

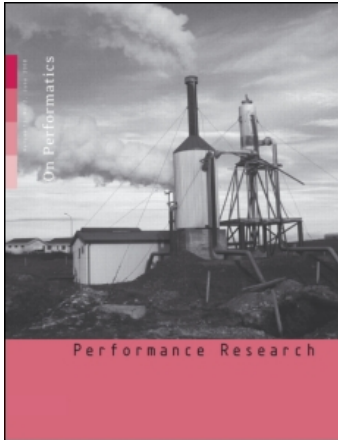
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When We Talk of Horses

Or, what do we see when we see a play?

DAN REBELLATO

I have something to confess. At the beginning of Shakespeare's *Henry V* the Chorus urges us to conjure vivid imaginative pictures of the events described. 'Think,' he says, 'when we talk of horses, that you see them / Printing their proud hoofs i' th' receiving earth' (Prologue. 26-7). And I do. Rather obediently, whether I'm reading the play or seeing it, at that point in the speech, I conjure up an image of a horse's hoof, imprinting itself proudly in the earth.

But - and this is the confession - I don't do it again. For the rest of the play, despite the Chorus explaining to me what I am supposed to be doing, I don't conjure any more vivid visual images. In a slightly different way, the same is true of how I read a play. I don't simply read it as words on a page, but I couldn't really say that I produce particularly vivid mental images, that inwardly I am transformed into a grand theatre in which these characters and their actions spring to life. I think when I read a play, I do so with an intermittent sense of how it might be to see it in a theatre, but this sense is not sharply visual.

I've generally kept rather quiet about this. I was told as an undergraduate that drama students should develop the ability, when reading a play, to visualize it in performance and I've repeated this back to my own students since, without being wholly confident that I do it myself. I work, after all, in Theatre Studies, a discipline that was founded on the principle that we study not plays on the page but performance itself; almost a precondition for entry into the discipline is an ability to imaginatively

transform a purely literary text into a three-dimensional visual experience.

But is this right? When we read a play what is the nature of the mental images necessarily and appropriately formed? Even more important for Theatre Studies, what is the nature of theatrical representation itself? When we go to the theatre, what are we looking at? How does that relate to the fictional world being represented? Do we take what we see on stage as a visual representation of the fictional world? How vividly are we to fill in the gaps in the performance?

These are, I think, fundamental questions for our discipline, though it seems that they are questions about which we have been largely silent. Indeed, the rise of Performance Studies has contributed to a shift of theoretical resources away from the study of plays in performance. While this has been hugely fruitful for the discipline in a number of ways, in its closer attention to the performative complexities of live art and non-theatre performance practices it has tended to assume that what's going on in 'conventional' theatre is obvious and uncomplicated.

In particular, there is a widespread belief that 'dramatic theatre' (plays that represent fictional characters and situations) is illusionistic. Hans-Thies Lehmann, in *Postdramatic Theatre*, states categorically: 'dramatic theatre was the formation of illusion. It wanted to construct a *fictive* cosmos and let all the stage represent - be - a world ... abstracted but intended for the imagination and empathy of the spectator to

follow and complete the *illusion*' (2006: 22). In this he is drawing on Brecht, who famously praised Chinese acting for not having 'one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place' (1972: 92). It is this illusionistic spell that epic - and latterly postdramatic - theatre is said to be breaking. Theodore Shank in *Beyond the Boundaries* characterizes a key attitude of the alternative theatre movement as 'suspicion of the illusionistic theatre because of the apparent use of pretence and the mystique surrounding it' (2002: 5). Anthony Howell in *The Analysis of Performance Art* asserts that what makes performance art different from 'traditional theatre' is that the former 'relies on the reality of a sequence of actions rather than on the illusion of an event' (1999:103). In her influential essay 'Performance and Theatricality', Josette Féral insisted that 'performance escapes all illusion and representation' (1982: 177).

These views of 'dramatic theatre' are wrong; representational theatre is not illusionistic. In illusions we have *mistaken beliefs* about what we are seeing. No sane person watching a play believes that what is being represented before them is actually happening. We know we are watching people representing something else; we are aware of this, never forget it, and rarely get confused. There is a difference between what we see and what we imagine or understand to be happening in the represented world. What is, then, the relationship between the stage and the fiction?

Searching the usual theoretical resources to explore these questions, the cupboard is rather bare. They are not questions that appear to have consistently animated many contemporary cultural theorists, despite the phenomenological influence on many thinkers in that tradition (and Sartre's important book on the imagination). There are various historical critiques of 'the visual', in Baudrillard, Foucault and elsewhere, and Maaïke Bleeker's recent *Visuality in the Theatre* (2008) sits very interestingly in that

tradition in its focus on 'the inscription of modes of looking as they are taking place in the theatre within the history of visibility as a culturally specific phenomenon' (20). My interest, though, is in trying to understand more basically what it is we do when we watch a play. I am sure this can be deeply historicized, culturally relativized, and good questions may be asked of who 'we' are in that last sentence. These are important sceptical qualifications, but I want to set them aside to clear a space in which to bring to the foreground the basic, barely conscious mental activity involved in watching theatrical representations. For that reason I have turned to the Anglo-American philosophy of mind, where my questions form a small corner of the 'mental imagery' debate.

In this essay, I survey a number of philosophical attempts to capture the nature of imaginative fiction. I attempt to assess the accuracy, coherence and plausibility of these models, testing them against various examples of theatrical performance. Although I reject all three, they are each in different ways useful in helping to characterize accurately what I now see as the very peculiar character of theatrical representation. At the end of the essay I offer an alternative way of describing the relationship between what we see on stage and the imagined fictional world.

Before I do, I want to say something about the scope of this article. What I am talking about here is representational theatre, by which I mean the sort of event in which people and things on stage represent other people and things. While many of my examples are plays, it's important to say that my comments may well have much wider application.

The three theoretical models for that relationship are offered by Kendall Walton, Gregory Currie and Bernard Williams, and I shall present them in turn.

IMAGINED SEEING

In *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990), Kendall Walton argues that the way we watch theatrical performance is to make-believe that we are seeing the events represented. The ubiquity of make-believe in childhood games suggests that make-believe is fundamental to our development as human beings; as such, it would be surprising if it simply disappeared with the onset of adulthood and, in fact, says Walton, it lives on in our engagement with representational fictions (11–12). Just as children in a wood might make-believe that a huge oak tree is a monster, we use what we see on stage as ‘props in games of make-believe’ (51). In other words, in the theatre we imagine ourselves present at the fictional events watching them. The fictional world does not begin at the stage’s edge, it engulfs me too.

There is much to recommend this argument. It is attractively simple, because it doesn’t require a complicated mental process whereby we convert perception into imagination, real experiences into fictional mental images. Instead, I perform an act of make-believe and then I just watch the story unfold as if it were real. Perception and imagination are the same thing. Second, Walton’s model has the audience’s attention directed squarely at the stage, which, as I shall show, is not true of the theory’s rivals.

There are problems with this argument, however. If I am to imagine that I am seeing Hamlet, who do I imagine I am? Why am I so far away from him? How am I travelling so fast and so effortlessly from the battlements of Elsinore to Gertrude’s bedchamber to the plains of Denmark to the graveyard? Why don’t I get cold when Hamlet does? What do I make-believe is happening when there’s a blackout? And, perhaps most perplexingly, who are all these other people sitting around me?

We could supply make-believe answers to these questions: perhaps I am invisible and invincible or I am watching from another dimension; perhaps I might imagine that all of us in the auditorium are ghosts in some afterworldly tribunal, gathered to pass judgment on the follies

of men. After all, in different words, these are the kinds of stories children tell themselves to ‘explain’ their games. The problem, as Gregory Currie remarks – I think rightly – is that (a) there’s no evidence anyone *does* think such things, (b) that to think such things would be mentally distracting and preoccupying, and (c) such stories are not remotely licensed by the theatre events themselves (Hedda Gabler, for example, does not seem to be a play that allows for the existence of ghosts from another dimension) (1995: 170–72).

Walton has two lines of defence against these problems. First he dismisses them as ‘silly questions’, explaining that they are ‘pointless, inappropriate, out of order. To pursue or dwell on them would be not only irrelevant to appreciation and criticism but also distracting and destructive. The paradoxes, anomalies, apparent contradictions they point to seem artificial, contrived, not to be taken seriously. We don’t take them seriously. Ordinarily, we don’t even notice them’ (1990: 176). He is right in one sense. The questions I asked above are not questions I’ve ever actually asked in the theatre. But they do seem to be questions we ought to ask if we do in the theatre what Walton thinks we do; the fact that we don’t suggests a flaw in his model.

Walton’s more considered response is to suggest that to sustain the make-believe we turn a blind eye to parts of the image: ‘offending fictional truths [are] deemphasized’ such that the contradictions are ‘not to be dwelt on or even noticed particularly’ (182). To illustrate this he describes a modern-dress production of *Oedipus the King* in which the characters are wearing jeans.

When Oedipus and other ancient personages are portrayed in contemporary dress, we can deny that what the actors wear is, fictionally, what the characters do, thereby undercutting questions about how the ancients managed to manufacture blue jeans. We can simply refuse to count the actors’ clothing as props [for our imaginations], even though the same clothing on the same actors would undoubtedly serve as props in a play about Chicago street gangs. (181)

This seems initially to solve the problem but it does so at considerable cost. The make-believing spectator of a modern-dress production, according to Walton, simply ignores all those carefully chosen design decisions and imagines Oedipus wearing some unspecified Theban costume. If this were true, why would anyone bother with costumes at all? The actor's own clothes would do. Certainly, any kind of design or directorial concept would be in vain if the audience is just going to turn a blind eye to it.

What Walton's theory also can't take into account is the role of some casting decisions on our understanding of a particular performance. He says explicitly that the presence of the actor 'is important only because they are objects of imagining' (27). The RSC's production of *Hamlet* in 2008 starred David Tennant, then best-known for his great success in the title role of BBC TV's *Doctor Who*. It seemed to me that the production drew on that association, particularly in its decision to take the interval not between acts, not even between scenes, not just in the middle of a scene, but in the middle of an action: as Hamlet goes to stab Claudius in 3.3. The blackout was, in classic *Doctor Who* style, a cliffhanger, and the moment was wittily clarified by that association. Casting against type is often very important in the way we watch plays and performances: I found *Waiting for Godot* at the National Theatre in 1987 very moving, particularly because the beautiful performance of Estragon was given by John Alderton, an actor more usually known for sitcoms and light comedy. But since David Tennant and John Alderton are not part of their respective fictional worlds, make-believe cannot make sense of such responses.

Walton's theory appears to explain why an audience might be engrossed in the stage action, but his attempt to deal with some serious objections to the theory lead to a vision of the audience possibly ignoring the entire look of a production and the casting in order to form their mental picture. For this alone, the theory must be rejected.

PERCEPTION VS. IMAGINATION

More fundamentally, however, there is a problem with Walton's attempt to suggest that what we imagine and what we see are the same thing. To explore this problem, I want to use a short piece of writing by Jorge Luis Borges, from his 1960 collection *El Hacedor* [The Maker]:

I close my eyes and see a flock of birds. The vision lasts a second, or perhaps less; I am not sure how many birds I saw. Was the number of birds definite or indefinite? The problem involves the existence of God. If God exists, the number is definite, because God knows how many birds I saw. If God does not exist, the number is indefinite, because no one can have counted. In this case, I saw fewer than ten birds (let us say) and more than one, but did not see nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, or two birds. I saw a number between ten and one, which was not nine, eight, seven, six, five, etc. That integer - not-nine, not-eight, not-seven, not-six, not-five, etc. - is inconceivable. Ergo, God exists. (1998: 299)

Borges gives this fragment the gloriously mock-theological title 'Argumentum Ornithologicum', though I suspect he is less interested in proving the existence of God than in trying to dramatize the peculiar nature of our imaginations. Fortunately for the atheists among us, I think there's a flaw in the argument and identifying it tells us something crucial about the nature of mental imagery.

At the root of Borges's argument is the belief that the images presented to us by perception are the same sorts of thing as mental images. There is a long tradition of thinking so, particularly associated with the British empiricists Hume, Berkeley and Locke, for whom the contents of the mind come from experience. Berkeley, in the introduction to *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, maintained that we could manipulate these images to create, if not new images, then new collages from old sense-impressions (§10). Hume believed that mental images differed from perceptions only in the 'degrees of force and liveliness' with which they appear to the mind, ideas being 'faint images' of previous impressions (1.1.1.1).

In fact there is reason to think that perceptions and mental images are not fainter or more forceful versions of each other but different kinds of thing altogether. Colin McGinn in his book *Mindsight* (2004: 12-39) lists nine key differences between the two, including that we can will mental images but we can't will perceptions; perceptions are subject to anatomy and optics, while mental images are not; you can see something without paying it any attention, you can't imagine something without paying it attention.

For my purposes, though, the most important difference between perceptions and mental images that I want to discuss is that mental images are *indeterminate*. For example, let's say I imagine a man. If someone asks me, 'does this man you're imagining have a beard?' it is perfectly comprehensible for me to say I don't know because I hadn't imagined that aspect. That detail has not yet formed part of the imagined scene. I might think about my mental image again to get the answer but what I'm actually doing when we do that is deciding the matter of his beardedness. Before I made that decision, the man I imagined was neither bearded nor clean-shaven.

This is because mental images are indeterminate. We can both imagine and perceive a man with a beard; we can imagine and perceive a man without a beard; we can both imagine and perceive a man whose face is obscured so that we don't know. But only in our imaginations can there be a visual image of a man where the question of whether he has a beard or not simply has no answer (cf. Dennett 1986: 93).

This is the key to disproving, *pace* Borges, the existence of God. If there were a flock of birds in the sky outside, there would be a determinate number of birds in that flock. But Borges can perfectly plausibly summon to his imagination a flock of birds that is of an indeterminate number. And, because mental images can have some aspects determinate and others not (we might have known the skin colour of the imagined man but not his facial hair arrangements), we can

know something of the volume of birds without there being a number, and so there need not be a God.

This tells us something important about the reading of plays. When reading a play, the images conjured up in our minds will be indeterminate because that's the nature of mental images. Urging people to create sharp, vivid mental images of the plays is always to add information that is not contained in the play. The same is true of images you conjure up in response to theatrical performance. It's very difficult to examine your own mental imagery introspectively since introspection seems to change them - a bit like what happens when you try to tell someone your dreams - but if I try to investigate the unusually sharp image that I obediently summon at the beginning of *Henry V* when the Chorus talks of horses, I realize that the 'proud hoof' is vaguely horse-like but the being-printed-i'-th'-receiving-earth-ness of the image derives from one particular CGI image of the T-Rex in *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1993), its huge scaly foot squelching into the mud. Again dreamlike, I have overlaid and combined these two images in creating the leg of my fifteenth-century English battlehorse. The image is still indeterminate in several important ways.

What this reflection on the nature of mental images tells us is that we can't elide perception and imagination in the way Kendall implies because perceiving and imagining are epistemically distinct activities with entirely different kinds of objects. So what do we see when we see a play? I want to canvass an entirely different model, one offered by Gregory Currie.

IMAGINING THAT

We don't always imagine things visually. If I were ask you to imagine the Eiffel Tower, it's hard to think you would do anything other than conjure up some kind of visual image of that building. If, however, I ask you to 'imagine a world in which no one believed in the value of loyalty', I'm not sure what visual image you would conjure up. You

might imagine, say, a room full of the casually faithless, but it's certainly not *necessary* that you do so. You can imagine such a world without doing so visually.

The way we might distinguish this second use of the imagination is to call it 'imagining that'. If I imagine that something is the case, I don't need to visualize it at all. If I imagine that Hitler won World War 2, that Sarah got that dream job, that I were a Master of Wine, I might conjure up something roughly visual, but it's not necessary, or particularly helpful, to do so.

It's worth noting that visual ideas can also be the objects of 'imagining that'. One can imagine that Paul is wearing a blue jacket, without visualizing a jacket. It's not clear that anything much is added to the information by doing so. The same can be said for a great deal of visual information; one can take in that someone is 5'7" with brown hair and green eyes as information; one doesn't need to engage with it visually. For some people, talk of mental images is misleading and mental contents are better thought of as linguistic descriptions than as images. This 'descriptivist' position would pretty much say that all we have is 'imagining that'.

Currie does not go the full descriptivist distance but he comes close; for him, we do not in any sense imagine ourselves to be seeing the events depicted. We simply see the depiction and we imagine that the events are taking place. In this sense, what happens on stage is simply a source of information about the fictional world. In one sense, watching a play is much like reading a novel. When we read a novel, we are given verbal information to build up a picture of the imagined world which we might visualize - if we believe in mental images - or simply amass as information. The stage is only different in that the source of the information is itself visual, otherwise theatrical performances 'are narrations carried on by other means: by means of objects and images visually presented' (Currie 1991: 143). This is no small difference, of course: it represents the difference between finding out what the Eiffel Tower looks like from a verbal

description and from a photograph. Currie is not a descriptivist, however; he is not saying that we take in the visual information and turn it into stored quasi-linguistic information. Instead, when the audience see the actor they assume the character looks like that. To the obvious objection that the fictional world doesn't look like everything on stage - the lights, for example, aren't usually part of the fictional world and sets are almost always stylized in one way or another - he notes that 'we are required to extend, revise or discount information from vision so as to arrive at something that meets overall constraints of coherence' (1995: 186). Conventions, as he stated in an earlier essay, 'Visual Fictions', may 'tag' what we see distinguishing between diegetic and non-diegetic, and helping the experience cohere (140).

There are some very positive aspects of Currie's theory, not least that it resolves the implausibilities of Walton's account. His idea that novels and films or theatre performances are similar seems a little counter-intuitive, but if I reflect on my experience of reading *The Lord of the Rings* and seeing the movies, the experiences seem comparable at the level of my relation to the fictional world; the difference being that one is visually dense and the other is verbal. When we go to see a play, we receive a lot of visual information but a great deal is given to us verbally - from Macbeth's military heroism to Lady Macbeth's death - without us feeling that there's a massive discontinuity in the nature of the fictional world.

Currie's solution is ingenious but I think it fails in two important respects. According to Currie, if I go to see David Tennant in *Hamlet*, I take it that Hamlet has brown eyes because David Tennant has brown eyes. What if I had also seen the RSC's previous production *Hamlet* starring Toby Stephens? He has blue eyes, so I must also assume that Hamlet has blue eyes. This seems to commit me to contradictory beliefs, that Hamlet's eyes are both brown and blue. A second problem is identified by Wittgenstein who famously observed: 'While I am looking at an object

I cannot imagine it' (1981: §621). Try looking at the page in front of you and imagining a bird. I think it's possible to do. Now try looking at the page in front of you and imagining the exact same page. The mind seems to lock that possibility out. Currie's theory, at least in some instances, would seem to imagine that we are looking at an actor and imagining him in the same way at the same time. For both these reasons, I think Currie's argument fails.

It might be possible to make his argument work if we adopt the descriptivism that he rules out. We might imagine that we watch the stage for information which does not populate a visual imaginative world but a linguistic one. We treat the stage as a source of information which we organize rationally as we would with a series of propositions. This rather stronger version certainly deals with the Wittgensteinian objection and if we assume that we suspend or ignore contradictory propositions, it should deal with the problem of Hamlet's eyes as well. And, as we've seen, language is visually indeterminate in the way that mental images are.

But this falls down on similar grounds to Walton. What is the basis for 'suspending' some parts of the image? If it's logical contradiction, we seem to be back to Walton and Oedipus's jeans. If I watch a modern-dress Oedipus, a contradiction would arise between the ancient Theban setting and the clothes and I could not let the clothes form part of my quasi-linguistic mental representation of the fictional world. Indeed, in a more decisive way than with Walton, this 'stronger' version of Currie's argument seems to suggest that we're barely looking at the stage at all. If I think of situations in which I am being given information - say, if I have asked for directions - I'm hardly looking at the information-giver, but rather concentrating on the mental picture or list that I'm building up. This is not, I think, how we watch performances where - if they're good - we lean in, we concentrate, we pay unusually close attention to the stage. My attention is not on some separate imaginative experience but on the stage itself. Connected to

that is a much more inchoate argument, based on my sense that when I'm watching a play I'm engaged in a collective experience. Currie's model - in its weak or strong version - seems to imprison us each in our own private imaginative world.

VISUALIZING VS. IMAGINING

Bernard Williams offers a position that addresses some of the problems of both Walton's and Currie's accounts. He is discussing Bishop Berkeley's argument in the first of the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (orig. 1713), in which Philonous persuades Hylas that to conceive of something not existing in a mind is as contradictory as claiming to see something unseen (Berkeley 1988: 149-50). Williams's attention is caught by the claim that we can't see something unseen and again the theatre offers a problematic case, as in the (imaginary) stage direction, 'Enter First Murderer, unobserved'. Would the audience at that moment refute Berkeley by seeing something unseen?

Walton would say the Murderer is seen by us, since we make believe we are part of that world, even if separated from him by invisibility or something strange like that. Currie would say they are unseen by anyone, including us. Both of their arguments fail, so what is our visual relationship to the unseen characters? Williams's attempt to characterize this is to make a distinction between imagining and visualizing. He proposes that one might imagine something 'by way of visualizing' (33). He gives as an example a man who for some reason has occasion to imagine a bath; having just been to an exhibition by the artist Bonnard, the bath he visualizes is one of Bonnard's series of paintings of his wife Marthe in a bath. Williams remarks that while the visualization may contain Marthe, he can subtract her for the purposes of imagination. I recognize something like this happening when I read a novel; often I find that while reading I have formed an indistinct visualization of the scene in the back of my mind. If I pay closer attention to that, I often realize

I have taken a remembered image and subtracted or smudged out some aspects of it. The novel has entered an abandoned, broken-down cottage; I remember a cottage we stayed in on holiday when I was young, and I subtract from it signs of life and habitation.

Adapting Williams' model to the stage, one might say that we see events on stage which form our (non-perspectival) visualization of a scene from which we subtract some elements to imagine the fictional scene taking place. The elements we might typically subtract include the lights, the scene changes, other members of the audience and so on. There are other, more complex things that we strip out from the image; it would be a mistake to say that Hamlet resembled TV's David Tennant, for example, although the person on stage certainly does. It would also be a mistake to say that Hamlet did not resemble TV's David Tennant, so in stripping out aspects and associations of the image, we are replacing determinate features of the stage pictures with indeterminate imaginary ones.

The principal achievement of Williams's model, it seems to me, is to introduce a gap between stage and fiction, which is required by the indeterminacy of mental images. Thus, it avoids Walton's error of entailing that we are positioned in a perspectival relationship with all the implausibilities that brings. Also, it avoids Currie's error of presuming a likeness between stage and fiction, with all the contradictions that brings. Meanwhile, it retains Walton's attractive sense that the stage is a sensory starting point for make-believe and imagination and Currie's acknowledgement of the non-perceptual nature of fictions.

Where the theory falls down is at the same hurdle at which Walton and Currie stumbled: how to cope with Oedipus in jeans. In creating my fictional image of Oedipus, it seems hardly likely that I allow an ancient Theban to be wearing them, so we must imaginatively remove his trousers (if you see what I mean), or at least imaginatively replace the jeans with some indeterminate fictional costume. This does

terrible counter-intuitive violence to the work of the costume designer. One can multiply dozens of examples where Williams would seem to be watching productions and mentally discounting every aspect that made that production distinctive and different from the experience of reading the playtext.

The problem with all three theories is that they don't have a sufficient gap between stage and fiction. For Walton, they are combined in the act of make-believe; for Currie, the stage is an accurate guide to the appearance of the fiction; for Williams, ultimately, the stage does resemble the fiction, only with some aspects subtracted, or rendered indeterminate. If the stage resembles the fiction, then decisions have to be made about whether to count aspects of the stage into the fictional image (which leads to absurdity) or count them out (in which you're not really watching the production). It seems to me that we need an entirely different model of theatrical viewing and the relation between stage and fiction.

DAVID TENNANT IS HAMLET

To get us into this alternative model, I want to examine the ordinary ways in which people express how theatrical fiction works. When we express the relationship between David Tennant and Hamlet, we might say a number of things. We can say that 'David Tennant is playing Hamlet'; we can say that 'David Tennant is in *Hamlet*'. I also think we'd quite ordinarily and comprehensibly say 'David Tennant is Hamlet' and the entirely unreliable test of running these sentences through Google reveals that the latter is somewhat more common than the others.

What does that ordinary sentence mean? More specifically, what is the nature of that 'is', between 'David Tennant' and 'Hamlet'? Standardly, there are three meanings for is: identity, predication and membership. The 'is' of identity is when the two terms are exactly the same in all respects; e.g., water is H₂O. It's clear that David Tennant is not Hamlet in that sense. (Not all things that are

true of Hamlet are true of David Tennant, nor vice versa.) The 'is' of predication attaches a property to the subject; e.g., water is transparent. Hamlet is not a property of David Tennant. He may be a bit Hamlety, but that's not what the sentence is saying. Finally, the 'is' of membership assigns the subject to a class of things; e.g., water is a classical Element. David Tennant is not a member of the class 'Hamlet'; there is no such class. He is certainly a member of the class of people who have played Hamlet, and this might be a reasonable way to unpack the sentence were it not that the force of the sentence is often exclusive: David Tennant is Hamlet to the exclusion of all others. So, linguistically, what is the function of that copula?

I want to suggest that there is a fourth use for the 'is' and it is that fourth use that is at work in this sentence. And that is the 'is' of metaphor. I want to suggest that 'David Tennant is Hamlet' in much the same way that love is a battlefield and all the world's a stage. In other words, David Tennant is a metaphor for Hamlet.¹ In metaphor, we are invited to see (or think about) one thing in terms of another thing. There is no make-believe involved, no amassing of propositional information, no artful subtraction from one to create the image of the other. We know the two objects are quite separate, but we think of one in terms of the other. My suggestion is that this is precisely (not metaphorically) what happens in theatrical representation: when we see a piece of theatre we are invited to think of the fictional world through this particular representation. Theatrical representation is metaphorical.²

THEATRICAL REPRESENTATION AS METAPHORICAL

I want to give five examples of how theatrical representation functions like metaphor, with the aim of persuading you that theatrical representation is metaphorical. The first thing to note is that metaphor does not prescribe in advance what sort of connection must be made between the two objects it compares. Metaphors

can invite us to think of a person as an animal (*he's an absolute pig*), a memory as an action (*the thought of it still wounds me*), a lover as a dwarf star (*Juliet is the sun*), an affair of state as a piece of performance (*it was pure political theatre*), and indeed any other combination you wish. The theatre has, within its technical means, similar flexibility. Old can play young, women can play men, black can play white, wood can play stone, large rooms can play small rooms, a wooden O can play the fields of France, and words can play horses printing their proud hoofs I'th'receiving earth. The means of theatrical production are metaphors for the worlds they represent. Metaphor is not limited - as I believe Walton's, Currie's and Williams's models are - by any notion of *resemblance*.

Metaphor is a much more flexible model of theatrical representation than resemblance. It is capable of covering the range of theatrical events. There are several plays and performances whose representational strategies don't work through resemblance. Sarah Kane's *Crave* is a play of voices and in none of the several productions I have seen do I believe that what I see on stage corresponds in any visual way to some fictional world; I don't believe I am even invited to think there is a fictional world evoked by that play. This is because performances can be metaphors for a number of things: the fictional world, the world itself (as in a docudrama that asks us to look at the world in a new way), or sometimes simply the play - a new production of *Hamlet* is usually asking us to see *Hamlet* itself, as well as the fictional events it describes, differently.

It is worth remarking here that the metaphorical model is in fact not limited to plays but is equally at work in live art performances that attempt, obliquely and reflexively, to capture the form and character of the contemporary world, or to represent members of the company, or to reflect on other performances, activities or habits of language. Each of those could be well described as metaphorical. But even as a description of plays, it suggests that to stage a play is to use a visually under-determined text to

¹ In 'love is a battlefield' the metaphor comes second, whereas in 'David Tennant is Hamlet', as I'm construing it, the metaphor comes first. This would make 'David Tennant is Hamlet' an unusual though not impossible verbal construction, akin to Brecht's Galileo declaring 'unhappy the land that needs a hero' (1972: 85), where 'unhappy' is a metaphorical description of the land. Max Black in *Models and Metaphors* (1962) suggested that in metaphor there is an 'interaction' between the two compared elements, such that light is shed by each on the other. (We might observe that David Tennant's performance invites us both to think differently of Hamlet and of David Tennant.) This interaction would allow for the curiously reversed construction.

² An influential contemporary reading of metaphor would dispute that there is such a thing as a special metaphorical 'is'. John Searle (1979) and Donald Davidson (1985) have both argued forcibly that metaphors work by saying things that are literally untrue ('Juliet is the sun') which force the listener to look elsewhere for the meaning of words, either in a judgment of the particular speaker-meaning (Searle) or in one's own productive attention to the two meanings juxtaposed (Davidson). If they are right, the route by which I have come to this conclusion is false, though the conclusion itself need not be. After all, it may be that 'David Tennant is Hamlet' is metaphorical for the reasons they, and not I, give. It may, however, not be metaphorical at all.

create metaphors for an indeterminate fictional world, which sounds like a conceptual art practice in itself.

Second, in metaphor we are, I think, equally as interested in the metaphor as the object it represents. Good metaphors (I'll discuss bad ones in a moment) are delightful in themselves; a friend of mine recently described the birth of her first daughter as seeing a whole new colour in the world: I was moved by the emotion represented because of the particular way she chose to express it. Good metaphors reward sustained attention; mentally, you can really stretch out in a good metaphor. This is also true of the theatre: I pay close attention to what happens on stage because it's as interesting as the thing it represents and the more I pay it attention, the more it enriches and enlivens my sense of what it represents. I never confuse the two; metaphors work precisely because we know the two objects are not the same thing. So, if I were to see a modern-dress Oedipus wearing jeans, I am simply invited to see these characters, those famous events, through the modern-day metaphor presented to me. I pay attention to the production but never confuse it with the represented fiction.

Third, metaphors can't be paraphrased. When Romeo says that 'Juliet is the sun' (2.1.46), what does he mean? How is Juliet like the sun? She has mass and weight and extension in space, but I doubt that's what Romeo means. Perhaps he means something like 'just as the sun warms and illuminates the earth, Juliet makes me feel emotionally warm and my life seems clear and bright'. But note three things (a) this has actually just replaced one metaphor with two others ('emotionally warm' 'a clear and bright life'), (b) it's approximate and partial: you would certainly have come up with a different paraphrase, and (c) as John Searle points out, when explaining even quite simple metaphors 'we feel that the paraphrase is somehow inadequate, that something is lost' (1979: 97). This is akin to our experience of theatre; you can read enormously detailed descriptions of theatre, but it's not the

same as being there; when we try to express what a piece of theatre was like we each say different things; and often we reach for metaphors to understand the experience (as in critic Charles Spencer's infamous description of Nicole Kidman in *The Blue Room* as 'pure theatrical Viagra' [1998: 14]).

Fourth, the varieties of metaphor have their equivalents in theatrical representation. The same kind of discomfort produced by mixed metaphors occur when productions clumsily mix theatrical conventions. (Of course, mixing conventions, just as mixing metaphors, can be witty, disruptive, poignant and so on.) Our language is filled with 'dead' or 'sleeping' metaphors, phrases which were once metaphorical but, through repetition, have become naturalized (dead of night, kick the bucket, it dawned on him etc.). Nietzsche thought that all language was metaphorical and that 'literal' expressions were simply 'illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour' (1999: 146); in other words, dead metaphors. (Given the way that naturalism's particular and peculiar stylistic conventions have been naturalized, we might say that naturalism is a kind of dead metaphor.)

Fifth, the metaphorical nature of theatrical representation is very inclusive. Any aspect of the experience might contribute to the metaphor; the detailed acting choices, but also the casting, the theatre in which it's being performed and so on. In the case of the recent RSC *Hamlet*, I'm invited to think of Hamlet by watching the part being performed by a man famous for playing Doctor Who; David Tennant's Doctor-Who-ness is part of the metaphor, as it cannot be in the other models I've presented. This raises an interesting question about the relationship between metaphor and the neighbouring forms of simile and metonymy. The theatre can approach simile, when an actor impersonates a well-known living person, and we are conscious that he is more literally 'like' the person he's playing than at other times. It can

often have on a metonymic quality, when, for example, actors are cast to type: a young white female actor playing a young white woman is in some sense a representative of a type. Sometimes this metonymic quality can be 'actualized', in the case of a play about asylum seekers in which asylum seekers have been cast³ or when a lesbian actress in the Gay Sweatshop production of Jill Posener's coming-out play *Any Woman Can* begins by telling the audience: 'You're looking at a screaming lesbian' (1987: 15). I think there are fuzzy distinctions between these categories; similes could be described as explicit metaphors or metaphors as inexplicit similes; metaphors can contain metonymic elements (if, say, I refer to part of a meal as 'a meal in itself'), and I think my definition of metaphor is relaxed enough to include such other cases.

There is also political significance to insisting that theatrical simile and metaphor are also on some level metaphor. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *The Imaginary* (orig. 1940), argues that the imagination is what stops us being locked purely into being what we are in the world and into the existential freedom of being-for-oneself:

It is the appearance of the imaginary before consciousness that allows us to grasp that the nihilation of the world is its essential condition and its primary structure. If it were possible to conceive for a moment a consciousness that does not imagine, it would be necessary to conceive it as totally bogged down in the existent. But it is precisely this that is not and never could be: every existent, as soon as it is posited, is consequently surpassed. (2004: 187).

Everything in the world is a thing - it is simply what it is - except consciousness, which, according to Sartre, overflows and exceeds its existence in the world. It is non-identical with itself. In the theatre, this manifests in the way the actor becomes 'irrealized' in their performance of the character they are playing (191).

This adds an existential-political dimension to this debate. The closer the stage and the fiction are together, the more representation becomes

identical with itself. Theatre as metaphor requires a non-identity of the two. This may seem abstract so take the example of what I believe was the first black actor to play Othello in the professional theatre, Ira Aldridge, who did so in London in 1833. Aldridge was much admired in some quarters and he has since been honoured as a pioneer in black theatre. However, *The Times's* reviewer commented: 'we could not perceive any fitness which Mr Aldridge possessed for the assumption of one of the finest parts that was ever imagined by Shakespeare, except, indeed, that he could play it in his own native hue, without the aid of lampblack or pomatum' ('Covent Garden Theatre' 1833: 3). In other words - and I should add, in contrast to many other critics and commentators - they could not see the metaphor for the metonymy, finding only, as they put it, '*hic niger est*'. They could not 'irrealize' Aldridge and, in Sartre's terms, granted him only the status of being-in-itself not being-for-oneself. Put another way, they saw him as pure simile not as metaphor.

My progress through Walton's, Currie's and Williams's models of what happens when we watch performance demonstrated, I hope, that theatrical representation, ordinary though it is to most of us, is hard to explain and contains a number of counter-intuitive features. My argument has been that these earlier accounts have been fatally wedded to some degree of resemblance with implausible implications for our theatregoing. My own suggestion is that we should understand theatrical representation as metaphorical; actors give performances that becomes metaphors for the characters, the stage becomes a metaphor for indeterminate imaginary worlds or determinate real ones. As a result, I hope, it is clear that the hermeneutics of 'dramatic theatre' is every bit as complex, paradoxical and supple as that of performance and the postdramatic. Finally I have suggested, tentatively, that there may be valuable political/ethical implications of finding metaphor at the heart of the theatre.⁴

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