prison policy in the previous two centuries. Jurgen Siess in “The Actor’s Body and Institutional Tensions from Act Without Words I

199 In a review of the Beckett Directs Beckett stage productions on tour in Chicago, Elin Diamond interviewed Cluche who emphasized Beckett’s detailed control over every element of the mise-en-scène, “‘We are conduits for Beckett,’ Cluche told me. Every word and gesture is dictated by the playwright when he directs. ‘Beckett Directs Beckett’ at the Goodman showed the drawbacks of the playwright’s directing style. In Krapp’s Last Tape, comic, non-naturalistic mime both restrained sentimentality and released the play’s verbal music. The Workshop’s Endgame—admittedly much harder to do—shrivelled under Beckett’s structuring hand. When actors cannot bring to life the stubborn humanity of Beckett’s survivors, his gray landscape pales. All that is left is an astonishing but unfulfilled stage image” (Elin F. Diamond “Beckett Directs Beckett: Krapp’s Last Tape and Endgame.” Theatre Journal. 33.1 (March, 1981): 109-111. 111).

to Not I’ might argue that actors entering this system are somewhat pre-equipped for the suffering caused by observation and the physical demands of acting (Winnie encased up to her neck in sand in *Happy Days*, for example), but actors and directors entering the prisons, such as those with Homan, consistently report uneasiness at the stripping away of rights and freedoms required by even visitors to the penal system.

It surprises me, then—as it surprises the actors and directors who bring theatre to prison—that within the theatrical space of the performance (usually a converted cafeteria or chapel), the rules that usually govern theatrical events are dissolved. The space within the system that for that night has been set apart for a special event becomes a space of freedom for the audience, and a dangerous space of anarchy (momentarily) for the actors.

Knowing nothing of the stultifying theater etiquette that often characterizes Broadway, the inmates on every other line it seemed, rose from their seats and shouted out comments or questions to the actors, who were desperately trying to stay in character…

Our frustration turned to exhilaration: here was an audience, these men waiting, who demanded to be part of the production, who took what we said so seriously that they could not remain silent.” (157)

Amy Scott-Douglass records similar uproar in a women’s prison audience when the Shakespeare Behind Bars group took their production on tour. While the interruptions changed the atmosphere of the play from one of well-rehearsed production to unanticipated call-and-response, Homan records that the greatest moment of fear occurred at the end of the performance when the inmates were ordered to line up and return to their cells.

Suddenly…the inmates broke ranks and started racing towards the stage. I was terrified. But my fears were born of ignorance: the inmates simply wanted to talk with us about the play, specifically about the identity of Godot…[who] now identified Godot with some aspect of their own prison life. (157)
During these event—occurring in the dual frames of theatre and prison—the disciplines of both theatre and prison life break down in an atmosphere of simultaneous freedom and anxiety. In *Prisoners of Beckett*, Jan Jonson reports a bizarre incident during rehearsal when one of his actors suffers a breakdown and attacks him. In *Shakespeare Inside*, Amy Scott-Douglass candidly reports her early fears when meeting the actors in the program. Homan repeated the production in nine other Florida state prisons, and in each one he found similar dynamics. He calls these events “a conversation between actor-characters and audience” in which “the line separating onstage from offstage was blurred, even nonexistent” (157).

*Waiting for Godot* in Kumla, Sweden had a profoundly different effect than Shakespeare has had in the Shakespeare Behind Bars program. It echoed the “blurred boundary” effect between theatre and real-life to such a degree that the finale of the group’s performance saw an actual prison break. Far from rendering its participants better behaved and more aware of their crimes, it stirred feelings of injustice over their incarceration and their role as performers. The man who acted Vladimir recalled with bitterness the return from their first performance outside the prison, “and then we were going freely into a cage, and we would not be able to do it if we weren’t doing theatre.” Estragon, more wistfully, recalled the trip to a nearby city as, “It was almost like we were free….” But the return to Kumla was all the more difficult after feeling almost free. He remembers, “It was not only, you know, fantastic to go outside…it felt like freedom, but it was an illusion. Of course it was sad to take off your civilian clothes…and to hear the doors lock behind your back.” The inmate who played Vladimir remarked on the incoherence of a penal system that allows the inmates out to entertain other civilians before locking them up once again as “dangerous” criminals:
If I am good to be outside playing theatre, I am then good to be outside with my wife, which is much more important to me than playing theatre. We are good to show ‘look’ to the society ‘how well behaved are these animals.’ But then we didn’t get anything out of it for our private lives, our normal lives.

The film emphasizes visually from beginning to end the process of leaving behind society and entering through a series of gates and doors the prison at Kumla. First, Jan Jonson makes the journey, then the camera follows the inmates’ paths through the corridors incongruously painted with murals. The murals seem to mock with their creativity and cheer, the same hypocritical stance that Vladimir accused the authorities of holding: they are good enough for the creative freedom, but in the end they are seen as “well-behaved…animals.”

Those who witnessed the performances at Kumla or by the prisoners at Gothenberg recall how the event made them see both the play and the prisoners in a new light. Betty Skawonius, a journalist, remembers of the performance,

Here men who have never played theater, who have never seen theater, have done what has seemed impossible...they have made this theater audience feel as if it is the first time they have heard this text. These guys, when they go onstage, they have lived unseen in a prison, the most unseen place in the world, and then suddenly you go up on a stage and you have an audience...and your ego might go, and you think you can do the impossible.

Marianne Hakansson in penitentiary administration remembers, “I attended the performance at Kumla. I was expecting an amateur production, but instead what I saw was incredible. I was deeply moved by the performances. They didn’t play the characters in the play...they were those people...They had talent for more than just crime.” Jan Jonson, the director, always saw more in the actors and the role of the play in helping them to express their condition. In both his article in Directing Beckett and Prisoners of Beckett, he quotes exactly the actor who played Vladimir’s first encounter with the play:
“He took the manuscript in his hand standing behind me and then he said ‘This is not a play,’” and I said, “what is it?” and he said, “This is my fucking diary!” That same actor recalled years later, “We were not good actors. We were real people expressing what we had inside. The feeling we had. We started to read the play and then something was growing. We felt somehow we felt identified with the—the play—with the characters. To express anger or despair for a person who is in prison is not difficult at all.”

The prisoners performing *Waiting for Godot* outside the prison walls take their frustration at the system and act on it. They escape while in a nearby city to perform. A newspaper headline the next day told the citizens, “The play by inmates of Kumla prison at the Town Theatre has been cancelled. Sorry but the ‘actors’ have escaped.” In the film, the interviews conducted over twenty years later correct the sensational early reports. The actor playing Estragon tells the interviewer, “We didn’t escape. We just walked.” The mastermind seems to have been Vladimir, who wanted to “do something that these people will remember for some time.” To that end, they each had a separate plan and only coordinated their time of departure. The documentary shoots in the theatre from which they escaped. The contrast with the prison, with its single point of entry, its multiple positions of observation, and the theatre with its multitude of *partial* perspectives, its hidden doors and serpentine hallways, pictures spatially the truth that the actors had felt on their first touring production: acting in *Godot* not only felt like freedom, it was freedom. They were free from the watchful gaze of the penitentiary. Marianne Hakansson admits, “The Kumla prisoners who escaped managed to do quite well on the outside. So we should ask ourselves, what’s the point of ever longer prison terms?” They lived successfully on their own for various periods of time, The actor who played Estragon turned himself in to rid himself of the fear of being caught. The actor who played
Vladimir, twenty years later and apparently still at large, admits in interview that, “I want to be free. I am still not free. The day I retire from my actual job that I don’t need to fake or hide anything, I would love to appear before the people of Sweden and tell exactly what it is I have been doing since I left Kumla….I changed completely of life, I have succeeded in raising up my family more or less in the way I want to raise them up… I would like to do that just to feel good.”

3.7 Conclusion: Plague and Prison

Toward the end of *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault parallels the organizing strategy of cities under the plague and prisons. Unlike Artaud who saw the plague as a purifying event, and theatre that could operate “comme la peste” to remake the chain between what is and what is not, between possibility and what exists in the material world, Foucault sees prisons as the architectural abstraction of the disciplinary policies that arose organically from the presence of plague in late medieval and early modern society:

They mark, at a distance of a century and a half, the transformations of the disciplinary programme. In the first case [the plague] there is an exceptional situation…it makes itself everywhere present and visible; it invents new mechanisms; it separates, it immobilizes, it partitions, it constructs for a time what is both a counter-city and the perfect society…The Panopticon, on the other hand, must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power in terms of the everyday life of men…[it] must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form…a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology” (*Discipline* 205).

In the contemporary world, when theatre comes to prison, the question is: is it another instrument of observation (indeed, of self-observation?) or does it answer Artaud’s call to theatre to “give them the experience itself, the plague itself, so they will be terrified, and
awaken?” (Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs 62-63) An additional consideration would have to be how the Prison Theatre Movement liberates theatre from the “culture as commodity” aesthetic of both education and commerce. By recording these productions as the expression of certain groups’ identities through the medium of performance, these events celebrate uncommodifiable theatre (you can’t pay to go see it, and it isn’t coming to a town near you). At the same time, it is sold as documentaries for private consumption, severed from the community of seeing live performances with their actor-spectator, giver-receiver dynamic.

The danger in analyzing prison theatre is one of patronizingly identifying what theatre “does” for the inmates, a temptation John Tulloch identifies and rejects in another case of theatre as education and reform: that of high school students taken to high-culture theatre performances. He writes of two different student groups at performances of Shakespeare:

What if we want to get beyond that dichotomy of high/popular culture altogether? Alasuutari, in moving toward his third generation notion of audience analysis, insists that ‘it is no way necessary to think that pleasure must be instrumentalised.’ To assume that teenagers’ pleasures at the theatre are likely to lie in a politics of resistance (since surely they are not going to enjoy their teacher-prescribed, high-cultural text) is to devalue the pleasures that many young people (alongside much older people like myself) can, in fact, get at a Shakespearean theatrical event” (Shakespeare and Chekhov in Production 5).

The actor-interviews, as we have seen, push against this instrumentalization of the dramas. The actor-inmates comment frequently not only on the pleasure they receive from reading the texts but also what Scott-Douglass calls Shakespeare as “a moralizing force.” Though, officially, the primary uses for these programs are educational—to improve literacy—or a therapeutic last chance when other rehabilitation programs have failed them, the testimony of the documentaries and interviews reveals that the act of
participating in a theatrical production has greater effects both on the individuals and the group (5-6). The actor-inmates are not approaching the dramatic texts by asking how this experience will improve their literacy or help them to find a job after their parole. They approach the texts and the rehearsal process asking the play to show itself to them, investigating and looking at characters from every angle. They approach the play-world like phenomenologists. More than just an educational program or therapy, the inmates will comment frequently on the pleasure of reading and performing these plays. And more than Shakespeare, specifically, as a moralizing force, the actors emphasize that it is the action of taking on a role and seeing through someone else’s eyes and the empathy that that requires which carries the moral force.

Those most likely to instrumentalize the theatrical event when it takes place within a prison, by and for prisoners, are the teachers, directors, prison officials, and—at a greater remove—the scholars sifting the evidence to look for conclusions. Amy Scott-Douglass tells her readers that the directors of prison Shakespeare programs are not “secretly working for the establishment,” but instead are committed to “social actitivism… To them, Shakespeare provides inmates with opportunities for personal liberation in spite of institutional restrictions” (Scott-Douglass 96). In contrast to this more therapeutic and political goal, Warden Chandler tells Scott-Douglass that, though he is a warden who does not believe in prisons, he likes the Shakespeare program because, “From a warden’s point of view, if you measure Shakespeare by how it impacts the institution, the program is successful for two reasons. It keeps things quiet and provides opportunity” (Scott-Douglass 104). The warden at Kumla, Sweden sought out Jan Jonson to direct his “boys” in a play because:

I thought it would be great if we could have a play that allows inmates to express themselves. We have a stage. So I thought it was a terrific idea.
I’d been trying to get different theatres involved. Drama is a fantastic resource. It allows you to play roles you don’t normally play, to escape from yourself, enter a new dimension. It involves rhythm, poetry, harmony, and violence, too, of course. Criminals are often far more colorful than the average person. (*Prisoners of Beckett*)

The inmates featured in *Shakespeare Behind Bars* testify to the experience’s effect on their lives within the context of an indefinite prison sentence. They contrast freedom and incarceration frequently. Shane tells Amy Scott-Douglass, “my new discovery is for like three hours when we’re doing a play, I’ve had this freedom. And it’s freedom that you guys in the audience give us” (Scott-Douglass 12) Demond, also, ties acting to a spiritual transposition to another life, “When I’m acting, I’m not me and I’m not in prison and I’m not, you know, living with what I live with. I’m somebody else, and so I live what they live” (Scott-Douglass 38). In an interview within *Prisoners of Beckett*, Mischa who played Lucky tells the camera, “It was so relaxing. It’s led to ties of friendship and a deep and strong sense of fraternity. Our *Godot* grew out of that feeling. It’s fantastic that we’ve come so far in a place where door after door is locked. Jan had the courage to go through the same doors but in the other direction… My body may be locked up but my soul is free.” The warden of Kumla, too, was caught up in the magic of taking on a new role, remembering of the special performances outside the prison, “It was incredible in that group that I could stop being a warden and change into stagehand and driver. That’s a kind of theatre too, and it’s an amazing feeling!”

Therapeutically, many of the inmates see the process of putting on a play as humanizing and a chance for moral reflection and growth. For Leonard in *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, “what is so horrible about prison is intellectually and psychologically it does, I mean, there’s a very real connection between being caged in physically and caged in mentally, very real” (Scott-Douglass 15-6). After attending rehearsals for a time, Amy
Scott-Douglass concludes that the peculiar process of role assignment in Shakespeare Behind Bars (that the roles are, for the most part, chosen by inmates for a multitude of reasons) is part of the therapy process designed into the program:

> In the Shakespeare program, volunteering to play the role of the antagonist who commits a criminal act, signifies that you’re ready to deal with your past, you’re taking accountability for your own criminal acts. Most of the men in the Shakespeare program tell me that they would rather play a woman than play the “villain.” (43)

The actors extrapolate from the dramatic situation to their own lives. This process is encouraged in *Shakespeare Behind Bars* by the mentor/director Curt Tofteland who encourages his actors to explore both the text for rational answers to character motivation and their own emotional responses to the dramatic action. In this alchemy, the inmates are able to identify with the darker aspects of human nature within Shakespeare’s plays while gaining a perspective on their own crimes, as Sammie recounts:

> I needed to really understand the extreme pain that I caused, and that, in essence, motivates me to be constantly aware of how I treat others. People are so special and unique and important, and no matter what’s going on, they don’t deserve to be hurt in that fashion…Like with Brutus, he doesn’t take the time to give Caesar a chance, and I will never be like that. Never again. (31)

Rick Cluchey, too, sees the process of acting in Beckett’s plays as freeing, writing, “in the end it was Beckett and not the Warden who gave me my freedom, a freedom of mind if not of body” (*Remembering Beckett* 197).

> While Sammie says “never again” and Cluchey says “free finally,” *Prisoners of Beckett’s Estragon* ironically reverses the therapeutic, self-discovery mode of the Shakespeare program when he tells the interviewer, “I did not see myself as a criminal before I went to prison either. I should have. I should have, cause maybe then I wouldn’t
have been there.” The inmate playing Estragon has concluded that the only way to maintain a semblance of freedom in Western society is to see himself as a criminal.

The popularity of prison theatre and theatre in prison attest to the theatrical form’s effect as ethical crucible. Bruce Wilshire specifically turns to one of Beckett’s shortest, most distilled theatrical compositions—*Act Without Words I*—to make the point that in the theatre, the spectator experiences situations *as if* he were the character being acted on stage. As the subject on stage grabs for the suspended water, which is repeatedly jerked just out of his reach by an unknown force in the heavens, the spectator feels that:

the actor is a proxy for each of us individuals in such a situation of desperation and tantalization. He says to us, in effect, ‘What if this should happen to you?’ or ‘Go try this yourself.’ He stands in for each of us. He models a response to a difficult situation, which, in one form or another, might befall any of us. Standing in for us in public, he authorizes our anxiety in such a situation, as well as our determination not to collapse in the face of the difficulty. But we also stand attentively in public in his presence. So, conversely, we authorize him to take our place, and we authorize his modeling of a response to the situation. Even if a performer should behave ridiculously as the character, and we should laugh at him, we all agree that this behavior should be counted ridiculous. His enactment authorizes our laughter, and our laughter authorizes his enactment. (Wilshire 22)

Whether a Western public is consuming the popular media of reality prison television shows or the less popularly available documentaries of theatre programs in prison, the appeal of these media resides in this *as if* effect. In wanting to imagine ourselves *as if* we were such subjects of oppression, we likewise want to imagine what Baz Kershaw calls in his study of prison theatre, “freedom of oppression” (46).  

201 For Kershaw, radical freedom can be pursued even within the Western penal system “through actions which combine resistant and transcendent ideological dynamics…and at least gesture to

possibilities beyond them” (49). Though these gestures of freedom may be so small as to be completely unrecognized by the dominant structures of authority, Kershaw asserts they “can insinuate pathologies of hope,” a salve whose efficacy to insinuate actual, infectious change remains unproven.

Theatre directors in prison bring the rumor of this hope, but not the sort of solutions that would lead to the radical freedom promised by the critical apparatus surrounding these events. In 1965, Hugh Kenner saw in Beckett’s Mr. Godot the image of the perfect Cartesian man—“body and mind in close harmony: the mind set on survival, mastery, and the contemplation of immutable relativities, the body a reduction to uncluttered terms of the quintessential machine” (56). This Godot could solve all of the tramps’ problems, yet he never comes, and meanwhile, “the Molloys, Morans, and Malones of this world must shift as they can, which is to say, badly.” Ten years later, Michel Foucault described another “solving and transforming paragon,” which came to prominence over the course of Enlightenment modernity: the Western penal system. Both the Cartesian man and the Panopticon are machines guided by a perfect, all-seeing, transparent-to-itself intelligence. Both offer a version of freedom that tantalizes the individual who would follow its directives. This freedom, the Stoic “freedom of oppression” put forward by Baz Kershaw and the prison wardens who support the theatre programs cannot be reconciled with the sort of freedom the prisoners testify to desiring. The freedom of oppression allies itself with an Existentialist reading of Godot, defending and supporting the “transforming paragon,” that set the mechanism of Waiting for Godot (the penal system) in motion.

Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, and theatrical performance in general, has found an uneasy home in Western prison life because it offers a simultaneous sense of freedom to
its participants, a critique of the capriciousness of the penal system (as capricious as the taunting, invisible cruelty at work in the *Act Without Words*), and a means by which those on the “outside” might see themselves “as if” imprisoned, imagining a reality that we sense is not so distant after all.
CHAPTER FOUR

UNSETTLED SPECTATORSHIP: MARTIN MCDONAGH’S LEENANE TRILOGY

Martin McDonagh, the 1990s “bad boy” of the London stage, came by that name thanks to a media blitz of coverage exploiting his drunken altercation with Sean Connery and a certain flippancy when answering questions about the theatre. The coverage, coupled with a dramatic style that has been touted as Tarantino-esque to the point of exhaustion has earned him all sorts of disapprobation for not taking Irish, Irishness, human violence, animal cruelty, or the English language seriously enough. In this thoroughly globalized theatrical economy, the bad boy, film-buff image sells his Leenane trilogy better than it sells itself. Thus, in a performance history crowded with shock tactics and accounts of audience revulsion, the most shocking thing of all is the omission of the plays’ original reception in the towns and provinces of Ireland. The media has predigested McDonagh’s modus operandi to such an extent that, though many critics have over the years indulged in worried handwringing, asking “where can he go from here?” it has turned out that following the Irish plays, McDonagh can easily surprise. First, by writing a dystopic fable of atonement in a nameless totalitarian state (The Pillowman), then by turning to writing and directing major motion pictures (In Bruges) and threatening never to return to the stage. In his recent return to the stage, A Behanding
in Spokane, he exploited expectations yet again only to subvert them by writing a play fraught with ominous expectations in which nothing violent actually happens. Audience reaction again clearly followed the media and advertising cues, reacting with “hilarity” to the unforeseen events of the play-world. What remains to be said about McDonagh? I propose that we can now say much about the ethics of his plays, an ethics that holds the mirror up to the audience’s reactions. Whether we consider Leenane or Spokane, the ethical event in McDonagh’s worlds appears in the silences following the raucous laughter.

4.1 Introduction: The “Irish” McDonagh and the Druid Theatre Company

With seven plays and two films to his credit, McDonagh is an international presence in drama and film, and the scholarly community often points to the West End and Broadway performances of his works and the awards he has won in Cannes and from the Academy as evidence that he is a postmodern, global phenomenon. But the first priority in considering the international reception of McDonagh’s plays ought to be to consider where they were first developed. At the age of twenty-five, McDonagh came to international recognition thanks to a theatre company with specific aesthetic and political goals, a company that has developed a complementary “avant-garde” project: to valorize and value the local and the provincial over the urban national and international artistic centers. Druid Theatre, since its founding in Galway in 1975, began to premiere new interpretations of old works alongside new writing in Galway before touring throughout Ireland and internationally. From the beginning, their goals have been:

… bringing work to towns in the Galway hinterland and … touring to those parts of Ireland otherwise overlooked by professional theatre. In its programming Druid
favoured moving between the Irish and the international repertoire. It also began its commitment to new writing.²⁰²

This commitment and uncompromising vision led Druid to produce challenging works for their most valued audiences in rural Ireland. Early in their history, they looked to Bertolt Brecht repeatedly, “to seek out the plays and theatrical means to investigate the west of Ireland as their spiritual home and to bring this work on tour to those parts where it could most meaningfully be received.” These tours become known as URTs in the theatre’s parlance, or “Unusual Regional Tours.”²⁰³ Patrick Lonergan calls Druid Theatre’s touring policy “an excellent example of the capacity of subsidized theatre to operate as a force for cultural inclusion.”²⁰⁴ However, as we shall see in the critical response to the plays, the “cultural inclusion” that allowed Irish audiences to embrace McDonagh as a native Irishman did not extend to the international appraisal of his work.

The “unusual” in these regional tours ought to dominate critical discussions of the works commissioned by Druid, but in the case of Martin McDonagh, the regions of Ireland slip away into a void created by international celebrity’s levelling effect.

Kierkegaard commented over a century ago on modernity and specifically journalism’s leveling effect, destroying the contours of the particular, the personal, and the local in its


rush to commodify events for a universal reading public.\textsuperscript{205} Seen now as a blockbuster author, his beginning in Parish halls in towns like Leenane is hard to match to the image of a young superstar, touted as being the only author to have four plays running simultaneously in the West End other than Shakespeare.\textsuperscript{206} In the history of Martin McDonagh’s international, commercial, and critical reception, digital journalism has reformatted an author working in and through the Druid Theatre’s political and aesthetic commitments as—by turns—a punk, an \textit{enfant terrible} of the in-yer-face generation in the mode of England’s Sarah Kane (\textit{Blasted}, \textit{4.48 Psychosis}) and Mark Ravenhill (\textit{Shopping and Fucking}, \textit{Some Explicit Polaroids}), and a literary colonialist poaching “hiberno-English” to entertain bourgeois urban audiences in London and Dublin. This notion of “what people think” of the play is often merely imagined by the media; as Kierkegaard puts it this imagined audience is, “a phantom… its spirit, a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage” (80).\textsuperscript{207} and a problem which Patrick Lonergan in his scathing critique of how \textit{The Leenane Trilogy} has


\textsuperscript{206} This factoid appears almost everywhere McDonagh’s name is mentioned. Patrick Lonergan is quick to debunk the exaggeration as the true case is that in the 1997 season, McDonagh was the only playwright other than Shakespeare to have four concurrent plays running, not the only playwright since the seventeenth century. But for an example of this man-as-myth reporting, see Jesse McKinley. “Suffer the Little Children.” New York Times. April 3, 2005.

\textsuperscript{207} By the time of this writing, McDonagh’s most recent play appeared before the public with a phantom double—that of the “raucous comedy” the surrounding media reporting created by advertising. The overwhelming street advertising, website slant, and advertising banners on the theater conditioned the audience to react in ways that conflicted with the action on the stage. It would take a stupendous leap of imagination to anticipate from the play script for \textit{A Behanding in Spokane} that the audience’s reaction to the first shooting would be laughter, as I witnessed in a Broadway performance in June, 2010.
been received pinpoints as “our understanding of McDonagh’s work has been conditioned by journalism that was written by people who in some cases had no knowledge of theatre, leading to reporting that is often inaccurate, superficial, and sensationalistic” (Lonergan 207). Worse, the critical response which often relies heavily on journalistic accounts of the productions, focuses almost exclusively on the London and Broadway productions to then generalize about the “Irishness” of McDonagh’s Irish plays.

The Irishness of the plays must at the least be read through Druid Theatre’s and Garry Hynes’s artistic and cultural goals for the productions from their young playwright. Patrick Lonergan’s article, “Druid Theatre’s Leenane Trilogy on Tour: 1996-2001” bemoans that the critical reception of McDonagh should ignore to such an extent the particularities of place, nation, and language, a negligence that goes so far as to alter the collective impression of the plays’ meaning. As Kierkegaard warns, in modernity we can hold opinions without actually having attended the event. Since the invention of cheap printing and journalism, the concept of “the public” has become possible, whereas in antiquity, “A people itself had to appear en masse, in corpore, at the scene of the action.” (81). Reconstituting the event of the early performances of The Leenane Trilogy is possible, in part, thanks to this journalism. To take from John Tulloch’s cultural and performance studies, this section hopes to situate its reading of the ethics of The Leenane Trilogy in the many “tales from the field” available in the early newspaper accounts and later published records of those who attended the plays in various settings. As will become apparent, the “places and occasions” of the performances contribute greatly to audience response: the size of the theatre, the nationality of the spectator, the locale and
the language of the town in which the performance took place (Tulloch “Chekhov in Bath” 181-182).

To begin, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* premiered on February 2, 1996 and was the first production staged in Druid’s new Town Hall Theatre. The play follows a middle-aged daughter and her aging mother through a twisted tale of co-dependence, abuse, madness, and murder. The plot echoes the film *Psycho* in its escalation from realism to horror in the second act. The play opens with a high level of banal banter about the routines of daily life in the rural Leenane—a life that revolves around Complan, telly, and in this play, the homecoming of Pato Dooley from England. Despite the Irish tropes of rural cottage and close-knit Catholic community and the backing of the Druid Theatre, from the beginning McDonagh aroused the worry of newspaper reviewers across Ireland for what they saw as his exploitation of stage Irishry. The Galway *City Tribune* looks toward the gala opening with anticipation of this new author who was already loudly claiming to “only having seen about ten plays in his life—and those the cheapest tickets he could get” who had won not only Druid’s but also the National theatre in London’s confidence. But by the time the play had been open a week, the paper’s appraisal had shifted.208 The day of the play’s opening, a reviewer for the *City Tribune* compared it to *Deliverance*, a condescending take on rural Irish life, mocking, “It was the way the townies do be thinking Connemara people spake!...Had the play been set 100 years ago, there would be no objection to use of this type of language.”209 The review continues by

208 “Countdown underway as Druid set for gala launch” from “Artsweek…a roundup with Bernadette Fallon” *City Tribune*. 1/26/1996 p.2

worrying that London audience would be “be treated to either a genuinely mis-
understood view of life in the West of Ireland or a great send-up, when it transfers to the
Royal Court Theatre after its run in the Town Hall. This play will do for Connemara what
the film Deliverance did for the French speaking Cajun country in the USA.” A week
later, an article on new literary talent finds that McDonagh cannot yet balance comedy
and tragedy, as evidenced by Galway audience reactions to the play:

His timing is good, particularly in the comic scenes, and he can return
endlessly to a theme to draw out just the right effect without overdoing
it… But no matter how you read the stage-Irishness, the language and the
portrayal of rural Ireland, you cannot argue that the balance being sought
between comedy and tragedy is working when some of the audience are
laughing (as the opening night audience were) at what is supposed to be the
blackest and most horrifying scene of the play, the scene where the
daughter viciously tortures her mother. He may write great plays as I have
said, but this is certainly not one of them.210

McDonagh’s own Irishness will figure heavily into appraisals of his work, but at this
early point it appears to have been of confused certainty. Before Beauty Queen departed
on one of Druid’s most ambitious regional tours, Kevin O’Sullivan, writing for City
Tribune calls it “the first play from Connemara writer Martin McDonagh,” and applauds
that it will “most appropriately” be playing in the parish hall in Leenane on November
23rd.211 Actually a London native and the son of Irish emigrants, McDonagh visited
western Ireland during childhood vacations. The combination of Anglo and Irish in
McDonagh’s identity complicates the critical reception of his work as Irish, as Aiden
Arrowsmith records in his article, “Genuinely Inauthentic: Martin McDonagh’s

210 “Cúirt land some more literary heavyweights” “ (City Tribune 2/9/1996 p. 2

211 Kevin O’Sullivan. “Druid embark on tour of the islands.” City Tribune.
Postdiasporic Irishness.” According to Arrowsmith, the British “race relations industry” focuses almost exclusively on differences of color in defining racial difference, to the point where any emphasis on Irish racial difference, especially for second-generation Irish, is “problematic or silenced” (238). This problematized Irishness, which Arrowsmith calls “genuinely inauthentic” is the Irishness of McDonagh’s subversively realistic plays.

\textit{Beauty Queen}—a co-production with the Royal Court Theatre—then traveled to London, where reviewers were considerably less agitated by its representation of Irishness. Nick Curtis writing for the \textit{Evening Standard} sees nothing false in what he calls “McDonagh’s witty but respectful way with the West-of-Ireland patter.” The \textit{Financial Times}’s Sarah Hemming commented mostly on the realism of Garry Hynes’s staging, which “expertly charts every nuance…On Francis O’Connor’s detailed set, you can almost smell the rancid sink and feel the damp air.” Even more boldly, Graham Hassell in the weekly series “What’s On,” considers the play to be an honest depiction of contemporary Ireland:

McDonagh presents the modern, unlovely side of rural life in western Ireland—nothing to do with travel brochure ceildhhs and ecu-rich farmers, but everything to do with cultural impoverishment…It’s tempting with Irish plays to look for symbolism, to expect characters to obliquely represent political standpoints, but there’s nothing evident here.

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\cite{212} In \textit{Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories}. Eds., Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006. 236-245. \\
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\cite{213} Nick Curtis for the \textit{Evening Standard}, 3/6/1996 in \textit{Theatre Record}. 96.288. \\
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\cite{214} 3/12/1996 in \textit{Theatre Record}. 96.288. \\
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\cite{215} Graham Hassell in “What’s On” 3/13/1996 in \textit{Theatre Record}. 96.290. \\
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Thus it appears that London reviewers saw nothing ironic or symbolic in either the playwriting or the staging, taking the Irishness of McDonagh’s Leenane as writ. The difference in response between Galway and London belies the Druid Company’s analysis of how the alliance with McDonagh and the Royal Court transformed their cultural goals. According to the history as written on their website, “This association with McDonagh represented a departure for Druid on several fronts. Stylistically, the terms with which Druid explored Irishness were unambiguously from an international and so a highly ironized vantage point.” The irony Druid claims this partnership symbolized is, on the whole, lacking in responses on both sides of the channel separating England from Ireland. Indeed, the early Irish reviews reveal an acute worry that the play will be read as contemporary realism in London.

The next year, however, Irish journalistic response toward McDonagh shifts with the production of the full Leenane Trilogy in Galway. The Beauty Queen of Leenane was reprised and joined by A Skull in Connemara, in which widower Mick Dowd has the gruesome task of digging up, smashing, and disposing of old bones in the graveyard to make way for new bodies, and The Lonesome West, in which brothers Valene and Coleman fight incessantly, almost to the point of murder. The plays were shown on alternate nights and for special all-day performances of the complete trilogy. In April of 1997, the Connacht Tribune recalled the popularity of Beauty Queen and the excited critical response. Bernadette Fallon for “Artsweek,” meanwhile, recalled her own


reticence toward *Beauty Queen* but found the full trilogy guided the audience through the appropriate moods much more effectively:

> Even though I did not enjoy *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* on its very first performance, the play has matured like a fine wine. The audience moved perfectly with its mood swings on its expertly paced journey from black comedy to dark tragedy, unlike the first time round. And while the language may still jar with those in the audience who have not yet passed their fortieths, the introduction of Aidan McArdle to the cast, as young lad Ray Dooley, was an asset to the representation of youth in this particular Irish setting.\(^{218}\)

Fallon goes on to call the conclusion of *The Lonesome West* “a triumph and something very exceptional for Irish theatre.” A few days later, another *City Tribune* reviewer observed that the trilogy “was the type of thing Quentin Tarantino would have done if he ever found himself in Connemara. I’m not sure if this is a service or disservice to Martin McDonagh, the trilogy’s author, but it is certainly meant as positive observation.”\(^{219}\)

One of the most interesting aspects of the premier of the *Leenane Trilogy* was Druid’s decision to open the rehearsal process to the public. They went so far as to construct a special viewing area from which people could watch rehearsals. The newspapers advertised this behind-the-scenes opportunity, in which potential audiences could wander in the Town Hall Theatre’s foyer, see and meet the actors and production staff, look at the production model of the set and the working scripts and watch rehearsals. Bernadette Fallon used the experience to introduce her anticipatory review in “Druid, Druid and more Druid in weeks ahead,” writing:


I wandered down there earlier this week—unfortunately Mick Lally was firmly installed behind glass. Rehearsals for A Skull in Connemara were under way, this will be the first production to come before the public in the Leenane Trilogy. Lally and David Wilmot were on stage and, from what I could gather, seemed to be trying to guess the age of unearthed corpses by their skulls. Not for the faint hearted. Wilmot also had a question as to where certain parts of the corpse’s anatomy had gone—I’ll leave it to you to guess which parts.\(^{220}\)

This unheard of level of openness brought the approval of the Minister for Arts, Culture, and the Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins, who called the experiment “an extremely brave one.”\(^{221}\) Seeing all three plays in one day proved popular with Galway critics, one of whom “found the experience enjoyable and in no way overly drawn out or long. The only thing which seemed strange afterwards, was going back to single evening performances which did not run for the day and offer you a chance to have breakfast, lunch, and dinner in a theatre! Pick of the trilogy for me has to be The Lonesome West, with its warped, twisted, funny, and tragic look at ‘lonesome rural life.’”\(^{222}\) This full-day, from-the-inside experience of Druid’s production process made Galway’s run of the Leenane Trilogy extremely successful. The openness of the production recalls at the same time it predates what the DVD would do for film and film buffs. In the same way that film aficionados look forward to the extra materials on a DVD, the Galway production of the Leenane Trilogy managed to make theatre competitive with the cinema in terms of what Martin McDonagh called being “open” in an interview with Ciara Dwyer for the Sunday


Independent. She writes “not only does he want theatre to be as open to the public as cinema is, but he also wants theatre to be on a par with film.” The trilogy’s opening in Galway appears to have unified the artistic goals of both Druid and McDonagh while causing reviewers to reconsider their original opinions of The Beauty Queen.

Meanwhile, London reviews of the full Trilogy were decidedly more mixed a year after McDonagh’s stunning debut. Michael Coveney declares he “has an unquestionable gift for structure and for cheeky magpie raids on his exemplary authors: Synge, Beckett, O’Neill, Orton, Sam Shephard.” Alistair Macauley, on the other hand, sees this less as homage, more as “synthetic” manipulation. He writes:

The problem with the plays of Martin McDonagh is that they are synthetic. They are also cute, melodramatic, and manipulative—but these faults, though irritating, would be offset by McDonagh’s sheer talent, if only he created a world onstage that he himself valued seriously. As it is, the world of his plays has no weight in our minds because it has none in his. Truth doesn’t interest him.

Whereas a year earlier, The Beauty Queen had been called “respectful” and “expertly...nuance[d],” with the addition of A Skull in Connemara and The Lonesome West, McDonagh offends London reviewers who now see him as shallow in his use of dialogue to unsettle any notion of reliable truth and weak in his critique of Catholic dogma. Robert Butler writes that the central tension of A Skull in Connemara is a result of the rapid dialogue, in which “the unreliability of any information and that characters’ comic fastidiousness about establishing facts,” though he does not approve of the effect.

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223 Ciara Dwyer. Sunday Independent. 6/1/1997


this creates.\textsuperscript{226} Paul Taylor, likewise, dislikes the way that the plays manipulate the emotions of the spectator for seemingly heartless reasons. He compares what he calls the heartlessness of McDonagh to the “ruthlessly logical understanding” of Joe Orton:

It’s just that, unlike a writer such as Joe Orton, who had the courage of his comic callousness and a ruthlessly logical understanding of the world, McDonagh opts for the less honourable course of giving the heart strings the odd strum before systematically snapping them. And despite the heavy symbolism of the crucifix that dangles over all three of Garry Hynes’s zestfully acted productions, he takes only sniggering pot-shots at Catholic culture…But it all seems very shallow compared with Orton’s lethally penetrating take on Christianity (‘a bird of prey carrying an olive branch’) in \textit{Funeral Games}.\textsuperscript{227}

Taylor’s reference to Orton’s 1968 \textit{Funeral Games}, written for a television series titled \textit{The Seven Deadly Virtues} and charged with portraying charity provides us with a good entry way to the problem the \textit{Leenane Trilogy} faced with international audiences. Orton’s \textit{Funeral Games} explored charity through farce, or as Joan Dean summarizes his work, “in Orton’s plays, virtue, if it can be found, is a sham.”\textsuperscript{228} The play concerns two clerical figures—Pringle who suspects his wife of infidelity and subsequently makes out to the town that she has “left,” hoping to be accused of her murder. He hopes this because he preaches a type of Christianity that exhorts “forgiveness is a thing of the past” and should not be tolerated. The other, Mcorquodale, has in fact murdered his wife after discovering her adultery with Pringle. Pringle risks losing his reputation as the prophet of this new brand of Christianity if it should come out that he has not murdered his wife and is in fact guilty of the crime of which she had been suspected.


\textsuperscript{227} Paul Taylor \textit{The Independent} 7/28/1997 in \textit{Theatre Record} 97.925.

We have seen so far in the very early reviews of McDonagh’s *Leenane Trilogy* that within the first two years of his playwrighting career he had been both lauded as the best new writer and the worst exploiter of Irish stereotypes. His work had led to some of Druid’s most interesting innovations in open theatre, an ambitious regional tour and an expansion of their international presence. Finally, one London reviewer accuses him of ineffectually sending up a false, weak Christianity in the world of *Leenane*, where a pathetic priest commits suicide to prevent further murders. Culminating in *The Lonesome West*, the *Leenane Trilogy*, like Orton’s *Funeral Games* is intimately concerned with forgiveness and the Christian view of charity. Yet, as we analyze the dramatic text and then recorded audience reactions from Ireland to America, similarities with Orton’s farce will disappear. The *Leenane Trilogy* works by first lulling its spectators into comfortable familiarity with its tropes, hilarity at its antics, and finally silence at the shocking portrayal of Christian charity in the figure of Father Welsh.

4.2 Killing Kitsch: McDonagh’s Multiple Media Intertexts

McDonagh’s plays invite befuddlement because to understand them is to try to untangle layers upon layers of media intertexts while paying careful attention to the conditions under which they were first produced. The works are therefore simultaneously universal (thanks to their *lingua franca* of television and movies) and pointedly particular. They are about Ireland (as Ciara Dwyer reports from an interview, “Martin insists that he is interested only in telling stories. They could’ve been set anywhere, it just happens to be Ireland. And because it’s Irish people talking, the details are more interesting for him”) as much as they are about “Hicksville, USA, somewhere in the
Urals…anywhere geographically distanced from populated communities.”

Due to his close association with Druid Theatre’s Garry Hynes, McDonagh’s early works are as much an expression of the Galway theatre company’s aesthetic of the value of the local and rural over international commodification as they are an expansion of a Hollywood aesthetic of glib dialogue and excessive violence. Although in the wake of his international reception McDonagh has become known for being the “Tarantino” of the Irish stage (a gross simplification perpetrated by a slapdash journalistic coverage according to Patrick Lonergan), the plays and their performance histories witness what Susanna Peters calls “a cautious return to humanity—albeit informed by the experience of the surreal and the grotesque on the one hand, and threatened by kitsch on the other.”

But is this kitsch a threat?

McDonagh owes his meteoric success to his peculiar ability to blend the particular and local with a universal language of kitsch and postmodern pop culture, thus explaining his plays’ tremendous international success. In layering his play texts with movies, radio, and television, McDonagh’s plays self-translate to (primarily) Anglophone audiences all over the world. As his work has become increasingly dis-associated from the particularities of history, nation, and place (The Pillowman, A Behanding in Spokane), this common idiom—the rapid staccato of a filmic dialogue, the common characters and tropes of old movies (good cop and bad cop in The Pillowman, psychotic killer and naïve

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young women in *A Behanding in Spokane*), and the common dialect of a hybridized Anglo-Irish-American English opens us to the question: is this the community of the digital entertainment age?

In this preliminary analysis of McDonagh’s first trilogy, tracing the operation of intertextual referents will show how the world of the play turns the audience’s gaze back upon themselves. The formal decision to be a writer of Irish rural plays in the tradition of John Millington Synge (*The Playboy of the Western World*), exploits the offensiveness possible in a play that criticizes the audience for both its sympathies and its prejudices. While the historical intertext unifies the audience by eliciting their pettiness and judgment, the intertextuality with the media of film and television exploit the common bond a global audience will have, both with each other and with the characters. This common cultural media motif lulls them into a feeling of security before subverting their expectations. By the final play in *The Leenane Trilogy*, McDonagh will further subvert the audience’s expectations based on his previous two plays: all the preceding violence will be recast by Father Welsh’s seemingly absurd and despairing actions. The audience that had erupted in nonstop hilarity at the Connor brothers’ explosive bickering, conditioned to react this way by McDonagh’s reputation for black comedy, must reconsider their own responsibility in endorsing a relationship bound for murder.

First, the question of genre must be tackled. McDonagh has infamously claimed that he began writing plays because they were easier than screenplays or radio dramas but that he has always preferred film and television (Huber 14). Critics such as Laura Eldred have made much of his use of both the gothic and of horror film tropes in *The Leenane Trilogy*. Furthermore, he has earned the moniker, “Tarantinoesque” for his stylistic
juxtaposition of extreme violence with witty banter over trivialities. In *The Lonesome West*, the Connor brothers argue over “Taytos” and a “fecking stove” before their standoff with a possibly loaded gun. In *The Beauty Queen*, Maureen and her mother, Mag, haggle over the consistency of lumpy Complan and whether or not Mag has been pouring wee down the kitchen sink. This homage by way of banter recalls *Pulp Fiction* (1994) with its now infamous descents into mundane topics, especially food (the “Royale with cheese” especially seems to inspire McDonagh’s attention to junk food and junk food preferences). These hilarious trivialities quickly turn vicious, as the audience begins to recognize the wee as symbolic of a lifetime of codependence, cruelty, and control. Although the particular referents (Complan, Taytos, football) are local to Ireland or Europe, the rhythm recalls not only Samuel Beckett’s trivial yet weighty exchanges (“*si on se pendait?*”) but also the staccato, rapid-fire dialogue of classic and more contemporary Hollywood film. McDonagh exploits the audience’s learned behavior: we respond to a dialogue’s rhythm as much as its content and therefore receive it as comedy. In this, the performance aspect of the productions cues the audience to react with laughter instead of fear.

In addition to film, television programming from England, the United States, and Australia, as well as the ubiquitous football matches, forms a visual and auditory background, constituting a particularly historical and realistic mise-en-scène for dramatic action that resists realist readings. The “telly” provides common touchstones to the characters across the chronology of the Trilogy, making this community one tied together

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more by foreign programming than religious or national ties. In *The Beauty Queen*, Mag reacts with brittle annoyance to the Irish language programming on the television:

Mag: Not for nonsense did I want it set.
Maureen: (pause) It isn’t nonsense anyways. Isn’t it Irish?
Mag: It sounds like nonsense to me. Why can’t they just speak English like everybody?  

McDonagh’s Irishness and the Irish character of his early plays is another hotly contested zone in the criticism his work has garnered so far. *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, parodying the problem of Irish terrorism, had trouble finding a company to produce it, according to Joan Fitzpatrick Dean, because it was “openly offensive to Irish republicans, animal rights advocates, and others,” ultimately taking seven years to find a theatre.  

Ondrej Pilny, meanwhile, scoffs that “To claim that the plays of Martin McDonagh offer representations of Irish reality is equivalent to regarding the films of Quentin Tarantino as images of urban life in the USA.” Yet, as Brad Kent skillfully summarizes, the choice of Connemara as the setting for a trilogy is one that brings with it a host of Irish shadings to any performance or reading of the play: Connemara has Ireland’s largest Gaeltacht, it is the furthest point geographically from England, and, according to Kent, “it is perhaps better known as Ireland’s poor agricultural and tourism dependent region.”

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The critical reception of his work has seen a fair number of McDonagh defenders, both as concerns the Irish character of the early plays and the generic interplay with film and theatrical predecessors. According to interviews, McDonagh chose the West because of his infatuation with the lilt and grammar of Western Irish-English as he experienced on childhood summer vacations there. In her article “Language Games: The Pillowman, A Skull in Connemara: Martin McDonagh’s Hiberno-English,” Lisa Fitzpatrick answers the heavy critiques of McDonagh’s exploitation of “Oirishness,” arguing that McDonagh’s Irish plays are not representing Ireland so much as using the fictionalized imagery of “Bórd Fáilte” advertising typical of tourism materials “to represent the alienation and stasis of the human condition.”236 Though there are many ways of reading McDonagh’s engagement with both Irish literary history (Synge) and a modern caricature of “Irishness,” what interests us here is the relative lack of attention by critics to how the plays were received in the “unusual” venues that the Druid Theatre specifically targets.237 By making the Irishness of the plays an exploitative intertext employed by a fundamentally English playwright, we fail to see the integrality of their Irishness to the ongoing cultural and artistic project of the Druid Theatre.

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237 Werner Huber offers a more sober and measured reading of the stylized, “Synge-song” language of the Irish plays, “This [stylization of Irish English] adds up to the impression that the linguistic behavior of his characters amounts to some kind of play-acting within the play thereby distancing itself from the dimension of the play’s realism.” (Werner Huber. “The Early Plays.” In Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories. 13-26. 22).
Rather than looking at the Gaeltachts through the sentimental lens of Ireland’s relationship to England and English, a relationship which in this respect seems to desire that the Gaeltachts preserve Irish merely for the pleasure of tourists in search of authentic Ireland, a more complete performance history would record, as Patrick Lonergan does, the audience reactions in the communities represented by the Irish plays. When performed in the Aran islands, when Mag complains that Irish should be left behind “Why can’t they just speak English like everybody?” according to Dubhghaill, the audience’s reaction to the statement exposes a ‘deeply-felt conviction, held in many Gaeltacht communities, that Irish is of no value’” (in Lonergan 199). But when performed in Leenane itself, “Mag’s opinion came ‘as an unwelcome reminder in an area where the decision to abandon Irish as a community language is still uncomfortably close,’” and so audiences reacted with silence. (Lonergan 199). The long-time relationship of the Druid Theatre company to the most rural areas of Ireland must be read when looking at the Irish character of the plays and their relation to the actual political and linguistic struggles of its rural communities. Druid’s commitment to these audiences is a necessary intertext to the play-text itself.

Thus we can read Maureen and Mag’s exchange as more than mere poaching on the part of a London native. We can read it as the statement of a theatre company with over thirty years of history of representing Ireland not only to the world but to itself. In their conversation, Maureen pushes the subject with her mother, insisting that in Ireland one would speak Irish and not English. Ultimately, Mag settles pragmatically on, “Except where would Irish get you going for a job in England? Nowhere.” Maureen becomes an eloquent defender of a national linguistic identity apart from the history of English colonial rule, “If it wasn’t for the English stealing our language, and our land, and our
God-knows-what, wouldn’t it be we wouldn’t need to go over there begging for jobs and for handouts?” (8) The historical subtext here would be well-known to many in Ireland, England, the United States and many other nations as the long history of Irish emigration in search of jobs. Only later does the audience come to understand how complicated and ugly is Maureen’s history of working in England, her hospitalization for a mental breakdown there, and how she had to be brought back to Ireland to be taken care of by her mother. The two settle that needing English to get a job in America is somehow less historically insulting, “because in America it does be more sunny anyways…Or is that just something they say [?]” (9) Druid Theatre here is insisting that Irish audiences question their own reliance on a global media to represent their own identities to themselves. The same global media that creates an instant community among Western, media-saturated audiences, serves as a subtle critique of communities that have abdicated the role of their own story-telling to foreigners. Thus, they find themselves at the mercy of foreign interests only interested in the value of Irish labor and Irish scenery.

This dream of America, a place where the particularities of Irishness would be less of a hindrance than in the economically depressed west of Ireland or the low-wage jobs in England, hangs tantalizingly before Maureen over the course of the play. America, like England, is a place where the young men go, men like Pato, who is fed up with working conditions in Ireland and is on his way to Boston: “You’d be lucky to get away with your life the building sites in England, let alone the bad money and the ‘You oul Irish this-and-that’, and I have been in touch with me uncle in Boston and a job he has offered me there” (49-50). For Pato Dooley, exile represents the oppression of racial discrimination, but for Maureen, it means freedom from a past of servitude to her mother. Maureen, despite her dream of making it to America, that sunny land with plentiful jobs
represented on the television in her living room, most likely will continue to transform into her mother following her murder, to the point that Ray Dooley, Pato’s brother, accuses her of being “the exact fecking image of your mother you are, sitting there pegging orders and forgetting me name!” (83) Irishness, Englishness, and Americanness recede as McDonagh’s homage to Hitchcock’s Psycho reveals that more is operating in this tale then the mere linguistic hegemony of English and the economic disparities between country outlands and city industry.

Likewise, A Skull in Connemara plays with the degree to which the citizens of Connemara form their manners and expectations after television. Old Mary holds up Irish talk show host Eamonn Andrews as a paragon of virtue to Mick Dowd as a caution against his cursing, to which he points out:

Mick: …And I’ll bet Eamonn Andrews would’ve cursed too were he to’ve fell, or sat on a nail.
Mary: He would not.
Mick: It’s only on television you ever saw. When he got home he probably cursed a-plenty. He probably did nothing but curse. (89)

Mary accuses him of lying, but for further clout in the argument, she points to the crucifix, “I’ll tell you someone else who doesn’t curse That man doesn’t curse.” Mick harangues her a bit longer, saying, “Well we can’t all be as good as Our Lord. Let alone Eamonn Andrews” (90). Later in the play, the role of television in forming unrealistic expectations begins to become apparent as Thomas, Mairtin’s brother and the town’s constable, stops by the graveyard as Mick and Mairtin are exhuming the bodies to be deposited in the lake. Thomas has commented that Mick’s work, making room for new bodies in the parish graveyard, is awfully gruesome, to which Mick replies it would be worse to come across people only minutes dead.

Thomas: When do I come across people only minutes dead?
Mick: Do you not? Oh. I thought the way you do talk about it, just like *Hill Street Blues* your job is. Bodies flying about everywhere….
Thomas: Ah there’s no detective work in that oul bullshit. Detective work I’m talking about. You know, like *Quincy*. (120)

Both *Hill Street Blues* and *Quincy* were sensational American “true crime” shows, now in reruns in Ireland and misshaping the expectations of the likes of Thomas Hanlon, who will steal Mick’s wife’s body in order to create the conditions for some exciting detective work (which will all go awry).

Religion, specifically Irish Catholicism, has also become so separated from practice and community that the people of *Leenane* struggle to explain its theological demands in anything but media terms. Tom Hanlon commits suicide in the middle of the action of *The Lonesome West*, walking out into the lake and drowning. As Father Welsh tells what has happened, the Connor brothers are quickly sidetracked into one of their petty arguments over potato chips and who paid for them. In *The Lonesome West*, Valene and Coleman, despite their intense, petty fights, host Father Welsh often, and he shares his doubts and fears of failure with them. Although both of them and Girleen, a seventeen year-old girl in love with Father Welsh, tease him often about his crises of faith, (“That’s twelve this week!”) they try to help him as much as they can. They try to cheer him up and encourage him that he’s not as bad as most priests in Ireland. And, in their way, they offer him guidance, although it is as usual in *Connemara*, lessons learned in film:

Coleman: Em, only I don’t think you should be telling me what people be confessing, Father. You can be excommunicated for that I think. I saw it in a film with Montgomery Clift.
Welsh: Do ya see? I’m shite sure. (177)
Father Welsh accepts this criticism, despite its hilarious source. He accepts humbly that Coleman has a more forgiving and generous nature; “You do see the good in people, Coleman,” he admits (178). He is suspicious that Mick and Maureen have in fact committed murders, and declares himself guilty of “pegging the first stone,” making this scene an ironic commentary on Biblical standards of ethics. The conclusion leads this priest to behave toward his murdering parishioners as if they are innocent. By layering the many pop culture references, the international linguistic and economic history of Ireland, England, and America, and by culminating in The Lonesome West with the figure of Father Welsh who navigates between this post-secular identity based on television and movies, and a great cloud of Catholic and Biblical guilt, McDonagh simultaneously fills his stage with Irish particularities while opening it to common Western experiences of life as represented by a global television media. All of these intertextual instances of play between film, television and stage erases the hard borders of “Irishness,” making the Ireland of McDonagh’s Connemara a common no-place for his thoroughly media-saturated audiences while it can also serve the specific cultural goals of the Druid Theatre Company.

The greatest intertextual reference in Leenane, however, must be John Millington Synge’s The Playboy of the Western World (1907), which heavily informs The Lonesome West (insofar as the title is a direct quotation from Synge’s play). Pegeen, the heroine of Playboy, raises a difficult question for Christy Mahon—the fugitive living on the glory of his “gallous deed” of patricide to find succor in a rural western Irish village: “Were you

238 It would be fruitful to examine Father Welsh’s supposed inneffectiveness through the viewpoint of Kierkegaard’s “foolish” love as described in Works of Love, especially a love that can believe all things, meaning to believe the very best of someone, while simultaneously being aware of the foolishness of that belief (this love “is never deceived”).
never slapped in school, young fellow, that you don’t know the name of your deed?” she demands of him. The echoes of *Playboy* in *Leenane* are multiform, not least being the fact that Druid Theatre chose this Synge play in particular for their inaugural performance. We know of *Playboy* that since its first performances it caused an uproar, indeed riots, on the part of the Dublin audience, who were insulted by Synge’s depiction of rural Ireland as backward, capricious, and judgmental. Synge situated himself as an early brutalist—a forbear of the “new brutalists” of the 1990s—when he proclaimed in 1909 that “before poetry could be human again it must learn to be brutal.” We can further juxtapose McDonagh and Synge, about whom Thomas McCaana has said he was “the artist who never takes sides, who stands in his own lonely circle and has no merchandise but truth.” Likewise, in many interviews and in the voice of his semi-auto-biographical character, Katurian of *The Pillowman*, McDonagh has protested that his only objective is to tell good stories. In the early twentieth century, Abbey Theatre writers like Synge and O’Casey took up their pens to “desecrate…Ireland’s household gods,” and, as if they were mere observers peering through a keyhole, they wished to “[present] Ireland as they found her and not as she wished to be found.” In *The Playboy of the Western World*, title character Christy Mahon is a fugitive son of a controlling farmer father whom he has struck in anger at the threat of an “incestuous”

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marriage to the Widow who suckled him as an infant. In *The Lonesome West*, Valene blackmails Coleman in exchange for keeping secret Coleman’s murder of their father. When he finds refuge in the public house of Pegeen Mike, Christy Mahon discovers the ability to remake himself through language and poetry, what it means to love and be loved, and how to show true strength and courage.\(^{242}\) This transformation leads to the community rejecting him and punishing him for the acts it had just recently celebrated and Christy leaves with his resurrected father to “[romance] through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day” (80).

Similarities to *The Playboy* appear throughout the *Leenane Trilogy*; most explicitly, in *A Skull in Connemara* we witness the comic resurrection of young Mairtin after a car accident with Mick Dowd at the wheel (recalling the “pure drink driving” in which his wife died and the reason the whole town suspects him of murder), which echoes the appearance of Christy Mahon’s supposedly murdered father. The title of *The Lonesome West* comes from a line spoken by Pegeen’s father about her sniveling, cowardly suitor who is more afraid of Father O’Reilly’s judgment than for Pegeen’s safety. Her suitor refuses to spend the night at their cottage so that she will not be alone, provoking her father to exclaim, “Well, there’s the coat of a Christian man. Oh, there’s sainted glory this day in the lonesome west” (13). Like the figure of Father Reilly, Father Welsh is an unseen presence in the world of Leenane (until the final play in the trilogy, that is). Yet even more than similarities of plot and quotation, McDonagh situates himself as Synge’s heir by intentionally provoking the guardians of Irishness who skewered

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\(^{242}\) Whitaker. 5.
Synge and would do the same to McDonagh. Following the premiere of *The Playboy*, William Butler Yeats blamed “a patriotic journalism” that saw in Synge’s play “the enemy of all it would have young men believe” and used its “ignoble power” to repeat Synge’s name “again and again with some ridiculous or evil association.” Rather than forwarding an image of Ireland as virtuous and sober, the play is designed to provoke its audience by showing an image of the Irishman that they all detested, a buffoon associated with English stage Irishry. Zack Bowen in his article on the early performances sees the audience reaction toward the playwright as mirroring that of the townspeople who condemn Christy, making Synge himself “the martyred playboy in the reflexive, real-life drama caused by the play.

Synge was known for a certain rough pastoral Irish realism, and his attention to dialect makes his plays, though written in English, musically “Irish” to the ear while what they say provokes the audience to reject his imagined version of western Ireland. As Thomas Whitaker points out in his essay on *The Playboy*, the sensation it caused stemmed not from its piercing realistic gaze, but on a much different “way of seeing,” one that highlighted something invisible in 1906 Dublin:

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243 Or, we might better say that Druid Theatre positioned McDonagh as Synge’s heir, as he had never read Synge, according to his own report, before 1997. Shaun Richards includes this fact before asserting that despite his belated introduction to Synge, McDonagh is “firmly…within a critical paradigm in which Synge has not ‘emerged ever more as a type of the post-colonial artist’.” (“The Outpouring of a Morbid, Unhealthy Mind’: The Critical Condition of Synge and McDonagh.” In *Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*. Eds., Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006. 246-263.)


William Butler Yeats made the necessary point when he declared: ‘The outcry against *The Playboy* was an outcry against its style, against its way of seeing.’ And that way of seeing …encompasses its own opposition. If we refuse to discover ourselves in the play’s comic protagonist, who is both victim and victor, and if we also refuse to discover ourselves in the vicariously rebellious but anxiously closed society which longs for that protagonist, half-creates him, celebrates him, and then casts him out—we merely make a scapegoat of the play itself.\(^2\)

Synge’s *Playboy* uses a highly aestheticized, poetic style to usher forth the phenomenon of its audience’s close-mindedness, cruelty, and hypocrisy before its gaze. Juxtaposing the realism of Synge’s mise-en-scène with his stylized language pushes him beyond the bounds of realism, as does the juxtaposition McDonagh creates between a realistic pop-cultural landscape and a linguistically poetic (albeit vulgar), half-imagined Irish patois remembered from his childhood to unsettle his audience’s expectations and show them something they may not have seen *in themselves*. McDonagh layers his plays heavily with references to Gothic and horror-film plots and set-pieces, a referent that is simultaneously familiar and unsettling for the spectator. As Laura Eldred has concluded, “McDonagh uses the genres of horror and the gothic in order to force his audience into positions that may be uncomfortable—into sympathy with monstrous characters and into recognition of its own atavistic love of aestheticized violence” (113).\(^3\) Eldred has written powerful and useful comparisons between McDonagh and various horror films such as Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, describing how these intertextual referents arouse an audience’s sympathy. McDonagh, like Synge, has never professed to drawing realistic

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portraits of the west of Ireland. What shame, then, has he uncovered that causes audiences and critics to lash out at the playwright for his excesses? He has given audiences a slap, but have they identified the crime?

4.3 Leenane Looks Back in Anger: Domesticating Violence

Critics who approach the Leenane Trilogy only through the conventions of realism—critiquing the plays for their inaccurate portrayals of rural Irish life (a realism the plays only play at with their roughly “authentic” cottage sets, televisions and radios and realistic representations of physical violence) for some reason also approach them through the lens of theatre as moral instruction, an attitude toward the stage out of vogue for at least a century. If instead they would see theatre as event, the multitude of questions raised by any one performance of The Leenane Trilogy would be proof that in the theatre, any effect follows upon innumerable causes, and those causes cannot all be traced back to the individual intentions of actors, directors, writers, or producers. The spectator shares in creating the play’s meaning by how she reacts, and due to McDonagh’s global appeal, the plays mean different things in their varied performance contexts.

To approach the problem of Martin McDonagh as an Irish author requires one to look not only at the intertextual contexts of his work and the political landscape in which Druid Theatre framed their productions, but then to ask what sort of ethical demand do these plays make? How and why do audiences, no matter their geo-political context, react to the world of Leenane with laughter, gasps, and ultimately silence? The Leenane Trilogy as a whole completely inverts audience expectations in the figure of Father
Welsh. They expect the bumbling parish priest of stage and screen. What they find is a confused, despondent cleric whose only possible response to the violent destructiveness of his flock is first to maim and then kill himself as both punishment for the sins of Maureen Nolan and Mick Dowd and to prevent further violence on the part of the Connor brothers. In a globalized Irishness of commerce, pop culture, and extreme familial violence, this act of self-sacrifice on the part of a powerless, mocked, ineffective priest questions both the realist form and ideology not with the extreme shock values of the plays’ violence but by the affirmation of the abjectly humble priest.

McDonagh himself has said in an interview that Father Welsh serves as an unconventional Christ figure in the plays: “I guess maybe I don’t see him as a priest…I guess it’s a suicidal Christ figure…Somebody who kills himself for the sake of others…He’s the savior figure of the Trilogy. More because he’s a decent man than anything.”248 This Christ who negates the orthodoxy of the Church, a Christ-figure who wants to rewrite what has already happened (from suicide to sacrifice) fulfills his call as shepherd of his flock in damning himself. Stephanie Pocock defends Father Welsh against the many criticisms that he is “ineffectual,” and if indeed McDonagh intended him as a Christ figure, he certainly fails if we consider that as “the first character in the three plays who is genuinely kind, self-sacrificial, and moved by the spiritual depravity and violence of his community” that he commits suicide and, at least according to Pocock, “fails in [his] aim of preventing further violence between brothers Valene and Coleman, … his final failure, a surrender to the mindless violence.” For Pocock, the only way in which Father Welsh can be considered “effectual” is if his death is seen as “more

248 Quoted in “‘The Ineffectual Father Welsh/Walsh’?: Anti-Catholicism and Catholicism in Martin McDonagh’s The Leenane Trilogy.” Stephanie Pocock. In Martin McDonagh: A Casebook. 70.
significant as an act of defiance against materialism” (64). While his act does have the eventual effect to undermine Valene’s out-of-control materialism (expressed in his collection of saints figurines), the transposition of suicide into sacrifice performs a much more nuanced critique of Christian charity and opens the plays to a deeper ethical reading.

The immediate reviews of McDonagh’s works and the ensuing scholarship that has been devoted to him have often commented on the degree to which his plays seem calculated to make the audience uncomfortable. With the exception of Marion Castleberry, who sees the movement between comedy and cruelty as creating “an aesthetic distance between the action and the audience” that is almost Brechtian, most critics would point out that McDonagh’s stage world always seems to judge the presence of the audience as, in a sense, condoning, sponsoring, and enjoying the violence and cruelty taking place before them. Implicating the audience in the play-world’s communal sin sets McDonagh apart from other in-yer-face authors of his generation, for whom the play operates by that Brechtian distancing that Castleberry confusedly assigns to McDonagh. The degree of discomfort recorded by reviewers in the early productions of The Leenane Trilogy attest that in a performance, the distance between the spectator and the work is collapsed, and collapsed in such a way as to hold the mirror up to spectatorship. McDonagh’s Irish plays are not so much a critique of murder, torture, animal cruelty, or homophobia, but a critique of our communal impulse to laugh at the tortured one, to gaze avidly yet judgmentally on violence against others from a comfortable position of spectatorship.

249 “Comedy and Violence in The Beauty Queen of Leenane. In Martin McDonagh: A Casebook. 50.
This reversal of the gaze answers the many critical voices that accuse McDonagh of “titillating” the audience, and of indulging in “postmodern irony [that] has become a hall of mirrors where ethical value is more a matter of clever refraction than critical reflection.” In the end, Father Welsh’s suicide is not the “ineffectual” means of preventing further violence between the Connor brothers, as it is most often accused of being. Father Welsh’s suicide is the atonement one man offers for a community that has stood by and watched and gossiped about its own crimes for generations. Unable to watch any longer, Father Welsh ends his life. This refusal to gaze any longer on the violence, and in fact, the equation of his gaze with failure and sin, makes Father Welsh a prototype of a post-Christian ethical character. This ethical impulse propelling the plays’ action has been noted before, as by Richard Rankin Russell, who writes that, “The often uneasy laughter that attends productions of McDonagh’s plays testifies to the audience’s discomfort … it is a strategy with far more of an ethical force than is sometimes admitted in discussions of the playwright’s work.” This ethical demand is heavily dependent on the staging of the play—the multitude of representational choices that shape the audience’s reception of the play. As a simple example, the choice to cast Father Welsh with a youthful actor, according to Garry Hines, effected greatly how the audience reacted to his melancholy, the multiple “crises of faith” that could be taken as indulgence in an older priest, but in one fresh from seminary they appear as a real crisis of overturned expectations.

250 “The Stage Irish are Dead, Long Live the Stage Irish: The Lonesome West and A Skull in Connemara.” In Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories. 60-78. 75-76.

251 Richard Rankin Russell. Introduction to Martin McDonagh: A Casebook. 3.
McDonagh’s *Leenane Trilogy* forces the audience to confront its collective responsibility for their continued gazing upon what have been often characterized as vile and meaningless acts of violence in the backward imagined town of Leenane. By sponsoring (monetarily) the cruelty laid before their eyes they implicate themselves in the many criticism of McDonagh’s work that call his love of cartoonish stage violence excessive. As theatre semiologist Keir Elam has noted, “It is the spectator who initiates the theatrical communication process…in sponsoring the performance, the audience issues, as it were, a collective ‘directive’ to the performers,” and “this spectacle is set in motion by our gaze.”\(^{252}\) However, as Elam quickly continues to emphasize in his *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, theatrical communication is complicated within the theatrical context by the dramatic context in which a fictional speaker addresses a fictional listener. It is this dramatic communicational situation which is ostended to the spectator” (38). Elam notes that the degree to which spectators perceive themselves as a mass or as individuals relies to some extent on the configuration of the theatrical space. While the “poor” theaters of the late twentieth century forced a degree of cohesiveness on their audiences with their small spaces and lack of “personal space,” the typical large and city auditoriums give the spectator “his own well-marked private space…and relative immunity from physical contact with his fellows (and even from seeing them). The latter emphasizes personal rather than social perception and responses, to introduce a form of ‘privacy’ within an experience which is collective in origin” (Bennett 64-65). At this point, a performance that has carefully taken stock of the *Leenane Trilogy*’s early performance venues, the “unusual regional tour,” in small towns and small auditoriums

\(^{252}\) Quoted in “Breaking Bodies: The presence of violence on Martin McDonagh’s stage.” Maria Doyle. 95.
across Ireland, begins to show its importance to interpreting the play’s ethical demands: this violence was meant to be observed in uncomfortable proximity and the audience’s reactions to be felt by the performers. Far from being a playwright who merely imitates the tricks of filmmakers such as Tarantino, McDonagh’s plays unfold without the comforting mediating distance of the screen. They resist the privatization of experience, so that the audience’s discomfort mirrors the action unfolding in *Leenane*—everyone is aware of the crimes, even if they have trouble naming it or confessing to it. The sponsorship of the violence is obvious and close in a small theatrical space. But outrage against the playwright does not excuse our own laughter.

McDonagh earned his reputation as “in-yer-face” because of the unapologetically dark world of *Leenane*. As Valene and Father Welsh concur, Leenane is a God-forsaken place:

Valene: A great parish it is you run, one of them murdered his missus, an axe through her head, the other her mammy, a poker took her brains out, and it’s only chit-chatting it is you be with them? Oh aye. Welsh: What can I do, sure, if the courts and the polis… Valene: Courts and the polis me arse. I heard the fella you represent was of a higher authority than the courts and the fecking polis. Welsh: (*sadly*) I hear the same thing, sure, I must’ve heard wrong. It seems like God has no jurisdiction in this town. No jurisdiction at all. (175)

Not only does God have no jurisdiction in Leenane, the fictional world ostended to the audience by way of dialogue, he has no jurisdiction over the audience’s reactions. In a post-Christian, secular age, the outrage of one spectator (the tortured cat in *The Lieutenant of Inishmoore* is often cited as a touchstone of ineffable outrage in McDonagh’s work: why should the audience fear so greatly for Wee Thomas’s safety as buckets of human blood bathe the stage?) may not be felt by the next and we have no
common moral language with which to describe our reactions. This post-Christian ethical landscape was described by Emmanuel Lévinas in an essay titled “Le moi et la totalité”: Religions have lost their leading role in the modern consciousness…. But the modern consciousness, does it recognize itself in the pious soul? An important part of humanity no longer finds the way of spiritual life in religion or religiosity. Not because they do not feel themselves less guilty than previous generations. They feel guilty differently. The offense that overwhelms them is not pardoned through piety; or, more exactly, the evil which weighs on them does not belong to the order of forgiveness. How, therefore, does the existence or inexistence of God, interest or indifference of God, matter to me? The goodness urged by religion does not accomplish the Good, and the purification it offers hardly cleanses (28-29).

Lévinas puts forward a new ground for being, one not motivated by doubt or anxiety, a ground he calls the human. According to Lévinas, it is in the moment that man begins to devote himself to the other (se-vouer-à-l’autre) that “the human begins.” Being human has its event in sacrifice, or, “just until the possibility of dying for the other,” in taking responsibility for the other. This is the “ethical event” that gives humanity to man. This is the gaze that recognizes the transcendent approaching in the face (figure) of the other. The theatrical event, as we have examined it, plays in the space of “ostension,” as Elam calls it—between the narrated world appearing by the dialogue and the real world of the spectator in the seat, a member of a community sponsoring this particular performance. If we look at both the textual evidence and records of various performances of The Lonesome West, it becomes apparent that Father Welsh’s suicide is actually a sacrifice and a tentative attempt to recover humanity in Leenane. This is the only way to

253 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

254 “Avant Propos.” In Entre Nous. 10.
understand McDonagh’s own claim that Welsh is the Christ-figure of this dramatic world.255

At the beginning of *The Lonesome West*, the closed society of Leenane, in which pairs of people hold grudges against each other for decades (“You can’t kick a cow in Leenane without some bastard holding a grudge twenty year”), seems to admit no interference from the outside.256 They tolerate their Catholic priest at the same time all meaning has been hollowed out of his appointed role. Hence, Maureen murders Mag, and other than Father Welsh, no one is over-concerned. Mick murders his wife (we all suspect), but the town shrugs and calls it “a pure drink-driving.” These closed societies admit no third, Lévinas tells us. By the time Father Welsh appears in *The Lonesome West*, we expect the stereotype of a bumbling parish priest settling small accounts between people and God—impure thoughts, betting. Those constitute their business with God and his representative. But Tom’s suicide by drowning inspires Father Welsh to question the role of ineffective intermediary and the dogma of the Church. He leaves the confessional (and the pub) and inserts himself in the comfortable society of the Connor brothers, where crime and punishment are leading to their ineluctable conclusion in their mutual murder when he plunges his hands into a vat of boiling plastic (Valene’s saints’ figurines that Coleman has cruelly melted down).

Lévinas writes on violence in an intimate society of two, that it “offends, but does not wound. It works beyond or apart from justice and injustice” (29-30). This is the violence of the Connor brothers’ pitched battles over Taytos, stoves, magazines, and

255 See “‘The Ineffectual Father Welsh/Walsh’?: Anti-Catholicism and Catholicism in Martin McDonagh’s *The Leenane Trilogy.*” Stephanie Pocock. In *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook.* 70.

256 Pato Dooley. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane.* 250
poteen. Only when these two realize that their actions offend and *wound* a third party (Father Welsh), does the possibility of a community of responsibility emerge. Father Welsh’s presence in the drama introduces a new dimension of conflict. The third person, “trouble cette intimité: mon tort à l’égard de toi, que je peux reconnaître entièrement à partir de mes intentions, se trouve objectivement faussé par tes rapports avec *lui*, qui me demeurent secrets, puisque je suis, à mon tour, exclu du privilège unique de votre intimité” (30). With the introduction of a third person, the wrong I commit against you is skewed by your relationship to this third person. By wronging you I may wrong him. The secrecy of your relationship with him means that “*j’agis dans un sens qui m’échappe*” (30). The relationship between Valene and Father Welsh will prove decisive in understanding the final act of the play and Valene’s choice not to kill his brother at the close. With his suicide letter, Father Welsh has interjected himself between the brothers, and even between the audience and the brothers. Father Welsh’s death recasts the previous violent antics of the trilogy in a way that judges and condemns the laughter.

The audience has been party to many offenses by the time Father Welsh appears which causes the extreme audience reactions of walking out, nervousness, etc., as they confront the logic of McDonagh’s post-Christian landscape. The plays do not posit a “moral” and this discomfits spectators. The violence generally comes as a settling of accounts, of tit-for-tat. Though the characters might wish to escape the cycle of violence, the pairs engaged in the violence are highly dependent on each other.257 Audience reactions, in fact, prove what Lévinas calls “the religious crisis” in contemporary spiritual life, because the audience, like Father Welsh, is in the position of third man interrupting

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and observing the violence unfolding onstage. Certain spectators, in walking out or in rejecting the action of the play, are “wounded” by the dialogue that unfolds in the intimate relationships of mother/daughter, neighbors, husband/wife, and brothers in Leenane:

The crisis of religion in contemporary spiritual life grasps at the awareness that society goes beyond love, that a wounded third man attends to the dialogue of love, and that in regard to him, the society based on love itself is wrong…. The crisis of religion comes, therefore, from the impossibility to isolate oneself with God and to forget all of those who remain outside the dialogue of love. The real conversation is elsewhere.258

In his vocation of priest, Father Welsh could easily isolate himself in dialogue with God (communion), and compartmentalize his functions as intermediary (confession) as between God and parishioner, with himself operating merely as a means and not a participant in individuals’ dialogue with God. But as Father Welsh’s self-accusations become more serious, he becomes increasingly aware of his responsibility for the Connor brothers. As the murders increase, he sees that the dialogue truly is elsewhere. When he tells them of Tom Hanlon’s death, their lacking reaction and closing back in on themselves and the ridiculous fight over a new stove causes Father Welsh to burst out:

Valene: Are you crying, father, or is it a bit of a cold you do have? Ah it’s a cold.
Welsh: It’s crying I am.
Valene: Well I’ve never seen the like.
Welsh: ‘Cos I come in, and tell ya a fella’s just gone and killed himself, a fella you went to school with…a fella ye grew up with…a fella never had a bad word to say about anybody and did his best to be serving the

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258 La crise de la religion dans la vie spirituelle contemporaine tient à la conscience que la société déborde l’amour, qu’un tiers assiste blessé au dialogue amoureux, et qu’à l’égard de lui, la société de l’amour elle-même a tort…. La crise de la religion vient donc de l’impossibilité de s’isoler avec Dieu et d’oublier tous ceux qui restent en dehors du dialogue amoureux. Le vrai dialogue est ailleurs. In Entre Nous. 31.
community every day of his life…and I tell you he’s killed himself be
drowning, is a horrible way to die, and not only do ye not bat an eye…not
only do ye not bat an eye but ye go arguing about crisps and stoves then!
(196)

He accuses first the brothers, then the community, but ultimately himself for Tom’s
suicide. He inverts the chain of responsibility given by Catholic dogma for a suicide,
which blames only the individual. As God’s representative, he is not their judge, but the
accused, making him, as McDonagh claims, the Christ figure of Leenane.

After this radical reversal of the usual paradigm, Father Welsh concludes with
Catholic orthodoxy, specifically that Tom is “rotting in hell now…No remorse. No mercy
on him.” But a pronouncement that would otherwise be dogmatic here is ironic. If Tom
did indeed die because of the negligence of the whole community, why should Tom be
the only one to suffer punishment? What is happening here is nothing less than the
complete overthrow of Western logic desired so deeply by Antonin Artaud, but in a dark,
postmodern comedy. Father Welsh, in taking full responsibility, in accusing himself, has
started to envision his life in a way that will lead to its narration being complete only
after he has died.

By abandoning the narrative arc of his life to the actions of the Connor brothers,
Father Welsh abandons isolation and autonomy.

For a friend of yeres, who cares about ye, who doesn’t want to see ye
blowing the brains out of each other, who never achieved anything as a
priest in Leenane, in fact the opposite, and who’d see ye two becoming
ture brothers again as the greatest achievement of his whole time here.
Sure it would be bordering on the miraculous. I might be canonized after.
(Pause.) Valebe and Coleman, I’m betting everything on ye. (223)

By “betting everything,” Father Welsh acknowledges that his life can only have meaning
in the context of a community that continues after his death—a community that exceeds
the individual. If Valene and Coleman show “the love for each other as brothers ye do so woefully lack,” he will have died a saint. If they do not, his suicide is his final crisis of faith, his final moment of despair. At the same time that he has given them the power to decide the trajectory of his life, Father Welsh has imposed a new standard on Valene and Coleman: they can no longer continue to humor him and the Catholic faith as they commit violent crimes against each other. Lévinas sees this indulgent disregard for the third party as blindness. “Love blinds respect, which, impossible without blindness with regard to the third party, is but a pious intention oblivious to real evil.” (18) Father Welsh first overcomes his own pious, intentional obliviousness to the real evil around him before forcing the Connor brothers to finally see him.

According to the dogma of the Church, suicide is an unforgiveable sin, a position which Father Welsh understood. Yet, in rejecting the dogma of the Church to “bet everything” on Valene and Coleman not killing each other, Father Welsh claims that the good of preserving his own life is defeasible, making even suicide justifiable if it could prevent an eventual murder. For Father Welsh, it is impossible to continue living if in his death he can stop Valene and Coleman from killing each other. Despite being God’s representative to man, Father Welsh recognizes the insufficiency of the Church to accomplish what Lévinas calls the “Good” in a post-Christian world. Lévinas writes, “Qu’important, dès lors, existence ou non-existence de Dieu, intérêt ou indifférence de Dieu à l’égard des homes? La bonté à laquelle la religion convie n’accomplit pas le Bien et la purification qu’elle propose ne lave point” (29). Lévinas calls the former way of reconciliation a false piety, a piety that looks very similar to Father Welsh’s description of confession as performed in Leenane. As The Lonesome West unfolds, he becomes increasingly disillusioned with this piety and expresses his desire to intervene effectively.
in the chaos around with physical acts of penance. He takes on the guilt of Valene, Coleman, and the town. We witness in Scene Three his self-wounding to halt Valene shooting Coleman. He plunges his hands in the vat of boiling plastic, an ironic inversion of Pontius Pilate’s washing his hands after handing Christ over to the mob. Far from “washing his hands” of the brothers, he places himself in such proximity to their hatred that he wounds himself. By the time of Scene Six, they are back at their bickering, seemingly unfazed by what happened earlier and more petty than ever, arguing over Taytos and magazines, until Girleen breaks up their scuffle by holding a knife to Coleman’s neck (curiously, Valene defends Coleman, “Leave Coleman alone, Girleen” (231)). Following the news of Father Welsh’s suicide, they begin their infamous “grand oul’ game” of apologizing, escalating the horrible crimes they confess to until they are once again threatening to kill each other, poised with the shotgun and the kitchen knife. At this point, Father Welsh’s rejection of “piety” in pursuit of the Good does, indeed, seem ineffectual.

Until Valene stands down, that is. Though he has confessed to wanting to kill his brother in desperate tones—a final confession overlooked when we list the crimes aired in their game of apologizing—“his head finally droops and he returns the knife to the drawer... VALENE idles to the stove and touches the letter pinned above it” (255-56). In the Broadway production, this confession was delivered with a desperate, hissing fervor, convincing us how painfully Valene wants to be free of the burden of his brother. Coleman’s reckless and violent behavior, meanwhile, begins to make more sense if we see him as the embodiment of existential freedom—he does not care if Valene stabs him., and he is not the savior or the figure of hope in this play. Valene will not indulge Coleman’s death wish because Father Welsh continues to place demands on him. In the
Broadway Druid Theatre production, his following line was delivered sadly, mourning their violent outburst as “Father Welsh is burning in hell now, because of our fighting.” Curiously, in a performance filled with laughter, even at Father Welsh’s self-immolation, no laughter disturbed these final moments of the play as the brothers violence escalated and then halted. That absence operates almost as a withdrawal of the audience’s support for the brothers’ violent antics. Their gazes are firmly fixed on the ethical moment: will Coleman finally push Valene enough to commit murder? The answer is no. The play does not end hopelessly. Indeed, despite Coleman’s final (and comic) confession that he never mailed the house insurance money but instead “pissed it up a wall,” and Valene’s dash for the gun, we know from the final line and Valene’s inability to burn Father Welsh’s letter that he will not kill his brother. Following the perverted rite (game) of confession in Leenane comes the equally anti-dogmatic rite of communion—they go for pints at the pub. Valene’s development as a character may have brought him far enough to put down the knife, but he “won’t be buying the fecker a pint anyways. I’ll tell you that for nothing, Father Welsh Walsh Walsh” (259).

By the end of the Leenane Trilogy, the audience has come from a position of comfortable familiarity with the tropes that McDonagh manipulates (television, radio, figures of religious fun, the Irish dramatic tradition) to bewitch them into uneasy laughter before introducing the ethical problem not only of each individual play, but of Leenane as a whole, and ultimately of the theatrical context of spectators interacting with the dramatic situation. Audiences may be quick to judge that there is something amiss in Leenane (torture in Beauty Queen, undeterminable truth in A Skull, fratricidal tendencies in Lonesome West), but that judgmental gaze eventually turns back on themselves, usually at the point the laughter fizzles. Supporting Lévinas’s assessment that we, “feel
guilty differently. The offense that overwhelms [us] is not pardoned through piety; or, more exactly, the evil which weighs on [us] does not belong to the order of forgiveness,” the crime committed in *Leenane* is the crime of gazing mercilessly on human suffering. As the dramatic situation of *Lonesome West* demonstrates, the only way back to the human, the *humane*, is through sacrifice: Father Welsh’s self-sacrifice and then Valene’s tentative step toward self-denial.

4.4 Slapped in School: The Audience Names Its Crime

Since our news cycle has reduced all reporting to the sound byte, the nuances of the postmodern and the avant-garde are airbrushed away by a need to explain the work in simplistic terms. Thus, the world of *Leenane* is characterized merely by its perverse and excessive stage violence. The on and off-stage violence makes it easy to align McDonagh with the “in-yer-face” or New Brutalism of authors like Kane and Ravenhill. But the psychological and social consequences of this extreme violence make up the force of McDonagh’s works, and they give us not brutalism but *sin*. There are no innocent people in McDonagh’s plays. Instead, every crime is met with the demand for

259 The penultimate scene of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* situates Maureen Nolan’s elderly mother in a rocking chair rocking of its own volition as Maureen recites her plan for leaving Leenane to join her lover, Pato, in America. As the monologue closes, the stage directions read, “*She [Mag] finally topples over and falls heavily to the floor dead. A red chunk of skull hangs from a string of skig at the side of her head.*” (72). Then there are the cut-off dog’s ears (*The Lonesome West*), the skull smashing spree (*A Skull in Connemara*), the torture and buckets of fake blood (*The Lieutenant of Inishmoore*), the murder of a mentally handicapped brother (*The Pillowman*), and a suitcase full of chopped-off hands (*A Behanding in Spokane*).

260 Even a mentally handicapped child is guilty of terrific crimes in *The Pillowman*.
full justice. An ethics of full responsibility drives the escalations of violence, as hurts and wrongs are answered each in full. McDonagh turns the postmodern reflexivity of art against the self and forces his audiences to gaze on their own reactions with judgment. When all fall short of his ethical demand for responsibility, courage, and justice, McDonagh turns his audience toward a more humane (and humanistic) foundation of mutual dependence McDonagh stands apart from the other New Brutalists because of his fundamental tension with the idea of grace and its inexplicability.

As various historians and critics have recorded: audiences do react strongly and uncomfortably to the effect of the play gazing back on them. McDonagh’s Irish plays evoke strong reactions from their audiences, according to contemporary accounts of early performances. When the complete *Trilogy* ran at the Royal Court Theatre’s Duke of York in 1997, reviewer Benedict Nightingale recorded that a pair of people could not stomach the extreme violence and desecration of *A Skull in Connemara*:

Maybe the wildest scene in the trilogy comes when a drunken Mick and his assistant pulverize old skulls with their mallets. It’s part schoolboy prank, part Dionysian catharsis, part symbolic revenge on the living ghouls and walking corpses of Leenane itself. Two people stormed out of the theater at the play’s London premiere, presumably sickened by the splintering bone.261

Recording the audience reaction as she saw *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* for the first time at the Garrick Theatre in London, Ashley Tiggart emphasizes the audience’s formation of community reaction as the play unfolded:

More than that—as the night wore on a general unease became increasingly apparent. Individuals glanced around from their seats, more or less surreptitiously, to see just how others were reacting to this stuff. In an oddly theatrical gesture some actually lifted their hands to their mouths

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Unease, guilt, and rejection combine with the many recorded instances of mounting hilarity as the plays progress. McDonagh’s reputation as a writer of comedies precedes his plays to such an extent that as the curtain rose on *A Behanding in Spokane* on Broadway in the summer of 2010, the audience erupted in laughter when Christopher Walken opened a closet door and fired a gun into it, presumably into a person encased within. The audience’s laughter preceded any dialogue and any understanding of the action. The hilarity did not, however, encompass all audience members, and two people were seen to walk out less than half-way through the performance of this, McDonagh’s latest, play. Collective reactions are formed both by prior conditioning (marquees, reviews, word of mouth), but also the collective experience of shared spectatorship of a particular performance. Spectators react as a masse, conditioned by smaller theatres to react corporately by judging the appropriateness of their responses against those of the spectators seated near them. At the same time, postmodern playwrights writing “offensive” theatre rely on the traditional theatre-going public willing to walk out when their personal space and moral sensitivities are offended by the configuration of the theatre and the action on the stage.

How “avant-garde” then is McDonagh? Joan Fitzpatrick Dean argues that McDonagh is “anti-avant-garde” when we take into consideration the amount of

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(263) *A Behanding in Spokane*. Seen June 4, 2010. Schoenfeld Theater, New York, New York. Ticket advertisers in Times Square in the afternoon preceding the performance were overheard to advise indecisive theatergoers that it was a raucous comedy.
“closure” provided by the plays through death. In addition to this closure-by-funeral, Dean sees the structure and the style of the plays, formed as they are in the tradition of “the well-made play,” and the horror film genre, to “create audience suspense and build to cliff-hanging, shocking, sometimes violent, and hilarious blackouts,” as making them firmly anti-avant-garde. Heath Diehl makes a strong case that to read McDonagh’s Irish plays as realistic is to misread them, because the hallmark of realist drama is the guarantee of its readability by a clear act of moral closure. “Closure in a realist play,” Diehl writes, “then, always ensures the play’s readability and universality by enacting a purgation of enigma and a resinscription of the dominant (ideological) order.” McDonagh resists allowing a “realist” reading of his plays precisely because his characters are not punished for their crimes or sins at the end of the play. Diehl asserts that this unreadability functions generically to critique the rise of globalism and the loss of a stable Irish national identity. Thus Diehl cannot answer the moral questions raised by the plays and wrongly concludes that it is because they are, indeed, unanswerable within the world of Beauty Queen. “The second half of BQ continues to pose questions which neither McDonagh nor his characters have any intention of answering” (102). But to say that no character is punished for the crimes committed in Leenane is to ignore the central role of Father Welsh to the narrative’s ethical demands. Beauty Queen can stand alone and is the best of the three plays as its own piece, but the answer to its moral questions requires the complement of A Skull in Connemara and The Lonesome West.

264 “Martin McDonagh’s Stagecraft.” In Martin McDonagh: A Casebook.

265 Dean. 38, 27.

266 “Classic Realism, Irish Nationalism, and a New Breed of Angry Young Man in Martin McDonagh’s The Beauty Queen of Leenane.” 101.
Theatre chose to stage all three together fast on the heels of *The Beauty Queen*’s premiere—a choice that suggests that three plays should be considered as a whole when possible.

It has been my argument so far that McDonagh’s plays provoke these mixed reactions because that is their intention. Woven into the *Trilogy* as a whole is a reversal of an ineffective Western morality of niceness. By troubling first our notion of “sympathetic characters,” (*Beauty Queen*) then of truth (*A Skull*), then finally of our ability to determine the meaning of our actions and thus of our lives (*Lonesome West*), McDonagh’s *Leenane* holds up a mirror to its international audiences who have come to admire Irishness, to laugh at backwardness, or to despise in-yer-face theatre. Fintan O’Toole records an audience reaction that took place during the 1997 production of the full *Trilogy* under the direction of Garry Hynes by the Druid Theatre Company:

> At a key point near the end of…*The Leenane Trilogy*, one of the characters looks guiltily at another and says: ‘We shouldn’t laugh.’ It’s a simple line, but, for the audience, a devastating one. We have, at that point, spent nearly six hours laughing ourselves sick at some of the blackest, bleakest stories that have ever been told in the Irish theatre.267

The *Leenane Trilogy* critiques the audience’s own passive spectatorship and easy laughter. The line is spoken by Coleman after Valene laughs at Father Welsh’s Christian name, Roderick, at the bottom of his suicide letter. Paul Murphy points out the power of this particular moment to turn the audience’s gaze back upon themselves following their hilarious reaction to a traumatic event because following laughter, they evince “the guilty recognition that such a reaction is ethically dubious,” and in the stage world of comedy and melodrama, “The third stage of this exchange is untypical as it involves somber

reflection on the ethics of laughing away the traumatic effects of another person’s demise, the reflective quality of which is made more profound because the exchange ends the scene, thus allowing the audience time to reflect.”

Audiences at the Lyceum Theatre’s 1999 performance of the Druid Theatre/Royal Court’s production of The Lonesome West laughed at Father Welsh’s pained plea that the Connor brother’s pronounce his name correctly as he ran offstage, scalded and screaming, “Me name’s Welsh.” The Lieutenant of Inishmoore points out the logical inconsistency in audiences that would laugh at horrific escalations of torture and murder then gasp in fear over the final outcome for Wee Thomas, the cat. Buckets of blood wash across the stage in The Lieutenant of Inishmoore, but Wee Thomas’s bedraggled appearance and possible death by poisoning in the final moments have consistently provoked consternation. The Pillowman, despite its more abstract meditations on storytelling and creativity, demands that the spectators watch multiple acts of “imagined” child torture before surprising them with the problem of mercy killings. A Behanding in Spokane, from the Broadway production, raises the problem of laughter again, as Carmichael tells the harrowing yet hilarious story of how he lost his hand to decreasingly sympathetic ears—both within the seedy hotel room and within the theatre. Carmichael repeats the harrowing tale so many times that it becomes more and more funny, even as I realized he collected his suitcase of hands from the countless people who made light of both his suffering and his quest to restore his hand. “Laughing ourselves sick” becomes the disease that McDonagh’s plays diagnose in their audiences—audiences left to wonder, did we react rightly?

268 “The Stage Irish are Dead, Long Live the Stage Irish: The Lonesome West and A Skull in Connemara.” In Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories. 60-78. 60.

269 Royal Court/DruidTheatre; performed June 13, 1999 at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway. Video Recording.
Multiple critics of McDonagh’s works believe that: no, audiences have not reacted and do not react rightly to the suffering that takes place in McDonagh’s worlds. One Galway reviewer openly admits that the plays provoke reactions in the audience that most would prefer not to analyze. Bernadette Fallon for the *City Tribune* records the effect of seeing the Leenane trilogy in its first production and the unsettling position the plays put her in:

> What transpires between [Mick] Lally, Wilmot, old skulls and a bottle of poteen doesn’t bear thinking about. In fact, all thought ceases as you double up with laughter; to think about the action unfolding onstage would put you in the dangerous position of feeling guilty for laughing.270

Shaun Richards, in comparing McDonagh and Synge, concludes that “while audiences have the potential to respond positively to the shock techniques McDonagh employs in terms of language and action, enjoying them on the titillating level of Tarantino-type terror if nothing else, only audiences familiar with the genre in which he is working are capable of analyzing and evaluating the plays as critiques of the society whose western ‘source’ [J.M. Synge and the Irish tradition] they so rigorously explode.”271 Paul Murphy, likewise, hears in the audience’s laughter mere hilarity as he observed repeated performances at the Lyric theatre in September and October of 2005. He writes, “The response which I witnessed…was regularly one which began with nervous giggling at the start of the scene, developing to muted sniggering and then raucous laughter as the remorseless rhythm of sarcasm kept pounding on.”272


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identified as the turning-point of the play and the climax of the moral action—Father Welsh’s self-immolation—he reports that the audience reaction as, “The waves of laughter rippling through the audiences at every performance I attended, both before and during the event, served to wash away the traumatic effects of the horrifying spectacle. Indeed the audiences continued laughing as Welsh dashed off the stage screaming in agony.”

As I reported above, an earlier Broadway audience also laughed at Father Welsh’s exit.

Skull smashing, elder abuse, pedophile priests—each of these garner both laughs and hand-wringing, depending on the gaze. In a tradition known historically for staging the repressed and the unsanctioned, theatre criticism reacts to “avant-garde” technique and subject matter with perplexingly consistent shock. Even when audiences willingly pay for performances of vile and grotesque subjects, the journalistic gaze continues to react with horror and approbation. It is as though the media gaze expects the aesthetic distance characteristic of film and is consistently overwhelmed by the proximity afforded by a stage (and McDonagh’s plays are usually performed in more intimate theatres, as well). As an example, The Lieutenant of Inishmore, a parody of the Irish national liberation army, has received the most vitriolic criticism for valuing the life of a cat more than the lives of the (human) characters. Such criticism ignores the constant subtext of the play—a media culture in which the victims of terrorist attacks are given the same degree of news coverage as animal-rights concerns and cute pet stories. The postmodern

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272 Paul Murphy. “The Stage Irish are Dead, Long Live the Stage Irish: The Lonesome West and A Skull in Connemara.” In Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories. 60-78. 63.

273 “The Stage Irish are Dead, Long Live the Stage Irish: The Lonesome West and A Skull in Connemara.” In Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories. 60-78. 69.
carnivalesque of McDonagh’s stage, in which pastiche, parody, and poignancy operate intertextually with film and television, lays bare the act of gazing.
CONCLUSION

In the course of this dissertation, I have used events that exist in record only, that were not available to me as first-hand experience, to test the limits of a spectator-centered approach to key events in the history of three well-known but wildly different twentieth-century playwrights. By way of conclusion, I would like to return, as I did in the introduction, to my own first-hand experience of a performance event: that of Martin McDonagh’s latest play, *A Behanding in Spokane*, in its Broadway debut in the spring of 2010. This was his first play to be set in the United States and to have an American debut. More than ever, McDonagh exemplifies what Richad Schechner called the “monoculturalist’s nightmare”: an avant-garde artist with broad popular appeal thanks to the success of this Broadway vehicle, the popular and critical acclaim received by the film, *In Bruges*, and McDonagh’s acceptance by “typical” American theatregoers (the Druid Theatre’s new production of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* recently toured the United States). Even more so than in the context of his 1990s *Leenane Trilogy*, the efficacy of the in-yer-face label and construct when attached to the work of Martin McDonagh—troubles me.

Aleks Sierz’s label became attached to young, British playwrights in the 1990s thanks to his early intervention on both the journalistic and critical level, and he has continued to publish insistent defenses of its usefulness. In “Still in-yer-face?: Towards a Critique and a Summation,” Sierz defines the movement as “a matter of sensibility rather
than of showing of any specific acts.\textsuperscript{274} It is crucial that while such plays might contain shocking scenes, the really disturbing thing about them is the bleakness, nihilism, or despair of the emotions, not about shock tactics.” At the same time that he has elsewhere emphasized with great zeal that what makes “in-yer-face” theatre unique is their status as “wildly, sometimes wonderfully foul-mouthed” (“Cool Britannia”), with themes of “the extremes of human emotion”; “the breaking of taboos”; and the “crisis of masculinity” (“Still In-yer-face” 21).\textsuperscript{275} Sierz opposes his own insight to the sluggish reactions of academics who have ignored this exciting new writing, declaring “Not many academics were as sensitive as the critics to changes in the cultural climate,” forgetting, or perhaps never understanding, the academy’s more reflective role in assessing new writing for academic consideration, a naïve conflation of a journalistic/consumerist sensibility (the better to sell it to a ticket-buying public) with academic inquiry.

McDonagh’s latest works do follow one of Sierz’s directives for the future of in-yer-face: they find a bigger stage. The commercial and critical success of \textit{The Pillowman} (starring Billy Crudup and Jeff Goldblum on Broadway), \textit{In Bruges} (featuring Colin Farrell and Ray Fiennes) and \textit{A Behanding in Spokane} (which premiered with big-name stars Christopher Walken and Sam Rockwell) has begun to situate McDonagh in the mainstream of Anglo-American entertainment, and destroys an easy continuum between him and writers like Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, who remain much less acceptable to a ticket-buying public. I went to see \textit{A Behanding in Spokane} in June, 2010. The ticket-buying purchase was framed by several layers of marketing, none of which revealed


McDonagh’s status as either “in-yer-face” or avant-garde. The first frame was the
production’s website, which emphasized the dark humor of the play and the prominence
of its stars. The second frame, the day of the show, was the ubiquitous commercialism of
Times Square, and the half-price ticket kiosk. Employees of the ticket kiosk walked the
length of the queues, informing ticket buyers of the content of plays and musicals and
their likelihood of securing tickets. An enthusiastic young man informed the couple in
their late fifties or sixties in front of us that A Behanding in Spokane was “hilarious” and
a “black comedy” that they would certainly love. “It’s the funniest thing I’ve seen in
ages,” he told them. The Schoenfeld Theatre, likewise, bore many advertising materials
proclaiming the play “Raucously funny” and “Hilarious.” The playbill revealed little
about the play’s content. The Schoenfeld is a smaller theatre, with a feeling of relative
intimacy in the house. The curtain for the show, heavily tattered, aged and seedy looking,
extended the dramatic locale (a shady hotel) into the pre-show time. Ushers repeatedly
warned spectators that the show had no intermission and ran for ninety minutes.

Sierz always lists a certain “gleeful” disregard for profanity and linguistic
appropriateness as a shared quality among in-yer-face authors, and Behanding ups the in-
yer-face ante with the inclusion of multiple instances of racial slurs to offend an
American audience (who were nonplussed by any problems of representing Irishness
negatively in Druid’s successful tours). McDonagh’s lack of racial sensitivity led to a
scathing review in The New Yorker. Hilton Als called the play’s repeated use of the n-
word “vile,” and that McDonagh himself “adds gag after gag to the show, as if he
believed that comedy could cover up the real horror at its core: the fact that blackness is,
for him, a Broadway prop, an easy way of establishing a hierarchy.” (March 15, 2010).
Meanwhile, the play garnered many positive reviews, such as Frank Scheck writes for
Reuters, “As you’ve probably figured out, plotting is not the strong suit of this fast-moving, 90-minute one-act. Rather, it is the torrent of hilariously profane dialogue that spews out of the vividly drawn characters’ mouths. Walken milks it brilliantly, especially in an instant classic of a monologue in which he speaks on the phone to his elderly mother who has fallen out of a tree (don’t ask). Assuring her that he hasn’t abandoned his racist principles, he points out: ‘There’s a black man chained to my radiator, and he’s covered in gasoline. Now that’s hardly affirmative action, is it?’” (March 5, 2010)

As I traced in the previous chapter, the performance history and critical reception of McDonagh’s Irish plays exhibited critical uneasiness toward his representations of Irishness and the involvement of Druid Theatre Company in promoting the stereotypes of “stage Irishry” in their foreign tours. Those concerns mirror Als’s outrage that actor Anthony Mackie would take the role of Toby, the conniving drug dealer and con-man who tries to swindle Walken’s Carmichael out of the reward money for his lost hand. Those who are offended at his representation of the Irish as backward, violent, and childish see him as an opportunistic foreigner trading on the same tired racist and religious stereotypes that have plagued the Irish in story, stage, and film. It should not surprise us, then, that he turns his attention to America’s fraught conversation on racial difference with the same fast-paced comedy that provokes laughter at America’s troubled racist past. The discomfort and then desire to condemn the playwright swiftly follow. In *Behanding*, McDonagh exploits his outsider status, this time to venture into territory usually reserved for black comedians.\(^\text{276}\) Als, however, does not accept the argument that

\(^{276}\) And even that often becomes fraught, as Katrina Bell-Jordan catalogues in “Speaking Fluent ‘Joke’: Pushing the racial envelope through comedic performance on *Chappelle’s Show.*” The question of whether tv audiences, necessarily diffuse and multiform, were laughing “with” the comedian or “at” his portrayed characters
McDonagh’s gaze is that of the perceptive outsider. He writes, “Like any smart immigrant, McDonagh knows that by going after Toby’s otherness he becomes less of an outsider himself. This is how many people, certainly in the Republic’s past, have first defined themselves as Americans.” So, from the Irish to the American West, McDonagh’s work uses identity politics, exploiting national and racial difference, to provoke reactions in the audience. But are these reactions justified?

The audience on June 5 found Carmichael utterly hilarious. Walken’s own particular performance style combined with McDonagh’s trademark repetitive dialogue (in which characters repeat each other’s lines almost verbatim, as in the increasingly ridiculous arguments between the Coleman brothers) to result in a house that was indeed “raucous.” Yet, several folks walked out of the performance after the first fifteen minutes or so. Those who came expecting hilarity were rewarded, but in an unexpected way: the play was trading on a tongue-in-cheek posture toward and within the history of American racism to provoke the laughter.

McDonagh also plays against what audience members familiar with his “in-yer-face” label expect through his masterful exploitation of the audience’s expectation of harrowing violence. As Carmichael grows increasingly angry at Toby and Marilyn for their con, the audience becomes certain that he will blow the hotel room apart (which would echo Kane’s infamous transition between Acts One and Two of Blasted). This expectation is fostered in part by McDonagh’s reputation, but for a Broadway audience unfamiliar with him, it would be more correct to say the expectation of violence is almost entirely a function of the threatening, racist language. Catherine Rees explains how terror operates in a theatrical event as, “The audience can be moved, terrorized, outraged, such as Clayton Bigsby and the Niggar family. Performance Research. 12.3 (2007): 74-90.
or simply made uncomfortable, not necessarily by what is depicted explicitly—although this of course still plays a crucial role—but by their reactions to what they have witnessed, and their expectation of what is yet to come” (85). This promise of violence was continuously deferred, until the final, ironic “fuck” uttered by Walken’s Carmichael whose malfunctioning lighter foils his suicidal mission. From beginning to end, candles, suitcases, lighters and sneakers determine the possibility of violence. The characters themselves seem unable to follow through on either their threats of brutality or the promise to rescue (Mervyn wants to be a hero and save Marilyn, but seems unable to act, lost as he is within the fascination of his own, strange thoughts and logic). The objects in the room—not the racist Carmichael or the erratic Mervyn (the hotel desk clerk who refuses to help Toby and Marilyn because Toby once cheated him in a drug deal) determine the possibility of violence moment-to-moment in the play.

The centrality of these objects has a leveling effect in McDonagh’s plays, each of which is a world without heroes. By Behanding, the colorful characters of the Irish plays and In Bruges and the eloquent writer at the center of The Pillowman have given way to representations of character faults, buffeted by a world of objects that seem bent on their preservation. The sense of impending violence and the manifest racism of Carmichael are frustrated by a world of objects that reverse the pessimism integral to the avant-garde perspective of Artaud and Beckett (for whom the universe is inhospitable and the human body prone to decay). Far from tormenting the character-less Marilyn and Toby, the objects that fall from the sky (severed hands) are a source of their salvation. This kitschy, glee in caricaturing the violence of the avant-garde guaranteed the play its Broadway

success (though its potential in regional and amateur theatres seems limited by budgets and the troubling content of the dialogue). But as we have seen before in McDonagh’s works, the surface level of antics and irreverence conceals a deeper, ethical problematic for spectators who overcame their discomfort at the racist dialogue to laugh at Carmichael’s speeches.

The problem I want to identify here is not new to Behanding, but has been present in several of McDonagh’s works and has inspired almost no critical attention, either from the in-yr-face school of critics or from Irish studies. It is his complex fascination with the representation of disability onstage and in film. Since The Leenane Trilogy, McDonagh’s works have become inextricably bound up with representing disability in an in-yr-face way, and which surprisingly attracts little notice. From Cripple Billy in The Cripple of Inishmaan to Katurian’s handicapped brother to the “midget” (Jordan Prentice as Jimmy) who captivates Ray (Collin Farrell) in In Bruges to, finally, the foul-mouthed, racist Carmichael of A Behanding in Spokane, McDonagh’s most in-yr-face quality is his unflinchingly unsentimental fascination with the otherness, not of race, but of physical disability. The DVD for In Bruges gleefully reprints a film review that calls the film “refreshingly un-p.c!!” The film at one point lingers pointedly on Jimmy as he struggles to carry two cocktail glasses from a tall bar, an implicit comment in a film full of explicit references to the character’s size. Implicitly, this visual pause reminds the audience, “Jimmy’s handicap is funny.” The cripple at the center of Cripple of Inishmaan defies the townspeople (and by extension, the audience) who would keep him safely cared for by his loving aunts, rather than following his ambition on a dangerous journey and committing crimes of his own along the way. Michal of The Pillowman suffers a mental handicap (most likely the result of sustained brutality in his childhood) and yet is
also a remorseless murderer. In Behanding, Carmichael’s comic insistence on rehashing the tale of his cruel behanding becomes a running joke, provoking increasingly hilarious laughter from the audience. A one-handed, racist psychopath is comical, not tragic. So far, the critical community has given little attention to this aspect of McDonagh’s storytelling, but in the case of Behanding, the question of laughing at the handicapped should be at least as pressing as the question of laughing at race.

Behanding frustrates audience expectations in order to put the spectator into an ethical quandary. The so-called sympathetic characters (Toby and Marilyn) are actually the least sympathetic. McDonagh’s particular genius lies in his ability to provoke inappropriate laughter before turning the play’s gaze in judgment on that laughter. To briefly recall some of the critical conclusions drawn from the Leenane Trilogy, Fintan O’Toole points out that the plays led the audience to the “devastating conclusion” that they had been “laughing [themselves] sick.”278 Likewise, Paul Murphy concludes that laughter following a traumatic event leads the audience to evince “the guilty recognition that such a reaction is ethically dubious.”279 Murphy believed that these moments of ethical awareness often came when the playwright imposed a scene or act break at a key moment to force the audience into brief darkness and a moment for reflection. Could such a moment take place in Behanding in Spokane—a one-act play? Or is it, as some reviewers have concluded, a weaker play overall? If audiences are to achieve the same moments of ethical clarity possible in the Irish plays, where do these moments come from in Behanding?


279 “The Stage Irish are Dead, Long Live the Stage Irish: The Lonesome West and A Skull in Connemara.” In Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories. 60-78. 60.
One place at which such reflection could begin is the very beginning of the play. The play opens by Carmichael shooting an unknown character in a closet upon the curtain’s opening. The audience almost uniformly erupted in laughter at this. With no context for judging the action beyond the program note and the street and press advertising, this possible murder was perceived as hilarious. When it turns out that the person in the closet is Toby and the play unfolds to reveal both Carmichael’s racism and McDonagh’s exploitation of African-American stereotypes, several audience members chose to walk out. An unmotivated murder within moments of the curtain opening was hilarious. A racist Washingtonian looking for his hand in a seedy hotel, in a play by an Anglo-Irish playwright, on the other hand, is deeply offensive. The hilarity that sells McDonagh’s plays, much like the gory sensationalism that sold Sarah Kane’s Blasted, betrays the audience midway through their laughter if they expect a simple (if violent) comedy. What they get is much more troubling. They encounter their own racism, their own willingness to laugh at other peoples’ traumas, and their own desire to blame the writer for their laughter. The fast pace of the play prevents any such moments of introspection, and is an argument for its structural weakness, or perhaps its pandering to an American audience.

Behanding blames Toby and Marilyn for the events that unfold on stage. They have tried to cheat Carmichael by passing off an ancient hand from the local museum as his, in order to collect the reward money. Toby and Marilyn literally accuse themselves in agreement with Carmichael’s demand for justice. In one of the more shocking breaks of reality in the drama (in a play that frequently stretches audience credulity), Toby and Marilyn handcuff themselves to the radiator. They agree that they are at fault. They have not taken care of a fellow human being’s need for restitution, but have laughed at him.
and his disfigurement. They condemn themselves to whatever punishment he might choose. This absolute ethic of restitution—the pursuit of pure justice—has been a running theme in all of McDonagh’s plays (and is the central question of *In Bruges*). The fact that two people would chain themselves at the request of a mad man should not strain our credulity any more than the fact that, ultimately, he extends grace to them and lets them go.

McDonagh’s plays, bizarre as they are, provoke moments of shared laughter and horror at the best and worst of life in a hyper-communicative world of global commerce. If we are to consider him “in-yer-face,” it would be because, as Ken Urban writes of the In-yer-face moment, it combined “cool” with “cruel” to open a path to new ethical possibilities in a nihilist framework.\(^{280}\) The problem of how we react to a fellow human being’s suffering has driven the choice of performance texts for this dissertation—from Artaud’s suffering mind and body to the actor-inmates sharing their experiences with Shakespeare and Beckett to McDonagh’s imagined Ireland. The theatre offers a school for our emotions and our reactions—a safe space, as Bruce Wilshire writes, in which reactions can be evoked, judged, and trained. I have ventured in to the theatres—both in records, recorded, and in person, to try to describe how the twentieth and twenty-first century spectator is part of a community who makes imaginative use of things, bodies, and events to try on, as it were, different ethical selves.\(^{281}\)


\(^{281}\) Wilshire 15.


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